

The Apocalyptic Rhetoric of
Dispensational Premillennialism
By Dr. David Naugle

Introduction

According to Francis Fukuyama, deputy director of the State Department's policy planning staff, events at the end of the 1980s such as the demise of the cold war and the lure of creeping capitalism (even in Moscow) reflected a significance far greater than just the reform policies of Mikhail Gorbachev; they suggest that the ideological Armageddon has been fought and western liberal democracy has been declared the victor. For Fukuyama, this means that the end of history has come. He writes:

What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the cold war, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.¹

Fukuyama's thesis, provocative though it may be, would be vigorously opposed by many grassroot American Christians who have specific views about the *terminus ad quem* of human history and what divinely planned eschatological events must transpire prior to the final day. These grassroot American Christians are constituents of the larger fundamentalist-evangelical movement and the theological system that informs their historical perspective is technically known as "dispensational premillennialism," a system that has a heavy eschatological or apocalyptic emphasis. Indeed for such believers, history has by no means ended.

The essential tenets of dispensational theology can be traced back to an Irish clergyman by the name of John Nelson Darby (1800-82) whose disenchantment with the Church of England led him to re-examine the biblical teaching on the nature of the

¹ Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?" *National Interest* (Summer 1989). It is significant to note that Fukuyama's article appeared before November 9, 1989—the day the Berlin Wall was breached and before other eastern European countries were opened to democracy. These events certainly lend to Fukuyama's thesis.

church. In 1829 he published a tract titled "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ" which embodied the essential principles of dispensationalism and set forth a distinctive ecclesiology which provided the basis for what came to be known as the Plymouth Brethren Movement. In the course of time, Darby and others began to spread the brethren movement and dispensationalism around the world, the United States included. Darby himself traveled to America seven times between 1862-77 speaking in churches and at conferences especially along the eastern seaboard. Darby was a prolific writer and in the mass of material which came forth from his pen, the fundamental tenets of dispensationalism can be found in a somewhat haphazard fashion. It remained for others to systematize his thought in a more organized fashion.

The first of these systematizers was C. I. Scofield (1843-1921) who 109 years after Darby's birth published the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). Through its notes and outlines, an attractive and easy-to-understand synthesis of dispensationalism was made available. The *Scofield Reference Bible* was the Bible of dedicated dispensationalists for almost six decades. It was revised in 1917 and 1967 and only of late has been replaced by the *Ryrie Study Bible* (named after the author of its notes and outlines, Charles C. Ryrie) as a main organ of organizing and promoting a dispensational understanding of the Bible.

The systematization of dispensationalism also was achieved at a more formal, theological level in the writings of a Presbyterian evangelist and song leader by the name of Lewis Sperry Chafer. Chafer was the founder and first president of the Evangelical Theological College (est.1913) which was later renamed as Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS). This seminary along with its acquired theological journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* became the world's leading exponent and exporter of dispensational theology. In the minds of many, "Dallas Seminary" and dispensationalism are virtually synonymous.

During the 1950s and especially in the 1960s, dispensationalism underwent some significant revisions. Criticisms from a variety of sources stimulated the re-thinking of numerous issues and important revisions found their way into the writings of several proponents of the system, all of whom were professors at DTS. These include J. Dwight Pentecost (*Things To Come*, 1958), John F. Walvoord (*The Millennial Kingdom*, 1959), and Charles C. Ryrie whose volume *Dispensationalism Today* (1965) is best known for setting forth a tripartite *sine qua non* of dispensationalism and for its response to various criticisms presented by opposing theological camps.

Even further developments in dispensationalism have been taking place during the decades of the seventies and the eighties, developments of such a magnitude that one may legitimately ask what remains of classic dispensationalism as system of theology. Indeed, one might call this highly revisionist form, "neo-dispensationalism."

Dispensational Premillennialism has wielded considerable influence in the United States, not only ecclesiastically but also at a broader socio-cultural level. This has been largely due to the popularization of dispensationalism through a variety of means, not the least of which has been through the electronic church and the now notoriously famous "televangelists." The ubiquitous religious broadcasters who espouse and promote dispensationalism include such luminaries as Jerry Falwell whose "Old Time Gospel Hour" reaches an estimated 5.6 million households (6.6% of all viewers); Pat Robertson whose show "The 700 Club" finds its way into some 16 million television households (19% of all viewers); Jimmy Swaggert's program in its time entered the homes of 4.5 million people daily and 9.25 million viewers on Sunday (10.9% of the T.V. audience); Jim and Tammy Bakker's show formerly reached about 6 million American families or 6.8% of the media's audience; and finally Oral Roberts' programs garner an audience of about 5.7 million people (6.8% of the viewers).²

In addition to the above means by which dispensational teachings are broadcast in America, there are numerous Bible schools, colleges and seminaries which promote this perspective not to mention the fact that in one form or another, dispensationalism is preached from hundreds of pulpits across the land on any given Sunday. The printed word has also been an exceedingly successful means of popularizing dispensationalism. Most notable in recent years has been Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) which reportedly sold an estimated 18 to 20 million copies in the 1970s, outselling every other book in that decade except the Bible itself.³ Because of the enormous sale of this book, Lindsey, educated at the University of Houston and Dallas Theological Seminary, "has become the most widely read writer on prophetic themes in history."⁴

Of local interest, Tom Landry, the former coach of the Dallas Cowboys who serves on the Board of Directors of Dallas Theological Seminary, and W. A. Criswell, pastor of the 25, 000 member First Baptist Church in Dallas, are also proponents of the dispensational perspective. And finally, even the name of Ronald Reagan has been associated with dispensationalism by virtue of his contact with the religious right throughout his presidency.⁵ For many, it was Reagan's "dispensationalism" that

² These T.V. ratings come from Grace Hasell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War*, pp. 11-13. She also includes the viewing audience of lesser known dispensational televangelists such as Kenneth Copeland (4.9 million), Richard De Haan (4.075 million), and Rex Humbard (3.7 million). Hasell reports that a Nielsen survey released in October 1985 shows that 61 million Americans (40% of all viewers) regularly listen to televangelists.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1975-1982*, p. 211.

