

Faith Pulpit

Are We Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth?

John Gerstner's *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991) is the latest of a number of books in recent years claiming to be the ultimate refutation of dispensationalism.

1. The design of the book:

The subtitle states the purpose of the book. As one reviewer notes, the word “critique” “is putting it mildly—the book is more like a butchering” (The Baptist Bulletin, March 1992, p. 38).

The jacket of the book informs the reader that this is “the most extensive and systematic study of Dispensational theology ever published.” J. I. Packer opines that dispensationalism is “seriously astray.”

How does Gerstner view dispensationalism? He describes it as not true premillennialism (p. 68) and identifies it as Arminianism (p. 107), Gnosticism (p. 208), pantheism (p. 136, 143), Pelagianism (p. 243), and, preeminently, as antinomianism. More seriously, dispensationalism is “a cult and not a branch of the Christian church” (p. 150). Dispensationalists are heretics and false teachers (p. 262) who have twisted the gospel (p. 252), are void of the gospel (p. 150), and deny the gospel (p. 169).

In his diatribe against dispensationalism Gerstner is liberal in the use of pejorative terms such as “travesty” (p. 141), “blasphemy” (p. 145), “absurdity” (p. 154) and “scandal” (p. 152). The tone of the book is angry, sarcastic, bitter and derogatory, in stark contrast to such irenic critiques of dispensationalism as Oswald T. Allis' *Prophecy and the Church* (1964).

2. The development of the book:

Gerstner's book is divided into three major parts. Part I comprises a historical sketch of dispensationalism, relating the movement to Church history, with special emphasis on its development in America and its relationship to the Reformed churches.

Mistakenly, Gerstner insists that J. N. Darby is the primary source of American dispensationalism. Interestingly, he considers dispensationalism to be "an accident of history," (p. 252) a remarkable position for one who is a strong defender of the Reformed position with its emphasis on providence and the sovereignty of God in history and salvation. Part II covers the areas of philosophy and apologetics, including a discussion of dispensational hermeneutics. Gerstner insists that "it is impossible to interpret Scripture in a consistently literal fashion" (p. 100) and ridicules dispensationalism for "spoof-texting" (p. 83, 99, 100).

In part III Gerstner attempts to show that dispensationalism is spurious Calvinism, not subscribing to any of its five points (ch. 7), that it denies the gospel (ch. 8), undermines the gospel in its emphasis on a literal kingdom (ch. 9), denies the gospel with its distinction between Israel and the church (ch. 10). Dispensationalism is antinomian (ch. 11–12). The concluding chapter argues for Lordship salvation, paying high tribute to John MacArthur's book and position.

3. The discussions of the book:

Gerstner's book has been reviewed to date in the following periodicals: *Dispensational Distinctives* (Sept.—Oct. 1991), pp. 1–2; *The Baptist Bulletin* (March 1992), pp. 38–39; *Reformation Today*, (Jan.—Feb. 1992), pp. 24–32. In the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, (Autumn 1991), pp. 59–70, Zane C. Hodges reacts to Gerstner's Reformed dogmatism with a review entitled, "Calvinism ex Cathedra." Dr. John A. Witmer, archivist at Dallas Theological Seminary, rises to Gerstner's challenge, ("show me the fundamental error in what I teach," p. 263) by writing an incisive two-part analysis of Gerstner's book. In *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April.—June 1992), Witmer deals with Gerstner's inaccuracies in fact and theology. In the July.—Sept. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, he interacts with the theological issues raised by Gerstner, such as hermeneutics, the offer of the kingdom, the way of salvation, the design of the atonement and the relationship of premillennialism to dispensationalism.

4. The defects of the book:

Errors in fact abound in the book, as Witmer demonstrates. Gerstner, praised by R. C. Sproul as "a world-class historian" (p. ix), says, for example, that Wheaton College was established around the turn of the century (p. 52). In fact, it was founded in 1860. William Pettingill is called a Plymouth Brethren dispensationalist (p. 71). He actually was a Baptist pastor.

