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IS DISPENSATIONALISM INDISPENSABLE?

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SYNOPSIS

Many Christians today read Scripture through a theological paradigm that was unknown prior to the nineteenth century. This view, called dispensationalism, introduced such concepts as the pre-tribulation rapture and third-temple Judaism in the millennium. However, eschatological novelties are not the most important differences between dispensationalism and historic Christian theology, many of which are not trivial. The controversy raises questions about the nature of the kingdom of God, of the church, and of the gospel itself.

Though originally viewed with suspicion by many conservative Christians, dispensationalism subsequently acquired mainstream status among evangelicals and is seen by many as the very definition of biblical conservatism.

The views of John Nelson Darby, the system's founder, have been propagated through annotated study Bibles, best-selling novels, radio and TV personalities, numerous Bible institutes, and seminaries. Dispensationalism has become the official theology of some of America's largest evangelical denominations. To some, its presuppositions have come to be seen as the indispensable foundation for correct biblical exegesis. Since its introduction in 1830, dispensationalism has branched into more than one variety.

Like many American evangelicals, I was once a dispensationalist without knowing it. I was unacquainted with the label. My teachers did not inform me that they were teaching me to interpret the Bible through a mental grid that had been constructed less than 150 years earlier. I had no inclination to investigate the relative merits of my system against those of any other — simply because I didn't know there was anything to investigate. I had the impression that ours was the only way sensible people had ever viewed Scripture. In other words, I was not educated, but indoctrinated.

It was not until my own studies in Scripture compelled me to rethink some aspects of my theology that I became aware of the degree of that indoctrination.

DEFINITION AND ORIGIN OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Dispensationalism is a theological system emphasizing the ways in which God relates differently to mankind during distinct eras, called *dispensations*. The history of mankind is viewed as a succession of dispensations, each defined by a distinct covenant by which God binds men to specific obligations relative to that particular dispensation. The ramifications of these views affect a number of theological issues.

Christian theologians have always recognized different administrative epochs in God's dealings with humanity — as, for example, the distinct economies inaugurated by the fall, by the exodus, and by the advent of Christ, respectively. However, the system known as dispensationalism was not formulated earlier than 1830. It was introduced by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), an early leader in the Plymouth Brethren movement. At age nineteen, while still a student at Trinity College in Dublin, Darby came to believe that there must be a future dispensation in which God will literally fulfill His Old Testament promises to national Israel. He saw this as a “rediscovered truth” that had been lost in the generations following the apostolic age. From this premise, several other innovations in theology arose (to be considered below).

If Darby's suggestion about the future of Israel does not seem theologically novel to modern evangelicals, it is due to the remarkable success his opinions have enjoyed in capturing the evangelical imagination. Prior to Darby, Christian theologians almost unanimously taught that the promises made to Israel have found their fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Darby believed the former theologians had erred through their failure to employ a thoroughly literalistic hermeneutic. In traditional theology, many prophetic passages concerning Israel and Jerusalem had been spiritualized and applied to the church. According to Darby's teaching, such passages should be applied to ethnic Israel, not to the church.

As a result of this hermeneutical commitment, Darby's views placed Israel, not the church, at the center of God's eschatological interest. The church, then, was said to comprise a *parenthesis*, occupying the interim between Israel's rejection of Christ, in the first century, and the restoration of Israel to God in the end times.

Darbyism, as it is sometimes called, became popular in the United States through a variety of media, not least of which was the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible in 1909, whose notes, printed at the foot of each page, provided dispensational explanations of the associated biblical text. This publication had far-reaching influence on many evangelical readers, who often read Scofield's notes as though they carried some kind of canonical authority due to their placement on the pages of Scripture.

Even before the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, dispensational beliefs were being disseminated in the United States through the Bible Conference Movement and numerous Bible institutes, which were founded across America to promote the new teaching. Among those that arose in the late 1800s were The Nyack Bible Institute, The Boston Missionary Training School,

and The Moody Bible Institute. Later, in 1924, dispensational theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer established Dallas Theological Seminary, which has trained many of the prominent dispensational broadcasters, best-selling authors, and commentators of our day.

DISTINCTIVES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

For many Christians, fascination with the end times translates into fascination with Darbyism. Of the controversies surrounding dispensationalism's various theological innovations, those that are most popularly discussed are the eschatological distinctives of the system—which include the expectation of an end-time regathering of the Jews to the land of Israel, the pretribulational rapture of the church, and the restoration of Jewish forms of temple worship during the millennium. The futurist view of the Book of Revelation, which, prior to Darby, had been rejected for centuries by Protestants, also gained respectability and popularity among evangelicals after it was wedded to the dispensationalist scheme.