⁵ "Did Ronald Reagan grow up with the same belief system as . . . Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggert and other dispensationalists? Andrew Lang of

possibly governed his view of communist Russia (the "evil empire"), motivated his military build-up campaign, influenced his pro-Israeli foreign policy and inclined him toward the possible use of nuclear weapons.⁶

From this survey it is easy to see that dispensational premillennialism has had significant impact from bottom to top, from grassroots America all the way to the highest levels of government.⁷ It is a system of theology which, because of its controversial teachings and pervasive influence, is hotly debated. Either it draws hearty support or arouses raging ire. Few who understand it are neutral about it. For some it is a most "sound, sober, sane, trustworthy"⁸ exposition of biblical prophecy. For others, it is religiously exotic, "a remarkable achievement of the mythopoeic fantasy" comparable to

Washington, D. C., who has made an in-depth study of Reagan and Armageddon theology, believes that he did. 'If Reagan was not a dispensationalist in the years of his presidency, he was earlier on. Remarks made by Reagan in the 1970s, and revealed for the first time in 1985, prove that Reagan was a dispensationalist—a believer in the ideology of Armageddon.' " Hasell, p. 40. See pages 40-50 in her book for a full treatment of Reagan's relationship to dispensationalism and the Religious Right.

⁶ The candidacy of Pat Robertson for the presidency in 1988 was adversely affected in similar ways by his prophetic outlook. For a fascinating fictional account of a U.S. president whose prophetic beliefs could induce nuclear war, see Charles Colson with Ellen Santilli Vaughn, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, pp. 12-40.

⁷ Estimates as to the number of premillennialists in America vary from four to eight million (David Edwin Harrell, Jr. "Dispensational Premillennialism and the Religious Right" in *The Return of the Millennium*, p. 11; for further statistical information see "Our Future Hope: Eschatology and Its Role in the Church." A Christianity Today Institute Symposium. *Christianity Today* 6 Feb. 1987). This figure may not identify correctly the adherents of *dispensational* premillennialism which is to be distinguished from what is called *historic* or *classic* premillennialism. On this distinction see Harvie M. Conn, *Contemporary World Theology: A Layman's Guidebook*, pp. 106-111.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Bible and Tomorrow's News*, p. 8.

the "apocalyptic poems of Blake."⁹ For some, this hermeneutical system is nothing short of an astounding intellectual and spiritual achievement.¹⁰ For others, dispensationalism reflects an hermeneutical naivety that misunderstands language and leads to inconsistencies of interpretation.¹¹ In general, some call dispensationalism "the most controversial"¹² yet the most significant theological development since the Apostle Paul, while others refer to it as a "cultic form of evangelicalism"¹³ if not an outright heresy.¹⁴

⁹ James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, p. 195.

¹⁰ Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 181, says that "Christians after the early second century spent little time defining prophetic truth until the middle of the nineteenth century [the time of J. N. Darby]. Then there seems to have been a great revival of interest in the prophetic themes of the Bible. Today, Christians who have diligently studied prophecy, trusting the Spirit of God for illumination, have a greater insight into its meaning than ever before." This is, no doubt, a reference to the dispensational system.

¹¹ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, pp. 78-96.

¹² Personal conversation (3/16/90) with William N. Garrison, private attorney, Fort Worth City Councilman and member of the Board of Directors of Dallas Theological Seminary.

¹³ Personal conversation (4/5/90) with Carl F. H. Henry, author of some thirty books, scores of articles and is considered by many to be the "Dean" of evangelical theologians.

¹⁴ The Board of Christian Education of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. prepared and distributed by order of the General Assembly a document entitled "Dispensationalism and the Confession of Faith" (1944) which charged dispensational theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer with heresy, especially in regard to his teaching that the Bible taught two ways of salvation, in the Old Testament by works, in the New Testament by faith and grace. The conclusion of the document reads as follows: "It is the unanimous opinion of your committee that Dispensationalism . . . is out of accord with the system of the doctrine set forth in the Confession of Faith, not primarily or simply in the field of eschatology, but because it attacks the very heart of the Theology of our Church which is unquestionably a Theology of one Covenant of Grace." In agreement with this

The eschatological or apocalyptic orientation of dispensationalism renders it a veritable goldmine for rhetorical analysis. What do dispensationalists talk about? How do they talk, especially about "end times"? With what language do they present their understanding of eschatological events which will bring human history to a close? Is dispensational discourse presented soberly, persuasively or sensationally? What kind of consequences does the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensationalism have on the attitudes of its adherents and upon society in general? In short, is dispensationalism rhetorically self-conscious?

The above questions will be explored in this paper which is devoted to a consideration of the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensational premillennialism. The architecture of this project will be as follows. First in brief compass an exposition of dispensational theology and its apocalyptic eschatology will be presented. This will be followed by the definitions of both apocalypticism and rhetoric making it possible to proceed to an informed, contextualized presentation of the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensational premillennialism. This will be done by examining several colloquial sayings and by setting forth quotations from the popular literature on two central subjects: the rapture and the role of the Jews in the dispensational prophetic program. A summary and conclusion will round out the work.

AN ANATOMY OF DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM¹⁵

verdict yet for different reasons, Barr says, "If dispensationalism is not a heresy, then nothing is heresy" (p. 196).

¹⁵ Certain presuppositions underlie dispensationalism which are quite contrary to the assumptions and *Zeitgeist* of the postmodern world. First of all, in contrast to the prevalent naturalism and atheism or divine immanentism and processism, is a belief in the existence of the sovereign and infinite God who made heaven and earth as an entity separate from Himself and who controls the history and destiny of humankind and the nations. Second, in contradistinction to

Allis has set forth the essentials of dispensationalism in the following telegraphic phrases.

. . . that Israel and the church are quite distinct; that the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament refer to Israel, not to the Church; that Israel is God's earthly people, while the Church is a heavenly mystery, unknown to the prophets and first revealed to the apostle Paul; that the Church is a parenthesis in God's prophetic program for Israel, and that its presence on earth interrupts the fulfillment of that program; that the rapture of the Church may take place "at any moment" and will be followed by a Jewish age in which the kingdom prophecies concerning Israel will be literally fulfilled.¹⁶

In order to cut this Gordian knot, it may be helpful to dissect dispensationalism by looking at it in two parts, first its theology and secondly its eschatology.

Dispensational theology

Dispensational theology¹⁷ consists of four essential concepts, that of the dispensations themselves and the tripartite *sine qua non* all of which are discussed by Charles C. Ryrie in his book, *Dispensationalism Today*.

the view of the cultural relativity of truth and all religious systems, is the belief in "true truth" or absolute, objective knowledge which has been disclosed by God through divine revelation and has been deposited authoritatively in the books of an inerrant Bible. When interpreted literally (and dispensationally), there comes an epistemological certitude for believers who have committed their lives to God and who have accepted His revelation in faith. A final presupposition concerns the philosophy of history. Rather than viewing history as either circular or cyclical, history is understood in a linear fashion with a concrete beginning and a concrete end. As May has offered, "But time is not cyclical, and this is the uniqueness of Judaeo-Christianity in the perspective of world religions. It has accepted the irreversibility of time, the terror of history" (*Toward a New Earth: Apocalypse in the American Novel*, p. 12). The contemporary reader will be assisted in understanding this paper if these underlying notions are kept in mind.

