

DISPENSATIONALISM

HOW TO OBSCURE DISPENSATIONALISM Pt. 2

by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

Based on the definition of “obscure,” obscuring dispensationalism means making dispensationalism relatively unknown. And there are many different ways this is happening.

1. **Either Use or Create a Different Hermeneutic**
2. **Blunt or Blur the Consistent and Complete Distinction between Israel and the Church**
3. **Put Some Scarecrows in the Field of Dispensationalism to Scare People Away**
4. **Devise a New, Different Theology**

There are some new theologies available today that will clearly lead believers away from dispensationalism. Preterism, which has different forms, means “past,” so preterists deal with eschatology passages as fulfilled. They take all of the Olivet Discourse and the book of Revelation to have been fulfilled by the year A.D. 70 when Rome overran Palestine. To do this, of course, the book of Revelation must have been written before the year 70, which is hard to prove. But preterists have a different theology without a millennium, so they certainly don’t need to be dispensationalists.

Another theology being substituted for dispensational theology is replacement theology, which says that the church now replaces Israel. Or in very small type, it says, “The church inherits Israel’s promises but not her curses.” So it’s not replacement theology; it’s replacement of the good things but not of the total package that was given to Israel. And that has an economic ramification. A bumper sticker for replacement theologians could say “boycott Israel,” which is what some groups have done. In the Presbyterians’ general assembly in September 2004, they voted to boycott Israel by not buying products from those who deal with Israel. The Episcopal Church did the same thing in November 2004, and the Methodists did likewise in July 2005. So this has been a normal, logical out-

growth of replacement theology in the economic realm.

Another new, different theology is, of course, Reformed theology. Reformed theologians are obviously not dispensational. Don’t let anyone tell you that Berkhof had dispensations in his scheme. He did, but he was not a dispensationalist. He just used the word to label the difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament and between the pre-Mosaic and Mosaic eras in the Old Testament. That didn’t make him a dispensationalist though. He was a pure, unadulterated Reformed theologian and a good church historian.



But I think people forget that Reformed theology is a package, or a whole group of things, including infant baptism. It includes teaching such as, “The church began with Abraham.” And I don’t think I’ve ever read what a Reformed person does with pre-Abrahamic saints such as Adam, Abel, or Enoch. They didn’t belong to the church because the church didn’t begin, supposedly, until Abraham. Reformed theologians would just say the pre-Abrahamic saints are part of the great umbrella of the people of God. Not only do they believe the church began with Abraham, they also believe

in limited atonement (Christ died only for the elect), and they are almost always amillennial. There are variations of course, just as there are variations with Calvinists and Arminians, but normally the Reformed package is infant baptism, the church beginning with Abraham, limited atonement, amillennialism, and of course, not dispensationalism.

And friends, make no mistake about it, Reformed theology is now aggressive in this country. It is led by some very well-known and popular Bible teachers. But it is not only non-dispensational, it is anti-dispensational.

Besides the Reformed, Replacement, and Preterist theologies, another one that is popular today and may be gaining ascendancy is Kingdom theology. This view says, "Kingdom is the unifying principle of biblical revelation. The Kingdom of God is the main idea in all of the Bible." When it's defined and used this way, people promoting this theology are not going to give much place to any kind of dispensational distinctions. Kingdom is used in a lot of ways in the Bible. The Old Testament has very local kingdoms, and the overall rule is of God because He is God. And another kind of kingdom is of God ruling over His angels. But we don't belong to that one—you're all nice people, but you're not angels. There's also the kingdom of the future where God will rule in some way. This is the millennial kingdom if you're a dispensationalist and premillennialist, but if you aren't, you can still be a kingdom theologian.

A conservative, amillennialist theologian wrote this about Kingdom theology not long ago:

God's kingdom now transcends the geospatial boundaries of national Israel. The people are no longer primarily Abraham's physical descendants but the nations themselves. The theme of the land [so clearly part of the Abrahamic Covenant, from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates] has been Christified. The King's throne is no longer in earthly but in heavenly Mount Zion. In the New Testament, the land theme undergoes a paradigm shift, which downplays the physical aspect of land in favor of its spiritual significance. Neither Christ nor His disciples ever teach that dispersed, ethnic Israel will ever return to Canaan. Canaan functions as a type of the Christian life in Christ.

