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Alan P. Boyd, Premillennialism, and the Post-Apostolic Fathers

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Dispensational Distinctives, Vol. II, No. 3; May-June 1992

" Alan P. Boyd, Premillennialism, and the Post-Apostolic Fathers, Part I"
by Thomas Ice

One of the ongoing controversies between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists revolves around what the church has historically believed or not believed on issues relating to dispensationalism. One of the major lines of, attacks commonly employed by opponents of dispensationalism is to say that the system of theology is so new and unique that it cannot be Biblical or it would have developed earlier. Most dispensationalists have replied, like Martin Luther did to the Roman Church, that the issue should be settled on the basis of exegesis and what the Bible teaches, not what the church has historically believed. For example, dispensationalist Dr. Charles Ryrie has noted, "After all, the ultimate question is not, Is dispensationalism—or any other teaching—historic? but, Is it Scriptural? Most opponents of dispensationalism realize that this is the issue, but they still persist in using the historical argument with its fallacious implications." (*Dispensationalism Today* (Moody Press, 1965):67)

ALAN BOYD AND DALLAS SEMINARY

Those who have been following the debate know that those within the Dominionist camp have been especially critical of dispensationalism, since our theology is the opposite of their "victorious church" scheme. Reconstructionists have attempted to weaken the commonly held view from virtually every quarter of scholarship which recognizes that the post-apostolic church was largely Chiliastic (premillennial). One of the sources being used the last few years by Reconstructionists (and a few others) in their attempt to give a black eye to dispensationalism has been a Master of Theology thesis from Dallas Theological Seminary.

Dallas Seminary has usually been thought of as the world center for dispensationalism. In 1977, Canadian Alan Patrick Boyd wrote a ThM thesis for the Historical Theology Department called "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)." 1977 was also the year I entered Dallas Seminary, where I too majored in Historical Theology under Dr. Edwin C. Deibler and Dr. John D. Hannah, who were the graders of Boyd's thesis. Reconstructionists believe that they have a tool from inside the dispensational womb which disproves our basic contention that the early church was *primarily* Chiliastic for about the first 200-300 years of her existence.

THE TRUTH ABOUT "BOY, O, BOYD!"

Recently my Reconstructionist friend and adversary Dr. Ken Gentry has been producing a series of articles about Boyd's thesis entitled "Boy, O, Boyd!" for the Gary North supported publication *Dispensationalism in Transition* (V:8; Aug. 1992), which is in its fifth year of blasting the theology they most love to hate—dispensationalism. Included in Gentry's background on Boyd's thesis is a reference to a phone call I made to him last year about my phone conversations with Alan Boyd concerning his thesis, who is currently a pastor in Canada. I informed Gentry that I had sent Boyd copies of the material that Reconstructionists had written using his thesis. Boyd wondered if they had really read through his entire thesis since he thought that they had misunderstood what he had said. He felt that they had used his material improperly to argue that the

early church was not significantly Chiliastic. Boyd told me on the phone that the early church was Chiliastic, but did not reflect a dispensational brand of premillennialism and this was his point in his thesis. I then commented to Gentry that I thought this was especially significant in light of the fact that Boyd said he was no longer a dispensationalist and had become posttrib, but still a premillennialist, since he wrote his thesis 15 years ago.

Gentry wrote in his article that Boyd was still a dispensationalist and said, "According to Tommy Ice, he [Boyd] remains a dispensationalist to this day." As just noted above, I actually said exactly the opposite. This statement provoked me to call Gentry and find out why he had misrepresented me. When I told Ken that he was mistaken on that point in his article, he said he did not know why he misunderstood, but would correct the mistake in a future article. We discussed Boyd's thesis further and told Ken that I thought he was misusing Boyd's material by overstating the case against the premillennialism of the early church.

Another comment that Gentry got wrong from our phone conversation was related to Boyd's attitude toward Reconstructionist use of his thesis. Gentry said, "Frankly, I was astonished when I heard that Boyd was surprised that his work was being employed against dispensationalism. What in the world did he expect?" I did not tell Gentry that Boyd was astonished over their use of his thesis, instead I told Gentry that Boyd seemed to be somewhat surprised that his thesis had become a center of controversy, not that it was being used by them. Gentry then said, "According to Ice, Boyd feels that his arguments have been taken out of context and wrongly employed in anti-dispensational polemics." Once again, that is not what I said or even implied. Boyd thought that Reconstructionists had misapplied his material in relationship to the broader issue of the extent and nature of the early church's premillennialism, not dispensationalism. Apparently Gentry's basic misunderstanding about Boyd's current relationship to dispensationalism has contributed to further error in his understanding of what I had told him about Boyd's reaction of Reconstructionist use of his thesis.

