A Pauline Dispensational Theology

A Literal Hermeneutics

Two recent books addressed a question concerning theological constructions: *Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*. "This use of "beyond" merely represents a theological construct that cannot claim a biblical context that directly teaches the point scored". [*Four Views on Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology, Gary T Meadows, Ed., Zondervan,2009. 8*] This view of theological construct was based upon an earlier book by [*I. Howard Marshall, Beyond the Bible (Baker, 2004)*]. Marshall contended that NT interpretation "reaches its goal only when it examines the meaning of the text today." Vanhoozer was concerned that in this view of interpretation "exposition by the present-day reader may take us "beyond the original intention" of the biblical authors." [I. Howard Marshall,82] He also questioned the metaphor "beyond", which would involve a separation or gulf between biblical studies and systematic theology. Does combining Biblical contexts go beyond the Bible or does it not form a Biblical context that reflects the progress in revelation? Rather than going beyond the Bible he contends that doctrinal truths are based on what the Bible actually meant by the original author whether it is in one context of a passage or combines contexts of several passages. I would agree with Kevin Vanhoozer with several qualifications:

First, the role of hermeneutics addresses the question of meaning which logically precedes the question of truth. "Doctrines are informative truth claims or propositions about objective realities" based on the interpretation of Scripture. [Vanhoozer,87] I agree that doctrine involves the truth content based on the meaning interpreted from one or several passages which have truth value because Scripture is God's word.

Second, correctly understood meanings of Scripture express doctrinal truth content. To "correctly understand", let's begin with Ryrie's Literal hermeneutics. After struggling through attempts to apply "literal" as a helpful principle of understanding, I chose one of Ryrie's summary statements, "The principle might be called *normal* interpretation"[Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism,* (Chicago: Moody Press,1995) 80] Then I chose the *normal* interpretation as defined by E. D. Hirsch and as recommended by Walter Kaiser, "An author's verbal meaning is *limited* by linguistic possibilities but is *determined* by his actualizing and specifying some of the possibilities". That is the meaning that the interpreter seeks to construe in reading communication. But how does the author actualize and specify the meaning? Hirsch's answer is defined "as a *willed type* which an author expresses by linguistic symbols and which can be understood by another through those symbols". [E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation,* (New Haven, Yale Univ. Press, 1967) 47,49] While this is the approach of General hermeneutics, when applied to special revelation in Scripture several qualifications need to be considered.

Correct understanding of the meaning in the Bible is based on the original **Author's/author's willed type** meaning of the overall message expressed in a text or in several texts addressed to original audiences. The first issue is how does the divine and human authors communicate the meaning in the shared text? Walter Kaiser in the First Council on Biblical Inerrancy posed that they express the same text to communicate identical meanings. This is the case since by inspiration of the text the divine Author shared the full meaning which the human author expressed. (1989)

In a different perspective, I believe that in inspiration, God and the human author share the same text, but they are not necessarily aware of all the same meanings. And they communicate the meanings that each is aware of. That is the reason for considering the **Author's/author's** meaning. The Scripture is God's word which expresses doctrinal truth content. But how can they share the same text and not communicate all the same meanings? The answer lies in the Author's/author's awareness of the meaning intended to be communicated. Is the divine Author aware of more than the human author in the message expressed by the same text?

The answer rests in how much an author is aware of in what he says. When the subject-matter is complex or the audience is unknown, it is common for a student to not fully grasp all that one says or how to express it in its' fullness. On the other hand, God is omniscient and all-knowing in all that He says. Thus, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine" … (2 Tim.3:16) Inspiration tells us that "God breathed *out* …the Scripture. To be sure, human authors wrote the texts, but the Bible originated as an action of God who breathed it out". [Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books,1986) 69] The purpose of inspiration is that the Scriptures are profitable to teach what is true. What the Spirit breaths out intends the full meaning, stated or necessarily implied.

Now a second issue is what in Hirsch's terms does a "***type"*** mean? It is the range of traits or implications that the Author/author actualizes in what is written and specified in the message intended. So, type is a class of traits in a type-message. It has two decisive characteristics. First, "it is an entity that has a *boundary* by virtue of which something belongs to it or does not. In this respect it is like a *class* of objects which is usually thought of as an array of instances arranged within a *class*, but a *type* can be *represented* by a single instance". This is illustrated in Biblical typology; a type is *fulfilled in an antitype*. This means that the overall type-message is **determinate.** At the same time, "the second decisive characteristic of a *type* is that it can always be *represented* by more than one instance". [Hirsch, 49,50] Or the same type-message can be stated in different messages understood. Otherwise, it couldn't be **shareable.** This is what happens in communication,

the author expresses a message in a verbal text, and the interpreter shares the same traits subsumed in the type-message. A **correct** interpretation involves a correspondence between the author's construction of what is to be communicated and the reader's construction of what has been understood, it is a correspondence in type-messages.

