

Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics

HERMENEUTICAL LONGEVITY: BUSTING MYTHS ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF  
DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS

by  
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# HERMENEUTICAL LONGEVITY: BUSTING MYTHS ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS

## Introduction

In recent discussions with a well-informed Church member, it dawned upon me that one myth about Dispensationalism which has been raised in some orbits is the myth that Dispensationalism finds its hermeneutical roots in enlightenment thinking. The implication is of course one of guilt by association: “Dispensational hermeneutics comes from Enlightenment philosophy. The Enlightenment birthed Theological Liberalism and Higher Criticism. Therefore, the Christian cannot trust Dispensationalism. It is too close to theologically liberal hermeneutics.”

Is this true? Do dispensational hermeneutics and higher criticism have so much in common that no one should trust Dispensationalism? What exactly are the accusations?

The aim of this presentation is to articulate the myth/accusation and assess its credibility. Fortunately, if you research the assertion that Dispensational hermeneutics has its roots in enlightenment thinking you will struggle to find any explanation of the myth much less a pedantic review in a journal or periodical. Some academic works have come onto the horizon in recent times. And this issue also reared its head in the 1980s through the work of George Marsden.

## The Myth

Like the more popular myth that Dispensationalism is wrong because it is new, those who use this accusation only offer a straw man argument built on false assumptions. The myth/accusation is that “dispensational theology was built upon modernist epistemic foundations.”<sup>1</sup> Some historians argue for “a philosophical link between dispensationalism and

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<sup>1</sup> B. M. Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

the modified Baconian philosophy of Thomas Reid.”<sup>2</sup> Even in 1975 G. C. Berkouwer wrote about how “historical criticism” brought about the rise of “concentrated attention to the text of Scripture” apart from dogmatics, implying a link in origin for any system which solely emphasized the text of Scripture:

“We now confront the noteworthy fact that, during the rise of historical criticism, concentrated attention to the text of Scripture was considered vital and necessary. Criticism protested against every form of Scripture exposition which went to work with *a priori* and external standards. It wanted to proceed from Scripture as it actually existed; it sought to understand Scripture in the way in which it came to us in order thus to honor the “interprets itself” [method]. This is what it claimed in its historical exposition of Scripture: something supposedly free of all the *a prioris* of dogmatic systems or ecclesiastical symbolics.”<sup>3</sup>

Two prevailing strands of the myth can be traced in the literature. The more popular one is that the Dispensational hermeneutic itself originates in Baconian Enlightenment philosophy/Scottish Common-Sense Realism (CSR).<sup>4</sup> The other is that the Dispensational hermeneutic originated in an effort to explain the Bible to modern man in a culture where the

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<sup>2</sup> Adam Van Wart, “The Relationship of Common Sense Realism to Dispensationalism’s Hermeneutics and *A Priori* Faith Commitments,” (paper presented at the Southwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2005), <https://bible.org/article/relationship-common-sense-realism-dispensationalism%E2%80%99s-hermeneutics-and-ia-priorii-faith-comm> (accessed 8 July 2024), par. 1.

<sup>3</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, ed. Jack Bartlett Rogers, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1975), 130. Earlier on in the same book, Berkouwer speaks of “literary-historical” hermeneutics synonymously with historical criticism (112). He also notes that while the interpreter does not “relinquish the general principles of hermeneutics, but may only allow a theological factor to dominate them” (113). So, for Berkouwer, the problem with “literary-historical” hermeneutics is that it is not dominated by theological *a priori*. That is what makes it synonymous with historical criticism in his estimation. Berkouwer follows Abraham Kuyper. Thus, he speaks of finding a “hidden meaning” for the sake of application as we would describe it in all fairness (13). Of course, speaking of “hidden meaning” is vague in and of itself and invites inevitable misunderstanding. It is also important to remember that Berkouwer seems to treat historical-criticism and literary-historical methods synonymously as he alternates between the two with no distinction.

<sup>4</sup> Francis Bacon is considered the “father of modern scientific method.” In his reaction to the prevailing medieval view of science, Bacon promoted the idea that one could arrive to authoritative conclusions through consistent observation and experimentation when presuppositions are abandoned and external influences are abandoned.

world was being thought of in more scientific terms, and thus, dispensational ministers borrowed ideas and language from scientific thinking of the day.