¹⁶ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. vi.

¹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, pp. 55-62, has suggested that the philosophical assumptions behind dispensational theology are the Baconian tradition supported by Scottish Common Sense Realism and a Newtonian view of the universe. Marsden writes of these respectively: "To whatever degree dispensationalists consciously considered themselves Baconians . . . this closely describes the assumptions of virtually all

First is the belief that Biblical and human history may be divided up into dispensations which, according to Ryrie, are "distinguishable economies in the outworking of God's purpose."¹⁸ The word "dispensation" comes from the Latin word *dispensatio* which the Vulgate used to translate the Greek word *oikonomia*—management or administration. Scofield, who defined a dispensation as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God,"¹⁹ found seven such time periods or administrations in the biblical record: innocence (Adam's condition before the fall into sin), conscience (from the fall of man to the flood of Noah), human government (from the time of Noah to Abram), promise (from Abraham to Moses), law (from the giving of the law to Moses to Christ's crucifixion), grace (the present church age) and kingdom (when Christ returns and sets up his rule in Israel). While not all dispensationalists assert that there are or have to be seven dispensations, nevertheless they do believe that Scripture is best understood and interpreted when dispensational distinctions are recognized.

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark

of them. They were absolutely convinced that all they were doing was taking the hard facts of Scripture, carefully classifying them, and thus discovering the clear patterns which Scripture revealed" (p. 56). "Common Sense philosophy affirmed their ability to know 'the facts' directly. With the Scriptures at hand as a compendium of facts, there was no need to go further. They needed only to classify the facts, and follow wherever they might lead" (p. 56). "Thus the millenarian's view of Scripture was, in effect, modeled after the Newtonian view of the physical universe. Created by God, it was a perfect self-contained unity governed by exact laws which could be discovered by careful analysis and classification" (p. 57). The précis of dispensational theology in the text of this paper confirms Marsden's suggestions.

¹⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 29.

¹⁹ C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1917 edition, p. 5, note 4.

off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.²⁰

Second, "a dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct."²¹ This is perhaps the most characteristic mark of dispensationalism, that God is pursuing two purposes with two peoples with two plans such that the church, *sui generis*, is separate in relation to God's plan for Israel. Chafer elaborates on this dispensational essential by noting that "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. . . ."²²

A third characteristic of dispensationalism which is said to be the real basis for the above distinction between Israel and the church is its literal hermeneutic. Whether the word *literal*, *plain* or *normal* is used, the idea is that a dispensationalist does not utilize a spiritual or allegorical method to interpret biblical texts, especially prophecy.

²⁰ Ryrie, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, p. 107. Two observations are pertinent here. First, one should note the radical dualism involved in this distinction between Israel and the Church: Israel is concerned with earthly matters; the church with heavenly ones. This distinction essentially eliminates all socio-cultural involvement on the part of the church since its purpose is explicitly stated to be heavenly or otherworldly. Consequently, if the dispensational linguistic output about the church is true to this dualism, little should be said to encourage the church to any kind of historical concern or social involvement. Second, in making the distinction between Israel and the church, it should be noted that Israel is God's primary concern. The church is a kind of parenthesis in God's prophetic program for Israel, its presence interrupting the fulfillment of that program. The fact that dispensationalism is an Israeli-centered philosophy of history accounts for the emphatic Jewishness of its rhetoric.

"Consistently literal or plain interpretation is indicative of a dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures."²³

Finally the theology of dispensationalism is marked by a final characteristic that is somewhat technical. Is God's primary purpose in the world soteriological or doxological? Is God's "why" salvation or His own glorification? Dispensationalism affirms the latter over the former (but nonetheless understands the former as the means of the latter) and sees in the doxological purpose of God's work in human history to be the unifying theme of biblical revelation. Honestly, this characteristic makes little difference in understanding the rhetoric or hermeneutics of dispensationalism.

Dispensational eschatology

Eschatology, popularly defined, is the study of future things. While dispensationalism "not only includes a description of the future but also involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible,"²⁴ nevertheless, eschatology is the area of biblical study that most people associate with the term dispensationalism. The prominent features of dispensational eschatology as identified by Ryrie are these.²⁵ First is a literal hermeneutical principle. "Consistent literalism is at the heart of dispensational eschatology." Second is the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies for the Jews. "If the prophecies of the Old Testament concerning the promises of the future made to Abraham and David are to be literally fulfilled, then there must be a future period, the millennium, in which they can be fulfilled, for the Church is not now fulfilling them in any literal sense." Third, a clear distinction between Israel and

²³ Ryrie, p. 46.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 157.

²⁵ The following quotations are all from Ryrie, pp. 158-160. There is some repetition here with the theology of dispensationalism.

the Church. "All other views bring the Church into Israel's fulfilled prophecies except dispensationalism." God has a separate eschatological destiny for the church which is the fourth characteristic of dispensational eschatology, namely the pretribulation rapture. "The distinction between Israel and the Church leads to the belief that the Church will be taken from the earth before the beginning of the tribulation (which in one major sense concerns Israel)." The events of the tribulation (Anti-Christ, judgments, Armageddon, etc.) are described in the book of Revelation, chapters 7-19. The fifth and final feature of dispensational eschatology is that of the millennial kingdom, the literal thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth. Christ will return to earth to establish this kingdom (hence, it is *pre*—millennial) which is absolutely necessary in the dispensational system because that is the time when the prophecies to Israel are finally fulfilled. Thus, "the doctrine of the millennial kingdom is for the dispensationalist an integral part of his entire scheme and interpretation of many biblical passages."

These chief features of dispensational theology and its eschatology are sufficient to give the reader a feeling for its mental universe. In this context, the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensational premillennialism can be better apprehended.

THE APOCALYPTIC RHETORIC OF DISPENSATIONAL PREMILLENNIALISM

For the sake of the following discussion, it is necessary to define what is meant by the terms apocalyptic/apocalypticism and what is involved in the notion of rhetoric.