Gerstner misquotes *The Ryrie Study Bible's* definition of election as a "free temporal," rather than a "pre-temporal" choice (p. 114). Gerstner then criticizes Ryrie for his faulty terminology and theology,

saying the mistake “defies comprehension” (p. 115). What really defies comprehension is how Gerstner, to whom Sproul ascribes “careful and painstaking research” (p. ix) could publish such mistakes, misquotations and misrepresentations. As Witmer observes, faulty research like this reflects “at least an indifference to accuracy... these errors place Gerstner’s treatment of dispensationalism and his charges against it under a cloud” (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, April—June, 1992, p. 136).

5. The distortions of the book:

While crediting his salvation to the witness of a dispensationalist (p. 1), Gerstner attacks the system mercilessly. He builds several straw men. His charge of antinomianism permeates the book, from the foreword (p. x) to the last paragraph (p. 272). Antinomianism is the view that “the Christian, justified by faith, has no obligation toward the moral law” (*Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, p. 27). Because dispensationalists insist that the believer is free from the Mosaic law, including the ten commandments (2 Cor. 3:7,11), they do not thereby reject God’s moral requirements. As Ryrie notes “although the believer has been set free from the law of Moses, he is nevertheless under the law—the law of Christ” (*The Grace of God*, p. 105).

Gerstner’s charge that dispensational preaching is characterized by “a conspicuous absence of moral stress” (p. 250) is untrue. We are saved by grace through faith unto good works. Gerstner’s accusation that dispensationalism teaches two ways of salvation grows out of his premise as a Covenant theologian that “the faith of Old Testament believers . . . can be meaningfully described as faith in Jesus Christ” (p. 164, Gerstner’s emphasis). Gerstner recognizes that dispensationalists claim to be teaching only one way of salvation (p. 155), but he insists that “their system of doctrine relentlessly militates against this” (p. 151).

The dispensationalist maintains that salvation in every age is based on the death of Christ, that it is appropriated by faith but “the content of faith changes in the various dispensations.” (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 123, emphasis in the original). Adam and Eve did not understand as fully as we do God’s provision for salvation through Christ’s sacrifice. But they, along with the other Old Testament saints, trusted in God’s promise and were saved (Gen. 15:6). One of the more annoying features of the book is that Gerstner recognizes what men like Ironside, Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie are teaching but then he charges them with subscribing to a totally different position than the one they clearly state because, as he sees it, their theology or cold logic forces them to that position, whether they know it or not.

6. The demonstration of the book:

Gerstner maintains that the “dispensational defection from the gospel has come to a head in the Lordship controversy” (p. 252). One of the beneficial byproducts of the book is that it demonstrates the integral connection between Reformed theology and Lordship salvation. Reformed theology teaches

that regeneration precedes salvation. The regenerated individual is thus enabled to yield to the Lordship of Christ in order to be saved.

Discussing Gerstner's view that "good works may be said to be a condition for obtaining salvation in that they inevitably accompany genuine faith" (p. 210), Hodges concludes that "in Reformed thought good works are a condition for salvation" (p. 68, emphasis is his). Dedication is not just possible before salvation but a prerequisite for salvation. This is why John MacArthur can say, "Forsaking one's self for Christ's sake is not an optional step of discipleship subsequent to conversion: it is the sine qua non of saving faith" (The Gospel According to Jesus, p. 135). MacArthur shows the influence of Covenant theology at this point. The normal dispensational understanding is that the Holy Spirit moves on or quickens the individual, enabling him to believe (Acts 16:14). At the moment of salvation the Holy Spirit regenerates the individual, creating in him a new nature which prompts submission to the Lordship of Christ and produces good works (Phil. 2:13).

7. The disappointment of the book:

Gerstner has blessed many with his earlier writings, such as A Bible Inerrancy Primer, A Predestination Primer, Theology for Everyman and The Theology of the Major Sects. Now, in his mid-seventies, the author has written his magnum opus (which the publisher has mercifully trimmed from the original 1,008 pages to 275 pages). For thirty years Dr. Gerstner taught at the liberal Pittsburgh Theological Seminary (1950–80). Instead of leveling his theological guns at the liberals who are the real enemies of the gospel, as Gerstner knows from long personal experience, he attacks his dispensational brethren as heretics and false teachers. Gerstner accuses the dispensationalists of having departed from the gospel, yet it is they, who, more than any other group of people in America, have rightly divided the Word of truth. Through their ministry they have brought millions to an understanding of the Word of God. Through their witness they have shown them the way of salvation through faith in Christ. One of these individuals is John Gerstner.

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