

Renewing Dispensational Theology: A Suggested Path

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[This article combines several related blog posts by Dr. Henebury.¹]

What is a Dispensationalist?

A Dispensationalist is a Christian who sees in Scripture certain clear divisions in the progress of revelation in which God governs history. At its best this is done on the basis of the covenants revealed in the Bible. A "dispensation" (Gk. "*oikonomia*") is an administration or economy, wherein, within a certain period of time (known to God, but afterwards revealed to man), God pursues His plan through the lives of men. The term *oikonomia* is made up of two other words: "*oikos*", meaning house, and "*nemo*", meaning to administer, manage, or dispense. Literally, an "*oikonomia*" is a house-management or household administration. In its theological usage it is well suited to describe what we might call a "Divine economy." This is much the way the word is used in Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25-26, and 1 Timothy 1:4. These passages also show that Paul held to the reality of certain dispensations in the broad sense given above.

Not unsurprisingly therefore, even Covenant theologians often speak of dispensations. For example, both Charles Hodge and Louis Berkhof employ the term much like Dispensationalists do. Willem VanGemeren speaks of 'epochs.' The number of these administrations is open to debate. Though commonly held, the seven dispensations articulated by C. I. Scofield are not the requisite number in order to be admitted into the ranks of Dispensationalist thinkers. The present writer, for instance, questions the theological value of some of these "economies" except perhaps as markers helping one trace the flow of God's acts in biblical history.

Plain-Sense Interpretation

A characteristic of Dispensational theology is the consistent use of what is called the "grammatico-historical" method of interpretation. Here 'consistent' applies in principle, although not always in practice. Whether dealing with biblical narrative, or poetry, or prophetic literature, the Dispensationalist applies the same hermeneutics to each genre. This certainly does not mean that the genre is ignored; clearly, for example, so-called apocalyptic literature is not the same as historical writing or wisdom literature. But Dispensational scholars do not believe that one needs to change hermeneutical horses midstream when one passes, say, from Matthew 23, (Gospel narrative), to Matthew 24-25, (which many scholars would describe as apocalyptic or at least prophetic). They believe that exploring the grammatical sense of a passage within its context, and throwing whatever historical light they can upon a text, will yield the intended meaning. To drift away from this is to get caught up in the currents of the academic fads of the day; whatever is or is not in vogue should not dictate biblical interpretation.

The supposition of the Dispensationalist includes a belief in the full inerrancy and inspiration

¹ *What is a "Dispensationalist" Theology?, Renewing Dispensational Theology: A Suggested Path* (parts 1 and 2).

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of Scripture, together with a belief that the propositional nature of Scripture. Propositionalism is best adapted when a statement indicates a “literal” or plain sense. Thus, Dispensationalists are adherents of propositional revelation – a position that is being affirmed less and less within the conservative community, as scholars make biblical interpretation more the province of the specialist than the “common man.”

The Importance of the Covenants of Scripture

Essential to the theology of all classic Dispensationalists are the Covenants of Scripture. These are the explicit and clearly recognizable covenants defined in the pages of the Bible. They include the Noahic Covenant; the Abrahamic Covenant; the Land Covenant; the Mosaic Covenant (which has been terminated); the Priestly Covenant; the Davidic Covenant; and the New Covenant. The principal biblical covenant for most Dispensationalists is the Abrahamic, out of which come those which follow. Because most of these are unilateral in nature (i.e. they were promises made solely by God and given to men) they cannot be rescinded or altered, since God can always be counted on to do just what He promises. Still, they may, like treaties generally, be supplemented by additional though never contradictory statements. An example of this would be the additional clarifications of the Abrahamic Covenant that one notices when reading Genesis 15 through Genesis 22.

The consistent application of the grammatico-historical method to these biblical contracts made by God with men leads to certain specific and undeniable expectations. Among these expectations is the one which, perhaps more than any other, distinguishes Dispensationalism from its main evangelical alternative, Covenant Theology. This distinguishing feature is the belief that there remains a set of incontrovertible promises given to the physical seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (“the Fathers” – Rom. 11: 26-29).

These promises, confirmed as they were by irrevocable Divine Covenant (see especially Gen. 15 and Jer. 33:15-26), must be brought to a literal fulfillment; a fulfillment which includes a physical land, and a king on a literal throne in earthly Jerusalem. As far as Israel’s inheritance of these promises is concerned, any future restoration of Israel to their land will not be apart from the new birth (Ezek. 36:21-28; Rom.11:5, 25-29). But the Divine favor for this “remnant” of ethnic Israel is based on God’s gracious unconditional promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob mediated through Christ via the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34).

The Name “Dispensationalism”

It is because of the significance of these biblical Covenants that

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"Dispensationalism" is a rather unfortunate name. If it were not for the fact that it might cause some confusion with what is called "Covenant Theology" Dispensationalism would be more accurately identified as "Biblical Covenantalism." Indeed, the pursuance of that idea and its ramifications has been a preoccupation of the present writer for several years.

