

Where is Dispensationalism Going? (Part 3)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Let's just cut to the chase: Since dispensationalism grew out of a renewed commitment to the rigorous study of the Bible, could it be that dispensationalism's decline is related to the notable neglect of Scripture?

At first blush, that might sound like an arrogant claim. But, note please what I am *not* saying. I'm not in the least stating that the proponents of other systems of evangelical Christian theology—particularly forms of covenant theology—do not hold as faithfully to verbal plenary inspiration as do dispensationalists. I am not implying that they do not read their Bibles—perhaps more zealously than we do. I am not questioning how distinguished their brightest scholars are, or disputing the fact that their list of theology volumes produced by major publishers is growing much more rapidly than ours.

But theology is not a matter for polling or public opinion. Like honest science, it is not built upon consensus, but by those who break through the consensus and discover the significance of previously overlooked factors. We do not arrive at orthodox conclusions by counting doctorates or the sales of commentaries.

So, let's confess that we will not rescue dispensationalism by any fleshly means—and we won't even rescue dispensationalism by talking more about it.

No, what we need to do is—wait for it—what we've always done. If dispensationalism grew out of a renewed commitment to meticulous Bible study, then it can only be revived through that very same means.

Once again, I can hear the objections. I wonder, however, if they are valid.

I ponder, for instance, whether non-dispensationalists are mining every word out of the Major and Minor Prophets—not simply for their historical content or devotional quality, but with the realization that the prophets saw mountaintops pointing toward the final return of Christ. Many of these details remain yet to be fulfilled, as they speak of divine interventions at the end of history (see Dan. 12:9). Are covenant theologians dealing with the intricacies of such passages?

Are they reading the Old Testament as the foundation for the New Testament—rather than reversing the process and reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament? Are they reading the Bible in the progressive order in which it was written?

Are they listening to the precise words that the prophets and apostles spoke—attempting to understand them as their very first readers would have, according to their grammar, in their historical context? Or is their interpretation tainted by their theology? Do they remember that the interpretation of any one word, verse or chapter must be able to bear the weight of the whole of Scripture?

Do they understand prophetic sections literally in context—not dismissing massive passages, or even whole books, as being close to irrelevant by artificially relegating them to a genre of literature like *apocalyptic*? Are they seeking to find the literal meaning signified by the signs, and symbolized by the symbols, within that context (see Dan. 8:20-21)? Do they take that as the basis to interpret related or parallel Scriptures?

As the church moved into the 19th and early 20th centuries, God’s people across many denominations, basking in the light from the Reformation, embraced an intensified commitment to the Scriptures—in newly accessible formats—with the enhanced freedom to study it. These principles began to govern their investigation. Their fascination was with discovering hidden and disregarded truth—not in aligning with theological consensus. Out of such a culture, dispensationalism was born.

I say it once again, as a clarion call—especially because many need their confidence restored: If dispensationalism grew out of a renewed commitment to the rigorous study of the Bible, then it can only be revived through that same means. It is my contention that when the details of the whole Bible are studied and interpreted literally, in context, the systematization of one’s results will produce dispensational theology.

In its noblest forms, dispensationalism offers a method of thinking and a course of living. It deals with the whole Bible in depth, and it challenges us to study that Word at length.

Just as the task of reforming the church will never be complete on this Earth, so neither will the development of dispensationalism ever be concluded. Its mission calls us forward, however; the exercise supplies its own reward.

So, to paraphrase my mentor, Dr. John Whitcomb, let’s do the impossible. Let’s open our Bibles, and begin to study, “Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, Line upon line, line upon line” (Isa. 28:13). And, as he would also remind us, take everything you learn and train someone else (see 2 Tim. 2:2).

This will be the primary means of reviving dispensationalism in the closing days of the church age.

Paul J. Scharf (M.A., M.Div., Faith Baptist Theological Seminary) is a church ministries representative for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, based in Columbus, WI, and serving in the Midwest. For more information on his ministry, visit sermonaudio.com/pscharf or foi.org/scharf, or email pscharf@foi.org.

Scripture taken from the New King James Version®.

Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.