

LITERAL HERMENEUTICS, THEOLOGICAL METHOD, AND THE ESSENCE OF DISPENSATIONALISM

As one evaluates the current debate between dispensationalism and nondispensationalism, the pervading notion seems to be that dispensationalism is in the midst of an identity crisis. While as a whole the evangelical community is seeking for some common ground in eschatology, certainly a worthy aim, this paper seeks to contribute some understanding to the essence of dispensationalism in a day when the very term has been brought into question by those within dispensational circles.¹

In particular this paper will attempt to articulate the essence of dispensationalism in hermeneutical terms. Earl Radmacher noted that "literal interpretation is the 'bottom-line' of dispensationalism."² This "bottom-line" expresses itself in its consistent application to prophetic portions of scripture.³ Thus, the essence of dispensationalism for Radmacher is the literal interpretation of prophecy. Eschatology must be derived from such an approach to the Bible. What follows is a defense of this position with the goal of added precision. The added precision will come by viewing literal hermeneutics through the eyes of sound theological method. The result is a refinement of Charles Ryrie's famous *sine qua non* of dispensationalism.⁴

A Brief Sketch of the Debate Concerning Literal Interpretation

One of the arguments used by Progressive Dispensationalists against more traditional approaches is that the history of dispensationalism is discontinuous.⁵

¹ I presented this paper in its original form during the doctoral seminar on dispensationalism taught by Craig Blaising at Dallas Theological Seminary in the spring of 1988. I was responding to his claim in class that "literal" interpretation was no longer an issue in the debate between dispensational and nondispensational systems of theology. In particular, I was attempting to synthesize all of the issues coming to the forefront with the rise of Progressive Dispensationalism and present them in a simple format. To Blaising's credit he gave me a good grade on the paper and maintained an irenic spirit of dialogue throughout the discussion in spite of my disagreement with him. It was at the Dispensational Study Group at ETS in November of 1986 where the issue was raised concerning whether or not the label "dispensationalist" should be retained.

² Earl Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and its Eschatology," *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, edited by Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 171.

³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 43ff.

⁵ This seems to be Craig Blaising's major contribution to the rise of Progressive Dispensationalism. See Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 9-56 and Craig Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, ed. by Blaising and Darrell Bock, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 13-34. Also in a recent workshop at the Evangelical Theological Society (Nov. 1995), Blaising read a paper entitled "On Defining Dispensationalism: A Historical Response to Ryrie's Dispensationalism." It seems that Blaising believes that the historical discontinuity within the dispensational tradition warrants the conclusion that a *sine qua*

Therefore, the reasoning goes, it is erroneous to posit that there is a *sine qua non* that is true for all dispensationalists for all times. I would agree that the level of understanding concerning the discontinuous areas in the history of dispensationalism needs more study. However, there are a few cautions that I want to put forward as this issue is discussed:

- **First**, little discussion has taken place concerning how continuity and discontinuity in the tradition are to be measured. Historical methodology should be targeted for study to a far greater degree before any pronouncements are made in this area.
- **Second**, Progressive Dispensationalists have tended to focus on discontinuity especially in the area of Ryrie's *sine qua non* to the exclusion at times of any elements of continuity. For example, literal interpretation, in their view, cannot be part of any *sine qua non* when a sampling of earlier and later dispensationalists shows any use of nonliteral methods. As we will see later, this is just the tact that has been taken by covenantalists for years. That Ryrie's *sine qua non* must be taken seriously on the historical level is proven by the fact that a Genevan pastor named Emile Guers, a disciple of Darby, gave his own version of an appropriate and extremely similar *sine qua non* in 1856 in a book entitled *The Future of Israel*.⁶ His *sine qua non* consists of the following:
 1. **The Principle of Literalism** -- Here Guers gives a rather sophisticated discussion of literal, figurative, metaphorical, and symbolic interpretation which would be at home in our modern debates. Guers' approach agrees in substance with Ryrie's insistence upon literal interpretation as the goal of grammatical-historical interpretation especially when dealing with prophecy.
 2. **The Principle of Diversity of Classes and Privileges in the Entire Body of the Redeemed** -- Here Guers agrees with Ryrie's insistence upon the distinction between Israel and the Church. He also mirrors Ryrie by noting that such a distinction is the result of the application of his first principle of literalism.
 3. **The Literal Value of the Word Day in Prophecy** -- In this last part of Guers' triadic formula, he returns to the special issue of literalism as

non does not exist for dispensationalism. The best one can achieve is a descriptive list of concerns which make up the tradition.