This covenantal aspect of Dispensational theology can lend to it a powerful eschatological and teleological force, but this has not always been placed under the correct theological or hermeneutical controls. One example of this is the popular success of writers like Hal Lindsey and Tim LaHaye, authors who concentrate only upon a populist approach to eschatology and who do not do justice to the whole discipline which is (or at least could be) Dispensational systematic theology.

Sad to relate, but much of Dispensationalism over the past fifty years has been held captive to this type of non-technical eschatological treatment. This has meant that serious development of Dispensational theology at the levels of exegesis, theological method, and philosophical explication has suffered greatly. Perhaps the most detrimental outcome of all this in terms of the thinking of many Dispensationalists has been the lack of exploration of the worldview implications of a full-orbed Dispensational systematic theology.

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For one reason or another traditional Dispensationalism has been abandoned by all but a relatively few Bible students. The wild success of the Left Behind novels is no sound indicator to the contrary. Two much better indicators which point decisively the other way are the degree of serious attention given to this point of view in most Biblical and Systematic theologies, which is nugatory; and the stunning lack of scholarly works in these areas by Dispensationalists themselves. As to the latter, I believe I could count on one hand the publications of traditional Dispensationalists of the past generation which even attempt to rival the surfeit of such work from covenant theologians. I say it as a friend; Dispensationalism may be likened to an old car pulled to the side of the road with serious transmission problems. And it has been there for a good long while looking like it needs hauling away.

I feel no need to prove this, as any perusal of the volumes of Biblical and Systematic Theology which have been rolling off the shelves for the past 25 years will show that their authors don't consider Dispensationalism to be much more than a smudge on the edges of the theological map.

This being said, here are some thoughts on five sectors of truth where Dispensational Theology (DT) might be renewed.

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1. Self-Understanding: What Are We About?

In many ways, defining oneself by ‘dispensations’ is more restricting than defining oneself under the theological covenants of Covenant Theology (CT). The dispensations of Dispensationalism are in reality blinders which severely attenuate the exciting potential of plain reading of the Bible. They are non-essentials which have been borne aloft for so long that no one has bothered to look up to see how abject they actually are. What do the concepts “innocence”, “conscience”, “government”, “promise”, “law”, “church” (or “grace”), and “kingdom” have in common as theological ideas (other than their obvious adoption by dispensationalists)?

Why, for example, would “government” be a more emphasized stewardship than “conscience” after Noah? Wasn’t Israel’s theocracy far more of a government than anything found in Genesis 9? The time of Abraham is often called the Dispensation of Promise. But are not promises made to Adam and Eve and to Noah before Abraham? Moreover, as John Sailhamer has stated, ‘the OT itself does not have a word or expression for the NT idea of ‘promise.’²

Realizing that Sailhamer is referring to the promise-fulfillment motif, but this is certainly relevant to the ‘Dispensation of Promise’ which assumes such a motif. If Sailhamer has a point it would seem wise to replace the imprecise term “promise” with “covenant.” But once we do that we will be required to drop the theme of “dispensation” too, so as to give the Abrahamic covenant the developmental scope it clearly must have.

In addition to this change of emphasis from what seems nebulous and inexact to what is plainly revealed and stressed in the biblical text there needs to be a rethink about what dispensationalists mean when they refer to their theology as a “system.” It needs to be made clear that if dispensationalists continue to accept a limited definition of DT as essentially relevant to only two or three areas of theology, or, (which is much the same thing), if they are content to assimilate DT within the narrow band of “dispensational premillennialism,” then they have admitted tacitly that DT is *not* and cannot be a complete “system.” Restricting, as many dispensationalists tend to do, DT to ecclesiology and eschatology, militates strongly against those definitions of DT which describe it as “a system of theology.” Patently, any viewpoint which only chips in when either the Church or the Last Things is being discussed does not qualify – neither does it deserve to be identified – as a system of theology. And this for a very good reason: only whole theologies can be systematized!

For the record, here is my working definition of DT:

*An approach to biblical theology which attempts to find its **raison***

² Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch*, 421

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d'être in the Scriptures themselves, and which constructs its systematic presentation of theology around a primary focus on the biblical covenants.

You will see that I have booted out the dispensations and thrown the spotlight upon the covenants in the Bible. That may disturb some people, but the profit of this move is immense.

2. Hermeneutics

Dispensationalism has often been associated with grammatico-historical interpretation. Quite apart from whether many older dispensationalists actually contented themselves with approach, the fact is that the very term “grammatico-historical” no longer enjoys a static meaning. So it becomes necessary to spell out what kind of hermeneutics is envisioned by that terminology.

