

Where is Dispensationalism Going? (Part 1)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Dispensationalism is definitely in decline. I have written two major articlesⁱ probing the causes of that issue and—though I take no delight in that conclusion—it is certainly one that deserves our attention.

The history of dispensationalism's downturn is well known. But, for those who may not be aware, let me rehearse a few general facts. There was a time, before the so-called *Reformed Resurgence*,ⁱⁱ when dispensationalism carried the day in evangelicalism on the popular level and, to a large extent, on the academic level.

When I interviewed Dr. Thomas Ice for the first time, back in 1997, he summed it up like this: "We were so big we couldn't get any bigger."ⁱⁱⁱ

Consider the fact that many of the largest and most prestigious evangelical seminaries in the country were thoroughly committed to dispensationalism—and their professors were producing books through mainstream evangelical publishers that taught and explained dispensational theology. Not only that, but these schools also provided many of the faculty members for other schools and they, in turn, trained thousands more students in the tenets of dispensational theology—using their old professors' textbooks.

Our minds, of course, immediately run to Dallas Theological Seminary. Names like Chafer, Walvoord, Pentecost, Ryrie, Toussaint, Lightner and Zuck form a dispensational ring of honor in our memories.

But Dallas was not the only significant dispensational seminary. My mentor, Dr. John Whitcomb, taught for nearly four decades at Grace Theological Seminary in Winona Lake, Ind. It was not at all unusual for men to earn their master's degree at one of these institutions, then do their doctoral studies at the other. In fact, Dr. Whitcomb loved sharing a humorous little verse that was appreciated in Winona Lake—even if not so much in North Texas or Greater Los Angeles. It went like this: "And now abide these three—Dallas, Talbot and Grace. But the greatest of these is Grace."

Dispensational teaching also filled the airwaves since the early days of Christian broadcasting through programs such as *Back to the Bible*, *Radio Bible Class*, *Thru the Bible*, and a host of others—including those presented by the pioneers of the sermon-based teaching format, featuring the voices of Bruce Dunn, John MacArthur, Charles Stanley, Chuck Swindoll and more.

Then, lying on the coffee tables of Christian homes, there was even more dispensational Bible teaching in the form of popular Christian magazines. They included The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry's own *Israel My Glory*—which turned 80 years old this past year—along with others like *Confident Living*, *Gospel Herald* and *The Sunday School Times* and *Moody Monthly*. Christians of every kind of denomination and church

background were also getting a regular intake of dispensationalism—whether they realized it or not—as they ingested *Our Daily Bread*.

So, what happened? There are myriad answers to that question. Many of the popular-level outreaches that I've listed above continued on, but their influence was muted to some extent by the growing Reformed outlets which would eventually flip the script and bring amillennialism, postmillennialism, preterism, and covenant theology, in general, into a place of unforeseen prominence—even in formerly dispensational circles.

Another major issue, which was developing during the time that I was in Bible college, was the launch of progressive dispensationalism. This new teaching almost immediately spread like wildfire through academic institutions previously known for their commitment to dispensational theology.

Amidst the newfound allure of Reformed theology, the dispensational fire inside many of my generation and those younger began to go out. Some were taught poorly, or never grounded at all, in dispensational thinking. I'm convinced that many threw the baby right out with the bathwater, attaching dispensationalism in their own minds to issues like legalism or even allegorical interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures—oddly enough, things diametrically opposed to dispensational orthodoxy.

Then, some of those who've remained in our camp have gone to seed, especially regarding prophetic truth, and moved into *dispensational sensationalism*—a term I've recently come across. Denying Scriptural sufficiency, their focus has shifted to UFOs and other oddities, real or imagined.

So, we know the how and the why of dispensationalism's decline—and I've also written at length on why I believe this is so damaging and dangerous for the church at large.^{iv}

Yet, dispensationalism is far from dead and gone. So, the pressing need now is for us to focus on what we as dispensationalists can, should and must do as we move ahead.

And I'll turn toward those matters in the next installment.

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ⁱ See Paul Scharf; "Facing Replacement Theology;" *Israel My Glory*; January/February 2023; <https://israelmyglory.org/article/facing-replacement-theology/>; Internet; accessed 11 May 2023; and Paul J. Scharf, "Young, Restless, Fundamentalist: Is There Still a Future for Israel?" *Baptist Bulletin* Vol. 85, No. 6. (Nov./Dec. 2019): 17-20.

ⁱⁱ The phrase is part of the title of a book by Brad Vermurlen, *Reformed Resurgence: The New Calvinist Movement and the Battle Over American Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

ⁱⁱⁱ Personal conversation, Feb. 21, 1997.

^{iv} See Paul Scharf; “The Danger of Replacing Israel” (three-part blog series); The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry; Part 1—Sept. 24, 2021; foi.org/2021/09/24/the-danger-of-replacing-israel-part-1; Internet; accessed 11 May 2023.