⁶ Emile Guers, *Israel aux Derniers Jours de L'Economie Actuelle ou Essai Sur La Restauration Prochaine de ce Peuple, Suivi D'Un Fragment sur le Millenarisme*, (Geneve: Emile Beroud, 1856), 22-28. A copy of the original French version can be found at Harvard University. For the English translation, see *Israel in the Last Days of the Present Economy; or, An Essay on the Coming Restoration of this People. Also, a fragment on Millenarianism*, trans. with a preface by Aubrey C. Price, (London: Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1862). A copy of the English translation can be found at the Elkhart Library of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. A German edition of the book yields the short title which is in English *The Future of Israel*. This book had a prominent role in the conversion of Arno C. Gaebelein from postmillennialism to premillennialism. See Michael D. Stallard, "The Theological Method of Arno C. Gaebelein," Dallas, Texas: Unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1992, 83-100.

it applies to the particular issue of the use of the word *day* in prophetic portions of the Bible. In such contexts the word must almost always mean a twenty-four hour day. This is a reaction to a common view debated in his day, especially at the Powerscourt Conferences beginning in 1831 (in which Darby took part), the view that the word *day* is to be taken symbolically as one year. There is no clear point in Guers corresponding to Ryrie's last point (the doxological purpose of God in the world).

- **Third**, Progressive Dispensationalism has failed to note that divergent views and practices within the history of dispensationalism do not eliminate a common thread that seems to be present when, in fact, that history is analyzed. So below we will discuss the development of the debate concerning literal interpretation in this century.

The Scofield-Gaebelein Era (early 20th century)

While Scofield's notes are a bit sketchy and can lead to wrong generalizations on the part of a reader, Arno C. Gaebelein, one of the associate editors of the Scofield Bible, has left us, in the estimation of this writer, almost 20,000 pages of material in commentaries and magazine articles spanning over half a century.⁷ It is in his writings and other similar dispensationalists of the period that one finds an enigma in Bible interpretation. There is simultaneously a claim that prophecy must be interpreted literally and a frequent practice of appealing to typological interpretations. The typology of Gaebelein is so extreme at times that it would, no doubt, embarrass most dispensational interpreters today. It is to these extremes that those who deny a valid place to literal interpretation in the debate appeal.

However, a close examination of Gaebelein's writings and those like him reveals a measure of consistency. What drove his typological interpretations was the conviction that every verse in the Bible was prophetic. Consequently, when you come to a prophetic passage, you let it stand as is, i.e., literally, to get the intended prophetic character. However, in historical narratives in the Bible, one had to resort to a typological or spiritualizing approach to "find" any prophetic significance. In short, Gaebelein would not complain that the amillennialist or postmillennialist was allegorizing the Bible. He would tell the amillennialist that he was *allegorizing the wrong part of the Bible!* In Gaebelein's mind, the approach was simple and consistent. What is important for our discussion is that *literal interpretation of prophecy is kept intact* among these kinds of dispensationalists, a point that may be lost among those who downplay the role of literal interpretation in the current debate.⁸

The Chafer-Pentecost Dialogue with Allis

⁷ For a fairly comprehensive listing see my dissertation mentioned above.

⁸ I will deal with a technical definition of literal interpretation later in the paper. For my analysis of these salient points in Gaebelein, see my dissertation referenced earlier, 193-270

In my original paper, I referred to this era of discussion as the "classical debate." On the dispensational side would be Chafer, Walvoord, and Pentecost while one representative from the Covenant camp would be Oswald T. Allis. The dialogue of debate in this period was characterized by "literal" versus "allegorical" salvos. Pentecost begins *Things to Come* with four chapters on interpretation. He laments the problems of allegorical interpretation and defines the central issue at the outset as one of allegorical versus literal interpretation and considers himself in agreement with Allis on this point.⁹

That Pentecost's assessment of Allis is correct can be seen in Allis' own words:

Literal interpretation has always been a marked feature of Premillennialism; in Dispensationalism it has been carried to an extreme. We have seen that this literalism found its most thoroughgoing expression in the claim that Israel must mean Israel, and that the Church was a mystery, unknown to the prophets and first made known to the apostle Paul. Now if the principle of interpretation is adopted that Israel always means Israel, that it does not mean the Church, then it follows of necessity that practically all of our information regarding the millennium will concern a Jewish or Israelitish age.¹⁰

Of course, in this statement, Allis was not writing favorably of dispensationalism. Much of his classical work is devoted to showing the necessity of what he believes to be non-literal interpretation such as typical and figurative language and to demonstrate inconsistency on the part of dispensationalists in the application of their own hermeneutic. But he definitely sees the issue in hermeneutical terms. What is especially important is that during this era of argumentation, ***both sides agreed that literal interpretation was the main issue dividing dispensationalism and nondispensationalism..***

The Context of the More Recent Debate

However, later forms of the debate between the two groups seemed to shift to overall theological method rather than to hermeneutics. A representative summary comes from nondispensationalist George Ladd:

The main point . . . is that many Old Testament passages which applied in their historical setting to literal Israel have in the New Testament been applied to the church. What does all of this have to do with the question of millennium? Just this: The Old Testament did not clearly foresee how its own prophecies were to be fulfilled . They were fulfilled in ways quite unforeseen by the Old Testament

⁹ Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964), 1.

