

The Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics at Age Four

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The Beginning

I do not remember the exact time when I first thought about the need to have a forum for traditional dispensationalists to talk to each other about serious hermeneutical and theological issues raised in the contemporary situation. However, the thought crystallized for me after the 2007 Dispensational Study Group meeting at the Evangelical Theological Society (perhaps in light of this year's theme involving the Holy Spirit, I can at least cautiously say that the Spirit led me?). At ETS that year I had a friendly discussion with Brent Sandy about his updated thoughts on his book *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, a book that, in my judgment, radically removed literal hermeneutics as a major stabilizing force in interpretation, especially of the Old Testament prophets. I came away from that exchange with two major thoughts. First, traditional dispensationalists have not spent much time talking to each other about hermeneutics and theological method. Most of the time when I am at professional conferences I am discussing such matters in an irenic way with those of a different persuasion or approach. Thus, only in the classes I teach, most notably at the Ph.D. level, was I conversing with other traditionalists about these important methodological themes. Second, I became convinced that traditional dispensationalists have not been interested in interacting with issues of interpretation to the degree that is necessary in the current evangelical climate. To my knowledge no major works had been written, for example, opposed to books like *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*. The deeper issues involved were largely being ignored by those in our camp, at least in terms of public response.

As a result of these concerns, I approached the administration of Baptist Bible College & Seminary with the idea of a two-day council on our campus where we would invite faculty members from around the country who were traditional dispensationalists. Initially, I asked for funding for room and board for those who came so that the idea would get off the ground. To their credit the leaders of BBC&S agreed to the importance of supporting this effort. Although funding for room and board is no longer a reality, such support in the beginning aided the start up so that various scholars and their schools would not be burdened in a way that would prevent them from coming. The administration of the school is to be applauded for its stand on the importance of advancing the cause of traditional dispensationalism. This is only important because (as we all believe) traditional dispensationalism reflects the literal truth of the inerrant Word of God.

Moreover, the need for such discussion among traditionalists is highlighted by the fact that dispensationalism seems to be greatly maligned at the present hour. Whether from the good men involved in the Reformed resurgence,¹ the disturbing writing of some in the Emerging

¹ One example is the Acts 29 network. Concerning what Acts 29 churches do not believe, one statement on the website is the following: "We are not eschatological Theonomists or Classic Dispensationalists (e.g. Scofield) and believe that divisive and dogmatic certainty surrounding particular details of Jesus' Second Coming are unprofitable speculation, because the timing and exact details of His return are unclear to us;" Internet; <http://www.acts29network.org/about/doctrine/>; accessed 5 September 2011.

Church,² unorthodox open theists, or preterists³ there seems to be more than a negative glance at dispensationalism. It sometimes takes on an aura of strangeness. For example, as I have noted elsewhere, during the George W. Bush administration, we were accused of being in decline as a movement while also controlling the foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East.⁴ Both cannot be true at the same time.

One reason that predictions of our demise are premature is that dispensationalism is a movement in the churches as much as a movement in the Academy. This was true in Darby's day. It was also true in the days of the Niagara Bible Conferences in America in the late 1800s. It was certainly true when Scofield gave us his study Bible in the early 1900s. It remains so today. Examples of this ongoing nature of dispensationalism's influence can be found easily. The establishment of the Pre-Trib Study Group to defend and focus on the pre-trib rapture and other related issues of eschatology led to a combination of scholars from the schools, parachurch ministry leaders, and local church pastors who have aggressively studied the Bible's prophecies together, all from a dispensational viewpoint. The *Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins has certainly bypassed the Academy. One may not appreciate the use of the genre of fiction to advance the cause. However, one cannot dismiss the fact the series has strengthened dispensationalism to some degree in the churches.

