

The Future of Dispensationalism: A Friendly Response to John Master

In a sense, today we are asking the question “Is dispensationalism alive and well on planet earth?” We could continue with many follow-up queries. In a general sense, are its prospects bright? Will it continue to offer solid theological alternatives and timely proclamations within the evangelical orbit as we face the rapidly multiplying theological options of the times? Can it serve as a stabilizing force in evangelicalism? Will it fragment and lose cohesiveness as a historical movement? Will it be “left behind?” As a dispensationalist I am a biblical futurist and not a historicist, so I refuse to make any predictions! But we can all ask the question about our future as a movement, both historically and theologically. I am grateful that John Master has ably led us in the discussion today to get us going.

There are several areas of agreement between John Master’s analysis and my own. First, he has attempted, in my judgment, a proper recognition of both faithfulness to a tradition steeped in accurate understanding of some basic biblical truths and the need to advance in biblical studies in areas where we need to do more work. The reason that this is so important to mention is attitudes about doctrinal development sometimes skew the theological results. The issue is not whether development takes place. It is the nature and direction of the development that is the issue. Development is not necessarily progress. Current directions portray dissatisfaction with many *recent* developments within biblical studies. There is no reason to doubt that the next generation of dispensationalists may look with some disapproval at current trends in biblical studies.¹ In short, dispensationalists must reject the notion that contemporary “mainstream” evangelical contributions to biblical studies automatically provide the parameters for proper doctrinal development. To say it in a balanced way, dispensationalists must avoid the extremes of moving with the flow on one hand and adhering rigidly to tradition on the other. Such balance, as we all know, is tricky business. I applaud John for trying.

Second, in relation to the need for development, I believe John is right in asserting that the New Covenant is perhaps *the* area where more work needs to be done. While I am not convinced entirely of the details of his view on the timing of fulfillment of the New Covenant and its relation to the Church (it is the Lord’s Supper passages and 2 Corinthians 3 that give me pause), I do not believe it is necessary to hold that the Church partakes in any *direct* covenantal way in the New Covenant blessings in order to make sense of the biblical passages. Furthermore, it seems to me that the exegetical argument of the book of Hebrews as to the superiority of the New Covenant to the Old does not rise or fall based upon the Church’s identification within various passages in the book. In this much, I think I am in agreement with John. Just as progressive dispensationalists have highlighted in some ways a return to the Christological focus of the premillennialism of the Niagara Conference for some issues, maybe we need to go back further in time for insights from the dispensational tradition on the New Covenant. Perhaps the early Darbyite approach (which on my reading is far from the two New Covenants approach of

¹ Remember that Church history is littered with evidence of pendulum swings between “both/and” versus “either/or” thinking, between scholasticism and pietism, between idealism and realism, to name a few. To be more specific with an implication of such pendulum swings in history, it may not make any more sense to conclude that the rise of modern dispensationalism is substantially the result of the methodology of Scottish Common Sense Realism than it does to credit John Calvin with the invention of Augustinian views of predestination.

Lewis Sperry Chafer), with its focus on a single New Covenant for Israel with blessings accruing to the Church by virtue of its union with Christ, can provide a way to explain the Church's experience of the Spirit without harming the unity of the national focus of the Old Testament texts about the New Covenant.² I do not think that John's understanding in the main is far removed from such thinking.

In addition, I find myself in substantial agreement with John's skepticism concerning New Testament dependence upon extra-biblical first-century techniques for reading the Old Testament. The view that New Testament authors show reliance upon so-called Second Temple hermeneutics has not been addressed much by traditional dispensationalists.³ Those traditional dispensationalists like myself who fear that such a view could turn out to be only a temporary fad in current academic studies need to do our homework and engage in the debate in a more serious way. It is one thing to assert one's skepticism. It is quite another to put energy into the necessary exegetical and historical work.

On the other side of this debate, I would like for progressive dispensationalists to think through and communicate clearly what it means for the Church practically to believe that the NT human authors are doing midrash when using some OT texts.⁴ How does such a notion change how I might teach Sunday School? How does it change how I teach people in my local church to read the Bible if the Church at large has indeed misread the Bible for almost two thousand years? Do I have to teach laypersons to discern elements of midrashic techniques? In other words, this is not merely an academic question. Its pragmatic significance may be highlighted even more when we remember that dispensationalism was born as a movement within the churches and not the academy. Its success has been partly, if not mostly, because it appeared to give the Bible back to the common man even more than the Reformation had claimed to do. I would like something in print to help me sort out this side of the issue.