Definition of apocalyptic and apocalypticism

The term "apocalyptic" is used in a variety of ways in contemporary discussions but its definition can be sharpened if one distinguishes "between apocalyptic eschatology (the expectation of the end which structures religion's perspective), apocalypticism (a 'sociological ideology,' presumably that of the oppressed) and the

literary genre apocalypse."²⁶ The apocalyptic eschatology of dispensationalism has been surveyed in the preceding section. Apocalypse as a literary genre refers to the canonical and extra-canonical writings which disclose or unveil the eschatological events which will bring history to a climax.²⁷ For present purposes, the notion of apocalypticism as a sociological ideology is most important. Dispensationalism is a form of apocalypticism and it is the purpose of this paper to investigate the rhetoric which this apocalyptic cultural model or sociological ideology has produced. But first it is necessary to demonstrate that dispensationalism is indeed an apocalypticism.

²⁶ E. P. Sanders, "The Genre of Palestinian Jewish Apocalypses," in *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*, p. 450.

²⁷ Lloyd J. Averill, *Religious Right, Religious Wrong*, p. 177 offers this fine definition of apocalypse, apocalyptic in the Appendix of his book in which he defines certain key terms. "Apocalypse, apocalyptic—literally, a revealing of what is hidden. The terms refer to a time of cosmic judgment, in which the evil ruling powers of this world will be destroyed and God's faithful will be vindicated and returned to their proper status in the divine order of things. Apocalyptic literature was written in order to encourage faithfulness until the time of vindication, which, though presently hidden from view, was surely coming. That literature, depicting the judgment and vindication, emerged primarily out of the second and first centuries B.C. and the first century A.D., times of persecution for Jews and Christians. Since the prophetic period was long past and there were no prophets present in the land to declare God's righteousness and judgment against evil, the authors of this literature used pseudonyms in their writing, attributing it to some ancient worthy as a means of adding to its spiritual authority. Apocalyptic writing utilizes symbol and image—the contents of dreams and visions—whose hidden meaning require interpretation; hence, again, the literal meaning of the term. Apocalyptic literature in the Old Testament consists chiefly of the books of Ezekiel and Daniel, and in the New Testament of Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, and Revelation (which was originally called the Apocalypse of John). Many other apocalyptic writings were produced but are not recognized in the standard Hebrew-Christian canon, including Enoch, Jubilees, the Assumption of Moses, the Testaments of the Patriarchs, the Apocalypse of Ezra, the Apocalypse of Baruch, and the Sibylline Oracles. For further study of apocalyptic literature and its content, see D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, 1964; Leon Morris, *Apocalyptic*, 1972; Paul D. Hanson, editor, *Visionaries and their Apocalypses*, 1983.

The twentieth century can indeed be called the "apocalyptic century." Two world wars, a great depression, the use and later proliferation of nuclear weaponry, the cold war, hot wars, the environmental crisis and a growing social and cultural decadence have all produced the disaster context which engenders apocalyptic movements. As Barkun has shown in his book *Disaster and the Millennium*, "those who regard the millennium as imminent expect disasters to pave the way." Disaster "is the very cause of the millenarian commitment itself. Men cleave to hopes of imminent worldly [or otherworldly] salvation only when the hammer blows of disaster destroy the world they have known and render them susceptible to ideas which they would earlier have cast aside."²⁸ And it is this general dismay with the historical situation, this ferment which forces one to deal with ultimate questions, this consequent openness to Being or to naked existence that produces an apocalyptic rhetoric.

Common to all true apocalyptic is a situation characterized by anomie, a loss of 'world,' or erosion of structures, psychic and cultural, with the consequent nakedness to Being or immediacy to the dynamics of existence. *Hence the rhetorics of this 'panic' exposure* in which all is at stake, involving antinomies of life and death, light and darkness, knowledge and nescience, order and chaos.²⁹

The *Weltschmerz* of dispensationalism in regard to both the church and the world fits the above scenario nicely as events of this century have provided its proponents the ideal setting for propagating its apocalyptic eschatology. As Harrell notes in quoting Weber,

²⁸ Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium*, p. 1. The nexus of disaster and apocalyptic expectation in both ancient and modern times is widely recognized by a variety of social and human scientists. On this connection see May, pp. 12-13; Joan B. Townsend, "Anthropological Perspectives on New Religious Movements," in *The Return of the Millennium*, pp. 140-46; Paul D. Hanson, "Old Testament Apocalyptic Reexamined," *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 455.

²⁹ Amos N. Wilder, "The Rhetoric of Ancient and Modern Apocalyptic," *Interpretation* 25 (1971): 440 (emphasis added).

The 'apparent apocalyptic character' of World War I, according to historian Timothy P. Weber, 'provided premillennialists an unprecedented opportunity to share their views on a much wider scale than ever before.' Since that time world events have provided an inexhaustible mine for prophets of despair. The uncertainty of the times combined with the dramatic changes in the politics of the Middle East since World War II has played into the hands of modern interpreters of the premillennial vision.³⁰

To illustrate how dispensationalists view prophecy as a response to crisis and as a means of providing security, hope and comfort in the place of fear, despair and sorrow, two examples will be presented. The first comes from the pen of Charles Ryrie whose popularly written book, *The Bible and Tomorrow's News*, begins with the question, Why Study Prophecy? To this question five answers are given, the first of which suggests that prophetic understanding offers "poise" and "stability" for troubled souls in intractable times.

1 *Understanding prophecy produces poise in a person.* Poise is defined as balance and stability. But can anyone be stable in a world like ours? [there follows a litany of modern day decadence and turmoil]. . . . Has the church any message for this confused day? Can a Christian be poised when everyone else seems completely unbalanced? The answers to this question are in the Bible, and particularly in an understanding of God's program for the future. This sort of knowledge will impart to you a certainty and confidence not available elsewhere.³¹

³⁰ Harrell, p. 14. It should be noted at this point that disaster or crisis whether personal or public, microcosmic or macrocosmic, would naturally lead either an individual or a community to hope for and talk about better days ahead. In this sense, "apocalypticism" is simply a natural response to the human condition and should not necessarily be construed as a perjorative characteristic of dispensational premillennialists only. Secular history has certainly seen enough of its own apocalypticists and utopians clamouring for an improved social, cultural and economic circumstances even if the source of such improvement would be strictly a product of historicism. As McGinn has noted, today, "apocalypticism has not so much disappeared from the scene as it has adopted a variety of secular disguises" (*Apocalyptic Spirituality*, p. 2). In agreement is Schall who says that at the present time "apocalypse has become pre-eminently a scientific rather than a religious phenomenon" (J. V. Schall, "Apocalypse as a Secular Enterprise," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 29 (1976): 357.

³¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *The Bible and Tomorrow's News*, p. 12.