In its most basic sense language conveys thought into words. God is the Author of language and when He speaks in the early chapters of the Bible there is a correlation between His thought, the words selected to convey His thought, and the product brought into existence by His word. This flow from God’s word to God’s action is so obvious in the Bible that it scarcely needs proof. Let the reader study the Bible Story with this in mind and he will see it everywhere. Thus we have an important hermeneutical marker from inside the Bible.

As we have seen God also makes covenants. We may easily locate Divine covenants, for instance, in Genesis 9, 15-22, Exodus 19-24; Numbers 25; Deuteronomy 29-30; 1 Chronicles 17; Psalms 89; 105; 106; Jeremiah 31, 33, Luke 22 and many other places. God does not need to bind Himself by an oath, so why does He do it? One reason, I want to suggest, is because of our propensity judge God’s word by our own capacity for belief. Like Eve sizing up the forbidden tree, we want to come to our own conclusions independently. It is our default position, and the covenants set up the boundaries within which our interpretations ought to operate. The biblical covenants might well be seen as ‘a reinforcement of Divine speech.’ If this be the case then God’s covenants serve to boldly underline the God’s word/ God’s action motif we saw earlier.

Hermeneutically speaking then, we have two powerful interpretive ideas coming at us from the pages of the Bible itself. And this is given further emphasis in such places as 2 Kings 1 and John 21 where goes out of His way to explain that He means what He says.

This hermeneutics take us a surprisingly long way when applied to all of Scripture.

3. Biblical Theology

If there is one thing that most biblical theologies fail to take seriously it is the doctrines of the sufficiency and clarity of Scripture. These concepts are inseparable. If Scripture isn't clear (except, of course, to those highly skilled practitioners in the genres of ANE and typology), then for sure it isn't sufficient. When one adds to this the miraculous coincidences wherein each type and genre corroborates the particular theological bent of the writer it all begins to look a little suspicious and question-begging. Understandably, dispensationalists prefer to stake out their hermeneutical tents on firmer ground. But the myopia induced by paying too much attention to dispensations prevents them from setting out a sound alternative Biblical Theology. Once the covenants are seen for what they are and the dispensations are allowed to merge into the background the program opens up invitingly before them.

Using something like the revised definition of DT given above, it is possible to trace out what I like to call "the Creation Project" using the two hermeneutical guidelines previously discussed. When this is done we begin to see something like the following:

- a. Creation involves both a teleology and an eschatology (thus a study of the End Times involves a study of the Beginning Times)
- b. The Fall introduces the noetic effects of sin which resets our default from dependence to independence. Genesis 3:15 covers the major work of Christ in a fallen world.
- c. The Noahic Covenant provides a predictable framework for history till the consummation, and further stresses the nature of Divine covenants as reinforcements of language – since all interpreters take this covenant 'literally.'
- d. The Abrahamic Covenant sets out a blessed future for at least two lines of humanity: those from Isaac and Jacob who inherit "the land of Canaan" and "the Nations." It also picks up on the Promised Seed idea from Eden.
- e. The Davidic Covenant promises a great King who will pull the strands of the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants together.
- f. The New Covenant brings all the other everlasting covenants into itself in the Person of Christ, through whose redemptive death and new life the covenants must pass in order to find their specific fulfillments.
- g. The Church as a "new man" created after the resurrection of Christ also enters into specific blessings of the Abrahamic and New Covenants. In fact, in a real sense, it enters them before those with whom they were originally promised.

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- h. The Second Coming, *which is given more emphasis* in the Bible than the First Coming, brings the earth's Owner and the second Adam back as King to judge, restore and beautify it. Just as all the covenants run through Christ, so Christ is Maker, Owner, Redeemer, Restorer, and Ruler as the physical world as a physical Being in the world. The two comings of Christ are in reality one work separated by time, as is evident from the Messianic prophecies in the OT and the Lord's Supper in the NT. This fact also shows us that the teleology/eschatology motif inaugurated at Creation and instilled in the biblical covenants is yet unfolding.
- i. Because this world is cursed even Christ cannot remove the ravages of God's curse on the ground without constantly exercising His miraculous restraint on it. This explains the need for a New Heavens and New Earth wherein there is no more curse. This completes the original "Creation Project." The whole Bible program is radically (but not artificially) Christological.

That, I submit, is a lot more promising than talking about the dispensations and restricting it to the Church and Israel. I call it, for want of a better term, 'Biblical Covenantalism.'

4. Systematic Theology

Coming now to Systematic Theology the first thing that must be said is that the pretended stand for a partial system must be summarily dropped. Dispensational Theology cannot be switched out for the term Dispensational Premillennialism. In point of fact, I make bold to say that the notion of Dispensational Premillennialism is a bit of an odd bird without a full-orbed system to back it up. Most Dispensationalists have been blithely contented to append their eschatology on to the end of another system – most often the Reformed position. But this is a dubious, and, let us admit it, half-sighted maneuver.

