

Dispensationalism's Feet of Iron Mixed With Clay: How We Arrived at an "Open-But-Cautious" View on Non-Cessationism

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ABSTRACT

We owe a tremendous debt to many traditional dispensationalists who labored to blaze trails more Biblical than those of their forefathers. Still, we must refine the system for an increasingly *more Biblical* understanding. To that end, this paper has three concerns.

First, it explores dispensationalism's concurrent dissatisfaction with non-literal eschatology and contentment with thomistic and reformed (hereafter, TR) platforms in soteriology and ecclesiology. Due to historical sympathy toward these platforms, we have failed to fully deconstruct our theology and reconstruct from a hermeneutically sound Biblical perspective. Consequently, our systematic theology is not univocally systematic or Biblical, but rather is an amalgamation of broadly informed historical systems.

Second, as such amalgamations eventually breaks down in favor of one system over another, we are not surprised in soteriology to see a settling in the lordship salvation debate, for example, as illustrated by the increasing prominence of the Young Restless, and Reformed, and the New Calvinists. Likewise, in evangelical ecclesiology there is an increasing drift toward an open but cautious view on non-cessationism, fostered in part by shared methodology of MacArthur and Piper on the issue.

Finally, as a remedy to drift favoring TR methodology and conclusions, we propose a full deconstruction of dispensational theology, and a reconstruction *in order* on literal grammatical-historical principles. If dispensationalism is to have any true explanatory value, it must fully extricate itself from the systems it has concurrently espoused and eschewed.

ARGUMENT IN BRIEF

The primary (inductive) argument of this paper is presented here in short form:

P1: Dispensationalism has historically disagreed with fundamental aspects of TR ecclesiology and eschatology.

P2: The explanation for the differences, according to representatives of each group, is centrally theological and hermeneutical.

P3: Dispensationalism has historically agreed with fundamental aspects of TR soteriology, while disagreeing on some points (as illustrated by Chafer).

P4: An explanation for the soteriological similarities is found centrally in the shared methodology of appealing to TR authorities (as illustrated by MacArthur and Piper).

P5: TR methodology is compatible with an open but cautious view on non-cessationism.

C: As long as dispensationalism appeals to TR methodology for any of its doctrines, inconsistencies identifiable in TR eschatology and soterology will be present within dispensational thought. With respect to the cessationism debate, this means dispensationalism will have increasing difficulty in arguing against non-cessationism unless it abandons TR methodology altogether.

ARGUMENT

Premise 1: Dispensationalism has historically disagreed with fundamental aspects of TR ecclesiology and eschatology.

While this disagreement is common knowledge, the historical differences relating to Israel's present and future are worth noting here. Ronald Diprose observes, "Christian theology should consider Israel for her own sake and not as an adjunct to a particular theological system."¹ Diprose notes that there are a number of passages viewed by some as being compatible with replacement theology, including John 8:30-59; Matthew 21:42-44; Acts 15:1-18; Galatians 3:26-29, 6:16; Ephesians 2:11-22; Hebrews 8:1-13; 1 Peter 2:4-10; Philippians 3:4-9, and 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16.² (I would also add Revelation 20:1-10 as a central passage in the discussion.) How these particular passages are handled goes a long way in determining ecclesiology and eschatology. While there are several permutations of supersessionist thought,³ the purpose here is not to explicate them all, but only to show a central point of contrast between dispensational and TR thought in this area.

Diprose traces early strands of replacement theology from the Epistle of Barnabas, where it is said, "But let us see whether this people is the heir or the former, and if the covenant belongs to them or to us."⁴ Justin Martyr considered the church to be the true Israelitish race,⁵ Diprose further catalogs how Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Ambrose, Augustine, Chrysostom, Cyril, Pope Gregory I, Constantine, and subsequent canon law all were influential in swaying the church toward a predominantly supersessionist perspective.⁶

¹ Ronald Diprose, *Israel and the Church* (Waynesboro, GA: authentic Media, 2004), 3.

² Diprose, 33-54.

³ The distinct systems are well cataloged by Michael Vlach in "Various Forms of Replacement Theology" in *The Masters Seminary Journal* 20:1 (Spring, 2009): 57-69.

⁴ Diprose, 73.

⁵ Diprose, 75.

⁶ Diprose, 77-96.

Thomas Aquinas later solidifies supersessionism, commenting on Galatians 6:16 that, “He therefore is the Israel of God who is spiritually an Israel before God...Hence even the Gentiles have become the Israel of God...”⁷ Martin Luther, in his commentary on Galatians makes no direct distinction between Israel and the church, nor does he equate the two.⁸ However, an editorial comment in Luther’s *Commentary on Romans* illustrates Luther’s wrestling and final resolution on the identity of Israel in Romans 11:

Luther at first wavered with regard to the conversion of “all Israel.” In Romans he at times speaks as though he believed in the final conversion of the Jews, though he also emphasizes the fact that only the elect will be saved. Later he definitely accepted the opinion of Origen, Theophylact, Jerome, and others, who identified “all Israel” with the number of the elect, to which corresponds the expression “the fullness of the Gentiles.”⁹

John Calvin adds, citing Galatians 6:15, that, “The Old Testament has reference to one nation, the New to all nations.”¹⁰ Commenting on 6:16, he suggests that

There are two classes that bear [Abraham’s] name, a pretended Israel, which appears to be so in the sight of men, – and the Israel of God. Circumcision was a disguise before men, but regeneration is a truth before God. In a word, he gives the appellation of the Israel of God, to those whom he formerly denominated the children of Abraham by faith (Galatians 3:29), and thus includes all believers, whether Jews or Gentiles, who were united into one church.¹¹

Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin illustrate, by their exposition, a common strand of basic supersessionism that has come to dominate church history, yet which is contradicted in premillennial and especially dispensational thought.

⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. F.R. Larcher, OP (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), electronic edition.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: CCEL, 1991), 135.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Peter Miller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 162.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1940), 2:11:11.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: CCEL), 154.

Premise 2: The explanation for the differences, according to representatives of each group, is centrally theological and hermeneutical.

Unlike the TR approach, John Darby notes that the Israel of God referred to “any of that people [Israel] who were circumcised in heart, who gloried in the cross according to the sentiments of the new creature.”¹² Darby was careful to maintain the ethnic distinction, though he does add, with reference to *them* in 6:16, “Moreover every true Christian was of them according to the spirit of his walk.”¹³

While Charles Ryrie admits that grammar is not dispositive in Galatians 6:16, for example,¹⁴ he carefully exposit:

The argument of the book of Galatians does favor the connective or emphatic meaning of “and” ...Use of the words Israel and Church shows clearly that in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and the Church is never equated with a so-called “new Israel” but is carefully and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age.¹⁵

S. Lewis Johnson agrees, and underscores a major issue encountered in the thomistic/reformed interpretation of the *kai* as explicative:

If there is an interpretation that totters on a tenuous foundation, it is the view that Paul equates the term “the Israel of God” with the believing church of Jews and Gentiles. To support it, the general usage of the term Israel in Paul, in the NT, and in the Scriptures as a whole is ignored.¹⁶

What Johnson observes is that in order for some to favor a particular theological conclusion, characteristics of common usage are not properly appreciated. The TR interpretation, though driven by presuppositions, employs different methodology than that used to derive the dispensational understanding.

Oswald T. Allis observes, “One of the most marked features of Premillennialism in all its forms is the emphasis which it places on the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is the insistent claim of its advocates that only when interpreted literally is the Bible interpreted truly.”¹⁷ He recognizes that dispensationalists “are literalists in interpreting prophecy,” but criticizes them for being inconsistent in other areas.¹⁸

¹² J.N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, Vol. IV* (London, England: Cooper and Budd, Ltd., 1965), 281.

¹³ Darby, 281.

¹⁴ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1965), 139.

¹⁵ Ryrie, 140.

¹⁶ S. Lewis Johnson, “Paul and “the Israel of God” an Exegetical and Eschatological Case Study, in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 20/1 (Spring, 2009): 54.

¹⁷ Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 16.

¹⁸ Allis, 21.

Louis Berkhof critiques premillennialism as a theory “based on a literal interpretation of the prophetic delineations of the future of Israel and of the Kingdom of God, which is entirely untenable.”¹⁹ He adds, “The New Testament certainly does not favor the literalism of the Premillenarians. Moreover, this literalism lands them in all kinds of absurdities...”²⁰

John Gerstner takes an important step in recognizing that the distinctions aren’t simply hermeneutic, but also theological – specifically regarding pre-commitment to theological conclusions:

We all agree that most literature, including the Bible, is usually meant to be understood according to the literal construction of the words which are used....At the point where we differ, there is a tendency for the dispensationalists to be literalistic where the non-dispensationalist tends to interpret the Bible figuratively. But to say on the basis of that limited divergence of interpretation that the two schools represent fundamentally different approaches is not warranted. Many on both sides think that this minor “hermeneutical” difference is a more foundational difference than the theological. We profoundly disagree for we believe that the dispensational literal hermeneutic is driven by an *a priori* commitment to dispensational theological distinctives.”²¹

While I believe Gerstner understates the hermeneutical disagreement and accuses the wrong side of theological pre-commitment, he is right to emphasize the importance of theological pre-commitment, since such *presuppositions are a part of theological method and can have a tremendous impact on hermeneutical principles.*

Robert Saucy makes a slightly different argument than the aforementioned TR thinkers. He suggests that,

An analysis of non-dispensational systems, however, reveals that their less-than literal approach to Israel in the Old Testament prophecies does not really arise from an *a priori* spiritualistic or metaphorical hermeneutic. Rather it is the result of their interpretation of the New Testament using the same grammatico-historical hermeneutic as that of dispensationalists...So the fundamental issue between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists is neither a basic hermeneutic principle nor the ultimate purpose of human history. The basic issue is the way we understand the historical plan and the goal of that plan through which God will bring eternal glory to himself.²²

¹⁹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 712.

²⁰ Berkhof, 713.

²¹ John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 92-93.

²² Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 20.

While Saucy downplays hermeneutic distinctions even more than does Gerstner, Saucy still recognizes the differences exist, but attributes them to a broader, rather than narrower, theological understanding. Hence, while there are differences regarding the extent of the hermeneutic differences and the exact nature of the theological disagreement, there seems to be a common recognition that the differences between dispensational and TR thought are (1) primarily theological and hermeneutic, and (2) found largely in prophetic passages.

Premise 3: Dispensationalism has historically agreed with fundamental aspects of TR soteriology, while disagreeing on some points (as illustrated by Chafer).

