

WHO IS WRONG?
A REVIEW OF JOHN GERSTNER'S
WRONGLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH¹

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Dr. John H. Gerstner, a recognized scholar with impressive credentials, has issued a call for dispensationalists to admit the glaring gaps between their system and orthodox Christianity. However, his presentation of dispensationalism contains shortcomings that necessitate this special review article to point out some of these and to challenge dispensationalists to publicize a greater clarification of their position. Many of the assumptions that undergird Dr. Gerstner's case against dispensationalism are in error. These faults are magnified by a number of major weaknesses in his argument. A review of the book shows how the author's treatment of his subject deteriorates even more through ten representative theological misstatements. The work is of such a misleading nature that a retraction of some kind seems to be in order.

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General Anthony C. McAuliffe, commanding officer of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, found his troops surrounded by the Germans early in the famous World War II Battle of the Bulge

¹John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991). This volume greatly expands on Dr. Gerstner's previous brief presentation of these issues in his booklet *A Primer on Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1982).

(December, 1944). The opposing Nazi general, sensing quick victory, sent word to surrender immediately. McAuliffe replied with what is now one of the most famous one-word responses in military history, "Nuts!" In love, that also is our response to Dr. Gerstner's call for the surrender of "dispensationalism."

This strong retort, borrowed from WW II, answers R. C. Sproul's (President of Ligonier Ministries and a disciple of Dr. Gerstner) initial comments in the Foreword (p. ix).

This bomb`unlike missiles that suffer from dubious guidance systems and are liable to land on civilian populations wreaking havoc indiscriminately`is delivered with pinpoint accuracy into the laps of dispensational scholars.

According to Sproul, Gerstner

would prefer torture or death to intentionally distorting or misrepresenting anyone's position. . . . If Gerstner is inaccurate`if he has failed to understand dispensational theology correctly`then he owes many a profound apology. But first he must be shown where and how he is in error. This is the challenge of the book. If Gerstner is accurate, then Dispensationalism should be discarded as being a serious deviation from Biblical Christianity (p. xi).

Dr. Gerstner delivers his "Surrender!" demand in the Introduction and elsewhere in the book:

Dispensationalism today, as yesterday, is spurious Calvinism and dubious evangelicalism. If it does not refute my charges and the charges of many others, it cannot long continue to be considered an essentially Christian movement (p. 2).

Dispensationalism . . . is in constant deviation from essential historical Christianity . . . (p. 68).

Since Gerstner believes so strongly that soteriology determines eschatology, one could expect that the President of The Master's Seminary, John F. MacArthur, Jr., would be the first to wave a white flag. Gerstner affirmingly quotes him (without documentation or obvious connection to his point) as saying, "There is no salvation

except Lordship Salvation" (p. 2). Gerstner finds this strongly reformed view of salvation incompatible with his understanding of dispensationalism. This convincingly illustrates the most obvious *non sequitur* in the book, i.e., Dr. Gerstner's assertion throughout his book that Reformed soteriology necessarily eliminates dispensational ecclesiology and eschatology. He labors for more than half the book's chapters 7-13 to prove that dispensationalism should surrender because it is unbiblical (pp. 105-263).

He seems to debate from the following basic syllogism, though he never states it so succinctly as this:

Premise 1: Calvinism is central to all true theology.

Premise 2: Dispensationalism does not embrace Calvinism.

Conclusion: Dispensationalism is a "spurious" and "dubious" expression of true theology (p. 2).

Thus, he strongly calls for dispensationalism's quick surrender.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HIS WORK

Dr. Gerstner, Professor Emeritus of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, is Associate Pastor of Trinity (PCA) Church in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and currently serves as theologian-at-large at Ligonier Ministries. He also lectures on the Bible at Geneva College. Gerstner has been a Visiting Professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School since 1966 and is Adjunct Professor of Theology at both Reformed Theological Seminary and Knox Theological Seminary. He holds a B.A. from Westminster College, an M.Div. and Th.M. from Westminster Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion from Harvard University.

Dr. Gerstner has published many books, audio and video tapes, plus numerous articles in theological journals and magazines. He was a pastor for ten years and a professor of church history at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary for thirty years (1950-80). He still preaches and

lectures around the world. He is best known for his lectures and writings on Jonathan Edwards.

In describing the author, R. C. Sproul writes glowingly about his mentor (p. ix):

As a world-class historian, Gerstner has done his homework. The book is a result of years of careful and painstaking research. Gerstner has examined in the minutest detail the works of the most important historic dispensational theologians. He has canvassed scholarly journals and Ph.D. dissertations. He has been in repeated dialogue and debate with contemporary dispensational scholars. The current publication is the crystalized essence of over one thousand typescript pages of Gerstner's research and conclusions.

J. I. Packer declares that this volume clarifies "the issues more precisely than any previous book has done."² The publisher suggests that "Dr. Gerstner . . . presents the most extensive and systematic study of Dispensational theology ever published."³

SYNOPSIS OF DR. GERSTNER'S THINKING

Dr. Gerstner divides his volume into three sections:

1. Historical Sketch of Dispensationalism (pp. 7-72).
2. Philosophy and Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism (pp. 73-101).
3. Theology of Dispensationalism (pp. 103-263).

Dispensationalism Historically

The author's sketch of history looks back to the early church, the middle ages, the Reformation, and post-Reformation periods (pp. 7-20). The dispensationalism of 19th century England receives attention (pp. 21-36) with special mention of John Nelson Darby (pp.

