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APOLOGETICS, DISPENSATIONAL

DISPENSATIONAL APOLOGETICS is based on a dispensational system of interpretation, or a dispensational hermeneutic. Some dispensationalists, however, speak of dispensationalism as a theological construct, calling it a dispensational theology. But because dispensationalism as a conceptual system does not relate to every area of theology, most would rather identify it as a system of biblical interpretation.

In his classic book *Dispensationalism*, Charles Ryrie (pp. 38-42) lays out what he feels are the three essentials that form the basis for the system: (1) A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct. (2) This distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation. And (3) the underlying purpose of God in the world is the display of His own glory (doxological), not the salvation of men (soteriological).

Feinberg (pp. 71-85) follows in like manner. Having determined several notions that are not the essence of dispensationalism, Feinberg goes on to identify six different items that he feels are both distinctive to dispensationalism and at its core: (1) multiple senses of terms such as "Jew," "seed of Abraham," etc. (Romans 4:9-11; 1 Peter 2; etc.); (2) hermeneutics (a consistent, literal or normal historical, grammatical, and literary interpretation of the Bible); (3) covenant promises to Israel as unconditional and eternal; (4) a distinctive future for ethnic Israel (the church neither replacing or continuing Israel); (5) the church as a distinctive organism with a unique "in Christ" position; and (6) a philosophy of history (the multifaceted aspects of God's workings in history). With these logically connected six facets, the dispensationalist moves toward more discontinuity between the testaments than continuity.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Theology is a developmental task. Since

any system of theology is *man's best attempt* at collecting, arranging, and explaining the revelation of God in a coherent way, it must by its very nature be an ongoing and developmental undertaking. Therefore, like all other current theological systems or hermeneutical refinements being articulated in recent years (such as Covenant theology, etc.), dispensationalism is also developmental. But that does not mean that it has no historical roots. In fact, there are historical references to what has been now systematized into modern-day dispensationalism that go back in a basic way to the early church fathers and following (Ryrie, pp. 69-72). For example, Justin Martyr (110-165) held to a concept of differing programs of God (*Dialogue with Trypho*). Irenaeus (130-200) spoke of dispensations (*Against Heresies*). Clement of Alexandria (150-220) distinguished three patriarchal dispensations as well as the Mosaic. Augustine also reflects some early dispensational concepts in his writings (*To Marcellinus*). Several others also spoke of basic schemes reflecting an early dispensationalism, among them such men as Joachim of Fiore (1135-1202), John Bale (1535-1575), Pierre Poirer (1646-1719), John Edwards (1637-1716), and Isaac Watts (1674-1748).

The most important factor, however, is whether dispensationalism conforms to the biblical revelation. While recognizing the so-called discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New, dispensationalists also recognize the continuity that exists between the two testaments. For example, the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) rests on the following fundamentals (cf. Ryrie, pp. 115-17, 120-21):

- (1) *The need for salvation* is the fact that, in the sight of an absolutely holy and righteous God, all persons are sinners (Psalm 51:5; 58:3; Habakkuk 1:13; Romans 3:9ff., 23).
- (2) *The basis of salvation* in every age is the death of Christ (Acts 14:16; 17:30; Romans 3:25; Hebrews 9:15).
- (3) *The means of salvation* in every age is the grace of an all-merciful God (Ephesians 2:1-9; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Peter 1:3).
- (4) *The requirement for salvation* in every age is faith, not works (Genesis 15:6; Romans 3:21-24; Ephesians 2:8-9; Hebrews

impermeability of the Earth (Jeremiah 31:37; cf. 33:21); (6) the regularity of the planetary and tidal motions (Jeremiah 31:35-36); and (7) the fixity of the earth's daily rotation (Jeremiah 33:20-21, 25-26; cf. Psalm 89:37).

While emphasizing a consistent literal method of interpretation, the dispensationalist does not ignore the figures of speech in the Bible. When covenant theologians accuse dispensationalists of also interpreting the Bible in a nonliteral sense because of the way they interpret figures of speech, they are confusing two fundamental issues. Feinberg (p. 74) explains this confusion on the part of the Covenant theologian: "...the objection fails to recognize the difference between *kinds* of language (figures of speech, plain language, e.g.) and *methods* of interpreting language." So then, while the nondispensationalist may shift his hermeneutical approach when he comes to interpreting eschatology, the dispensationalist is committed to a consistent, literal interpretation of the entire Bible.

In conclusion, dispensational apologetics, deriving its existence from a dispensational system of hermeneutics, is anchored to two apologetic factors: (1) a *consistent* literal, normal interpretation of the Bible; and therefore, (2) a distinction between Israel and the church—in the past, the present, and the future. Thus, dispensational apologetics provides the best approach to both the unity and the diversity of the Bible. And in so doing, God is glorified to the maximum degree (cf. Romans 11:25-36).

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dispensationalist does an exegetical study of the term "Israel" in the New Testament, he finds 17 uses by Paul (11 of those in Romans), 12 in Matthew, 12 in Luke, 15 in Acts, two in Mark, four in John, three in Hebrews, and three in Revelation—all contextually referring to the ethnic people of Israel.