Lewis Sperry Chafer accomplished inestimable gains for dispensational soteriology and sanctification, as his *Systematic Theology* remains to this day arguably the most comprehensive dispensational work on both topics. While Chafer's volumes are tremendously helpful, they also betray an important reliance on TR thought, as evidenced by Chafer's own theological method. Chafer suggests that "theology may be extended properly to include all material and immaterial realities that exist and the facts concerning them and contained in them."²³ This curiously broad characterization is advanced in his definition of systematic theology, which he describes as, "A science which follows a humanly devised scheme or order of doctrinal development and which purports to incorporate into its system all the truth about God and His universe *from any and every source* [emphasis mine]."²⁴ Chafer admits that his source material for the systematic theology is much broader than the Scriptures themselves (though he acknowledges that Biblical theology relies exclusively on Scripture).

A further methodological characteristic of Chafer's theology is his proclivity to include large portions of quoted material – not to illustrate ideas, but to state them initially, as primary source material. This approach is not unique to Chafer, being characteristic of his times. However, this penchant for relying on secondary source data as primary, and his methodological admission that secondary source material may have equal standing with Scripture is troubling for the development of dispensational theology.

To illustrate the influence of these two methodological traits on Chafer's theology, note his first extended quote of the volume on soteriology. The initial quotation includes no less than three full pages reproduced from W. Lindsay Alexander's *System of Biblical Theology*, on the accomplishment of Jesus's death. Chafer introduces the quote by saying that Alexander "discusses this feature of Soteriology in a manner well suited to this thesis."²⁵ Chafer offers a remark immediately following the quote: "In conclusion it may be observed..."²⁶ Instead of building his theology directly and exclusively from Scripture, Chafer imports a tremendous portion of the doctrine of atonement from Alexander's work. That is not

²³ LS Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 3.

²⁴ Chafer, *Vol. 1*, 5.

²⁵ LS Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 3* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 68.

²⁶ Chafer, *Vol. 3*, 72.

to say that Alexander is either right or wrong, only to acknowledge that he was steeped in TR thinking,²⁷ and Chafer allowed him to have a significant role in the newly systematized dispensational understanding of the atonement.

To his credit, in the spirit of scholastic integrity, Chafer also extensively quoted those with whom he disagreed. In the same volume, Chafer allows John Miley a six-page quotation, but only so out of respect for Miley's scholarship on the issue of the governmental theory of the atonement.²⁸ Chafer concludes his chapter on the atonement with a *ten-page* quotation of B.B. Warfield's "Modern Theories of the Atonement," lauding Warfield's address as "the most clarifying analysis of this subject ever published."²⁹

By contrast, Chafer's volume on eschatology shows a reluctance to rely on TR sources. Besides the introduction (in which he quotes numerous TR thinkers to illustrate the importance of eschatology) and the section discussing the history of chiliasm (where one expects and finds a number of quotes from historical sources), with two exceptions Chafer only quotes extensively from C.I Scofield,³⁰ Frederick Taylor,³¹ H.A. Ironside,³² Henry Thiessen,³³ Ford Ottman,³⁴ and J.J. Van Oosterzee,³⁵ all dispensational thinkers in their eschatology. As for the exceptions, Chafer cites George Peters, but only to agree with Peters' argument that we should pay more attention to the Davidic Covenant,³⁶ and he cites B.B. Warfield, but only to compare historical views on immortality in the eternal state.³⁷

My point here is not to impeach Chafer or his scholarship, but simply to demonstrate that his theology – the most comprehensive theology dispensationalism has yet produced – allows TR thought to do some heavy lifting in certain key areas, while restricting TR influence in others – and that by Chafer's own design. Later influential thinkers would capitalize on this, attempting to bring definition to areas that remained otherwise underdeveloped in Chafer's dispensational thought, but doing so in deference especially to TR thought.

²⁷ E.g., Alexander's supersessionism is evident in James Ross, *W. Lindsay Alexander, D.D., L.L.D.,: His Life and Work* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1887), 267 and 330.

²⁸ Chafer, *Vol. 3*, 147-152.

²⁹ Chafer, *Vol. 3*, 155ff.

³⁰ LS Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 4* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 286-287; 311-312; 357-358; 413-414.

³¹ Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 307-311.

³² Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 335-336.

³³ Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 338; 348-349; 361-363; 369-370.

³⁴ Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 354-357.

³⁵ Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 423-426.

³⁶ Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 324-325.

³⁷ Chafer, *Vol. 4*, 421.

Premise 4: An explanation for the soteriological similarities is found centrally in the shared methodology of appealing to TR authorities (as illustrated by MacArthur and Piper).

Self-identified *leaky dispensationalist*, John MacArthur pursued clarification in the areas of soteriology and sanctification by blasting Chaferian thinking for not being consistent enough with reformed thought (my words, not his). MacArthur critiques Thomas Constable's view that "not everyone who believes the gospel realizes that the Savior has the right to be sovereign over his life."³⁸ MacArthur asserts, "Along with everyone else who rejects the Savior's right to be sovereign, that person is an unbeliever..."³⁹ It seems obvious that MacArthur's critique misrepresents what Constable said (Constable did not suggest that one could reject His lordship and be saved, but only that one could not fully comprehend it and still be saved). MacArthur later pans Constable's statement that "Repentance means to change one's mind; it does not mean to change one's life."⁴⁰ MacArthur cites Charles Ryrie and Michael Cocoris as being erroneous on this same issue.⁴¹ Instead, MacArthur prefers J.I. Packer's, Louis Berkhof's, and Geerhardus Vos's definitions of repentance, quoting sympathetically all three.⁴²

