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EXCELLENCIES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

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As a system of Biblical interpretation, Dispensationalism has been controversial ever since it became popular during the nineteenth century. Consequently, throughout the years it has been misrepresented by its opponents, and even misunderstood by many who have professed to embrace it. The criticism of this school has been intensified to the point that a volume published in 1958 classifies the dispensational movement among the "isms" facing the Church.¹ During that same year, Norman Kraus, an anti-dispensationalist, wrote that "many conservative writers have called dispensationalism a heresy."²

That many men have carried the dispensational method of interpretation to an unwarranted extreme is undeniable. To any clear thinking person, however, this would be an indictment upon man who is a creature of extremes, and not upon the school. In spite of the objections raised against Dispensationalism (all of which have been adequately answered), it is this writer's opinion that a sane dispensational approach to Scripture is still the best method of understanding the complex plan of God. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to point out what are considered the major excellencies of this system. It is believed that these commendable features argue very cogently against the claims of its critics, and establish its right to stand above other methods of interpretation. Those who speak so disparagingly of this movement apparently overlook, or consider of little consequence, or are not familiar with the following excellencies of Dispensationalism:

It Harmonizes Scripture

Passages which appear contradictory can be harmonized by this school because of its sound hermeneutical basis, and its recognition of the different dispensations in accord with progressive revelation. Employing consistently the literal, historical, and grammatical method of interpretation, and by observing carefully the full context of a passage, the interpreter is able to explain a text according to the natural meaning of its words, and in the light of its proper dispensational setting. This approach enables one to discern correctly the distinct rules of life governing man's relationship to God. Law and grace are not confused; Israel and the Church are kept distinct. While acknowledging these dispensational distinctives, it is to be pointed out that all dispensationalists abide by the divine dictum that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God (i.e., God-breathed), and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:16, 17). The ensuing examples demonstrate how the dispensational method of interpretation harmonizes Scripture.

(a) Two diametrically opposed commands are found in Genesis 4:15 and 9:6. In the first case God promised to take vengeance on anyone who might attempt to kill Cain, who had murdered Abel his brother. Thus, divine protection was granted to the first murderer. But in the latter instance the Lord God charged man with the solemn responsibility to enforce the death penalty in case of murder. Obviously, the apparent conflict in these passages disappears when it is recognized that these commands were issued in different dispensations.

It is to be observed that man had no external law to prevent him from committing murder during the Dispensation of Conscience (from Gen 3:7 to 8:19). The only fear of reprisal came from the possibility that another might take vengeance upon the murderer (Gen. 4:14-15, 23-24). However, since this particular freedom was so abused that by the time of Noah the earth was filled with violence (Gen. 6:11-13), then God, according to His plan decreed in eternity past, initiated capital punishment in the subsequent dispensation to restrain man from wilfully taking human life. It is note-worthy that this divine command has never been abrogated (Rom. 13:4). Those who are determined to rid our society of capital punishment would do well to observe Holy Writ on this matter.

(b) Many commands were given to the children of Israel under law which are no longer binding. To cite a few, in Numbers 15:38 Jehovah instructed Moses to command the Israelites to make fringes in the borders of their garments, and to sew ribbands of blue upon them. Deuteronomy 16:16 declared that all the males had to go up to Jerusalem three times a year. The elders of a city were commanded to wash their hands over a slain heifer to exonerate a community in the case of a mysterious murder committed within its precincts (Deut. 21:1-9). Deuteronomy 25:5 stated that a brother was obligated to marry his widowed sister-in-law if his brother died childless.

These and many more commands are no longer in force, and no one in his right mind attempts to perpetuate them. Why? How is this abstention justified? The answer is that these were some of the commands which were given to the children of Israel to serve as their guide for life during the Dispensation of Law (from Ex. 19 to Jn. 19:30). Grace replaced law as the rule of life following the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17; Rom. 6:14).

(c) As in the Old Testament, it is also true of many passages found in the New Testament. The dispensational distinctive must be observed to do justice to their interpretation. For example, difficulty faces the interpreter in Luke 10:4 and 22:36 where Jesus gave His disciples conflicting orders. Sending out the seventy in Luke 10:4, our Lord instructed them, "Carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes: and salute no man by the way." Later on, in Luke 22:36, He told His disciples, "... , But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment and buy one." This problem is solved by observing that in the first case Jesus sent His disciples to offer the kingdom to Israel in view of the immediate presence of the King (Luke 10:8-12); but since Israel had rejected the offer, and the death of Christ was just a few days away (Luke 22:34), their instructions were changed because of the new dispensation which would soon begin. The absence of the King in this age required His servants to be equipped both materially and spiritually as they embarked into a hostile world to represent Him.

