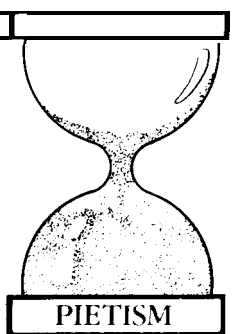


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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DISPENSATIONS WITHIN DISPENSATIONALISM

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We return to our survey of dispensational theologian Darrell L. Bock's helpful article: "Charting Dispensationalism" (*Christianity Today*, September 12, 1994). This is an important article, not only because of who wrote it and how well it was constructed, but also because of what it said and to whom. It is presented to an audience much larger than that of dispensational sounding boards such as Bibliotheca *Sacra* and *Southwestern Journal of Theology*.

In the article under review Bock details the massive internal reorganization occurring within dispensationalism. In this newsletter we will trace the first two stages of developmental progress as reported by Bock; his analysis appears to be fundamentally sound, (Page numbers cited below, unless otherwise noted, are from this article.)

Theological Method Applied to Historical Evaluation

Interestingly, we are discovering that dispensations not only apply to biblical prophecy and history but to **dispensationalism** itself! In his landmark book *Dispensationalism Today* Charles Ryrie defines what is meant by "dispensation." He notes that it "is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. If one were describing a dispensation he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment" (Moody, 1965, p. 29).

That being the case, Bock's article is important enough to mark off a new dispensation: Classic dispensationalism has had its day. Its "dispensation" of grace is over. Its *distinctive revelations* were its theological defenses by Ryrie, Walvoord, and Pentecost (not Hal Lindsey's three marriages). Its *testing* came from the resistance of the entire world of evangelical theology outside of dispensationalism (from David Brown to William Cox to O.T. Allis to John Gerstner). Its *failure* probably can be traced to Hal Lindsey's birthday. And its *judgment* may well be found in the publication of the article under review.

After briefly highlighting the birth of the influence of American dispensationalism in the Bible conference movement in the late 1800s, Bock traces "three discernible types of dispensationalism" (p. 27). Let us follow this yellow brick road. Broadly speaking, classic dispensationalism has two different forms; progressive dispensationalism currently has one basic form,

Scofieldian Dispensationalism

Bock designates the first discernible type of (American) dispensationalism as Scofieldian. This, of course, is due to the tremendously influential work of C. I. Scofield through his

Scofield Reference Bible. Under Scofield's profound influence, L. S. Chafer founded in 1924 what later became known as Dallas Theological Seminary, which has perhaps been the second most influential agent for dispensationalism. Since Chafer was under Scofield's influence, his contribution to dispensationalism is largely Scofieldian. Hence the designation by Bock.

Bock touches on one of the distinctive aspects of Scofieldian dispensationalism when he writes: "This approach stresses the existence of two completely distinct 'programs' of God, one for Israel and another for the church, so much so that Chafer (though not Scofield himself) argued that there is a New Covenant for Israel and a distinct New Covenant for the church. When it comes to the two peoples of God, the emphasis is almost exclusively on discontinuity" (p. 27). Bock complains that this (absurd) position remains a favorite for attack by non-dispensationalists, even though this view is older and virtually non-existent among dispensational theologians today.

The New Covenant is quite a sticky problem for classic dispensationalism. The classic dispensational hermeneutic of liberalism (~~literal-except-when-contrary-to-what-we-want-it-to-say~~) demands something be done with regard to the New Covenant. It is a major stumbling block causing the dispensationalist to trip and impale himself on the painful horns of a dilemma: Shall we be literal with the reference to "the house of Judah and house of Israel" in the original prophecy (Jer. 31:31-34)? Or shall we interpret the New Covenant like Christ (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) and the New Testament writers (1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 9:15), applying it to the Church? In short, Scofield or Christ? (Believe it or not, that is a painful dilemma for some.)

The Scofieldian form of dispensationalism had a difficult time with the New Covenant, either arguing there were two different new covenants or stressing there was one New Covenant that is to be fulfilled for the Jews and while being *applied* to the Church, and other such approaches. Bock rightly points to this issue as descriptive of early dispensationalism. Scofieldian dispensationalism even had a tendency to separate God's earthly people (Israel) from God's heavenly people (the Church) *throughout all eternity!*

Revised Dispensationalism

Bock continues onto note the arising of a new generation of dispensational theologians. He lists names such as McClain, Walvoord, Ryrie, and Pentecost. He notes that "this second

form of dispensationalism sees more continuity in the program of God. These developments have led some to call this *revised dispensationalism*" (p. 27).