²Endorsement on the outside back of the dust cover.

³Inside front of the dust cover.

23-27). Next, he reviews American dispensationalism ranging from C. I. Scofield to E. W. Bullinger (pp. 37-56). Finally, he looks at dispensationalism in relation to American Reformed churches of the late 19th and early-to-middle 20th centuries (pp. 57-72).

He notes in his brief historical survey of twenty centuries (66 pages) that dispensationalism "has a new theology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and a new systematic arrangement of all of these as well" (p. 18).

Dispensationalism is a theology of persons holding to a deviation from the Christian religion. Just as truly as a proper premillennialist would resent being called a Jehovah's Witness because Jehovah's Witnesses also are premillennialists, or a Mormon because Mormons also are premillennialists, so also, a premillennialist should resent being called a dispensationalist because dispensationalists also are "premillennialists" (though I do not infer for a moment that Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons are orthodox trinitarians at the heart as are *all* dispensationalists) (p. 69)

Dispensationalism Philosophically and Hermeneutically

Gerstner first looks at the philosophy, epistemology, and apologetical method of dispensationalism (pp. 75-81). Then he turns to dispensational hermeneutics (pp. 83-101). He concludes that dispensationalism is essentially anti-philosophical and without a proper philosophy (p. 75), devoid of an articulated epistemology (p. 78), but generally adhering to Gerstner's own "classical" approach to apologetics associated with the theology of Old Princeton. However, he asserts that dispensationalists hold a "weakened form" of this method (p. 79).

Regarding hermeneutics, Gerstner writes that ". . . almost all dispensationalists maintain that their mode of Biblical interpretation is more fundamental than their theology" (p. 83). Yet he concludes that ". . . far from determining dispensational theology, the dispensational literal hermeneutic (with all its inconsistencies), is in fact the direct result of that theology" (p. 101).

Dispensationalism Theologically

Gerstner first states and then attempts to prove that dispensationalism significantly deviates from all five points relating to the nature of man, sin, and salvation as articulated by the Synod of Dort (1619). These are commonly called the five points of Calvinism (pp. 105-147, esp. p. 105). Next, he accuses dispensationalists of teaching more than one way of salvation (pp. 149-169, esp. p. 149). "If Dispensationalism has actually departed from the only way of salvation which the Christian religion teaches, then we must say it has departed from Christianity" (p. 150).

Gerstner discusses the issue of Christ's kingdom preaching (171-179). He variously calls the dispensational position "appalling" and "novel" (p. 172). The dispensational view on Christ making a bona fide kingdom offer to the Jews, according to the author, ". . . is a direct affront to the righteousness of God, involving as it does the implication that God can and did lie" (p. 179).

Only one chapter discusses eschatology proper (chap. 10, pp. 181-208). Gerstner approaches the issue of Israel's relationship to the church with the view that "from the earliest period of Christian theology onward, the essential continuity of Israel and the church has been maintained" (p. 186). "Nevertheless, this scriptural unity of Israel and the church is directly challenged by Dispensationalism, wrongly dividing asunder what God's Word has joined together" (p. 187). He concludes, "The dispensational distinction between Israel and the church implicitly repudiates the Christian way of salvation" (p. 206):

The root of the problem is the Israel/church distinction which assumes that Israel is an entirely temporal matter and the church an entirely spiritual affair. As a result, dispensationalists retreat into a hyper-spiritual Gnosticism which spurns the structures of the visible church which God has graciously given to His people (p. 208).

Returning to the issue of soteriology, Gerstner then discusses sanctification (chaps. 11-12, pp. 209-250). He attempts to ". . . show that all traditional dispensationalists teach that converted Christian persons

can (not may) live in sin throughout their post-conversion lives with no thought to their eternal destiny" (p. 209). "To depart from it (antinomianism) is to depart from dispensationalism" (p. 231). He perceives in the conclusion to this discussion that "there is no question that dispensationalism has been relatively indifferent to strict morality and usually indifferent to reform activities" (p. 250).

A brief discussion of the Lordship Salvation issue concludes Gerstner's case against dispensationalism (pp. 251-59). "We have shown throughout this volume that Dispensationalism teaches another gospel" (p. 251). ". . . Dispensationalism is another gospel" (p. 259).

He draws his argument to an ultimate conclusion (pp. 261-63) by stating first,

We have now examined the Dispensationalism of yesterday and today. We have found that Dispensationalism is virtually the same today as yesterday. There have been some variations, of course, but none are essential. There are many varieties (to use an expression from natural science), but no new species (p. 261).

He then abstracts the allegations enumerated in chapters 7-13 (pp. 261-62). Finally, Dr. Gerstner issues the following appeal:

My plea to all dispensationalists is this`show me the fundamental error in what I teach or admit your own fundamental error. We cannot both be right. One of us is wrong`seriously wrong. If you are wrong (in your doctrine, as I here charge), you are preaching nothing less than a false gospel. This calls for genuine repentance and fruits worthy of it before the Lord Jesus Christ whom we both profess to love and serve (p. 263).

