

**High Hopes for 21st-Century Dispensationalism**

**A Response to "Hope and Dispensationalism:  
An Historical Overview and Assessment" (by Gary L. Nebeker)**

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by

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## Introductory Remarks

I am grateful for this opportunity to engage the work of my good friend and former classmate, Gary Nebeker. I will say right away that his piece, "Hope and Dispensationalism: An Historical Overview and Assessment" is characterized by the sort of carefulness, insightfulness, and thoughtfulness for which he was well known among his doctoral colleagues at Dallas Seminary. I consider it a privilege to respond to this piece; I thank Darrell Bock for extending me the invitation to do so.

My response to Nebeker's paper is structured around two major themes: (1) challenges for dispensationalism today which emerge from certain patterns in its history (as surveyed by Nebeker *et al.*), particularly the challenge to provide "hope" to contemporary Christians in a biblically accurate and well-nuanced way; and (2) suggested strategies for promoting dispensationalism's future exegetical, theological, and ministerial success (in light of Nebeker's conclusions and questions).

## Challenges for Dispensationalism Today in Light of Its History

It would seem that dispensationalists, from the beginning, have understood the definition of "hope" to contain "escapist" denotations and connotations. Premillennialism and pretribulational rapturism initially grew popular in contexts where the circumstances were dire, when believers found themselves caught in a protracted period of social and/or cultural crisis. Though Nebeker does not mention this point specifically, one can see this point clearly in the early dispensationalists he mentions: Darby joined the Plymouth

Brethren when he became disillusioned with the Anglican church's disenfranchisement of the very group of people to whom he was trying to minister;<sup>1</sup> James Brookes and C. I. Scofield were both ministers within the Southern Presbyterian Church just before, during, and after the Civil War;<sup>2</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer was another such Southern Presbyterian;<sup>3</sup> other early dispensationalists—as well as other early premillennialists—fit this pattern, too.<sup>4</sup>

Dispensationalists would do well to observe the power of socio-cultural influences on doctrinal development.<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to avoid these influences, though their effect does not,

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<sup>1</sup>Darby was ministering among the Irish, with whom the 19th century Church of England seemed none too concerned; cf. biographical information in Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Carl E. Sanders, II, "The Premillennial Faith of James Brookes" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 97-152; Charles Gallaudet Trumbull, *The Life Story of C.I. Scofield* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1920).

<sup>3</sup>See John David Hannah, "The Social and Intellectual History of the Origins of the Evangelical Theological College" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Texas at Dallas, 1988), 72-367.

<sup>4</sup>James Moorehead demonstrates convincingly that postmillennialism gave way to premillennialism as social conditions worsened, especially in the post-civil war South; see James H. Moorehead, "Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought: 1800-1880," *Journal of American Religion* 71 (December 1984): 524-42; *idem*, "The Erosion of Postmillennialism in American Religious Thought, 1865-1925," *CH* 53 (March 1984): 61-77.

<sup>5</sup>For a cogent summary of the issues among contemporary epistemologists and hermeneuticians, see Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987). For appropriations of certain post-modern epistemological insights into evangelical hermeneutics, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980); Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987); Brian J. Walsh and Richard Middleton, *Truth is Stranger Than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Stanley Hauerwas, Nancy Murphy and Mark Nation (eds.), *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994); Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999); and Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000). For an interesting discussion between a post-liberal theologian and an evangelical theologian concerning what is the significance of history and tradition and what is their proper role in the formulation of doctrine, see George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1984) and Alister E. McGrath, *The Genesis of Doctrine* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

of course, mean that the direction a certain doctrinal development takes is wrong. A theme of "escape" is clearly present in biblical teaching.<sup>6</sup> The harder question is, "How closely does the dispensationalist emphasis on "escape" align itself with the biblical emphasis?"