Of course, the perceptive student of theology will recognize that the issue of continuity vs. discontinuity lies at the heart of the debate between **covenantal** and dispensational theologies. In fact, an insightful book published in 1988 stresses this theme in a point-counter point format: John S. Feinberg, cd., *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Crossway). Feinberg notes in that work: "The more one moves in the continuity direction, the more **covenantal** he becomes; and the more he moves in the discontinuity direction, the more dispensational he becomes" (p. xii, cf. p. 64 also). He is right on the money, of course.

Consequently, Ryrie's move in a direction of more continuity was a concession to **covenantal** theology. That concession has really gotten the dispensational ball rolling now - despite Ryrie's heroic casting of himself in the path of that crushing stone. As we shall see next month, progressive dispensationalism takes even larger strides in a continuity direction.

Bock cautions the reader, however, not to jump to any conclusions: "Revised dispensationalists do maintain distinctions, since the kingdom program today takes on a spiritual form that is detached from Old Testament promise. But all do not agree on precisely how **Walvoord, Ryrie**, and Pentecost all had different angles" (p. 28). In other words, there is still the clarion call to "rightly divide the word of truth," as per 2 Timothy 2:15 (a misuse of Scripture matched only by the abuse of Remans 6:14, "we are not under law but under grace").

It is at this juncture that Bock's earlier noted embarrassment (see last newsletter) comes to the forefront. He comments that "this type of dispensationalism also popularized apocalyptic readings of the Bible in terms of current history. The best-known examples are Hal Lindsey's books on prophecy" (p. 28). (His article makes it sound as if this tendency arose under the revised dispensationalism and was without precedent in **Scofieldian dispensationalism**. That implication is erroneous.)

This is the brand of dispensationalism that most prophecy buffs know of today, of course. This is the variety that is the toppling goliath of our very day. Although we need no longer fight with it as if a viable option, its gargantuan mass must be avoided as it crumples to the ground. Watch out below! The Pre-Trib Study Group (of LaHaye, **Ryrie, Walvoord, et al.**) is giving this collapsing giant artificial resuscitation at this very moment. (Their writers are so rich it looks like they could afford the real thing, and not have to rely on the artificial).

Next month I will focus on Bock's presentation of progressive dispensational distinctive. But for now, you must remember to:

Study to Show Thyself Approved

If we are **knowlegably** to critique the opposition's position, we must, as J. Gresham Machen so strongly urged, "quote

their prophets." Important books debating the topics of interest include the following. Not only are these books major contributions to the issue, but they provide a wealth of bibliographic resources, as well:

John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988). This book includes point-counter point articles by dispensationalists and **covenantal** theologians. Dispensational contributors include: John Feinberg, Paul Feinberg, Mama Feinberg (just kidding), Allen Ross, Douglas Moo, Robert Saucy, and Walter Kaiser. Covenantal contributors include: **Willem** VanGemerén, O. Palmer Robertson, Fred Klooster, Knox Chamblin, Marten Woudstra, and Bruce **Waltke**. (You can tell VanGemerén, Klooster, and Woudstra are **amillennial** by their names. Amillennialism is a genetic defect among modern Dutchmen, though it has not always been that way.) Some of the dispensationalists undertake a little Ryrie bashing in the process. It is quite an excellent resource.

Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton, Ill.: Bridgepoint, 1993). This book is by two of the three leading progressive dispensational scholars. It is must reading if you are to come to grips with the radical nature of the changes within dispensationalism. Few classic dispensationalists will pick it up: there are no pictures and only a few charts.

Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). This book concentrates on the lone remaining dispensational distinctive: the role of Israel in the plan of God. It also is an important work to own. It is a composite work providing an opportunity for the meeting and interaction of several minds.

Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993). Saucy of Talbot Theological Seminary is the third leading scholar in the triumvirate of progressive dispensationalism. He has been hammering away on this new brand of **dispensationism** for several years in the pages of Dallas Seminary's *Bibliotheca Sacra*. As the title and sub-title strongly proclaim, this book deals with the fundamental issues separating dispensational and non-dispensational theologies.

Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). This is a highly regarded analysis of dispensationalism by a Westminster Seminary professor of reknown. It is handy sized (136 pages) and **well**-worth reading.

Wesley R. Willis and John R. Masters, eds., *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1994). This is the book I reported on briefly in my January newsletter. Though the editors are not well-known, contained in the book are articles by **Walvoord, Ryrie**, and others. This book shows the serious concerns and the utter despair of classic dispensationalism. I have reviewed it for *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.

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