¹⁰ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), 244.

itself and unexpected by the Jews. With regard to the first coming of Christ, *the Old Testament is interpreted by the New Testament.*

Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament. It confesses that it cannot be sure how the Old Testament prophecies of the end are to be fulfilled, for (a) the first coming of Christ was accomplished in terms not foreseen by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, and (b) there are unavoidable indications that the Old Testament promises to Israel are fulfilled in the Christian church.¹¹

This comment characterized a shift in focus for the debate and gave a clarion call to the study of the New Testament use of the Old Testament which has dominated discussions in the debate for almost the last twenty years. Furthermore, the statement is revealing for the following reasons:

1. The significance of literal interpretation is still retained in the debate in some form.
2. Emphasis is placed upon the literal interpretation of the Old Testament rather than upon literal interpretation of "prophetic scripture" in general.
3. The priority of the Testaments is raised as a major divisive issue in the discussion. The stage is set to pit "literal" interpretation of the Old Testament over against "literal" interpretation of the New Testament.

As a result of the newer forms of debate, it is no longer possible to simply argue "literal" versus "allegorical."¹² The overall debate must take on a more sophisticated approach. However, it is this author's contention that literal hermeneutics cannot be overlooked as a factor in this new phase of dialogue.

The Meaning of Literal Interpretation

The most basic objection that has been raised against dispensational literal hermeneutics is that the term "literal" does not possess such a simplistic definition as suggested by earlier forms of the debate. Feinberg, a dispensationalist, remarks that

many nondispensationalists make two claims that call into question the dispensationalists' claim to being practitioners of sound hermeneutics. (1) They

¹¹ George Eldon Ladd, "Historic Premillennialism" in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert Clouse, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 27.

¹² It cannot be said that the earlier antagonists in the debate such as Pentecost and Allis did not see these same issues. The point is that the thrust of the debate was not formulated in those terms. For example, Allis shows keen perception as to the issue in his accusation that dispensationalists emphasize the Old Testament to the loss of the New Testament, *Prophecy and the Church*, 48-50.

claim that they consistently use literal hermeneutics. (2) They claim that dispensationalists do not consistently interpret literally, for they admit that Scripture contains figures of speech and attempt to interpret such figures.¹³

The first point hinges on the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, a topic to be taken up in the next section. Here the nondispensationalist notes the many places the New Testament "interprets Old Testament prophecies in a way *not suggested by the Old Testament context*."¹⁴ The second point is a matter of surveying the imperfections of dispensational theologians from the past.

This is precisely the tact taken by the nondispensationalist Poythress.¹⁵ Concerning inconsistencies among dispensationalists on the point of literal interpretation he cites Pentecost's alleged abandonment of literal hermeneutics when reading I Cor. 15:51-53. To fit this passage into the dispensationalist scheme Pentecost must rid himself of the "plain" meaning of the "*last trump*."¹⁶ Of more consequence is Poythress' exposition of the dual hermeneutics of Scofield who, according to Poythress, practices a literal hermeneutic when Israel is in view, but a more "spiritualized" (non-literal) hermeneutic when the church is in view.¹⁷ Such interpretations of the dispensationalists themselves make the claim to consistent hermeneutics (as in Radmacher) a questionable one from Poythress' point of view.

As to the other point made by Feinberg, Poythress makes the implicit claim that he, and those of like thinking, practice literal interpretation more than the dispensationalists. This is seen by emphasis upon the literal interpretation of the New Testament. In fact, Poythress seems to assert that a literal interpretation of the Book of Hebrews will undo much of the dispensational understanding of the Old Testament.¹⁸ More will be said of this later. For now it is sufficient to conclude that many nondispensationalists feel comfortable with the term "literal interpretation" when they are simply doing with the Old Testament what the New Testament writers have done with it.¹⁹

Up to this point no definition has been given to "literal interpretation." The use of it as an element in the delineation of the essence of dispensationalism has merely been

¹³ John S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the Old Testament," in *Tradition and Testaments: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. by John S. and Paul D. Feinberg, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981): 45.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Vern S. Poythress has provided an excellent summary of some of the issues dispensationalists must work through to refine their system and respond to nondispensationalism in the current climate of the debate. See *Understanding Dispensationalism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987). There seems to be some affinity between many of the things which Poythress says and the approaches taken in Progressive Dispensationalism.

¹⁶ Ibid., 71-77.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22-29.

¹⁸ Ibid., 68-70.

¹⁹ See Feinberg, 45. Here Feinberg asserts that the difference between a dispensationalist and a nondispensationalist is "how" literal interpretation operates not necessarily "what" it is. However, it still appears that the issue is pointing to the literal interpretation of the Old Testament versus literal interpretation of the New Testament. Thus, the next section is highly significant.

called into question. Poythress is helpful here in this matter of definition. He sees three plausible ways of talking about literalness.²⁰ First, he refers to "first-thought" meaning in which the various words and phrases of a sentence or discourse are viewed in isolation from the context. Second, there is "flat interpretation" in which a passage is taken as *literal if possible*. Obvious figures of speech are recognized but nothing more.

