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FORUM

CALVIN SEMINARY

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COVER ESSAY

DISPENSATIONALISM AND THE REFORMED

On almost every list of best-selling fiction these days is one or more of a series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins: *Left Behind*, *Tribulation Force*, *Nicolae*, *Soul Harvest*, *Apollyon*, and *Assassins*. What is so remark-

able about this series is that the authors are evangelical Christians and the subject matter is the Second Coming of Christ, hardly a combination one would expect to produce sales in the millions. But LaHaye and Jenkins have

done in fictional form what Hal Lindsey did a generation ago in non-fiction with *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970)—popularize a view of the end times known as dispensational premillennialism, or dispensationalism for short.

Of the various millennial schools of thought in the Christian Church, premillennial dispensationalism is the most recent to emerge. It traces its roots to John Nelson Darby, founder of the Plymouth or Darbyite Brethren in Great Britain in the nineteenth century. It was in the United States, however, that Darby's ideas had and still have their greatest impact. Through several channels—the writings and speeches of Darby and the American William E. Gladstone, a series of major prophecy conferences in the 1880s, the evangelistic preaching of D. L. Moody and later Billy Graham, the more



LYLE D. BIERMA

Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary.

than 100 Bible institutes founded in the U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century, and especially the publication in 1909 of *The Scofield Reference Bible* (a King James Version with extensive dispensational study notes by C. I. Scofield)—dispensational premillennialism came to shape the eschatological thinking of thousands of fundamentalist and evangelical

Please see COVER ESSAY next page ▶



“. . . Be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him”

FEATURED ARTICLES

“Dispensationalism and the Reformed” - Lyle D. Biermap. 1
 “Reflections on the Future” - James A. De Jongp. 3
 “The Armageddon Imagination” - John Boltp. 4
 “The Church and Y2K” - Alton J. Danksp. 6
 “Facing, Not Fearing, The Future” - Calvin P. Van Reken.....p. 7

COVER ESSAY_{cont.}

BIERMA

Christians across the United States.

Today it continues to hold sway in many Baptist, Pentecostal, and independent evangelical churches. Schools such as Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary teach from a dispensational perspective, although a group of younger scholars at the latter institution has developed a modified version known as "progressive dispensationalism." (Reformed Bible Institute, now Reformed Bible College, was founded in 1939 to provide a Reformed alternative to dispensational lay-training schools like Moody.) And the dispensational message is widely disseminated throughout the U.S. today (less so in Canada) through literature, videos, CDs, websites, prophecy conferences, and radio and television programming.

**What
Dispensationalists Teach**

Dispensational premillennialism is, as the name indicates, a form of premillennial teaching. Premillennialists understand Revelation 20:1-6 to mean that the Second Coming will take place before the Millennium, that is, prior to a millennial or thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth at the end of world history. In this respect dispensational premillennialism is like its much older cousin, historic or classical premillennialism.

But that is where the similarity stops. Wedded to this view of the millennium is a set of principles of biblical interpretation not found elsewhere in the Christian tradition. Dispensationalism is a way of understanding Scripture that

// Wedded to this view of millennium is a set of principles of biblical interpretation not found elsewhere in the Christian tradition. //

divides biblical history into distinct periods of time or "dispensations," in each of which God tests humanity's obedience to a specific revelation of his will.

The New Scofield Reference Bible (1967) identifies seven such dispensations: (1) Innocence (from Creation to the Fall); (2) Conscience (from the Fall to the Flood); (3) Human Government (from the Flood to Babel); (4) Promise (from Abraham to Moses); (5) Law (from Moses to Christ); (6) Grace (from Christ to the Rapture); and (7) the Kingdom Restoration of Israel (from the return of Christ to the end of the Millennium). Though salvation in each of these dispensations is by grace through faith, humanity for the most part fails the tests and falls under some form of divine judgment. At the end of Dispensation 5, for example, Christ came to earth and offered to restore the kingdom of heaven to the Jews, an earthly reign over Israel predicted in Old Testament prophecy. The Jews, however, failed the test of faith in the Messiah and were judged by being dispersed among the nations. Christ postponed the kingdom restoration of Israel until the Millennium (Dispensation 7) and has proceeded in the meantime to establish the Christian church among the Gentiles (Dispensation 6). Near the end of history, however, the Gentile church will be taken to heaven

