

PRELIMINARY COPY

An Essentialist¹ Response To Robert A. Pyne's "The New Man in an Immoral Society: Expectations Between the Times"

Representatives and direct taxes shall be apportioned among the several states which may be included within this union, according to their respective numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole number of free persons, including those bound to service for a term of years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three-fifths of all other persons. -- The U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 2.

Introduction

I share many of the concerns which Bob Pyne, my esteemed colleague and former fellow student at DTS, has voiced with respect to social concerns in general and racial reconciliation in particular. My first encounter with racial issues that touched close to home was when I was a senior in an Alabama high school. I naturally rooted for my school's sports teams which were nicknamed the "Rebels." Our symbol was the Confederate Flag. Our fight song was "Dixie." The school year was 1970-71.

My unstudied devotion to such symbols met head on with protests from African-American students who resented the use of these symbols because such images represented for them the memories of slavery, oppression, and abuse. I can honestly say that I had never before that time looked down upon African-Americans by using these symbols. Yet in a high school of roughly 2500 students, the feelings of the African-American students were so strong that protests erupted into two riots during my senior year, one at a football pep rally and one at a basketball game, both of which I witnessed as police came in force with dogs to squelch the mayhem. This experience illustrates in microcosm the same feelings that have been demonstrated at large in the continuing African-American experience. At the time, I was not yet a Christian and was struggling with who Jesus was, much less whether he was seated on the throne of David at the right hand of the Father or what character could be ascribed to the present age or whether any of this really makes a difference.

Now that I am a Christian, I feel, as many of you do, the deep sense of moral obligation to change the world I live in the best I can. Uppermost in my mind is the spreading of the Good News that Jesus is alive and that forgiveness of sins is available by the grace of God through faith in His finished work on the Cross for the world. Beyond that, I believe that my life should reflect the character of God while I work in this world "between the times" awaiting the return of Christ. The comments that follow provide a provisional analysis of Bob Pyne's thoughts about this endeavor.

¹By "essentialist" I mean that I believe there is a core set of beliefs or essential principles that have a fairly continuous history within the development of modern dispensationalism that help define the movement, both historically and theologically. The best expression of such essential principles is still Charles Ryrie's famous *sine qua non* in *Dispensationalism Today* (1965). In other words, I would prefer to call myself a revised or traditional dispensationalist (rather than a Scofieldian dispensationalist) and am not a progressive dispensationalist.

What I Like About The Paper

There are many elements of Bob's paper to be lauded, not the least of which, *is the basic idea that we are even talking about social action and racial reconciliation*. Although we must make sure that we do not offer symbolism over substance in the solutions we propose, I am sure we will get no where in this area as dispensationalists and as evangelicals if we do not indulge in self-critique and significant theological dialogue on this issue.

Second, Bob reminds us of the great impact that our culture has on us. We do believe and act sometimes because of our Americanism not because of our great commitment to Scripture. When I pastored a church in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area for several years, I was keenly aware of the tension that existed in that area. Many of the members of the congregation assumed that whatever the Bible-belt culture had taught them was, in fact, the Christian tradition which had been passed down to them.² They were blinded to the factors that actually determined their value system. This tension can be expressed in regional biases as well. As the only Southerner on the seminary faculty where I now teach, I can see my own prejudices (both positive and negative) up against exposure to those who do not share my heritage. These things we need to be deliberately aware of as we develop doctrines and make applications to real life. Thank you, Bob, for this great reminder. It is something that progressive dispensationalists have focused on more than traditionalists and deserve credit for their willingness to explore. However, I do not accept Bob's entire cultural exposition as will be seen when I try to enhance Bob's critique below.