MacArthur understands that Chafer's soteriology departs from TR thinking in some areas. MacArthur cites, for example, "Chafer's dichotomy between carnal and spiritual Christians" as a teaching previously shown erroneous by B.B. Warfield.⁴³ Notably, MacArthur attributes his own departure from dispensational thinking on that point as *methodological*, as he observes this issue to be "a classic example of how dispensationalism's methodology can be carried too far."⁴⁴ MacArthur, favoring the understandings of A.W. Tozer and James Boice over Charles Ryrie and Michael Cocoris,⁴⁵ synthesizes salvation and discipleship, perceiving them not as two steps, but as a single process. He says,

Those who teach that obedience and submission are extraneous to saving faith are forced to make a firm but unbiblical distinction between salvation and discipleship. This dichotomy, like that of the carnal/spiritual Christian, sets up two classes of Christians: believers only and true disciples.⁴⁶

In soteriological areas, MacArthur exhibits a preference for TR doctrine and tradition. Note, for example, the similarity between how John MacArthur and John

³⁸ Thomas Constable, "The Gospel Message" in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1982), 203.

³⁹ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 75.

⁴⁰ MacArthur, 177.

⁴¹ MacArthur, 177.

⁴² MacArthur, 179.

⁴³ MacArthur, 30-31.

⁴⁴ MacArthur, 31.

⁴⁵ MacArthur, 34-37.

⁴⁶ MacArthur, 36.

Piper handle the issue of limited atonement. MacArthur holds to Calvinism's five points, including limited atonement (the "I" in TULIP). He departs from his generally literal hermeneutic in handling 1 John 2:2, arguing that ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου does not refer to the whole world. He adds, "Jesus didn't pay for the sins of Judas...or Adolf Hitler."⁴⁷ MacArthur explains that the verse is simply explaining that atonement was now available to the whole world, but that it does not mean that Jesus paid for the sins of the whole world. Appealing to John 11:52, MacArthur asserts Jesus only died on behalf of the children of God. But 11:51 describes that Jesus would die for the nation [of Israel.] Still, 11:51-52 makes no claim that Jesus would die for the children of God, but only that He died in order to gather them together. MacArthur's presupposed limited atonement drives his (non) exegesis of 1 John 2:2. When John says "the whole world" he really means "the whole world...*except for anyone in the whole world who would not believe in Him.*"

John Piper agrees with MacArthur, and defends his own conclusion almost identically: "When Christ died on the cross paying the price for us...He decisively accomplished that for His own. His sheep. His elect...He didn't just make it accomplishable, He accomplished it."⁴⁸ In other words, when Jesus declared that it was finished, He had completed the entire redemptive process for believers. For this reason, Piper prefers the term "triumphantly effective atonement" instead of limited atonement. Referring to John 3:16, Piper admits that "the cross is universal in that conditional sense," that anyone believing will have life.

Jesus "decisively purchased with a dowry, His bride," Piper says. In handling 1 John 2:2, Piper identifies Jesus as the "wrath remover" for the whole world, and like MacArthur, likens the passage to John 11:51-52 – a passage which again, *does not limit His death to the children of God.* Piper adds, "I think that is what he means by propitiation for the whole world, namely, as the gospel spreads around the whole world, the whole world becomes the object of His saving work in that He gathers children of God from out of every tribe and tongue." But John didn't say in 1 John 2:2 that Jesus died for people *from* the whole world, but that He was the ἰλασμός, the propitiation περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου – for or *on behalf of* the whole world.

Both Piper and MacArthur are playing a semantic game here, and neither can deal with the exact phrasing of 1 John 2:2. Both refer to a distant context that is dissimilar in wording, and both redefine *the whole world* to mean *not the whole world*. The very simple problem they are trying to avoid – that Jesus's propitiation must be a completed purchase, and thus must be fully efficacious – is a theological/philosophical problem, not an exegetical one. They are trying to resolve a philosophical conundrum that isn't there by explaining away the passage that is there. In fact, there is no problem at all – they are assuming too much of the word ἰλασμός, without any exegetical warrant to do so. Romans 3:25-26 distinguishes between propitiation (ἰλαστήριον) and justification (δικαιοῦντα). There is no

⁴⁷ John MacArthur "John MacArthur – Limited Atonement: Explained – 1 John 2:2" (YouTube video) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DepxyWF8euA>, viewed 8/15/2013.

⁴⁸ John Piper, "John Piper on Limited Atonement" (YouTube video) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZEIPPgMkFA>, viewed 8/15/2013.

exegetical need to conclude that justification of the elect occurred at the cross. It didn't. The justification is through faith, and has always been (Gen 15: 6; Rom 3:26).

Also, this argument favoring limited atonement takes the sheep/shepherd metaphor too far. Shepherds don't create their sheep (Jn 1), nor do shepherds hold their sheep together in every way (Col 1), nor are shepherds priests on behalf of their sheep (Heb 4), nor do shepherds choose their sheep before the foundation of the world (Eph 1). The metaphor in John 10 simply serves to illustrate how the sheep enter the fold (10:1-6) – through the shepherd. The figure of speech doesn't go much further than that. A sheep is one who enters through the shepherd (10:2), and His disbelieving audiences were not sheep because they didn't come to the Father through Him (10:26). In other words, He puts it on their shoulders that they are not sheep – it is their fault. Jesus is not referring to election here at all.

The formal quality of this limited atonement assertion is not problematic, but the truth-value is. Piper's and MacArthur's appeals to John 10:11 (sheep) or 11:52 (children of God) is a valid (in form) *modus ponens* argument:

P1: If Jesus died for the sheep (or the children of God) then He didn't die for those who weren't sheep (or the children of God).

