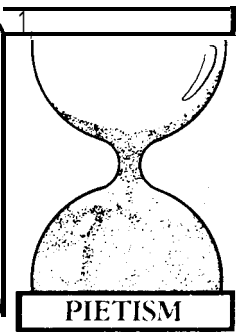


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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SHERLOCK HOLMES' DOG THAT DIDN'T BARK

(Part 2 of a series on **Boyd's** DTS Thesis)

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We are continuing our seriatim survey of the major *contra-dispensational* conclusions of Alan Patrick Boyd's "A *Dispensational* premillennial Analysis of the Post Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)," a 1977 Dallas Theological Seminary Th. M. thesis.

Boyd's approach to analyzing the crucial question of the historical continuity between ancient premillennialism and modern dispensationalism is fundamentally sound and his presentation, though sketchy at times, is reasonably well-presented. He begins by defining the modern *dispensationalism* of Ryrie and Company in order to have an objective standard from which he might judge the claim to continuity (Chapter 1).

All Systems Go

Chapter 1 of Boyd's thesis is entitled "The Foundations of Modern Pretribulational Dispensational Premillennialism." Its purpose is "to concisely articulate the foundational tenets of twentieth-century dispensational premillennialism, thereby elucidating a foundational eschatological construct for the study of second-century premillennialism" (p. 4).

Boyd provides five tenets to structure his comparison. Those tenets are: (1) "Consistently applied literal interpretation of the Scriptures" (p. 4). (2) "A consistent distinction between Israel and the Church in Holy Writ" (p. 6). (3) "The progressive series of God's administrative economies over human affairs" (pp. 7, 9). (4) "The Millennium [as] the climatic zenith of revealed history" (p. 9). (5) "The concept of imminency," wherein "the Rapture . . . must be distinguished chronologically from the Second Advent" (p. 12). These tenets are largely drawn from Ryrie's seminal work, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (1953, p. 12). They are, nevertheless, characteristic of Dallas Seminary dispensationalism, though these tenets are increasingly falling into disrepute by major non-Dallas dispensationalists who are, as we say, in transitional

These are important program-defining issues worthy of system comparisons. As Boyd notes: "it is evident that twentieth-century 'premillennialism', as represented by Dr. Ryrie, is *much more than* just the belief in a literal Millennium and Christ's return before it; but it is evident that this 'premillennialism' is an intricate *system* of theology, based upon the foundational tenets just discussed and incorporating a *complex chronology* of eschatological events" (p. 14, emphasis mine). Unfortunately, the average dispensationalist-in-the-pew seems to think of his system as a simple matter of pointing to Revelation 20 and saying, "I told **YOU** so." The issues involved are much more complex and

involved. (Sometimes I have found it helpful to point out to such dispensationalists all the system-wide distortions engendered by their theology, while leaving Revelation 20 for later discussion.² Apparently Sir Walter Scott was reading dispensational literature when he penned his famous: "O, what tangled webs we *weave!*")

Important admissions by Ryrie are cited by Boyd (p. 7, nl, 3) showing that dispensationalism should be set against the world of evangelical theology: "*All other views* bring the Church into Israel's fulfilled prophecies except dispensationalism."³ "Consistently literal or plain interpretation is *indicative of a dispensational approach* to the interpretation of the Scriptures."⁴ "The doctrine of the Church, is *the touchstone of dispensationalism*."⁵ Walvoord is cited as agreeing to this distinctiveness of dispensationalism: "Premillennialism [sc. dispensationalism] is rather a system of theology based on many Scriptures and with a *distinctive theological context*." "It should be clear from this survey of the field that premillennialism [sc. dispensationalism] is a *distinct system of theology*. Opponents of premillennialism are right in part when they charge that *premillennialism is essentially different from other forms of theology*. The chief differences arise in ecclesiology, eschatology, and hermeneutics."⁶

Let the Show Begin

In Chapter 2 ("The Eschatology of Papias' Predecessors") the analysis actually begins. The material researched includes 1 Clement, 2 Clement, the Epistle of Barnabas, the Didache, Ignatius, Hegeppus, and Cerinthus.

In analyzing their writings Boyd concurs with Lamps's reserve, which seems not to be realized by many popular writers on eschatology: "It is scarcely possible to trace in the early Fathers a regular and logical pattern of consistent eschatology. Consistency is not one of the characteristics of the fathers" (p. 17).⁷ He also cites Kelley: "Four chief moments dominate the eschatological expectation of early Christian theology – the return of Christ, known as the Parousia, the resurrection, the judgment, and the catastrophic ending of the present world-order. In the primitive

2. I have a two tape lecture entitled "Dispensational Distortions" available for \$9.00. Order from ma at: 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.

3. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 159. Emphasis mine.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 46. Emphasis mine, but the space to the right of this colon is for rent:

5. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

6. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), pp. 127, 137. Emphasis mine, but I will share them with you, if you like.

7. G. W. H. Lampe in William Manson, ed., *Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), pp. 17-18.

1. See for instance, John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL Crossway, 1955).

period they were held together in a naive, unreflective fashion, with little or no attempt to work out their implications or solve the problems they raise" (p. 20, n1).⁸

The Resurrection

Boyd notes that "with the exception of Hegesippus, for which there is only fragmentary evidence, there is universal assent among the writers/writings of this period to the resurrection, with the majority of them stressing the resurrection of the flesh" (pp. 22-23).⁹ But as to its relationship with the kingdom, the story is different.