in the Rapture. This will be followed by a seven-year tribulation on earth during which a mass conversion of Jews will take place. Then Christ will return to Jerusalem with his saints to rule the world for a thousand years with Israel at the head of the nations. At the end of the millennium there will be one final satanic revolt, Christ and his forces will crush the enemy, and God will usher in the new heaven and earth. Both

despite our differences with them, dispensational premillennialists are our brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow members of the one, holy, catholic church. There is much that we have in common, including a belief in the inspiration, infallibility, and authority of Scripture, in justification by grace through faith on the basis of Christ's substitutionary atonement, and in the personal return of Christ at the close of history. There is also much that we can learn from these fellow believers. How many of us share their zeal for the study of Scripture? Are we as watchful and ready for the return of Christ as many of them are? Is their sense of evangelistic urgency also found in our churches?



Our task as the people of God...is not to figure out God's blueprint for the future ...
Our task is to tell the world that he is coming and to be prepared to welcome him at any time.

redeemed Jews and Gentiles will populate the new universe, but the Jews will never lose their distinct identity and status.

How should we in the Reformed tradition evaluate this movement? We must begin with the acknowledgment that,

Nevertheless, there are, from a Reformed point of view, some serious weaknesses in the dispensational approach to Scripture that we ought not to gloss over. Space limits prevent a full treatment of these weaknesses, but we shall focus on two of the most important ones—the dispensational claims that all prophecy should be interpreted literally and that

" The Bible is the story of one plan of God as it unfolds in one covenant of grace that he enters into with his one people. "

Cont. page 8 ►

James A. De Jong, Guest Editor

REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE



JAMES A DE JONG

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Seminary.

In the 1790s Rev. Samuel Hopkins, the Puritan preacher at Newport, RI and disciple of Jonathan Edwards, appended a lengthy "Treatise on the Millennium" to his two-volume systematic theology. Hopkins believed that the year 2000 would be the beginning of the millennium. He predicted an era of enormous technological advances: machines that could move mountains, devices for rapid communication and travel, the conquering of diseases, unprecedented agricultural productivity. The end of the twentieth century would witness quality education available to all, a common language on earth, universal peace, the abolition of hunger, the virtual absence of criminal activity, and enormous prosperity. It would also be a time when the name of Jesus Christ would be universally acknowledged and the Christian church would flourish in all lands.

Samuel Hopkins' "threshold" is only weeks away! His

predictions, made in the infancy of the industrial and scientific revolutions more than 200 years ago, seem uncannily accurate. At least on many points! On matters of morality, civility, justice, racial and ethnic relations, and the universal acceptance of Christ as Lord, he missed the mark by a country mile.

Why would an otherwise sober Calvinist preacher and theologian dally in rhapsodic visions of the future? Why did St. Augustine, Joachim of Fiore, William Smith of Adventist fame, and a host of others through the centuries attempt to set dates for the coming of Christ's kingdom on earth and

created with a sense that this Power will call us to future account and will set all crooked things straight. As Christ-following, Bible-believing people, we know that God is our Father who for the sake of his Son's finished work on the cross is gathering, winnowing, and glorifying his people. We know that his kingdom is coming in all its fullness and that it will never end. Believers in Christ have always been interested in the coming kingdom. Our Lord has taught us to pray for its coming. He has taught us to prepare and to be ready for his return. We look to the future because we look to Christ.

// One of God's greatest gifts to the church is theologians who instruct us how to think and to believe responsibly about the future. //

for the mighty outpouring of the Holy Spirit? Why are Reformed Christians today intrigued by large turning points in history and what they portend, such as the dawn of the third millennium A.D. and the Y2K issue?

This number of The Calvin Seminary Forum, which I am pleased to edit in Henry Zwaanstra's sabbatical absence, is devoted to addressing and probing such eschatological topics.