P2: Jesus died for the sheep (or the children of God).

C: Jesus didn't die for those who weren't sheep (or the children of God).

In a deductive argument, if the two premises are true, then the conclusion will necessarily follow. The problem is simply that P1 is not exegetically defensible (there is no passage which supports such a thing, and 1 John 2:2 seems to strongly assert the opposite view). If there is no exegetical evidence for the assertion, then it is *not demonstrably true*. In order to solve a nonexistent problem, these two intelligent men appeal to *an exegetical assumption and state it as fact*. MacArthur and Piper are able to find tight agreement in these conclusions because they are employing common methodology.

Premise 5: TR methodology is compatible with an open but cautious view on non-cessationism.

Chafer says little about the closure of the canon in his Systematic Theology, making only brief observations in his volume on bibliology, but what he does say is dispensationally significant:

The formal closing of the New Testament canon is at least intimated in Revelation 22:18. The dissimilarity in the manner in which the two Testaments end is significant. All the unfulfilled expectation of the Old Testament is articulate as that Testament closes and the last verses give assurance of the coming of another prophet. But no continued revelation is impending as the New Testament is terminated; rather that announcement is made that the Lord Himself will soon return and the natural conclusion is

that there would be no further voice speaking from heaven before the trumpet heralds the second advent of Christ.⁴⁹

Rather than relying on a single passage (or on any appeal to a previous theological tradition) to make his case here, Chafer's assertion that the canon is closed rests commendably upon the whole of progressive revelation considered synthetically and chronologically. Chafer's appeal to a synthetic view of Scripture is characteristic of classical dispensational thought, as illustrated by Scofield's emphasis on Biblical synthesis.⁵⁰ This synthetic approach, simple though it is, underscores a commitment to the Biblical narrative on its own terms, and literally understood.

Chafer gives but a little attention to 1 Corinthians 13:8, suggesting that, "it is possible that the averment that prophecy shall 'cease' (1 Cor. 13:8) anticipates the close of the New Testament canon; for where there is no divinely designated and duly attested prophet there is no Scripture to be received or delivered."⁵¹ In a later discussion on the nature of spiritual gifts, Chafer quotes John Walvoord extensively, including Walvoord's acknowledgement that by individual exposition of each gift, it is evident that there are "gifts known by the early Christians, which seem to have passed from the scene with the apostolic period. Some of these are claimed for today by certain sects, whose neglect of the Scriptural instructions for use of these gifts is in itself a testimony to the spurious quality of their affected gifts."⁵² Walvoord's comment marks dispensationalism's attention to both synthesis and exegesis in considering spiritual gifts. For good measure, Charles Ryrie discusses the canon in historical and theological terms, to illustrate that a dispensational perspective on the canon is consistent with dominant historic perspectives of the early church.⁵³

The testimony of the later church is mixed. For example, John Chrysostom referred to the gifts' "cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place."⁵⁴ Augustine initially described tongues as "done for a betokening, and it passed away,"⁵⁵ and early on he held to a cessationist position:

When the Catholic Church had been founded and diffused throughout the whole world, on the one hand miracles were not allowed to continue till our time, lest the mind should always seek visible things, and the human race should grow cold by becoming accustomed to things which when they were novelties kindled its faith...⁵⁶

⁴⁹ LS Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 93.

⁵⁰ See C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course Volume I: Introduction to the Scriptures* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1959), 12.

⁵¹ Chafer, *Vol. 1*, 101.

⁵² LS Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 6* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 220.

⁵³ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), 105-109

⁵⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: CCEL), XXIX: 169.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. H. Browne, ed. P. Schaff, 6:10, at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1702.htm>, viewed 8/19/2013.

⁵⁶ *Of True Religion* 47, from J.H.S. Burleigh, (ed.), *Augustine: Earlier Writings, Library of Christian Classics*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1953), 6, 248.

Despite Augustine's early sentiments, his personal experiences over the years caused him to take another position:

It is sometimes objected that the miracles, which Christians claim to have occurred, no longer happen...The truth is that even today miracles are being wrought in the name of Christ."⁵⁷

Even while defending the existence of miraculous signs, Augustine maintained that the canon was indeed closed.⁵⁸ Still, Augustine introduced an experiential element to his often otherwise rationalistic approach. That experiential component would play a substantial role in the later TR sympathy to the non-cessationist viewpoint.

Aquinas adds important commentary to the cessationist debate. He describes miracles in the present tense as serving two purposes: "in one way for the confirmation of truth declared, in another way in proof of a person's holiness."⁵⁹ While charismatic gifts are possible, they are not common, as he quotes Augustine to say, "the reason these are not granted to all holy men is lest by a most baneful error the weak be deceived into thinking such deeds to imply greater gifts than the outwards signs of righteousness."⁶⁰ One can see the fruit of Aquinas's thinking in the Catholic doctrine of sainthood, which requires that the candidate for sainthood demonstrate "heroic virtue."⁶¹

While Aquinas was open to charismatic gifts in some instances, he adds that 1 Corinthians 13 "is not speaking here about the cessation of spiritual gifts through mortal sin, but rather about the cessation of spiritual gifts which pertain to this life through supervening glory."⁶² Regarding the cessation of prophecy he says, "in future glory prophecy will have no place..."⁶³ Of tongues, he observes, "some in the early Church spoke in various tongues...in future glory each one will understand each tongue. Hence, it will not be necessary to speak in various tongues."⁶⁴ Aquinas is a cessationist only in the sense that he recognizes that the charismatic gifts will be unnecessary in future glory, and in that he acknowledges they were utilized in the early church particularly, but his open approach looks very much like the open-but-cautious view of today.