An appendix summarizing and evaluating Charles Lincoln's 1943 article on covenants from a dispensational perspective caps off the book (pp. 265-72).⁴ Because Gerstner believes that he successfully

⁴Charles Fred Lincoln, "The Development of the Covenant Theory," *BSac* 100/397 (Jan-Mar 1943) 134-63. Gerstner remarks, "His work on the covenants is the best dispensational presentation of the subject I have seen" (p. 266). This reviewer

refutes all sixteen of Lincoln's points, he reasons, ". . . Covenant theology ought, . . . to be vindicated in the minds of dispensationalists" (p. 266).

WHY A REVIEW ARTICLE?

When someone with Dr. Gerstner's credentials, with such extensive teaching and writing experience, addresses a subject so significant as "dispensationalism," he cannot go unnoticed or unread. Out of respect for the author's reputation and in response to his invitation for interaction (p. 263), this review is undertaken.

To ignore this work, which has been heralded by some as possibly providing an epochal contribution to the theological debate between covenantalists and dispensationalists, would be an insult to the author and the position he represents. Furthermore, silence would imply that his facts are correct, his logic impeccable, his conclusions formidable, and his call to "surrender" as unavoidable to one who truly has a passion to be biblical in all areas of theology.

If one assumes that Dr. Gerstner has his facts straight, always represents dispensationalism accurately, has studied both the older classic dispensational works and is familiar with the current dialogue among dispensationalists, correctly understands the theological issues, and is exegetically valid in his approach to the subject, then he will tend to conclude that dispensationalism must indeed surrender. At face value and upon first reading, the majority of people (especially those who have not studied the issues for themselves) will be convinced that Gerstner is right in his conclusions.

This review is not an unabridged analysis of Gerstner's arguments and conclusions. Nor would this reviewer suggest that, if Gerstner can be shown to be mistaken theologically, dispensationalism

suggests that Dr. Gerstner consider Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990) 1-111, as more current and representative material to evaluate.

is vindicated. Rather, the purpose of this review is twofold. First, it intends to demonstrate that what Dr. Gerstner delivers in the book falls well short of what he repeatedly claims to have accomplished throughout the book and what the testimonials of his friends and publishers urge the readers to believe are his contributions to this debate.

Second, it hopefully challenges in a small way the dispensational community to publish decisive clarification of the significant issues of dispensationalism in terms of its history, its essential identifying elements, the features that most or all dispensationalists currently embrace, the textual interpretations and theological conclusions of older dispensationalists that the current generation has questioned, the current debate over the exegesis of particular biblical texts, the current articulation of dispensational conclusions, and the decisive issues that distinctly set dispensationalists apart from covenantalists. Dispensationalists must seize the present opportunity to state what is and what is not essential to dispensationalism, upon whom current dispensational theology is dependent, and how dispensationalism of the 1990's differs from that of past decades.

EXAMINING THE AUTHOR'S ASSUMPTIONS

Presuppositions and assumptions undergird all reasoned thought. At times they are enumerated explicitly in the introduction to a subject while in other cases, such as this book, assumptions make their appearance somewhat randomly throughout the discussion, either in implicit or explicit fashion. This review suggests that at least ten of Dr. Gerstner's major assumptions are in error and thus seriously damage the validity of his conclusions.

1. Dr. Gerstner is perceived to assume that he is right and thus speaks on this subject *ex cathedra*.⁵ One only needs to ponder

⁵John Witmer will note this tendency in his soon-to-be-published "A Review of

the book's title, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* to sense the author's confidence. Implicitly, one gains the idea throughout the book that the author believes he stands in the theological gap at the eleventh hour as the champion of covenantalism and thus the destroyer of dispensationalism.

2. Dr. Gerstner seems to assume that he is factually, logically, and theologically decisive. Both R. C. Sproul's mild acknowledgment that Dr. Gerstner could be wrong (p. xi) and the author's own challenge to be corrected (p. 263) are more like a challenge than a humble invitation to other brothers in Christ "to come let us reason together" (cf. Isa 1:18).
3. When Dr. Gerstner writes, ". . . that Calvinism is just another name for Christianity" (p. 107), one senses that he presumes to be the spokesman for all Calvinists. His own discussion of the atonement, which highlights varying approaches to the subject in the Reformed community, evidences that this is not altogether true (pp. 127-28).
4. One gets the distinct impression that Dr. Gerstner's view on soteriology, as expressed by the Synod of Dort (1619), serves as the canon by which other people's doctrine is judged as true or heretical (p. 105). Yet, much later in the book he writes, "The standard of judgment is fidelity to God's inerrant Word" (p. 262). A noticeable lack of biblical discussion throughout the book, plus the obvious appeal to a "dogmatic" approach in his own theology, leads the reviewer to suggest that the author frequently seems to espouse the latter (Scripture) but employ the former (Dortian doctrine) to authenticate truth.
5. Dr. Gerstner further narrows the field of those who understand and hold to Scripture correctly regarding the atonement by limiting this group to the Protestant Reformed Church (p. 128). This reviewer challenges this assumption and so do some of his covenantal brethren. In a letter dated September 12, 1991, the Elders of Trinity Baptist Church in Montville, NJ, pastored by

Al Martin, himself a staunch proclaimer of Reformed doctrine, disavow Dr. Gerstner's teaching on the atonement beginning on p. 118 and continuing through p. 131. They write that, "Dr. Gerstner strays from the mainstream of historic calvinistic teaching regarding the free offer of the Gospel." This disclaimer letter comes with every copy of Dr. Gerstner's book that they distribute. A review of Dr. Gerstner's work by *Reformation Today* seriously questions his discussion of total depravity, election, and irresistible grace as it relates to his analysis of dispensational thought.⁶