Poise, balance, stability, certainty and confidence. These are the qualities that will replace the confusion and imbalance produced by modern times if one gives him- or herself to the study of the prophetic Scriptures. This is the balm for an apocalyptic age that can be found nowhere else.

The second example comes from Hal Lindsey's famous *The Late Great Planet Earth*. The context for its prophetic pronouncements is the breakdown of modern culture: "the population explosion," "wars," "religious deception," "the occult," "internal revolutions," "oil price increases," "changing weather patterns," "earthquakes," "plagues," and "strange events in the skies," (UFOs). In this chaotic *Sitz im Leben*, Lindsey explains current political events, especially those concerning Israel and the Middle East, through the lens of the prophetic texts of the Bible interpreted dispensationally. Having helped his readers know exactly why society is like it is, and having explained to his readers exactly what to expect in the near future religiously and politically, he is able to offer this encouragement at the conclusion of his book.

Right after one of the major passages of the apostle Paul concerning the Rapture, he gave this promise: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (I Corinthians 15: 58 NASB).

*As we see the world becoming more and more chaotic, we can be "steadfast" and "immovable" because we know where it's going and where we are going. We know that Christ will protect us until His purpose is finished and then He will take us to be with Himself.*³²

Again, soothing words for unsettled times. In this quote there is the anticipation of increasing chaos in the world, but this should not discourage believers; they can maintain a steady course because they know where both the world is going (into the judgments of the tribulation and domination by the Anti-Christ) and where believers are going (namely to heaven with Christ at the time of the Rapture before the tribulation

³² Lindsey, p. 188 (emphasis mine).

arrives). Yet there is the promise of Christ's protection until the day He returns to deliver His people from the pell-mell world.

The foregoing analysis has been presented to demonstrate that dispensationalism is clearly a form of apocalypticism with all of its attendant characteristics. Convinced of its apocalyptic world view, as a community of discourse, it has sought to persuade its own and as well as others of the validity of its outlook. Thus the art or discipline of rhetoric has played a major role in the dispensational arena. What, then, is the relationship of dispensationalism to the field of rhetoric?

Definition of rhetoric

The word rhetoric is a slippery one. "Socrates: . . . with what is rhetoric concerned? Gorgias: with discourse. Socrates: What sort of discourse?"³³ Since this exchange between Socrates and Gorgias, the debate over the nature and scope of rhetoric has not ceased. But in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggested that rhetoric is the art of enchanting the mind.

Socrates: Is not rhetoric, taken generally, a universal art of enchanting the mind by arguments; which is practised not only in courts and public assemblies, but in private houses also, having to do with all matters, great as well as small, good and bad alike, and is all in all equally right, and equally to be esteemed . . . ?³⁴

But the "art of enchanting the mind by arguments" could be used for either benevolent or malevolent ends. Consequently, Socrates saw that there were two types of rhetoric.

Socrates: I am contented with the admission that rhetoric is of two sorts; one, which is mere flattery and disgraceful declamation; the other, which is noble and

³³ Plato, *Gorgias*, 449.

³⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 261.

aims at the training and improvement of the souls of the citizens, and strives to say what is best, whether welcome or unwelcome, to the audience. . . .³⁵

But the *true* rhetorician always uses his or her craft for noble purposes.

Socrates: And will not the true rhetorician who is honest and understands his art have his eye fixed upon these, in all the words which he addresses to the souls of men, and in all his actions, both in what he gives and in what he takes away? Will not his aim be to implant justice in the souls of his citizens and take away injustice, to implant temperance and take away intemperance, to implant every virtue and take away every vice?³⁶

Given these ideas from the *Phaedrus* and *Gorgias* of Plato plus the notions about rhetoric from other classical writers (namely Aristotle's *Rhetoric*), it is commonplace to affirm that "the classical rhetoricians seem to have narrowed the particular effect of rhetorical discourse to that of persuasion."³⁷ Corbett expands on this essential premise and offers the following definition of rhetoric: "Rhetoric is the art or the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or move an audience, whether that audience is made up of a single person or a group of persons."³⁸ This generic definition would possibly please rhetoricians in the classical, medieval and modern periods.

The field of rhetoric, however, has in recent years has expanded beyond the notion of persuasive or influential discourse and beyond the home disciplines of English

³⁵ *Gorgias*, 503.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 504.

³⁷ Edward P. J. Corbett, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, p. 3.

³⁸ *Ibid.* Corbett cites these definitions of rhetoric from other students of the discipline: "a means of so ordering discourse as to produce an effect on the listener or reader" (Marie Hochmuth Nichols); "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (Kenneth Burke); "the function of adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas" (Donald Bryant).

and Speech-Communication to include what is now called the rhetoric of inquiry. This discipline is

a new field that stems from increased attention to language and argument in scholarship and public affairs. It examines how scholars communicate among themselves and with people outside the academy, and it investigates the interaction of communication with inquiry. Thus it tries to improve the conduct and content—as much as the communication—of research.³⁹

The rhetoric of inquiry works within and among disciplines and their research projects to enhance awareness of their practices and fundamental assumptions. It short, it seeks to increase self-reflection in every discipline and across the disciplines since such a method creates the greater capacity in each field for self-criticism and consequent improvement.⁴⁰

Both the rhetoric of persuasion and the rhetoric of inquiry are germane to the study of the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensationism. First of all, dispensationalism uses the rhetoric of persuasion extensively to convince others of the truthfulness of its prophetic viewpoints. Persuasion may be the bottom line of all rhetorics, but it is especially characteristic of religious rhetoric. As Burke points out, "the subject of religion falls under the head of rhetoric in the sense that rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thoroughgoing modes of persuasion."⁴¹ Certainly dispensationalism is no exception to

³⁹ John Nelson, Alan Megill, and Donald N. McCloskey, *The Rhetoric of the Human Sciences*, p. ix.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, p. v. For further discussion on the relationship of religion and rhetoric, see George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, pp. 120-60; and Amos N. Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric*.

this observation. For just as St. Augustine in his profound volume *De Doctrina Christiana* sought to explain "the mode of ascertaining the proper meaning [of Scripture], and the mode of making known the meaning when it is ascertained,"⁴² so dispensationalists share the same concern in their own approach to the prophetic Scriptures: how to interpret them rightly and how to communicate those interpretations persuasively. As was noted earlier in this work, dispensationalists have masterfully communicated their apocalyptic eschatology through a variety of means including the printed and spoken word, through film⁴³ and music⁴⁴ and through the media of radio

⁴² St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* I. 1. Augustine says that his fourth book is not intended as a treatise on the rules of rhetoric useful though they may be. Despite the fact that he says such rules should be learned elsewhere, he offers an apologetic for their use by Christians in the following paragraph.