In addition, a type-message is a generalization in some sense. Hirsch then characterizes how it is general. "Verbal meaning can never be limited to a unique, concrete content. It can, of course, refer to unique entities, but only by means that transcend the unique entities, and this transcendence always has the characteristics of a typification." [Hirsch, 50] Hirsch explains the typification in the phrase, the "death of Buonaparte". This particular name "Buonaparte" is a particular use of the name, which would not have an identical meaning to "Buonaparte" in another usage, like the "birth of Buonaparte". Each phrase provides a typification or a more general sense of the meaning of "Buonaparte", since it refers to the same person but at two different stages, Buonaparte is general so that the same term can refer to the person "at birth" and "at death".

How does typification affect the meanings of divine and human authorship? Both authors share the text and thus share the overall type- message as expressed in the text. The divine Author is also aware of all the traits that are implied by the type- *message*. These traits or implications may either be unstated but necessary to understand the subject matter or unstated traits necessary for a future audience to grasp what is meant. The human author may be aware of only what the type- message of the text intends to express to the original audience. The divine Author knows that and what the text intends to mean to any future audience. It is not sensus plenior [fuller, Raymond Brown] but sensus plenus [fulness]. How is that possible?

That is possible if the message is trans-historical as it is in the Constitution, or literature, or in much of the Bible. The human author may be aware of a universal message and expresses it as relevant to relate to any future generation. However, in the Bible there are cases in prophesy where the divine Author has a unique awareness of what is meant. This is the third issue in Hirsch's definition of verbal meaning. Since verbal meaning in Scripture is a ***willed*** *type meaning,* and Peter said about ***will***, "prophesy (the type) never came by the ***will*** of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit". (2 Pet.1:20-21) To the extent that this refers to both foretelling and forthtelling, then God has the role of prompting and guiding along the Biblical author to speak the prophetic message. And what is necessarily implied but unspoken in the message, these implications the human author may be unaware of, but God wills to include them in what is intended to mean, whether stated or not.

As an example, Hebrews 10:25 exhorts an audience to draw near to God in prayer, "as you see the Day approaching". What was involved in the Day approaching? That historical author and reader both could have been aware of it in this case since the book of Hebrews was written about AD 65-68. Jesus had spoken of the destruction of Jerusalem that would occur in AD 70. Both author and reader could see what had been prophesied in Luke 21:5-6 and 20-24 when Jerusalem had been prophesied to be destroyed by Rome. Much of the audience of Hebrews probably lived to see that destruction, but the Day of the Lord's return that followed in the text (21:25-28), didn't immediately follow in that day. The divine Author is aware of all that happened in that Day, but would the human author be aware of when it would happen? The day in which Christ actually would return can read what is prophesied in Luke about it and can also recognize in their day Jerusalem's destruction when it happens. The divine Author willed to have it written and was aware of all that was written about what would happen, in either AD 70 or in the Day of Jesus return.

A final benefit of Hirsch's view of *normal* interpretation is that type-message provides a basis for interpretation that is **objective.** It is objective because a type-message is a **determinate** entity, having correctly interpreted the meaning of the whole text. As determinate, the message has a boundary so that implied traits of the type are included and other traits are excluded. An argument that is based on the textual evidence can be advanced to support the interpretation as correct. While this process of validation does not prove the interpretation to be correct, but it does provide an *evidential conviction* that the truth content of the interpretation is correct. [Elliott Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: Advancing the Discussion,* (Eugene, Or.: WIFF & STOCK, 2023) 165-182.]

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Based on this hermeneutic, *Theological Constructions* are understood as the divine Author's meaning. One example of a construct is "Trinity" which refers to "God" as revealed with in a consideration of the progress of revelation. Trinity refers to the unity and complexity of God; He is in essence One, who is revealed in history in three Persons; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, in Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God" … Moses is aware of God, while the divine Author is aware of three Persons implied in the concept of the one essence of God. So, when God said, "Let Us make man in Our image" (1:26) God was aware of the plurality of Persons involved in the creation of mankind of which, Moses was aware in the use of plural pronouns, "in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them". (1:27) But Moses may not have been aware of all implied in male and female, as even men are not today.

