

Toward a Definition of Dispensationalism¹
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No amount of negative evaluation of the modern movement of dispensationalism will ever lead me to abandon my love for the tradition. It was the ministry of a dispensational church, where the people for the most part carried the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, which led me to faith in Christ thirty years ago. It was under dispensational teachers at that church that I cut my teeth on the exposition of the Bible in classes on the Minor Prophets and Dispensationalism as well as able teaching from the pulpit of the church week in and week out. In that assembly I learned the names of men like Chafer, Pentecost, Ironside, and Ryrie (Darby came later). It was under the ministry of such a church I began to devour the Bible and books about the Bible from a dispensational viewpoint (although my reading also included those from Reformed and other camps). In this environment I became a maturing Christian. It was there I truly learned to follow the Lord in my life. Looking back, it is impossible for me to have anything but fondness for this delightful and positive Christian experience.

That is not to say that I have over the years been a non-analytical clone of one or more voices within the movement, but I have stayed within the tradition because I think on the whole it reflects biblical truth. I would characterize my own vantage point as essentially a “refined Ryrie.” But the tradition has rich diversity, a historical fact that many of its detractors gloss over. There has been lively interaction and development within the movement. However, some would focus on this diversity and development within dispensationalism to argue for the absence of any substantial continuity within the tradition. On the other hand, I will argue that there is a rather clear and substantial core of beliefs and concerns prominent in the historical records, which are at the heart of modern dispensationalism and mark it off as distinct to some extent within the world of evangelical Christianity while at the same time being solidly in harmony with the

¹ This article was written a few years ago and is a planned part of an upcoming book on the history of dispensationalism which is nearing completion. It is being provided in this forum but is not to be copied or distributed without the author’s express permission.

commitment to Scripture and salvation through faith in Christ that is at home with every evangelical.²

Misrepresentations of Dispensationalism

Over the years, dispensationalists have encountered a lot of criticism from those outside the tradition. Much of it has been totally undeserved and at times borders on sinful caricature and total misrepresentation. Blasing lamented that dispensationalism had been associated with date-setting, works salvation (two ways of salvation), cheap grace, social pessimism, rejection of the doctrine of the local church, and the gap theory in Genesis 1:1-2.³ Virtually every dispensationalist has experienced such exaggerated criticism. A ministerial colleague once told me that Scofield was to blame for many of the spiritual problems in our churches. The dispensational heritage of Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, has been blamed largely for the carnality of churches within American Christianity through a “new gospel” even though other nondispensational churches within evangelicalism do not show any outward signs of being better off spiritually.⁴

At one professional society meeting, I heard dispensationalism compared to canonical criticism. In addition, using a guilt-by-association argument, dispensationalism has been compared to higher criticism, which breaks the Bible up into parts to the detriment of truth.⁵ What dispensationalist has not heard that the theology that he cherishes stands against the present application of the Ten Commandments, dismisses the

² I will flesh out my view later in this chapter. However, a more detailed defense of this continuity and its significance will be found in the later chapter in this volume entitled “Continental Dispensationalism in the Nineteenth Century.”

³ Craig A. Blasing, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blasing and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 13-14. The issue of date-setting will be taken up in part in a later article in this volume entitled “Pop Culture and Dispensationalism.”

⁴ John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 15-16 and note 1. MacArthur himself follows the dispensational outline of eschatology.

⁵ Oswald T. Allis, “Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of Scripture,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (January 1936): 22-35.

Sermon on the Mount as out of hand for today, and avoids obedience to God's commands as a valid category for sanctification (antinomianism)?

A couple of illustrations will suffice to show the lengths to which such misrepresentation of dispensationalism has been taken.⁶ First, one feature within the history of dispensationalism has been the so-called postponement theory. In this view, Christ offered the messianic kingdom to Israel during the First Advent. However, upon Israel's rejection Jesus turns toward the Gentile mission. The Church is born while the Davidic messianic kingdom is delayed until the Second Advent. Some outside of dispensational circles have taken this interpretive scenario to be a denial of the sovereignty of God. Note the following comments about modern dispensational premillennialism by one covenant theologian:

This view can *only* be called a *recent innovation*. It is rather the product of the dispensational system, of which it is a part, than of the ancient teaching of the Christian Church. ... The Messiah came and offered to establish this [messianic] kingdom. The Jews refused. *Christ was therefore forced to delay* the