Third, Bob Pyne's greatest contribution is the focus he brings to the specific point of impact from the Great Reversal. The fundamentalist-modernist controversy, while defending the faith against the onslaught of modernistic tendencies, took a turn for the worse when the fundamentalists lost the cultural battle along with the denominations. It may be that the validity of any battle for culture needs to be questioned to some degree.³ However, after the loss of the denominations, the fundamentalists developed a defensive posture which has helped them, in some places, to develop a withdrawal mentality – i.e., the social disengagement of which Bob speaks. It is precisely this tendency that we need to focus on to the point of reversing attitudes in our churches. I have never had anyone reject my efforts in dispensational churches to develop social ministries such as food pantries, clothes closets, etc., on the basis of any so-called pessimistic view of present culture and some associated view of the non-inaugurated but coming kingdom at Jesus' return. But I have had overwhelming rejection based upon a prior commitment to such activities as "liberal" and therefore, of no value. Bob is right

² The diversity within the Bible-belt culture of the South has been aptly described in Christine Leigh Heyram, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

³ An interesting but unsettling proposal against the evangelical critique (characterized by Schaeffer, Wells, Carson, et al) can be found in Sean Michael Lucas, "The Scandal of the Evangelical Critique," (Northeast Regional ETS, Spring 1997).

to point to this side of things. There are too many passages we have overlooked because we have been afraid of sounding like liberals.

Things I Would Change or Expand

First, the general thrust of Bob's argument seems to be overly simplistic. I have prefaced my paper with Article I, Section 2, from the United States Constitution.⁴ It explicitly allows the devaluing of minority individuals. Important for our analysis is the fact that it was written over a century before any form of dispensationalism dominated any group of American evangelicals. It also true that Southern churches of different varieties were quoting the Bible to justify slavery long before Darby's charts were popularized in America. These simple facts point to the rather obvious truth that the root problems for race relations in this country transcend what view of dispensationalism one opts for. Does what view of dispensationalism one hold to really matter? Of course it does. However, in trying to deal with such a profound, horrible, and long standing sin problem within our own culture, it seems a bit simplistic to address the issue of the timing of the inauguration of the Messianic kingdom as a major player in the solution. To assert that the character of the present age is the real culprit, i.e., an overly pessimistic view of the Church Age, is the proverbial Band-Aid for cancer. As I read Bob's paper, I wondered that if we approach the topic in this way, will we be like those who, while the Titanic sinks, argue about what song the band is playing? Racial reconciliation in particular and social action in general are too serious to try to solve at the level of the sub-points of our theological outline.

Second, Bob overuses the anecdotal approach. While I enjoyed reading the stories (which did a good job of keeping me awake) and view some of them as necessary, they often set up the reader to adopt Bob's conclusions emotionally before he actually gives any solid evidence. For example, his reference to participation by progressive dispensationalists at Dallas Seminary in conversations with the STEP Foundation with no parallel participation by traditionalists is a bit self-serving. Although the admission is made that this is not conclusive, and the on-target discussion about the age of the participants follows, the damage has already been done.

I believe traditionalists could add their own anecdotes. My own involvement in inner city ministry off and on throughout my entire ministry as a traditional dispensationalist would be a case in point. Three years ago I started a ministry called Mission Scranton in the Scranton, PA, area modeled somewhat after Mission Arlington in Arlington, Texas, where I had worked for two years. This is an outreach and church planting ministry in the inner city areas of Scranton which, by its very nature, requires social action that goes beyond the average fundamentalist church. In addition, one of my DMin. students, Rob Elkington, pastors a church in South Africa and is doing his degree project on "Planting a Multi-Ethnic Church in the New South Africa." He is a dedicated, traditional dispensationalist who sees social action as necessary and not contradictory to his view of the kingdom of God. By the way, Rob and I are in the

⁴ Fortunately, this section of the U.S. Constitution was superseded by the 14th Amendment.

younger generation and I suspect that this is substantially more pertinent to the question than one's brand of dispensationalism.

Why bring up the counter examples? I only wish to show what we do not want to do and nothing more. To borrow terminology from Millard Erickson who gave some reminders on a different issue, we do not want to get into theological discussions which result merely in "shouting matches" about what God is doing.⁵ I am interested in getting more traditional dispensationalists involved in these kinds of discussions. If the traditionalists at DTS have been slow to respond, it is certainly the case that there are a number of us elsewhere who have not been so slow. I am optimistic about seeing their increased involvement. An overly anecdotal response against them may hinder this possibility. I would ask Bob to help me to speak to them and not give up on trying to convince them of the necessity of their participation.