6. Throughout the volume one receives the strong impression that Dr. Gerstner believes that Dallas Theological Seminary speaks representatively for all dispensationalists. He refers to "Dallas Dispensationalism" (p. 47). While this reviewer would not want to take away from DTS's contributions to furthering dispensational thought, dispensational thinking extends significantly beyond Dallas, especially in its theological formation. While Grace Theological Seminary, Capital Bible Seminary, and Western Conservative Baptist Seminary are mentioned (p. 52), numerous other schools such as Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, The Master's Seminary, Talbot School of Theology, and a host of Christian colleges, not to mention scholars and pastors who do not teach at dispensationally oriented schools, swell the ranks of institutions and individuals who claim to be "dispensational" in their ecclesiology and eschatology.
7. Dr. Gerstner identifies dispensationalism with a certain view of soteriology. ". . . Dispensationalism is another gospel" (p. 259). "When Dispensationalism does truly give up mere nominalistic faith for a working faith, Dispensationalism will be Dispensationalism no more" (p. 272 n. 9). R. C. Sproul says of the author's view, "For Gerstner, when a dispensationalist eschews Antinomianism, he is, in effect, eschewing Dispensationalism"

⁶Tom Wells, "Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism: A Review," *Reformation Today* (Jan-Feb 1992) 25-32.

(p. x). Nothing could be further from reality or better illustrate the meaning of *non-sequitur*. Both Zane Hodges and John MacArthur consider themselves dispensationally oriented in their ecclesiology and eschatology, and yet see a great gulf fixed between their views on soteriology.⁷ One could be both "a five-point Calvinist" and dispensational without being biblically inconsistent. D. G. Hart has recently written about the Westminster Seminary faculty of Machen's day being explicitly Reformed, yet having dispensationalist Allan A. MacRae as Professor of Old Testament.⁸

8. Dr. Gerstner assumes that dispensationalism is in a theological rut and has brought no essential change to its thinking: "A pressing question today is whether Dispensationalism has changed in any significant ways in recent years. I think not" (p. 72). "In spite of numerous contemporary fringe changes, Dispensationalism in America is still essentially Scofieldian . . ." (pp. 252-53). He does not acknowledge the Dispensational Study Group that has been meeting since 1985 just prior to the Evangelical Theological Society's Annual Meeting.⁹ Nor does he interact with several recent, major works such as *Continuity*

⁷Dr. Gerstner takes great issue with Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), but so does John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According To Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). Yet Hodges and MacArthur both remain dispensationalists. Why? Because one's soteriology does not necessarily dictate the essence of his ecclesiology and eschatology.

⁸D. G. Hart, "The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen and the Identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church," *WTJ* 53 (1991) 213

⁹Craig Blaising, who teaches theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, presented a major paper to the 1986 meeting of the Dispensational Study Group (DSG), which was subsequently published as two articles. "Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy," *BSac* 145/578 (Apr-June 1988) 133-40 and "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *BSac* 145/579 (July-Sept 1988) 254-80. Dr. Gerstner acknowledged this latter article on p. 159 (n. 19). For a short history of the DSG see Ronald T. Clutter, "Dispensational Study Group: An Introduction," *GTJ* 10/2 (Fall 1989) 123-24. This same issue of *GTJ* also contains the papers presented at the 1989 DSG by Vern S. Poythress, Paul S. Karleen, and Robert L. Saucy.

and *Discontinuity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988) where John Feinberg, the editor, brings together both sides of the debate on key issues.¹⁰ Robert Saucy has recently contributed several important articles: "The Crucial Issue Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Systems," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/1 (Fall 1986) 149-65, "Contemporary Dispensational Thought," *TSF Bulletin* (Mar-Apr 1984) 10-11, "The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the Church," *BSac* 145/577 (Jan-Mar 1988) 30-46. Dr. Saucy is now completing a full-length volume tentatively entitled *The Interface Between Dispensational and Covenantal Theology* to be published by Zondervan in 1992.¹¹

In all these, dispensational spokesmen have moved rapidly and significantly beyond Scofield, Chafer, and Ryrice.¹²

9. Dr. Gerstner assumes that dispensationalism is a theological system much like the Calvinistic system. He refers to the "dispensational theological system" (pp. 105, 158). Then he erroneously tries to equate dispensational thinking with the Arminian system of theology (p. 103). Earl D. Radmacher makes the point that dispensational thought comes more from a hermeneutical approach to Scripture than from any theological system.¹³

¹⁰Gerstner hardly acknowledges this significant work, *Continuity and Discontinuity*, including only a two-sentence reference to it on p. 151 n. 4.

¹¹Also expected in 1992 are Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, eds., *Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) and D. Campbell and J. Townsend, eds., *Premillennialism* (Chicago: Moody, 1992). The recent publishing of Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992) is also significant. In this he strongly refutes Dr. Gerstner's charge that Darby is ". . . to this day the chief influence" (p. 24).

¹²Covenantalist Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 12, agrees that "many dispensational scholars have now modified considerably the classic form of D-theology. . . ."