He is promoting Kingdom theology without a millennium, from the viewpoint of an amillennialist. This shows that Kingdom theology doesn't have to be within the realm or limited to premillennialists or even progressive dispensationalists. And I think Kingdom theology is being promoted in other circles as well.

Because kingdom theology makes room for signs and wonders, one circle is promoting it for that movement and that emphasis. Signs and wonders are an emphasis of Kingdom theology because they will accompany the coming of the kingdom. One thing that I think embarrasses progressive dispensationalists is that we don't have enough signs and wonders now. We view them as occurring later on, or else say they were just in the first generation, and that's all.

"But if the kingdom is now, why should God withdraw signs and wonders in any century or generation?" asks a thoroughly conservative man associated with the Vineyard movement, which has been promoting signs and wonders. He makes a distinction that has become part and parcel of Kingdom theology: the "already, not yet" or the "already now, not yet future" distinction.

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According to Kingdom theology two important aspects of the kingdom are the "kingdom already" (which means Christ is now ruling on the Davidic throne) and "kingdom not yet" (which if you're a premillennialist means Christ will rule on the Davidic throne on earth). For an amillennialist, there is no rule of Christ on earth except now through the church. This man says the "already" aspect of the kingdom, which means now, is the

community of Jesus and is about the business of expressing Jesus' rule in our own lives and then in the world around us. This man teaches that, individually, we live the ethic of the kingdom, and that ethic is the Sermon on the Mount, the long version which is recorded in Matthew 5-7. Communally and individually, we are supposed to obey the Sermon on the Mount.

This man goes on to say, "In lifestyle, we should live by Acts 2:42 and the 'apostles' doctrine, fellowship, the breaking of bread,' and in those aspects of power, miracles, signs, and wonders. Though now in power, the kingdom will come later in even more power." That is the way he focuses power in signs and wonders relatively now. But I think he means "now" not in just the first or second generation of church history but in the "not yet" aspect of the kingdom in greater power. He also states, "The data of Acts suggests that the one constant in the expansion of the kingdom is the proclamation of

Jesus as King.” However, you can put whatever importance you want on kingdom, but the importance now in the New Testament is on the *body* of Christ. And the importance and emphasis is always on the members of the body taking directions from the “Head,” not as subjects taking directions from the “King.” The members of the body are supposed to follow the lead of the Head of the body.

There is another way in which Kingdom theology is being promoted. In 2002, the Southern Baptist Convention (which I name because it’s very public) started a program called, “Empowering Kingdom Growth.” The theme of the national convention was “Kingdom First” in 2003 and “Kingdom Forever” in 2004. This is a very large movement comprised mostly of conservatives who are into this “kingdom” emphasis, which isn’t necessarily wrong, but it isn’t the focus of Scripture for the present church age. I think one of the serious ramifications of this misfocus is that “kingdom ethics” are substituted for “church ethics” or “body ethics.”

These kingdom theologians try to impose upon people the Sermon on the Mount as commands to be followed now without any disobedience. No dispensationalist says that the Sermon on the Mount is to be torn out of the Bible, and the older dispensationalists very plainly said that it has significance and relevance as with all Scripture, but to press every word of the Sermon on the Mount as being directly applicable to the church today is going to get you into a heap of trouble. Even contemporary dispensationalists clearly make it plain that we take what we can of guidance from the Sermon on the Mount. And certainly if any of the commands in the Sermon on the Mount are repeated elsewhere in the New Testament, then they are absolute commands which we are to obey plainly, clearly, and unequivocally.

Kingdom ethics deal with conditions in the Kingdom when the King is here, but are they required for the church today? I have a little trouble with that, not because they’re necessarily wrong, which they aren’t, but because they play down the hundreds of references in the New Testament that are clearly for the body of Christ. In describing some of the teachings of his book called, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective*, one au-

thor says that “the priorities of the King must become the priorities of the Kingdom colony, the Church.” I’m not part of a colony; I’m part of a body. And that’s where I ought to be. I’m not sure where a colony is. This is similar to the progressive dispensationalist who talks about the church being an “outpost of God’s Kingdom,” and says that “the priorities of the King are now my priorities as members of the kingdom colony.”

