

Where is Dispensationalism Going? (Part 5)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

In the previous installment, I primarily addressed the need for the leaders of dispensational churches—including pastors and all members of the congregation—to take their roles more seriously.

Indeed, this will be crucial to rebuilding a culture of dispensationalism in our churches. It must extend to much more rigorous theological screening of potential candidates for ministry positions. It will also necessarily involve greater commitment and boldness when it comes to providing dispensational perspectives from the pulpit.

We could apply this logic to other areas of church life as well—such as the screening of current and potential supported missionaries (who are an extension of the church's ministry to other fields) and the training of Sunday school teachers (who are the foundation of the church's ministry for years to come).

These topics could be addressed at length, but the dynamics of dealing with them would be similar to what I have already presented with regard to pastors. Desiring to keep a focus specifically on issues involving dispensationalism, I will therefore move ahead.

Now, someone might respond by saying that the opinions I've articulated here—while basic to the revitalization of the dispensational movement—will take us only so far. Unless or until we are able to make considerable headway on the academic level—in Bible colleges and, especially, seminaries, and through major initiatives with mainstream evangelical publishers—the corrections I have offered will simply fall flat and we will never reclaim our former position of prominence.

I am sure that they may very well be correct—at least as far as human measures of our dispensational movement go. May we bear in mind, however, that Christ is the ultimate judge, and His evaluation will only be disclosed at the *Bema* (2 Cor. 5:10).

Of course, I would love to see the reemergence of dispensationalism in seminaries and noted publishing companies. But these things are outside of my control. I only hope, again, that perhaps one person will take up this series and determine to do something with it. If that were to happen, I would deem this effort to be wildly successful.

But, what if (under the sovereignty of God) dispensationalism never regains a foothold in our Christian culture? What if it will be manifested from this point forward largely through a variety of small to midsize ministries, mission boards, schools, publishing efforts, conferences and, of course, numerous churches?

As I stated earlier, I see some advantages to that. Yet, it certainly presents challenges we are forced to address. So, first, we need to **widen our vision**. We're going to depend upon one another more and more in our traditional dispensational movement.

Certainly, many of us practice particular convictions, doctrinal emphases and distinctives in our families, churches and ministries. But we must also look beyond our preferences and cooperate on matters of utmost importance when appropriate.

It's instructive to remember that the dispensational movement grew largely out of the group now known as the Plymouth Brethren in 19th-century England. Here in America, it was widely disseminated among Presbyterians, such as James Hall Brookes and, later, Lewis Sperry Chafer. C.I. Scofield was a Congregationalist. W.H. Griffith Thomas, who supported Chafer in establishing the school we know as Dallas Theological Seminary, was Anglican. There's a rich history of premillennialism in some quarters of Lutheranism—as personified by George N.H. Peters—and even of Lutheran dispensational theology. Then, of course, there was the great Methodist dispensationalist Arno C. Gaebelein.

By the middle of the last century, dispensationalism largely coalesced inside the burgeoning Bible church movement. Thankfully, many Baptists also became enthusiastic adherents. Today, dispensationalism resides principally within these last two groups although, gratefully, it certainly still has many other advocates.

Reflecting on our history, we ought to develop a mindset of seeking to attract and encourage as many people as possible to move toward dispensational thought. I am not calling for ecumenical ministry endeavors at the expense of truth, but for targeted cooperation with those who share agreement on significant issues—especially if they are our theological first cousins. We simply don't have the luxury of fracturing over frivolous quarrels. We need to focus our energies deliberately on appealing to young people—certainly in the most engaging way possible, but always with solid, substantive Biblical truth and in a manner that provides answers to their concerns.

In the midst of all of this, however, we must attentively **maintain our focus**. I referred previously to *dispensational sensationalism*—certainly one danger which threatens the cohesion of our movement. Other strange doctrines are also reemerging, notably on social media, including forms of hyperdispensationalism. We must lovingly but carefully defend against the intrusion of these kinds of spurious teachings and “[g]uard what was committed to [our] trust” (1 Tim. 6:20).

Finally, we as dispensationalists need to be cognizant of **looking back** and **looking up**. Much good work is being done in the former realm by talented and determined church historians. We'll conclude the series by considering these vital concepts.

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.