Consequently, "we would ignore the possibility of poetic overtones, irony, wordplay, or the possible figurative or allusive character of whole sections of material."²¹ The shortcomings of these first two approaches are apparent. The potential for ignoring the entire context of a statement is great in both cases.

Thus, Poythress correctly opts for a third alternative, the equation of literal interpretation with the grammatical-historical interpretation of a passage. Of course, others have done this before.²² But the key in this situation, which Poythress points out, is that this equivalence must not be given in the context of the older forms of debate involving literal versus allegorical interpretation:

Moreover, in the history of hermeneutical theory, the term *sensus literalis* ("literal sense") has been associated with grammatical-historical interpretation. Therefore, there is some historical warrant for using the word "literal" in a technical sense, simply to designate the aim of grammatical-historical interpretation.

Nevertheless, in our modern context the repeated use of the word "literal" by dispensationalists is not helpful. "Literal" tends to be understood as the opposite of "figurative." Thus the word "literal" may quite easily suggest the two other types of interpretation above (first-thought interpretation or flat interpretation).²³

Thus, Poythress finds no better way to describe literal interpretation than to say that it means the application of the grammatical-historical method to a text. Throughout this paper the term "literal interpretation" has that meaning.

As the above remarks show, the definition of literal interpretation may not be able to help one define the essence of dispensationalism. Both sides in the debate, unlike earlier forms of the debate, claim to be following the grammatical-historical method of interpretation even in matters of eschatology. Thus, to prove that the definition of dispensationalism is tied to literal hermeneutics in some way requires the dispensationalist to prove either that the nondispensationalist is incorrect in asserting his use of the method or that there is some particular way in which the literal hermeneutic is *used* that is unique to dispensationalism. In the former case, it is doubtful that any headway will be made. Inconsistencies on the part of both parties show that disagreement over many matters of exegesis will lead to no solution along those lines. Therefore, it remains to be seen if there is a particular way in which a dispensationalist uses the literal hermeneutic in principle which can be distinguished from the nondispensationalist.

²⁰Poythress, 82-86. Also, chapter nine gives some significant descriptions of dispensationalist views of literal interpretation, 87-96.

²¹Ibid., 83.

²²Cp. Pentecost, 9.

²³Poythress, 84-85.

The Priority and Harmonization of the Old and New Testaments

Hints have already been given which suggest the appropriate avenue of discussion. Ladd remarked that dispensational eschatology begins with a literal interpretation of the Old Testament.²⁴ Ladd's statement also suggests that the nondispensationalist begins with the New Testament. Thus, the issue is cast as the priority of the Old Testament versus the New Testament.²⁵

Saucy adds the pertinent comment that

Analysis of nondispensational systems reveal . . . that their less than literal approach to Israel in the Old Testament prophecies stems not from an *a priori* spiritualistic or metaphysical hermeneutic, but rather from their application of the same grammatico-historical hermeneutic used by dispensationalism to the New Testament Scripture from which they conclude that these Scriptures teach the equation of the Church with Israel. It is this conclusion based upon their application of normal evangelical hermeneutics which leads them to their differing interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures.²⁶

Hence, the basic distinction if these writers are correct seems to be posited in the starting place for theology. Dispensationalists begin their eschatological scheme by applying the grammatical-historical method of interpretation to the Old Testament. Nondispensationalists begin their sketch of prophecy by applying the same hermeneutic to the New Testament. Each system then branches out from its starting place to include the other remaining portions of Scripture.²⁷

An example of how this can be seen is Poythress' claim that the dispensational view of the Old Testament is altered (if not eliminated) by applying the grammatical-historical method of interpretation to the Book of Hebrews, especially Heb. 12:22-24. He remarks that

the Book of Hebrews is the single most important text to consider in a discussion of dispensationalism. More than any other part of the Bible, it reflects explicitly and at length on the crucial question of the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament.²⁸

²⁴ Ladd, 27.

²⁵ By "priority" I do not mean that one has logical superiority to the other. I would understand that the OT text has priority in OT interpretation and that the NT text has priority in NT interpretation. In the process of theologizing that brings them together, the OT text comes first because of the progress of revelation (more to say about this later).

²⁶ Robert Saucy, "The Crucial Issue Between Dispensational and Nondispensational Systems," *Criswell Theological Review* 1 (1986), 155.

²⁷ Saucy still asks the question "why such divergent results from these two methodologies?" The next section is an attempt to show why the divergence exists.

²⁸ Poythress, 118.

Poythress attempts to show exegetically that Hebrews 12 teaches that there is a fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham within this age.²⁹ Furthermore, the destiny of Israel and the Church can be related as can the nature of heaven and earth in the last days.³⁰ To Poythress these conclusions from Hebrews demonstrate what an interpreter knows about the meaning of the Old Testament promises before he encounters them in the Old Testament.