Hence, it is in a context of hostility to the dispensational position and the lack of vigorous discussion among dispensationalists that the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics was born. Its goal is not to recapture some glorified past but to pave the way forward in advancing the cause of inductive Bible study and proper theological method. In the process, clarification of dispensational positions will emerge as well as reasons for why we disagree among ourselves on specific issues. At the center of the effort is a continuing commitment to the concept of literal hermeneutics (properly understood). Along the way, the fashionable teachings of our times can be evaluated with true biblical centrality. Just as a strong premillennialism emerged during the

² See Brian McLaren, "Three Crises of Peace," Internet; <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/three-crises-of-peace-3.html>; accessed 5 September 2011. Specifically McLaren notes, "The need to confront the terrible, deadly, distorted, yet popular theologies associated with Christian Zionism and deterministic dispensationalism. These systems of belief - so common among my fellow Evangelical Christians - too often lead people to act as if Jewish people have God-given rights but Palestinians do not. They use a discredited hermeneutic (way of interpreting the Bible) to imply that God shows favoritism - that God is concerned for justice for one group of people and not for others. They create bigotry and prejudice against Muslims in general ... and in particular against Palestinians, many of whom are Muslim but many of whom are Christian too. These doctrinal formulations often use a bogus end-of-the-world scenario to create a kind of death-wish for World War III, which - unless it is confronted more robustly by the rest of us - could too easily create a self-fulfilling prophecy." McLaren goes on to suggest that Christian Zionism (and along with it dispensationalism) brings a new "bigotry."

³ Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 203 n. 4. Boyd says, "Under the influence of the dispensational/rapture theology that has taken evangelicalism by storm over the last one hundred years, many Christians are expecting God to take Christians *out of* the world and then destroy the earth. Heaven, they believe, is 'located' somewhere else. Scripture, however, is consistent in its witness that God will not abandon the earth." Taken on the face of things, this is almost humorous from a dispensational viewpoint. Many dispensationalists would likely say that this would be a fair criticism aimed at amillennialism instead. Most of us have always affirmed God's plan for the earth. Boyd is an open theist with preterist leanings.

⁴ Michael Stallard, "Is Dispensationalism Hurting American Political Policies in the Middle East?" in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond* edited by Christopher Cone (Ft. Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), 461-62.

fundamentalist-modernist controversy a century ago, we need to assure similar results in present struggles in Christendom over postmodernism.

The Council Meetings

At this point, it is helpful to talk about the process that the Council has followed. Some of those who were not here the first year may be surprised to know that we only allowed *twenty* minutes for presentations with about an hour or more of discussion. We have relented and now allow *thirty* minutes for presentations and about an hour of discussion! This is important. The purpose was to have a forum for us to *talk to each other*. I did not want a repeat of some of the workshops at ETS where the short times allow for little discussion. Other conferences give discussion times that are much longer but often speakers take up all the discussion time anyway. This is not allowed at the CDH. We are somewhat legalistic about the time of presentations. That puts more pressure on our speakers, but gives our dialogue more punch as we communicate in a lively but friendly environment. We must hammer things out personally and not just talk to each other in papers. This face time is important to us. That is why we do things this way. Most folks I have talked to have been approving of this arrangement.

In the second year, we also began to invite pastors to attend the council as observers. This is harmonious with the idea that dispensationalism is a movement among the churches. The input given by pastors from the front lines of ministry is invaluable as we try to sort through the various issues we face. This union of pastors and those who train others for ministry in our schools is an important combination for the discussion of our approach to theology. This importance is highlighted for the 2011 meeting with Thursday night given to a panel of pastors to discuss the importance of themes about the Holy Spirit in their church work.