For instance, often 1 Clement is cited as a premillennial work.¹⁰ Boyd, however, notes that the time of the resurrection in 1 Clement is associated with the Second Advent, though "not specifying whether it is before, during, or after it. Also, he relatea it to the establishment of the Kingdom (50:3,4) - again not specifying the chronological relationship" (p. 26). A premillennialist would need to specify not only two resurrections, but the chronological relationship of the resurrection, the Second Advent, and the Kingdom. But such is absent from Clement of Rome's epistle.

The Second Advent

Regarding the immediacy of the Second Advent, Boyd argues from original sources that Hegesippus "communicates a sense of immediacy" (p. 28). The same holds true for 1 Clement (p. 32), 2 Clement (a pseudonymous writing attributed to Clement of Rome) (p. 32), Barnabas (p. 33), Didache (p. 33), and Ignatius (p. 35). Of course, they were all wrong, as we may now confidently judge 1900 years later! But the issue before us is *historical*, and Boyd profers historical evidence for the views of these Apostolic Fathers. The reader should be aware that an amillennial view may hold to the immediacy of Christ's coming. Consequently, immediacy (or "imminency") does not demonstrate premillennialism - or dispensationalism.

Boyd shows that "many of the writers/writings perceive the primary purpose of the Second Advent to be the judging of believers and unbelievers" (p. 37). But he notes that in regard to the question of whether there is a general or two separate resurrections: "It is probably unwise to extrapolate any conclusions from their silence" regarding "the state of the unbelieving dead at the Second Advent" (p. 37, n1).

I will skip Boyd's treatment of the Kingdom (pp. 37-41) in that it is too sketchy, inconclusive, and not very helpful.

Prophetic Hermeneutics

Unfortunately for the historical argument, a key concept - a *sine qua non* - of dispensationalism is the literal interpretation of prophecy. Dispensationalists bet the house on literalism. witness Ryrie: "This is the basic tenet of premillennial eschatology."¹¹ This is unfortunate because, according to Boyd, "there is not a great deal of evidence in

8. S. J. N. D. Kelley, *Early Christian Doctrines* (2d ed: New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 462.

9. Ha cites 1 Clamant 24:1; 26:3; 2 Clamant 9:1; 19:3; Barnabas 5:7; Cerinthus in Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 3:28:2; Didache 16:6; and Ignatius, *Smyrna* 7:1.

10. G. N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884), 1:482-483; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 374. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), p. 20.

11. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 158.

this period as to how these writers/writings interpreted prophecy" (P. 145). This fundamental principle of dispensational theology, upon which the weight of the whole complex system rests, lacks evidence from history.

Specifically, Boyd notes that 1 Clement, who is not a premillennialist, though claimed so by many Dallas dispensationalists, "did not apply consistently literal interpretation to Old Testament prophecies" (p. 46).

in the case of Barnabas, Boyd writes that "he interprets prophecy allegorically (e.g., 6:1-19; 9:8; 10:1-112; 16:1-10)" (p. 46). "in fact, he specifically designates the Church to be the heir of the covenantal promises made to Israel (4:6-7; 13:1-6; 14:4-5)" (p. 47). (Tommy ice and Dave Hunt would probably point to Barnabas as a member of the Manifest Sons of God cult because of this gaff!)12

Israel and the Church

Uh, oh! Now we run into serious trouble. Not only is it difficult to discover the *fundamental tenet* of literalism held among the Apostolic Fathers, but the second most important dogma of dispensationalism is also absent. This should be most distressing for dispensational apologists, for according to Ryrie: "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct. . . . This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a man is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive."¹³

Yet according to Boyd, "the majority of writers/writings in this period completely identify Israel with the Church (p. 47). First, Clement "finds the fulfillment of prophecy concerning Israel (Deut. 32:5) in the Church" (1 Clement 3:1) (p. 47). Second, Clement is guilty of "completely merging the identity of the two (2:1; cf. 2:2-3; 3:5)" (p. 47). "Barnabas identifies Israel with the Church by emphatically asserting that the Church has taken Israel's place in God's program (2:4-6, 9; 3:6; 4:6-7, 8; 5:2; 6:13-15; 7:5; 13:1, 3, 5-6; 14:4-5)" (pp. 47-48). indeed, "the promise made to the patriarchs is fulfilled in the Church, not in their descendants" (p. 48, n1). The Didache also is guilty of "merging the identity of Israel and the Church (cf. 14:2,3)" (p. 46).

Concision

Boyd concludes this chapter with some helpful comments regarding the "profound differences" between pre-Papian eschatology and "the modern construct" of dispensationalism. He feels that there are similarities in regard to the kingdom "on/over the earth" and the coming of the Antichrist and the Tribulation (p. 49). "However, the differences are profound, and disqualify any claim the pretribulational, dispensational premillennialism existed *in any form* in the period" (p. 49, emphasis his).

He notes that "a consistently applied literal interpretation and a distinction between Israel and the Church are missing" and "there is no concept of dispensations . . . at all" (p. 49). What is worse, "as far as being premillennialists, the best that can be said is that Cerinthus was one" (P. 50). "Nor can 1 Clement, 2 Clement, Barnabas, nor Ignatius be claimed as chiliasts/premillennarians. . . ." (p. 50, n1). Thus, he concludes, "it is quite evident that traces of modern pre-tribulational, dispensational premillennialism simply did not exist in the immediate post-apostolic period" (p. 50).

12. H. Wayne House and Thomas D. Ice. *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1988), p. 388.

13. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 44, 45.

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