² The desire to discuss NT fulfillment in such a way so as not to damage or unravel OT exegesis is a concern of all dispensationalists. We often state that God can add to his promises but he cannot do less than he promised. Traditional dispensationalists are known for emphasizing (some progressives might say overemphasizing) the need to consider the OT text when working in NT passages that use OT texts. This concern is why I prefer to make a sharp distinction between exegetical meaning in the OT text and theological conclusions that draw from several sources. Oftentimes our recent discussions in the area of hermeneutics have become somewhat vague, in my judgment, by blurring this distinction too readily so that we talk of NT texts as if they give the "meaning" of the OT text.

³ Herbert W. Bateman, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 40-41. Bateman contrasts Elliott Johnson and Darrell Bock on this point. I do not know why traditional dispensationalists have shown little interest in studying this challenge to their way of thinking. As a systematic theologian, it is somewhat removed from my main field of study. I really think that a book-level study of this issue needs to be presented by traditional dispensationalists with NT exegetes in the lead.

⁴ I am not arguing for a complete absence of any midrashic elements in the Bible any more than I would argue that Paul never quotes Greek poets in Acts 17. I would not see the quoting of Greek poets as evidence of the need to Hellenize Paul methodologically as I read his letters. In the same way, when I see midrashic elements in the NT text, I do not see that as reason to accept Second Temple hermeneutics as a major interpretive tool. It may be a simple matter of disagreement over exegesis. It could also be a matter of degree and not kind, although traditionalists generally fear this approach as an example of parallelomania. However, some traditional dispensationalists agree with progressives about elements of *pesher* in the Bible in such passages as Acts 2:16 (the introductory phrase *this is that*). See Zane Hodges, "A Dispensational Understanding of Acts 2" in *Issues in Dispensationalism* edited by Wesley Willis and John Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 168 and Elliott Johnson, "Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* edited by Herb Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 151ff.

On a related point, John rightly questions the predominate assumption that an “already/not yet” perspective should be used to describe what is happening in the New Testament text concerning fulfillment of OT kingdom promises. While I accept some “already/not yet” theological conclusions in areas like individual soteriology, dispensationalists of all stripes must be careful not to make the mistake of turning this perspective into a theological grid by which the entire Bible is read and our whole theological system is built.⁵ If we do this, we will make the same mistake that covenant theology does in reading the entire Bible through the glasses of the covenant of grace. In addition, I remain unconvinced that the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is automatically the coming of the *eschaton* and that Jesus is reigning today on the throne of David.⁶ I believe a “king-in-waiting” perspective makes better exegetical sense of the various NT passages without violating the OT promises. John Master may be quite right in asking all of us to get past the “dominion atmosphere” we are currently breathing.

However, while I am in considerable agreement with the outlook of John’s presentation, there are some areas that I come at differently. For example, I am not inclined to give up as quickly on the insights of Charles Ryrie concerning literal interpretation and the Israel/Church distinction as the heart of dispensationalism. John does what many do in diminishing these features when he points out the difficulties of defining literal interpretation and when he points out the fact that many on both sides share viewpoints about Israel and the Church. However, sharing, whether it is the sharing of perspectives by various theological viewpoints or whether it is the overlap of fulfillment of promises to Israel and the Church, does not tell the whole story. It seems that when we point out, for example, that *some* amillennialists have incorporated post-Second Coming earthly features in their theology, we go too far when we then assume that earlier ways of describing distinctions between premillennialism and amillennialism no longer have the same value in the theological debate. It seems that we sometimes have crafted most of the current discussions based upon the exceptions and not the mainstream of the traditions involved. Such an approach may have its advantages for dispensational-covenantal dialogue since the exceptions are points of commonality, but better theology and self-understanding does not necessarily follow.⁷ The points of commonality can only bear fruit when they are supported by sound exegesis.

One factor that makes me unwilling to give up Ryrie’s methodological focus comes from my studies in the early Darbyites. They seem to portray themselves from a methodological viewpoint in *exactly the same terms* that Ryrie uses over a century later to assess the entire tradition (i.e., literalism and Israel/Church distinction).⁸ While there has been both wonderful

⁵ I believe that C. Marvin Pate comes close to doing this for Pauline theology in *The End of the Age Has Come: The Theology of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁶ A recent doctoral student of mine researched the early Church Fathers and came to the conclusion that they do not speak in “already/not yet” categories, which I find a bit strange (Bruce Baker, “Complementary Hermeneutics and the Early Church” [Unpublished paper, Baptist Bible Seminary, Spring 2002]).