Bottom line, God has endowed humanity with a sense of the future. As religious beings, we know a Power above and beyond us controls all things—past, present, and future. As moral beings, we are

Christians run amock, unfortunately, when they read the Bible on the future in a way in which it never intended to speak. Samuel Hopkins did; he went far beyond Jonathan Edwards' saner, more cautious, more hermeneutically aware moderate postmillennialism. Edwards held a rock-solid optimism about the triumph of Christ's work on earth; Hopkins mistakenly sought a timetable and a concrete description of the kingdom in the Bible. One of God's greatest gifts to the church is theologians who instruct us how to think and to believe responsibly, reliably about the future. I've noted some of the best in the sidebar on this page. ■

RECOMMENDED TITLES ON THE FUTURE

Bavinck, Herman, *The Last Things: Hope for this World and the Next*, edited by John Bolt, translated by John Friend. Grand Rapids: The Dutch Reformed Translation Society and Baker Books, 1996.

Clouse, Robert G., Robert N. Hosack, and Richard Pierard, *The New Millennium: A Once and Future Guide*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999.

Hoekema, Anthony A., *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979.

Holwerda, David, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.



JOHN BOLT

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THE ARMAGEDDON IMAGINATION

the American religious Right. There is present among certain apocalyptic sects and militia groups such as Christian Identity an "Armageddon imagination," a worldview that sees the American federal government as the antiChrist engaged in a war against the saints and thus to be resisted to the death. The attack on the Mt. Carmel Center confirmed the apocalyptic timetable of Branch Davidian leader David Koresh; the military attack only increased the cult's determination to fight to the end against the great satanic powers that were arrayed against them. As the authors of a recent useful volume on current millennialism put it: "For the followers of Koresh, this war with unbelievers truly signaled the end of the world" (Robert G. Clouse, Robert N. Hosack, and Richard V. Pierard, *The New Millennium Manual: A Once and Future Guide* [Baker, 1999], 30).

The Branch Davidians and groups similar to them have a radically dualistic worldview. They live in the shadow of

"Dispensational premillennialism has in common with the Branch Davidians and similar groups a preoccupation with conspiratorial politics and calendar speculation."

guard of the new age; in them prophecy will be fulfilled and a new human beginning started. They have a destiny to build the kingdom of God on earth; they are the destiny of God's kingdom on earth. This mindset is nurtured by direct application of biblical prophecy to the group's current situation. One of the staples of American apocalyptic cults is the eccentric teaching of British-Israelism, a strange notion that the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom carried off into Assyria in 722 B.C. found their way to the British Isles, where King David's true heir sits on the throne of Great Britain.

Why should we pay any attention to what are clearly fringe and fanatic groups such as these? Would it not be better to ignore them and thus deprive them of the publicity they so obviously crave and need? As a general principle, yes; it would be preferable to apply some serious attention deficit to apocalyptic groups and deny them the Armageddon publicity they want. But there are two reasons why such benign neglect is not prudent. First, many North American evangelical Christians have been taken in by key elements of the Armageddon imag-

ination, particularly as we approach the magical-mystical year 2000. Second, the excesses of the small presence of Christian militia groups have been effectively used by secular people to discredit and try to eliminate all Christian witness to Christ's lordship in the public arena. In the remainder of this essay I will address each of these issues in greater detail.

The dominant eschatology in American evangelical Christianity is dispensational premillennialism, and many evangelicals therefore take to eschatological conspiracy-thinking and end-time calendar-gazing like squirrels to acorns—they tend to go nutty. Proof that dispensational premillennialism is immensely popular is not hard to find. Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*, first published in 1970, sold over 35 million copies and was the best-selling non-fiction (!) book of that decade. More recently, Dallas theologian John F. Walvoord's *Armageddon, Oil and the Middle East Crisis*, republished during the Persian Gulf War, sold over one million copies after a major billboard advertising campaign. Well-known evangelical pastor and author Tim LaHaye and prominent evangelical ghost-writer Jerry Jenkins are coauthoring a series of seven end-time novels (*Left Behind, Tribulation Harvest, Nicolae, Soul Harvest, Appolyon, Assassins*) which are also selling millions of copies. 700 Club host and former Republican Presidential candidate Pat Robertson has also written an end-time novel in this vein, *The End of the Age*. Finally, the incredible popularity of Frank

“ There is a strong inclination in the secular media to lump all Christian eschatology together with the extremists. ”

ments showing that the attackers had in fact used explosive agents.