Talking about his book, *The Kingdom of Christ*, the previous author continues to say, “The priorities of the eschatological kingdom must transform the priorities of our churches, including the ways we think of culture and politics.” However, there isn’t going to be much open change admitted or permitted in the millennium politically because we will be in a theocracy then. The author continues to say, “If the kingdom is ruled by believers of every tribe and nation (Revelation 5), who are these? These are those who came out of the great tribulation and made their robes white in the blood of the Lamb.” The author is interpreting future tribulation saints to be saints “now”—of the present church age. He continues by asking, “If the kingdom is ruled by believers of every tribe and nation, then how can Christians stand by while some of the cosmos’s future rulers are denied justice”? He is clearly attempting to make the ethics of the millennium, the “not yet kingdom,” the ethics of the “already kingdom,” that is of our lives today in the body of Christ. And not all of it is wrong; but it’s the wrong emphasis, which bothers me considerably.

I’ve also read things such as, “Dallas and Westminster are getting together,” which means, “Dispensationalists and Reformed people are getting together.” One of the Reformed people said, “Prophecies of the future should be understood as descriptions, in figurative language to be sure, of the new earth, which will last not for 1,000 years, but forever.” This is a different step because he believes that some of these prophecies will be fulfilled in the new earth, so he doesn’t need a millennium. One dispensationalist wrote recently, “Modified dispensationalism and modified covenantalists (Reformed people) have come to a substantial agreement on a present initial stage of fulfillment of the eschatological promises (already, not yet) and a unified spir-

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itual people of God.” In response I would say that I don’t deny there is a unified people of God—of course there is. It’s like having a family, and you have pre-Abrahamic saints, church saints, and tribulation saints, and in that sense we are unified. But just as in the family, there are differences, and a big difference goes back to the baptizing work of the Spirit. Christian saints now are members of the body of Christ, which didn’t exist in Old Testament times. With dispensationalists and Reformed people getting together, I think that dispensationalists are making more compromises than Reformed people are, and that isn’t good.

5. Focus on Present Responsibilities and Activities and Downplay the Future

Obscuring dispensationalism by focusing on present responsibilities and activities and downplaying the future is an elaboration of something I introduced earlier. Proponents of this say we must focus on the “already kingdom”; and if there are differences of opinion on the “not yet kingdom” (whether it’s millennial, or new earth, or nonexistent), then so be it. They say the important thing is to focus on the “already” form of the kingdom. So “emphasize the present, play down the future, promote kingdom living here and now, and so on and so on.” They say, “The Sermon on the Mount is the best means of evangelism.” While the Sermon on the Mount has wonderful content, I don’t see Acts 16:31 in it! I don’t see John 3:16 there either.

And if the future is downgraded, of course there is no reason to talk about, think about, or read the newspaper about modern-day Israel, the nation itself, and what’s happening in that part of the world and in other prophetic blocks of power that will come to full fruition in the Tribulation period. You can say, as progressive dispensationalists have said, that this viewpoint is “less land centered,” or as the amillennialist says, “the land centered is not geospatial anymore.” They also do not make the Pre-tribulation Rapture too prominent or even necessary because they’ve de-emphasized Daniel 9. But if something is in the Bible, it’s important, whether I understand or not how it might be used by God. One progressive dispensationalist has said:

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1 Thessalonians 5 would appear to be Pre-tribulation . . . while most dispensationalists probably hold to a Pre-tribulation Rapture of the church as being in certain respects more harmonious with dispensationalism in general, many would not desire to make this a determining feature of dispensationalism today.

But by saying it’s not “a determining feature,” he’s saying that he’s playing it down. What about the “Blessed Hope”? It becomes the “Neutered Hope.” And a very down-to-earth practical effect is that we can forget about Bible prophecy conferences. I’m old enough to remember that every year or every other year, people had prophecy conferences and several Bible conferences on prophetic subjects. I went to a Bible conference not long ago, and it was compressed into one day. It did have four meetings,

and it probably got more people to attend than if it had Sunday-through-Wednesday meetings, but it was just four meetings once a year. Fortunately that pastor was an expositor, so the people were getting Bible teaching every Sunday as well. But some say, “Let’s have a marriage conference, a parenting seminar, a men’s conference, a women’s conference, a financial seminar.” These all have their place, but what’s happening is that people are pushing aside the Bible, often the prophetic portions of the Bible, which is not good at all.