⁶ One criticism of dispensationalism that is worthy of note is the accusation that the *Scotfield Reference Bible* teaches the subjugation of the black race due to its teaching about the curse on Ham in Genesis. This assertion is often made. For example, Frederick Price notes that "In 1917, Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, a highly influential Bible commentator, wrote in the notes of his Scofield Reference Bible: 'A prophetic declaration is made that from Ham will descend an inferior and servile posterity.' Though those words and many like them by Bible teachers have no basis in Scripture, they were promulgated as truth. There is virtually no difference between Scofield's words and the utterances of a grand wizard of the Klu Klux Klan" ("The Gospel of Division in the Church," The Black Collegian Online, available from <http://www.black-collegian.com/issues/30thAnn/division2001-30th.shtml>; Internet; accessed 26 May 2003). While one must be sensitive to the racism inherent in American culture at the time of the *Scotfield Reference Bible*, this comparison of Scofield to the KKK by Price is emotional overstatement. Price accurately quotes the note from Genesis 9:1 which has reference to the statement in Genesis 9:24-27. However, to Scofield's credit, the Bible editor does not explicitly mention black people in his rather terse note about subjugation: "A prophetic declaration is made that from Ham will descend an inferior race." Any allusion to a predicted inferior nature of blacks can only be seen as implicit or perhaps read into the words of Scofield rather than clearly taught. It could be that Scofield believed that the black race was in view, but it is hard to know that from the note itself or in the other writings of Scofield, which this writer has seen. Most scholars see the fulfillment of the subjugation mentioned in the verse in Joshua's conquest of the Canaanites when Israel entered the land after the wilderness wanderings. For an example of a modern dispensational commentary that follows this approach, see Allen P. Ross, "Genesis" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 41-42. More balanced on this issue is Tony Evans who shows that many scholars of that day did not teach that the descendants of Ham were black (Anthony Evans and William Dwight McKissic, Sr., *Beyond Roots II* [Wenonah, NJ: Renaissance Productions, Inc., 1994], 15-39. He admits the indirectness of any Scofieldian error when he notes "Obviously Scofield's brief footnote lacked some vital detail and thus fostered faulty fallacies associating servility and inferiority to blackness" (Ibid, 23). Evans' presentation furthermore shows that the debate about the passage in question is not one that is limited to dispensational or even Christian circles. It is a positive mark on the history of dispensationalism when the *New Scofield Reference Bible* removed the note and avoided misunderstanding.

establishment of the kingdom. He *temporarily withdrew* ... but will return to do what he was then *kept from doing*. ... The Church is regarded as a *mere parenthesis* in the history of the kingdom. It has no connection with the kingdom and was unknown to the prophets. It is a sort of *unexpected* “break” which resulted in the “windfall” of the gospel of grace for the nations. Most dispensationalists do not look for very profound results in the preaching of the gospel. The real hope is only in Christ’s return (italics supplied).⁷

Notice the italicized portions of the quote. The impression is given that dispensationalism is man-centered and has no real belief in the sovereignty of God. Such a caricature makes Christ appear to be at the mercy of the historical choices of men in dispensational teaching. An examination of teachings throughout the history of dispensationalism easily shows that such is not the case. Any so-called delay is from the vantage point of Israel and is not a surprise to God. To be sure many dispensationalists have abandoned the use of postponement language partly because of these kinds of misunderstandings and misrepresentations while others have refined the way the delay in the kingdom is discussed so as to emphasize God’s sovereignty in the historical process.⁸ However, the exaggeration of what dispensationalism actually teaches is for the most part unwarranted.

A second major example of the misrepresentation of dispensational teaching is the often-cited assessment by covenant theologian Gerstner:

What is indisputably, absolutely, and uncompromisingly essential to the Christian religion is its doctrine of salvation. A theologian may depart from the Reformed system and travel at its own peril. To depart from the essential salvation pattern is inevitably to depart from Christianity. Consequently, the doctrine which we now consider is of the essence. If Dispensationalism has actually departed from the only way of salvation which the Christian religion teaches, then we must say it has departed from Christianity. No matter how many other important truths it proclaims, it cannot be called Christian if it empties Christianity of its essential message. We define a cult as a religion which claims to be Christian while emptying Christianity of that which is essential to it. If Dispensationalism does

⁷ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1964), 261.

⁸ For an example of dispensationalist teaching which defends postponement language but refines the argument with a clear biblical defense, see J. Randall Price, “Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. John R. Master and Wesley R. Willis, (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 133-65. Progressive dispensationalists, due to their focus on continuity in the dispensational progression through time, including the church, usually abandon parenthesis and postponement terminology to describe the present age. See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993), 26-27, 49-51.

this, then Dispensationalism is a cult and not a branch of the Christian church. It is as serious as that. It is impossible to exaggerate the gravity of the situation.⁹

Gerstner's comments are given in the context of the claim that dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation. He speaks, as others before him have done, of the so-called Scofield problem in which one of the notes in the *Scofield Reference Bible* reads "As a dispensation, grace begins with the death and resurrection of Christ. . . . The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as the fruit of salvation."¹⁰ The implication is that there are two ways of salvation, one before Christ and one after. Unfortunate language from the writings of Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Seminary, is also added to the mix.¹¹ The assertion has been made that the doctrine of two ways of salvation in dispensationalism "dominated from the late 1800's to the 1950's."¹²

Dispensationalists have admitted to the lack of clarity and the potentially misleading nature of such statements as Gerstner notes.¹³ However, dispensationalists can also point to the lack of comprehensive historical study undertaken by those opposed to dispensationalism. It simply will not do to suggest that later dispensationalists have changed the system due to the earlier complaints. One clear and unequivocal counterexample can be seen in the writings of Arno C. Gaebelein. What makes his example interesting is that he was an associate editor of the *Scofield Reference Bible* and one of the closest friends of Scofield.¹⁴ Concerning the salvation of Old Testament

⁹ John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, 1991), 150.

¹⁰ C. I. Scofield, ed., *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1115. See Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing*, 152-54.

¹¹ See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:219; cp. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing*, 160-61.

¹² Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publications, 1985), 7.

¹³ Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing*, 152-54. See John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity" in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg, 337, n. 28.