¹³Earl D. Radmacher, "The Current State of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology," in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 163-76. Compare Paul D. Feinberg in "Hermeneutics of Discontinuity," *Continuity and Discontinuity* 109-28. See also Darrell L. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old

10. Dr. Gerstner continually assumes that because he thinks he has proven dispensationalism wrong, therefore covenantalism is demonstrated to be a correct expression of truth. Nowhere does the author adequately demonstrate the biblical correctness of his own beliefs. Until he does so, his brand of covenantalism is just as suspect as the dispensationalism he sets out to discredit. And, let this reviewer and all his dispensational friends be alert to remember the need to do the same in the debate with covenantalists.

NOTING MAJOR WEAKNESSES

In addition to unwarranted assumptions, Dr. Gerstner's book contains a number of flaws that greatly lessen its credibility as a significant critique of dispensationalism. The following list briefly discusses some of the more serious deficiencies:

1. Dr. Gerstner's volume does not generally reflect the writings of dispensationalists since 1980, as illustrated above. Therefore, it could not possibly represent or interact with current dispensational thinking as it purports to do (p. 72).¹⁴
2. Dr. Gerstner frequently cites certain men as representative of dispensational thought. To current dispensationalists, most of these men represent anachronistic referencing and/or a giant caricature of dispensational spokesmen. Examples include Jim Bakker (p. 54), Harold Barker (p. 223), M. R. DeHaan (pp. 54, 88), Jerry Falwell (p. 54), Norm Geisler (p. 75), Billy Graham (pp. 54, 137, 174), Zane Hodges (pp. 225-230), W. W. Howard (p. 224), Rex Humbard (p. 54), Hal Lindsey (pp. 175, 221), James

Testament in the New, Part 1," *BSac* 142/567 (July-Sept 1985) 209-23 and "Part 2," *BSac* 142/568 (Oct-Dec 1985) 306-19.

¹⁴In addition to the literature cited above, Dr. Gerstner does not acknowledge such notable pieces as Kenneth L. Barker, "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," *JETS* 25/1 (Mar 1982) 3-16 or David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *GTJ* 6/2 (Fall 1985) 275-87.

Robison (p. 54), Jimmy Swaggart (p. 54), R. B. Thieme (p. 225), and A. W. Tozer (p. 139). Throughout this volume Dr. Gerstner has presented "strawman" arguments, among which this is his masterpiece.

3. Dr. Gerstner resorts in places to a "guilt by association" form of argumentation. R. C. Sproul (p. x) in the Foreword associates dispensationalists with Joseph Fletcher, father of modern "situational ethics." Gerstner puts dispensationalists alongside cults like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses (p. 69). Dispensational thought is equated with Arminian theology (p. 103). Gerstner calls John Nelson Darby the "major theologian" of dispensationalists (p. 84). Trivialization and dispensationalism are equated (pp. 69-70). He even implies that dispensationalism is more deceptive than liberalism and the occult (p. 2).
4. Dr. Gerstner frequently resorts, out of character with a carefully reasoned scholastic exchange, to pejorative language and sarcasm.¹⁵ One wonders why one needs inflammatory rhetoric`e.g., cult (p. 150), pantheism (pp. 136, 143), and "departed from Christianity" (p. 150)`to disprove such a supposedly lame theological opponent as "dispensationalism."
5. Dr. Gerstner shows familiarity with the writings of Darby, Scofield, Chafer, and Ryrie, citing them frequently. However, the author shows little or no familiarity with other older dispensational works that are classics. These include Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1968) and George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (3 vols., 1978 rpt.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, n.d.). Besides a brief quote from German dispensationalist Eric Sauer (p. 183 n. 8), Gerstner

¹⁵This charge has more than adequately been documented by both John Witmer, "A Review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Part 1," *BSac* 149/594 (Apr-June 1992) 132-33, and Thomas Ice, "How Trinitarian Thinking Supports A Dispensational Rationale," *Dispensational Distinctives* 1/5 (Sept-Oct 1991) 1. Therefore, I will not duplicate their observations.

attributes no significance to his classic trilogy which includes *The Dawn of World Redemption: A Survey of the History of Salvation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), *The Triumph of the Crucified: A Survey of the History of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), and *From Eternity to Eternity* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1954). A volume making the promise of being "the most extensive and systematic study of Dispensational theology ever published" would surely interact with these indispensable works. Yet Dr. Gerstner has in essence ignored them. This reviewer does not affirm all that is taught in these classics. However, a comprehensive critique of dispensationalism should certainly recognize and comment on them.

6. Dr. Gerstner has not paid the kind of attention to historical, factual, and bibliographic details that one would expect. Examples of such discrepancies have been catalogued by Dr. John A. Witmer, archivist at Dallas Theological Seminary.¹⁶
7. Dr. Gerstner would have served his readers far better in his discussion of sanctification (pp. 209-50) by quoting from John F. Walvoord, "The Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 197-226. Here is a recent and focused expression on sanctification by a noted Dallas dispensationalist. While this reviewer does not agree with all that Dr. Walvoord writes there,¹⁷ the doctrine that he articulates is far different in many respects than the dismal picture painted by Gerstner (esp. pp. 231-39). It should be noted that one's view with regard to sanctification does not necessarily identify a person as dispensational or non-dispensational, contrary to the author's conclusion.

¹⁶Witmer, "A Review, Part 1" 133-36.

¹⁷This reviewer found Reformed theologian Anthony A. Hoekema to be fair but forthright in his critique of Walvoord in *Five Views* (230-32), in contrast to the "worst-case scenario" approach of Dr. Gerstner.

