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Contemporary Dispensational Thought

by Robert Saucy

Any discussion of contemporary dispensationalism must recognize at the outset that there exists within this broad theological school a considerable variety of interpretive opinion. From the specific interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount to the relation of the Church age to the Old Testament Messianic promises and many lesser issues, those who fall within "dispensationalism" arrive at differing exegetical conclusions. While the pre-tribulational rapture of the church has traditionally been universal among dispensationalists, even that is being called into question by Robert Gundry and those who follow his posttribulational rapture position which it is claimed "accords well with a scripturally measured dispensationalism."¹ All of this is simply to say that caution must be exercised in the use of theological labels. There is obviously a common denominator which lumps together adherents of a particular theological system, but there are sufficient distinctions to warrant questions before uniformly applying a detailed system to any particular individual.

Basic to all dispensationalism is a certain emphasis on the recognition of differing economies in the outworking of God's program of human history. It is from this that the name "dispensationalism" is derived since the central meaning of the word "dispensation" (Greek, *oikonomia*) involves the management or administering of the affairs of a household.² Many ancient and modern theologians also acknowledge the fact that God has administered His historical program by different economies, so that it is not simply the recognition of changes throughout history, but the significance and perhaps one might say the depth of the distinction that distinguishes dispensationalism from non-dispensational systems. In particular it is the distinction between Israel and the church which all recognize as the essential mark of dispensationalism.

Most students of history point to John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) and the Plymouth Brethren as the prime movers in systematization and promotion of what has become known as dispensationalism. Darby's thought in this area issued from his reaction to contemporary organized Christianity which at that time was allied to the state in England. He saw in the New Testament a church which was spiritually united with the heavenly Christ and quite different from the outward, more worldly Christendom of his day. His emphasis on the believer's exalted heavenly position in union with Christ, and the absolute grace of that status due to the finished work of Christ led him to develop a considerable contrast between the New Testament picture of the church and Israel. The Scriptures portrayed Israel as having earthly promises and living under an economy somehow involving law, while the Church although existing on earth was a heavenly body which lived under an economy of pure grace. From the evidence of these differences there developed within dispensationalism a tendency to structure history around the various different economies seen in the other portions of biblical history. The most popular form sees seven distinguishable administrations under which humanity lives throughout the whole of history. By distinguishable it is not meant that the economies are totally distinct, only that some distinct change has been brought about by the revelatory action of God which changes the conditions under which men and women live in obedience to God. An example of such a change is readily seen in the command to take human life which came only after the Flood and in relation to the fact that God had determined not to destroy humankind again by a flood (Gen. 8:20–9:7).

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The focus on distinctive expressions of the will of God for human life on earth has led to many accusations that dispensationalism teaches more than one way of salvation. In response, most dispensationalists will acknowledge a lack of clarity and even exaggeration in some statements made by early advocates of this system. But outside of the difficulty that many have had to elucidate clearly the distinction of life for the believer living under the Mosaic Law and the believer under the New Covenant,³ a certain allowance must be granted in consideration of the reactive nature of some of early dispensationalism. Modern dispensationalism arose when much of the theology tended to level out any changes in the advance of God's program in history so that as James Orr states in his noted work, *The Progress of Dogma*, practically the whole of the New Testament was read back into the Old.⁴ Against this background it is understandable that some overstatement might eventuate by the initiators of a new understanding which viewed the Scriptures more historically. History reveals that "prophets" of fresh insights frequently are carried beyond the proper balance of truth. Martin Luther, for example, was led by his discovery of justification by faith to derogate the Epistle of James as "a right strawy epistle" in comparison with other writings which in his view had gospel character.