The first council was held in 2008. There was no single theme. Six issues were discussed:

1. Hyperbole and Poetry in Prophecy
2. Extended Metaphors
3. Implicitly Conditional Prophecy
4. Speech Act Theory
5. Use of the OT in the NT
6. New Covenant in Dispensational Interpretation

While some might think that there is no rhyme or reason to such a list, the first four are related to the discussions in Brent Sandy's book *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*. All four involve discussions for which many dispensationalists wonder if literal interpretation of the prophets is being undermined, even if in some cases there are some positive features to discuss. The use of the OT in the NT continues to be one of the most important issues in evangelicalism, not just for dispensationalism. How integration is done across the testaments shows quickly where the pockets of differences exist between covenant theology, progressive dispensationalism, and traditional dispensationalism. The importance of such an issue cannot be overstated. However, one of my concerns was to ask whether traditionalists have said enough or if there are further issues we need to address. The final topic of dispensational understanding of the New Covenant addresses the issue where traditionalists may disagree with each other the most. The goal was to

discover why we disagree among ourselves so much. All in all, this collection of six issues provided the basis of our first steps in launching our conversation.

What did we accomplish? By and large the most solid accomplishment was that we were actually talking to each other. The networking involved was important. Beyond that I think the issues that were presented (especially the first four) elevated issues to consideration that many of us had not really been thinking about in a concrete way. At this level I considered this a success to the point that it would be worth pursuing a second council the following year.

However, in my judgment our overall exploration of the issues was below what we could have done. It could be that these issues were somewhat new to many of us. One specific issue will serve to illustrate my point. In the matter of speech act theory, we were almost unanimous in our negative assessment. Bob Thomas gave a useful presentation to initiate this discussion. I agree with Bob's overall paper. I see little value in using the categories of speech act theory in labeling what is going on in various texts. When we made a public statement of our thoughts on speech act theory on our website, feedback came to us from one nondispensationalist that we did not understand speech act theory. Dave Fredrickson's follow-up paper the next year was helpful in giving more perspective. In hindsight I think we were trusting Sandy's use of the categories too much and should have done more homework in the theorists. In short, our work during the first council showed that we still had much to do and that our thinking through of some issues would take more time. Even if our conclusions are right, we must be as thorough as we can in our reasoning so that our responses will have the maximum credibility.

Consequently, for the second council (2009) we decided to avoid making formal statements until we possessed more maturity on various issues. I also decided to take a year off from the discussions about language and Scripture. Instead, we went to the topic of the New Covenant – something we could all agree on!!!! Covenant theologians think us a bit odd in our views here. However, we have something they do not possess. We have an interest in the literal interpretation of the OT promises to Israel. Thus, the many views among us still reflect a unified commitment to those promises. We are merely trying to understand how best to state the promises while being true to both OT and NT texts on the New Covenant.

The popularity of this topic was confirmed by the large number of pastors who attended the council that year and packed the chapel. In my judgment, this particular meeting saw the best interaction we have had. All major views were represented although the two New Covenants view did not appear to be held by many. Most of us saw some participation of the Church in the New Covenant blessings while some did not. The depth of this discussion led to one of the desired outcomes of the CDH. We want publications to emerge that reflect in a positive way on the interaction of traditional dispensationalists with each other and with important issues. As a result a book to be published by the Regular Baptist Press is nearing completion. It contains some of the papers presented at the council with some modifications. It also contains new material not offered at the CDH such as a history of the interpretation of the New Covenant among dispensationalists. Perhaps the best feature, however, is a debate section in the book between three views among us which all affirm there is only one New Covenant:

1. The Church has no legal relationship to the New Covenant (Roy Beacham);
2. The Church participates indirectly in the blessings of the New Covenant without being a legal party to the New Covenant (Elliott Johnson);
3. The Church participates directly in the blessings of the New Covenant (Rod Decker).

The formulations here are my own. The three authors may word the titles of their views differently. Finalizations of the overall scheme will be presented shortly in the book. As I have worked on this project as editor, I have come to the conclusion that the various positions among us are really closer to each other than I had previously thought. A question I had when we started the CDH has been answered in my mind. Why do we traditional dispensationalists disagree so much on the New Covenant? You will have to buy a copy of the book to find out!

