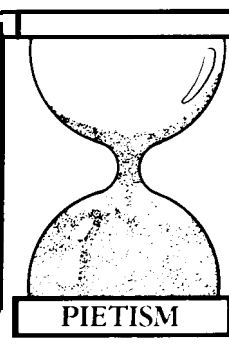


# R.P. Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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## WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO SCOFIELD'S DISPENSATIONALISM?

by Gary North

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven (Eccl. 3:7).*

In January, 1988, I launched this newsletter, This month, I am ending it. The target - dispensationalism - is now catatonic. The first issue was titled, "1988: Dispensationalism's Year of Crisis." The State of Israel began on May 14, 1948. That year supposedly marked the beginning of what dispensationalists call **the generation of the fig tree**: the last generation before the Rapture. A biblical generation is supposedly 40 years. Pre-tribulational dispensationalists believed in 1948 that in just 33 years, 1981, Jesus would return to rapture His Church, leaving seven years for the Great Tribulation in which two-thirds of the Jews of Israel would perish - dispensationalism's prophetic guarantee of failure for premillennial-era Christian evangelism to the Jews. But by 1988, the Rapture was already seven years overdue. I wrote in that first newsletter:

Hal Lindsey's vast popularity in fact has sealed the fate of the entire dispensational movement (all-tribs). There has been neither a Rapture nor a Great Tribulation. The generation of Israel's fig tree grows steadily older - too old, in fact, to be taken seriously, prophetically speaking. The events of 1948 become steadily irrelevant for dispensational interpretations of biblical prophecy. So do the events of 1988. Hal Lindsey's second wave of exegetical bills comes due this year (the first wave appeared in 1981). All dispensationalists will have to pay his bills. For the remaining life of the movement, dispensationalism's spokesmen will try to explain away 1988. Dispensationalists cannot win this one. The year 1988 will prove to be the winter of their discontent,

A few months after I wrote this, one Edgar Z. Whisenant (pronounced WHIZnant), published his "two, two, two books in one" prophetic treatises: *On Borrowed Time* and *88 Reasons why the Rapture is in 1988*. All 88 of them turned out to be wrong. Between spring and September - his scheduled date for the Rapture - literally millions of copies were bought by thrill-seeking dispensational laymen. Once again, the faithful were caught up into the clouds of paperback sensationalism. Once again, they were unceremoniously dropped to the ground from their emotional high by subsequent events. Once again, Jesus was a no-show.

In that same year, an independent publisher picked up L. S. Chafer's 8-volume *Systematic Theology* (1948). Dallas Theological Seminary had allowed its founder's magnum opus

to go out of print.

All in all, 1986 was a bad year for dispensationalism. Then things got worse.

### Spasms of a Dying Horse

Another wave of "who's the Antichrist" speculation has come and gone: Saddam Hussein. Well, not quite. Saddam Hussein is still in power, but somehow he does not look like the Antichrist, the way he appeared to some prior to January 16, 1991. In 1990, John Walvoord pulled in royalties from the sales of 1.5 million copies of his hastily reprinted 1974 book, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East*. Dallas' Charles Dyer did almost as well on 500,000 copies of *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times*. But on January 16, the U.S. military killed those royalties as surely as they failed to kill Hussein.

The Soviet Union collapsed the following August. **Oops**. No more "bear of the north." It was more like bare in the north. No more military threat to the State of Israel. The Arabs were left high and dry without their major benefactor. Hal Lindsey had no cogent ex **post facto** explanation. He seemed to go into seclusion. When he emerged in 1989, all he brought with him was the manuscript for *The Road to Holocaust*, which accused every non-dispensational eschatological system of being implicitly anti-Semitic. This book was published by Bantam Books, located at 666 Fifth Avenue, New York City. It was copyrighted by the Aorist Corporation, a well-named firm. (The **aorist** tense in Greek is the past tense: definitively finished.) The book sold like hotcakes: three-day-old stale hotcakes.

Some very large dominoes started toppling, Grace Seminary fired John Whitcomb, its only faculty member known off campus. Then the entire faculty was dismissed. The president announced that henceforth, there would be no more academic Th. D. program at Grace. Then he resigned. Soon thereafter, Dallas Seminary hired best-selling paperback author Chuck Swindol to be its president. Rev. Swindol's specialty is not scholarship. Talbot Seminary had quietly abandoned traditional dispensationalism in the late 1980's. What, exactly, its new version of dispensationalism is, no one has yet been made clear. Talbot's Dr. Saucy has tried, but without success.

### Succession Have We None!

In the 1950's, dispensationalism was in high cotton. The State of Israel was obviously going to survive, it looked as though fundamentalism was at last becoming a force to be reckoned with. In those days, the big names in dispensational theology were John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Charles C. Ryrie. Today, the big names are novelists Frank Peretti and Tim LaHaye, along with "novelists in disguise" Hal

Lindsey and Dave Hunt. The leading theologians are still Walvoord, Pentecost, and Ryrie.

There are no well-known academic defenders of the traditional dispensational system. There is no recent systematic theology that carefully describes and integrates the dispensational system. There is something known as progressive dispensationalism, but its outlines are vague, its details are even more vague, its consistency with the older dispensationalism is nonexistent, and its market share is tiny. Its inventors are unknown in the fundamentalist world. There is no *Blaising Study Bible*, nor do I expect one. (The sound of *Saucy Study Bible* is so odd that I do not expect to see that one, either).