On the other side is a dispensationalist like Pentecost. It is no accident that after the opening chapters on hermeneutics, he *begins* (like other dispensationalists) with the covenants in the Old Testament.³¹ The starting point is different than the one used by the nondispensational Poythress. But the problem is the same for both sides. The Old and New Testaments must be harmonized regardless of which Testament is given priority. The issue is not a minor one:

It is evident that Allis and Chafer did not differ over some triviality or technicality in theology. Rather, they differed over the nature of the Bible's unity--a question which is second in importance only to that of the truth of Scripture. Both men were deeply committed proponents of the truth of Scripture, but each felt that the way the other viewed the Bible as a unity seriously threatened its truth.³²

It is no wonder that Turner asserts that the basic issue of eschatology is the "continuity of Scripture in progressive revelation."³³ Thus, the implication is that the different starting places lead to different approaches to harmonizing the two Testaments.

Fuller's discussion concerning theological hermeneutics is helpful at this point. He notes that covenant nondispensational theology tends "to impute to passages a meaning which would not be gained merely from their historical and grammatical associations. This phase of interpretation is called the 'theological interpretation.'"³⁴ Fuller states that his spiritual pilgrimage has removed him from his earlier position and has led him to agree with Ryrie that "new revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation mean something different."³⁵ Recall that Ladd had said that nondispensational eschatology is

²⁹ Ibid., 120.

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

³¹ Pentecost, 65ff.

³² Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 25-26.

³³ David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985): 275-87.

³⁴ Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," (Doctor's Dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 147. Note that the example which Fuller applies this comment to is a New Testament one (Jesus' answer to the lawyer about inheriting eternal life). However, the primary point from this writer's perspective is the introduction of theological considerations into the Old Testament by nondispensationalists. This is where the next section of the paper should prove to be helpful.

³⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 94; Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 62.

formed from the "explicit" statements of the New Testament. Presumably this resultant theology, unlike Fuller and Ryrie, governs as one reads the Old Testament.

Therefore, it seems that the newer forms of the debate are really more refined ways of talking about whether or not the New Testament should be read back into the Old. Notice that this is somewhat different from the older debate's forum of "literal versus allegorical." In fact, the argument appears to be moving from basic hermeneutics to theological method. What remains to be seen from the standpoint of this paper is the relationship of literal hermeneutics to theological method as it is found in dispensationalism.

However, before one can address theological method directly, it is necessary to examine the justification used in nondispensationalism for the approach of harmonizing the two Testaments by reading the second back into the first. This justification is found in the way that the New Testament writers use the Old Testament.³⁶ It is at this point that Bock's four categories or schools of thought concerning the use of the Old Testament in the New prove to be helpful.³⁷

The first school of thought is the *full human intent* school represented by Walter Kaiser. In this view, Old Testament prophets have a rather comprehensive understanding of their prophetic declarations with the possible exception of the time element in their prophecies. Kaiser relies on a concept of generic promise, the viewing of a prophecy as a whole which may or may not possess a series of parts. The fact that it is viewed as a whole prevents a separation of the later expansions of the prediction from the original prediction. Consequently, there is a downplay or elimination of any distinction between the human and divine intent in the original proclamation.

This school of thought can be a double-edged sword with respect to dispensationalism. It would seem that the concept of generic promise, which concentrates the totality of the Old Testament prophecy (including the idea of fulfillment minus the time element) in the Old Testament text itself, fits nicely with the dispensational priority of the Old Testament. However, one readily recognizes that, on occasion, the idea of progress of revelation, about which more will be said later, requires more emphasis upon the concept of development than this school allows. The dispensationalist would certainly not want to water down this aspect of revelation. On the other hand, to the nondispensational, particularly covenantal, point of view, the built-in aspect of unity which generic promise appears to present could easily commend itself.³⁸

The second school of thought is the *divine intent-human* words view represented by S. Lewis Johnson, James I. Packer, and Elliott E. Johnson. In this view, a distinction is allowed between what the human author in the Old Testament prophecy meant and

³⁶ See Feinberg's comments, "Salvation in the Old Testament," in *Tradition and Testament*, 45.

³⁷ Darrell Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New," part I, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-Sept. 1985): 209-23.

³⁸ The argument here is not that nondispensationalists readily endorse this school of thought. The issue is much more complicated than that. All that is being said is that an analogy can be drawn between the downplay of diversity in this school of thought and the downplay of diversity from the covenantal side that characterizes the history of the debate.

what the divine intent is. The divine intent includes the meaning of the Old Testament author but is extended either by means of a fuller sense or the addition and clarification of new references. That this particular view has no distinctive relationship to dispensationalism is clear from the fact that it is expounded by both a nondispensationalist (Packer) as well as a dispensationalist (E. E. Johnson). Both are simply recognizing the need to express the progress of revelation demonstrated in the New Testament explanation of Old Testament prophecies.