The same is true with reference to Matthew 10:5 and 28:19, 20, where Jesus gave His disciples conflicting commands. In the first case He gave them explicit instructions not to go unto the Gentiles, but only to the house of Israel (Matt. 10:6), while later our Lord commanded them to go into all the world (Matt. 28:19, 20). The interpretation of these passages is made relatively easy by observing the definite change in dispensations, for between these different commands occurred the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Israel had rejected her King (Jn. 19:15), and the fulfilment of the promised kingdom was now in abeyance (Matt. 21:43) until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in (Acts 1:6, 7; 15:13-17; Rom. 11:25-29). Jesus, therefore, commanded His disciples to go into all the world to proclaim the good news of salvation (Rom. 1:16, 17). The Dispensation of Law had terminated, and the Dispensation of Grace had begun (Jn. 1:17, Rom. 6:14).

Another problem text is Matthew 24:20 where Jesus said: "But pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day." How can this verse be harmonized with Colossians 2:16 which declares emphatically, "let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holy day, . . ." The answer is quite simple for the dispensationalist. In the Matthew passage, which is part of the Olivet Discourse, Christ was speaking of the Jews who would be living under the conditions of law during Daniel's seventieth week, while Paul, in Colossians, was writing to members of the Church living in the Dispensation of Grace.

Along with the afore-mentioned problem texts attention is called to the fact that the dispensational approach enables one to explain adequately the varied ministry of the Holy Spirit. It also helps the interpreter to treat satisfactorily the problems in the Book of Acts which occurred during the period of transition in the infant Church. Moreover, this school demonstrates capably the true progress in divine revelation. Its dispensational divisions and distinctives are in accord with the established fact that divine revelation was given in a fragmentary manner (Heb. 1:1-2a). Finally, since Dispensationalism observes the distinct covenants found in the Old Testament, it has little difficulty in explaining satisfactorily Hebrews 8:7-13, which teaches that the New Covenant will replace the First Covenant.

It Explains History Adequately

The course of history is an insoluble enigma without rhyme or reason to many scholars who represent various branches of learning. Such is true because they have attempted to establish a philosophy of history without considering seriously the facts which are available in Holy Writ. While it is true that Scripture per se is not a philosophy of history, it nevertheless contains the only sane and adequate explanation for history. Unlike the vain and circular reasoning engaged in by many erstwhile and contemporary philosophers and historians, the Word of God speaks eloquently and accurately upon the history of man. It traces the broad outline of history with amazing precision from its beginning to its consummation, and submits the only satisfactory answers for the many baffling questions relative to the origin, purpose, and destiny of man. This is obviously true because history is merely the unfolding of God's plan and purpose delineated in Scripture.

It is presumed that all conservative theologians concur with the above generalizations. Unfortunately, however, all do not agree upon the method by which history is being disclosed nor the manner of its consummation. We believe that Dispensationalism alone is in keeping with divine revelation, for it explains intelligently and satisfactorily the progress and termination of history.

This is sustained by the fact that Dispensationalism unfolds the course of history in a logical, chronological, and systematic way. Beyond this, in view of its consistent literal method of interpretation, Dispensationalism proclaims that history will be climaxed by unprecedented glory within the realm of time. Its long and arduous course will terminate with the establishment of the millennial kingdom of Christ (Rev. 19:11-20:6), and it will be then that man will have every advantage and opportunity in an ideal environment to realize his full potential in a world of sense experience.

It must be borne in mind that this optimism is a result of the hermeneutics employed by this school, and is not a figment of the imagination. Since a literal interpretation of Scripture confirms this doctrine, it is right to call this a Biblical optimism. Let it also be understood that dispensationalists by no means minimize the glory of the eternal state by stressing the magnificence

of the millennial dispensation. To the contrary, all of this persuasion agree that for redeemed man his full and final glory awaits the conclusion of history. It will, indeed, be consummated beyond time (Rev. 21 and 22). I concur, however, with Alva J. McClain who has reasoned that if man under God has been able to make some strides in alleviating human suffering, and in making this world a better place for man to live in, then why

should there not be an age when all wars will be stopped, all diseases cured, all the injustices of government rooted out, and a full measure of years added to human life? Why should there not be an age in which all such unrealized and worthwhile dreams of humanity will at last come true on earth? If there be a God in heaven, if the life which He created on the earth is worth-while, and not something evil per se, then there ought to be in history some worthy consummation of its long and arduous course.³

It is essential at this point to stress that the dispensationalist's doctrine of a future millennium differs radically from that of postmillennialism. The latter school envisions a golden age in the future that will come into existence when the world has been Christianized by the preaching of the gospel. J. Marcellus Kik, a contemporary advocate of this position, says that "the evangelical postmillennialist looks for a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies of a glorious age of the Church upon earth through the preaching of the true Gospel under the power of the Holy Spirit."⁴ Such a doctrine fails to conform to the facts of history, and cannot be sustained by sound exegesis. The Bible teaches that this golden age will be established by the Lord Jesus Christ when He returns to the earth (Rev. 19:11-20:6).