WAS THE EARLY CHURCH AMILLENNIAL?

One of the major quotes used by Reconstructionists from Boyd's thesis which has led to confusion about what Boyd is saying is a footnote from his conclusion. Boyd recommends that dispensationalists pursue five things in the future in the area of early church studies as it relates to eschatology. His third suggestion was that we need to do more direct study of the early church fathers and their interpretation of prophecy. In that light he said, "And thus avoid reliance on men like Geo. N. H. Peters, . . . whose historical conclusions regarding premillennialism . . . in the early church have been proven to be largely in error. Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Hermas, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Hegesippus can not be claimed as premillennialists. This validates the claim of L. Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines*, (1937; reprinted., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), p. 262, ' . . . it is not correct to say, as Premillenarians do, that it (millennialism) was *generally* accepted in the first three centuries. The truth of the matter is that the adherents of this doctrine were a rather limited number.' On the other hand, this invalidates the claim of premillennialists like John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, p. 137, 'The early church was far from settled on details of eschatology though *definitely* premillennial.'" (Italics mine). (92)

This is why Reconstructionists like Gary DeMar use Boyd to give his readers the impression that while there was some premillennialism in the early church, it was not widespread, and he seems to suggest that amillennialism was really the more

widespread view of the ancient church, which is not the case at all. DeMar writes in *The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction* (a book written as a sentence by sentence rebuttal to a live debate he had with Dave Hunt and I in 1988) that Boyd said, "So then, it's *amillennialism* that shows up in the early church" (96). DeMar goes on to declare, building upon his reading of Boyd, "Where, then is the historical evidence for premillennialism? What was once considered insurmountable evidence, has now turned out to be scant evidence" (97).

It is interesting that when I looked at the full Berkhof quote cited by Boyd and delighted in by DeMar, that Berkhof's list of patristic (i.e., early church fathers) premillennialists is longer than Boyd's. This raises a question about Boyd's basis for evaluating the fathers which will be dealt with in our next issue. Boyd concluded that "Clement of Rome, Barnabas, Hermas, Ignatius, Polycarp, and Hegeppus can not be claimed as premillennialists" (92). However, Berkhof, whom Boyd is quoting in agreement, includes Barnabas and Hermas as patristic premillennialists. Upon reading the full text of Berkhof on this matter, he does not seem to be saying that the majority view of the early church was not premillennial, but that modern premillennialists have overstated their case as to the full extent of early premillennialism. One thing can be said with certainty, and that is that the early church certainly was *not* amillennial, as DeMar implies.

No wonder Boyd told me in our phone conversation that Reconstructionists had misused his thesis. Boyd is not saying that the early church was not Chiliastic or premillennial, instead the thrust of his thesis was to say that they were not like the modern or dispensational premillennialists; but that while still Chiliastic, the seeds of, not dispensationalism, but amillennialism are found in the fathers.

"It is the present conviction of this writer that there was a rapid departure from New Testament eschatological truth in the early patristic period. Therefore, it warrants the writer little concern that there are no roots of dispensational premillennialism in that period, but instead the roots of both post-tribulationism and amillennialism. The *roots* of dispensational premillennialism are Scriptural, and the most one could hope to find in the early patristic period would be some remnants of it (as this thesis demonstrates there are). Similarly, it warrants little concern that there is evident post-tribulationism and seminal amillennialism in these patristic writings. A rapid departure from New Testament eschatological truth would account for this phenomenon." (Boyd:Preface)

CONCLUSION

The stated purpose of Boyd in his thesis was "to determine whether Dr. Ryrie's 'premillennialism' is similar to, or dissimilar to, the premillennialism exhibited in some of the patristic writings under consideration" (2). Boyd's very statement presumes that the early church was premillennial. What Boyd was doing in his thesis was comparing the modern system of dispensationalism premillennialism with patristic premillennialism to see how similar the two brands of premillennialism were. Boyd concluded, not that the early church was not premillennial, but that early church did not have much in common with modern or dispensational premillennialism as represented by Dr. Ryrie and others.