Renowned historian Mark Noll asserted in 1985 that Scottish “Common Sense [Realism] loomed large in the dispensational theology which became a foundational perspective for many evangelical groups in the late nineteenth century and beyond.”<sup>5</sup> Immediately after his statement he provides quotes from both R. A. Torrey and Lewis Sperry Chafer describing the study of Scripture in Baconian scientific terms.

Adam Van Wart in a 2005 *ETS* presentation concludes: “[...] Common Sense Realism [...] was the often unstated philosophical undergirding of the earlier dispensationalists [...]”<sup>6</sup> It is stated more than once, “that the progenitors of dispensationalism most likely adopted the common philosophical assumptions of the day unknowingly.”<sup>7</sup> The emphasis is of course on adopting CSR.

This strand aims to demonstrate the thesis that Dispensational thought had adapted CSR by reiterating that it “was the unquestioned philosophy of choice for 19th century theologians and indeed, the American mindset in general.”<sup>8</sup> The overall idea is that anyone who “viewed Scripture to be objective fact, needing only to be read, understood, and classified via common sense, plain, normal, or literal interpretation,”<sup>9</sup> had in one way or another emerged from CSR foundations. A third defense of this view is to muster a group of phrases and statements on hermeneutics from dispensational leaders emphasizing approaches like “plain,” “normal,” or “common sense,” implying an influential connection to CSR.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the view that dispensational hermeneutics emerged from CSR effectively defines the philosophy broadly as a belief in the received laws of language innate to all people alike.

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<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Noll, “Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought.” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer, 1985), 223.

<sup>6</sup> Van Wart, 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 7 n 33.

The second strand to the myth that “dispensational theology was built upon modernist epistemic foundations,” is promoted by Brendan M. Pietsch in his 2011 dissertation *Dispensational Modernism (DM)* and 2015 Oxford University Press publication under the same title. The view argues that dispensational hermeneutics arose due to a nineteenth century cultural belief that mankind’s religious and social problems could be answered with scientific knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Thus, dispensational hermeneutics were designed as one among many efforts to define scientific biblical interpretation.

Higher criticism’s search for scientific reputability resulted in an approach to Bible study dominated by a rejection of “canonicity or supernatural authorship as appropriate considerations for scientific studies of texts,” resulting in analysis of external historical reconstructions as the basis of interpretation.<sup>12</sup> The prevailing idea of this form of scientific study of Scripture was Hegelian historicism which deemed all literature including the Christian Bible as strictly a result of cultural circumstances in history.<sup>13</sup> Thus, “Reconstructing the cultural interests, political power, and theological agendas of the ancient Israelites at various moments in history became the goal of historical critics.”<sup>14</sup> The entire system was governed by anti-supernaturalist presuppositions.

Dispensationalism on the other hand popularized “Five interlocking assumptions” according to *DM*: (1) Scripture needed to be interpreted in order to be understood. (2) Any genuine benefit from Bible interpretation could only be attained via the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit in the interpreter. (3) “study required the use of engineering methods, such as classification, enumeration, cross-references, and endlessly bi-directionally referential examination and dissection of literary units.” (4) A belief in progressive revelation in harmony with the law of non-contradiction. (5) The intertextuality of Scripture was dominated by numerology, typology, and interconnected themes.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 96.

<sup>12</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2011), 144.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 96-97.

## Analyzing Dispensational Hermeneutics as CSR

### *CSR Tenants*

Before moving onward to assessing the myths themselves, it is important to provide an outline of *CSR* lest the reader assume that common sense as a philosophy refers to the modern idea of thinking it is opposite of foolishness. Nor is it a philosophy that simply acknowledges the innate ability to understand grammar when all things are equal.

Scottish Common Sense Realism is a philosophy that rose to prominence in the eighteenth-century through the work of Francis Hutcheson, Adam Smith, and Thomas Reid. Reid has been called the “*sin qua non* of eighteenth-century Scottish common-sense thought.”<sup>16</sup> *CSR* philosophy became wildly influential in “nineteenth-century American Protestantism [...] shaping American Protestantism between the late 1700s and the Civil War.”<sup>17</sup> This was due in large part to the work of John Witherspoon at the College of New Jersey which became Princeton University.