8. Dispensationalists would generally say that their consistently applied, normal hermeneutic leads them to their views on the church and its relationship to national Israel. These conclusions would then set them distinctly apart from covenantalists.¹⁸ Dr. Gerstner has chosen to major on the *non sequitur* that one's soteriology determines his ecclesiology and eschatology by devoting at least six full chapters to its discussion (chaps. 7-9, 11-13). In contrast, he minors (only chap. 10) on what dispensationalists would consider to be one of their major distinctive's eschatology. Thus his discussion of dispensationalism is notably out of proportion with the real issues distinguishing dispensationalism from covenantalism.
9. Nowhere does Gerstner distort the facts more than with his stereotypical chart on p. 147. The right-hand column, inaccurately labeled "dispensationalism," should be more accurately titled "modified Arminianism." In so doing, he has led his readers to equate dispensationalism with Arminianism. This reviewer does not deny that some dispensationalists subscribe to an Arminian soteriology, but asserts rather that an Arminian soteriology is not synonymous with dispensationalism.

Sadly, Dr. Gerstner's volume does not live up to its advanced billing and hints of irrefutable argumentation. Numerous books and booklets have been written in the recent past with the purpose of analyzing dispensational thinking.¹⁹ Of them all, Dr. Gerstner's most

¹⁸Consult Parts 1 and 2 of Willem A. Van Gemeren, "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 132-44 and *WTJ* 46 (1984) 254-97, for a thorough survey of Reformed thinking about Israel, beginning with Calvin who had "no clearly defined position on Israel" and extending to the publication dates of these articles.

¹⁹For example, Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and The Church* (1977 rpt.; Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.); Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided: The Breakup of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds To Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids:

resembles the maiden voyage of the Titanic. This supposedly "unsinkable" book seems to have sustained severe damage below the water line at the hands of its own self-imposed icebergs of specious reasoning, fallacious assumptions, incomplete and outdated research, inaccurate data, distorted characterizations, and a seemingly premature celebration of victory.

ASSESSING THEOLOGICAL VALIDITY

In this reviewer's opinion, dispensational thought entered a new era somewhere in the late 70s or early 80s. Because no one person or single institution speaks for all dispensationalists and because it is not a theological system like Calvinism (but rather tends to result from a consistent hermeneutic applied with exegetical skill to particular texts whose individual conclusions comprise a macro-summation of a biblical truth), no designated person speaks for the movement. Scores of individual scholars and schools are involved in formulating dispensational thought.

Unfortunately, Dr. Gerstner has not accurately identified the current makeup or movement of dispensationalism. Thus, the almost unrecognizable image he paints of current dispensationalism results from several errors of fact and/or omission. First, he looks at the Darby/Scofield era and then the Chafer/Walvoord/Ryrie era as the bases for his conclusions, rather than being current with the new era of dispensational thought in the 80s`90s whose leading spokesmen might well include Robert L. Saucy and John F. MacArthur, Jr. The former deals more with eschatology and the latter soteriology/ecclesiology. The author limits his research primarily to earlier Dallas Theological Seminary expressions of dispensationalism that do not comprehensively reflect the whole of dispensational thought, past or

Baker, 1977); William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980); Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*; Jon Zens, *Dispensationalism: A Reformed Inquiry Into Its Leading Figures and Features* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980).

present.

The Master's Seminary could agree with much of what Dr. Gerstner affirms as biblical truth about salvation and sanctification.²⁰ However, it strongly opposes the wrong equation of a soteriological position with the distinctive feature of dispensationalism. Further, it disavows what Dr. Gerstner pictures as the current consensus of dispensational thinking. The Master's Seminary, in opposing easy believism for salvation,²¹ does not deny its dispensational roots, but rather works hard to sink them deeper into the good soil of solid biblical exegesis with the result of proper theological conclusions.

"Covenantalism" and opposition to easy believism are not synonymous. Conversely, dispensationalism and antinomianism are not necessarily synonymous either. One may be a five-point Calvinist and still be a consistent dispensationalist with regard to one's view of Israel in relationship to the NT church and one's expectation regarding events on God's prophetic calendar. The achilles heel in Dr. Gerstner's entire argument is the assumption that Calvinism, or Reformed theology, stands as the antithesis of dispensationalism, thus making one's soteriology determine whether he is a dispensationalist or not.²²

²⁰As evidenced by MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*. Note also the affirming review by dispensationalist Homer A. Kent, Jr., "The Gospel According to Jesus: A Review Article," *GTJ* 10/1 (Spring 1989) 67-77. Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary does not fully commend all of Dr. MacArthur's book, but he gives it affirmation beyond what one would expect based on Gerstner's discussions (p. 253) ("A Review of *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *BSac* 146/581 [Jan-Mar, 1989] 21-40).

²¹"Opposition to easy believism" more accurately defines the issue under discussion than the expression "lordship salvation," because the latter implies a false addition to faith as the sole condition for salvation (cf. MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus* xiii-xiv, 28-29 n. 20).

²²Gerstner writes "The Bible teaches Dispensationalism or Calvinism. It cannot teach both and be the infallibly true Word of God" (2 n. 1). This statement, as it stands, is erroneous and/or potentially very misleading. First, it could be true that the Bible teaches something other than these two schools of thought. The burden rests with him to prove his point biblically. Second, his reasoning would make dispensationalism the antithesis to Calvinism. If by Calvinism, Dr. Gerstner means Calvinistic soteriology, then he errs because dispensational thought does not

On the other hand, this reviewer affirms that dispensationalism does stand in notable contrast to covenantalism.