¹⁴ See Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 94-100.

saints, Gaebelein taught that “no condition is mentioned; for their salvation as well as ours, is ‘not of works’ but of Grace alone.”¹⁵ He makes this remark in his commentary on the Bible book where the Mosaic Covenant is established. It would be impossible to make the unity of one’s view of individual redemption across dispensations any clearer. Yet Gaebelein is not a peripheral theologian on the dispensational scene; he is one of dispensationalism’s major spokesmen during the Scofield to Chafer time period including being a teacher during the early days at Dallas Seminary. The dispensationalist has the right to ask those who charge dispensationalism with two ways of salvation why they consider such clear statements in that historical context as unimportant and why they latch upon other statements that have more ambiguity. In the end, nondispensationalists like Gerstner act like news reporters who constantly try to present their stories in the greatest negative way possible.¹⁶

In light of such misunderstandings and caricatures by the opponents of dispensationalism, it is no wonder that Blaising commented, “Sometimes dispensationalists find these caricatures quite bizarre, and their frequent repetition has a surrealistic quality.”¹⁷ Ryrie long ago, while considering the same intellectual climate, suggested that it is “certainly fair to attempt to prove a position illogical, but it is never fair to misrepresent that position in the attempt.”¹⁸

In spite of these unnecessary exaggerations mostly from those outside of dispensational circles, dispensationalists must be honest about the fact that some confusion has been caused by those within the movement who have made unguarded statements or who have been imprecise in their theological expressions such as the one mentioned above by Scofield. In addition, John Calvin long ago criticized the chiliasts

¹⁵ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Book of Exodus: A Complete Analysis of Exodus with Annotations* (New York: Our Hope Publication Office, n.d.), 21.

¹⁶ Gerstner presents his negative portrayal even while admitting that dispensationalists like Darby, the father of modern dispensationalism, did not teach that Old Testament saints were saved by works (see *Wrongly Dividing*, 151). Gerstner simply does not give such teachings within the history of dispensationalism their proper consideration.

¹⁷ Blaising, “Search for Definition,” 14.

¹⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 207.

(premillennialists) because they limited the kingdom to a thousand years.¹⁹ While his claim predates the rise of modern dispensationalism, it still rings somewhat true for many present-day dispensational presentations. Calvin believed correctly that God's kingdom was a forever kingdom although he incorrectly held to an amillennial understanding of that kingdom. Many dispensational charts and presentations leave the impression, perhaps unwittingly, that the millennial kingdom fulfills all of the kingdom promises. But how can a forever promise be fulfilled in only one thousand years? The millennium is only the inauguration of God's coming kingdom which will last for eternity in fulfillment of all that God has planned and promised (Dan. 7:13-14; Rev. 22:5).²⁰

Is there any hope that the misrepresentations of dispensationalism on the part of other evangelicals will come to an end? Progressive dispensationalists, who view themselves as more involved in the scholarly developments within mainstream evangelicalism, are optimistic that overstated differences such as those discussed in this section as well as clear and unmistakable distinctions in dispensationalism will come to be understood in their proper place.²¹ In addition, some traditional dispensationalists have adopted a posture of loving "across the boundaries" without consciously developing their theological systems with the larger evangelical world in mind.²² Hopefully, the caricatures will diminish in the days ahead.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, XXV, 5; see *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 995.

²⁰ Another area that has created unnecessary reaction is the development in the late nineteenth century of what today is called ultra- or hyper-dispensationalism. Such schemes do not have strong exegetical support and will not be addressed here. Ryrie correctly views ultra-dispensationalism as outside the scope of mainstream dispensationalism (*Dispensationalism*, 197-207).

²¹ Craig Blaising, "Search for Definition," 30-32.

²² I have argued elsewhere that too much is at stake methodologically to see ultimate theological harmony between the two camps of covenant theology and dispensationalism. See Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997), 35-36. This does not mean that traditional dispensationalists ignore *all* developments within evangelicalism.

Various Approaches to the Definition of Dispensationalism

When I made the oral defense of my Ph.D. dissertation, the examination committee was kind enough to let me ask questions of my own at the end. I took the opportunity to ask the three men to define dispensationalism whereupon I received three distinct answers. One defined it as a theological system that highlighted dispensations. A second referred to an Israeli-flavored view of history. A third recited Charles Ryrie's three essential principles of consistent literal interpretation, a distinction between Israel and the Church, and the doxological unifying theme of the Bible.²³ There are, no doubt, elements of truth to all of these answers. In this respect, dispensationalism is not unlike other segments of Christian history where debate over definition arises with reflection on the tradition. Thus, below I will present four major views of the definition of dispensationalism so that the reader can have some sense of what he is dealing with when he previews the historical studies relative to dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism as a Theology Highlighting Dispensations

One of the more popular approaches to defining dispensationalism is to see it as primarily a theological system that believes in and highlights dispensations. A dispensation can be understood as “a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.”²⁴ The *Scofield Reference Bible* listed a scheme of seven dispensations.²⁵ Most dispensationalists have not been dogmatic or absolute about the actual number of

²³ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 43-47; see also Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 38-41.

²⁴ The idea of a dispensation comes from the concept of a steward who is managing a household for someone else. As such it is a non-technical term in the Bible (see Luke 16:1-15). The word is applied to the relationship between God and man in such passages as Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9. The main thrust of the idea is not the time period involved but the management or stewardship arrangement for that time. When on a trip to South Africa, I noticed that the newspapers often referred to the Nelson Mandela “dispensation” in the same way that American papers refer to the Bush “administration.” It is not the time period but the way that management is carried out during the given time. For further clarification see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 23-43 and Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 106-27.