One of the good things that happened with the second council was the formation of a steering committee of six men for the council. It is not a good thing for one man to control such an effort as the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics. In addition to myself, the leadership team consists of Joe Parle (College of Biblical Studies in Houston, Texas), George Gunn (Shasta Bible College in Redding, California), Mark Soto (Grace Seminary in Winona Lake, Indiana), and Elliott Johnson (Dallas Seminary in Dallas, Texas). I also asked my colleague Rod Decker from Baptist Bible Seminary here in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania to be on the team so I could walk down the hall and talk to one of the team members directly if needed. There are a lot of good dispensationalists to choose from around the country. I tried to pick men who would represent various regions across America from schools with a variety of historical backgrounds. One might protest that two of the men are from Texas. However, remember that Texas is a big state! Someone might complain that the Southeast is not represented. However, I can count for that since I am originally from Alabama, the state where the people, according to a recent poll, know their Bibles better than any other state! All in all, I count it a privilege to have such excellent men and good friends to help in this endeavor. They meet annually the night before the council and via email and phone help determine which proposed papers to accept for the meeting. The team also gives direction to the topics that are chosen as well as offering advice on how things are run. For example, the team's influence led to the decision to post papers of the conference on the website *only* after they have been modified or given more thought after the interaction at the conference. Thus, I tweaked my major presentation last year as a result of input from the council discussion before it was posted at the council website.

For the third council in 2010 we returned to some unfinished business from the first council—"Dispensationalism, Language, and Scripture." As I suspected, interest in the topic was not as great as that for the New Covenant. Perhaps the abstractness of some of the concepts or the tedious nature of the discussion does not attract many of us. It should. This is where the rubber meets the road right now in the battle over hermeneutics. For those of us who champion a certainty in hermeneutics, we must defend the faith and the Scriptures on these vital battlegrounds. Nonetheless, some advances were made in our discussions that were helpful. For example, Alan Ingalls' study on conditionality in prophecy which centered on the text of Jeremiah 18 added to the past discussion at the first council when Joe Parle gave us his study of conditional prophecy in Jonah. Many scholars today are declaring prophecies to be implicitly conditional with the result that they do not have to be understood in a straightforward way as having a certain promised fulfillment in the future. Traditionalists, especially the exegetes among us, need to include more case studies in the prophets to make our case for prophetic certainty. If we can gather enough such textual work, I see the development of a wonderful new book that can help pass on to the next generation the certainty of God's Word. On the whole, however, I still see reluctance among us to deal with the knotty issues of metaphor, poetry, and similar issues of language. To be sure this may stem from the belief that some have voiced to me that the Hirsch-Gadamer debate should never have been brought over into biblical studies along

with the sidebars that constituted a “Pandora’s box” of linguistic developments. Nonetheless, this debate thrives around us regardless of our disregard. As a matter of apologetics relative to our position, I believe more of us are being called to address these issues.

The fourth council is dedicated to the topic of the Holy Spirit. The idea to cover this was raised in a steering committee meeting by Elliott Johnson who noted that dispensationalists use to own that issue. But now the evangelical landscape is different.

The Future of the CDH and Dispensationalism

In light of the fact that I am neither a prophet or the son of a prophet, any predictions that I make in this section should definitely be taken as implicitly conditional! I do not know what is to come although trends obviously track in certain directions. I can certainly tell you what I *want* to happen. Below I will give some general thoughts followed by a brief discussion of specific issues that need to be addressed by the council in our future meetings.

General Thoughts

First, although the council is dedicated to studying hermeneutics and theological method through various topics and case studies, we must never lose our desire to think about practical application. That is one of the advantages of having pastors as observers. The pastors need to hear what the teachers are saying in wrestling with what the Academy seems to be discussing. However, the council members need to hear what the pastors are saying as well. The pastor’s panel on Thursday night is an attempt to put this forward. If dispensationalism is truly a movement primarily in the churches which is not driven only by the Academy, then the need to do our work thinking about church application is imperative. The end product of our deliberation matters at the local church level. It is not something just for journals and books as we talk to ourselves, although such books and journals are also necessary.