Now, in order to limit this review article to a reasonable length, brief note will be taken of a series of selected theological misstatements by Dr. Gerstner in his discussions of philosophy, hermeneutics, apologetics, and theology.²³

1. In his brief discourse on dispensationalists and philosophy, Dr. Gerstner charges, ". . . It [dispensationalism] is almost impatient in its desire to get to Holy Scripture" (p. 75). Dispensationalists consider this a great compliment consistent with their high view of Scripture's sufficiency as outlined in such classic passages as Psalm 19, Psalm 119, and 2 Tim 3:14-17.²⁴ Therefore, to dispensationalists logic and philosophy are secondary to Scripture and serve as a means to an end, not the end itself.
2. Dr. Gerstner, an avowed advocate of the "classical" approach to apologetics, states, "Dispensationalists are not disposed to conscious fideism" (p. 79). This reviewer is amazed that Dr. Gerstner personally finds the "classical" approach in common with most dispensationalists (p. 79). Gerstner is surprised that

essentially involve soteriology and is not formulated from a certain creedal soteriology. If by dispensationalism he means to include ecclesiology and eschatology, then he errs because the antithesis would be with "covenantalism" rather than "Calvinism." For a reasonable clarification of terms to allow a comparison of "apples with apples," see Michael Harbin, "The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology," *BSac* 143/571 (July-Sept 1986) 246-59, from a dispensationalist's perspective, and Morton H. Smith, "The Church and Covenant Theology," *JETS* 21/1 (March 1978) 47-65, for a covenantalist's view.

²³In a soon-to-appear article John A. Witmer, "A Review, Part 2" 149/595 *BSac* (July-Sept, 1992) will biblically challenge and attempt to correct Dr. Gerstner's attack on varying aspects of dispensationalism as taught in the past or as currently being taught by some at Dallas Theological Seminary.

²⁴McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom* 527-31, lets some air out of Dr. Gerstner's over-inflated charge that dispensationalism is "almost anti-philosophical" (p. 75) with his chap. 28, "A Premillennial Philosophy of History."

more dispensationalists do not embrace the presuppositional approach to apologetics, since it is in the vanguard of contemporary, conservative thinking (p. 81). This reviewer is even more surprised since the author asserts, ". . . All presuppositionalists are thoroughgoing Calvinists and they do not think that Dispensationalism is an authentic form of Calvinism" (p. 81). Those dispensationalists who are presuppositionalists are so because they believe it is taught in Scripture, not because they believe it is Calvinistic.²⁵ There is no necessary connection, other than consistent biblical thought and conclusion, between dispensational theology and presuppositional apologetics.

3. The discussion of hermeneutics deserves at least a whole volume rather than just a chapter (pp. 83-101). However, given the reality of limitations in a review article and in Dr. Gerstner's book, in kindness it is proposed that his discussion contributes more heat than light as it relates to understanding dispensationalism. His eclectic discussion of older and/or "pop" dispensationalists such as Darby, M. R. DeHaan, Feinberg, Scofield, and Lindsey is, at best, inadequate. His discussion of "spooof-texting" or throwing "massive citations" at an issue (p. 99-100) is certainly an unfair caricature of dispensationalists who have a legitimate desire to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Many dispensationalists hold in high regard the Reformed approach of interpreting the Bible by the Bible with the principle of *analogia Scriptura*.²⁶

²⁵Dr. Gerstner does recognize John C. Whitcomb as a dispensationalist who is also a presuppositionalist (80 n. 14). However, he fails to mention The Master's Seminary which embraces presuppositionalism. See TMS Professor of Theology, George J. Zemek, "Review Article: *Classical Apologetics: A Rational Defense*" GTJ 7/1 (Spring 1986) 111-23, where he evaluates the discussion of apologetical method by R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsey.

²⁶Dispensationalist Elliott E. Johnson has recently provided a comprehensive discussion of hermeneutics in general in *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). In contrast to Gerstner, Vern Poythress,

4. Dr. Gerstner has strong words against anyone who tampers with the Reformed view of "the eternal sonship of Christ" (pp. 33-34). In discussing this issue, he attempts to discredit dispensationalists historically by associating them with F. E. Raven, a Brethren figure of the late 19th century, who, according to Gerstner, denied full humanity to Christ. One's view of Christ's eternal sonship, so long as it does not deny or diminish His eternality, deity, and full humanity in his incarnation, does not affect whether one is a dispensationalist or a covenantalist. As such, it serves no logical purpose in Dr. Gerstner's discussion, other than trying to portray dispensationalists as guilty of the same heresy.²⁷
5. Concerning unconditional election, Dr. Gerstner writes, "A predestination of some corpses to life and foreordination of some corpses to remain dead is what is meant by the Bible doctrine but dispensationalists refuse to accept that" (p. 113). Dr. Gerstner's assertion is generally true of dispensationalists with regard to the reprobative corollary of unconditional election, but it is not a defining distinctive of dispensationalism. One can believe in the doctrine of double predestination as articulated by sane Calvinists and still be a dispensationalist.²⁸
6. Dr. Gerstner questions the orthodoxy of dispensationalists concerning the full humanity of Jesus Christ. He asserts that, regardless of whether it comes more from a lack of theological care than heterodoxy, dispensationalists have an unusual conception of Christ's full humanity (pp. 116-17). The author's discussion is altogether too brief for such a major charge, being

Understanding Dispensationalists 78-96, presents a covenantalist's perspective on this issue in a more informative and irenic fashion.