Michael BeLashmutt summarizes *CSR* in twelve principles:

(1) a belief in the existence of all things of which I am conscious; (2) that my thoughts are my own; (3) that my memories are reliable; (4) that my existence is self-constant; (5) that things really exist which I perceive by my senses; (6) that I have ‘some degree’ of power over my actions and the determination of my free will; (7) that my natural capacity to distinguish truth from error is reliable; (8) that the other person has an intelligent inner life; (9) that actions as well as words indicate thoughts in the mind of myself and the other; (10) that testimony and personal opinion are matters of regard; (11) that there are events which are self-evident; and lastly (12) that nature will remain phenomenological self-referential: things will be as they have been in similar situations.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Michael W. BeLashmutt, “Nathaniel William Taylor and Thomas Reid: Scottish common-sense philosophy’s impact upon the formation of New Hven theology in Antebellum America,” *SJT* 58 (1), 61.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel G. Reid et al., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> Belashmutt, 62-63.

BeLashmutt continues: “Reid’s common-sense philosophy held as its central tenet the belief that human sensory capacity was reliable and profitable for creating a map of the world, from which one could confidently navigate through life.”<sup>19</sup>

Principles six, seven, twelve and BeLashmutt’s final assessment ought to jump out at anyone holding to the doctrine of total depravity. The central theme is the moral goodness of man at heart and thus the innate ability of all people alike to accurately judge the world, life, and history and make sense of all things within themselves.

Five critiques immediately come to mind. One, Virtually all major leading Dispensational thinkers in modern history have explicitly demonstrated a belief in total depravity and thus an inability to make complete sense of one’s own existence and of the world and history around him on his own.

Two, CSR’s rejection of total depravity and belief in man’s innate moral goodness locates epistemological authority within the individual which undermines Biblical authority. Pietsch rightly notes that dispensationalists across the board have held that “Non-seminary-trained interpreters could offer expert interpretation based on a thorough knowledge of the text of the Bible itself (and the guiding of the Holy Spirit).”<sup>20</sup> When discussing the dispensational view of the guiding ministry of the Holy Spirit he rightly comments that “The guidance of the Holy Spirit was necessary.” And “the student needed to be internally receptive to the Bible in order to make any profitable study.”<sup>21</sup> Without a doubt, some early dispensational thinkers such as Arthur T. Pierson did consider themselves Baconian in approach.<sup>22</sup> Yet, Pietsch correctly observes that a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>20</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 105.

<sup>21</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2011), 185.

<sup>22</sup> George Marsden’s quotation of Arthur Pierson has been widely cited but I have yet to find the actual Pierson source: “I like Biblical theology that does not start with the superficial Aristotelian method of reason, that does not begin with an hypothesis, and then wrap the facts and the philosophy to fit the crook of our dogma, but a Baconian system, which first gathers the teachings of the word of God, and, then seeks to deduce some general law upon which the facts can be arranged” (George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism 1870-1925* [New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982], 55). In any case, we should assume this frame of mind for Pierson is accurate since according to Thomas McIver Pierson truly did advocate a CSR approach, neither was he a young earth creationist (Thomas Allen McIver, *Creationism: Intellectual Origins, Cultural Context, and Theoretical Diversity* [PhD dissertation, University of California], 1989).

close examination of the two systems demonstrates “radically different” hermeneutical principles.<sup>23</sup>

Three. Following Pietsch, Dispensationalists drew their language primarily from the “Protestant Reformation—“the Bible alone” and “the priesthood of all believers”—than from any distinct philosophical epistemology.”<sup>24</sup> Communication techniques are major indicators of one’s hermeneutical philosophy. Dispensational hermeneutics and CSR are distinct in this regard.

Four. Those who accuse dispensational hermeneutics of being in essence CSR seem to only think of CSR as the rigorous articulation of grammar and adherence to whatever a text bears. That is not in any sense the central thesis of CSR. CSR’s central thesis is the reliability of mankind’s “sensory capacity” due to his innate goodness.