I suggest that, during times of persecution, oppression, or crisis, the traditional dispensationalist emphasis may be helpful; it may capture the virtue, which Scripture encourages, of living with steadfast confidence in the future despite contrary circumstances.<sup>7</sup> The "escapist" emphasis in dispensationalism seems prone to going awry, however, during times of prosperity.

Specifically, dispensationalist "escapism" seems prone to degenerating into blithe disregard for others who are suffering in this world (as opposed to being transported, in the twinkling of an eye, to the next). In its worst forms, dispensationalist "escapism" reassured prosperous American 20th-century Christians that they need not worry about the "cares of this world"—cares that likely were being shared at the time by others rather than themselves anyway—

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<sup>6</sup>E.g, Luke 21:36; 1 Thess.5:1-11.

<sup>7</sup>Of course, even a good thing can be taken too far. At the outbreak of World War I, vociferous objections were voiced against the "lessons" some pre-tribulational rapturists suggested could be taken from the war's horrors; apparently, some were suggesting that the more stringent the difficulties of the world, the clearer the indications that Christ was soon returning. One phrase that was lit upon was R. A. Torrey's, "[T]he darker the night gets, the lighter my heart gets." Premillennialists who offered such "comforts" were accused of being unpatriotic, of undermining American Christian resolve to stand up to evil, and of discouraging people from making the awful sacrifices necessary to defeat the Enemy. See Spectator [a pseudonym], "Premillennialism and Patriotism," *PrStand* 59 (28 August 1918): 5; S. F. Tenney, "The Millennium and the Second Coming of Christ," *PrStand* 59 (25 September 1918): 4; J. R. Bridges and R. C. Reed, "Editorial: Premillennialism and Patriotism," *PrStand* 59 (2 October 1918): 3; *idem*, "Editorial: Rejoiceth Not in Iniquity," *PrStand* 62 (22 June 1921): 3; and *idem*, "Rejoiceth Not in Iniquity [Part 2]," *PrStand* 62 (6 July 1921): 3; cf. the replies to these articles by premillennialists: Rollin T. Chafer, "Unfounded Charges Against the Patriotic Loyalty of Premillenarians," *PrStand* 59 (13 November 1918): 9-10; R. A. Torrey, "Dr. Torrey's Reply," *PrStand* 62 (6 July 1921): 3; Addison Hogue, "Rejoiceth Not in Iniquity [A Reply]," *PrStand* 62 (13 July 1921): 3; and M. F. Daniels, "Illustrious Heretics," *PrStand* 62 (14 September 1921): 9.

and that God could be counted on to rescue those that really counted before such cares would become too serious.<sup>8</sup> Such an attitude smacks far more of hedonistic American materialism than it does of biblical forbearance.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, to give a pointed "for instance," dispensationalists might be excused for not being first to join the cause for basic human and civil rights, but their consistently being among the last to join such causes I, for one, find inexcusable—this is an embarrassment that, frankly, was left for my generation of dispensationalists, only now at this late stage, to try to rectify.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps younger dispensationalists merit some understanding, therefore, if we find ourselves less than enamored by

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<sup>8</sup>As Nebeker mentions, for some late-20th century dispensationalists, "the reason the 'the blessed hope' is 'blessed' is because the Church will be spared the judgment of the Great Tribulation" (11). Dispensationalists have been fairly consistent in arguing that the "comfort" of 1 Thess. 4:18 is "meaningless," "devoid of real meaning" if Paul expected those Christians to endure the Great Tribulation. See *The New Scofield Reference Bible: 1967 Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1292-93nn); James M. Boice, *The Last and Future World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 41-42; John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 165. Cf. also Charles Ryrie's rationale for why the "kingdom ethic" of the Sermon on the Mount must be postponed, for "if the laws of the Sermon are to be obeyed today they could not be taken literally, for . . . every businessman would go bankrupt giving to those who ask of him" (*Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 106-07).