The Reformers espoused a cessationist view, in part to counter Catholic claims of miracles as confirmation of unorthodox doctrines. To their credit, the Reformers, in accordance with sola scriptura, sought to ground their arguments

⁵⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, abridged from trans. Walsh, Zema, Monahan, Honan (New York, NY: Image Books, 1958), 22:8, 512-513

⁵⁸ Augustine, 22:8.

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Grand Rapids, Mi: CCEL), II, Q. 178.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *Summa*, II, Q. 178.

⁶¹ *Catholic Catechism*, 828.

⁶² Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. Fabian Lercher, electronic edition at <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SS1Cor.htm>, 787.

⁶³ Aquinas, *First Corinthians*, 788.

⁶⁴ Aquinas, *First Corinthians*, 789.

exegetically. Luther is resolute in his cessationist stance, asserting that “Once the Church had been established and properly advertised by these miracles, the visible appearance of the Holy Ghost ceased.”⁶⁵ Calvin’s perspective on healing is similar: “But that gift of healing, like the rest of the miracles, which the Lord willed to be brought forth for a time, has vanished away in order to make the new preaching of the gospel marvelous forever.”⁶⁶ Jon Mark Ruthven identifies key components of Calvin’s cessationism in particular: miracles were for the confirming of Scripture, not post-scriptural teaching, and Catholic miracles were consequently self-evidently false.⁶⁷ Further, while Calvin held to cessationism, he left a window open to the possibility that such gifts could potentially have a present or future use in the church.⁶⁸ Ruthven observes another important component in Calvin’s thought: namely that Calvin borrows Aquinas’s approach to associating the charismata with the accreditation of Scripture without attempting systematically to prove the connection.⁶⁹ This is significant because it shows that the Reformers in some instances borrowed from thomistic traditions without earning the doctrines for themselves. Modern TR methodology is not unique in its tradition of appealing to theological authorities.

Whereas Aquinas and the Reformers held to varying degrees of cessationism and openness, B.B. Warfield’s cessationism was unmistakably closed. He argued that miracles were

The characterizing peculiarity of specifically the Apostolic Church, and it belonged therefore exclusively to the Apostolic age...These gifts were not possession of the primitive Christian as such; nor for that matter of the Apostolic Church or the Apostolic age for themselves; they were distinctively the authentication of the Apostles...This does not mean, of course, that only the Apostles appear in the New Testament as working miracles, or that they alone are represented as recipients of the charismata. But it does mean that the charismata belonged, in a true sense, to the Apostles, and constituted one of the true signs of an Apostle. ⁷⁰

Warfield appeals primarily (in the early context of his argument) to theologians of the post-Reformation era who he says “taught with great distinctness that the charismata ceased with the Apostolic age.”⁷¹ He offers roughly fifteen pages of historical and theological data before introducing his first Biblical citation (a

⁶⁵ Martin Luther, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: CCEL, 1991), 84.

⁶⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1940), 4:19:18.

⁶⁷ Jon Mark Ruthven, *On the Cessation of the Charismata: The Protestant Polemic on Post-Biblical Miracles* (Sheffield, UK: University of Sheffield Academic Press, 2009), 22.

⁶⁸ See Ruthven, footnote 22 on page 22.

⁶⁹ Ruthven, 23.

⁷⁰ B.B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York, NY: Scribner and Sons, 1918), 6 and 21.

⁷¹ Warfield, 6.

mention of Acts 8:14-17),⁷² and that lone reference is the only Biblical citation in the entire opening chapter that discusses his cessationism. In fact, the only references to Scripture in the remaining two hundred pages are Mark 16:17-18,⁷³ Matthew 8:17,⁷⁴ James 5:14-16,⁷⁵ John 14:12-13,⁷⁶ and 1 Corinthians 12,⁷⁷ and these are considered only in the context of an apologetic specifically contra the teachings of A.J. Gordon. Once again, as we have seen before with Thomas and the Reformers, the method for deriving doctrinal conclusions is more related to historical rather than Biblical theology. Whether or not Warfield's conclusions are correct is not the central issue. Warfield's work is respected as the most influential cessationist apologetic to that point,⁷⁸ yet, by the design of its author, the work attempts almost no attention to exegetical or synthetic grounding.

More recently, John MacArthur has been a leading advocate for cessationism. MacArthur's *Charismatic Chaos* attempts a Biblical response to the charismatic movement, and succeeds more than most. Like Chafer, MacArthur begins his defense of a closed canon by appealing to a synthetic view of Scripture:

When the canon closed on the Old Testament after the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, there followed four hundred "silent years" when no prophet spoke God's revelation in any form. That silence was broken by John the Baptist as God spoke once more prior to the New Testament age. God then moved various men to record the books of the New Testament, and the last of these was Revelation....Just as the close of the Old Testament canon was followed by silence, so the close of the New Testament has been followed by the utter absence of new revelation in any form.⁷⁹

Initially, MacArthur correctly appeals to a synthetic perspective, however, unlike Chafer, he then immediately turns to the TR method of appealing to historical authority when he adds, "Since the book of Revelation was completed, no new written or verbal prophecy has ever been universally recognized by Christians as divine truth from God."⁸⁰ The first part of his argument is textual (and objectively verifiable), but the *evidence* of his argument is historical and subjective. This is a specific example of how mixed methods can weaken a case. MacArthur demonstrates further admixture of the objective and subjective in order to justify his cessationism.