Even if its eschatological outlook on the future has received the greatest attention in popular sermons, novels, and movies, dispensationalism is not merely a distinctive program for the end times. Many aspects of the system have greater impact on the Christian message than does its view of the winding down of world history. Some of the issues affected have more practical bearing on daily Christian life.

Hermeneutics

Charles Ryrie informs us that the dispensationalists' principle of hermeneutics "is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation which gives every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage."¹

Dispensationalists acknowledge, of course, that most conservative nondispensationalists also interpret much of the Bible literally, but they allege that nondispensationalists inconsistently "use two methods of interpretation, the spiritualizing method for prophecy and the literal method for other Scriptures."²

Previous to Darby, it was customary for biblical scholars to view many of the Old Testament prophecies concerning "Israel" as having a spiritual, not literal, fulfillment in the church. Dispensationalists say that they differ from their nondispensationalist counterparts in this important characteristic, and that they alone consistently take the Bible literally.

Israel

Dispensationalism also departs from earlier Christian theology by making a distinction between God's ultimate intentions for Israel and the church, respectively. The church and Israel, dispensationalists insist, must never be confused nor intermingled.

The upshot of this view is that every promise that God ever made to Israel must be fulfilled literally, and not through the church. John Feinberg observes, "Only dispensationalism clearly sees a distinctive future for ethnic Israel as a nation."³ Modern developments in the Middle East—especially the reestablishment of the nation of Israel

in 1948—are often viewed as confirmations of the dispensational expectations that Israel is about to enjoy the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises to the patriarchs.

In dispensationalism, the purpose of the millennium (which is conceived as following the second coming of Christ) is to bring about the fulfillment of all that God has promised to Israel in the Old Testament. As Scofield wrote, “The return of the Lord to the earth is to accomplish the yet unfulfilled prophecies of Israel’s national regathering, conversion, and establishment in peace and power under the Davidic Covenant.”⁴

The Kingdom of God and the Church

The burden of the teaching of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament concerns the coming and the nature of the kingdom of God. Historically, Christian theologians taught that Jesus came as the Davidic King, in fulfillment of the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament. At His first coming, He planted His kingdom, likening it to a mustard seed and to leaven in a lump of dough. Thereafter, His rule began to spread and permeate the world through the preaching of the gospel. The manifestation of His kingdom on earth is that society that recognizes His kingship, or the church of Jesus Christ.

Darby believed that the kingdom promises were not fulfilled in Christ’s first advent, and that they require the political restoration of Israel and the coronation of the Messiah on the physical throne of David in Jerusalem. Such a messianic kingdom failed to materialize at Christ’s first advent, they say, due to the Jews’ rejection of their King. The messianic (Davidic) kingdom is thus said to have been postponed, not to be established until the second coming of Christ and His millennial reign.

The church is seen as a parenthesis between the advents, through which God is drawing Gentiles to Himself. When the Church Age is complete, the rapture will occur, and God’s dealings will again be focused on preparing Israel for the Davidic kingdom. Chafer wrote, “The new purpose of God in this age is seen to be the out-calling of a heavenly people [the Church]. They...are in no way related to the Messianic earthly kingdom of Israel.”⁵ According to Ryrie, “The church is not a part of this kingdom at all.”⁶

The Gospel

According to dispensationalism, the gospel preached by Jesus was the gospel of the Kingdom of God and was intended for the Jews, with a mind to their accepting Him as their King and His establishing a political, Davidic kingdom. According to Chafer, “The gospel of the Kingdom...consisted of a legitimate offer to Israel of the promised earthly Davidic kingdom, designed particularly for Israel. However, the Jewish nation rejected their King and with him the Kingdom.”⁷

Due to the postponement of the kingdom, a new dispensation, the Church Age, has intervened, introducing another gospel—“the gospel of grace”—which was first preached by Paul. According to Ryrie, “The apostle Paul was principally, though not exclusively, the agent of the revelation of the grace of God for this dispensation.”⁸ It is

Paul's gospel that we are to be preaching today. Only after the rapture of the church (the close of the present dispensation) will the gospel of the kingdom again be relevant.

VARIETIES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Contemporary dispensationalists are not all of one stripe. There has been development within the movement, resulting in three different kinds of dispensationalists.