<sup>9</sup>Gleason Archer's point is well taken: "[I]t is highly questionable whether personal escape from the agonies of the Tribulation is what the Scripture is really talking about when it refers to the comfort and encouragement afforded by the Rapture. Even in our own age, prior to the commencement of the seventieth week, there are many of God's beloved saints who are allowed to pass through the agonies of malignant cancer or heart disease. These things involve excruciating anguish like that described for those who pass through the Tribulation. . . . The avoidance of suffering and distress on earth is hardly the highest level of comfort that the Scripture has to promise us" ("Mid-Seventieth Week Rapture," in *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?*, ed. Richard R. Reiter [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 134). Still, Archer reveals, too, how strong is the sociological force that pushes one to accommodate one's view to the culture in which one is teaching or writing; despite his clearly seeing the problems with the "comfort" pre-tribulation rapturists offer from 1 Thess. 4:17-18, he cannot resist also mentioning: "It cannot be denied that this line of reasoning has considerable appeal, for it sounds very reassuring to be guaranteed exemption from the griefs and horrors of the Tribulation described in the Olivet Discourse (Matt. 24:15-22) and in Revelation 6-18. This element of comfort is also built in to the mid-seventieth week theory as well . . ." [!] (133-34).

<sup>10</sup>This point was made before this very group three years ago, by Robert A. Pyne, "The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times," paper presented to the Dispensational Study Group, Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA, November 1997.

the fine chronological charts of prophecy that characterized dispensationalisms past, which, so we find in historical hindsight, were constructed to the neglect of what should have been more pressing concerns. In view of the less-than-impressive history of dispensationalism on such social and civic issues,<sup>11</sup> I appreciate the inaugurated kingdom ethic that is advocated by progressive dispensationalists today. Without malice aforethought, I confess that I have sometimes wondered whether dispensationalism *without* this inaugurated kingdom ethic might deserve, in the 21st century, to go the way of the Montanists, the Irvingites, the original Millerites, Herbert W. Armstrong and the Worldwide Church of God, and others found today only among the bones of the theologically extinct, who by the verdict of history have been declared too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.<sup>12</sup>

Nebeker suggests that dispensationalism of the mid-20th century went through a "scholastic" stage, which may further account for why, as a theological system, dispensationalism was so unresponsive to social injustices and moral ills of the time period while it simultaneously refined some of the more arcane aspects of its ideology. While I think he is right in this suggestion, I also

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>E.g., when Charles Ryrie published his classic defense of *Dispensationalism Today* in 1965, the institution at which he taught was still three years away from admitting its *first* African-American student, in flagrant violation of civil rights laws that had been on the books for a decade. I would not mention this, except that Ryrie has actually continued to defend the traditional dispensationalist (escapist) disregard for social and civic issues in our day, and has gone on record as being opposed to progressive dispensationalist concerns in these areas, warning, "Holistic redemption can easily lead to placing unbalanced, if not wrong, priorities on political action, social agendas, and improving the structures of society" (*Dispensationalism* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], 176). Can we really afford to grow no wiser from our past, egregious inaction, which has given evangelicalism, in general, a "black eye"? It is the recalcitrant refusal to learn from our past mistakes that I am suggesting should be extinguished in 21st-century dispensationalism.

see at least two other factors at work in the further development of dispensationalism's "escapist" view of hope.

First, dispensationalism's traditional fascination with "predictions" seems to share a remarkable similarity with modernist scientific methodology, which uses "the ability to predict results" to confirm or deny its theories.<sup>13</sup> This similarity seems to manifest yet another point at which dispensationalism and Baconianism were intermingled.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, once the atom bomb was dropped on Japan, once Israel became a nation that again physically occupied the "literal" Promised Land, and once the events of history seemed more and more to take on a truly apocalyptic character, dispensationalists felt vindicated; they even may have felt that their biblical and theological "theory" had, by the 1950s-60s, received veritable "scientific confirmation."