The third school of thought is the historical progress of revelation school represented by Ellis, Longenecker, and Dunnnett. In this view there is a recognition that at times the New Testament gives the "rewording of the Old Testament passage so that it more nearly conforms to the New Testament situation in light of larger biblical and theological understanding."³⁹ Of special interest is the theological understanding of the New Testament writers with respect to messianic expectation and salvation history. It is interesting that the dispensational Bock, after citing some potential problems with the application of this view, notes a positive use of it:

For example, any New Testament passage where Yahweh in the Old Testament becomes Christ in the New Testament (e.g., Rom. 10:13 and its use of Joel 2:32) follows this principle of reading the Old Testament in light of New Testament realizations about the nature of the Messiah (where Jesus of Nazareth is recognized as Lord and God Himself). Even Christianity's interpretation of a gap in Isaiah 61:1, 2--in which part of the passage refers to Jesus' first coming (Luke 4:18) and the other part refers to Jesus' return--is possible only because of the New Testament teaching about Jesus' two comings. This 'refractory' and reflective use of the New Testament on the Old is a key factor that must be evaluated in the use of the Old Testament by the New. As a new revelation was given (in the life of Jesus and in the teaching about Him), the Old Testament was elucidated with greater detail.⁴⁰

Thus, even a dispensationalist can realize some reading of the New Testament back into the Old (if Bock is correct). It is important to realize that Bock's statement allows "elucidation" of the Old Testament text and stops short of the Old Testament meaning being totally dictated by the New Testament.

This limitation is keenly felt in Bock's discussion of the fourth and final school of thought known as the *canonical approach and New Testament priority school* represented by Bruce Waltke. The Old Testament must be read in light of the whole canon. The New Testament takes priority in the application of this principle by "unpacking" the literal meaning of the Old Testament.⁴¹ In what appears to be a rejection of Waltke's position, Bock states

³⁹ Bock, 216.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 217-18.

⁴¹ Bock's reference to Waltke's interpretation of Psalm 2:6-7 in light of Acts 3:24-25 is instructive, 220.

So Waltke's position is that the whole of the Old Testament is to be reread ultimately in light of the New Testament: as a result the original expression of meaning within the Old Testament passage is overridden and redefined by the New Testament . . . Such a wholesale shift of referents to the exclusion of the original sense is actually a shift of meaning.⁴²

Bock's viewpoint is ultimately an eclectic one.⁴³ Its significance lies in the fact that exegetical observations have forced him to recognize expanded meanings for Old Testament texts in light of the New Testament expositions of them. However, he, as a dispensationalist, predictably refuses to allow any such expanded meanings to abandon the priority of the Old Testament text for itself. This is another way of saying that a dispensationalist allows a reading of the New Testament into the Old *with strong limitations*. The implication may be that the nondispensationalist has no such limits. The discussion of these limits hinges upon the issue presented at the beginning of this section, namely, the priority of the Old Testament versus the priority of the New Testament as it pertains to Old Testament interpretation. Thus, a reminder is once again given of the need to examine theological method in the revised debate.

To summarize the thrust of this paper to this point, the following conclusions can be listed:

1. The older forms of debate which centered around "literal" versus "allegorical" are probably inadequate to explain the essence of the problems involved;
2. Both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists claim to apply literal hermeneutics defined as the grammatical-historical method of interpretation;
3. The starting place for both sides is different, the Old Testament for the dispensationalist and the New Testament for the nondispensationalist (such a difference implies a debate over the priority of the Testaments);
4. A different starting place leads to a difference in the way the Testaments are harmonized;
5. The way that the New Testament writers use the Old Testament does not lead one to abandon dispensational principles;
6. All of the above indicate that the essence of dispensationalism will probably be found in the arena of theological method. The pertinent question is how this involves in any way the method of literal interpretation.

The Significance of Proper Theological Method

It has been shown that dispensationalists and nondispensationalists approach the harmonizing of the Old and New Testaments in different ways. That is, each has adopted a different methodology. The great departure of the two methods from each other is seen in the starting points used in each case. Which approach is right? This writer believes

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., see also Part II in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct.-Dec. 1985):306-19.

that the dispensational approach is superior because of its grounding in biblical theology. Much of the arguing in the later forms of the debate may be traced to a misunderstanding of how biblical theology and systematic theology are related in the proper development of a theological position.

Biblical theology is used here in its technical sense as "that branch of theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible."⁴⁴ One of the keys to understanding biblical theology is to recognize that it is limited to the Bible as the only source of revelation to be systematized.⁴⁵ This is different than systematic theology which requires the theologian to take into account general revelation, historical tradition, and other sources, to a greater degree. That is not to say that biblical theology and systematic theology are not properly related. Ryrie makes the significant comment that

Strictly speaking Biblical Theology is foundational to Systematic Theology . . . Logically and chronologically Biblical Theology should take precedence over Systematic Theology, for the order of study ought to be introduction, exegesis, historical backgrounds, Biblical Theology, and finally Systematic Theology.⁴⁶

Although nondispensationalists surely understand this point, the actual outline of how systematic theology is derived will show how the basic differences outlined in the last section can be seen in light of this relationship between biblical and systematic theology.

