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At All Silly Costs: How Dispensationalists Confuse "This Generation"

The dispensationalist interpretation of "this generation" in Matthew 24:34.

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Nothing Hal Lindsey, Jack Van Impe, or Tim LaHaye have ever written has come true. Despite this fact, many continue to cling to what these men teach, and AT ALL SILLY COSTS. After all, once original audience relevance is disregarded, it's anything goes.



The failure of so many dispensational predictions in recent times has had a negative and positive effect. On one hand, some have lost their pep for scripture in general because their hopes were dashed and their pride was humiliated. In particular, some have abandoned the study of eschatology altogether, choosing instead to adopt such falsely humble mottos as "it's not important", "let's just preach the gospel", "we'll know when we get there". Thus, the "de-eschatologization of religion". These people usually view those who are "into prophecy" as divisive and wrong spirited. Sad.

On the other hand, the fact that so many sensational futuristic predictions of recent times have never materialized as predicted has caused many sincere students of Bible prophecy to go back to the Bible for another look. This group of believers have come to see that, as with all false teaching, the problem all along has been the taking of scripture out of context.

Folks, it's time to go back to basics. What we need today more than anything is accurate exegesis. Scripture interprets scripture, if we let it.

The grammatical-historical hermeneutic will keep us in the ballpark. Careful attention must be paid to what scripture meant to the original audience, and also to the historical context in which it was made. These two rules of interpretation, if heeded, will eliminate the kind of wild-eyed speculation we see today.

The historical context for the fulfillment of Bible prophecy is given in the time-frame indicator "this generation"; Jesus said:

"Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."

Jesus was obviously referring to the contemporary generation of that day, i.e., the lifetime of the disciples. This is consistent with numerous other gospel references. For instance, Jesus said he would be **"rejected of this generation"** (Lk.17:25). The generation that rejected Jesus was that first century generation. He said, **"This is an evil generation: they seek a sign; and there shall no sign be given it, but the sign of Jonah the prophet."** (Lk.11:29) The sign of Jonah was given to that same generation when Jesus rose from the dead.

In Matthew 23, Jesus pronounced seven woes upon the Pharisees and scribes of his day, calling them the children of them which killed the prophets, and saying to them, **"Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation."** In Luke 11:50-51, he said to the Pharisees, **"The blood of all the prophets...shall be required of this generation."** Less than forty years later, God avenged the blood of His Son, and all the prophets, in the destruction of Jerusalem.

"All these things" included three major things:

1. The destruction of the Temple, which was the centerpiece of the Olivet Discourse.
2. The coming of the Lord.
3. The end of the age.

In other words, all three elements of the disciples' questioning would be fulfilled in a single time period - "this generation". This, in turn, means that we cannot separate the Lord's return from the desolation of Jerusalem, which happened in 70 A.D. The two events went hand-in-hand.

REDEFINING "THIS GENERATION"

Dispensational theologians have necessarily had to change the meaning of "this generation" to accommodate their preconceived expectations of Jesus one day sitting on a big chair in Jerusalem. In general, they define "this generation" as "the generation that sees all the signs", which they presuppose to be the present generation, or some future one. The problem with their definition is that the chief sign was "Jerusalem compassed with armies" (Lk.21:20), which occurred in 70 A.D. In fact, the very centerpiece of the Lord's Olivet sermon was the destruction of the then-present Temple. It would be SILLY to think that Jesus was speaking of a yet future destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, since that would have misled the very ones he was speaking to, the disciples.

But what about the various "birth pangs" Jesus mentioned, such as false teachers, wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famines, and pestilences?? Aren't we seeing these things today?

CONTEXTUALLY, these were things that led up to the compassing of Jerusalem with armies, the chief "sign" (v.3), and did indeed characterize that first century period. Josephus, the Book of Acts, and the New Testament epistles document the proliferation of these activities in the first century. Unfortunately, dispensationalists have panned the birth pangs out over nearly two millennia!

TWO TRIBULATIONS???

Stanger still, dispensationalists claim that Luke's mention of "**Jerusalem compassed with armies**" is not referring to what Matthew and Mark called "the abomination of desolation" and ensuing "tribulation of those days", despite the admonition to "flee to the mountains" in all three synoptic accounts. In other words, according to the theory, Luke only wrote about the tribulation coming in 70 A.D., while Matthew and Mark only wrote of a worldwide tribulation that has still yet to arrive nearly 2000 years later. The reason for this inconsistency is obvious - Jesus said he would return "immediately after the tribulation of those days". Therefore, in order to deny a past-fulfillment of the Lord's coming, dispensationalists have to teach two different tribulations, one in 70 A.D., and one yet to come.

THE 1948 GENERATION???

"The 1948 generation" is a mainstay of dispensational teaching. It has been proven wrong by time itself, not to mention a consistent exegesis. The proof-text they use is the parable of the fig tree; Luke's version reads:

"Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." (Lk.21:29-31)

The "fig tree" is a symbol for Israel in scripture. According to the theory, the fig tree parable is foretelling of Israel "shooting forth its leaves" by becoming a nation again in 1948 after being dispersed for 1900 years. Since the pronouncement by Jesus concerning "this generation" textually follows the fig tree parable, dispensationalists conclude that the generation that saw Israel become a nation again in 1948 is the generation that will see the Second Coming of Christ.