It is this quest for "scientific confirmation" that seems to be in back of the dispensationalist interest in eschatology, not, as some of dispensationalism's detractors have insinuated, a sorcerous curiosity in fortune telling.<sup>15</sup> A second factor seems to

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<sup>13</sup>Cf. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 293-96.

<sup>14</sup>See "Dispensationalism and the Baconian Ideal," in George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 55-62; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *CH* 24 (1955): 257-72; Jerry Weinberger, *Science, Faith, and Politics: Francis Bacon and the Utopian Roots of the Modern Age (A Commentary of Bacon's "Advancement of Learning")* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); and Charles Whitney, *Francis Bacon and Modernity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).

<sup>15</sup>See, e.g., William Masselink, *Why Thousand Years?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 7-39; Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* ((Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 16-54; Dave MacPherson, *The Great Rapture Hoax* (Fletcher, NC: New Puritan Library, 1983); and John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 16-56; see also Albertus Pieters, *A Candid Examination of the Scofield Bible* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1938); *idem*, *The Lamb, the Woman and the Dragon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1937); *idem*, *The Ten Tribes in History and Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1934); and Joseph M. Canfield, *The Incredible Scofield and His Book* (Asheville, NC: By the author, 1984).

have fueled dispensationalism's interest in eschatology to a level nearing obsession: in the marketplace of evangelical Christian ideas, prophecy sells.<sup>16</sup> And many a buck has been made from even patently false predictions. This had provided a temptation that, for some, has seemed just too hard to resist.

These two factors combined somewhere in the mid-20th century to give dispensationalism a heavy boost of confidence and ambition, which in some cases did produce a definite "overassurance" in prophetic schemes. At the beginning of the 21st century, therefore, we can look back and see, not just the successful predictions of Israel back in the land and apocalyptic weapons of mass destruction appearing like a red horse on the horizon, but also

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<sup>16</sup>Dispensationalist Hal Lindsey's, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970) was a best seller; this work took apocalyptic speculation in dispensationalist eschatology to new heights, correlating such prophetic speculations with World War II events, with Cold War events, and with other current events of the time. This Revised-Essentialist dispensationalist work continued an apocalyptic tradition that seems to have begun with William E. Blackstone's, *Jesus Is Coming* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), the *Scotfield Reference Bible* (1909), Isaac M. Haldeman's, *The Signs of the Times* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1910) and Clarence Larkin's *Dispensational Truth* (Philadelphia: Clarence Larkin Estate, 1918). These works, along with the publication (also in the early 1900s) of *Our Hope* (edited by Arno C. Gaebelien) popularized dispensationalist eschatology to such an extent that it became pervasive in the thinking of (especially lay) fundamentalists-evangelicals. Lindsey's book is perhaps the most well-known of a series of similar revised-essentialist dispensationalist apocalyptic speculations, which have continued to the present day; cf. Wilbur M. Smith, *The Atomic Age and the Word of God* (Boston, MA: W. A. Wilde Co., 1948); John F. Walvoord and John E. Walvoord, *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976); J. Dwight Pentecost, *Will Man Survive?: The Bible Looks at Man's Future* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980); Charles H. Dyer, *The Rise of Babylon: Sign of the End Times* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1991); John Hagee, *Beginning of the End: The Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the Coming of Antichrist* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996); Ed Dobson, *The End: Why Jesus Could Return by A.D. 2000* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997). Such apocalyptic speculation clearly carries a certain entertainment value; the *Thief in the Night* film series (Des Moines, IA: Mark IV Pictures, 1972), and the more recent *Left Behind* series of fictional books by dispensational author, Tim LaHaye (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1995-99), as well as dispensationalist television shows (e.g., hosted by Jack Van Impe, Zola Levitt) have capitalized on this entertainment value and, in the process, have further popularized dispensationalist eschatology. The very genre has come to be recognized largely as the "bread and butter" of dispensationalism; for assessments of this phenomenon, see Douglas Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1982); Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, and Richard V. Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide* (Grand Rapids: Baker 1999).

