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"DUBIOUS EVANGELICALISM"? A RESPONSE TO JOHN GERSTNER'S CRITIQUE OF DISPENSATIONALISM[1]

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INTRODUCTION

DISTINGUISHED church historian and apologist John Gerstner's formal entrance into debate with dispensationalists began in 1982 with the publication of his *Primer on Dispensationalism*.[2] Though converted through the witness of a dispensationalist, Gerstner soon afterward began what has become a fifty year career advocating reformed theology. Concern over questions about dispensational antinomianism led to his *Primer*. Now the lordship salvation controversy has rekindled his interest and led to his conviction that there has been no essential change in dispensationalism. According to Gerstner, "Dispensationalism today, as yesterday, is spurious Calvinism and dubious evangelicalism."[3] To demonstrate this thesis, he surveys the history of dispensationalism in 65 pages. Next he critiques dispensationalism's philosophy and hermeneutics in 28 pages. The bulk of his book, the remaining 172 pages, addresses dispensational theology.

J. I. Packer, for one, agrees with Gerstner. He praises Gerstner's "skill and thorough knowledge." Speaking of a gulf between dispensationalism and Calvinism, Packer applauds Gerstner's proof that the two systems are "radically opposed."[4] Along similar lines R. C. Sproul's foreword lauds Gerstner as a "world-class historian" whose charges

[1]John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991). Hereafter cited as *WDWT*. For other substantial reviews see R. L. Mayhue, "Who is Wrong? A Review of John Gerstner's *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*," The Master's Seminary Journal 3 (1992) 73–94; T. Wells "*Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*: A Critique of Dispensationalism: A Review," Reformation Today (Jan–Feb 1992) 25–32; J. A. Witmer, "A Review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*," BSac 149 (1992) 131–45; 259–76.

[2]John H. Gerstner, *Primer on Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982).

[3]*WDWT*, 2.

[4]*WDWT*, dust jacket.

are delivered with "pinpoint accuracy." According to Sproul there are only two alternatives. If Gerstner is right, dispensationalism "should be discarded as being a serious deviation from Biblical Christianity," but if he is wrong, "he owes many a profound apology."[5]

Readers should not minimize the seriousness of this book's charges. If Sproul's foreword is correct, dispensationalism is the "majority report" among American evangelicals.[6] And if Gerstner is correct, dispensationalism may not even be worthy of the label "evangelical." Thus Gerstner, along with his two prominent endorsers, evidently believe and charge that the majority of American evangelicals may not be evangelicals at all.

In response to this charge I have first engaged in a running commentary on Gerstner's arguments as he presents them in the book. Then I have synthesized what I believe to be serious weaknesses in the argument. I have attempted to engage Gerstner cordially because I hold him in high regard as a distinguished Christian scholar. This is not a debate to be won at all costs. Rather it is a family discussion in the body of Christ (2 Tim 2:24).

RUNNING COMMENTARY

Part One: Historical Sketch of Dispensationalism

Here four chapters chronicle the historical antecedents of dispensationalism, its early history in England, its development in the U.S.A., and its influence upon reformed churches. The discussion of the question of dispensationalism in the early church rightly points out that dispensationalists have at times overstated their case. But Gerstner seems to weaken his own case by the use of guilt by association (Many heretics were chiliasts.) and by understating the presence of premillennialists in the early church.[7] As the discussion proceeds into the post-reformation period, Gerstner makes three blanket assertions which are at least questionable. He believes that dispensationalists always deny the binding nature of the OT sabbath commandment.[8] He also states that dispensational futurist interpretation of the book of Revelation uniformly takes everything from chapter four to the end of the book as yet to be fulfilled.[9] Third, he asserts that eschatology is not the most important element in dispensationalism.