Books were written purporting that 1988 would be the year Christ returned, based on a Biblical generation being forty years. But when 1988 came and went without so much as a 7-yr. peace treaty, it was back to the drawing board. Amazingly, many today still teach the 1948 generation, despite being 56 years removed from 1948. Needless to say, they have had to revise the length of a generation several times in order to keep this interpretation alive.

What about the fig tree parable? Notice the words "and all the trees" (Lk.21:29). If "shooting forth" means for a people to become a nation at a particular point in time, then did all the nations shoot forth in 1948?? Jesus told his disciples to behold the fig tree "and ALL the trees"! Not surprisingly, dispensationalists prefer to quote Matthew's version of the fig tree parable because Matthew's version doesn't say "and all the trees".

The truth is, Jesus was simply recapitulating in a parable what he had just told the disciples concerning various things leading up to his return. Yes, these things concerned Israel, the "fig tree", and all the trees, or "nations" (Matt.24:7). But they would all fall within the scope of the disciples own lifetime, or "generation", and the distinct, first century language bears this out ("holy place", "Judaea", "on the housetop", "sabbath").

THE 1967 GENERATION???

The latest invention is "the 1967 generation". I guess this one gives them a few more years to salvage their credibility. According to the theory, the "times of the Gentiles" (Lk.21:24) began with the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C. and ended in 1967 when the Jews recaptured East Jerusalem from the Arabs. Thus, it is taught that the generation that saw East Jerusalem taken by the Jews in 1967 is the one that will see the return of Christ.

In a past article, I showed by comparing Lk.21:24 with Revelation 11:2 that "the times of the Gentiles", contrary to popular teaching, ended in 70 A.D., as it referred to that "forty-two month" Roman War on Jerusalem from 66-70 A.D. So, "the 1967 generation" will come and go without a blink too. Then what?? Maybe "the Gulf War generation"???

A RACE OF PEOPLE???

Some futurists interpret the expression "this generation" as "the race of sinful humanity". No dates to get anyone in trouble, just "the race of sinful humanity". Some even define "this generation" as "the JEWISH race". But is that saying that the Jewish race "passes away" at the Second Coming?? Surely not. The bottomline is, the race definition just doesn't fit the flow! The disciples wanted to know "when" the Temple would be destroyed, and what the sign of the Lord's return and the end of the age would be. They no doubt knew from their Jewish history that the Temple's destruction was directly equated with "the day of the Lord's wrath" and an end of an age. That's why Jesus answered all three facets of their questioning by saying that "ALL" those things would be fulfilled in a single time period, or "generation". The words "this generation" implied that there were OTHER generations, and also that Jesus was speaking of a PARTICULAR generation. How does that harmonize with "the race of sinful humanity"?

AT HAND

The "at handedness", or nearness, of the kingdom in the first century cannot be denied. John the Baptist warned the people of his day to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt.3:2). Jesus said to the multitudes, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand." (Mk.1:15) "At hand" is the ultimate imminency statement.

How do dispensationalists handle the dilemma of imminence?? Dr. Thomas "Pre-Trib Research Center" Ice says that "at hand" is similar to the Super Bowl being at hand to the Buffalo Bills for a number of years but not yet being attained. What kind of scholarship is that?? Ice's Buffalo Bills analogy concerning the imminency statement "at hand" is inconsistent with several other New Testament references which demonstrate the meaning to be NEAR fulfillment, not delay. Critics of Christianity have zeroed in on just such inconsistencies.

I once pointed out to Dr. Ice that his futuristic interpretation of "this generation" stands alone from all other gospel references. His solution?? He said, "Sometimes it's warranted." In other words, whenever one needs to justify isolating a word from all other references in order to defend a preconceived position just say "sometimes it's warranted". Again, what kind of scholarship is that??

When pressed on this, Dr. Ice appealed to his "prophetic text versus historical text" theory. This theory says that words and phrases contained in "prophetic texts" have different meanings than the same words have when used in "historical texts". However, Dr. Ice overlooks the fact that nearly all of the texts containing "this generation" and "at hand" were prophetic at the time they were spoken. Thus, his "prophetic text versus historical text" theory is nothing more than fancy dancing, and gives the critics all the more to hoot about.

Why all the confusion??? At the core is a wrong understanding of the nature of the kingdom. In order to keep alive the idea that Jesus will one day sit on a big chair in Jerusalem, dispensationalists have to necessarily change the meaning of "this generation" to something other than what it meant to the disciples. This despite the fact that Jesus never once said he would return to sit on a big chair in Jerusalem! Rather, he said that when he returned he would "sit on the throne of his glory" (Matt.19:28; 25:31). I Timothy 3:16 says that Jesus was "received up into glory".

Folks, ever-changing dispensational theories about the term "this generation" have been embraced for too long and AT ALL SILLY COSTS. It's time to get this turned around.