⁷ Of course, we would all agree that the points of commonality can only bear fruit when they are supported by sound exegesis.

⁸ Émile Guers, *Israël aux Derniers Jours De L’Économie Actuelle ou Essai Sur La Restauration Prochaine De Ce Peuple, Suivi D’Un Fragment Sur Le Millénarisme*, (Genève: Émile Beroud, 1856). An English translation is available: Émile Guers, *Israel in the Last Days of the Present Economy; or, An Essay on the Coming Restoration of this People. Also, a Fragment on Millenarianism*, trans. with a preface by Aubrey C. Price, (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1862). Guers was a disciple of John Nelson Darby as early as the 1830s. For a more complete discussion of this early Darbyite anticipation of the later Ryrie synthesis, see Michael D. Stallard, *The Early*

and questionable diversity, discontinuity, and development within the history of dispensationalism, it remains puzzling to me why we so quickly abandon the tradition's view of itself. Recently, we have so focused on the discontinuities in the past that I fear we have too readily overlooked the continuity in the tradition.⁹ In spite of the inconsistencies, perhaps there is something substantial that dispensationalists have hit upon that has determined who they are. I am not sure that a complete abandonment of this Darbyite/Ryrie portrait will help us down the road in defining who we are as dispensationalists. At least, we must continue to advance in historical studies of our own tradition, something that is still incomplete at best.

In light of such considerations, one area where I found John's presentation intriguing is his definition of dispensationalism. He notes: "I would identify dispensationalism as that system of theology that identifies the dispensational distinctions as the major key to interpreting correctly the Scriptures. This stands out against the covenant approach which sees the covenant of grace as the major key to interpreting correctly the Scriptures." When he said this, I must confess that Ryrie's famous third, yet ignored point, came to my mind – the doxological unifying theme of the Bible. John elsewhere correctly refers to Ryrie's focus on doxology as evidence that dispensationalists have been concerned about taking diversity to an extreme and that some approach to unity must be voiced. I had abandoned Ryrie's point early on in seminary training because I was told to do so, but over the last few years have come back to it as something that needs to be recaptured. It may be true, as John Master says, that the notion of kingdom is a better way to integrate theology at the highest level. However, this does not rule out the significance of Ryrie's insight.

In particular, I want to argue that John's desire to define dispensationalism as the use of dispensational distinctions as the "major key" for Bible interpretation brings us to the same place that Ryrie wanted us to consider. As one reads the Bible at face value (literal interpretation), Ryrie would say, he not only recognizes a distinction between the two institutions of Israel and the Church, the interpreter goes on to see an even larger mosaic of what God is doing through the panorama of the ages. This multi-faceted plan of God better gives God his due than does the single-track system of covenant theology with its focus on individual redemption through election.¹⁰ While individual salvation is not ignored in dispensationalism, dispensationalists have often talked of God's *purposes* through the ages. The plural is important. God is doing more than one main thing throughout history. This diversity is played out in the progression of both continuity and discontinuity in the various dispensations of divine history all to the glory of God.

However, beyond this I would say that a genuine commitment to grammatical-historical interpretation precedes one's recognition of the dispensational structure of biblical history and that the distinction between Israel and the Church informs the content of much of that structure. Thus, I would still prefer Ryrie's definition of dispensationalism, even if it needs refinement as I have argued elsewhere.¹¹ But Master's idea that dispensational distinctions are the major key to Bible interpretation does serve a purpose at the level of theological integration across authors and

Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelin, Studies in American Religion, Vol. 77 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 61-73.

⁹ See Carl Sanders, "The Myth of Normative Dispensationalism" (Unpublished ETS paper, Danvers, 1999). It seems to me that if the same focus on discontinuity were applied to all of church history, I wonder if we could define anything such as orthodox Christianity.

¹⁰ Note that it is not a matter of whether a dispensationalist glorifies God in his personal life more than the covenantalist. Neither is it a matter of whether each theological system incorporates the feature of God's glory.