Now, the art of rhetoric being available for the enforcing either of truth or falsehood, who will dare to say that truth in the person of its defenders is to take its stand unarmed against falsehood? For example, that those who are trying to persuade men of what is false are to know how to introduce their subject, so as to put the hearer into a friendly, or attentive, or teachable frame of mind, while the defenders of truth shall be ignorant of that art? That the former are to tell their falsehoods briefly, clearly, and plausibly, while the latter shall tell the truth in such a way that it is tedious to listen to, hard to understand, and, in fine, not easy to believe it? That the former are to oppose the truth and defend falsehood with sophistical arguments, while the latter shall be unable to either defend what is true, or to refute what is false? That the former, while imbuing the minds of their hearers with erroneous opinions, are by their power of speech to awe, to melt, to enliven, and to arouse them, while the latter shall in defence of the truth be sluggish, and frigid and somnolent? Who is such a fool as to think this wisdom? Since, then, the faculty of eloquence is available for both sides, and is of very great service in the enforcing either of wrong or right, why do not good men study to engage it on the side of truth, when bad men use it to obtain the triumph of wicked and worthless causes, and to further injustice and error ? (4. 2. 3)

⁴³ "Films with titles like *A Thief in the Night*, *A Distant Thunder*, *Image of the Beast*, *Years of the Beast*, *Early Warning*, *The Rapture*, *Revelation*, *The Return*, *The Final Hour*, and *The Road to Armageddon* are widely used in premillennialist circles, especially for evangelistic purposes." Weber, p. 216.

and television. In this sense dispensationalists are no strangers to the use of the classical art and discipline of rhetoric as persuasion.

Despite the fact that dispensationalists have used rhetoric effectively, are they nevertheless rhetorically self-conscious? Are they aware not only of how they communicate as scholars among themselves but also how they talk to people outside of the academy and what effects that dialogue has? Are they cognizant of how they cognize the world and are they aware of the social, cultural, ecclesiastical and political affects of their cognitive system upon their adherents? Are they aware of the "pivotal social function of talk itself" and do they recognize how "discourse can be crucial to the efforts of individuals to create inner meaning for themselves"? Do dispensationalists realize how a "well articulated cultural model of the world may also carry 'directive force'"? For indeed, "talk is itself a kind of act, and speech acts can have powerful social consequences."⁴⁵ It is questions like these that a rhetoric of inquiry will help answer and it is this method that will lead dispensationalists to increase self-reflection in their area of inquiry and to recognize the consequences of their own apocalyptic speech.

Examples of the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensational premillennialism

The following quotations have been selected from popular dispensational writings not because it is hoped that such will contain the most sensational material but because these volumes are the ones that have the largest readership and the most influence. Some of the quotations will be sane and sober; others rather silly and sad.

⁴⁴ Typical is Larry Norman's song "I wish We'd All Been Ready," which envisions a married couple being separated by the rapture since one was saved and one was not.

⁴⁵ Naomi Quinn and Dorothy Holland, "Culture and cognition," in *Cultural Models in Language and Thought*, pp. 8-9.

The intention is to provide a balanced diet of the apocalyptic fare that the average reader of this material would likely be served. Of the scores of subjects that could be dealt with, two have been selected which offer helpful insights when looked at rhetorically. The first subject to be treated is that of the rapture, the second is the role of the Jews in the dispensational prophetic program.

The Rapture. The first event scheduled to occur according to the dispensational prophetic timetable is the rapture of the church, that is, the removal of the entire body of Christian believers from the face of the earth at the coming of Christ before the start of the seven-year tribulation period. The basic New Testament text which teaches the rapture is 1 Thessalonians 4: 16-18.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall 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. Therefore comfort one another with these words.

The dispensational understanding of this biblical text has produced some interesting colloquialisms among dispensationalists, of which three examples will be given.

Since there is dispute among interpreters regarding the timing of the rapture in relation to the tribulation, the pre-, mid-, and post-tribulation rapture theories as they are called, many at the grassroots level have coined a phrase which expresses the desire to be raptured before the tribulation but shows that their wishes may not be realized. Consequently many dispensational believers are heard to say on occasion: "Pray for the pre- but prepare for the post-."

That the rapture, according to dispensational teaching, could occur "at any moment," leads many single Christians, who fear they may not get to marry before the event transpires, to bemoan their present marital status in the woeful expression: "Bachelors (or bachelorettes) till the rapture."

Bumper stickers sometimes adorn the automobiles of those who expect the rapture to occur at any moment, even while the believer is behind the wheel of the car. One sticker seems to serve as a sort of warning to nearby motorists who would be left behind should the event occur but who would nevertheless be endangered by the presence of numerous driverless vehicles running amok. The bumper sticker reads: "In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned!"

What is to be made of such household expressions? Are they to be taken humorously or seriously? Do they reflect a lack of assurance regarding the timing of the rapture and the consequent fear of being on earth during the tribulation? Do they express the feeling that at any moment rapture may not be that attractive or desirable after all since it may deprive one of marriage? Does the bumper sticker have the net effect of trivializing a significant eschatological event? Whatever the point of such sayings, one thing is clear: they betray lives that to a greater or lesser extent are governed daily by apocalyptic expectations. Implicit in such speech is an entire world and life view which provides inner meaning for the adherents of the perspective and whose shared cultural understandings play a significant role in social relationships and historical understanding. In such phrases there may be more there than meets the ear.

It is also most interesting to observe the description of the rapture by Hal Lindsey and the implications he draws from its impending occurrence.

It will happen!

Someday, a day that only God knows, Jesus Christ is coming to take away all those who believe in Him. He is coming to meet all true believers in the air. Without benefit of science, space suits, or interplanetary rockets, there will be those who will be transported into a glorious place more beautiful, more awesome, that we can possibly comprehend. Earth and all its thrills, excitement, and pleasures will be nothing in contrast to this great event.

It will be the living end. The ultimate trip.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Lindsey, p. 137.

On that same page, Lindsey uses the promised rapture which will deliver one from the seven-year tribulation as the basis for an evangelistic appeal.

The big question is, will you be here during this seven-year countdown? Will you be here during the time of the Tribulation when the Anti-Christ and the False Prophet are in charge for a time? Will you be here when the world is plagued by mankind's darkest days?⁴⁷

Furthermore, Lindsey finds in the rapture (which he calls "the blessed hope"—) Titus 2: 13) a basis for personal optimism. Specifically, Christians can be optimistic because they will not be here on the earth during the tribulation period—"that period of the most ghastly pestilence, bloodshed, and starvation the world has ever known."