Third, the historical analysis which is put forward needs to be expanded. It is not that Bob is necessarily wrong, although at some points I wonder. It may be that the analysis is incomplete. Understanding that his paper in this forum cannot deal extensively with all such issues, I would like to suggest some historical lines of evidence to pursue which must be included in the discussion.

1. *The mentioning of dispensationalism as a movement born in separatism as a contributing factor to our current dilemma needs to be tempered with an understanding of the difference between the British origins of dispensationalism and American developments of dispensationalism.* Darby was, no doubt, quite surprised when Americans bought into his eschatology charts without accepting his ecclesiology. Although Americans have been known for their distrust of experts and authorities, many accepted the dispensational scheme without dismantling the structures of their denominations and affiliations: the Baptists became Baptist dispensationalists, the Presbyterians became Presbyterian dispensationalists, and so forth. It is the American experience that finds dispensationalism becoming a trans-denominational phenomena. This needs to be taken into account in the discussion.
2. *The analysis of the Southern tradition which is given is largely Presbyterian. What must be added is a parallel discussion of Baptist developments.* After all, it is the Baptist mentality which has dominated the South, and the Southern Baptist Convention which has led the way. It is important to remember that the SBC has never been known for its dispensationalism. In fact, on the contrary, anti-dispensationalism has predominated in the midst of a down-playing of eschatology in general. The SBC also does not have a long-term reputation for a strong social ethic along the lines of what we are discussing these days. It has prided itself on being people of evangelism and missions. Yet dispensationalism does not seem to be a major player in their

⁵ Millard Erickson, "Signs and Wonders Today?" (Western Seminary: Spring Lectureship, 1992).

own past history of social disengagement. Maybe the culprit lies somewhere else.⁶

3. The independent Baptist groups which withdrew from the SBC over perceived issues of liberalism add another unique dimension to the historical analysis. For the most part, these groups have adopted to various degrees the emphases of landmarkism. Adherents of this movement, originating in the SBC in the nineteenth century, often adopt the dispensational structure of eschatology while at the same time denying the existence of the Universal Church.⁷ This is a denial of one of the cardinal points of dispensationalism. Adding such an enigma to the mix of Southern heritage points in the direction that we must be careful to overstate the influence of dispensational developments in Southern argumentation with respect to social action.

I believe that it is historically significant that a few years ago the Southern Baptist Convention, a largely nondispensational group, tried to make amends with African-Americans, especially in light of their founding in 1845 because of a pro-slavery position. It is also extremely interesting that the next year, the General Association of Regular Baptists, a strongly traditional dispensational group, did likewise. It would seem that regardless of one's eschatological outline, there is movement in Baptist circles toward some form of social engagement. So the idea of traditional dispensationalism giving a loophole for the lack of social action, in the light of the above preliminary analysis, seems to be irrelevant at least for Baptist circles.

Fourth, I am somewhat surprised at Bob's statement that "traditional dispensational theology has not demanded social disengagement, but it has provided a theological loophole for those whose understanding of social ethics had been thrown out of balance by sin, controversy and culture." There is a ring of truth to the statement that I cannot deny. There are always those who will take a theological point and abuse it. That will be true till Jesus comes. But his solution is grounded in the progressive dispensational attempt to recast the present age as the inaugurated form of the kingdom. The supposed model of reconciliation is a noble one. However, it is neither sufficient nor necessary.

I reject the idea that to prevent a theological loophole, one must revamp the original theological statement (in this case traditional dispensationalism's view of the present age). A host of significant examples shows the possible meaninglessness of such an exercise in general. Do I recast the teachings of Christ and Paul because their teachings have provided ample ammunition to those who wanted to justify slavery (e.g., see Eph. 6, Philemon)? Should Reformed theologians recast their theology simply because some accuse them of anti-Semitism based upon their rejection of the present role

⁶ While I was doing my dissertation at DTS entitled "The Theological Method of Arno C. Gaebelein," I had the privilege of working through the collection of letters between Gaebelein and Lewis Sperry Chafer. It was interesting that their political and social interests dovetailed – both being strongly against Franklin Roosevelt for President. Yet Gaebelein was not someone we can characterize by the Southern political and social climate. He was an immigrant German who lived in the New York City area.