Chapter two on the British backgrounds of dispensationalism is an unremarkable and unobjectionable sketch of the Plymouth Brethren

[5]*WDWT*, ix, xi.
[6]*WDWT*, ix.
[7]*WDWT*, 9–10. For other examples of guilt by association cf. x, 69, 99.
[8]*WDWT*, 15.
[9]*WDWT*, 17.

movement. Gerstner grants that men like J. N. Darby and William Kelly were gifted, but adds that their minds were narrowed by their theological views.[10]

Chapter three addresses dispensationalism in the U.S.A. Here Gerstner begins to be more polemical in emphasis. He remarks that dispensational literature is usually in the form of pamphlets written in "not very profound language."[11] He is skeptical of what he perceives as the abundant statements in dispensational literature which indicate that Bible study alone led people into dispensationalism.[12] His sarcastic response to a statement by A. C. Gaebelein seems out of place in the context of scholarship, let alone scholarly discussion among evangelicals.[13]

His discussion of recent developments in American dispensationalism focuses on Dallas Seminary, where he finds the appearance of movement away from Scofield and Chafer.[14] However, Zane Hodges' publications on the gospel are taken as outspoken traditional dispensational counter measures to such a movement. It appears here that Gerstner overestimates the scope and importance of Hodges' work as it relates to contemporary dispensationalism as a whole. No disrespect to Hodges, but he is not the champion of dispensationalism which Gerstner makes him out to be. Gerstner also observes that many Dallas professors are Dallas graduates, which indicates to him that Dallas is closed to unsafe outside influences.[15] However, the presence of alumni on the faculty of institutions of higher education is certainly not limited to Dallas Seminary. And it might be added that many of those Dallas professors received their terminal degrees from other institutions which are not even remotely dispensational.

Later in this chapter Gerstner alludes to dispensationalism's teaching on the inviolability of God's land promises to Israel. Accusing dispensationalists of ignoring "the clear teaching" of the OT that Israel must obey its covenantal requirement of obedience, Gerstner states that the "return of the Jews to Palestine in unbelief hardly fulfills such a Biblical requirement."[16] Though some sensationalists may have implied this, credible spokesmen for mainstream dispensationalism teach that Israel's presence in the land must be accompanied by faith in Jesus the Messiah in order for prophecy to reach its goal.

The fourth and last chapter in part one is about dispensationalism's influence upon reformed churches. Viewing dispensationalism as a

[10]*WDWT*, 29.
[11]*WDWT*, 38, 52.
[12]*WDWT*, 39.
[13]*WDWT*, 44, n. 19.
[14]*WDWT*, 47.
[15]*WDWT*, 47.
[16]*WDWT*, 55; cf. 183, 207–8.

threat to the reformed faith, Gerstner admits that it infiltrated the reformed community by allying with it against modernism, both in the days of the publication of *The Fundamentals* and more recently in connection with the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Nevertheless, a "dispensational Presbyterian" is a contradiction in terms for Gerstner.[17] Therefore Presbyterians like J. H. Brookes, W. G. Moorehead, D. G. Barnhouse, Wilbur Smith, Carl McIntire, Allan MacRae, and J. M. Boice are either insincere or ignorant of the incompatibility of dispensationalism and reformed confessions of faith. In relating a story about Wilbur Smith and D. G. Barnhouse, Gerstner becomes enmeshed in a contradiction. After stating that dispensationalists believe the Lord's Prayer is not intended for today, he notes that dispensationalists Smith and Barnhouse disagreed on whether it should be recited in church. It would seem that either some dispensationalists do not fit Gerstner's rigid description of dispensationalism or that Gerstner's description is erroneous. Evidently Gerstner is unaware of Martin's article which demonstrated that dispensational views of the Sermon on the Mount (including the Lord's Prayer) cannot be stereotyped.[18]

Dispensationalism and premillennialism are sharply distinguished in Gerstner's discussion: "Dispensationalism is antithetically opposed to premillennialism properly understood. . . . Premillennialism is merely an eschatology while dispensationalism is a theological system which includes 'premillennialism.'" Gerstner is willing to own premillennialism as a viable option for orthodox Christians, but he disowns dispensationalism as a system "in constant deviation from essential historic Christianity."[19]

There are two problems here, the first logical and the second semantical. First, it is hard to understand how the deviant dispensational system can include an orthodox eschatology (which is antithetically opposed to it!) and still be in constant deviation from historic Christianity. Second, it would seem to me that most dispensationalists do view their position as an eschatological view resulting from a hermeneutical approach, not as a comprehensive scheme of systematic theology. No doubt traditional dispensational eschatology is connected with other viewpoints, such as the Israel/Church distinction, but it nevertheless is fundamentally a variation of generic premillennial eschatology. It is a way of construing the biblical theology of progressive revelation. It is more of a hermeneutical approach to scripture than a grid of dogmatic conclusions from scripture. In the U.S.A. dispensationalism flourished across denominational lines through the prophetic

[17]*WDWT*, 60.