a good half century's worth of mistakes, mishaps, false alarms, and failed predictions. The Rapture did not occur in 1988, and neither Lenin nor Lennon, the Kaiser, Hitler, Mussolini, Kissinger, Kruschev, Brezhnev, Andropov, nor Gorbachev turned out to be the Antichrist—though, granted, that thing on Gorbachev's head still does kind of give me the willies, and the jury is still out on Saddam Hussein; the same goes for the artist formerly known as the artist formerly known as Prince (no, that's not a dittography). In any case, as to Nebeker's question about how correct is the charge which accuses dispensationalism of being "inherently guilty of historical and theological 'overassurance,'" I think the 20th century record pretty much speaks for itself.

#### Strategies and Suggestions for Improving Dispensationalism's Present and Future Viability

As best I can tell, little good has come of dispensationalists' emphasis on a pre-tribulational rapture up to now; there is promise for even less good to come of such emphasis in the future. While dispensationalists, in general, need not be discouraged from sharing their opinions on this question if they wish, I do recommend that those inclined to treat this opinion as though it were on the level of orthodox doctrine or dogma should cease and desist.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>I am here deliberately employing the categorizations described by Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson (*Who Needs Theology?* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996], 73: "Over the centuries theologians have developed three main categories of Christian beliefs: *dogma*, *doctrine* and *opinion*. A belief is considered dogma if it seems essential to the gospel. . . . A doctrine . . . is a belief that is considered important without being essential. . . . A belief is relegated to the status of opinion when it is considered interesting but relatively unimportant to the faith of the church. One is allowed to believe whatever one wishes about the matter so long as it does not conflict with a dogma or doctrine. Denial of an opinion is simply a difference of interpretation."

Consider: virtually anything put in the blank to complete the following sentence ends up being wrong: "Belief in a pretribulational rapture is crucially important, because \_\_\_\_\_." (Try a couple.) E.g., "Belief in a pre-tribulational rapture is crucially important, because it gives Christians reassurance in the goodness of God and His commitment to not allow such Tribulation to overtake His children"? If that is the "blessed hope" that 1 Thess. 4 offers, then what hope can then be given to the family whose son did *not* escape the explosion on the U.S.S. Cole, to the family of the young mother who did *not* escape terminal breast cancer, or to the Christian couple who prayed faithfully for years to conceive a child, only to then *not* escape pregnancy complications, giving them a stillborn baby? If "escape from Tribulation" is what Paul has in mind when he says, "Wherefore comfort one another with these words," then someone needs to explain what comfort can be offered to the thousands of Sudanese and Alabanian Christians, their only crime being an unwavering Christian faith within a predominately Muslim country, who have had their teenage daughters kidnapped from their homes to be gang-raped before being sold into prostitution and slavery. Someone please help me understand how the "comfort" of 1 Thess. 4 could ever be truly comforting in light of Idi Amin's reign of terror which was applied to Christians with such vengeance. The doors of upper-middle-class evangelical Christian homes were busted down in the middle of the night, so that gangs of drunken, laughing soldiers could then herd whole families of men, women, and children into the parlor or living room where, one-by-one, they were sexually assaulted, their tongues cut out, their eyes gouged out, they were forced to eat feces and/or

the amputated appendages of their spouses or children, only to be killed anyway before the crying eyes of their toddler and primary age children—children whom these soldiers, in some cases, allowed to live just for spite, in order to inflict the cruelty of tortured memories on them throughout the course of their remaining days.<sup>18</sup>

Someone please explain how the so-called Great Tribulation could be any worse for those particular Christian people. Someone please explain what comfort the alleged promise of "escaping" the so-called "Great Tribulation" is supposed to bring, if the distinct possibility remains that such "Less-Than-Great" tribulations may come, which Christians should well expect to endure in their full strength?