Neither the original assault nor the coverup would have surprised the Branch Davidians themselves or the several thousands of contemporary conspiracy devotees on the fringes of

Armageddon, convinced that they alone are the elect children of light facing off against the hosts of darkness and evil. Thriving on opposition and usually led by a powerful charismatic leader—sometimes even seen as the returned Christ—they see themselves as the van-

Cont. page 5 ►

ARMAGEDDON... cont.
BOLT

Peretti's spiritual warfare novels highlight the same characteristic tendency.

Dispensational premillennialism has in common with the Branch Davidians and similar groups a preoccupation with conspiratorial politics and calendar speculation. Dark, sinister forces of evil (them) are viewed as arrayed against God's chosen people (us) and only a supernatural intervention can save the elect. In the meantime we should hunker down in mental if not actual bunkers and wait for Armageddon, the final battle in which the forces of darkness

periods in actual church history. The chart below, taken from Clarence Larkin's *The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth in the World*, is a classic illustration.

As the year 2000 approaches, the siege mentality so characteristic of militia and survivalists groups has also made its inroads into the worldview of ordinary Christians. Fears about the Y2K problem have led to excessive stockpiling of fuel, food, water, and in some cases, even firearms. Now, of course not all prudential stocking of bottled water and firewood is an



“ Fears about the Y2K problem have led to excessive stockpiling of fuel, food, water, and in some cases, even firearms. ”

“ ...many evangelicals therefore take to eschatological conspiracy-thinking and end-time calendar-gazing like squirrels to acorns... ”

will be destroyed. All this is set forth in specific timetables drawn from literalist interpretations of biblical prophecy, particularly the book of Revelation. A typical example of this prophetic charting is the interpretation of the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) as a chronological description of

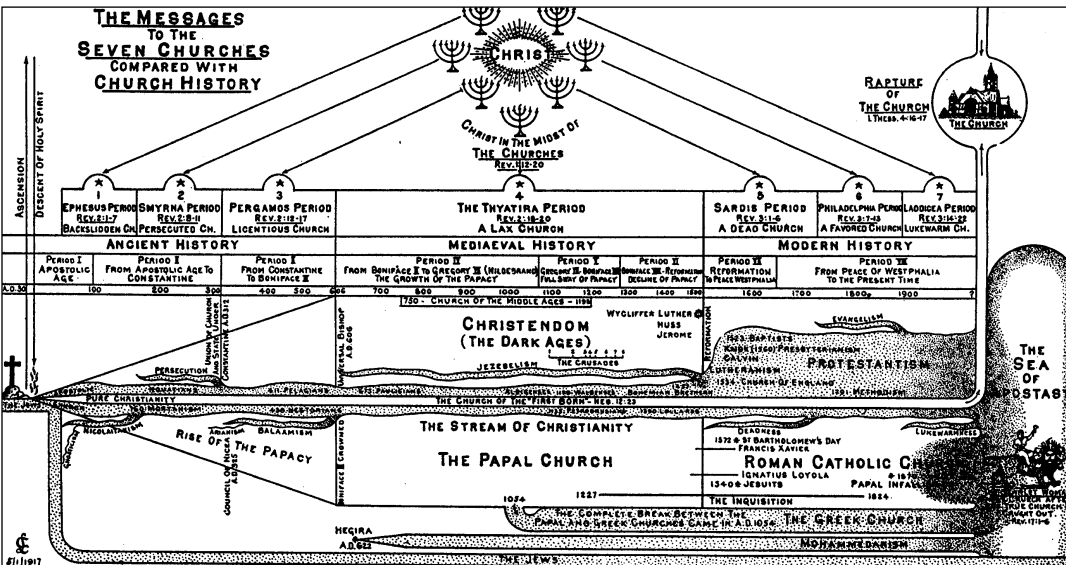
expression of what I have called the Armageddon imagination. However, major league hoarding as a response to biblical prophecy tied to specific calendar dates is another matter. While it is unfair to label all those who are obsessed with the Y2K problem as closet militia members, it is true that there

are important similarities in attitude and practice between Y2K hoarders and cult groups such as the Branch Davidians.

