

Some Mud That Sticks: An Insider's Criticism of Dispensationalism

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It is well to note that the following charges against dispensationalism are not theological and exegetical in nature, but are more psychological and sociological.¹ Here is my opinion:

Pragmatism

It is our opinion that dispensationalism can be (and ought to be) wedded to a full-orbed systematic world and life view, but only if it begins to take itself more seriously and starts the painful process of self-examination.² In order to do this it must divest itself of the pragmatic outlook that it often clings to, and which spoils its thinking and stunts its theological development. For present purposes we have in mind the following helpful definition of Pragmatism: "Pragmatism as a theory of knowledge says that a person is warranted in believing any proposition or theory that produces good results."³

The lure of pragmatism is its emphasis upon short-term goal setting and tangible "success." This vision is what drives American

society⁴, and Christian institutions and publishing houses have, by and large, fallen for it "hook, line and sinker." It is our conviction that most if not all of the observations that follow stem from the influence of a pragmatic mindset. Comments like "will it sell?" betray this wrong-headed attitude. The real question is "is this important?," "is it right?" It ought to be borne in mind that many of the books cited in important theological works are not big sellers. But it is superficial thinking to equate large sales numbers with influence.

An Undue Focus on End Times⁵

Because dispensationalists are often concerned with matters such as the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the Antichrist, the accusation is that they attract a certain kind of crowd; one that is drawn to speculation and away from more pressing Christian concerns like, for example, the Person of Christ, or the impact of a creational outlook on Christian living. This is undoubtedly true as a limited proposition. But it is no more true than the fact that many of a sacramentalist disposition are drawn to episcopacy or that many of high brow inclination are attracted by Presbyterianism. Still, dispensationalist theologians must be careful not to scratch the

¹ <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2014/06/15/some-mud-that-sticks-an-insiders-criticism-of-dispensationalism/>

² My personal opinion is that dispensationalists need to focus their attention on the Biblical Covenants and not on the dispensations. Once this is done the system can be developed from the ground up and formulated into a full worldview.

³ David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God*, 158.

⁴ Os Guinness, *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith*, (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 358.

⁵ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 119.

speculators where they're itching for fear of working against the broader work of the Holy Spirit in conforming people to Christ. There has always been and will always be a subset of futurists who can speak nothing of the Bible unless it is about the End Times.⁶ But this party is not the clientele of the movement. At least it *should* not be! If we have fully explicated the *eschaton* but have failed to explain it in relation to the Doctrine of God and His Plan then there is much work to do. Too often we have not been faithful in presenting "the whole counsel of God."⁷ Dispensationalism as a movement has clearly made important contributions to the study of eschatology, but if these contributions are thought of by dispensationalists themselves as *defining* the movement, it is inevitable that it cannot survive as a vibrant theology in its own right.

Populism

There is no doubt that success brings with it tremendous temptation, some of it is quite subtle, but at other times the bait is taken because of wrong thinking. Hal Lindsey's books have sold by the tens of millions. They teach a garbled mixture of pretribulationism and historicism. They also espouse rank Arminianism to boot.

The main reason for the trumpeting by dispensationalists of Lindsey and his work is that, from the point of view of sales, and, therefore, the promotion of a brand of futurist

eschatology, it was successful.⁸ It is often said that many people have been brought to Christ through reading these books (a very hard claim to substantiate). It is also said that many believers have been brought to a premillennial understanding of Scripture through these works.⁹ But that is pragmatism pure and simple! Truth ought never to be assessed according to the end product it is adjudged to produce. Demand does not equal value. If the two are connected then it is the audience – fitful and changeable at best, who will control the Truth. When that happens, Truth must suffer as a consequence. This is what has assuredly occurred within much of the dispensational movement. As proof of this one only needs to look at the Left Behind series of fiction books. These titles, with no pretense at being good literary productions, being speculative and containing some poor theology, have been touted by many in the Dispensational camp as a great boon to the movement. It seems never to have crossed the minds of these supporters that there is an obvious connection between the lamentable state of contemporary evangelicalism, with its love of unbiblical Church growth strategies, rampant individualism, and disdain for theological discussion and Bible reading, and the "Left Behind" craze. The question, "Why, in the midst of this evangelical apostasy, were the books so successful?" appears never to have been broached. A glib (and woefully

⁶ Indeed whole ministries have been built on this.

⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer seemed to have been aware of this and his *Systematic Theology* evinces a concern, not just for eschatology, but for every one of the theological disciplines. Perhaps most of all for personal consecration.

⁸ In fact, phenomenally so. Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* was "the best-selling book of any sort published in the United States in the decade of the 1970's." – Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 378.

⁹ The present writer would include himself among this number.

inadequate) response would be that God is using the series to awaken sinners.¹⁰ But where is the evidence of such a work of God in the churches? Are the assemblies swarming with eager new converts, hungry for Bible teaching? No! The Bible-teaching churches are struggling, and the outlook is gloomy.¹¹ Could there be another reason then? Surely! Might it not be the very same reason why *The Prayer of Jabez* or *The Purpose-Driven Life*, or the ever-increasing volume of “prayer” books by Stormie Omartian are successful? Or, to cross into the secular realm, might it not be the same reason why *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and *The Da Vinci Code* sold by the millions? They meet the faddishness of consumer demand.¹²

