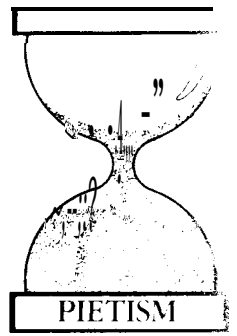


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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PAPIAS, BOYD, RYRIE, AND WALVOORD

(Part 3 of a series on **Boyd's** DTS Thesis)

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As we conclude our review of Alan Patrick Boyd's, "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr),"¹ I need to make a correction to an error in the August installment of the series. There I stated: "When Boyd wrote the historical study he was a dispensationalist. According to Tommy Ice, he remains an ardent dispensationalist to this day." But Boyd is no longer a dispensationalist. I should have written: "he remains an ardent *premillennialist*." As King James might say, "Oopeth!"

As I conclude this brief review series, I would like to survey Boyd's treatment of Papias. This is illustrative of the manner of **Boyd's** presentation as well as the confusion generated by dispensational apologists for the historicity of dispensationalism. If I were to continue, my review could end up longer than his thesis! The reader interested in studying the matter more closely should borrow the thesis through his local library's inter-library loan program.

Introducing Papias (A.D. 60-130)

Boyd's Chapter 3, "The Eschatology of Papias," has as its purpose: "to evaluate the eschatology of Papias from a pretribulational, dispensational premillennial perspective" (p. 51). Papias is generally recognized as a premillennialist and I concur with this assessment. Boyd notes that the significance of Papias in the history of eschatological inquiry is due to three factors, the two most important being:

(1) "The probable source of Papias' teaching – even his eschatology – was the apostolic tradition" (pp. 51-52). Boyd states this due to the (uncertain) tradition that he was a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus claims Papias heard John (*Against Heresies* 5:33:4), though Eusebius disputes this assertion (*Ecclesiastical History* 3:39:2).²

(2) "He was the first orthodox chiliast, and as such, exercised a formidable influence on his successors" (emphasis his, pp. 52-53). Boyd emphasizes Papias' orthodoxy because he recognizes that "Cerinthus was the first chiliast, but he was heterodox in other respects" (p. 52 n3). **Cerinthus'** views mixed Gnosticism and Jewish Ebionite thoughts

Most scholars recognize chiliasm as rampant among first century, non-Christian Jews: "Jewish chiliasm was very common at about the beginning of the Christian era, and is represented in the voluminous apocalyptic literature of that day."⁴ Frend even notes that Papias' millennial views are those "shared with Jewish and proto-Gnostic contemporaries."⁵

In fact, Papias' famous statement about millennial vines producing ten thousand branches, each branch with ten thousand twigs, each twig with ten thousand shoots, and each shoot with ten thousand clusters, and each cluster with ten thousand grapes is quite similar to a statement found in the Jewish *Apocalypse of Baruch*, chapter 29. Schaff calls Papias "a pious but credulous contemporary of Polycarp [who] entertained quaint and extravagant notions of the happiness of the millennial reign, for which he appealed to apostolic tradition."⁶

Having established what he deems to be the significance of Papias to his research, Boyd turns to consider the particular eschatology of Papias.

Papian Eschatology

Boyd points out several aspects of Papias' eschatological views: "1). the kingdom will be of 1,000 years duration, 2). the kingdom will occur after the resurrection of the dead, 3). the kingdom will be established 'physically', 4). the kingdom will be on this earth" (p. 56).

To this he adds information attributed to Papias by Irenaeus and Eusebius. From Irenaeus: "1). creation will be liberated, rejuvenated and fructified in the kingdom, 2). as a consequence, the animal kingdom will be at peace within itself, 3). the animal kingdom will be totally subject to man, and 4). not all men shall see the events of this time" (pp. 58-59). From Eusebius we learn that Papias held that the resurrection of the dead "will precede the kingdom."

Now all of these elements are definitely premillennial. But none of these is distinctively *dispensational*. In fact, Boyd notes of ancient attributions to Papias, that "Papias applied much of the Old Testament to the Church. In other words, he did not utilize a consistently applied literal interpretation" (pp. 60-61). What is more, notes Boyd, "the company with whom Anastatius associates him [i.e., Papias] practically rules this out, as well as the express statement

1. Master's Thesis: Dallas Theological Seminary, May, 1977.

2. Eusebius held a low view of Papias' intelligence: "He appears to have been of very limited understanding" (*Eccl. f-fist.* 3:39:13).

3. Cerinthus "held a strange admixture of Gnosticism, Judaism, Ebionism, and Chiliasm. Borrowing from Philo as did other Gnostics, he held that the earth was not created by the Supreme God, but by an angel who was ignorant of, though not hostile, to God. Denied the virgin birth; the Logos or 'the Christ' who descended on Jesus at Baptism departed from Him before the crucifixion. Differed from both the Gnostics and the Ebionites on the matter of the millennium, holding that Christ would later set up a millennial kingdom." Elgin S. Moyer, *Who Was Who in Church History* (Chicago: Moody, 1966 [1962]), p. 61.

4. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, "The Church History of Eusebius," in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966 [1890]), 1:172, n19.

5. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), p. 143.

6. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (5th ed.: Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1910 [1889; rep. 1985]) 2:615-616.

that he employed 'allegorical' interpretation" (pp. 61 -62).

