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Gerhard Pfandl

In an election year, religion in the U.S. becomes a very public matter. Every presidential candidate has professed faith in Christ, knowing that there is a sizable constituency of evangelical voters they cannot ignore. The theology that binds most of these evangelical believers together from many different denominations is called dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism teaches that the second coming of Christ takes place in two distinct phases. First, Jesus comes invisibly to remove His church (the secret rapture) prior to a seven-year period during which the rest of humanity must face the antichrist.

At the end of the seven years, which according to dispensational theology is the fulfillment of the last week of the 70 weeks of Daniel 9:24, Jesus will again return, but this time visibly to deliver those who became Christians during these seven years. This means those who were not

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taken to heaven at the time of the secret rapture get a second chance during the seven-year period. At the second, visible coming, Jesus also destroys the enemies of Israel at the Battle of Armageddon.

Foundational to the rapture teaching is the concept that God has two separate plans—one for the Israelites or Jewish people and another for non-Jews, or Gentiles. The plan for Israel is revealed in the Old Testament. However, when the Jews rejected the Messiah, the prophetic clock for Israel stopped and the Church Age began. When the Christian saints are taken to heaven in the secret rapture, the prophetic clock begins ticking again and God's plan for the Jews takes its course. This means that the prophecies in the Old Testament are meant only for the Jews, not for Christians.

What makes this theology so appealing to conservative Christians is the fact that several events that dispensational theologians predicted

would take place before Jesus can return, have come to pass. Their end-time scenario rests on five pillars: (1) The Jews have to return to Israel [fulfilled during the first half of the 20th century when hundreds of thousands of Jews returned to Palestine]; (2) Israel must be restored as a nation [fulfilled in 1948 when the State of Israel was created, and millions of Jews from around the world moved to Israel]; (3) The city of Jerusalem must again be in Jewish hands [fulfilled in 1967 during the Six-Day War]; (4) The temple must be rebuilt and the temple service restored [what they are all waiting for now, but the The Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest places for Muslims, stands where the temple is supposed to be built]; and (5) The antichrist must rule over a united Europe, which will be the revived Roman empire [The European parliament and the events in Europe today are seen as a prelude to the rule of the antichrist].

It is remarkable how the first three of the predicted events have been fulfilled. It is if a supernatural power were guiding these events; and this may well be, but it is *not* God who is guiding them.

Undergirding dispensational theology is its understanding of the 70-week prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27. The first 69 weeks are seen as pointing to the Messiah, but the 70th week is believed to still be in the future. The “he” in verse 27, therefore, is not Christ but the antichrist of the future.

According to this theology, soon after the rapture of the church, the antichrist will be revealed. He will make a covenant with God’s people, the Jews, pledging to protect them from their hostile neighbors, but in the middle of the seven years, he will break that covenant, outlaw all religious practices of the Jews, who by then have rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem and have begun to sacrifice animals again. The antichrist will



enter the temple in Jerusalem and demand to be worshiped as God. Thus Paul's statement in 2 Thessalonians 2:4, "[The antichrist] sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God" (NIV) will be literally fulfilled. Therefore, the temple in Jerusalem has to be rebuilt so that the Antichrist can literally sit in the temple. He will begin a reign of terror against the Jews, who after the rapture have accepted Christ (the 144,000 are all Jews), but he will also persecute the Gentiles, who have accepted Christ since the rapture of the church.

The linchpin of this theology is the restoration and well-being of Israel today. This is the reason for America's total commitment to Israel. The evangelical lobby in Washington is constantly pressuring the government to support Israel and its expansion at all costs—no matter what happens to the Palestinians.

In January 2006, Ariel Sharon, the prime minister of Israel, suffered a massive stroke. A few days later, Pat Robertson, one of the best-known evangelical leaders, stated that God had punished Sharon for withdrawing from Gaza and giving the land to the Palestinians. Robertson had to apologize a few days later, but his view reflects the teaching of dispensationalism that all the land of Palestine belongs to the Jews.

There are basically four reasons that Seventh-day Adventists cannot

accept dispensational theology:

1. The Bible does not teach that the 70 weeks can be split into two time periods, the first 69 weeks reaching to the death of Christ and the 70th week still in the future. The 70th week begins with the baptism of Jesus and ends with the death of Stephen in A.D. 34. This was the teaching of conservative Christians until John Nelson Darby in the 19th century introduced this new theology.

2. The rapture of the saints will not be a secret rapture with people disappearing while life goes on here on Earth. The Rapture will happen when Jesus comes back visible for the entire world with the voice of the archangel according to 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17, "The Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (NKJV).

Before the real rapture occurs, the resurrection of the dead in Christ will take place. After the dead are raised, the living saints will be translated, and together the two groups will be raptured, that is, "they will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air." Nowhere does the Bible teach a secret rapture before the res-

urrection of the dead.

3. The Bible does not teach that the Jews as a nation will again be God's people after the church is raptured. The special status of the Jewish nation as God's people came to an end in A.D. 34 at the end of the 70 weeks (Matt. 21:43). Ellen White was very clear on this: "I saw that God had forsaken the Jews as a nation; but that individuals among them will yet be converted."¹ Similarly, in *Spiritual Gifts* she wrote, "Individuals among the Jews will be converted; but as a nation they are forever forsaken of God."²

4. Nowhere does the Bible teach that people who have not accepted Christ will get a second chance during the seven years between the secret rapture and the Second Coming. Why would only the last generation get a second chance, why not the rest of humanity from Adam on?

Dispensational theology is not scriptural. Nevertheless, most conservative Christians subscribe to it and support modern Israel in any

way they can, including political pressure on the White House.

The Jews, of course, do not accept the dispensational theology, but they are happy for the support they receive from evangelical Christians. Nathan Perlmutter, director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, is not concerned about the dispensationalist teaching that most Jews will be killed by the antichrist and that the rest will convert to Jesus. He said, "We need all the friends we have to support Israel. . . . If the Messiah comes, on that day we'll consider our options. Meanwhile, let's praise the Lord and pass the ammunition."³

REFERENCES

¹ *Early Writings*, p. 213.

² *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 1, p. 107.

³ Nathan Perlmutter and Ruth Ann Perlmutter, *The Real Anti-Semitism in America* (New York: Arbor House, 1982), quoted in Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), p. 232.

"There is a downside to the dispensationalist/Israeli friendship.

In their commitment to keep Israel strong and moving in directions prophesied by the Bible, dispensationalists are currently supporting some of the most dangerous elements in Israeli society"

(Timothy P. Weber).