The subsequent development of dispensational theology as well as non-dispensational covenant theology has led to a convergence on the issue of law and grace with regard to salvation so that today the charge of two ways of salvation is seldom heard. Both recognize God's gracious dealings with His people during the Old dispensation as well as a clearer and fuller manifestation of grace through the work of Christ.⁵

Contemporary dispensationalism then may be said to be characterized primarily by its insistence upon a distinction between Israel and the Church which allows for the term Israel to stand for the covenant nation both in biblical history and predictive prophecy. To state it another way, the dispensationalist does not believe that the New Testament writers interpret the church as a "new" or "spiritual Israel" which fulfills the prophecies relating to Israel throughout Scripture. It should also be noted that this primary distinction of Israel and the Church tends to carry with it a viewpoint on biblical history which sees God dealing with humanity through a number of administrations designed to reveal human inability and the need of God's grace. This idea of various tests and failures on the part of humanity is, however, only secondary to the primary thrust of dispensationalism seen in the place of Israel and the Church.

Although all dispensationalists maintain a distinction between Israel and the Church, there are significant differences as to the extent of their separation in the purposes and programs of God. These differences focus on the relationship of the present Church age with the messianic promises of the Old Testament. Since these promises contain the restoration of the nation of Israel as a central feature, older traditional dispensationalism has tended to deny any fulfillment in the Church age of those promises related to the Messianic kingdom during the present church age, arguing that their fulfillment involves the salvation and restoration of Israel as a nation under the Messiah. Since Israel as a nation has not yet turned to God nor has the Messiah returned to reign on the Davidic throne, the present Church age must be viewed as a time when the Messianic kingdom program has been

¹Robert Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), p. 28.

²C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 25.

³Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1941), pp. 296–97.

⁴James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), pp. 303–304.

⁵Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel & Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 45.

interrupted and God is calling out of all nations a people for His name. Such an interruption is based on a variety of Scriptures including Romans 11:25 where Israel is seen under the temporary hardening of divine judgment. It is acknowledged that during this age Jew and Gentile alike share in the blessings of Messianic salvation which are related to the fulfillment of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31. But according to traditional dispensationalism this does not involve the fulfillment of the Messianic *kingdom* promises founded on the covenant with David. Rather it is related to the overall spiritual kingdom of God which includes the elect of all ages. Thus there is a unified kingdom of spiritual salvation throughout all history while the actual manifestation of the rule of God on earth has taken various forms. The greatest and final form will be the Messianic kingdom of the future in which Israel will have a central role as God brings blessing to all nations (Rom. 11:11–15). According to this type of dispensationalism the different manifestations of God's rule on earth all coalesce in the revelation of God's glory. The unifying factor of history is thus said to be the revelation of the glory of God rather than any single historic kingdom program which necessitates the equation of Israel and the Church and the interpretation of Israel's prophecies as fulfilled by the Church.⁶

Some dispensationalists, however, have come to see a greater unity in the historical program of God centered in the Messianic kingdom. Without giving up the fulfillment of the promises for the nation of Israel when Christ returns to reign openly in glory, this form of dispensationalism agrees with non-dispensational premillennialism that it

Although all dispensationalists maintain a distinction between Israel and the Church, there are significant differences as to the extent of their separation.

is preferable to interpret this age as the first phase of the fulfillment of the one promised Messianic kingdom. The present age involves the spiritual aspects of that Messianic kingdom, that is, the blessings of the New Covenant (i.e. regeneration, the indwelling spirit, etc.). The remainder of the promises including those concerning Israel and the nations will find their fulfillment following the second advent.

Thus this form of dispensationalism shares much in common with non-dispensational premillennialists in seeing the action of God through His word and Spirit in this age as the presence of the power of the Messianic kingdom in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies. Where it yet differs from non-dispensationalism is seen in the understanding of the relationship of the church and Israel. Based on the Old Testament prophecies that God would bring salvation to the nation of Israel and the other nations without confusing the two entities, the dispensationalist sees in the present salvation of God for all nations a beginning phase of this universal Messianic salvation. These prophecies are in turn seen as the outworking of the original promise to Abraham which includes God's blessing for a "great nation" as well as "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:2–3). In common with the more traditional dispensationalism this modified form maintains that the New Testament writers retain this Old Testament distinction. What is understood by the nondispensationalist as the merging of the concepts of Israel and the church so that in fact the church becomes new Israel, is interpreted by the dispensationalist as teaching the common sharing of Messianic salvation by Jew and Gentile without destroying their identities. Illustrative of this dispensational understanding is the teaching of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:11–3:7. Although the Gentiles are described as being outside of the privileges of Israel prior to Christ and subsequently brought near (vv. 12–13), the apostle does not say that they are incorporated into "Israel." Rather both are made into "one new man" (v. 15). Both the Gentiles who were afar off and the Jews who were near are brought into a new place in relation to God in the Spirit (vv. 17–18); they have both been brought into the Messianic salvation of Christ to share it equally. But this in no way necessitates denial of a future function of the nation of Israel according to the Old Testament prophecies. For as previously noted, these prophecies taught both a particular function of Israel among the nations as well as an equal sharing of all nations in the salvation of God.