A corollary of this point should be considered. As a group we should support church planting. The formation of new churches that are dispensational is one way of spreading dispensational truth. In the fourth century, Jerome famously said that “the whole world groaned and marveled to find itself Arian.” Although I am not comparing our movement to a heretical group of folks, the sentiment is important. I want the people of the world to wake up one day and find that they are surrounded by dispensational churches. Long ago our seminary established a church-planting emphasis in our Master of Divinity program. We partner with local churches to train men in church planting by actually starting other churches. All of us as we represent the schools and churches should be leaders in advancing this cause. If we may learn from the history of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, the liberals (supposedly after their victory) were busy doing social action and reading books. In the meantime, fundamentalists planted churches and took a large part of the strategic battlefield.

Related to this is the need for existing dispensational churches to add evangelistic zeal to hermeneutical sharpness, historical awareness, and doctrinal integrity. Our council can play a positive role in all of these. It may be easier for us to think about the last three. However, our churches need also to be concerned about lost souls and not just the eschatology charts we produce. When I was a college student, I was searching for spiritual peace as I would have described it. If someone would have mentioned dispensationalism to me at that time, I would have thought he was talking about a disease. However, thanks to a local church that was

doctrinally sound and aggressively evangelistic at the same time, I came to the Lord and advanced in my sanctification as a knowledgeable dispensationalist.

Second, I would like for us to be known for *what we are for* and not just what we are against. We are *against* replacement theology, covenant theology, amillennialism, postmillennialism, preterism, general unorthodoxy of any kind, and bad hermeneutics and weak theological method, to name a few. It is important that we speak against certain things. However, we need to learn to voice these in a positive way as well. We are *for* taking God's Word at face value as He meant it when He gave it. We are also *for* the hermeneutical autonomy of the Old Testament, the national and political promises to the nation of Israel, the future hope we have when Jesus comes to make all things right (premillennialism), theology that is grounded in exegesis, the Church's wonderful place in God's economy, interpretation in light of progressive revelation, the central role that Jesus plays in all of redemptive history, etc. Of all of the things we are for we probably have our worst reputation on grounding our views in exegesis. Nondispensationalists sometimes say we do not do this well. Often this is an unfair criticism. Nonetheless, there are times I hear dispensationalists argue from the vantage point of our "system." While that has value in certain contexts, sometimes we leave the impression that such arguments are the only arguments we have or are the best arguments to use. We must remove this criticism by becoming excellent exegetes who know how to build systematic theology on the actual intended meaning of the text. We do this well in the Old Testament when promises to Israel are at stake. Let's do this universally throughout the whole Bible and all of theology. We cannot let the covenant interpreters be the best exegetes.

Third, I want to emphasize the need to recognize the diversity among us. We are not clones of Darby, Scofield, Chafer, or even Ryrie – not that mimicking such great men would be a bad thing. As we approach our work in the future, we must continue to provide an atmosphere where we are all brothers in Christ and in dispensational truth who can discuss biblical passages and issues without fear of losing those friendships. Just because we may disagree in the minutiae it does not follow that we are radically different. We share a rather substantial continuity with each other in the area of hermeneutics and theological method. We possess a host of similar concerns. So in this balance between what our movement is generally and how we handle the details, we must forge ahead with an alliance of like minds but with respect for our differences without allowing such divergence to create disunity.

Fourth, we need to harness technology but do so cautiously. What do I mean? Some have suggested that we stream our discussions live on the Internet as some other popular conferences do. While I am open to such ideas, I am not sure that this particular one is the right one for a couple of reasons. First, I am not confident that we are mature enough as a gathering to do this. To be sure, one goal we have is to spread the dispensational faith. Such use of technology can be and should be one day for such use. However, our first steps need to be measured as we develop the quality of what we do. Second, our format does not lend itself to live streaming. Our focus is on discussion not the presentation itself. The presentations are certainly good in and of themselves. Nevertheless, streaming at this time does not seem to be the best avenue for back and forth debate among ourselves. I am open to contrary opinions and other avenues of technology used to advance our cause. The steering committee would be delighted to receive thoughts on such matters.