As we see the circumstances which are coming on the world, this hope [the rapture] gets more blessed all the time. This is the reason we are optimistic about the future. This is the reason that in spite of the headlines, in spite of crisis after crisis in America and throughout the world, in spite of the dark days which will strike terror into the hearts of many, every Christian has the right to be optimistic.⁴⁸

And finally Lindsey closes the chapter on the rapture, the ultimate trip, by asking on the basis of its nearness, "What's Important?" His answer is characteristic of apocalyptic movements which incline followers to abandon the regular activities of life in anticipation of the final day. He introduces his exhortation with an analogy.

Have you ever found an electric train, or a bedraggled doll that belonged to you as a child and remembered how terribly important it was to you years ago? When we meet Christ face to face we're going to look back on this life and see that the things we thought were important here were like the discarded toys of our childhood.

What a way to live! With optimism, with anticipation, with excitement. We should be living like persons who don't expect to be around much longer.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 137-38.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 138.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 145. How Lindsey squares this statement with the following found on the last page of his book is hard to determine: "Fifth, we should plan our lives as though we will be here our full life expectancy, but live as though Christ

Several comments are in order about these texts from Lindsey's book. First of all, Lindsey makes the experience of the rapture sound like the ultimate hedonistic adventure in which one is supernaturally transported to a glorious place of total and awesome beauty. No thrill, excitement or pleasure on earth compares to the transport experience itself. It is the living end, the ultimate trip. Only against the background of the drug culture and sexual revolution of the sixties could such sensational language about a theological doctrine make any sense. The description, to say the least, is overproduced.

Second it is clear that Lindsey uses his prophetic views for evangelistic purposes. "Will you be here during this seven year countdown?" The idea is "Be saved now and escape by the rapture not only the tribulation but the worsening social and political conditions on the earth." The salvific appeal is grounded existentially rather than in the theological notions of the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and peace with God.

Lindsey's rhetoric also conveys a selfish, ahistorical optimism. It is a selfish optimism in that the believer's main concern is not to be here when things get bad. And since the Christian knows this, he can be optimistic. The idea is something like, "Hey I know its going to get really bad down here and *I'm just glad I won't be here* when it happens." The optimism is consequently "ahistorical" since it pertains exclusively to one's personal deliverance to the heavenly realm, and not to improved historical conditions on the earth.

Lindsey's statements finally support an otherworldliness which is also characteristic of apocalyptic rhetoric. He suggested that "we should be living like persons who don't expect to be around much longer." This statement reveals a basic

may come today. We shouldn't drop out of school or worthwhile community activities, or stop working, or rush marriage, or any such things unless Christ clearly leads us to do so. However, we should make the most of our time that is not taken up with the essentials."

Manichean outlook and could have vast practical implications for those who take the suggestion seriously. What does Lindsey mean by the statement? Should the eschatological believer quit work, get a divorce, abandon the city and seek refuge in the mountains? Chances are what Lindsey means is that one ought to pay as little attention as possible to the regular affairs of daily life in order to devote one's time to the spiritual priorities. But such an attitude could make a charade of human life. Lindsey needs to examine more carefully the weight of his words and the presuppositions underlying them.⁵⁰

The Jews. Dispensationalism is an Israeli-centered system of theology which asserts that God's entire purpose for the earth and for human history focuses upon the fulfillment of the covenants and promises which He made to the Jews. Genesis 12: 1-3 contains the foundational text for this belief. It reads as follows:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

On the basis of this passage, dispensationalists believe that God has given the Promised Land, the land of Palestine, to the Jews forever. It is theirs by divine right. Furthermore, dispensationalists believe that the phrase: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse" still applies today such that if any individual or nation curses or blesses Israel, they will find themselves reciprocally blessed or cursed. These two concepts about the land and the promise of blessing or cursing have affected not only America's foreign policy toward Israel and the Arabs but

⁵⁰ For additional illustrations of rapture rhetoric, see Charles C. Ryrie, *The Living End*, pp. 103-02; *The Bible and Tomorrow's News*, pp. 123-38; and Halsell, pp. 36-39. For a critique of the rapture position both theologically and rhetorically, see Allis, pp. 167-91.

also has been powerful in shaping the attitudes of many Americans toward events in the Middle East. This pro-Israeli doctrine of the dispensationalists has produced some interesting pieces of rhetoric. One such example is discussed below.

Jerry Falwell as editor of the book, *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, contributed the concluding section entitled, "The Future-word: An Agenda for the Eighties" in which he set forth his views about the "State of Israel" under the general heading of "Political Issues." These paragraphs are worth reproducing in their entirety since they reveal in very practical terms not only Falwell's viewpoint on Israel but the perspective of dispensationalism in general.

We believe that God in Genesis 12: 1-3, very clearly promised a blessing for those who bless Israel and a curse for those who curse Israel. I take that as literally as I take John 3: 16 in the New Testament.

To stand against Israel is to stand against God. We believe that. I love the Jew because God loves the Jew. As a follower of God, I am under obligation to love as he loves. My life is committed to a number of priorities, and one of them is to promote, protect, and stand alongside the Jewish people. History and Scripture prove that God deals with nations in relation to how they deal with Israel. My deep conviction is that America will not remain a free nation unless we defend the freedom of Israel. We must proclaim this from our church pulpits as ministers, as well as in our daily lives as private citizens with a Christian obligation to the Jewish people.

The land and people of Israel are important because, as members of the human family, they have the right to exist. Israel's battle is not one for superiority or a jockeying for position but rather one of survival. We believe that Genesis 15 sets the boundaries of Israel and supports its claim to the land. We do not condone unrighteous acts by Israelis, Arabs, or any other people. But we do believe that the Jews have the historical, theological, and legal right to the land called Israel.

Probably the most important reason for Israel's survival and for Christians' support is that Our Savior came from a Jewish family and the Lord Jesus Christ was a Jew. This demands of all of us a warm and gracious spirit toward the Jewish people. We received our Bible—Old and New Testaments—from Jewish writers. The Oracles of God were transmitted to us by the Jewish people, and so we owe a great debt to Israel. Any who do not support Israel are inviting the judgment of God upon themselves. I think the Adolf Hitlers, all the various leaders of the nations who through the centuries have persecuted the Jew, stand as mute testimony to the fact that God keeps His word to punish those who punish the Jews.