Five. One of CSR’s biggest failures is its vagueness in criterion which helps explain why it withered in usage.<sup>25</sup> In short, it is intellectually dishonest to declare a philosophical system to be the root of a hermeneutical system when the philosophical system is vague enough to be placed anywhere.<sup>26</sup> Dispensational hermeneutics and CSR are unrelated.

### **Assessing Strand Two**

The second strand to the myth that “dispensational theology was built upon modernist epistemic foundations,” is that dispensational hermeneutics were designed as an effort to define scientific biblical interpretation. Pietsch’s work is useful in many ways. And he is often very fair

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<sup>23</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 122.

<sup>24</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2011), 162. Pietsch is very careful in his assessment of the dispensationalist view of the role of the Holy Spirit in Bible interpretation. He essentially recognizes that dispensations unanimously believe in the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit for anyone to gain true value from Bible interpretation: “The Holy Spirit’s guidance was necessary but not sufficient” (Ibid., 186).

<sup>25</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and J.I. Packer, *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 152.

<sup>26</sup> My final point may explain why CRS is rare in philosophical works. Another observation that should not go unmentioned is Van Wart fails to acknowledge James Hall Brooks’ education which should massively inform one as to the actual influence Scottish Common-Sense Realism upon dispensational thinking. James H. Brooks was a second-generation Presbyterian Pastor and graduate of Princeton Seminary. We should have no doubt that not only was Darby well versed in philosophical categories of thought, but Brooks would have been equally skilled and knowledgeable having graduated from America’s epicenter of Common-Sense Realism. Nothing has yet been found from Dr. Brooks on the matter.



in his assessments. One example is his disproving of the myth that dispensational hermeneutics is CSR or Baconian thought, or at least immerses from it.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, his response fails to provide a correct assessment of the formation of dispensational hermeneutics. *DM* describes the formation in four parts. *First*, the reality that the meaning of the Bible was plain and effective for anyone indwelt by the Holy Spirit is perceived as one of many “marketing devices for religious leaders and Bible teachers.”<sup>28</sup> *Second*, the brethren movement in the United Kingdom “developed and popularized a new method of approaching the Bible”<sup>29</sup> which focused on explaining a topic throughout the whole of Scripture demonstrating Scripture’s cohesion. *Third*, the key to Bible interpretation is numerology and typology.<sup>30</sup> Numerology and typology were key in revealing “the intricate and endlessly nuanced connections between the literary parts and the whole of the Bible.”<sup>31</sup> *Fourth*, Dispensational hermeneutics brought its system together which could compete with Higher Criticism through the distinctive features of a historical-grammatical hermeneutic and the Israel Church distinction.<sup>32</sup> At the heart of this view is the assumption that dispensationalism and high criticism arose from the central motivation of understanding the Bible scientifically.

While there are a number of inaccurate assessments, and poor management over technical terminology in the work, it should be stated that *DM* is valuable for studying the modern history of dispensational thought. *DM* is a well researched work and makes its point explicit. Cory Marsh and James Fazio commend B. M. Pietsch for a “more sympathetic ear, even recognizing

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<sup>27</sup> Disclaimer: Pietsch’s work never presents dispensationalism or dispensational thought in terms of ancient hermeneutics that gained formal systematization under Darby, Brookes, and others. The presentation takes place entirely within the setting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thus, his presentation continues in the stream of thought that Dispensationalism as a whole is new.

<sup>28</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 100.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. “Although chiefly a method of interpretation, biblical numerics also provided reasons for confidence in the inspiration and unity of the biblical texts” (*Ibid.*).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Rejection of historicism, in order to make sense of evidence of change over time in the Bible, dispensationalists proposed that the text needed to be interpreted in light of some hard theological distinctions. Chief among these stood a distinction between the categories of “Israel” and “the Church” (*Ibid.*, 117). Also, “Meaning was born from linguistic relationships” (*Ibid.*, 119).

the “scientific” approach of dispensationalism in its literary intertextual readings that reflect intellectual engineering methods of quantification.”<sup>33</sup> It accurately represents the development of dispensational thought in post-Antebellum America and places it in a cultural context of competing methods of bible interpretation at that time in American history.