1. Classical Dispensationalism (1830–1940s)

This is the label given to the earliest forms of dispensational thinking, as found in J. N. Darby, C. I. Scofield, and Lewis Sperry Chafer. God is said to have two "New Covenants." One "New Covenant" applies to the church in the present time, and another "New Covenant" is for Israel, applicable to the future millennial kingdom. This recognizes two "peoples of God" — God's eternal "heavenly" people, the church, and God's eternal "earthly" people, Israel. One writer who still holds to the classical approach is Miles Stanford (author of *The Green Letters*⁹).

2. Revised Dispensationalism (1950–1985)

A revision of the system is found in the writings of Charles C. Ryrie, John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, and Charles Feinberg. These dispensationalists maintain the classical view's separation of Israel and the church, but have abandoned the "two New Covenants" approach. Instead, there is only one (future) New Covenant, for Israel. The church is not under a specified covenant. Classical and Revised Dispensationalism are regarded by many as varieties of "Normative Dispensationalism."¹⁰

3. Progressive Dispensationalism (1985–present)

Yet further modifications of dispensational theology have been expounded by Craig A. Blaising, Darrell L. Bock, and Robert L. Saucy. They do not recognize such a stark discontinuity between Israel and the church as did the earlier dispensationalists. These scholars modify the idea of a complete postponement of the Davidic kingdom and, drawing closer to traditional Christian theology, recognize the church as the Davidic kingdom in an "inaugurated phase" of fulfillment. Christ is now believed to be reigning on David's throne from heaven and will later do so from a physical throne on earth, during the millennium.

CRITICISM OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Since Darby acknowledged that his system represented a departure from historic Christian theology, it is not surprising that, when it first appeared, the system received criticism from those who still embraced those "historical truths" with which Darby's "rediscovered truths" were in conflict. The controversy continues, since many still do not believe that the things Darby "rediscovered" were "truths" at all.

Literally?

Dispensationalism's "literal hermeneutic" does not adequately take into account that many of the Old Testament prophecies were, in fact, interpreted nonliterally by the New Testament writers—a precedent from which Christian theologians have historically taken their cues. Although dispensationalists accuse nondispensationalists of inconsistency in the use of literalism, the nondispensational hermeneutic "is not literal nor spiritual, but surrendered to the usage, regulation, and amelioration of the infallible in-scripturated Word."¹¹

Though claiming to use literalism consistently, dispensationalists, like everybody else, ignore this commitment when faced with overriding considerations. For example, all dispensationalists find a gap of thousands of years between Daniel's sixty-ninth and seventieth "weeks," though there is certainly nothing in Daniel 9 which, taken literally, would require or justify this. Dispensationalists also insert a gap of two thousand years at a comma between two clauses in Isaiah 61:2. This gap is not suggested by any literal reading of the text. Like everybody else, dispensationalists do not believe that Jesus is a literal "Lamb...having seven horns and seven eyes" (Rev. 5:6¹²), nor that the Devil is literally a seven-headed reptile (Rev. 12:9), nor that the world will worship a ten-horned wild animal (Rev. 13:1–4). A strictly "literal" approach to Revelation would require such a reading, but no one is so foolish as to insist on such "consistency."

The most accurate way to state the case is that *all biblical interpreters* interpret some things literally, and some figuratively. The dispensationalists are not more consistent than are the nondispensationalists in the application of a literal hermeneutic—nor is that necessarily a criticism. The incongruity would seem to be in the dispensationalist's claim to differ from others in this respect.

Too Many "Gospels"

The dispensationalists postulate two distinct "gospels" for two different dispensations. Jesus, they say, preached the "gospel of the kingdom" to Israel (Mark 1:14), while Paul preached the "gospel of grace" to the Gentiles. One serious defect in this suggestion is that the term "gospel of grace" is found in only one passage of Scripture—Acts 20:24–25—in which Paul equates this gospel with his preaching of "the kingdom of God." The two gospels are one and the same. Paul was particularly intolerant of the idea of more than one "gospel" (e.g., Gal. 1:8–9; 2 Cor. 11:3–4).

The "Davidic Kingdom"

When Jesus came, the kingdom that the Jews anticipated was a Davidic one—namely, a political empire in which one of David's sons would rule eternally from David's throne (2 Sam. 7:12, 13). Jesus' announcement of the imminent kingdom was understood by the Jews in this light, and raised questions among them as to whether He might, in fact, be the anticipated "Son of David" (Matt. 12:23).