I am not against the Arabs or Palestinians. I believe in their right to exist in peace. But I do not believe in the efforts of the P.L.O. to exterminate the Jews and drive Israel into the sea. The majority of Americans are deeply and sincerely concerned about the well-being of Israel. Israel has a right to exist among the nations of the world. It has been persecuted long enough. We must defend it at all costs while maintaining an equal concern for the Arab nations.⁵¹

Another quotation on the same theme by the same author cannot be resisted.

I firmly believe God has blessed America because America has blessed the Jew. If this nation wants her fields to remain white with grain, her scientific achievements to remain notable, and her freedom to remain intact, America must continue to stand with Israel.

There are some very distressing developments presently in American-Israeli relations. I see a growing willingness to accept as reputable and civilized the murderers of the P.L.O. There is an increasing tendency to allow our need for oil to blind us to our greater need for God's continued blessing. If America allows herself to be blackmailed by the oil cartel and trades her allegiance to Israel for a petroleum "mess of pottage," she will also trade her position of world leadership for a place in the history books alongside of Rome. We cannot allow that to happen.

The Jews are returning to their land of (sic) unbelief. They are spiritually blind and desperately in need of their Messiah and Savior. Yet they are God's people, and in the world today Bible-believing Christians in America are the best friends the nation Israel has. We must remain so.⁵²

These statements from Falwell can be analyzed in two categories: what he wants Christians to do for Israel, and why he thinks such things should be done. First, what does Falwell expect Christians to do on behalf of Israel? His language is rather generic. He says there is a "Christian obligation to the Jewish people" and that believers "owe a great debt to Israel." To fulfill their obligation and to discharge their debt, Christians should love the Jews, promote, protect, and stand alongside the Jewish people, defend their right to the land, display a warm and a gracious spirit toward the Jewish people, and continue being the best friends the nation Israel has.

⁵¹ Jerry Falwell, editor. *The Fundamentalist Phenomenon*, pp. 215-16.

⁵² Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* p.113.

Even more interesting is Falwell's language supporting this type of pro-Jewish action. He invokes God's promises and love, the lessons of history, the teaching of the Scriptures, the continued prosperity of the United States, Jesus' pedigree, the gift of the Bible, and the longevity of Jewish persecution as reasons for supporting Israel and their right to the land. Of these, the one that stands out most daringly as a motivation for a pro-Semitic outlook is American national interests. On the basis of sheer emphasis, one gets the *feeling* that for Falwell, this is the real reason for his support of the Jews (even though he says that "the most important reason [for]. . . Christians' support [of the Jews] is that our Savior came from a Jewish family. . . "). Note the following selection of quotes that support this contention.

History and Scripture prove that God deals with nations in relation to how they deal with Israel. My deep conviction is that America will not remain a free nation unless we defend the freedom of Israel. We must proclaim this from our church pulpits as ministers

Any who do not support Israel are inviting the judgment of God upon themselves. I think the Adolf Hitlers, all the various leaders of the nations who through the centuries have persecuted the Jew, stand as mute testimony to the fact that God keeps His word to punish those who punish the Jews.

The majority of Americans are deeply and sincerely concerned about the well-being of Israel. Israel has a right to exist among the nations of the world. It has been persecuted long enough. We must defend it at all costs while maintaining an equal concern for the Arab nations.

I firmly believe God has blessed America because America has blessed the Jew. If this nation wants her fields to remain white with grain, her scientific achievements to remain notable, and her freedom to remain intact, America must continue to stand with Israel.

If America allows herself to be blackmailed by the oil cartel and trades her allegiance to Israel for a petroleum "mess of pottage," she will also trade her position of world leadership for a place in the history books alongside of Rome. We cannot allow that to happen.

Bible-believing Christians in America are the best friends the nation Israel has. We must remain so.

From these citations it appears that Falwell supports Israel for the sake of American freedom and productivity (agricultural and scientific) and in order that America might maintain a position of leadership in the modern world. While dispensationalists support Israel because of her prophetic role and destiny, and though on the surface it appears that Falwell's pro-Israeli rhetoric is eschatologically motivated, it is in fact highly political and nationalistic. Though he no doubt bases his support for Israel on theological notions, it seems clear that his main concern is for America rather than the Jews. Harrell reports that in a November 1981 interview, Ronald S. Godwin, then director of the Moral Majority, explained that "the organization supported Israel only on the basis of American national interests, despite the fact that both he and Falwell were dispensationalists."⁵³ The rhetoric may be dispensational but its purpose is *amor patriae*.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this paper an examination of a highly popular form of Christian fundamentalism has been analyzed with respect to its apocalyptic orientation. Dispensational premillennialism, as it is known, originated in Britain and spread here to the United States where it has had significant influence. Dispensationalism as a form of apocalypticism (a sociological ideology), sustains a significant relationship to the discipline of rhetoric, especially the rhetoric of persuasion and rhetoric of inquiry. With definitions of both notions of rhetoric in place, two central dispensational topics, the apocalyptic event known as the rapture and the prophetic role of the Jews, were

⁵³ Harrell, p. 27. That American national interests are a main reason for support of the Jews can be seen in yet another bumper sticker which spells out Jerusalem with the middle letters USA in bold face capitals: "Jer**USA**lem." For further discussion on the relationship between Israel and the New Christian Right, see Halsell, pp. 145-95. The alliance between the two is highly symbiotic in that both seem to use the other for their own specific agendas.

analyzed. Now, on the basis of the examination of the rhetoric used by dispensationalists in discussing these issues, a final conclusion may be suggested.

As with any community of discourse, the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensationalism shapes the thought and life of its members. Words alone are not sufficient to shape a life, but the presupposed knowledge and theories which words express, can. Then in turn, the special and peculiar words used to express tacit theories have their own powerful way of adding to a world view and shaping the very substance of human existence. World views and the words used to express them are mutually influential. This was seen in the popular phrases used by dispensationalists with regard to the rapture. The apocalyptic paradigm created a mental universe which was subsequently expressed verbally, and in this case quite colloquially. The possibility of persecution, the fear of not marrying and the danger of driverless automobiles were all related directly to an apocalyptic mentality expressed rhetorically in homespun sayings. It is this apocalyptic model and its speech that bear directly on how such individuals live their lives. There is indeed a directive force derived from cultural meaning systems and their lexicons.

From the other examples considered, apocalyptic rhetoric was used to induce Christian conversion: "Will you be here when the world is plagued by mankind's darkest days?" It led to an ahistorical, otherworldliness: "We should be living like persons who don't expect to be around much longer." It led to a pro-Israeli political position: "to promote, protect, and stand alongside the Jewish people." Words are powerful; words are persuasive; and indeed, the apocalyptic rhetoric of dispensationalism has had its effect.

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