[18]*WDWT*, 60; cf. 187–88. But see John Martin, "Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. S. Toussaint and C. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 35–48.

[19]*WDWT*, 68; cf. 105.

conference movement. Today at meetings of dispensational scholars held in connection with the Evangelical Theological Society, many theological systems and denominations are represented. Thus Gerstner's point is dubious at best, and the bulk of his book which addresses dispensationalism as if it were a monolithic comprehensive confessional system is fundamentally flawed.

Part Two: Philosophy and Hermeneutics

In this rather brief section of the book Gerstner devotes two chapters to philosophy, apologetics, and hermeneutics. The thesis of these chapters seems to be that "dispensationalism is rather short on theory and long on practice." Nevertheless, Gerstner believes that dispensationalism says far more about hermeneutics than is necessary, raising "a virtual non-issue to a level of prime importance."[20] How dispensationalism can be both short on theory and say too much about hermeneutics is unclear. Gerstner makes no mention of a recent major hermeneutics textbook written by dispensationalist Elliott Johnson.[21]

In the chapter on philosophy Gerstner believes that dispensationalists are less academically inclined than nondispensationalists. He interprets the perceived silence of dispensationalists in this area as an intentional avoidance of this subject.[22] In the area of apologetics Gerstner is aware of Norman Geisler's thomism and John Whitcomb's presuppositionalism. No friend of Cornelius Van Til's presuppositionalism, Gerstner identifies it with fideism and notes that dispensationalists tend not to embrace it. He goes on to say that presuppositionalists are thoroughgoing Calvinists and do not believe that dispensationalists are authentically Calvinistic. Gerstner is evidently unaware of several articles by dispensationalists which support presuppositional apologetics.[23] By his logic his own adherence to non-presuppositional "classical" apologetics is suspect, given his Calvinism.

In the chapter on hermeneutics Gerstner critiques dispensationalism for its insistence that its theology is a product of its hermeneutics, not *vice versa*. He also coins the pejorative term "spooftexting" to describe dispensational hermeneutics.[24] He is particularly critical of dispensationalism's "literal" hermeneutic, its charge that covenantalists

[20]*WDWT*, 73.

[21]Elliott Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

[22]*WDWT*, 76, 78. Cf. 192 for another unfair accusation that silence amounts to intentional avoidance.

[23]James M. Grier, "The Apologetic Value of the Self Witness of Scripture," *GTJ* 1 (1980) 71–76; David L. Turner, "Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18–21," *GTJ* 2 (1981) 45–58; George J. Zemek Jr., "*Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense*: A Review Article," *GTJ* 7 (1986) 111–23; and Stephen R. Spencer, "Fideism and Presuppositionalism," *GTJ* 8 (1987) 89–99; and "Is Natural Theology Biblical?" *GTJ* 9 (1988) 59–72.

[24]*WDWT*, 83, 99.

"spiritualize" the Bible, and its distinctive approach to biblical prophecy. He argues that dispensational theology has determined its literal hermeneutic.[25] At this point there is a great deal of truth in Gerstner's argument. However, what he argues against dispensationalism could just as easily be argued against covenantalism. It is inescapable that one's theology will influence one's hermeneutics. This recognition of the reality of the hermeneutical circle (or better, spiral) should cause Gerstner and dispensationalists alike to avoid triumphalistic epithets such as "wooden literalism" and "spiritualizing." Gerstner evidently is not aware that recent dispensational publications no longer take the hermeneutical tack which he opposes.[26]

Part Three: Theology

In this, the largest section of the book, Gerstner devotes seven chapters to argue that dispensationalism is spurious Calvinism and dubious evangelicalism. Under the heading of spurious Calvinism Gerstner arrays a host of charges reflecting his view that dispensationalism is semi-Pelagian or Arminian in essence. According to him, Calvinism is "consistent Christianity" or "just another name for Christianity." Therefore evangelical Arminianism is labelled "inconsistent Christianity."[27] Be that as it may, even more serious are Gerstner's charges that dispensationalism is "dubious evangelicalism."[28] Thus dispensationalism, along with Arminianism, may not even be worthy of the label "evangelical." Gerstner is particularly exercised by the lordship salvation controversy, which he styles as traditional dispensational antinomianism versus inconsistent dispensational advocates of lordship.[29]

According to chapter seven on spurious Calvinism, dispensationalists claim to hold four of the five points of Calvinism but actually hold none of them. Gerstner asserts that dispensationalism "specifically rejects the doctrine of limited atonement."[30] In response to these assertions two statements can be made. First, there are dispensationalists who would not claim to hold any of the five points of Calvinism; many dispensationalists are unashamedly Arminian in theology. Second, there are certain dispensationalists, myself included, who hold Calvinistic theology, including limited atonement. The upshot of these

[25]*WDWT*, 87, 98, 101, 200.