Another example of a theological construction in the progress of revelation is *Dispensationalism*. *It suitably* represents Paul's view of the theological construction which

reveals God's plan in the outworking of God's purpose in the progress of revelation, unfolded in the whole of Scripture. Charles Ryrie gives a concise definition of the basic subject: *"A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose".* [Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism,* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995)28] In addition, he describes the system: "Dispensationalism reveals the outworking of God's plan in the historical process in a progressive revelation of His glory". [37]

Not only does Dispensationalism represent economies, but it also represents a purpose for each economy, in the outworking of God's climactic purpose, His glory. But it is Paul's viewpoint of these economies expressed in *Ephesians,* in which he reveals two "dispensations" explicitly and he necessarily implies two other dispensations in the context of his writing about his viewpoint.

First, Eph.1:9-10 says, "having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to the good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fulness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth". This speaks of the economy which climaxes the history of our earth. Paul's use of the term "**dispensation of the fulness of times**", introduces his view which included these aspects:

Since, this dispensation has been described as a mystery of His will which was made known, "a mystery in the New Testament sense of the word is something hitherto concealed which has now been disclosed" (F.F. Bruce) Although aspects of His will have been revealed separately before in the Old Testament prophets, this "one dispensation is an economy of the Messiah's Kingdom" which brings together all the aspects of God's purposes to full realization of one purpose in Christ, God's glory.

God's purpose in this economy is to bring God's glorification into focus, since "His will" will be fulfilled in the climax of a fallen world. This climax reveals God's glorification when all things in heaven and on earth were brought together under Christ's authority and in mediation of God's rule on earth. What God had appointed in creation in the rule of Adam was lost in his fall but would now be realized. This is the dispensation in which the Son of Man mediates God's will combining what's happening on earth and heaven. In this realization, God's glory will be fully disclosed. So, the first economy spoken of directly is Christ's revelation of God's will in the full display of God's glory. This enabled Paul to see how the Bible's story reached its' climax in Christ's second coming. The complexity and apparent failures experienced in a fallen world still reaches a climax which was glorious as God fulfilled His will through the enablement of Christ. A second aspect of God's will can enable Paul to understand his own ministry is **the dispensation of grace**, (Eph.3:2,9) in which Christ's first coming enablement occurred.

Second, Eph. 3:1-2, and 6 reads "I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles---If indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you…that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel". This **dispensation of grace** does not introduce grace into human history but speaks of grace in its' fulness after what was promised in the first coming of Christ Jesus was now being realized.

The essence of Paul's understanding of his stewardship in the dispensation of grace is found in the preceding passage, Eph.2:11-22:

(1) Gentiles who were once "separate from **Christ**, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" have now been "brought near by the blood of **Christ**" (2:11-13),
(2) **Christ** has made "the two into one new man" and has removed the wall that the law and the tabernacle had erected (2:14-17),
(3) This "new man" with its equality in spiritual privilege between Jews and Gentiles is the "dwelling of God in the Spirit", **Christ's body** the Church. (2:18-22) This dispensation of grace is the second dispensation spoken of by Paul which enabled all to pursue his ministry with a shared understanding.

These two economies have portrayed Paul's view of God's purpose in the last days of history, in the present ministry which Paul spoke about his epistles and in the future rule mediating God's reign through **Christ**. And both of these are related to **Christ's** accomplished work on the cross which determined the present history (1:3-14; 2:8-10) and the climax of history so that God "might gather together in one all things in **Christ**". (1:10d)

Since God had preparatory purposes to accomplish for the present dispensation, these purposes were implied in previous dispensations. What purpose arose from the condition of the Gentiles before the message of the Gospel brought them grace? That condition was described in Eph. 2:1-3. "You (Gentiles) were dead in trespasses and sin, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience among whom also we (Jews) all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of the flesh…and were by nature children of wrath". This is the theological purpose of the Law for both Jews and Gentiles, as both are condemned in sin and death.