This leads to another key principle in dispensationalism: the unilateral, unconditional, and therefore eternal nature of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant is unilateral in the sense that God Himself initiated the covenant with Abraham and his descendants, binding Himself alone for its ultimate and final fulfillment (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; Hebrews 6:13-18). Likewise, the Abrahamic Covenant is unconditional in the sense that for its ultimate and final fulfillment, God required only faith on the part of the recipients (cf. Genesis 15:1-6ff.; Hebrews 11:1-40). And finally, the Abrahamic Covenant is eternal in the sense that God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that His covenant with them would grant them a specific land (amplified in the Mosaic Land Covenant in Deuteronomy 30), descendants (amplified in the Royal Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89; and 1 Chronicles 17), and blessing (amplified in the Messianic New Covenant in Jeremiah 31; Isaiah 59; Ezekiel 16; 37)—all granted to them "forever" (cf. Genesis 13:15; 17:7-8, 13, 19; 48:4; also 1 Chronicles 17:16; Psalm 89:28-29, 36-37; 105:8-10; Isaiah 24:5; 55:3; 66:8; Jeremiah 32:44; 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26; Hebrews 6:13-18).

In fact, the perpetuity of the Abrahamic Covenant is so basic to any biblical understanding of God's covenant program that He binds Himself to its ultimate and final fulfillment through the following guarantees: (1) the immutable character of God Himself (Malachi 3:6); (2) the inviolability of the covenant and oath of God (Leviticus 26:40-45; cf. Psalm 89:28-37; Galatians 3:15-22; Hebrews 6:13-18); (3) the irrevocability of the gifts and calling of God (Romans 11:1-2, 25-29); (4) the immunity of the earth from another universal flood (Isaiah 54:7-10; cf. Genesis 9:8-17); (5) the immeasurability of the heavens and the

from the OT is passe for the Christian or (2) everything that the NT has not *changed* in principle still remains in force for the Christian.

The dispensationalist opts for the second method. Thus, it is not necessary for God to repeat everything from the Old Testament in the New for something to be authoritative for the New Covenant believer (for example, the sexual morals laid out in the Levitical laws; Leviticus 18; the land inheritance promised to the patriarchs and their descendants; Genesis 12-13; 15; 17; 22; Leviticus 26:40-45; Psalm 89:28-37; Amos 9:11-13). In other words, as Kaiser (p. 100) asserts, "only where the text itself (in either Testament) signals the reader that the author clearly intended the material to have a limited application or a built-in obsolescence can we dare to conclude that the material in that section is discontinuous and of no permanent or literal authority." And when it comes to the nation of Israel and God's eternal plan for her, no such text exists in the Bible.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

The unity and diversity of the dispensational system is founded on its consistent, normative, and literal approach to interpreting the Bible. The operative term here is the word *consistent*. While nondispensational systems such as Covenant theology also seek to apply a literal and normative interpretation of the Bible, they are not consistent in the hermeneutical task. They interpret biblical passages on the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) in a literal and normative way, but deviate from this approach when it comes to the doctrine of last things (eschatology). Enns (p. 513) summarizes dispensationalism in the following words: "Dispensationalists arrive at their system of interpretation through two primary principles: (1) maintaining a consistently literal method of interpretation, and (2) maintaining a distinction between Israel and the church." The latter, the distinction between Israel and the church, is the result of the former, a *consistently* literal method of interpretation. So when the

11:6). (5) *The object of faith* in every age is God (Genesis 15:6; John 11:2; 3:16-18; Hebrews 11:6). And (6) *the content of faith* changes according to progressive revelation (Genesis 3:15; 9:26; 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-15; 35:9-35; 49:10; 2 Samuel 7:4-7; John 3:16-18).

Dispensationalists also recognize other continuities between the Old Testament and the New, with *varying shades of commonality* (cf. Romans 4:23-25; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 3:7-19)—for example: (1) a common Trinitarian outlook; (2) a common theology proper, with God as Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator of the ages; (3) a common Messianic/Christological focus; (4) a common Spirit of God experience; (5) common elements in the human condition as sinners in need of salvation; (6) a common salvation initiated, nurtured, and consummated by God; (7) a common relationship with God as the people of God; (8) a common morality based on the character and nature of God; (9) a common source of evil; and (10) a common goal of history with God dwelling with His people forever.

UNCONDITIONAL PROMISES

God has committed Himself to Israel in His elective promises and purposes in the Old Testament, and He will not—indeed, He cannot—retract them. As Feinberg (p. 76) asserts, "Progress of revelation cannot cancel unconditional promises... If the NT explicitly rejects an OT institution, etc., it is canceled. But if God makes a point once (the OT), why must he repeat in the NT for it still to be true and operative?" Kaiser (p. 147) reminds us there are only two basic methods to choose from when the Christian is deciding what is directly and authoritatively applicable from the Old Testament.

Despite all the positive affirmations about the formal principle of the authority of the OT for the Christian, the material question eventually reduces itself to one of the following methodologies: (1) everything the NT does not *repeat*