[26]David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *GTJ* 6 (1985) 275–78.

[27]*WDWT*, 103, 107.

[28]*WDWT*, 103, 149.

[29]*WDWT*, 209–59.

[30]*WDWT*, 105, 118.

two observations is that Gerstner's view of dispensationalism as a monolithic confessional system is mistaken.

Gerstner also seems to think that dispensationalists deny the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin and the spiritual inability which accompanies that imputation.[31] To prove this he puts his own words on the lips of J. D. Pentecost after pedantically dissecting a statement by Pentecost which is capable of being interpreted very differently than Gerstner interprets it.[32] He goes on to assert that dispensationalists do not believe in limited atonement, irresistible grace, or the perseverance of the saints. No doubt there are some dispensationalists who do not hold these doctrines, but it is just as clear that many do.[33]

Gerstner's argument against what he perceives to be dispensationalism reveals some disturbing facts about his own brand of Calvinism. It comes out that Gerstner, against Murray and Stonehouse and Hoekema[34] among others, does not believe in the free offer of the gospel to all people indiscriminately. Instead he holds that the well meant offer of the gospel is given only to the elect, a position outside the mainstream of reformed theology as represented in most confessions and textbooks.[35] He opts for the rigorous supralapsarianism of Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Church instead of the mainstream Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Christian Reformed Church. This fact implicitly weakens Gerstner's argument, since he shows himself to be at odds not only with dispensationalists but with most reformed theologians as well. It is also noteworthy that this indicates that reformed theologians are not in agreement on every point. Nevertheless, Gerstner usually assumes that all dispensationalists agree on every point.

Chapter seven on spurious Calvinism concludes with a table which purportedly contrasts the five points of Calvinism with dispensationalism.[36] At each point dispensationalism is represented as traditional Arminianism. The table reads much like a summary of the debate of the remonstrants with the reformed theologians at the famed

[31]*WDWT*, 108–9.

[32]*WDWT*, 109–10.

[33]E.g., on the matter of the imputation of Adam's sin see Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1947) 2.296–315; Charles M. Horne, *Salvation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 10; and Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 111–12.

[34]John Murray and Ned Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Lewis J. Grotenhuis, n.d.). This study was presented as a committee report to the Fifteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1948. Cf. Anthony Hoekema's discussion of the gospel call in *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 68–79.

[35]*WDWT*, 119, 27–31; 67, 77.

[36]*WDWT*, 147.

Synod of Dort in the Netherlands in 1618–19. No doubt some who hold dispensational eschatology hold Arminian soteriology. However, speaking as one who has studied at two dispensational institutions and who has taught at three such institutions, I have never been taught and have never myself taught (1) that people are able of themselves to receive the gospel offer, (2) that election is based on foreseen faith, (3) that people of themselves choose to believe in Christ, and that (4) the "old nature" is unaffected by the new nature and continues to operate sinfully until death. I have been taught but have not myself taught that the atonement was designed to save every person. Many dispensationalists do prefer to call themselves "four point Calvinists" because of their reluctance to accept limited atonement. So in this area alone Gerstner avoids caricaturization. But on the other four points misrepresentation has occurred. Gerstner fails to demonstrate that dispensationalism is essentially Arminian. Be that as it may, it must also be said that the larger issue is whether dispensationalism is a theological system or an eschatology. Gerstner believes that dispensationalism is an Arminian theological system. I would argue rather that dispensationalism is a type of premillennial eschatology which is held by Arminians and Calvinists alike.