In our next issue I will pursue this matter further.
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"Alan P. Boyd, Premillennialism, and the Post-Apostolic Fathers, Part II"
by Thomas Ice

In this article I am continuing interaction with Reconstructionist use of Alan P. Boyd's "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Post Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)," which was his 1977 Master of Theology thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary. While I am in basic agreement with Boyd's work, I do agree with Reconstructionist Ken Gentry that it is "not without its flaws (e.g., occasional scanty treatment and presumptive conclusions)" ("Boy, O, Boyd!" in *Dispensationalism in Transition* (V:8; Aug. 1992):1).

SOME PROBLEMS WITH BOYD'S WORK

It must be kept in mind that the purpose of Boyd's thesis was to compare modern dispensational premillennialism with ancient premillennialism to see if there is a basis for similarity. Boyd was correct to conclude that there were not many similarities. However, in his zeal to demonstrate his point I think that he sometimes gave the benefit of the doubt away from dispensationalism and premillennialism. Boyd has accused dispensational premils of not distinguishing between modern premillennialism and ancient forms when they do historical surveys of the fathers. This is often true, but we also must keep in mind that most of the time when modern premils are surveying the ancients they are merely attempting to discover who is a premil, regardless of what kind of premillennialism they happen to hold.

In our book *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?*, we were mainly dealing with the issue of premillennialism vs. postmillennialism, not dispensationalism *per se*. However, our critics wanted to discuss what kind of premillennialism was present or absent in the early church, which was not the issue for us. We also wanted to show that futurism was also widespread, although undeveloped, in opposition to the preterism of many Reconstructionists. However, they wanted to discuss the issue of dispensationalism in their rebuttals. This is something that Boyd could have noted more clearly in his thesis: that the early church, when they spoke, was basically premil. This Boyd admitted to me in our phone conversation. Reconstructionists should keep in mind that regardless of how different and advanced in many areas dispensationalism is from primitive formulations of premillennialism, both are still premillennial. That is something that dispensationalists have in common with early Chiliasm. Anti-dispensationalist, John Gerstner, has correctly said, "All do agree, however, that you cannot have Dispensationalism without premillennialism. Therefore, the presence of premillennialism admits the possibility of the presence of Dispensationalism. Conversely, the absence of premillennialism almost proves the absence of Dispensationalism." (*Wrongly Dividing The Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991):8)

The criterion that Boyd used to determine who was a premil and who was not is likely too strict to yield a true and complete picture of the patristic fathers. As noted in the previous issue of *Dispensational Distinctives*, anti-premil scholar, Louis Berkhof, concluded that at least two of those classified as not being premils by Boyd were called premil by Berkhof. Those two were the Epistle of Barnabas and Hermas. Here is a difference in judgment. W.G.T. Shedd, who is distinctly anti-premillennial also includes Barnabas and Hermas as ones who "exhibit in their writings distinct traces of this doctrine [*i.e.*, premillennialism]" (*A History of Christian Doctrine* (Charles Scribner, 1864):II:390).

I think Boyd's criterion that an early church father has to say something explicitly premillennial, or he was not premillennial is too narrow. I think that this is reasonable

in light of the fact that so many others from that period who had an identifiable eschatology were premil. When this is combined with the fact that there are no specific examples of a clear and distinct amillennialism in any of the other fathers, then why would it be unreasonable to think that most of the others should not be classified as premil because they do not have explicitly clear statements?

This assumption could be further supported by Justin Martyr's statement in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* when he was addressing the issue of "a thousand years in Jerusalem." Justin says, I admitted to you formerly, that I and many others are of this opinion, and that such will take place, as you assuredly are aware; but, on the other hand, I signified to you that many who belong to the pure and *pious* faith, and are true Christians, think otherwise" (80). True, this is a clear admission by Justin that there are *many* other orthodox Christians of his time who were not premil. But at the same time Justin's statement also includes a general confirmation that *many others* are of his premil faith as well. The problem for non-premillennialists is that we do not have extant records of statements by many who were not premil. Anti-premil Shedd also sees Justin Martyr's statement declaring widespread premillennialism. "So general had the tenant premillennialism become in the last half of the 2d century, that Justin Martyr declares that it was the belief of all but the Gnostics" (II:394).