Is it not ironic that the writer of the very letter which dispensationalists have claimed teaches Christians to "take comfort" and "have hope" in the knowledge that they will escape the horrors of "the Tribulation" was himself martyred by an emperor known to use Christians as human torches to light his nightly strolls through his gardens? Is it not ironic that the "pre trib rapture" view—a view that was virtually unheard of before the mid-19th century<sup>19</sup>—was

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<sup>18</sup>The story behind the martyrdom of Christians in Uganda under Idi Amin is told in graphic, numbing detail, by F. Kefa Sampangi, *A Distant Grief* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1979).

<sup>19</sup>I have added the word "virtually," in deference to Timothy Demy and Thomas Ice, who argue that Pseudo-Ephraem, an obscure sermon fragment from the early middle ages, alludes to a pre-tribulational rapture ("The Rapture and an Early Medieval Citation," *BibSac* 152 [July-September 1995]: 306-17). I will clarify that I am not convinced by their argument, though I suppose one can find most anything in the eschatological musings of the medieval period, if one looks hard enough. When I first read this document (Pseudo-Ephraem), I had some of the same questions that, apparently, have been forwarded to Ice, independently, by a letter from Robert Gundry (cf. "Afterword: A Response by Thomas Ice to the Gundry Critique," in *The Return*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 67-73). Of course, if we assume that Ice is completely right about this reference, how far does that really advance the pre-trib rapture case anyway? No one can argue that this sermon reflects a consensus before, during, or after its writing (regardless of what date one assigns it, whether 373 A.D., 606 A.D., any time in between, or afterward). Do we really want to suggest that the historical underpinnings for a pre-trib. rapture view lay in *Pseudo-*

popularized by dispensationalists during the very century in which more Christians were tortured and killed for their faith than in all the other centuries combined? Something seems amiss in this brand of "hope" that dispensationalists have touted so dogmatically, which to me looks suspiciously like the "American dream" (a vision conceived in materialistic paganism, which Jesus expressly warned against—Matthew 6:24).

What about the pre-trib rapture's significance for undergirding Scripture's teaching on "imminency"? So, once again employing our "fill-in-the-blank" test: "Belief in a pre-tribulational rapture is crucially important, because only a pre-trib rapture preserves Scripture's teaching on imminency." Is this really true? I am not convinced that the "imminency argument" was ever really a good one for pretribulational rapturism anyway, since all dispensationalists must concede that the sort of "chronological imminency" which 20th century dispensationalists have emphasized was impossible for the original audience anyway; everyone acknowledges that the "Rapture" could not happen until a couple of events had happened which Jesus had predicted concerning his disciples and immediate audience in the first century had come to pass.<sup>20</sup> But even beyond that, one simply does not need a pre-trib rapture to get the

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anything? We are almost better off granting that the view may have been popularized by Margaret MacDonald's trances. . . .

<sup>20</sup>E.g., the temple had to be destroyed, according to Jesus in Matthew 24:2; Peter would die a martyr's death, according to John 21:18-19. The "rapture" *could not* have taken place until these two events (at least) had come to pass, meaning that the "imminency" which dispensationalism traditionally has emphasized could not take effect until these two events (at least) had come to pass. Of course, once one is a century a more away from these writings, the point seems moot. Nevertheless, the fact that the New Testament writings *could not* have had the emphasis on "imminency" *with the original readers* that dispensationalist theology has consistently emphasized seems significant. Is not a perspective inherently suspicious that could not have been shared by the original writers and readers, especially given the traditional dispensationalist emphasis on "authorial intent"?

sort of "imminency" that encourages holy living. If I deny a pre-trib rapture, I may not be able to stand before a congregation, stare ceiling-ward, my face piously aglow, and say, "Before even the end of this meeting tonight, the Lord may come back and snatch us all away to meet Him in the air." Nonetheless, as all Christians recognize, I could meet the Lord by way of heart attack before I finish this very sentence—a historicist post-millennialist who believes we are still three stages away from "the end" can affirm that. Practically speaking, therefore, what further "imminency" does pre-tribulational rapturism add?

