

BAHNR 3: 140-42

Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: a critique of dispensationalism

John H. Gerstner

Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1991; 2000 (2nd expanded edn)

xii+476pp ISBN 1573580686 \$29.95 (hb.)

It is unfortunate that R.C. Sproul, introducing this volume, refers to its author as a ‘world-class historian’ who has ‘done his homework’ (p.ix). Whatever his skills as a theologian, Gerstner demonstrates real difficulty in getting to grips with the history he relates. These problems are extremely unfortunate, as this volume spends unusual time on the early days of the Brethren movement as part of its examination of the historical roots and development of dispensationalism. But errors and significant silences abound. Gerstner’s historical project is marked by omissions. It is extremely interesting, for example, that Gerstner omits any survey of English Puritanism from his section on the eschatology of the post-Reformation period: recent scholarship has noted the extent to which English Puritan writers adopted a vibrant millennialism—often a vibrant pre-millennialism—and built much of their worldview upon it. But there may have been a reason for Gerstner’s silence. As many of their nineteenth-century opponents correctly noted, Brethren share many of the distinctive features of some of the puritan movement’s more radically millennial Calvinists. Citing the eschatology of the puritans might give the eschatology of the Brethren movement the historical credibility Gerstner wishes to deny. Instead he merely notes in passing their shared Independency (p.17). *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* suggests that Gerstner misunderstood his readings in Brethren history. He claims, for example, that Darby ‘studied law at Westminster College’ (p.21); actually Darby attended Westminster School in London, and graduated from Trinity College Dublin before preparing for the bar. Gerstner further claims that Darby was ordained to the Anglican ‘priesthood’ in 1826 (p.21); but Darby was only ever ordained as a deacon, and never entered the priesthood. Furthermore, building on his description of Brethren beginnings, Gerstner claims that an ‘aristocratic membership has continued in a

lesser degree to characterise the Brethren' (p.34). Ironically, to support this claim, Gerstner cites Neatby's 1901 history—which was already ninety years old by the time of Gerstner's first edition. This inappropriate citation of Neatby's work is indicative of one of the basic problems in Gerstner's historical method. His footnotes demonstrate his extensive dependence on older secondary sources. He quotes from Neatby (1901), Noel (1936), Ironside (1942), Turner (1951), but cites Coad (1968), Carter and Mills (1980), and Rowden (1986) in only one introductory footnote during his extended discussion of the Brethren (pp.17-34). Gerstner could be excused for making mistakes while working in an unfamiliar field. But, more seriously, there is also evidence that he misunderstands the development of his own Reformed tradition. He claims, for example, that 'every doctrine in the Institutes of John Calvin reappears in the work of Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and B.B. Warfield' (p.61). If that is the case, it is only because Charles Hodge, for example, sometimes quotes Calvin in order to refute him—as in opposing Calvin's view of the Lord's supper in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 11:33-34. There is much of value in *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*; but it is unfortunate that Gerstner stakes so much of his theological analysis on his historical sketches. Whatever else it may be, this book is hardly the work of a 'world-class historian'.

Crawford Gribben