The central failure of the work is that it does not trace the entire historical timeline of dispensational thought. More accurately, it traces the historical timeline in only the United Kingdom and the United States of America. While CSR errs on the side of philosophy, *DM* errs on the side of historiography.

Provided the benefit of the doubt, it should be noted that *DM*'s 2015 publication took place two years before the landmark work *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, edited by Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, and eight years before *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First Century to the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Cory Marsh and James Fazio. And its publication was in the same year as *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* by the late William C. Watson. A peripheral reading of any of these works will greatly assist the pastor, scholar, or layman in verifying the history of dispensational thought.

My aim here is to briefly demonstrate that the four pillars of dispensational thought as outlined in *DM* are in fact not new in any sense and can be traced throughout church history prior to the seventeenth century. The first pillar to be critiqued is the idea that the Brethren movement in the United Kingdom “developed and popularized a new method of approaching the Bible.” We have no contention with the view that the Brethren developed and popularized Dispensational hermeneutics in so far as development is understood in terms of systematizing, not creating. Our objection to the assertion lies in the idea that dispensational hermeneutics is a “new method of approaching the Bible.”

Jeremiah Mutie proves the opposite point in a chapter entitled “Nicene Era (AD 250-430).” In it, he demonstrates that this period of church history while characterized by many changes in hermeneutics (primarily a move from a literal approach to a figurative approach in

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<sup>33</sup> Cory M. Marsh and James I. Fazio, “Retrospect and Prospect of Dispensational Thought,” in in *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First Century to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Cory Marsh and James Fazio (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023), 365.

pop-culture), was still replete with thinkers who held to the characteristic literalism of dispensational thought “pertaining to the imminent return of Christ and the events preceding and succeeding that advent.”<sup>34</sup> Paul Hartog’s assessment of Larry Crutchfield’s work aligns with this claim in the same volume recognizing the Israel Church distinction as key to dispensational hermeneutics: “Irenaeus believed that the Church proper was built upon an apostolic foundation. So the church did not exist prior to the apostles, thus marking off the church from national Israel.”<sup>35</sup>

Another critique is the place of numerology and typology in dispensational hermeneutics. *DM* does not provide a sufficient amount of evidence to prove that numerology, even in its most literal sense or typology was a key element in early dispensational thought. We have no doubt that there have been dispensationalists who have utilized an allegorical approach to numerics in the Bible which is the picture drawn in *DM*. But the burden of proof lies upon the assertion. This is not to be conflated with the fact that dispensational thinking has always interpreted explicit numbering in Scripture literally. Such is not a recent development but can be demonstrated in the first centuries of the Christian church.

Virtually all theologians today acknowledge that chiliasm was the view of the early church. Such is one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the kind of literal hermeneutic characterized in dispensationalism. The emphasis in chiliasm is not so much on one thousand years as much as it is on a literal reading of Revelation 20:1-6.

Another example on the issue the role numerics played in early dispensational thought was the often held “year-day tradition.”<sup>36</sup> This view was an early expression of the concept that God is working with mankind in progressive economies of increased special revelation characterized by God’s increased revelation culminating in man’s failure to obey that revelation. The “year-day” expression of dispensations among the patristic fathers “divided human history

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<sup>34</sup> Jeremiah Mutie, “Nicene Era (AD 250-430),” in *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First Century to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Cory Marsh and James Fazio (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023), 121.