²⁵ C. I Scofield, ed., *Scofield Reference Bible*, 5.

dispensations in biblical history. For example, Arno C. Gaebelein, an associate editor of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, presented a multiple number of possible outlines of various dispensations, sometimes with seven, five, or three dispensations cited.²⁶ Pre-patriarchal dispensations have usually been held loosely in dispensational history, while three dispensations (law, grace or Church, and kingdom) have been consistently held by all dispensationalists. Gaebelein gives the universally accepted dictum when he asserts, “surely these three ages, or dispensations, are clearly marked in Scripture. The teacher who rejects them cannot be a safe and sound teacher.”²⁷

John Walvoord represents the position that dispensationalism should be defined in terms of dispensations when he wrote the following: “Dispensationalism is an approach to the Bible that recognizes differing moral responsibilities for people, in keeping with how much they knew about God and His ways.”²⁸ In essence, he is referring to dispensationalism as a theology with dispensations that can be related to the progress of revelation. A peculiar advantage to a definition of dispensationalism as a theology of dispensations is that one can virtually say, “Everyone is a dispensationalist.” There are always Old Testament commands that are not practiced in the same way in the present age. No one, for example, brings an animal to church on the Lord’s Day for the purpose of a sacrifice. All biblical Christians must acknowledge some change over time in the outworking of God’s plan through the ages. If somehow evangelicals could agree that everyone is a dispensationalist in that basic sense, then perhaps a misunderstood, even pejorative, term (dispensationalism) could be removed from the debate among evangelicals. Instead, focus could be placed on other issues such as the distinction

²⁶ Arno C. Gaebelein, “The Dispensations,” *Our Hope* 37 (December 1930): 341-46. See also Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 144-47.

²⁷ Arno C. Gaebelein, “Dispensations,” 343.

²⁸ John F. Walvoord, “Reflections on Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (April-June 2001), 132.

between Israel and the Church or the level of understanding of God's provision of salvation at various stages in the progress of revelation.²⁹

Certainly, the hermeneutical-theological system called dispensationalism is related to the concept of dispensations. After all, the concept of dispensations highlights the truth that there is diversity in biblical history, a factor in all versions of dispensational theology. Nonetheless, the idea of defining dispensationalism as a theology of dispensations is not the most helpful way of dealing with the issue. Polemically, not much is achieved by moving the debate from one area to the other. Continuity and discontinuity with the larger evangelical world is not comprehensively explained nor Bible study made any easier. Another way to say this is to note that defining dispensationalism only in relation to dispensations tells an incomplete story. As will be seen below, there is a deeper level that defines the contribution of modern dispensationalism to Bible interpretation. The movement has provided a corrective for the evangelical world by establishing the priority of the Old Testament text for its own interpretation and restoring the Jewish character of the Bible for Christian understandings of God's kingdom. This is one of the major factors feeding the dispensational focus on the distinction between Israel and the Church. Finally, the idea that dispensationalism should be defined primarily as a theology with dispensations fails to capture fully the significance of the modern historical movement that has come to be labeled by the term.³⁰ In particular, the self-perception of the movement moves in broader strokes that will be outlined later in this article.

Dispensationalism as a Descriptive List of Abiding Concerns

The recent rise of progressive dispensationalism, an innovative attempt to harmonize the dispensational tradition with developments in mainline evangelicalism, has

²⁹ I heard the late John Walvoord voice this very sentiment a couple of years ago at a conference. For a similar tone, see Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), 9.

³⁰ John Feinberg's discussion about the inadequacy of defining dispensationalism as a theology based upon dispensations is worth reading. See John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity" in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* edited by John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 67-69.

led to a search for a new definition of dispensationalism. Some progressive dispensationalists view the term from the vantage point of the entire historical tradition and ask what list of abiding concerns and emphases characterize that tradition.³¹

In this light, Blaising has proposed eight distinct features that constitute the list of doctrinal concerns.³² He states the significance of these features in the following way: “Dispensationalism is not a monolithic movement; diversity exists today on a number of matters of interpretation. However, there are some broad features which unite these diverse elements into a common tradition. Together, these features provide a descriptive definition of dispensationalism.”³³ This descriptive approach to the definition of dispensationalism can be contrasted with the more prescriptive approach to the movement’s definition given by Ryrie and to be discussed below. However, both views attempt to assess the nature of the historical movement as a whole.

Blaising’s discussion begins with an affirmation of biblical authority. The importance of this particular feature of the dispensational heritage cannot be exaggerated. Years ago I invited John Walvoord, Chancellor of Dallas Seminary, to speak at the church where I was then the pastor. When I took him to lunch after the morning worship service, I asked him to identify the number one issue facing dispensationalism today. Without hesitation, he said, “It’s what it has always been, the inerrancy of the Bible.” Whatever the detractors of dispensationalism may say about it, they simply cannot get away from the fact that dispensationalists have been and continue to be some of the greatest supporters of the perfect character of the Bible, a book given by God Himself. That may also account for the fact that dispensationalists have voiced great concern over hermeneutical issues and the mishandling of the text, especially when it pertains to prophecy.

The second abiding concern of the dispensational tradition within this scheme is the focus on dispensations. Blaising notes, "Understanding the dispensations is crucial to

³¹ Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 21.