Chapters eight, nine, and ten argue as a unit that dispensationalism denies the gospel by its teaching on dispensations, its view of the kingdom offer to Israel, and its view of Israel and the Church. Gerstner believes that dispensationalism is in blatant opposition to the gospel.[37] He makes it quite clear that in his view dispensationalism "has departed from Christianity. . . . cannot be called Christian. . . . is a cult. . . . It is impossible to exaggerate the gravity of the situation."[38] True, Gerstner puts all these charges in a conditional mode—if dispensationalism has done what Gerstner charges it has done, it has departed from Christianity, etc. But there is no doubt that Gerstner believes that dispensationalism has actually done what he accuses it of doing and thus has actually departed from Christianity. Why else would it be "impossible to exaggerate the gravity of the situation"?

Chapter eight addresses the question of the definition of a dispensation. The heart of Gerstner's argument seems to run like this: despite disclaimers by dispensationalists, their system introduces multiple ways of salvation into biblical theology.[39] Their protests to the contrary aside, they do not really believe that the Old Testament saints were saved by faith in Jesus Christ whom they anticipated.[40] In all of

[37]*WDWT*, 181.
[38]*WDWT*, 150.
[39]*WDWT*, 150–51.
[40]*WDWT*, 168–69.

this Gerstner apparently is unaware that Ryrie's modification of Scofield's definition of a dispensation moves from a temporal orientation toward a stewardship orientation.[41] Reacting to the classic view of a dispensation as a time period in which a test occurs, Gerstner objects that this implies the possibility of successfully passing the test and achieving salvation by a means other than the finished work of Christ.[42] No doubt this objection has some force against the classic Scofieldian position, but many no longer hold that position. It would also appear that the objection is just as forceful against classic covenant theology's covenant of works, in which it was possible for Adam's representative obedience to be imputed to Adam's posterity if Adam successfully passed a period of probation.

Chapter nine addresses dispensationalism's view of the kingdom offer to Israel, arguing in essence that if it had been accepted, Jesus would not have had to die on the cross. In this chapter a number of misconceptions surface. The first is that all dispensationalists hold to such a kingdom offer. Gerstner is evidently unaware that some dispensationalists do not support such a kingdom offer. Another misconception concerns the supposed distinction between the Matthean expression "kingdom of heaven" and the kingdom of God. Gerstner asserts that all dispensationalists make such a distinction, but this is not the case. He is also incorrect when he asserts that all other exegetes view the terms as synonymous; there are non-dispensational exegetes who maintain a distinction between the two expressions.[43] Another misconception concerns the parenthetical nature of the church age or dispensation of grace as a time period totally unforeseen by the Old Testament. Not all dispensationalists have held this and many today do not hold it.[44] A final misconception is Gerstner's characterization of Hal Lindsey and Billy Graham as credible spokesmen for mainline dispensationalism.[45] Though both of these persons are prominent popularizers of eschatology, it is doubtful that their eschatological views

[41]Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 29–33.

[42]*WDWT*, 155.

[43]*WDWT*, 172. But see Clarence Mason, *Prophetic Problems with Alternate Solutions* (Chicago: Moody, 1973) 102–3; E. Sauer, *Triumph*, 23 n. 1; and S. D. Toussaint, "The Kingdom and Matthew's Gospel," in *Essays in Honor of Pentecost*, 23. D. A. Carson in "Matthew," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8.100, cites nondispensationalist M. Pamment as one who sees a distinction in her study "The Kingdom of Heaven in the First Gospel," *NTS* 27 (1980–81) 211–32. Gerstner later (174) admits some dispensationlists do not distinguish between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven.

[44]*WDWT*, 172. See e.g. Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* (London: Paternoster, 1957) 166; and Robert Saucy, "Contemporary Dispensational Thought," *TSFBull* 7.4 (1984) 10–11.

[45]*WDWT*, 174–75.

converge and that their views should be considered as representative in a scholarly discussion of dispensationalism.