<sup>35</sup> Paul A. Hartog, “Patristic Era (AS 100-250), in *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First Century to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Cory Marsh and James Fazio (El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023), 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

into a multi-staged unfolding of 6,000 or 7,000 years.”<sup>37</sup> According to Daniel G. Hummel this “day-year” tradition was widely held by premillennialists of the early nineteenth century and even led men like John Nelson Darby to promote “a premillennialism that assumed that a proper decoding of biblical prophecy would reveal the exact date of Christ’s return,” until the 1830s.<sup>38</sup>

Eventually, Darby, James Inglis and almost all of Christendom came to reject the “year-day theory” of God’s dealings with man which also led to a complete rejection of date setting.<sup>39</sup> I mention this illustration in relation to the role of numerics within dispensational thought, because it shows that numerics have never played a major role outside of a literal reading of numbers in dispensational thought in any era. The emphasis has always been on the naturally occurring built-in corrective of a literal-grammatical-historical interpretation to the dispensational hermeneutic. A literal reading of the text should lead anyone to see salvation history in terms of God’s working through distinct economies of new special revelation. But the complete unraveling of those economies in the minds of the readers takes time and repeated revision based on a literal reading so that the expectation within dispensational hermeneutics is always an increased and more consistent handling of the Bible as a whole. *Semper Reformanda*.

Like numerics the use of types has never been a key element in dispensational thought. If it has, it cannot be argued that it was a new innovation in competition with High Criticism since its use as a key hermeneutical tool in some sectors of Christendom are clear throughout Christian history.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2023), 22.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>40</sup> Take note of typology in *The Epistle of Barnabas*: “(3) But he also was given vinegar and gall to drink when he was crucified. Hear how the priests of the temple have revealed something about this: when the command that “Whoever does not keep the fast shall surely die” was written, the Lord commanded it because he himself was planning to offer the vessel of his spirit as a sacrifice for our sins, in order that the type established by Isaac, who was offered upon the altar, might be fulfilled.” Also, “(7) But what shall they do with the other one? “The other one,” he says, “is cursed.” Notice how the type of Jesus is revealed! (8) “And all of you shall spit upon it and jab it, and tie scarlet wool around its head, and then let it be driven out into the wilderness.” And when these things have been done, the man in charge of the goat leads it into the wilderness, and he removes the wool and places it upon the bush commonly called rachia (the buds of which we are accustomed to eat when we find them in the countryside; only the fruit of the rachia is sweet)” (Michael William Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, Updated ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999], 291–293. It should also be mentioned that three primary uses of typology have come to the fore of dispensational thought today. One is that there are types all over Scripture and they are prophetic in nature. Second is the view that types exist beyond those which are explicitly

The next critique that must be noted is the idea that the availability of everyone to know the Bible equally through the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit as a “marketing device” is categorically rejected. While it should be appreciated that *DM* recognizes the importance of Spirit indwelling to Bible interpretation, the idea that such was a marketing device is unfounded and only arrived to through an uncharitable interpretation of history. It ought to also be recognized that the importance of Spirit indwelling to truly valuable interpretation is a part of the Reformed legacy as well and should not be thought of as new to Christian hermeneutics in any sense:

“Neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe on him, and obtain him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us by and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the gospel. ... Where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost who creates, calls, and gathers the Christian church, without which no one can come to Christ the Lord.”<sup>41</sup>

The final critique of this paper is on the idea that dispensational hermeneutics brought its system together to compete with Higher Criticism through the distinctive features of a historical-grammatical hermeneutic and the Israel Church distinction. At the heart of this view is the assumption that dispensationalism and higher criticism arose from the central motivation of understanding the Bible scientifically.<sup>42</sup> *DM* gathers this much from assertions from dispensationalists such as, “Grammar is the science of correct language.”<sup>43</sup> And further descriptions of what scientific interpretation means from such leaders.

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states but the relationships are primarily correspondences. A third is the view that the only types in Scripture are those which are explicitly stated. Interpreters holding to a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic do utilize typology to varying degrees. Some of that is because typology is not a key hermeneutical tool in dispensationalism. Thus, there is no complete unanimity over the nature and role of typology in hermeneutics among dispensational theologians.

<sup>41</sup> Quotation taken from Martin Luther’s *Larger Catechism* in Eifion Evans, “John Calvin: Theologian of the Holy Spirit,” *Reformation & Revival*, Volume 10, Number 4, Fall 2001, 91.

<sup>42</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 123.

<sup>43</sup> Arthur T. Pierson, *Knowing the Scriptures: Rules and Methods of Bible Study* (London: James Nisbet & Co., Limited, 1910), 76.

