

Comfort, Comfort Ye My People*Johann Olearius (1611–1684); tr. Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878)*

Comfort, comfort ye my people,
 speak ye peace, thus saith our God;
 comfort those who sit in darkness
 mourning 'neath their sorrow's load.
 Speak ye to Jerusalem
 of the peace that waits for them!
 Tell her that her sins I cover,
 and her warfare now is over.

Yea, her sins our God will pardon,
 blotting out each dark misdeed;
 all that well deserved His anger
 He will no more see nor heed.
 She hath suffered many a day,
 now her griefs have passed away;
 God will change her pining sadness
 into ever-springing gladness.

For Elijah's voice is crying
 in the desert far and near,
 bidding all men to repentance,
 since the kingdom now is here.
 O that warning cry obey,
 now prepare for God a way;
 let the valleys rise to meet Him,
 and the hills bow down to greet Him.

Make ye straight what long was crooked,
 make the rougher places plain,
 let your hearts be true and humble,
 as befits His holy reign;
 for the glory of the LORD
 now o'er earth is shed abroad,
 and all flesh shall see the token
 that His Word is never broken.



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www.centalseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
 900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Indefensible Dispensationalism***Kevin T. Bauder*

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Dispensational theology has gone out of style. Fifty years ago, probably a majority of American evangelicals held some version of dispensationalism. Today, the balance has tilted in the opposite direction. Not only are dispensationalists in the minority, but their system is widely viewed as indefensible, sometimes even by former dispensationalists.

Some of the reasons for this shift are theological. For example, the inaugurated eschatology of Geerhardus Vos and George Eldon Ladd did much to redefine certain key questions about the kingdom of God. Dispensationalists have responded in different ways: some have rejected inaugurated eschatology, while others have adapted their dispensationalism to accommodate it. The effect, however, is to make dispensationalism seem less plausible than it did half-a-century ago.

Other reasons for the shift are social. Dispensationalists have rarely been trained in the most respectable universities and seminaries. They have not typically published through the most academically reputable book houses. Some important evangelical schools like Westminster Theological Seminary have historically opposed dispensationalism. Other traditional seminaries have simply ignored it. In short, dispensationalism has been a commoners' approach to the Bible, a theology that grew up on the wrong side of the tracks. Few within the theological establishment are impressed with its pedigree.

Political forces also play into the decline of dispensationalism. Its adherents are almost always pro-Israel, and they are not always careful to distinguish either ethnic or national Israel from the modern state of Israel. Obviously, people who have greater sympathy for the Arab world, and especially for Palestinian Arabs, look askance at the tendency of some dispensationalists to grant almost unqualified support to the current Israeli regime.

Some of the most important reasons for the decline come from within dispensationalism itself. Dispensational theology exists simultaneously in two overlapping but distinguishable worlds. One is the world of academic

dispensationalism, in which Bible teachers are motivated primarily by the desire to understand the biblical text and to explain it to the Lord's people with precision and care. The other is the world of populist dispensationalism, dominated by television and radio personalities, prophecy wonks, film producers, and novelists. The first has been the world of Alva McLain, John Walvoord, Erich Sauer, Charles Ryrie, and John C. Whitcomb. The second is the world of *A Thief in the Night*, Hal Lindsey, Nicolae Carpathia, and John Hagee.

Many non-dispensationalists make the mistake of thinking that the popularizers represent all of dispensationalism. They do not. In fact, many academic dispensationalists find the popularizers' presentations quite distasteful. At least four behaviors of popular dispensationalists tend to provoke chagrin from committed, thoughtful dispensationalists.

The first is the tendency to convert eschatology into a source of amusement. Eschatology—the biblical study of last things—is a precious field of doctrine, intended to buttress the perseverance of believers even under the most difficult circumstances. Consequently, eschatology should be an ongoing object of reflection and rejoicing for every Christian. But how can this area of doctrine receive proper consideration when it is turned into a plot device for action adventure movies and apocalyptic thrillers? No doubt the filmmakers and novelists believe that they are communicating biblical doctrine to thousands who would otherwise remain unenlightened. In reality, they are trivializing biblical doctrine.

Second is a penchant on the part of some popularizers to mix up their dispensationalism with other weird and unbiblical teachings. For example, John Hagee has opined that Hitler was a distant descendent of Esau, one of a race of “half-breed Jews” who have “persecuted and murdered the Jews” (*Jerusalem Countdown*, 185). Certainly Hagee is not the only person who has held this theory, but publishing this kind of unsubstantiated speculation is the sort of thing that brings dispensationalism into disrepute.

Third, populist dispensationalists typically allow their dispensationalism, and especially their eschatology, to overbalance the rest of the system of faith. Prophecy becomes such an obsession with them that other important biblical teachings are neglected. To be sure, populist dispensationalists believe all the fundamentals of the faith, but such core doctrines as the Trinity, the hypostatic union, and the nature of the atonement seem to occupy their attention much less frequently than (e.g.) the identities of certain prophetic figures. To minds that have been steeped in the full teaching of the Bible, this doctrinal disproportion resembles an arm or leg that has become so swollen as to disfigure the body that supports it.

Fourth, populist dispensationalists exhibit an unfortunate enthusiasm for finding prophetic fulfillments in the latest newspaper headlines. These

fulfillments are taken to indicate that the Rapture is not only imminent, but actually immediate. An imminent Rapture is one that could occur at any moment, but that might not occur for a long time. An immediate Rapture is one that is almost certain to happen very soon. The strength of historic dispensationalism is that it affirms imminence while carefully specifying that the actual timing of the Rapture is not even approximately knowable.

The reason for stressing imminence is that the Bible names no prophetic signs that need to be fulfilled before the Rapture can occur. Consequently, the Lord's people are to be expecting it at any moment. They should always be ready to meet the Lord.

Some populist dispensationalists, however, do believe that signs precede the Rapture. They are looking for cosmic and social upheavals as well as dramatic rejections of Christianity. For them, every occurrence of such events becomes a prophetic fulfillment indicating the immediacy of the Rapture. Recently, they have taken to talking about what they call “the convergence of signs,” meaning that bunches of biblical prophecies are being fulfilled all at once. For them, this means that Jesus is (virtually?) certain to rapture His church in the very near future.

The Bible offers no signs of the Rapture. Any supposed sign is one that somebody either made up or else twisted away from a proper reading of Scripture. The constant drumbeat of supposed fulfillments exposes dispensationalists to ridicule. It also wears down the saints with disappointment. This variety of dispensationalism truly is indefensible.

I've been a dispensationalist since before I knew what the word meant. I can remember looking over my father's shoulder at the notes of his Scofield Reference Bible. Every couple of years my pastor would stretch a huge, Larkinesque dispensational chart across the auditorium, and he would teach through all the dispensations. While I don't agree with every wrinkle of Darby, Gaebelain, Scofield, or Larkin, I believe that dispensationalism is an eminently defensible approach to the Bible. Except for those versions that aren't.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