In the final analysis, I simply am not convinced that Scripture teaches a pre-tribulational rapture view as clearly and as incontrovertibly as past dispensationalists have thought. It is not that I think the pre-trib rapture view is undeniably wrong; it may be right, and there is a side of me that "hopes" it is right. It is the cocksureness of traditional dispensationalism in demanding that it is the *only* view that *could* be right that bothers me.

It is intriguing to me that pre-tribulationalists seem not to have noticed that, once they conceded Matthew 24 to post-tribulationalists, they had given away one of their strongest passages.<sup>21</sup> 1 Thessalonians 4 never mentions the Tribulation

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<sup>21</sup>The story behind this deserves to be told in greater detail than I am able to give here. Briefly, dispensationalist handling of Matthew 24 seems to have evolved in three stages. (1) Early dispensationalists latched on to the descriptions of Matthew 24:36-51, which speak of the Son of Man's "not knowing that day or hour" and which gives graphic descriptions of one person being snatched away while the others are left behind, as being a reference to the "secret Rapture" of the saints before the tribulation. *Prima facie*, there is no other passage in Scripture that could be more easily assimilated into a dispensationalist description of "the Rapture." E.g., see J. N. Darby, *Collected Writings* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1882), 2:290-300, 11:118-67, 24:219-32, 30:166-67, 286-301; William E. Blackstone, *Jesus is Coming* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1908), 63-66, 135; W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Outline Studies in the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1914), 353; James Robinson Graves, *The Work of Christ in the Covenant of Redemption Consummated in Seven Dispensations* (Texarkana, AR-TX: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1883), 406-08; Clarence Larkin, *Dispensational Truth* (Glenside, PA: Clarence Larkin Estate, 1918),

specifically, nor does it mention the chronological timing of events at all. As held by most contemporary dispensationalists, therefore, the pre-trib rapture is a doctrine earning not so much as an honorable mention by Jesus, is a doctrine supposedly revealed for the first time to Paul, and whose chronology can only be determined by vague inference. I can certainly tolerate this scheme being suggested as an opinion, but is this really the sort of tenet that should appear in doctrinal statements of institutions, organizations, and churches, implying it is essential, a viable test of orthodoxy?

To their credit, dispensationalists of the 20th century

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79-80. (2) As debates with partial rapturists and post-tribulationists grew more intense (see Larry Pettegrew, "The Rapture Debate at the Niagara Bible Conference," *BibSac* 157 [July-September 2000]: 331-47), pre-tribulationist rapturists backed off from using Matt. 24 as a proof-text. Some dispensationalists claimed that Matt. 24 contained a "double interpretation," one referring to "the church," one referring to "Israel" (see C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Bible Correspondence School*, (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1907), 176-86; *idem*, *Scotfield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1917], 1032-36nn, 1269n; *idem*, *Dr. C.I. Scofield's Question Box* [Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1917], 129-30; *idem*, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* [Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing Co., 1921]; also cf. Harry A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Matthew* [New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1948], 325). Most dispensationalists, however, uncomfortable with the explicit "after the tribulation" chronological marking of Matt. 24:29, and also with the difficulty of arguing for (an amillennialist-sounding hermeneutic of) "recapitulation," abandoned the three-fold division of Matt. 24 into three sections answering separate aspects of the disciples original questions, and simply conceded the entire chapter to post-tribulationists—under this new dispensationalist interpretation, therefore, Matt. 24 did not address the "rapture" at all (see Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Olivet Discourse* [Greenville, SC: The Gospel Hour, 1925], 76-108; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948], 5:128-40). (3) Dispensationalist abandonment of Matt. 24 as a proof-text for a pre-trib rapture became so complete that, by 1999, Stanley Toussaint could say matter-of-factly, "All non-pretribulationists place both the church and the rapture in Matthew 24. . . . However, pretribulationists exempt both the church and the rapture from Matthew 24" ("Are the Church and the Rapture in Matthew 24?" in *The Return*, ed. Thomas Ice and Timothy J. Demy [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999], 122). Toussaint's statement is generally correct, although one can still occasionally find pre-trib rapturist arguments from Matt. 24 (e.g., J. F. Strombeck, *First the Rapture* [Moline, IL: Strombeck Agency, 1950], 64-77; Tracy L. Howard, "The Literary Unity of 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11," *GTJ* 9 [1988]: 163-90). Especially in more popular level works, use of Matt. 24 has always been prevalent, meaning that dispensationalists could take advantage of the popular perception that Matt. 24's "snatching" referred to the rapture, even though the argument, in the minds even of many dispensationalist scholars, had actually been debunked. Howard's argument (*op. cit.*) is a bit unusual today, therefore, in that he argues for a pre-trib rapture on the basis of a correlation (rather than a separation) between Matt. 24 and 1 Thess. 4. The correlation of 1 Thess. 4 and Matt. 24 is not unusual, however, within current New Testament scholarship outside dispensationalism (cf. D. A. Carson, *Matthew: Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 1984], 488-95).