6. Modify, Neuter, or Don’t Enforce a Doctrinal Statement or Position

Modifying, neutering, or not enforcing a doctrinal statement or position applies to churches, organizations, missions, and schools. Not all have doctrinal statements, but if they do and want to play down dispensationalism, that or at least the eschatological part is often what goes or is changed. Or if the statement is not changed, it won’t be enforced, and this won’t produce anything except the new stance that organization has accepted. Two different groups, both historically Pre-tribulation and Pre-millennial, recently debated about changing their doctrinal statement. Guess what they made broader and more inclusive? It’s the eschatological portion, the Rapture and in one case even the Millennium. I was able to ask someone connected to one of the

organizations why they were doing it. The person said, "We want to make it easier for people to understand." I think you ought to be clear when you speak and write, but it's not other people or groups who need to understand but the board, faculty, missionaries, and administration themselves who need to understand. If their statement becomes more inclusive, weaker, and less clear, then they're targeting the wrong audience. It ought to be made clear to the group who has the power to state it, teach it, live it, and make the organization stand for it.

But if they can't or don't change the statement, then what they will often do is simply broaden the meaning of the existing statement so they can claim they are still "agreeing" with their original doctrinal position. I got trapped once because I thought I was saying that a group should have "essential" agreement with the doctrinal statement, and someone made the word essential mean "pretty much." And the people in question had that kind of "essential" agreement. But the dictionary says that essential means "indispensable; of primary importance." So if you make essential agreement essential, then it is primary, actual agreement. The word "actual" comes from the word "active," so an organization should not have passive agreement with its doctrinal position. However, in practice this often means: "Well, I don't teach or speak against a certain thing in your doctrinal position, but to be honest I won't promote it either." And that's the beginning of the end.

These ways of neutering a doctrinal statement or position, demeaning it, or playing it down are becoming quite acceptable. This is happening not just today, but I've lived long enough to see it happen in years and decades past. People say, "We'll have a committee, and the committee will examine the missionary, the faculty member, or the student who is supposed to agree, and we will see if they agree." But if they have to have a committee to find out, then they probably don't agree, so save the time.

Recently I met two young men who are graduates from one of our fine schools in this country. They had told the school they were not pre-tribulation rapturists, but the school had that position. So the school appointed a committee to examine them and found out that they should be encouraged to agree and sign something they needed to sign to graduate.

This bothered the two students, which translates to the two students having more integrity than the school. A year after graduating, they still didn't believe in the Pre-tribulation Rapture, but they had received their diplomas.

If people change a position, whatever the position is, they're acting with integrity only if they promote or enforce it. I think people don't enforce a changed position because they're enamored with numbers and can reach more people. But if they want to reach the most people, they would have to give up a number of doctrines. They wouldn't press matters about the Holy Spirit because they'll reach more people. They wouldn't believe in verbal inerrancy so they can reach more people. And never mind the Trinity. Let's look at one of our national TV stars

who is a modalist. He's reaching a lot of people, but does that excuse his modalism? Not in my book. They think if we are too specific, we are going to be dividing the church and so on.

In a sense though, the strength of American Christianity is due to the fact that we *can* divide and start our own school, our own mission, or our own Pre-tribulation Rapture group and promote what we

think is right. If you don't believe this has, in one sense, been the strength of American Christianity, then go live in a Protestant country where the church is a state church. If you want to start a school there, you've got to be 400 years old before you're recognized in a state-church system. So these are some of the ways and effects of obscuring dispensationalism by modifying, neutering, or not enforcing doctrinal statements or positions. ■

"For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables."

2 Timothy 4:3-4

This article is a transcription of Dr. Ryrie's message by the same title given at the 2006 Pre-Trib Rapture conference in Dallas, TX, with slight revisions by Dr. Ryrie.

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie is one of the most well-known and highly respected evangelical theologians in America today and is considered a leading authority on premillennial dispensationalism. He served for many years as professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary and has authored numerous books, including the best-selling *Ryrie Study Bible*.

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