³² *Ibid.*, 13-21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13.

understanding how the whole of Scripture relates to Christian faith and practice."³⁴ Of special interest then is the present dispensation or Church Age. A proper understanding of the Church Age leads to the recognition of two other abiding concerns: the *uniqueness of the church* and *the practical significance of the Universal Church*. As to the former, the present age is viewed as God doing something new. While progressive dispensationalists will craft the distinction between Israel and the church somewhat differently, they affirm that the newness of the work of the Spirit in this present dispensation marks off a characteristic emphasis that is generally true of the entire dispensational tradition. As to the latter, the dispensational tradition has often voiced, through the doctrine of the church as the body of Christ, that there exists a true spiritual unity among believers that transcends denominational boundaries.

The last four abiding concerns in this approach all deal with eschatology, the area of theology by which dispensationalism has largely developed its reputation. There is, first of all, a focus on *biblical prophecy* which "expected God's future blessings to include earthly, national, and political aspects of life."³⁵ In particular, dispensationalism holds to a *futurist premillennialism* in which Christ returns to earth to set up his kingdom on the earth itself. It also usually emphasizes a belief in the *imminent return of Christ*, usually by means of a pre-tribulational rapture of the Church in which Jesus comes to remove the church from earth prior to a seven-year tribulation period of judgment poured out on the world by God. Finally, the dispensational tradition has consistently held to a *national future for Israel*. Dispensationalism rejects supersessionism or replacement theology.³⁶ The national promises to Israel are not replaced by spiritual fulfillment in the church during the present age.

³⁴ Ibid., 15.

³⁵ Ibid., 18. Consequently, as Blaising says, "the dispensational tradition has offered a broader concept of redemption than found in some other theologies." Within the progressive scheme, this statement may come the closest to recognizing a measure of truth to Ryrie's assertion of the doxological unifying theme of the Bible to be discussed below.

³⁶ Craig A. Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001): 435-50.

In this approach to defining dispensationalism, the list of eight abiding concerns functions as a general guide to the tradition, which in the mind of adherents provides both continuity and allows for development within the tradition.

There has been no standard creed freezing its theological development at some arbitrary point in history. As dispensationalism has developed, the characteristics noted above have been reconfirmed through the dynamics of renewed biblical interpretation. The evidence of this continuity testifies to the strength of the dispensational tradition.

However, the same dynamics of continued biblical study have modified the ways in which some of the above features have been understood.³⁷

In other words, the list of abiding concerns does not serve as a prescription for how all dispensationalists of all times have precisely ordered their theology. Instead, the list provides a loosely knit collection of beliefs broad enough to allow development even within the doctrinal presentation of individual elements within the list of concerns.

The advantage of such an approach to the definition of dispensationalism is that it allows a significant number of features of the tradition to stand out while providing a framework that allows for differences of opinion among various dispensationalists. In this way, it does justice to the large amount of diversity present within dispensationalism's history. In fact, this approach may be necessary for progressive dispensationalists to place themselves as the next major development within the history of dispensationalism.

However, two weaknesses can be seen in defining dispensationalism historically in terms of a list of abiding concerns. First, the list that has been given does not focus appropriately on hermeneutical and methodological interests. While acknowledging some of the issues, the view downplays any interpretive commitments which may form the basis for the doctrinal beliefs that make up the list.³⁸ At the heart of this discussion is how one views literal interpretation. Is it part of the debate between dispensationalism and nondispensationalism? If so, how? If not, why not? Progressive dispensationalists have tended to minimize the differences within evangelicalism over hermeneutics and not craft dispensationalism's identity in those terms. It has adopted a more inclusivist and less separatist posture in this area as it attempts to define and participate in the tradition.

³⁷ Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 22.

³⁸ Ibid. Note Blaising's acknowledgement of literal interpretation.

Traditional dispensationalists have focused intensely on the hermeneutical debate over consistent literal interpretation, something to be taken up below.

As a corollary to the above point, the second weakness of this approach to defining dispensationalism is that it may understate the presence of continuity in the history of dispensationalism. While the list of abiding concerns brings its own notions of continuity, the tradition seems to view itself, even from its earliest days, in more prescriptive ways relative to methodological issues. In particular, it will be argued below that the sine qua non for dispensationalism highlighted by Charles Ryrie is not something only and newly stated and conditioned by his own time and experience. Rather it is an insight into the actual state of affairs that has characterized the history of the movement and an insight that is not original with Ryrie.

Dispensationalism as Belief in the Future of National Israel

Robert Saucy, another progressive dispensationalist, has suggested that dispensationalism should be defined as a belief in a future role of Israel in God's kingdom program. Thinking through the recent development of progressive dispensationalism he notes that

The question may be raised as to whether such a revised dispensationalism is still legitimately "dispensationalism." We have chosen to keep this terminology because of its association with dispensationalism's traditional interpretation of the prophecies concerning the nation of Israel. Anyone who asserts not only the restoration of Israel as a national entity but also a future role for that nation in God's kingdom program has been generally identified as dispensationalist. The new dispensationalism retains such a future for Israel. In fact, because it has minimized many other previous distinctions held by dispensationalism, the revised form of dispensationalism may be said to be even more essentially defined by this understanding of the prophecies of Israel. Thus we still use the term "dispensational" to describe the position set forth in its contrast to non-dispensationalism.³⁹

In the midst of wrestling with how to describe the new view, Saucy tends to boil the definitional issue down to one essential feature that generally runs through the tradition of dispensationalism. Thus, one of the concerns that Blaising had emphasized in his list

³⁹ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case For Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 9.

of abiding concerns stands out for Saucy as the one chief concern that distinguishes dispensationalism from other forms of theology.