⁷ See J. R. Graves, *The Work of Christ Consummated in Seven Dispensations*, (Texarkana: Published by the Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1928, reprint from 1883).

of Jews as the nationally chosen race? Should Christians remodel their approach to evangelism and missions just because some Jews believe that the very fact of evangelism is anti-Semitic? Theological loopholes exist sometimes not because of bad theological emphases but because of the abuse of adherents or the misunderstandings of opponents.

This all gets us back to the need to develop a social ethic on exegetical grounds before our theological system is put in place. I do not doubt that my progressive brothers are serious about exegesis and I only ask that my more traditionalist brothers would do the same. My heartbeat (and part of why I accepted the invitation to come to this forum) is to help convince traditionalists of the great need for a social activism that is still subordinated to the primacy of the gospel of Christ. Contrary to what you might expect, I am “**optimistic**” about the prospects (contrary to how a traditionalist is supposed to think about things in this age). However, I am “**pessimistic**” (I’m back to my traditional pessimism) that dispensationalists as a whole will get on the same page to impact our culture, especially if traditional dispensational theology is cast as a theological loophole.

The Direction We Should Go Until Jesus Comes

First, we should reaffirm the need to challenge Christians who are oppressed to look for the Second Coming of Christ as their ultimate hope. This was a starting point for both Peter and Paul. In I Peter, the great apostle focused on the issue of persecution and suffering by believers. To those who were enduring mistreatment (1:6-7), Peter offered the hope of the coming inheritance in Christ (1:4), which would be activated or “revealed in the last time” (1:5). Peter encouraged Christians to bear their trials “tested by fire” with the hope of reward and honor at the “revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:7). Peter is strong-minded and clear. His basic message to mistreated Christians was “Gird your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope **completely** on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1:13). Hence, he could say “to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation” (4:13). The sharing of the sufferings of Christ means also the partaking of the “glory that is to be revealed” (5:1) and elders were expected to look to the Second Coming as their ultimate reward (5:4). Peter’s final message appears to be a repeat of his opening exhortation to find encouragement in the midst of suffering based upon future hope in Christ: “And after you have suffered for a little, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen, and establish you” (5:10).

Paul follows the same general outline in 2 Thessalonians. The occasion of the epistle is the persecution suffered by the Thessalonian Christians. Paul did not focus on any present inauguration of the Messianic kingdom but to the Second Coming of Christ as the great hope and motivation for their present situation: “For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of

eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marveled at among all who have believed – for our testimony to you was believed” (1:6-10).

Now this is not to say that Peter and Paul do not address other concerns even in these epistles. However, it is to show that, at least for Christians who were being oppressed for who they were, the first point of the sermon is the Second Coming of Christ. This focus has been common in traditional dispensationalism. If such emphasis leaves a theological loophole for social disengagement in the present age, then so does the teaching of Peter and Paul. As we discuss the issue of how best to express the character of the present age and any empowerment available to us to better the lot of those around us, we must do so without demeaning the great hope we have in the Second Coming of Christ.

Second, we must keep the gospel of eternal life primary as we engage ourselves socially. We do not want to repeat the error of liberalism (like we seem to be doing in other areas). Jesus taught us about “expectations between the times” in Matthew 13 (the kingdom of heaven parables) where the sowing of the seed refers to the Word of God which springs forth into life based upon the various responses. I understand that many dispensationalists relegate this passage to some futuristic time (tribulation or millennium), but I cannot accept their outline of the book of Matthew. Jesus seems to be talking about the present age (see v. 39, 52). In the Petrine and Pauline passages listed above under my first point, this idea is bolstered when one considers the context of the gospel of eternal life which places one in the position of receiving the anticipated blessings and renewal.

Third, we must treat social disengagement and racial discrimination as serious sin problems at the individual level. Our church leaders and church members should repent of their decisions to give up our great cities. Moving to the suburbs because that was the comfortable thing to do was and is blatant sin. It smacks of an unwillingness to treat those moving to the cities as equals and people worthy to hear the Gospel of grace. Our hyper-separation tendencies brought on by our failure in the Great Reversal should be fought.