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST USE OF BOYD

First, it must be kept in mind that Boyd's thesis surveyed a very narrow slice of early church history consisting of only about 65 years. Had Boyd included the 100 years following Justin Martyr, as he suggests someone else carry out (91), then it would have revealed a time of even greater premil dominance. Shedd notes that "The period between the year 150 and 250 is the blooming age of Millenarianism; . . . The Millenarian tendency became stronger as the church began, in the last half of the second century" (II:392-93).

The problem with some Reconstructionists is that they tend to cite Boyd's work, which only covered a relatively short period of early church history, and then make characterizations of the overall early church period. Gary DeMar follows this tactic in *The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction*.

Reconstructionists tend to spend much of their time in the historical debate showing how many of the tenets of dispensationalism are not found in the early church, and then attempt to argue that dispensationalism is so different that it should not really belong in the premillennial family at all. Dispensationalism, no matter how developed it may be in comparison to ancient premillennialism, is still premillennialism, and by virtue of that fact does have continuity with the early church. Further, we argued in our book *Dominion Theology*, that early church premils also tended to be futuristic and literal in their interpretation. It is modern premillennialism or dispensationalism that has developed a *consistent* use of the literal and futuristic hermeneutic. Because early premillennialism was not consistent, even though these feature were present, helps explains why it eventually broke down into amillennialism. This is the whole point of dispensational premillennialism: that we have attempted to pursue a *consistently* literal and futuristic hermeneutic, especially as it relates to God's plan for Israel and for His church. I completely agree with Boyd that the "majority of the writers/writings in this period completely identify Israel with the Church" (47). I further agree when he says that "this thesis would conclude that the eschatological beliefs of the period studied would be generally inimical [*i.e.*, unfriendly, TDII] to those of the modern system

(perhaps, seminal amillennialism, and not nascent dispensational premillennialism ought to be seen in the eschatology of the period)." (90-91).

The fact that the early church's brand of premillennialism was at too many points inconsistent with the later developed logic and theology of premillennialism explains the decline of premillennialism into amillennialism. The seeds of replacement theology within the premillennialism of the early church eventually bore, not only the fruit of anti-Semitism, but of full blown amillennialism. However, even though the ground of early premillennialism was soft, it still cannot be denied that the early church was indeed predominately premillennial. They certainly were not amillennial, even though the seeds of amillennialism were present.

CONCLUSION

Boyd's thesis can show us as dispensationalists some important things. One of those lessons would be the Reformation principles of Scripture as the sole authority in determining truth; and the Reformation belief in an ever reforming church. It is nice to have the antiquity of church history on our side, and we do in the area of premillennialism. However, it is of sole importance to have the authority of God's Word supporting our beliefs. I believe that this is what we have when it comes to the matter of dispensationalism. Dispensationalists have, over the years, majored in Bible exposition and not historical theology. This likely explains why our theology has attracted so many Bible believing Christians the last few hundred years.

Boyd sums up our history and a proper response when he says: This writer believes that the Church *rapidly* fell from New Testament truth, and this is very evident in the realm of eschatology. Only in modern times has New Testament eschatological truth been recovered. Dispensational premillennialism is the product of the post-Reformation progress of dogma. Any dispute that it has with other modern eschatological systems must be settled on the grounds of Biblical truth and not historical precedent. (91)

Another thing Boyd's thesis demonstrates is the historical validity of John Walvoord's analysis of where systems of theology lead. He used to tell us in class while I was a student under him at Dallas Seminary, that there are ultimately two consistent systems of eschatology: amillennialism and dispensational, pretrib, premillennialism. All other systems were inconsistent blends of the two basic systems. Boyd's historical evaluation that the premillennialism of the early church contained "the roots of both post-tribulationism and amillennialism" (Preface) support Walvoord. I would contend that because the premillennialism of the early church was not dispensational; since it mixed Israel and the church and was posttrib, then we should not be surprised to see it collapsing over a period of time into amillennialism.

I have seen the truth of Dr. Walvoord's observation work in the lives of many thinking Christians, who have backed off from dispensational distinctions into posttribulationism and then into amillennialism. I have also seen it go the other way, as an amillennialist starts taking God's plan for Israel literal ending up in the dispensational fold. Scripture is our only authority for building our faith, but knowing the church's history helps to show us where our beliefs will lead us.