¹¹ Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism" *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 5-36.

history once the dispensational structure is recognized. This may be played out in Bible interpretation as nothing more than the willingness to let distinctions stand in the light of the progress of revelation without any forced theological unity. I think that was Ryrie's concern although it was voiced in the context of apprehension over Reformed theology's forced soteriological unity via the covenant of grace.

I do not think the Dispensational Study Group has exhausted all the necessary debate on many of the important issues that have consumed us such as the nature of typology, the use of the OT in the NT, the nature of metaphor (as John discusses), and others. I hope we will not come to the place any time soon when we believe that we have said all there is to say and move on to something else. Dispensationalists can make some strong contributions to current debates that go beyond our own traditional-progressive back and forth (although we still need to continue that dialog). For example, has anyone noticed that the open view of God is utterly incompatible with a dispensational understanding of Scripture? Has anyone noticed preterism in some of the open theists? Has anyone noticed that the belief that God can change his mind, so that some prophecies were wrong when spoken to the original audience, not only undermines the doctrine of inerrancy, but also makes dispensationalism utterly impossible? I've heard precious little dispensational response to the open view of God that is not mainstream evangelical. What about those traits that are unique to dispensationalism that might force all evangelicals to pause and think about some things?

I will say this about the Dispensational Study Group. The two topics that have drawn me back to it with the greatest excitement are hermeneutics and social action. I want to continue to deal with the first because it is where we live and struggle the most (it is also where we have the most fun, in my opinion). It is the heart and soul of present discussions. That topic will more than any other determine the future of dispensationalism in particular and evangelicalism in general. Although we may need a temporary break from such things from time to time, I think we all see the need for further discussion. On the other hand, the level of interest in social action as a topic has been somewhat disappointing. I say this as a traditional dispensationalist. Should there not be a practical theology that flows out of our dispensational theological system that makes a difference for the whole person, including the preaching of the gospel of eternal life and the recognition that to love others requires involvement in their lives at several points? Perhaps the group needs to address more aggressively Darrell Bock's proposal for purpose-directed theology, bouncing his ideas off of all strands of dispensationalism as well as other evangelicals.¹² I for one will not be inclined to stay interested in the Dispensational Study Group if it becomes ethereal and does not address everyday issues of life that really matter.

Finally, as we look ahead, let's also look over our shoulders. The main contribution of the dispensational movement within the history of Christianity seems to me to be the revival of belief in God's promises to *national* Israel, which has fed the diversity side of the debate.¹³ In the

¹² Darrell Bock, "The Purpose Driven ETS: Where Should We Go? A Look at Jesus Studies and Other Example Cases" JETS 45 (March 2002): 3-33 and *Purpose-Directed Theology: Getting Our Priorities Right in Evangelical Conversations* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

¹³ Some traditionalists have criticized progressives too strongly by calling them amillennialists. I have publicly defended progressives against that charge on numerous occasions although I have certainly been critical of them on many other points. One of my students accused me of being a progressive dispensationalist because I was unclear (?) and was too irenic with progressives. Unlike some of my traditionalist brothers, I still refer to progressives as dispensationalists and will continue to do so as long as they have a national, political, ethnic future for Israel on earth in God's coming kingdom. However, we all have the right to ask questions about where theological systems will lead. It is not pejorative to wonder out loud if progressives are on a slippery slope on their

early nineteenth century, such insights appeared fairly new and enticing. Today, perhaps they have become worn and old and some tire of them. Hopefully, we will not become like the Athenians who “used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new” (Acts 17:21). I find it interesting that much of evangelicalism is looking back in order to go forward. Many are looking for answers to our postmodern culture based upon the early Church’s understanding of Scripture in an attempt to give answers that are not simply Enlightenment driven.¹⁴ As I stated earlier, progressive dispensationalists have driven us back to the Christological focus of the Niagara fathers.¹⁵ I would like to include the Darbyite/Ryrie axis in our backward look. Perhaps answers for the future of dispensationalism lie, at least partly, in its past as well.

way to abandonment of the pre-tribulational rapture or toward a possible synthesis with various brands of historical and covenant premillennialism or any host of concerns. That is the nature of thinking through possible ramifications. Traditionalists must be given their say about their concerns just as progressives have the right to defend their developments within the tradition. In my opinion, both sides have too quickly accused the other side of being pejorative.

¹⁴ For example, see Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) and the associated series edited by Thomas Oden (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, also by IVP).

¹⁵ See Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search For Definition” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 18 and “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue” in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 382-83.