It is noteworthy that in chapter nine Gerstner addresses the comparison of the dispensational kingdom offer with the covenantal Adamic administration or covenant of works. He denies the force of this *tu quoque* argument by analogy, asserting that God could not have honored his offer of the kingdom to Israel but could have honored his promise to give Adam life. But why these situations are not analogous is unclear; evidently in both scenarios salvation hypothetically could have been achieved apart from the finished work of Jesus Christ.[46]

Chapter ten addresses the traditional dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church as two peoples of God. No doubt this is clearly taught by Darby, Scofield, and others. However, Gerstner pays little attention to the fact that this distinction has been nuanced if not denied at least since Robert Saucy in 1971.[47] He states dogmatically that dispensationalists see Israel and the Church as having separate eternal destinies, evidently unaware of W. Robert Cook's assertions to the contrary.[48] Once again he brings up the mistaken notion that all dispensationalists see the Sermon on the Mount as law for Israel, not as an ethic for the Church.[49]

Also in this chapter Gerstner declares his own position on Israel and the Church. It is his view that they are identical.[50] This position is just as far from Paul's teaching in Romans 11 and Ephesians 2 as is the separation argued in classic dispensationalism. Finally, Gerstner's view that in Ephesians 2:20 the prophets are Old Testament prophets would not be acceptable even to all covenantal scholars.[51] I would not accept the Darby/Scofield view which over stresses the distinction between Israel and the Church, but Gerstner's antithetical approach which identifies the two is hardly more adequate.

Chapters eleven, twelve, and thirteen function as a unit which critiques dispensational antinomianism. It should be remembered that this is the issue which evidently rankles Gerstner the most.[52] My own view of sanctification and the perseverance of the saints is similar to Gerstner's, and I am as concerned as he is about Hodges' and Ryrie's views of discipleship.[53] However, I believe Gerstner incorrectly equates Ryrie's

[46]See Turner, "Continuity of Scripture," 285–86.

[47]*WDWT*, 208.

[48]*WDWT*, 185; cf. W. R. Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody, 1975) 167–68, 226–27, n. 27.

[49]*WDWT*, 187–88. But see Martin's work cited in note 18.

[50]*WDWT*, 194–95, 207.

[51]*WDWT*, 206. Cf. e.g. W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of Ephesians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1967) 142.

[52]*WDWT*, 1.

[53]David L. Turner, Review of *Five Views of Sanctification*, *GTJ* 10 (1989) 94–98.

and Hodges' views. Ryrie seems to place more emphasis on perseverance than Hodges does. At any rate, I do not object to Gerstner's concerns in this area, though I do object to the pervasive meanness of the material. There is an antinomian taint in some dispensational literature, and this has come to the fore recently in the Lordship salvation controversy. But here again Gerstner's attempt to condemn all dispensationalism as a theological system[54] fails, since this controversy is among dispensationalists who disagree with each other. John MacArthur and Zane Hodges both hold a dispensational premillennial eschatology, but their respective views of salvation and sanctification diverge widely. It is not unusual to find in dispensationally oriented publications authors who support both of these positions.[55] If indeed "Scofield and his followers exercise a kind of papal infallibilism" with the result that American dispensationalism "is still essentially Scofieldian" it is passing strange that such a controversy exists.[56] It is also quite surprising to see a reformed theologian like Gerstner dismissing dispensationalism's prominence as "due to an accident of history."[57] It would seem to be more in keeping with reformed theology to speak of dispensationalism's success as a matter of divine providence rather than as an accident of history.

Another of Gerstner's major charges is rendered dubious by this discussion of antinomianism. It is the charge that dispensationalism is essentially an Arminian system. If that were the case, there would be little controversy over lordship salvation. The so called "carnal Christians" of the non-lordship position would be viewed as backsliders who have lost their salvation. Arminianism and antinomianism seem to be at opposite ends of the theological spectrum.

SYNTHESIS OF MAJOR PROBLEMS

Having completed the running commentary of interaction with Gerstner's arguments, I now present five major reasons for my view that his work is fundamentally flawed.

First, Gerstner's approach may be faulted on logical grounds. His book is filled with hasty generalizations which comprehensively sweep aside all dispensationalists. But these generalizations are built on critiques of individuals who do not represent contemporary dispensationalism. At times these individuals are nonrepresentative because their views are outdated. Historical development has occurred. At other times Gerstner cites unpublished sources or rather obscure individuals whose views

[54]*WDWT*, 209.

[55]See e.g., H. A. Kent's lengthy and sympathetic review, "*The Gospel According to Jesus*: A Review Article," *GTJ* 10 (1989) 67–77.

[56]*WDWT*, 252–53.

[57]*WDWT*, 252.

may tend to be idiosyncratic. The result is inadequate induction which does not support the global deductions about all dispensationalists.