This description of Gentiles as well as Jews is the result of another aspect of the Law's purpose? This historical aspect of purpose is implied in the distinction that the Law made between the uncircumcision and the circumcision. (2:11) The uncircumcision (Gentiles) were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel which

nation was historically formed by the Law of Moses. (2:12) So the economy which separated Gentile nations from Israel yet revealed them both to be condemned in sin and to death was **the dispensation of Law**. The purpose of the economy of law was added because of transgressions present in mankind until the Seed to whom the promise was made. The Law was historically provided to Israel as a Tutor to bring them to Christ (Gal.3:19-25). Israel had the privilege of learning from the law while Gentiles did not unless they lived as Cornelius fearing the God of Israel. (Acts 10:1-48)

The second implied dispensation was one in which Gentiles were "strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph.2:12d) This would be **the dispensation of Promise** in which God purposed to bless Abraham and through Abraham "all nations were to be blessed". (Gen.12:3d and 7) So, the dispensation of promise came into existence as having God's soteriological purpose which Paul knew about and explained in Galatians, "now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made…to your Seed who is Christ…the law, which was given four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant which was confirmed before by God in Christ" (Gal. 3:16-17). That same promise is mentioned in Eph.3:6 as "His promise in Christ through the gospel".

So, the dispensation of promise existed with the patriarchs and continued to exist with the purpose of justification by faith (Gen.15:6). The promise was not annulled when the Law was given but the economy was called dispensation of Law having its historical-theological purpose with Israel and with Gentiles. So, the promise remained as the basis of faith for Israel until it appeared in the gospel of Christ, now addressed to Jew and Gentile in the dispensation of grace (Eph. 3:6). In the dispensation of Law, Israel was to be the Light for the Gentiles.

Conclusion

Since Paul had a view of the outworking of God's purpose in history, which consisted of four dispensations in the progress of revelation, all following Charles Ryrie's definition of "Dispensation", [promise, law, grace, kingdom], I propose that we as the Council of Dispensational Hermeneutics formally adopt that system of "Dispensational Theology". Such a position could provide a contemporary expression of Ryrie's Sine Qua Non with which the academic world could interact. Is not this Pauline System of Dispensationalism textually supported in Ephesians to provide a conviction of the truth defining Dispensationalism?

Mike has engaged with me since I first wrote the article in Walvoord's Tribute which has resulted in fundamental questions from this final proposal:

First, what do we mean by Dispensationalism?

I propose that it is a Biblical Theology in which the purpose of God for a good creation in which the opposition of Satan was permitted to test mankind. That purpose would display fully God's Glory, consisting of grace and truth, which is displayed in the whole of the canon that is displayed most fully in the Dispensation of Christ's Kingdom mediating God's rule over the fallen but redeemed world.

Second, how does Genesis 1-11 contribute to that climactic purpose? In this model, Genesis 1-11 rather than consisting of three introductory dispensations, provides a Literary Setting for the Biblical Theology. And that setting is revealed in the Toladoth sections of Genesis 2:4 and ff.:

1:1-2:3 the **Creation** of a Good heavens and earth

2:4-4:25 the History of the heavens and earth, which permits evil---
The creation of Adam and Eve in the Garden,
The **Fall** of mankind into **evil**, at the deception of the Serpent,
The judgment of the Serpent through the Seed of the woman.

5:1-6:8. the Book of the Genealogy of Adam which will include the seed who will contend with evil---
The descendants from Adam to Noah,
The multiplication of man among whom Noah found grace.

6:8-9:29 the Genealogy of Noah---
The descendants of Noah and the building of the Ark,
The world wide **Flood** to judge all human evil,
The world Governed after the flood,
Noah and his family.

10:1-11:9 the Genealogy of Shem, Ham, and Japheth---
The Table of Nations,
The **Tower of Babel** in which the division of languages which facilitated in the scattering of the nations.

11:10-26 the Genealogy of Shem introducing Terah---

11:27-25:11 the Genealogy of Terah to Abram: THE DISENSATION OF PROMISE

Third, in Ryrie's primary and secondary characteristics of Dispensationalism, he and Mike Stollard are reasoning as Systematic Theologians and reaching a Seven-dispensation Model. I am attempting to reason as an Expositor to reach a Four-dispensation Model that is revealed by Paul. This Model features God's Purpose in the Creation of the Heavens and

the Earth in which the Serpent was allowed to oppose mankind, but God's glory is fully revealed as Christ's defeat of Satan in being bound and reign in the Millennial Kingdom. The New Heaven and New Earth is created free from Satan and sin.