Classical and Revised Dispensationalists believe that Jesus indeed came with this in mind, and, if not for the Jews' rejection of His offer, His coming would have resulted in His reigning on David's literal throne in Jerusalem. They believe that this kingdom

was postponed until the second coming of Christ, when Jesus will sit on David's throne during the millennium.

The theological difficulties that these propositions present are significant. In scripture, the Jews did not reject Jesus as a political king. In fact, they wanted to "take Him by force to make Him king" (John 6:15). It was He, not the Jews, who quashed that idea. His kingdom, He said, was "not of this world" — meaning not of worldly origin (John 18:36). In speaking to Nicodemus, He described it as a spiritual phenomenon, which can neither be seen, nor entered, other than by spiritual rebirth (John 3:3–5).

Dispensationalists and nondispensationalists agree that it is the coming of Jesus that brings the Davidic kingdom. But nondispensationalists place this fulfillment at the first coming of Christ, and dispensationalists place it at the second. Which is it?

There is nothing in Scripture to suggest that the kingdom was or would be postponed. John the Baptist and Jesus both proclaimed that the kingdom was "at hand" (Matt. 3:2; Mark 1:15), and Jesus later said that the kingdom of God "has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28) and "is within you" (Luke 17:21). It was not derailed or postponed, but came powerfully in the person of the King Jesus (Acts 17:7).

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the people celebrated what they hailed as "the kingdom of our father David that comes in the name of the Lord" (Mark 11:10). Clearly, they believed and declared that the Davidic kingdom was coming in the donkey-mounted Messiah Jesus (cf. Zech. 9:9). Apparently, they were not mistaken, because Jesus said that if they had stopped saying such things, "the stones would immediately cry out" (Luke 20:40). Even the rocks knew that the Davidic king was riding to power!

Contrary to dispensationalism, the Davidic promises cannot be fulfilled at the second coming. The promise that a descendent of David's would establish an eternal kingdom was to take place at a designated time: "when you [David] rest with your fathers" (2 Sam. 7:12). In other words, this would be fulfilled at a time when David was dead and buried. This would fit the first advent of Christ admirably, a point not lost on Peter when he preached: "David...is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). Conditions were thus in place for fulfillment. At the second coming, David will be resurrected and will no longer be resting with his fathers. Fulfillment at that time would not fit the wording of the prophecy.

Both Peter and Paul affirmed that the promises made to David had come true in Christ's heavenly enthronement (Acts 2:30–36; 13:33–34). Paul defines the kingdom as a spiritual reality (Rom. 14:17) into which Christians have already been "translated" (Col. 1:13).

No verse in Scripture mentions Christ's failure to accomplish His mission. There is no intimation that the kingdom has been postponed until a later time.

Israel and the Church

An oft-repeated mantra of dispensationalism is that "the church and Israel are never confused in Scripture." However, the fact that the true Israel (or the true "circumcision") is not linked to ethnicity, but is identified with followers of Christ, is

stated unambiguously by Paul (Rom. 2:28–29; 9:6; Phil. 3:3), who also said that the true heirs of Abrahamic promises are not the “children according to the flesh” (ethnic descendants), but the “children of the promise” (Rom. 9:7–8; Gal. 4:23, 30). To avoid any confusion, Paul then identifies the latter with his Christian readers—hence, the church (Gal. 4:28). All who belong to Christ are included in the “seed” of Abraham, and are, therefore, the heirs of the promises (Gal. 3:29; 4:30–31). In view of these things, the dispensational assertion that the church is never meshed with Israel is indeed perplexing.

IT COMES DOWN TO THIS...

Either all the Christian scholars prior to 1830 have been wrong about the central teachings of the New Testament or else the dispensationalists are wrong. When considering the biblical merits of each position, it is necessary to discern whether we are seeing the text as it reads and was intended, or whether we are reading the text through a preferred grid, supplied by the teachers whose influence first shaped our thinking as Christians. Simply to raise the question is more than many believers have done. “The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” (Prov. 18:17).

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NOTES

- 1 Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 86–87.
- 2 John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 63.
- 3 John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 83.
- 4 C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 1148 (note on Acts 1:11).
- 5 L. S. Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1919), 71.
- 6 Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), 398–99.
- 7 Quoted from G. E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 50.
- 8 Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 56.
- 9 Miles J. Stanford, *The Complete Green Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).
- 10 Larry Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 23–42.
- 11 Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool Publications, 1987), 38.
- 12 All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.