It is also to be noted that there is an unbridgeable chasm existing between premillennialism and amillennialism with regard to the climax of history. Amillennialism fails to show the proper progress and development of history, and proposes an unwarranted pessimistic goal for it. This is true because it teaches that the Church is the Kingdom of God upon the earth, that good and evil will continue to the end of history, and then God will intervene with judgment and establish the eternal state. Such a doctrine offers no hope for mankind within the realm of time. In view of this dismal prospect, John Bright, a spokesman for this school, said truthfully that "the path of the future is indeed dark, and the end of it may not be seen."⁵

Amillennialism, then, teaches that the only hope for man lies in a future which is beyond history in the realm of eternity. It is rather superfluous to say that such a doctrine is diametrically opposed to Scripture, and fails to offer a rational explanation for the meaning and purpose of history. Because of its dark, pessimistic goal for history, McClain has observed wisely that

history becomes the preparatory "vestibule" of eternity, and not a very rational vestibule at that. It is a narrow corridor, cramped and dark, a kind of "waiting room," leading nowhere within the historical process, but only fit to be abandoned at last for an ideal existence on another plane. Such a view of history seems unduly pessimistic, in the light of Biblical revelation.⁶

We concur with Charles C. Ryrie that "in relation to goal in a proper philosophy of history only dispensationalism with its consummating dispensation of the millennium offers a satisfactory system."⁷

Its Biblical Basis Is Conducive To A Constructive Influence In The Christian Life.

This statement has been made with the knowledge that opponents of Dispensationalism believe that it is a system which has been "a reactionary movement from its inception," and is therefore open "to the charge of escapism and obscurantism."⁸ It is agreed that many who have professed to embrace Dispensationalism have gone to unwarranted extremes in some of their viewpoints, and have thus done great harm to the movement. Nevertheless, we maintain that if its doctrines are properly understood and obeyed, they will have a constructive influence in the believer's life. We hasten to add that whenever enlightened men bring disgrace upon a system which is Biblically sound, then there is something radically wrong with them, and not the school which they profess to represent. To such the admonition of James is indeed applicable, "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves" (James 1:22).

It is indeed strange to discover how blinded anti-dispensationalists appear to be to their faulty logic! Has it never occurred to these men that if their standard of determining the validity of a system was pressed consistently, it would invalidate not only Protestantism but Christianity itself? Such is true because there are many professing believers who bring disgrace upon Christianity due to their inconsistencies and peculiar viewpoints. This, however, is not a reflection upon the truth of God's Word, but upon the individual himself. Surely, all scholars should be cognizant of the fact that the validity of a system is not determined by tradition, history, or what some of its professing members have done or purport to believe, but upon the basis of whether or not its doctrines are sanctioned by Scripture. And here we maintain that the overall structure of Dispensationalism is sound, and is sustained by true Biblical exegesis.

Because of its adequate hermeneutical basis, we contend that the dispensational approach to the Word of God enables the Christian to attain to a large measure a correct knowledge in the areas of theology, bibliology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. It is asserted further that such is indispensable to normal Christian growth. Therefore, if this knowledge is integrated into the daily walk of the believer, it is certain to result in the following:

(1) It will promote fellowship with God and with other believers. Every Christian should have this goal as a daily objective, for it is in harmony with the teaching of Scripture (I Jn. 1:3). Since believers are imperfect, their fellowship will be strained at times and limited by their own shortcomings and inadequate knowledge of God's Word. True Dispensationalism does allow fellowship with all born-again believers within the confines of these limitations, and reasonable disagreements with brethren in certain areas of Scripture are permissible without severing fellowship. Indeed, the words of Augustine are always in vogue: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Furthermore, the grounds for discontinuance of fellowship are stated emphatically and precisely in Holy Writ (cf. Rom. 16:17, 18; I Cor. 5; II Cor. 6:14; Eph. 5:11; I Tim. 6:3-5; Titus 3:10; II John 9-11).