The failure of so many dispensational leaders to see this is symptomatic, not of problems within the system itself – dispensationalism *a la* Griffith-Thomas or Chafer or McClain could never be characterized this way – but of the effect of American pragmatism upon its modern proponents. An example of this was the publication of a multi-volume, mid-level series of theological books by dispensational scholars from Dallas Seminary, Talbot, Philadelphia, and other institutions. The books included contributions by able men like John Witmer, Henry Hollomen, Robert

Lightner, John Walvoord, and Earl Radmacher. Sadly, the volumes were not good sellers.¹³ Perhaps one reason for this was the decision to have Charles Swindoll, the popular but academically lightweight preacher, as general editor. Swindoll (whose soteriology is again Arminian) is known for his slick, catchy, superficial “feel-good” books. He is *not* known for his theological rigor. Presumably, he was brought in to ‘sell’ the books. But what person with a real interest in theology would want to buy a theology book edited by a non-theologian? What message does this send about the depth of these works? More to our point, what made the publishers agree to the ambiguity? Was it because they were looking more to the supposed target-audience than the God whose truth they claim to be disseminating? While the idea behind them was commendable, and the quality of some of the volumes was high, the implicit line was that they were lightweight and, therefore, many pastors and theology students looked elsewhere.

Sensationalism

Going along with pragmatic populism is sensationalism. Although the major dispensationalists such as Darby, Scofield, Chafer, McClain, Pentecost, Walvoord and Ryrie were not guilty of irresponsible fortune-telling or regular excursions into the realms of speculation, men like John Hagee, Hal Lindsey and Grant Jeffrey have been.¹⁴ But this is not

¹⁰ See e.g., David L. Larsen, *The Company of Hope*, (Bloomington, IN: Authorhouse, 2004), 529ff. Notwithstanding, this is a very fine book.

¹¹ See Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1984); John H. Armstrong, ed., *The Compromised Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998).

¹² Consumerism is the essence of the postmodern mindset. See Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 117-120.

¹³ Robert Lightner in a personal communication 10/04.

¹⁴ This has been documented, for example, by Richard Abanes in his book, *End-Time Visions* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows,

where the problem ultimately lies. The issue becomes an unfortunate one for serious dispensationalists through the phenomenon of a lack of distinction between sensationalists and scholars in this tradition. We need to weigh such charges as the following:

Dispensationalists at the popular level tend to overlook creation as they emphasize [Arminian] salvation ...common grace for special grace, the visible present for the invisible future, and the normal and everyday for the dramatic and the apocalyptic.¹⁵

Despite some understandable protests, a person would not have to do much searching to find dispensational scholars praising the work of the sensationalist authors and hence reinforcing this kind of stereotype. Nor would a researcher need to look far to find endorsements from sensationalist authors on books written by the scholars. What is more, they have often written articles for the same book and appeared on the same platforms. In our opinion this shows that many of its promoters do not see dispensationalism as a holistic theology, only a brand of eschatology. One cannot castigate non-dispensationalists for treating the Jeffrey's and Lindsey's of this world as representative of dispensationalism proper when the publications and conferences of dispensationalists bring these men together.¹⁶

1998). What is so sad is that those who know better have not distanced themselves from these individuals, but have sometimes encouraged them. This once more shows how prevalent pragmatic thinking has become among dispensationalists.

¹⁵ Guinness, *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, 67.

¹⁶ See, for example, Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case For Amillennialism*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

We do not like much of what is called "progressive dispensationalism," but two of its main protagonists are surely right when they state that dispensationalists "must protect themselves and their churches from speculations and sensationalism which do not build up the body of Christ, but lead to delusion, resentment, and faithlessness when would-be prophecies under the guise of interpretation fail."¹⁷

Obscurantism

Another charge is that dispensationalists are obscurantists. By obscurantism is meant, "the denial of the validity of modern learning. It is the stock method used by people who feel that modern learning threatens their beliefs."¹⁸

Taken in one sense this is actually a badge of honor, if by it one means that we are not enticed by academic respectability *for its own sake*. However, if what is intended includes an aversion to treating Theology as *scientia* and as "the Queen of the Sciences" in the academy, and for improving and developing it in light of contemporary issues, then we should confess that dispensationalists as a group come away with a bloody nose. There is, of course, a connection between obscurantism and the pragmatic forms of populism. If one has decided to set ones agenda on the basis of short-term returns, then not only will there be a shying away from matters involving philosophy and modern theological movements, there will be positive

¹⁷ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993), 294.

¹⁸ Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 19. Ramm is quite taken with the word.

ignorance of it, and this will be apparent to those who have labored for any time in these fields.¹⁹ That contemporary 'normative' dispensationalists have avoided coming to terms with the intellectual milieu of the West is painfully obvious. Even more damning, though, is that they have shown little regard for the development and enhancement of dispensational theology, especially at the academic level. This staticism and lack of enthusiasm for development, to which may be added an embarrassing dearth of scholarly leadership and high caliber, graduate-level books, does not auger well for dispensational theology's future. And I may add to this an unhealthy aversion to criticism!

As a result of this "stand-offishness" dispensationalism is seen as something of a religious curio by many evangelical academics. And as such it is poorly positioned if it is to influence the next generation of promising conservative seminarians.



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org

¹⁹ Chafer's works show that he was not philosophically inclined. Walvoord had training in philosophy but this is not evinced in his books. Ryrie wrote a fine little evaluation of *NeoOrthodoxy*. Geisler has a strong background in philosophy, but it is heavily Thomistic in orientation, and affects his whole approach to theology. Perhaps the finest philosopher-theologian within dispensationalism is Gordon R. Lewis. See his *Testing Christianity's Truth Claims*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997). See also, Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).