It is important to note that Ryrie establishes a threefold *sine qua non* for dispensationalism: "What marks off a man as a dispensationalist? What is the *sine qua non* of the system?"⁷

"The answer is threefold: (1) A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct. . . That 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. A man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will. (2) This distinction between Israel and the Church is born out of a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation."⁸

(1 only list two of Ryrie's three points because his third point is wholly mistaken.)⁹

Very clearly, then, Papias fails the litmus test of dispensationalism. *The two key, system-defining, fundamentally important foundation stones of dispensationalism are absolutely denied by Papias' methodology.* And if Papias' significance lies in the fact that he heard the Apostle John, as Boyd argues, what does this say for dispensational theology?

As Boyd himself notes: "Papias believed in a literal millennial rule of Christ on earth. Secondly, however, there are no further similarities between the systems" of Papias and dispensationalism (p. 62). In fact, Papias' view of the resurrection shows that he "did not have a concept of a secret rapture, but of a resurrection immediately before the Kingdom" (p. 62). Thus, "it seems safe to assume that his chiliasm was of a markedly different character than the modern variety [dispensationalism] used as a construct for this thesis" (p. 62).

The Dispensational Employment of Papias

Boyd has clearly shown that Papias cannot be assumed to be an historical forerunner of dispensationalism. Yet Papias is widely used in historical argumentation by dispensationalists. Ryrie and Pentecost, for instance, point to Papias in their defenses of the historicity of premillennialism, by which they imply dispensationalism, which they most certainly set out to defend.¹⁰

Now if dispensationalists made it clear that Papias' views were merely premillennial and not dispensational, their arguments would not be as objectionable. But the impression inevitably – and intentionally! – left by their manner of historical argumentation is that dispensationalism, therefore, is historically grounded in antiquity. This is simply not the case, as Boyd so clearly shows regarding Papias (in Chapter 3), and others from antiquity.

Let me illustrate my complaint. Ryrie is obviously quite sensitive to charges of the recency of dispensationalism. He introduces his seminal work *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* with these words: "opponents of the premillennial system have attempted to obscure the main issues involved by inventing distinctions between historic premillen-

nalists, pretribulationists, dispensationalists, and ultra-dispensationalists. Such distinctions are not warranted since the differences involved are so minor and since the roots of premillennialism go far deeper."¹¹

Is it true that anti-dispensationalists have "attempted to obscure the main issues by inventing distinctions"? Is it the case that those distinctions are "not warranted since the differences involved are so minor"? It is Ryrie himself, after all, who speaks of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, one of which is consistent literalism.¹² The *sine qua non* of a system are, by definition, absolutely essential to that system. That is, they are major points, not minor ones.

Furthermore, in defining dispensationalism Ryrie even states: "Perhaps the issue of premillennialism is determinative [of dispensationalism]. Again the answer is negative. . . ."¹³ Premillennialism is not determinative of dispensationalism, says Ryrie! He even attacks the "covenant premillennialist" in his writing: "Of course there are nondispensational premillennialists. But these men, like the amillennialist, do not apply the literal principle consistently."¹⁴

The differences between Ryrie's dispensationalism and, say, Ladd's premillennialism are both foundationally and structurally significant. Neither are they inventions of anti-dispensationalists, but are established by dispensationalists themselves.

In the very book by Ryrie quoted above, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, the author sets forth a distinctively dispensational form of premillennialism. The entire remainder of his book establishes his premillennialism on the basis of two *sine qua non* of dispensationalism: Hermeneutics (see particularly Chapter 3) and the distinction between the Church and Israel (see particularly Chapters 6-7)! Yet he establishes the historicity of his '(pre)millennialism" on the basis of church fathers who were clearly out of accord with the major issues of dispensationalism!

Walvoord comments elsewhere: "the fine judgment necessary to discern that which is to be literally interpreted in contrast to spiritual and allegorical interpretation is demanded" in eschatological study. Just after this "demand for literalism (surely a demand is a "major point"!), Walvoord states: "Major issues must be distinguished from minor points."¹⁵ As a matter of fact, his comment introduces a book that opens with four entire chapters given over to the matter of prophetic interpretation. Indeed, the opening words by the author of the book Walvoord introduces and endorses are: "No question facing the student of Eschatology is more important than the question of the method to be employed in the interpretation of the prophetic Scriptures."¹⁶

Certainly interpretative methodology is one of the "major issues" that "must be distinguished from minor points." And interpretive methodology separates dispensationalism from historic premillennialism.

Conclusion

Clearly major issues separate historic premillennialists from dispensationalists. Just as clearly, Papias breaches one of the most important principles of the dispensational system. Yet he is set forth as a representative of premillennialism in such a way as to lend historical credibility to dispensationalism. Such is most improper, as Boyd shows.

7. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 43.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 44, 45

9. His third point is that dispensationalism makes the glory of God the underlying purpose of history, whereas covenantal theology does not (*Ibid.*, p. 46). But see: WCF 3:3, 7; 4 1; 5:1; 6:1; 16:2, 7; 181, 33:12; LC 1, 2, 7, 47, 66, 101, 102, 107.)

10. Charles C. Ryne, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), p. 21. J Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 374.

11. *Ibid.* (emphasis mine). He repeats this thinking on p. 17.

12. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 43ff.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 44

14. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 91.

15. Walvoord, "Introduction," in J. D. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. ix.

16. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 1 (emphasis mine).