(2) It will enable the believer to discern correctly between law and grace. It is a foregone conclusion that no Christian can experience normal growth who is confused in the areas of law and grace. Many untaught believers today are seeking holiness by attempting to live under some form of law. To such the rebuke of Paul continues to speak, "Are ye so foolish? having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). And, "He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the

hearing of faith?" (Gal. 3:5). Without controversy, the Book of Galatians is the strongest polemic against placing believers under any form of legalism, for Paul said, "Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4).

We believe that Dispensationalism distinguishes correctly between law and grace, for it accepts the facts of Scripture which demonstrate clearly that the law was given to the children of Israel at Mt. Sinai to serve as their guide for life (Ex. 19:5-6), and it terminated with the death of Christ on Calvary (Col. 2:14). It also teaches that the believer is declared to be dead to the law (Rom. 7:4); victory over the sin nature, therefore, cannot be attained by striving in the weakness of the flesh to keep a certain form of legalism. Contrarily, such has already been provided for in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, and is to be obtained by faith (Rom. 6:1-11; 8:1-4; II Cor. 5:7; Gal. 2:20). Thus, it is only when the Christian frees himself from all forms of legalism, and begins to apply by faith the truth of these passages that this victory can be realized.

(3) It will enable the believer to understand to a large measure the plan of God. The dispensationalist is able to look backward and see the marvel of God's plan as it has been unfolded thus far. Even more thrilling, he is able to look forward with some degree of confidence and know what the future holds for him and this world. Such knowledge is not intended to inflate man's ego, or merely to satisfy his curious nature, but is granted to condition the conduct of the believer here and now (Rev. 1:3; 22:10-12; I Jn. 3:1-3).

Apart from acting as a purifying agent, this understanding of God's program functions as a stabilizer to the Christian, for it enables him to remain calm in the midst of world tension and turmoil. He is able to view the future with optimism in the light of the rapture of the Church (I Thess. 4:13-18) and the return of Jesus Christ after the period of tribulation to establish His millennial kingdom (Rev. 19:11-20:6).

(4) It will provide the believer with the proper perspective for the Church. A true Scriptural distinction between Israel and the Church enables the Christian to understand the place and purpose of these distinct redeemed groups in the program of God. This knowledge, if applied, leads each member of the Body of Christ to orient his life to conform to the mission of the Church. What is the true mission of the Church? According to Clarence B. Bass, "The mission of the church to the world is to reflect the ethics and ideals of Jesus, through personal salvation, into the culture of society so that the culture may be changed."⁹

That the Church is to reflect the moral glory of Jesus Christ to this present evil age is not questioned; but to make this the mission of the Church so that culture may be changed is, in my judgment, missing the real purpose for the Body of Christ. It is clear from Acts 15:14 that God is taking out a people for His name in this dispensation. Therefore, it is quite apparent from Scripture that the primary task of the Church in the world is to witness for Christ so that this Body might be completed (Acts 1:8). The Church is to evangelize and make disciples of new believers (Matt. 28:19, 20). To be sure, cultural improvements will be a by-product whenever the true mission of the Church is fulfilled.

It is to be observed that dispensationalists are accused of caring little for the immediate material and physical needs of man, because of their strong emphasis upon the work of evangelization. To illustrate, Kraus writes that Dispensationalism "is not concerned with the life of the Church in

this world as such. Much less is it to be concerned with the world."¹⁰ Edward J. Carnell, in his caricature of fundamentalism, which he obviously equates with Dispensationalism, says:

Since the task of general charity is apparently unconnected with the work of saving souls, it rates low on the scale of fundamentalism. Handing out tracts is much more important than founding a hospital. As a result, unbelievers are often more sensitive to mercy, and bear a heavier load of justice, than those who come in the name of Christ. The fundamentalist is not disturbed by this, of course, for he is busy painting "Jesus Saves" on rocks in a public park.¹¹

That this may be true of some who have professed to embrace Dispensationalism is not doubted; however, it is not a fair appraisal of the teachings of normal Dispensationalism. This school teaches that a true disciple of Christ will minister both to the spiritual and physical needs of man, for he will seek to serve our Lord in word and in deed. Scripture is quite clear on this matter, for John wrote, "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue: but in deed and in truth" (1 Jn. 3:18).

All learned dispensationalists agree that ministering to the temporal needs of men, insofar as it is possible, is a counterpart to the spiritual ministry, and is to be used as a means to an end, namely, to win men to Christ. Furthermore, that dispensationalists by and large do not minimize the importance of meeting the physical needs of mankind is confirmed by the missionary statistics of their program both at home and abroad. It would be an act of courtesy on the part of anti-dispensationalists to admit that those who profess to be dispensationalists are not representing the true position of this school if they oppose this ministry.