F. David Farnell summarizes the major distinctions between dispensational hermeneutics and the hermeneutic of higher criticism in four points. Dispensationalism is characterized by the “grammatico-historical hermeneutic that has its roots in the Reformation of 1517. In contrast, the historical-critical hermeneutic has its roots in deism, rationalism, and the Enlightenment.”<sup>44</sup>

Thomas Baurain affirmed Farnell's assertion by pointing out that a return to “utilizing the original languages, concurrent with the Renaissance study of languages,” and an abandonment of the Medieval approach of multiple senses in favor of a single meaning approach was characteristic of the reformers.<sup>45</sup> The major difference between the Reformers and later dispensationalists is that the hermeneutic was carried to every sector of Scripture without prejudice through the latter group.

Pietsch asserts: “What the literal sense excluded was historicist reimagining of prophetic language that dismissed the possibility of temporal foresight.”<sup>46</sup> The reason for this is because of the issue of authority. Dispensationalists and Reformers acknowledged the supernatural and miraculous on the authority of the Bible. The so-called historicists (higher critics) “dismissed” those realities on principles of uniformitarianism and a Troeltschian ideology of doubting history.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the interpretive result of higher criticism is always a reader response method and its claim to history's unity is a denial of it and emphasis on a closed system.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, a literal approach to Scripture is much older than the Reformation as Paul Hartog has demonstrated:

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<sup>44</sup> F. David Farnell, “Grammatical-Historical Versus Historical-Critical,” in *Biblical Criticism: Beyond the Basics* (Cambridge, OH: Christian Publishing House, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas S. Baurain, “*SOLAR SCRIPTURA: Return to Literal Grammatical-Historical Hermeneutics*,” in *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2017), 311-312.

<sup>46</sup> Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (2015), 121.

<sup>47</sup> Farnell.

<sup>48</sup> Pietsch demonstrates a great confusion of the Higher Critical system when he asserts about dispensationalism the opposite: “The interpreter's gaze thus became authoritative, rather than historically relative doctrines” (Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* [2015], 123). The reason for this is because he seems to view the higher critical approach as utilizing the facts of history when in reality the approach only utilizes the higher critic's interpretation of data that has been collected through archaeology and selections of historical accounts based on the whims of the researcher. There are no sources of authority outside of the researcher. Thus, the result is always a reader response interpretation and absolute subjectivism.

“Concerning literal interpretation, Crutchfield notes how Papias looked forward “with wide-eyed wonder” to the fertility of the coming kingdom. Justin Martyr paralleled the literal fulfillment of past prophecy in the first advent with the future fulfillment of the other prophecies. Ireneus directly spoke of the “clear,” “plain,” and “natural” meaning of Scripture.”<sup>49</sup>

*Dispensational Modernism* claims that the dispensational hermeneutic is a new interpretive system which rose in tandem with higher criticism. Such is categorically wrong. While it may be true that both sides read the text of Scripture and initially interpret the text as a piece of literature, the agreement stops there.<sup>50</sup> Higher Criticism views the reader as the authority for deciding the meaning of the text and its own proponents acknowledge its newness in the stream of history. Dispensationalists unanimously recognize the authority of Scripture and the role the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit plays for proper interpretation and application. While newness of a view—to the best of our current research—is not the deciding factor for the validity of a view, history has borne out that the key components of dispensational thought do appear throughout the history of the Christian church with expanding and contracting pop-culture popularity.

### **Conclusion**

The best summary I have heard concerning the roots of this debate is that the reason Dispensational hermeneutics and Theologically Liberal/Higher Critical hermeneutics seem to mirror one another is because both interpret the Bible literally, but one side believes the Bible is true and the other side does not. The central issue then is one of authority. Dispensational hermeneutics are not based on competition with higher criticism. Neither is their foundation in Scottish Common-Sense Realism. Dispensational hermeneutics are based on the received laws of language which all people experience. Thus, we are not surprised to discover Christian thinkers of the past who demonstrate and advocate key components of the dispensational hermeneutic stretching all the way back to the first century.

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<sup>49</sup> Hartog, 54.

<sup>50</sup> “the critical method... accepts literally the text of Scripture, then rejects its truth” Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1969), 177.

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