took seriously the exhortation of Revelation to read its visions with "a mind having wisdom" (Rev. 13:8; 17:9). They proceeded then to carefully calculate the numbers they found therein and to correlate the visions of the Apocalypse with other scriptural teaching and with other conclusions which they had reached by means of their dispensational theology. All this may have been very helpful, but for one thing. After they were through, some dispensationalists seemed to suggest that they had in fact achieved the "wisdom" to which the book of Revelation encourages its readers to aspire. But if one insists that one's own calculations alone reflect the "wisdom" of Scripture, if one thus proclaims oneself "wise," does not one then run the risk of forgetting the warning of Proverbs 26:12: "Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."

Let me be blunt. I think we dispensationalists should begin the 21st century by climbing down off our high horses on this one. Whereas Nebeker clarifies that his view need not "foster a kind of 'rapture agnosticism'" (27), my own view suggests that such "rapture agnosticism" is the only responsible stance we can take until we actually see Jesus' face.

Contrary to the apocalyptic escapism of traditional dispensationalism, biblical hope is of a kind that instills in one the ability to "endure to the end" of what could be difficult trials, severe testings, torturous persecutions, and, yes, great tribulations. The hope that the Bible holds out does not tacitly condone the fat-cat American pew-sitter's social and spiritual indolence by encouraging him to believe that God, after all, understands his aversion to suffering and sacrifice, and is with him

in his pursuit of creature comforts. Rather, biblical hope motivates the believer to give up the treasures and pleasures of this life in order to invest in the life to come; and contrary to what most American evangelicals seem to think, Jesus told us explicitly that we cannot, in fact, invest in both. Biblical hope imparts to one that understanding, which only the mature Christian can maintain with confidence, that down here we may be pierced with many a thorn, but it will be worth it all when we see Christ.

### Conclusion

True to character, Gary Nebeker has included in this presentation thoughtful questions and admonitions, framed in the most gentle way possible. His survey of dispensational history, nonetheless, surfaces some odious aspects of dispensationalism as it has existed up to now; and the answers to his questions point to some stark realities about the way dispensationalism must adjust itself in the 21st century, if it is to remain a worthwhile contingent of evangelical thinking and life. I hope that such questions as Nebeker raises will not only be tolerated by dispensationalists, but actually encouraged. My hope is that 21st-century dispensational institutions, organizations, and churches will be safe places for future dispensationalists to think, to work, and to hash out such questions as Nebeker raises. If they are, and if dispensationalists like Nebeker are any indication of dispensationalism's future, then I believe that dispensationalists today may maintain great hope that their heritage will not only survive, but thrive in the days ahead.