It Provides An Adequate Defense Against The Errors of Liberal Theology.

Since the theology of Dispensationalism is a product of the literal, grammatical, and historical method of Biblical interpretation, and because this school embraces without reservation the plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture, it naturally presents an impregnable defense against the inroads and advances of Modernism. Its insistence that every area of the Word must be interpreted literally (with due recognition given to the various literary devices) is diametrically opposed to the liberal approach, which is tantamount to a denial of Scripture. In the light of this fact, these two systems are antipodal in their teachings, for Dispensationalism merely reaffirms what the Bible teaches clearly, while Modernism consistently negates this same teaching.

Dispensationalism affirms that the Bible is the Word of God from Genesis through Revelation, and, as such, is devoid of error and contradiction. It is the only repository of divine truth, containing the complete and final revelation of God to man, serving alone as the infallible, authoritative guide in all spiritual matters. Thus, it is the only safe criterion by which man can measure his understanding of such vital subjects as God, creation, life, sin, righteousness, death, and eternity. Therefore, the Bible has objective value as it stands, the written Word of the living God.

The liberal theologian, on the other hand, declares that the Bible merely contains the Word of God. He insists that it is filled with myths, legends, errors, and contradictions. Human reasoning has been substituted for the authority of Scripture, and the Bible has been reduced to the level of other literature. Furthermore, having set aside divine revelation and the supernatural

character of Christianity, Modernism stripped God of His transcendent glory, deified man, and forged into its theological foundation the philosophies of humanism, materialism, and empiricism.

It is generally agreed that the first inroads of Liberalism in the church were attributed to the so-called spiritualizing method of interpretation. This baneful device is an outgrowth of the allegorical method traced back to the Jews in Alexandria about 160 B.C. These Jews were led to this eclectic method of Biblical interpretation due to the strong influence exerted upon them by the dualism of Platonic philosophy. It was later accepted and developed somewhat by Philo (25 B.C.-50 A.D.), the noted Jewish philosopher. This method entered the Christian church through key members of the school of Alexandria. The same Platonic error led such men as Clement of Alexandria (150-220 A.D.), Origen (185-254 A.D.), and Dionysius (190-265 A.D.) to embrace this method of Biblical interpretation. It was later adopted to a certain extent by Augustine (354-430 A.D.), and through his influence became a hermeneutical guide for both Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians.

We concur with John F. Walvoord who said, "The introduction of the spiritualizing method in Bibliology has opened the door for every variety of false doctrine according to the whims of the interpreter."¹² Modernism, which traces its history back through the schools of Higher Criticism, German Rationalism, French Skepticism, and English Deism, has been encouraged by this method to practically deny the totality of Scripture. Therefore, it must be admitted that the consistent literal method of interpretation is the only safeguard against the destructive encroachments of Modernism.

In conclusion it is noteworthy that the bibliology of Dispensationalism argues cogently against the bewildering teachings of so-called Neo-orthodoxy. Since the postulates of Modernism, based primarily upon the doctrine of immanence, have proved to be woefully inadequate and impractical, it has been giving ground rapidly to this school with its various cognomens such as the Theology of Crisis, of Paradox, of Dialectic, etc.

This system of theology, which traces its origin to Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher, and has been promoted and systematized by such men as Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Reinhold Niebuhr, features the principles of Kierkegaard's existentialism and Hegel's dialecticism, and purports to be a return to the Bible as the source and norm of religious truth. For this reason, it is said that "the designation which undoubtedly best conforms to the intention of these theologians themselves, is that of Kattenbusch, i.e., the Theology of the Word."¹³

It is quite clear, however, that this system, like Modernism, denies the literality of Scripture. In its attempt to perceive spiritual truth existentially-dialectically and not objectively-historically, it has followed the course of its predecessor by teaching that Holy Writ

is full of errors, contradictions, erroneous opinions concerning all kinds of human, natural, historical situations. It contains many contradictions in the report about Jesus' life, it is overgrown with legendary material even in the New Testament.¹⁴

It says further that "if we confuse a 'witness' to truth with a corpus of infallible revealed propositions, we convert a profound understanding of Scripture into a distressing literalism."¹⁵

In the light of the error and confusion being propagated by the complex and somewhat irrational doctrines of this school, it is quite evident that the only sure defense against its damaging influence is a return to the literal interpretation of the Bible. Those who object to the literalism of Dispensationalism would do well to keep in mind that it alone provides an adequate defense against the errors of Modernism and Neo-Orthodoxy which have engulfed many of the once leading conservative institutions and denominations.

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