We now see the institutional crisis in dispensationalism's intellectual leadership: its failure to reproduce itself. With the demise of the Big Three seminaries' commitment to a comprehensive intellectual defense of the original dispensational system, there is no longer much likelihood that this system will maintain itself. Dispensational scholarship has reverted to its origins: the intellectually sealed-off world of Bible colleges.

Can a theological movement sustain itself without academically trained intellectual leadership? Of course. The Pentecostal movement is proof. But Dallas Seminary presented the dispensationalism as a serious academic movement. It sent its young men off to secular universities to get their Ph.D's. It presented a facade of being a contender for the replacement of the old Princeton Seminary's level of biblical scholarship. It forced its students to endure four years of Greek and three years of Hebrew. It made a public claim: "We are here to defend the faith against all comers."

From the beginning, this claim rang hollow. Dispensationalism's intellectual leaders did not respond, line by line, argument by argument, to Oswald T. Allis' devastating critique, *Prophecy and the Church* (1945). They did not respond, line by line, to the ultradispensationalism of Cornelius Stare. They chose to ignore William Bell's New York University Ph.D. dissertation, "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology." In 1985 Ryrie wrote *Dispensationalism Today*, a thin - in every respect - little book that responded to Allis' continuity arguments by quoting arguments for discontinuity originally raised by the ultradispensationalists, and then tried to refute the ultradispensationalists by quoting arguments consistent with Allis' covenant theology. It was a bizarre performance. That this book is still in print, unrevised, three decades later is clear testimony to the present state of dispensational theology: comatose. **Dispensational theology is to contemporary theology what the "Great Parenthesis" of dispensationalism's "Church Age" is to dispensational prophecy: its clock is not ticking.**

When a Christian believes that the Church has no future, he is unlikely to sacrifice much in the present to secure the Church's victory in the distant future. He is unlikely to keep giving money to academic institutions whose original task was to identify, train, and ultimately employ the next generation of intellectual leaders. Succession is not a primary concern to a movement whose members took seriously 88 *reasons why the Rapture is in 1988* and whose leaders did not sound an alarm: "This book is nuts,"

This is why, in the final decade of the second millennium after Christ, dispensationalism is a fading movement. It will no doubt continue to shuffle along, like its aging leaders, deep in the shadows of the fundamentalism's cultural ghetto. Its members will still get all tingly with anticipation when they read some twenty-first century version of Lindsey's *The 1980's*:

*Countdown to Armageddon*, the same way their grandparents did. But the chronological reality is this: the generation of the fig tree, supposedly begun in 1948, is aging fast. When that generation is gone, what becomes of Lindsey's Rapture chronology? The same thing that became of his first two marriages.

### The Temptation of Relevance

For half a century after the death of William Jennings Bryan in Dayton, Tennessee, fundamentalists mentally chanted, "We don't vote. We don't chew, We don't go with the guys who do!" But since the late 1970's, fundamentalists have begun to get politically active. There is nothing like a political campaign to drive the language of defeat out of one's vocabulary. **A politically active Christian is an operational post-millennialist.** It is difficult to call on the nation to "return America to its Christian roots" when you are also preaching the imminent return of Christ to remove the church from world history.

This is why the man in the pew will eventually abandon the rhetoric of dispensationalism. He wants to be relevant when he is not in his pew. His children will find other commitments than Rapture fever. This is already happening. About decade ago, I heard Jimmy Swaggart say on TV that he was the last of TV's dispensational preachers. Then I read this on the back cover of Dave Hunt's *Whatever Happened to Heaven?* (1988): "Today, a growing number of Christians are exchanging the hope for the rapture for a new hope that Christians can clean up society. . . ." The promise - unfulfilled, I might add - of the back cover is that this book will show old fashioned dispensationalists "how we lost that hope [the Rapture] and how it can be regained."

The home school movement, the Christian Coalition, and all the other Christian social action organizations will erode fundamentalism's commitment to dispensationalism's vision of historical defeat. There are far more activist Christian women who send money to Beverly LaHaye's Concerned Women of America than men who buy her husband's dispensational books. Beverly is making operational postmillennialist out of her followers.

### Conclusion

Dispensational scholars have been emotionally unwilling and methodologically unable to respond to Christian Reconstruction, as surely as they were unable to refute Allis' *Prophecy and the Church*. They have pretended that Gary DeMar did not write *Last Days Madness*, David Chilton did not write *Days of Vengeance*, and Ken Gentry did not write *Before Jerusalem Fell*. Meanwhile, Constance Cumbey and Edgar Whisenant have come and gone, The Trinity Broadcasting Network gives the fading dispensational movement the latest prophetic word on goings-on in Israel, but when it comes to matters sensational, these prophetic insights are hardly a match for Mrs. Crouch's latest hairdo,

I have asked Ken Gentry to write books and pamphlets comparing the old and new dispensationalism. Maybe some dispensational theologian will at last respond to him. Although they have failed to respond to serious Christian critics for fifty years, maybe this time it will be different. But probably not. There are too few dispensational scholars remaining.

And so, in wrapping up eight years of this publication, I ask: **What ever happened to Scofield's dispensationalism?** If your answer is **Tommy Ice and Dave Hunt**, I have made my point,