As part of this repentant response, we should move to the Antiochan model for the local church, not the Jerusalem model. The homogeneous principle from church growth advocates points us toward Jerusalem. I am suggesting that enough of us must go the other way to make a difference. In Antioch, we find a cosmopolitan situation (Acts 13:1-3). Black Gentiles, white Gentiles, and Jewish church leaders all form part of a leadership team. Missionary enterprise came out of this environment while the Jerusalem church delayed perhaps because of its prejudicial tendencies.⁸ We must promote involvement in church work (especially church planting) in the inner city. This cannot be merely an academic exercise for all of us. There are too many of us running around as “theological eggheads” talking to each other and failing not only to talk to the Church, but failing to talk to the lost world which needs to hear what we have to say. If you think that is not your “calling,” I suggest that you reevaluate (perhaps repent) and make it your calling. God has not commanded us to impress each other in our theological journals. We must be people of action whose words are confirmed in the lives of those we touch.

⁸ See Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1981), 197-213.

Fourth, we must find common doctrinal ground in the discussion that allows doctrinal separationists to participate in the dialogue. The Promise Keepers have, in a well meaning way, combined the putting aside of doctrinal and racial differences among Christians as a cardinal tenet of their movement. However, there are many of us who want racial reconciliation who reject the notion of casting aside all doctrinal distinctions. For example, many of us are still uncomfortable with any alliance with Roman Catholicism. Such an uneasiness does not stem from some particular view of the kingdom of God. Also, my belief is that it is not merely a rehash of the hyper-separation that came out of the Great Reversal. Rather it shows an interest in scriptural principles of purity which must be safeguarded while at the same time balancing such a desire with love among all genuine Christians.⁹ A large number of separationists in this more biblical sense should be allowed to join us in our quest for genuine social action and racial reconciliation.

Fifth, we must find common doctrinal ground in the discussion that transcends one's view of the Messianic kingdom of God. Virtually all evangelicals hold to some form of the sovereignty of God. He reigns yesterday, today, and forever regardless of the eschatological chart one believes the text to be yielding. Can we not look at teachings such as the story of the Good Samaritan and say they transcend one's view of eschatology? Can a progressive dispensationalist and a traditional dispensationalist (and perhaps even a historical premillennialist) sit in the same pew at the same local church as it tries to address the disturbing issues of racial discrimination? The answer is, of course, yes.

The reason that such an occurrence is possible is that we have some things in common. In fact, all evangelicals usually go beyond the affirmation of the sovereignty of God and speak of God's rulership as expressed in the image of God in man (Gen. 1:26-28). This image is not lost in the Fall as many passages attest (Gen. 9:6, 1 Cor. 11:7, Ja. 3:9). Consequently, because men and women of every economic and racial status are made in God's image (even if unregenerate), they have value that is worth pursuing. Giving a cup of cold water in Jesus' name, teaching a child to read, helping a family to learn to use a checkbook, teaching English as a second language, and a variety of other actions of love need no particular eschatological scheme to legitimize them. Of course, we should discuss the eschatological particulars as we debate among ourselves, but I doubt that making them essential to social engagement from one perspective or another will actually enhance what we are trying to accomplish.

Sixth, we must treat the overall problem of social engagement and a lack of racial reconciliation in a global sense, not an American sense. Because there are American nuances and distinctives to our racial problems, we should not universalize any proposed solutions, either theologically or socially. We must be very careful that our missionaries do not export solutions to contexts where they do not make sense. South Africa, which I have written on above, is a case in point. It is a country almost devoid of major dispensational influence. To propose a solution of social engagement based upon a recasting of a dispensational view of the present age may fall on deaf ears which do not have sufficient reference points from which to understand its significance.

⁹ Francis Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1984), 70.

Conclusion

I hope that my reflections on Bob Pyne's thoughts are not taken in any way as disrespect for him professionally or personally. They are simply my musings (from a traditional dispensational perspective) about the important things he has forced us to consider. I encourage the progressives among us to engage the traditionalists in this dialogue. Within the last two years I have increased my efforts to talk to progressives and try to understand them. We cannot afford to be separated on the issues of social engagement and racial reconciliation. Every one of us needs to read Marvin Olasky's book *The Tragedy of American Compassion* to temper our judgments. Too much is at stake for precious human beings, our country, the world, and the coming kingdom.