And it is these similarities that lead us to consider the second reason for taking a serious look at apocalyptic fringe groups. There is a strong inclination in the secular media to lump all Christian eschatology together with the extremists. The argument goes something like this: Members of the religious right who believe that Jesus is Lord, that his will must be done on earth as it is in heaven, that America will be blessed only if it is a godly and obedient nation—these people want to impose their religious and moral beliefs on freedom-loving Americans. Though they may appear to be law-abiding and

peaceful, their beliefs in dark, conspiratorial forces of government—agents of the Prince of Darkness—will bring them to a point where they engage in violence to achieve their goal of a Christian America. In sum, there is little or no difference between the Christian Coalition and the Branch Davidians or the Oklahoma City bombers. Public expressions of Christianity are therefore dangerous to the civic good and should be silenced (think of Ireland and Lebanon and the Balkans!). The public square should be religiously neutral and naked.

Though I consider this secularist argument to be wrong and dangerous, it is understandable in the light of the Armageddon imagination. For that reason it would be good for evangelical Christians to move away from that kind of eschatology. In fact, there is no mythical or mystical prophetic significance to the year 2000. The number is of course in itself fascinating but it has absolutely no prophetic significance. In this it is exactly like the year 1000 or that very important year 1947. Interesting, personally significant perhaps, but not of prophetic weight. Y2K is no big deal, and when we make it one, we only generate theological and pastoral as well as political problems. ■



Larkin Chart

THE CHURCH AND Y2K



ALTON J. DANKS

Information Technology
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As I am writing this, there are just under 100 days left before January 1, 2000. People have different beliefs about the impact this event will have on our lives. These beliefs are reflected in the different ways people are preparing. We see people building fortresses in wilderness areas and others doing nothing at all.

What should churches do? How is the year 2000 most likely to impact them?

Problems

Perhaps the most important thing is to understand what types of problems may occur as we move into the year 2000. The primary issue is the change-of-the-century digits in the year. Due to technology and economic conditions that prevailed until recently, a lot of computers and electronic devices did not store the century digits of the year. Instead, the century was either assumed to be 1900 in all cases, or assumed to be 1900 if the year was below a specified

'pivot' year. Some computer software, for example, assumes years 00-30 are 2000 dates and 31-99 are 1900 dates. Problems occur when these assumptions are wrong. These problems may be cosmetic (date doesn't display correctly) or functional (device doesn't work as needed).

So what could happen?

First, a date in the year 2000 may be out of the range of acceptable dates for a computer or electronic device. This could cause the device to stop working entirely or prompt you for a new date. In most cases, simply entering a date within the range the device can handle will get it working again.

Second, a computer may not move to the year 2000 automatically. In at least some cases, manually setting the date will fix this problem.

Third, a computer or device may not display dates properly.

Fourth, a computer may not sort dates properly.

Fifth, a computer may not calculate the number of days between dates correctly when the century of the one date is 1900 and the other is 2000.

Sixth, a computer or other device (like a VCR) may not compare dates correctly when the century of the one date is 1900 and the other is 2000. In other words, it may not be able to correctly calculate whether one date is older than another date.

Any electronic device that required a date entry when it was first started (like a computer), or requires a date entry whenever power is interrupted (like a VCR) is one that may

experience one of the problems noted above.

Speaking of power interruptions, it would be wise to develop a contingency plan in case your area experiences power problems due to the year 2000. This is unlikely, but the possibility of being without power for even a short time in the winter should not be ignored. A church planning a New Year's Eve service that extends to January 1, 2000 should think about having flashlights on hand.

Solutions

The solutions available depend on the nature of the problem.