²⁷See John MacArthur, *The Sonship of Christ* (Grandville, MI: IFCA Press, 1991), for a discussion of the incarnational approach to Christ's sonship.

²⁸Cp. dispensationalist Emery H. Bancroft, *Christian Theology* (2nd rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 241, whose discussion of reprobation in its conclusion is essentially indistinguishable from that of R. C. Sproul, "Double Predestination," in *Soli Deo Gloria* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976) 63-72.

limited to Darby, Chafer, and C. H. Mackintosh. Regarding Christ's humanity, covenantalists and dispensationalists agree that it remained without sin throughout His earthly life (2 Cor 5:21). The theological discussion still goes on as to whether the impeccability of Christ's human nature meant that He was susceptible to temptation like humanity, yet without sin, or whether He could not be tempted at all. After everything is said and written, the issue at hand is not really germane to the discussion of dispensationalism.

7. Dr. Gerstner's own view that one must be regenerated before becoming an object of God's call to salvation is stated but never defended biblically (p. 119). How then can he accuse dispensationalists of being unorthodox until he proves the point scripturally? Furthermore, his own view is seriously questioned by others who, like Gerstner, are strong Calvinists.²⁹
8. Throughout the book, but especially in chapter eight, "Dubious Evangelism: The Dispensational Understanding of 'Dispensation' Denies The Gospel" (pp. 149-69), Dr. Gerstner repeatedly charges that Dispensationalists teach multiple ways of salvation. Since the author acknowledges the existence of the book *Continuity and Discontinuity* (p. 151 n. 4), this reviewer cannot understand why Dr. Gerstner does not inform his readers of and then interact with one of its contributors, Allen P. Ross, "The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Discontinuity" 161-78. To do so would have pushed the debate from the 1960's almost to the 1990's. Dr. Gerstner's charge that current dispensation-alists teach multiple ways of salvation is defenseless.³⁰

²⁹E.g., the elders of Trinity Baptist Church in Montville, NJ, mentioned above (p. 81). Why, then, attempt to hold dispensationalists responsible for error in this point when even fellow Calvinists do not agree?

³⁰For another excellent refutation of Dr. Gerstner's charge, see John S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the Old Testament," in *Tradition and Testament* (John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, eds.; Chicago: Moody, 1981) 39-77.

9. In chapter 11 (p. 209), the author writes, ". . . I will show that all traditional dispensationalists teach that converted Christian persons *can* (not may) live in sin throughout their post-conversion lives with no threat to their eternal destiny." Then he points out a contradictory exception on p. 216: "Harry Ironside is especially interesting, for surely no classical dispensationalist has tried more strenuously to avoid Antinomianism (unless it be John MacArthur [sic], who succeeded)." It seems to have escaped Dr. Gerstner's attention that not only has John MacArthur succeeded, but also every dispensationalist who believes as MacArthur does. Therefore, Gerstner subsequently disproves what he originally set out to prove.
10. "There is no question that Dispensationalism has been relatively indifferent to strict morality and usually indifferent to reform activities" (p. 250). Here Dr. Gerstner libels dispensationalists by making a universal statement about them without any documentation or real substance (documented or otherwise). The statement is false and damaging to dispensationalism's reputation. This defamatory caricature alone brings Dr. Gerstner's objectivity in his critique of dispensational teaching into serious question.

A CLOSING WORD³¹

This review article did not set out to prove Dr. Gerstner altogether theologically wrong or to affirm dispensationalism as theologically correct. But in response to the book's invitation to be evaluated, this reviewer has attempted to comply with that wish. Here are the conclusions.

Dr. John Gerstner has sincerely attempted to the best of his

³¹It is beyond the scope of this review, but a subsequent article is needed to interact with and evaluate Dr. Gerstner's exegesis of key passages that dispensationalists use to show a distinction between Israel and the church (cf. pp. 187-200).

scholastic skills, intellect, theological prowess, and debate technique to critique dispensationalism. The work appears to be a culmination of his life-long study of dispensationalism. This review concludes, however, that (1) Dr. Gerstner's claim to comprehensive research falls seriously short of its boast, (2) his penchant for factuality and accurate representation of dispensationalism has failed, (3) he demonstrates his apparent unwillingness to discuss major theological issues without uncalled-for and repeated diatribe, and (4) his *non-sequitur* argumentation disqualifies much of this book as a positive or helpful contribution to the growing rapprochement between covenantalists and dispensationalists. If anything, it has attitudinally and informationally hurt the dialogue.

This review might not satisfy Dr. Gerstner's challenge to ". . . show me the fundamental error in what I teach" (p. 263). However, it should be more than enough to respond to R. C. Sproul's conditional offer of Dr. Gerstner's apology when substantial reason can be shown: "If Gerstner is inaccurate`if he has failed to understand dispensational theology correctly`then he owes many a profound apology" (p. xi). At best, one could hope that this title would be withdrawn from circulation as unworthy of the author's reputation for accuracy and fairness. But at the very least, R. C. Sproul's promise on the author's behalf should be kept.

Dr. Gerstner, the contemporary dispensational community awaits your "profound apology"!