Outlining the approach of dispensational theology first, one might list the following broad, theoretical points or steps in determining one's dispensational systematic theology:

1	The recognition of one's own preunderstanding
2	The formulation of a biblical theology from the Old Testament based upon literal interpretation (grammatical-historical method of interpretation) of the Old Testament text
3	The formulation of a biblical theology from the New Testament based upon literal interpretation (the grammatical-historical method of interpretation) of the New Testament text, which method includes the backgrounds arrived at via number 2 above
4	The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all inputs to theology including 2 and 3 above

It should be noted that these steps are not performed in linear fashion to a final conclusion. A theologian cycles through the list over and over making adjustments based upon new inputs such as improved exegesis of certain passages. Nonetheless, the basic sequence appears to be a valid one if there is to be any order to theology at all.

⁴⁴ Charles Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959), 12.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

The first step is a realization of one's own presuppositions as he comes to the task of not just systematic theology but biblical theology as well. That is why this step is number one. It would be virtually impossible to find the real essence of any system such as dispensationalism if this step is not admitted.⁴⁷ The second step is what has been called the starting place of theology. With dispensationalism it is the literal interpretation of the Old Testament. The output from this step becomes one of the inputs to the third step of producing a biblical theology of the New Testament. In both the second and third steps there is dedication to the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. This is not to claim that dispensationalists have been perfect in this matter. It is merely to state adherence to this approach as the accepted principle to follow. Finally, the point of culmination is the synthesis of the inputs of theology. It is important to note that the sequence indicates a dependence upon what has been determined before.

If that is the case, one does not have to look hard to find a major distinction between this dispensational approach and the nondispensational one as evidenced in Ladd, Poythress, et al. Notice the nondispensational sequence below:

1	The recognition of one's own preunderstanding
2	The formulation of a biblical theology of the New Testament based upon the literal interpretation (grammatical-historical interpretation) of the New Testament text
3	The formulation of a biblical theology of the Old Testament based upon the New Testament understanding of the Old Testament text
4	The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all of the inputs above to theology including the results of 2 and 3 above

The presentation above is certainly different from the dispensational outline.⁴⁸ The nondispensational approach has many places where it can suffer damage in developing its theological system. First, because priority of the New Testament with its biblical theology ahead of the Old Testament's biblical theology, one might fall into the trap of minimizing Old Testament backgrounds to the New Testament text. This particular problem does not seem to be as major as the ones to follow.

A second problem is that at point number 3, the grammatical-historical interpretation of the Old Testament is subordinated to the conclusions of New Testament biblical theology. In essence, this is the abandonment of the literal interpretation of the Old Testament (at least in eschatology) and is the basis of the classical debate about "literal" versus "allegorical" interpretation. Too much room is given for "undoing" or "replacing" the results that would have been obtained in performing a true biblical theology of the Old Testament. Because the dispensational approach at the point of

⁴⁷ This step is a necessary precaution. Without this point one would be hardpressed to move from the polemical mode to one of dialogue.

⁴⁸ At this point one might ask if there is only a difference when eschatology is in view. One would want to be careful not to produce a simplistic answer to that question. The history of the debate might suggest yes. But the intertwining nature of doctrine might suggest more caution.

bringing in the New Testament has the Old Testament biblical theology in hand, the approach becomes one of "enhancing" or "expanding."

However, on the other hand, the Old Testament is almost an afterthought to the nondispensationalist who uses the New Testament like the presidential power of veto over exegetical results in the Old Testament text. When the nondispensationalist comes to the Old Testament text with the New Testament in hand, the truth he finds appears to be a "scaling down" of what he already has. Consequently, there is a tendency to leave off grammatical-historical interpretation in order to make the Old Testament text sit at the "same level" of his New Testament truth. This is in stark contrast to the dispensational model which sees the priority of the Old Testament text in the formulation of Old Testament biblical theology.

The third place where error is easy to make is at point # 4. When doing systematic theology the theologian cannot rise above his sources. But as a result of # 3, there is actually no true Old Testament biblical theology which can serve as input to the systematic level. As a result the problem at # 3 filters down to the next level at # 4. Such is the nature of sequence. According to Wolfe's analogy of a world view (theology) as a web which has been spun, the outer strands of the web only make perfect sense if the inner strands of the web are correct.⁴⁹ Thus, we are back to the significant change that takes place when one opts for a different starting place for theology, i.e., Old Testament or New Testament.

One must ask why the dispensational sequence is best. The reason lies in the nature of the *progress of revelation*. By its very nature revelation builds upon previous revelation. A nondispensationalist knows clearly that the New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ relies heavily on the revelation of Israel given in the Old Testament. Should it be surprising that theological formulations also recognize the same sequence? The theological superstructure should resemble in some form the revelational foundation from which it has been derived. Nondispensationalists will not readily accept this however:

Premillennialism's (especially dispensationalism's) tendency to give the millennium a Jewish flavor has been criticized for centuries, two early critics being Caius of Rome (ca. 200) and Origen. The premillennialist must be on guard lest literal Israel retain such a significant place in God's plan and program that it virtually displaces the church as the primary object of God's working. He must also beware of interpreting the New Testament with the Old, thereby nullifying progressive revelation.⁵⁰

What Erickson has done in the above quote is to warn correctly of the other extreme. In developing a New Testament biblical theology, the New Testament text must have center place. The Old Testament provides one source of background material. The

⁴⁹ See David Wolfe, *The Justification of Belief* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982).