Fifth, we need to think organizationally so as to expand our influence to spread dispensationalism. One of the ideas the steering committee is developing is to move the council meetings to other parts of the country every other year. That way other schools can host the

discussions, while inviting pastors from those particular regions. What we do needs to be seen and heard in other parts of the country. Along with this is the desire that the moderator of the council would change in the process. One man as the moderator is probably not healthy as we seek to expand our influence.

Our sixth and final general observation is that we need to move ahead with an awareness of our weaknesses. I have already mentioned the need for planting more dispensational churches, but that is something that is not strictly the purview of this group. I also mentioned earlier our reluctance to take up the battlefield of linguistics. However, our greatest weakness may be in the area of publications that advance the cause of dispensationalism. At one time in the twentieth-century, a lot of textbooks, even for nondispensational schools, were written by traditional dispensationalists. To what extent is this true today? Perhaps my own personal analysis is incomplete, but I sense that we have some catching up to do. I applaud what Regular Baptist Press is trying to do. There are other publishers I could name who join in the joy of writing and publishing. But overall, we are far behind where we need to be in my judgment. One of the purposes of this council is to provide a forum where we can generate publications that will show that traditional dispensationalism is alive and well on planet earth. Maybe I could get more done myself if I quit watching reruns of NCIS!

Specific Issues

The thrust of the council is to try to deal with issues that are not being dealt with in other forums. We are not trying to duplicate the Pre-Trib Study Group (my all time favorite conference). That does not rule out that one day we would work on areas of eschatology. For another example, I have encouraged the steering committee to stay away from the Lordship Salvation debate. I do not mean to say that it is unimportant. We are quite divided among ourselves on that doctrinal discussion. But there are other ongoing forums where that issue is being addressed. We could go on and on about specific issues. Our main concern should be to understand the hermeneutical and theological arguments at play in important theological discussions that normally are not being discussed at the present time. In fact, it is of extreme importance for us to understand the nature of the arguments we use and why we disagree with others and at times with each other. We must pay close attention to the details of method.

With that in mind, here are some of the topics that have been discussed by the steering committee as possible future issues for the council (not in any particular order):

- Preterism
- Historical Premillennialism
- Problem Passages for Dispensationalists – Answering Critics
- The Priority of the Testaments
- The Use of the Old Testament in the New Testament
- The Hermeneutical Significance of Prophecy or Relevance of Eschatology
- A Case for Dispensational Hermeneutics
- Approaches to the Book of Revelation
- Further Work on the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit (filling, sign gifts, etc.)
- The Structure of Biblical Covenants
- The Structure of Biblical Dispensations
- Dispensational Application of Scripture

- Boundaries of Traditional Dispensationalism
- The Peoples of God
- The Nature and Mission of the Church in Dispensationalism
- Continuity and Discontinuity in the Millennium and Eternal State
- The Nature of the Eternal State
- Dispensationalism and Social Action
- Dispensationalism and Political Action
- Dispensationalism, Creation, and Evolution
- Dispensationalism, Language, and Scripture

There are of course more topics that could be added and the steering committee would appreciate the ideas of others in this matter.

You will recognize the last one as the topic from last year, which itself was a follow-up to year one. I have added it again to reinforce what I said earlier. There is much more to be done here. Even if we solve some other knotty issues, it will not serve us if we give the field to those who use metaphor to eliminate prophetic predictions from many of the prophets.

For each possible topic that we choose to examine, hermeneutics and theological method should be at the forefront. We must analyze our arguments and not just come to our conclusions. We must hone our skills at advancing the cause of grammatical-historical interpretation in such a way that we can tell people why it is necessary to do so. Remember, we may be the last evangelicals defending inductive Bible study.