Such a way of defining dispensationalism has its advantages. It is clear that the belief in a national future for Israel has been held consistently by dispensationalists of the last two centuries. This particular feature of dispensational thought also raises several issues that play pivotal roles in the debate between dispensationalism and non-dispensationalism. For Israel to have a future national role entails a concrete form of an earthly kingdom associated with a particular land. Biblical passages that speak of the promises of God with respect to these matters are among the most debated among the various parties in the theological dialogue. However, it is far from clear that this notion is comprehensive enough to justify its use as drawing the parameters of the meaning of dispensationalism.⁴⁰

Dispensationalism as a List of Essential Hermeneutical and Doctrinal Concerns

Perhaps the majority view among dispensationalists over the last forty years is that dispensationalism should be defined in terms of a core set of hermeneutical and doctrinal concerns that identifies a rather substantial continuity in the history of dispensationalism. Charles Ryrie popularized this view in 1965 in his well known work *Dispensationalism Today*. Since that time, much of the discussion of dispensationalism's definition and various issues related to a presentation of dispensational views about Bible content still revolve partly around interaction and response to the historical, hermeneutical, and theological categories that Ryrie outlined.

Ryrie referred to three main points that he called the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism: (1) consistent literal interpretation, (2) distinction between Israel and the church, and (3) the doxological purpose of biblical history.⁴¹ He actually lists the second point first. The quickest way to tell if a person was a dispensationalist was to ask

⁴⁰ I have made some positive statements about this particular focus in a responsive paper entitled "The Future of Dispensationalism" given at the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society in Toronto in November 2002. However, although it may serve as a useful way of speaking of positions, the view that Ryrie advocates (see below) provides a better foundation for understanding the methodological history of dispensationalism.

⁴¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 43-47.

him what he thought about the relationship between Israel and the church. In fact, Ryrie is so strong on this idea that he refers to the distinction between Israel and the church as *the* essence of dispensationalism.⁴² However, Ryrie pointed out that the distinction between Israel and the church is based upon literal interpretation, so I have listed it first. By consistent literal interpretation, Ryrie meant to remind us that a dispensationalist interprets the entire Bible literally including prophecy. This was contrary to covenant theology's penchant for abandoning literal interpretation in prophecy.

By the doxological purpose of biblical history, Ryrie taught that dispensationalism did not undermine the unity of the Bible nor minimize the doctrine of salvation. However, contrary to covenant theology, dispensationalism did emphasize the *purposes* (the plural is important) of God. Individual redemption through election was not the integrating factor for theology. Rather, God's plan was multi-faceted through the panorama of the ages, which highlighted the glory of God rather than the salvation of individual men as the centerpiece of theology. In short, a view of the Bible (dispensationalism) which allowed all of these distinctive features of God's plan to stand out better gives God his due.

Ryrie's intent in these three points is to a certain measure prescriptive. These points form boundaries that separate dispensationalism from nondispensationalism. There is no goal to craft the points with future theological development in mind. In his way of thinking, these points would describe dispensationalists of all times. That is why this way of defining dispensationalism is sometimes referred to as "essentialist."⁴³ The points are essentials whose absence in the theological system would mean the abandonment of the

⁴² Ibid., 47.

⁴³ Progressive dispensationalists have been the ones who have strongly used the label of "essentialist dispensationalism" to describe Ryrie's approach and that of his era in dispensational history. See Blaising, "The Search for Definition," 23-30. While some traditional dispensationalists have voiced concern over the label (primarily because it has been used by progressives to control the discussion), the term does not seem to be one that is shunned by Ryrie himself since it is rooted in his own *sine qua non* terminology. See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 162. However, Ryrie does seem to prefer the term *normative dispensationalism* for what he is advancing.

tradition and of true biblical interpretation. Consequently, the term “normative dispensationalism” has also arisen to describe this position.⁴⁴

Progressive dispensationalists have naturally moved away from such an approach to defining the tradition.⁴⁵ In their minds, this way of defining the tradition is too rigid and does not do justice to the discontinuity within the tradition.⁴⁶ For example, a focus on consistent literal interpretation, progressives say, does not take into account Ryrie’s own historical context. Evangelicalism during Ryrie’s time had come to a consensus that literal interpretation (grammatical-historical interpretation) was the proper approach to reading the Scriptures. However, covenant theologians in the past had often voiced the view that in prophecy one must resort to allegorical interpretation.⁴⁷ Ryrie’s insight that pointed out the need to interpret prophecy just like the rest of the Bible was appropriately labeled consistent literal interpretation in the context of that debate in his own day. Progressives would continue to add, however, that Ryrie’s insight does not make sense when the entire dispensational tradition is discussed. They would point to disagreements among dispensationalists who did not practice literal interpretation, but resorted to typological or allegorical interpretations of their own in certain passages.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 88-89. Dale S. DeWitt has also tried to define dispensationalism in an essentialist way (*Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century: Theological Development and Cultural Context*, [Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002], 53-76). However, he views Ryrie’s approach as too simplistic and other lists as too fragmented and complex. His own list yields seven points: (1) literal interpretation of Scripture, (2) salvation by grace without Israel or Israel’s law, (3) genuine progress of revelation, (4) the (sovereign) plan of God involving covenants and dispensations, (5) distinctions between Israel, the Church, and the Kingdom, (6) the Church as Pauline revelation, (7) a belief in a Pretribulational rapture. Such a list attempts to be more refined in how the issues are discussed. While it is useful for such discussions, it is not clear that it helps to define the core of dispensationalism any better than Ryrie’s three points which would cover everything that he has listed. John Feinberg also modifies Ryrie but speaks of the essentials of dispensationalism (“Systems of Discontinuity,” 63-86).