This dispensational interpretation is borne out by the same apostle's teaching in the olive tree illustration of Romans 11. There Israel is identified as the "natural branches," some of which have been broken off from the root (v. 17; cf. v. 7). The Gentile believers are seen as cuts from "a wild olive tree" (v. 24). Both partake of the "rich root" (v. 17) that is probably best understood as a symbol of the promise to Abraham which includes both Israel and the nations. Thus both Gentiles and Jews participate equally in the richness of the root without losing their identity. When the apostle predicts the future ingrafting of the natural branches, the dispensationalist views this as evidence that God's future for Israel predicted in the Old Testament has not been abrogated by the present participation in salvation by Gentiles (vv. 24–26).

Dispensationalism as a system of biblical interpretation, although varied in some respects, nevertheless maintains that the prophetic Scriptures in both Old and New Testaments with regard to Israel and the nations in history should be understood basically at face value. To be sure there is the recognition that some aspects of the descriptions are couched in the terminology of the time of their origin and thus allowance must be made for other forms of fulfillment corresponding to the later time. But any new theological understanding must be prescribed by the New Testament. There are types and shadows of realities which the later Scriptures reveal as outmoded, but it is the position of dispensationalism that the New Testament does not reinterpret the meaning of the nation of Israel as much of church interpretation has done throughout its history. It is interesting to note that in the light of the preservation of the Jews and the reestablishment of the state of Israel several scholars, including some from traditionally non-dispensational backgrounds (e.g. Hendrikus Berkhof,⁷ A. A. van Ruler⁸), are calling for a new understanding of the place of Israel in God's program for history.

History evidences the truth that no system of interpretation or theology can justly claim finality in all details. Under the continuing illumination of the Spirit the Church grows in its knowledge of God's revelation found in Scripture. That dispensationalism has been a contributing factor in the growth of understanding is generally acknowledged even by non-dispensationalists. Along with its cognizance of Israel, it has been credited with contributing to an awareness of the historical development in biblical history and significantly stimulated Bible study in general.⁹

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⁶Ryrie, *op. cit.*

⁷Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History* (Richmond, Virginia, 1966).

⁸A. A. Van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971).

⁹Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), p. 177; Millard Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), pp. 122–23.

OXFORD CENTRE FOR MISSION STUDIES

The new Oxford Centre for Mission Studies is holding a summer session which will include "Ways of Witness Among People of Other Faiths" (July 22–28), "Mission and Social Transformation" (July 29–August 4), and "New Frontiers in Mission" (August 5–12). Speakers include Michael Nazir Ali, Gerald Anderson, Stephen Neill, Rene Padilla and Vinay Samuel. For further information, write to Christopher Sugden, Oxford Centre of Mission Studies, P.O. Box 70, Oxford, England.

EVANGELICAL WOMEN'S CAUCUS NATIONAL MEETING

"Free Indeed—The Fulfillment of Our Faith" is the theme for the 1984 EWC national meeting, to be held June 19–23 at Wellsley College in Massachusetts. In addition to Bible studies, plenary lectures and worship, several subjects will be explored in seminars and workshops: Women in Creative Arts, Women in Social Action, Women in Spirituality, and Women in Theology. For information and registration, write to EWC 1984 Conference, 40 Calumet Road, Winchester, MA 01890.