⁵⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1977): 106. It may be significant that Erickson places little emphasis upon progressive revelation in his *Christian Theology*, 3 Vols., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983.

grammatical-historical method of interpretation must remain intact as one views the New Testament. However, that is not to say that dispensationalism has fallen into that particular trap as Erickson may be saying. As Ryrie points out, "The true concept of progressive revelation is like a building--and certainly the superstructure does not replace the foundation."⁵¹ The dispensational sequence is true to this historical perspective in which written revelation has been given. The nondispensational sequence is not. But the sequence is a matter of theological method. Thus, the essence of dispensationalism, that which distinguishes it from nondispensational systems, is bound up in its theological method. Such a conclusion is not surprising since Ladd's earlier statement gave hints in such a direction.

A Refined Version of the Sine Qua Non of Dispensationalism

At this point it is possible to formulate with more precision the essence of dispensationalism in light of the foregoing remarks. First, it may be helpful to summarize the three marks of dispensationalism given by Ryrie:⁵²

1. A distinction between Israel and the Church
2. A consistent literal interpretation of all of the Scriptures
3. A doxological purpose of biblical history

The last point has been one of recent pondering on the part of this writer. While it does not seem to get much credence from either side in the debate two recent factors have helped me to reconsider its validity. However, for the purposes of this paper I will not address this point here.⁵³

In relation to the remaining two points, I offer for consideration the following statements:

1. The preservation of the literal interpretation of the Old Testament at all points of theologizing in the light of progressive revelation;
2. The distinction between Israel and the Church.

Concerning # 1, the points of theologizing are (a) Old Testament biblical theology in which the priority of the Old Testament text is acknowledged, (b) the development of New Testament biblical theology for which accurate Old Testament biblical theology is a background input, and (c) formulation of Systematic Theology in which the literal interpretation of the Old Testament is not abandoned at the point of harmonization with

⁵¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 95.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 43-47.

⁵³ Two recent factors have led to my reexamination of this question: (1) teaching a recent class on Christology/Soteriology forced me to readdress Reformed approaches and emphases, including the strong focus on individual redemption found in that school of thought; and (2) recent discussions with Tommy Ice (who can be very convincing at 2 AM in the morning at a Pre-Trib conference!) has kept me from ignoring this issue.

the New Testament and other sources of theology. The proper sequence of theological method based upon a correct understanding of the progress of revelation prohibits the reading of the New Testament into the Old although expansion and enhancements are allowed. This is not literal interpretation of the Bible in general, but ***the guaranteeing of literal interpretation of the Old Testament through the use of a correct theological method.*** Thus, literal interpretation tied to correct theological method is a distinctive of dispensationalism.

Concerning the second point involving a distinction between Israel and the Church, Ryrie's idea should be left intact. This truth is the most basic ramification of the first point above.⁵⁴ For example, nondispensationalism, with its starting place of the New Testament, views the Old Testament promises to Israel through the grid of New Testament truth, i.e., the Church. It is much easier then for the politico-ethnic nature of the promises to Israel in the Old Testament to be obscured or dropped altogether. On the other hand, dispensationalism with its starting place in the Old Testament will later be able to integrate New Testament truth with less corruption of the national promises to Israel. Improved exegesis may account for the growing rapprochement which Radmacher sees between the two camps.⁵⁵ Each side is recognizing both points of continuity and discontinuity concerning Israel and the Church.⁵⁶ However, the starting place of dispensationalism in the Old Testament seems to assure an "Israeli" flavor to the developed system.

Concluding Remarks

The need for refinement of Ryrie's well constructed distinctives for dispensationalism should not be surprising in light of the need for doctrinal development.⁵⁷ That dispensationalism and covenantalism have moved closer together is clear. What does the future hold? Is it possible to find common ground in eschatological territory where no basic distinctions can be seen? If the thesis of this paper is correct, the answer to that question is "no." The differences are basic at the level of theological method as it relates to the literal interpretation of the Old Testament. The two positions will not continue to move toward a merger because there is disagreement at the starting point of theology (Old versus New Testaments). Continued refinement of exegesis might still cause some motion toward the middle. This could be due to the fact that there is more common ground between the Testaments than the Old Schools realized. However, just like the graph of a hyperbola grows ever closer to its axis, it never does reach out and touch it. Hence, the final common ground of eschatology in evangelicalism may turn out to be a spirit of love in the heart when there is no agreement of mind. The only

⁵⁴ I will not go into the issue here of whether the distinction is absolute or relative. My main concern is the overall theological approach.

⁵⁵ Radmacher, 163.

⁵⁶ See Kenneth L. Barker, "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25 (March 1982): 3-16.

⁵⁷ See Blaising's article, note 1.

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December 1995*

alternative is for one side to abandon the basic sequence to its theological method. At stake is the literal interpretation of the Old Testament.