Introducing the topic of the cessation of tongues, MacArthur proclaims, "I am convinced by history, theology, and the Bible that tongues ceased in the apostolic

⁷² Warfield, 22.

⁷³ Warfield, 48, 166-169.

⁷⁴ Warfield, 166, 174-177.

⁷⁵ Warfield, 166, 169-173, 187.

⁷⁶ Warfield, 167, 173-174.

⁷⁷ Warfield, 167, 173.

⁷⁸ Ruthven, 29.

⁷⁹ John MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 71-72.

⁸⁰ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 72.

age.”⁸¹ Note the order of the evidence: history and theology (two subjective disciplines) come before the Bible (objective truth). *Why?* This order of priority seems a common characteristic of TR methodology. He adds, “Tongues were therefore a sign of transition between the Old and New Covenants. With the establishment of the church, a new day had dawned for the people of God...once the period of transition was past, the sign was no longer necessary.”⁸² Notice the vague appeal to at least some degree of supersessionism (if tongues is no longer in play, then according to MacArthur’s assertion, the New Covenant is presently being fulfilled). To that end, MacArthur quotes reformed scholar O. Palmer Robertson to confirm that, “the transition [between Old and New Covenants] has been made.”⁸³ MacArthur not only finds himself on slippery methodological footing, but by this maneuver he has connected his cessationism with the *full blown supersessionism* that Robertson advocates!

Further, MacArthur asks the question, “What evidence is there that tongues have ceased?”⁸⁴ His answer is first theological, and then historical: “History records that tongues did cease.”⁸⁵ He adds based on the historical and theological evidence, “Thus we conclude that from the end of the apostolic era to the beginning of the twentieth century there were no genuine occurrences of the New Testament gift of tongues.”⁸⁶ In all this, he has not offered an *exegetical basis* for the cessation of tongues. Once again, the issue is not whether the conclusions are correct, but whether the manner in which the conclusions are derived are legitimate. Consequently, he has left the door open for historical and theological reinterpretations that would call into question his cessationist conclusion.

John Piper provides just such a reinterpretation. In a sermon on spiritual gifts, Piper notes, “I think it would be fair to say also from this text that you shouldn’t bend your mind too much trying to label your spiritual gift before you use it. That is, don’t worry about whether you can point to prophecy, or teaching, or wisdom, or knowledge, or healing, or miracles, or mercy, or administration, etc...”⁸⁷ His open-but-casual approach comes across as relevant and non-dogmatic (I think this approach is a major factor in his broad appeal). On March 5 [1984], Piper discussed a survey to determine Bethlehem’s “Charismatic Quotient,” and expressed that “Truth is not determined by counting noses...Let’s study the word together and see if our ‘Charismatic Quotient’ is too high or too low.”⁸⁸ Notice how he has

⁸¹ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 281.

⁸² MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 282-283.

⁸³ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 283.

⁸⁴ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 282.

⁸⁵ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 283.

⁸⁶ MacArthur, *Charismatic Chaos*, 286.

⁸⁷ John Piper, *Spiritual Gifts* (sermon), March 15, 1981, at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/spiritual-gifts>, viewed 7/31/2013.

⁸⁸ John Piper, Testing Bethlehem’s Charismatic Quotient (sermon), March 4, 1984, at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/testing-bethlehems-charismatic-quotient>, viewed 7/31/2013.

apparently shifted from historic TR methodology to take a more exegetical posture. In the discussion, Piper proposes four theses on the NT gift of prophecy:

1. It is still valid and useful for the church today. He asserts that this is the clear implication of 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 and Acts 2:17-18.
2. It is a Spirit-prompted, Spirit-sustained, utterance that is rooted in a true revelation (1 Corinthians 14:30), but is fallible because the prophet's perception of the revelation, and thinking about the revelation, and report of the revelation are all fallible. It is thus similar to the gift of teaching which is Spirit-prompted, Spirit sustained, rooted in an infallible revelation (the Bible), and yet is fallible but very useful to the church.
3. It does not have an authority that is on a par with Scripture, for Scripture is verbally inspired, not just Spirit-prompted and Spirit-sustained. The very words of the biblical writers are the words of God (1 Corinthians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16). This is not true of the words that come from the "gift of prophecy."
4. The New Testament gift of prophecy is a "third category" of prophetic utterance between the categories of 1) verbally inspired, intrinsically authoritative, infallible speech spoken by the likes of Moses, Jesus and the apostles; and 2) the speech of false prophets spoken presumptuously, without inspiration and liable to condemnation (Deuteronomy 18:20). Those two categories (absolutely infallible vs. false) do not exhaust all the biblical teaching on prophecy.⁸⁹

The *study of the word* that Piper offered turned out to be almost entirely theological rather than exegetical – none of the theses Piper proposed are exegetically defensible from the passages he cites, and he doesn't even attempt such a defense. Granted, the context is sermonic, but much of what Piper writes is equally homiletic. Evidently, Piper does not depart from TR methodology. Instead, he re-labels it with an attractive and casual *study the word* tag.