When DT is tagged onto an already developed system of theology it can only present itself as a correction to certain aspects of that system of theology. In so doing it tangles with the methodological presuppositions of that theology. But because it allies itself so often to say, Reformed theology, it must act deferentially towards Reformed formulations in areas other than ecclesiology and eschatology. For if it failed to acknowledge Reformed theology's right to assert itself in these other areas – the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man and sin, the doctrine of salvation, for example – it could not think of itself as Reformed. This is because in claiming its right to question Reformed assumptions in any theological corpora save in regard to the Last Things (and perhaps the Church), Dispensational theology would be asserting its right to formulate ALL its own doctrines independently of other theologies. It would grow to dislike its assumed role as a beneficial parasite, cleaning up areas of another theological system,

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and would wish to be “Dispensational” in every area! Ergo, even if its formulations of all the theological corpora were closely aligned with Reformed theology here and there, they would be its own formulations! This is precisely what I am pleading for!

Every knowledgeable person knows that Systematic Theology ought to be an outgrowth of Biblical Theology. The fact that most Dispensationalists are content to tack their views on to an already existing whole system doesn't speak well for their Biblical Theology. For if Dispensational Biblical Theology cannot produce the impetus to formulate a distinctive and whole Systematic Theology of its own perhaps the trouble goes deeper? I believe it does, and that reformulating Dispensational Theology from a Biblical Covenantalist viewpoint gives you all the main points of traditional Dispensational Eschatology and Ecclesiology, but it also gives you enough material from which to formulate clear and distinctive versions of Prolegomena, Theology Proper, Anthropology, Christology, Pneumatology as well. As I have said elsewhere, I do not think that tracking the “dispensations” produces enough usable doctrine to work up a solid systematics or worldview. If one is going to follow the standard definitions of Dispensationalism as a “system of theology” there will be slim pickings when it comes to forging a Dispensational Systematic Theology. The irony should not be lost on us.

In the last part of my series [*Christ at the Center*](#)³ I tried to sum up the strong Christological emphasis of Biblical Covenantalism with some of the solid by-product from which robust doctrines in Systematic Theology could be constructed. Although I have recorded over two hundred lectures in Systematic Theology along conventional lines, I think if I were to try to write a volume I would use the triad God, Man and the World. Beginning with the title “God Has Spoken” and introducing epistemological and ontological concerns, which in turn require ethical responses, I would ask questions about the knowability of God and (following Calvin) the knowability of ourselves in Creation. This introduces the doctrine of Revelation. Here I would want to press the joint reliance of the Sufficiency and Clarity of Scripture for the job ahead. That would open the door to hermeneutical questions.

Even so, dealing with Christ I would take up the same rubric: God, Man and the World. In this way I would attempt to discuss the pre-existence of Christ along with the incarnation and cross and resurrection. I would want to ‘lace’ the whole Systematics with Eschatological (and teleological) concerns, being careful to converge these themes in the section called “Eschatology” at the end of the work. This way one would hopefully see the inevitability of the convergence rather than now turning to “The Last Things.” The covenants of Scripture, dealing as they do with the same triad of God, Man and the World, could help

³ <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/05/16/christ-at-the-center-conclusion-pt-7b/>

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accomplish this.

5. *Worldview*

Contrary to some views, Systematic Theology sets out the Bible's teaching on God, Man and the World. It does not go cap-in-hand to worldly science and unbelieving philosophy because it knows that the Biblical Worldview is the only workable worldview.

We are not free as Christians to indulge ourselves in the speculations of immanentistic philosophies (to use Dooyeweerd's term). Our descriptions of the world must comport with the new man (cf. Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 10:31). Because we don't begin with man but with God the Revealer, our comprehension and description of the world differs from the worldly descriptions. The worldly descriptions all fall under the cosh of Hume's critique of induction and causation. They eventually have to appeal to the pragmatic for verification. We must see the world as God sees it. That requires a comprehensive Systematics, not a piecemeal approach.

Again the covenants help us do this. Since the biblical covenants deal with matters like the uniformity of nature, the physical world and its inhabitants, recognition of the fallenness and wickedness of man, the land of Israel on the earth and among the nations, the promised Seed, the Priesthood, the Davidic kingship and kingdom, the new birth, the Church, and the restoration of all things, it appears that rightly connecting the doctrines one with another in conformity with the covenant stipulations and requirements; centering them in Jesus Christ, through whom they must pass, will produce a certain kind of Systematic Theology and Worldview. Because of the tight relationship between Systematic Theology and Christian Worldview the one represents just a different perspective on the other. And because they both grow from the soil of "Biblical Covenantalism" the Biblical Theology behind them lends itself well to preaching the whole counsel of God.

These are just some thoughts which I hope will help reignite the flame of Dispensational Theology.



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