⁴⁵ A more complete discussion of the interaction between traditional and progressive dispensationalism on these points will be presented later in this volume in the article entitled “Modern Developments in Dispensationalism.”

⁴⁶ Blaising, “Search for Definition,” 29.

⁴⁷ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 244.

⁴⁸ Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 36-37. For a particular example of a dispensationalist who practiced extreme typology and allegory at times, see Stallard, *Arno C. Gaebelien*, 170-86.

In addition, the focus on literal interpretation would be challenged by highlighting post-Ryrie developments in hermeneutics which have forced a shift in understanding how we should read biblical texts.⁴⁹ Progressives point to advances in understanding the role of the interpreter, biblical theology, and the use of the Old Testament in the New as undercutting Ryrie's claim to consistent literal interpretation. In this way, literal interpretation is no longer part of the debate between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists, according to progressives, and should not be seen as a major identifying concern for dispensationalism. I have defended Ryrie on this point by agreeing that the issue has become more sophisticated and that the real differences between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists lie in the integration of biblical texts across authors and history, but noting that in the process of synthesis, the interpreter must be careful not to unravel prior exegetical results following literal interpretation in either the Old or New Testament texts.⁵⁰ In doing so, I have recast Ryrie's point on consistent literal interpretation as the "preservation of the literal interpretation of the Old Testament at all points of theologizing in the light of progressive revelation."⁵¹ This is my way of keeping Ryrie's insight intact while showing how it functions within the later debates over interpretation within evangelicalism.

Nonetheless the progressive dispensational criticism of Ryrie's point must be seriously considered. Blaising, referring to Ryrie's approach, notes that

the essentialist view of dispensationalism sought for continuity in certain elements (expressed as the *sine qua non*) that remained unchanged through the history of the tradition. However, as already noted, while there is no question that the elements of the proposed *sine qua non* are related to traditional views and practice, nevertheless one must regard them as modifications and reformulations, whether small or great, that were part of the changes then taking place. They were in fact the central tenets of a new dispensationalism. But when that which is in fact new is presented and accepted as if it had always been the case, the result

⁴⁹ Blaising, "Search for Definition," 30-34.

⁵⁰ Stallard, "Literal Interpretation," 5-36. I have also defended Ryrie's focus on the doxological purpose of biblical history in "Prophetic Hope in the Writings of Arno C. Gaebelein: A Possible Demonstration of the Doxological Purpose of Biblical History," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 2 (Fall 1998): 190-211.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

is not only historical confusion but a conceptual naïveté that resists both the idea and the fact of further development in the tradition.⁵²

While Blaising admits that there is some connection between the dispensationalism of Ryrie and prior generations of dispensationalists, he laments the lack of historical perspective that has distanced essentialist dispensationalists from some of the views of past dispensationalists. In summary, according to Blaising, Ryrie's insights represent a new form of dispensationalism and not the entire tradition.

However, the view that Ryrie's *sine qua non* represents something new within the history of dispensationalism cannot be maintained. Émile Guers, a Genevan pastor influenced by John Nelson Darby, posited over one hundred years before Ryrie a methodological checklist for reading the Bible and understanding its doctrine.⁵³ Like Ryrie, Guers' formulation had three points: (1) literalism in prophecy, (2) the principle of diversity of classes and privileges in the entire body of the redeemed, (3) futurism. The last point does not match Ryrie's list although it is consistent with dispensational understanding. Nonetheless, the first two points are remarkable. Guers' discussion of them reflects the same language of Ryrie's concerns. It also reflects an understanding of complex hermeneutical issues that would place him at home in current debates. Above all, Guers' example shows strong continuity from Darby to Ryrie in deliberately voiced methodology at the level of essential principles. The question must seriously be raised. How can Ryrie's tenets be a "new dispensationalism" when there is so much similarity with such a self-portrayal from the earliest times of the movement? In light of these historical facts, it may be best to retain a form of Ryrie's insights as the way to describe the essence of dispensationalism.

⁵² Craig Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," 29.

⁵³ Émile Guers, *Israël aux Derniers Jours De L'Économie Actuelle ou Essai Sur La Restauration Prochaine De Ce Peuple, Suivi D'Un Fragment Sur Le Millénarisme*, (Genève: Émile Beroud, 1856). An English translation is available: Émile Guers, *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). Guers was influenced by John Nelson Darby as early as the 1830s. For a more complete discussion of this early anticipation of the later Ryrie synthesis, see Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein*, Studies in American Religion, Vol. 77 (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 61-73 and Mike Stallard, "Émile Guers: An Early Darbyite Response to Irvingism and a Precursor to Charles Ryrie," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 1 (April 1997): 31-46.

Outlines of the History of Dispensationalism

The proliferation of conflicting labels has made the study of the history of dispensationalism difficult to endure. Students of the literature can be excused for their confusion when they are confronted with terms like *classic* dispensationalism, *traditional* dispensationalism, *revised* dispensationalism, *essentialist* dispensationalism, *normative* dispensationalism, *neodispensationalism* and *progressive* dispensationalism, to name a few.