Second, Gerstner seems to lack a truly historical perpective. He does not allow for historical development in dispensationalism. Nor does he seem to acknowledge that reformed theology has its own developmental history. Apparently he views reformed systematic theology as tantamount to the Bible in authority, not as a noble and largely successful but nevertheless human effort to articulate biblical truth. He equates Calvinism with biblical Christianity. But which Calvinism? Calvin's? Beza's? Owen's? Edwards's? Hodge's? Warfield's? Murray's? Gerstner's?! His theology is certainly *reformata* but his approach to history neglects the crucial *et semper reformanda* aspect. Here it is particularly unfortunate that he does not interact substantially with Blaising's *BSac* articles on development in orthodox theology.[58]

A third area of major disagreement is Gerstner's insistence that dispensationalism is not merely an eschatology like premillennialism but a theological system which has an eschatology. This view of dispensationalism as a theological monolith will not stand the scrutiny of comprehensive examination. From the outset there has been disagreement among dispensationalists. Those who hold dispensational eschatology will be found in many confessional soteriological and ecclesiastical circles, from reformed, as Gerstner grudgingly admits, to charismatic.[59] One is reminded that G. N. H. Peters, and J. A. Seiss, whose writings were influential in early dispensationalism, were Lutherans. The early ultradispensationalist E. W. Bullinger was an Anglican. It is noteworthy that two of the most prominent dispensational educational institutions, Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary, are interdenominational. In a recent summer doctrine class I taught at Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary the students present represented such varied backgrounds as Assemblies of God, Baptist, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Church of Christ, Plymouth Brethren, and Wesleyan. There were many spirited discussions as we surveyed pneumatology, soteriology, and ecclesiology, but there was general agreement when we came to eschatology.

Fourth, it appears that in crucial areas Gerstner is much more familiar with classic dispensational sources than with contemporary dispensational sources. Substantive interaction occurs mainly with Darby, Scofield, Chafer, and Ryrie. This tendency counters Gerstner's statements that he has examined current dispensational sources[60] and the glowing remarks of Sproul's foreword about Gerstner's careful

[58]C. Blaising, "Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy" and "Develoipment of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *BSac* 145 (1988) 133–40, 254–80.

[59]See the 1991 dispensational study group paper by Douglas Oss, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism within the Pentecostal Tradition," available from Prof. Darrell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary.

[60]*WDWT*, 2–3, 72, 169, 261 etc.

research and precise targeting of the issues.[61] To some extent this is the fault of contemporary dispensationalists, who have not widely published their views. The lack of contemporary dispensational literature will be alleviated with the publication of *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition.*[62]

But there are several sources already available which Gerstner does not discuss at any length if he mentions them at all. Several such studies have already been mentioned. Here Radmacher's article on dispensational eschatology is relevant.[63] Ken Barker's and Carl Hoch's *JETS* articles on false discontinuities between the testaments and Jew-Gentile relationships come to mind,[64] as well as the articles by Saucy in *TSFBull* and *CTR*.[65] Homer Kent's study of the new covenant and the church affirms one new covenant in distinction from the position of many early dispensationalists.[66] Craig Blaising's articles in *BSac* and John Martin's study of dispensational approaches to the Sermon on the Mount have already been mentioned. My own studies of dispensational versus covenantal hermeneutics and Matthew 24 address several of the issues which trouble Gerstner.[67] The writings of Erich Sauer present a strand of dispensationalism emphasizing continuity in biblical theology, but Gerstner is apparently unfamiliar with these writings.[68] The recent *Festschrift* in honor of S. Lewis Johnson addresses many of these issues from both dispensational and covenantal perspectives,[69] but it goes unmentioned in Gerstner's book. Even the "ultradispensational" movement which Gerstner wrongly styles as consistent dispensationalism has come a long way since J. C. O'Hair and Cornelius Stam. Gerstner does not discuss the more recent *A Dispensational Theology* by Charles F. Baker[70] and

[61]*WDWT*, ix.

[62]C. Blaising and D. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

[63]Earl D. Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and its Eschatology," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. K. Kantzer and S. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 163–76.

[64]Kenneth L. Barker, "False Discontinuities Between the Testaments," *JETS* 25 (1982) 3–16; Carl B. Hoch Jr., "The Significance of the *sun*-Compounds for Jew-Gentile Relationships in the body of Christ," *JETS* 25 (1982) 175–83.