First, try entering a new date. This may fix the first two problems noted above. TIP: For electronic devices other than computers, consider using the corresponding date in 1972. Both 1972 and 2000 are leap years and their dates and days of the week match - i.e. January 1, 1972 and January 1, 2000 are both Saturdays. This can help if you need the dates and days of the week to match. Do not backdate a computer as it can cause problems with backing up and restoring data or installing new software. In these cases the computer compares the dates of files and can incorrectly identify older files as newer ones and vice versa.

You could apply a software patch. Windows '95, for example, has some problems with the year 2000. The Windows Explorer file manager will not sort or display year 2000 dates properly. A patch is available at <http://microsoft.com/technet/year2k/>. Select Product Guide and then select the

product to check. Links are available on the product page when a patch is available.

Or, you might have to replace either the device or the software.

Opportunities

Churches have two great opportunities regarding the year 2000 issue. Starting now, churches may extend their role of "truth bearer" into the year 2000 area by helping inform their communities of what problems may occur and how to deal with them. This may really help the communities and help build trust. Churches may also develop plans to provide shelter or other assistance to the community in case of local power outages.

One More Thing

One more thing to think about. It is not a year 2000 related issue, but recent changes in the television industry are impacting churches. Local television stations are moving to High Definition TV, or HDTV. When they do this they may use a frequency that interferes with a church's wireless sound system. Our local churches just experienced this when one of our local television stations upgraded. If you need to replace sound equipment to deal with year 2000 issues, make sure you get equipment that will handle the local HDTV issue also. ■

FACING, NOT FEARING, THE FUTURE



**CALVIN P.
VAN REKEN**

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People fear the past in different ways. In Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* Michael Henchard has a shameful past. Early in his life, while drunk, he auctioned off his young wife and his baby daughter to a sailor for five guineas. Later, filled with shame, he swore off drinking, moved away, and eventually became the mayor of his new home, Casterbridge. As the narrative

only limited success. Some adults don't want to think about their childhood; it was too painful. For people with painful memories the past is a black hole, and they are afraid of being sucked back into it.

I am just old enough to remember the nuclear bomb scare in the 1950s, when some people were building bomb shelters in their backyards. They were trying to fix it so that they would live through a nuclear attack and the subsequent nuclear winter. Today there is quite a stir about Y2K. People are warned to make sure they have food and other supplies for a week or two or even longer. Bottled water, canned tuna, potatoes, and generators are being stockpiled. Some mattresses are slowly becoming lumper with cash taken out of banks. Some people are afraid of what the future holds, so they try to make it so they would survive if something bad happens.

Fear is a powerful emotion. Like every emotion, it has a good and proper function, but

is protected from a potential danger.

Within limits the emotion of fear can be trained. To do so properly requires discerning which contexts really warrant fear and which do not. This is not an easy thing to do. One general rule is that the degree of fear that is warranted in a person is directly proportional to the danger to the person. If there is no actual danger, then one should not have any fear. If there is a real and serious danger, then one should be very afraid. While this is often a helpful rule of thumb, it doesn't help us much with the current alarm over Y2K. The problem is that we simply don't know how much danger Y2K poses.

In Scripture we are told specifically about events in the past. We are repeatedly told to remember the past. But we are not encouraged to recall everything about the past. We are not told to remember our sins, our good deeds, or our cleverness at avoiding trouble. Rather we are told to remember how God has shown Himself through all the joys and sorrows of our lives to be a faithful Provider and Savior. We remember the past so we keep in mind that our lives now and in the future are not secured by our own efforts, but by God. And because we know that He cares for us, there are real limits on how much we should fear the future, no matter how threatening it may appear. The proper confidence is well expressed in the words of the gospel song, "I don't know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future."

This brings us to the ques-

" ... the emotion of fear can be trained. To do so requires discerning which contexts really warrant fear and which do not. "

tion of how to deal with Y2K. Is stocking up on tuna because of Y2K showing a lack of faith?