Even differences of definition within one label often make the theological landscape hard to follow. For example, from within the progressive dispensational camp, Saucy uses the term *progressive* to mean simply the next progression within the history of dispensationalism.⁵⁴ That is, progressive dispensationalism is just the next development after previous, more traditional ones. Blaising, on the other hand, uses the term *progressive* in a theological sense to define dispensationalism:

...different dispensations may reveal more of one aspect or more of another, but each dispensation is related to the final dispensation in which the plan culminates. Because they all have the same goal, there is a real, progressive relationship between them. As each leads to the goal of final redemption, Scripture draws various connections between them which relate them together in a truly progressive fashion. It is from this progressive relationship of the dispensations to one another that the name *progressive dispensationalism* is taken.⁵⁵

Blaising's definition predominates in the technical discussions, but one can see how students could get confused depending upon which scholarly presentation they read first. This would apply to other terms as well as progressive dispensationalism.

In addition, not only is the student confronted with a large number of terms, some with more than one meaning, he is forced to examine some of the claims that the terms themselves are pejorative. Two terms that come to mind are *normative* and *progressive*. Progressive dispensationalists dislike, for good reason from their perspective, the use of the term *normative* to describe earlier versions of dispensationalism or to describe the entire tradition. This smacks of creedalism and brings into question whether their own

⁵⁴ Saucy, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 9.

⁵⁵ Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 48-49.

modifications are truly part of the history of dispensationalism. Some traditional dispensationalists do not mind the term *normative* in this context because they see progressive dispensationalism as a departure from dispensational truth rather than a development within the tradition.

On the other side, some traditionalists are bothered by the term *progressive dispensationalism*. By its use, they believe that progressives leave the impression that earlier forms of dispensationalism are *regressive*. While this is not the intent in Blaising's use of the term, Saucy's definition leaves itself open to this charge more readily. The term *progressive* is a loaded one in American culture in general. It is often used to describe those who are innovative, daring, forward thinking, enlightened, and caring. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the term has become part of this theological development among dispensationalists. However, in the end, it will not accomplish much to argue about these terms in these ways. There will always be those progressives who view traditionalists as regressive and those traditionalists who believe that progressives have abandoned the dispensational position. People have the right to their beliefs and to the use of labels. Hard feelings need to be put aside and the substance of theology and history engaged in a more meaningful way.

Various outlines of modern dispensational history have been given. Blaising, concentrating on the American experience of dispensationalism, emphasized four eras in modern dispensationalism.⁵⁶ There was the Niagara Bible Conference era of the late nineteenth century, which constituted a trans-denominational experience in which dispensational ideas were nurtured. This was followed by Scofieldism, the era of dispensationalism characterized by the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible (1909) and dominating much of the discussion until the revision of the reference Bible in the 1960s. This form of dispensationalism was codified in *Systematic Theology* published by Lewis Sperry Chafer (1948) and propagated by the establishment of Bible institutes and schools across the nation. The third era in this outline is that of essentialist dispensationalism. Here Ryrie's revision using the *sine qua non* is highlighted. This period covers from the 1960s until the 1990s and focuses on an attempt to define the historical tradition of dispensationalism. The fourth era, begun in the 1980s and producing literature in the

⁵⁶ Blaising, "Search for Definition," 16-34.

1990s, is progressive dispensationalism with its greater focus on biblical continuity across the testaments and harmony with covenant theology.

In a later work, Blaising changes the categories somewhat as he emphasizes theological change to a greater degree.⁵⁷ He uses the designation of *classical dispensationalism* to describe the period from Darby to Chafer. The kind of dispensationalism prevalent in the period from the 1950s to 1970s is called *revised dispensationalism*. This era includes the writings of men like Alva McClain, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, and Stanley Toussaint. The third era is designated as *progressive dispensationalism*, a movement of revision begun in the 1980s. Adherents of the proposed changes introduced the term *progressive* in 1991.

Ryrie believes that historically the Darby to Chafer era probably needs to be divided into a study of the early Darby era and a second study of the Scofield/Chafer period.⁵⁸ I have also referred to the Scofield/Gaebelein era rather than the Scofield/Chafer period.⁵⁹ At one point in time I called the 1940s-1950s the classical period due to the foundational debates between Allis on one side against Chafer and Pentecost on the other.⁶⁰ In the end, Ryrie uses the term *normative dispensationalism* to describe all of the tradition, not including progressive dispensationalism.

In light of this discussion, the best outline of modern dispensational history is probably the following:

- ❑ The Darby period (1830s to 1870s)
- ❑ The Niagara Bible Conference period (1870s to 1900)
- ❑ Scofieldism (Scofield to Chafer – 1900 to 1950)
- ❑ Essentialist dispensationalism (1950s to present)
- ❑ Progressive dispensationalism (1980s to present)

There is certainly continuity among all of the periods under consideration. However, it is important to note that I have placed the last two parts of the outline (essentialist and

⁵⁷ Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 21-23.

⁵⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 162.

⁵⁹ Stallard, "Literal Interpretation," 10.

⁶⁰ I used this terminology in an earlier version of this article in the previous note.

progressive dispensationalism) as going into the present time. I do this intentionally so as not to give the impression that the essentialist period is over. Many, if not most, dispensationalists at the present time still define dispensationalism in ways close to the Ryrie synthesis. However, progressive dispensationalism has become a major movement in its own right worthy of study as a historical and theological phenomenon. Hopefully, all periods of modern dispensational history will be more scrutinized in the days ahead.