[65]Robert Saucy, "Contemporary Dispensational Thought" and "Dispensationalism and the Salvation of the Kingdom," *TSFBull* 7.4 (1984) 10–11 and 7.5 (1984) 6–7; and "The Crucial Issue between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theological Systems," *CTR* 1 (1986) 149–65.

[66]Homer A. Kent, "The New Covenant and the Church," *GTJ* 6 (1985) 289–98.

[67]David Turner, "The Structure and Sequence of Matthew 24:1–41: Interaction with Evangelical Treatments," *GTJ* 10 (1989) 3–27.

[68]Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* etc.

[69]John Feinberg, ed. *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988).

[70]Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 1971).

he evidently is not aware that the old Milwaukee Bible College has developed into Grace Bible College in Grand Rapids, MI.

Gerstner is evidently unaware of the work of the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society. This group has met in conjunction with the annual ETS meeting since 1985 and has enjoyed cordial relations with several reformed scholars who were invited participants. Papers from these meetings have been widely circulated and some have been published.[71] Others are available from professor Darrell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary.

The fifth and final major problem with Gerstner's study is the spirit in which it is written. At times the language and tone of the book is sarcastic, arrogant, and demeaning. Earnest theological debate is fine, but not rhetoric which slurs fellow imagers of God in God's new creation. It is especially disturbing that respected theologians J. I. Packer and R. C. Sproul have endorsed this diatribe. Sadly, this book is a throwback to earlier days where there was frequently more heat than light produced in this type of discussion. And certainly dispensationalists have been just as guilty as covenantalists of incendiary tactics. But there seems to be a different spirit now, one of irenic yet earnest interaction.[72]

CONCLUSION

According to Gerstner, all dispensationalists are characterized by the following positions: They do not believe in any of the five points of Calvinism. They do not believe in the continuing relevance of the sabbath. They do not believe that anything beyond Revelation 4 has yet been fulfilled. They do not believe in praying the Lord's prayer. They do not believe that the Old Testament saints were regenerate. They do not believe that the kingdom offered to Israel by Jesus was spiritual. They do not equate the kingdom of heaven with the kingdom of God. And they do not believe that becoming a Christian necessarily results in a change of lifestyle.[73]

[71]Ronald Clutter, "The Dispensational Study Group: an Introduction," *GTJ* 10 (1989) 123–24. Clutter's introduction precedes a dialogue between convenantalist Vern Poythress and dispensationalist Paul Karleen, pp. 125–64.

[72]Here one thinks of Vern Poythress's *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Nevertheless other current books are less irenic and essentially repeat old charges: G. Bahnsen and K. Gentry, *House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensational Theology*, Tyler, TX: ICE, 1989); and C. Crenshaw and G. Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool, 1989 rev. ed.). These covenantalist works are joined by the dispensational work of R. Showers, *There Really is a Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 1990).

[73]*WDWT*, 2, 17, 25, 60, 90, 105, 132, 147, 171–72, 233.

If this is the case, I have a problem. I have been taught in two dispensational institutions. And I have taught in three such institutions. Yet I believe in all of the above positions which according to Gerstner I must not believe. So I have a problem. Maybe I am not a dispensationalist after all! But maybe Gerstner is the one who has the problem. Maybe dispensationalism is not a rigid monolith of confessional Arminian solidarity. Maybe it is only a recent eschatological innovation which stands upon the inviolability of God's covenant promises to Israel and eagerly expects the imminent return of Christ to consummate those promises. Maybe. . . .[74]

[74]Three current major studies should be consulted by anyone who wishes to understand the current status of dispensationalism. Reference has already been made to Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church.* In this work ten dispensationalists present current perspectives from biblical theology and there are three responses from prominent non-dispensationalists. See also D. K. Campbell and J. L. Townsend, eds. *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus* (Chicago: Moody, 1992). This work addresses premillennialism in general from a biblical theology perspective but nearly all of the fourteen contributors would want to be identified as dispensationalists. Expected in 1993 is R. L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan). Saucy has been a major voice in current dispensationalism. Among his propositions are two prominent departures from classic dispensationalism. He argues that the fulfillment of OT prophecy has already begun in the current age of the church and that the church is in continuity with the OT messianic program rather than an unrelated mystery parenthesis. These points are made in the Fall/Winter 1992 Zondervan Academic and Professional book catalog.