I don't think so. One of the ways the Lord cares for us is to give us the ability to make reasonable preparations. Maybe computer systems will fail. Maybe supplies will run low. Maybe there is some real danger. I don't know if there is real danger or not. I do know this, that if you think that the future is dangerous because of Y2K, then you should prepare for it calmly. In what spirit you go about your preparations does matter. It is a temptation to fear the future excessively and to make inappropriate precautions. To fear the future excessively or inappropriately is to worry, to be anxious. And Jesus said that we should not worry or be anxious. Jesus says we should not worry about whether we will have food to eat or water to drink. People without Christ run after all these things. Our Father in heaven knows that we need them. What's most important for us today is not to panic and so prepare for some future disaster, but to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. Let's not be anxious about tomorrow; each day has enough trouble of its own. ■

// Fear is a powerful emotion. Like every emotion, it has a good and proper function... //

unfolds his past catches up with him. For people with guilty secrets the past is a wounded bear that seems to be gaining on them.

For other people the past is threatening in a different way. Some Viet Nam veterans won't talk about the past. The war is a powerful memory that they work hard at forgetting with

not every occurrence is appropriate. If someone is afraid of heights, we think he should overcome it. But if someone is afraid of bungee jumping, we may think him sensible. If a child is afraid of the dark, we try to quell her fear. But if a child is not afraid of stray dogs, we may warn her about dogs so that she learns to be afraid and

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CALVIN SEMINARY FORUM

COVER ESSAY cont.

BIERMA

there is an abiding fundamental distinction between Israel and the church.

Prophecy & Fulfillment

One reason for dispensationalism's popular appeal is the certainty it offers its followers about the future fulfillment of biblical prophecy. It is convinced that much of the prophetic material in Ezekiel, Daniel, the Gospels, and Revelation will be literally fulfilled in events at the end of world history, some of which are already taking place. These prophecies are "God's blueprint for the future" (Charles C. Ryrie), which, if read correctly, provides a detailed account of geo-political developments around the time of the Second Coming. At the center of this prophetic picture is the restored state of Israel.

This approach to prophecy is misguided, however, for at least two reasons. First, biblical prophecy is not primarily prediction, as dispensationalism assumes, but proclamation. It is not so much God's fore-telling as his forth-telling. Prophecy is not a puzzle to be solved or a code to be cracked but the word of God addressed to his people then and now in the form of promise, exhortation, encouragement, and warning. Even when it is predictive in nature, it is often condi-

tional: certain things will happen if you repent or unless you repent (cf. Jeremiah 18:7-10).

Second, much of the prophetic material in question is apocalyptic in nature. Apocalyptic passages are grand poetic dramas, which paint the climactic cosmic struggle between the forces of God and Satan in broad, highly symbolic strokes. They are not meant to be read like historical narrative or tomorrow's newspaper. And when "literal" interpretations of these texts turn out to be wrong

**// dispensational
premillennialists
are our brothers and
sisters in Christ //**

(cf. Hal Lindsey's identification in 1970 of a ten-nation European Common Market in Daniel 7; the European Union now has fourteen members), not only is the rest of the church embarrassed, but the credibility of the gospel is damaged.

Israel and the Church

A second and closely related

aspect of dispensationalism that concerns Reformed Christians is its insistence that God always has and will have separate purposes for Israel and the church. According to this view, the history of redemption is about two distinct peoples and two divine plans. From a Reformed perspective, however, this represents a serious misreading of Scripture. The Bible is the story of one plan of God as it unfolds in one covenant of grace that he enters into with his one people. The true sons and daughters of Israel today are not the citizens of a secular state on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean but the one great Seed of Abraham, the Messiah (Gal. 3:16), and all those Jews and Gentiles who are incorporated into him in the church universal (Gal. 3:28-29). The dividing wall of hostility has been destroyed (Eph. 2:14-15). God's chosen people, royal priesthood, and holy nation today are the one body of Christ, the church (1 Pt. 2:9), the new "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:15). There are both natural branches and grafted branches in this olive tree (Rom. 11:17-21), but the tree itself is one.

The King is coming! On this we and our dispensational brothers and sisters can agree. Our task as the people of God, however, is not to figure out God's blueprint for the future or where we are in "the final count-

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down" (Ryrie). Only the Father knows when the Son is coming (Mt. 24:36). Our task is to tell the world that he is coming and to be prepared to welcome him at any time. As Jesus himself reminded us, "Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come . . . Be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him" (Mt. 24:42, 44). ■