As Piper discusses signs and wonders, he declares, "I am one of those Baptist General Conference people who believes that 'signs and wonders' and all the spiritual gifts of 1 Corinthians 12:8-10 are valid for today and should be 'earnestly desired' (1 Corinthians 14:1) for the edification of the church and the spread of the gospel... if signs and wonders were not limited in function to validating the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, but rather had a role in the edifying and evangelistic work of the church in general, then there is good reason to trust God for their proper use today."⁹⁰ Good reason, based on what? Piper's interpretation of 1 Corinthians 13:8-

⁸⁹ John Piper, The New Testament Gift of Prophecy (sermon), March 26, 1990, at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/taste-see-articles/the-new-testament-gift-of-prophecy>, viewed 7/31/2013.

⁹⁰ John Piper, Signs and Wonders: Then and Now (sermon), February 1, 1991, at <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/signs-and-wonders-then-and-now>, viewed 7/31/2013.

12 is the definitive factor in his advocating of signs and wonders for the present day church. Piper's entire argument is worthy of reproducing here:

So the answer to the question of when the perfect comes and when the imperfect gifts pass away is the "then" of verse 12, namely, the time of seeing "face to face" and "understanding as we are understood." When will this happen? Both of these phrases ("seeing face to face" and "understanding as we have been understood") are stretched beyond the breaking point if we say that they refer to the closing of the New Testament canon or the close of the apostolic age. Rather, they refer to our experience at the second coming of Jesus. Then "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2) The phrase "face to face" in the Greek Old Testament refers to seeing God personally (Genesis 32:30; Judges 6:22). Thomas Edwards' hundred-year-old commentary is right to say, "When the perfect is come at the advent of Christ, then the Christian will know God intuitively and directly, even as he was before known of God" (First Epistle to the Corinthians, p. 353, italics added). This means that verse 10 can be paraphrased, "When Christ returns, the imperfect will pass away." And since "the imperfect" refers to spiritual gifts like prophecy and knowledge and tongues, we may paraphrase further, "When Christ returns, then prophecy and knowledge and tongues will pass away."

Here is a definite statement about the time of the cessation of spiritual gifts, and that time is the second coming of Christ. Richard Gaffin does not do justice to the actual wording of verse 10 when he says, "The time of the cessation of prophecy and tongues is an open question so far as this passage is concerned" (Perspectives on Pentecost, p. 111). It is not an open question. Paul says, "When the perfect comes [at that time, not before or after], the imperfect [gifts like prophecy and tongues, etc.] will pass away."

Therefore, 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 teaches that such spiritual gifts will continue until the second coming of Jesus. There is no reason to exclude from this conclusion the other "imperfect" gifts mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:8-10. Since these include miracles, faith, healings, etc., with which we associate "signs and wonders", there is clear New Testament warrant for expecting that "signs and wonders" will continue until Jesus comes.⁹¹

Notice Piper's two-pronged appeal to historical authorities (Thomas Edwards' "hundred year old commentary"), and to English context-connecting without anything but anecdotal exegetical attention to the original languages (1 Jn 3:2 [ὅτι ὁψόμεθα αὐτὸν καθὼς ἐστίν] and 1 Cor 13:12 [τότε δὲ πρόσωπον πρὸς πρόσωπον] are not at all similar in the Greek).

By formalizing Piper's argument, we can see that his method for handling 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 is an attempt at logic-based rather than exegetical articulation. Further, his argument is neither sound nor are the premises accurate. His argument demonstrates a core interpretive problem in the spiritual gifts debate:

⁹¹ Ibid.

P1: Both phrases (“seeing face to face” and “understanding as we have been understood”) are stretched beyond the breaking point if we say that they refer to the closing of the New Testament canon or the close of the apostolic age. [Based on what textual authority?]

P2: Then "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2) The phrase "face to face" in the Greek Old Testament refers to seeing God personally (Genesis 32:30; Judges 6:22). [Invoking a dissimilar distant context contributes nothing to the exegesis of 1 Cor 13:12]

P3: Thomas Edwards' hundred-year-old commentary is right to say, "When the perfect is come at the advent of Christ, then the Christian will know God intuitively and directly, even as he was before known of God" (First Epistle to the Corinthians, p. 353, italics added). [This offers nothing objective for understanding the definition of τὸ τέλειον then. The age of Edwards or his commentary is irrelevant.]

Conclusion: Therefore, 1 Corinthians 13:8-12 teaches that such spiritual gifts will continue until the second coming of Jesus.

The argument includes a series of subjective assertions and a conclusion unsupported by the premises, and hence is nothing more than a non sequitur. Yet this is the argument offered to answer the central question of when the revelatory gifts of 1 Corinthians 13 will conclude. Piper's open-but-casual conclusion represents a dominant strand in evangelical theology. It is clear we have lost our methodological way.

Mark Driscoll, representing an emergent/reformed version of TR methodology, characterizes cessationism as “a clever way of saying we don't need [the Holy Spirit] like we used to...that's not true.”⁹² While Driscoll is guilty here of false dichotomy, he criticizes cessationists for employing that very logical fallacy:

And so their argument even comes down to 1st Corinthians 13 which gets turned into origami, right? When the perfect comes the imperfect disappears, we'll see him face to face, the perfect is Jesus. The perfect is Jesus. But then what happens is, to defend this sort of modernistic rationalistic, cessationistic position, we throw up the craziest kooks in the charismatic camp and say well you don't want that do ya? uh no, no we don't. If it's nothing or that it's a real coin flip, cause neither is the real win.⁹³

⁹² Mark Driscoll “Don't Elevate Doctrine above the Holy Spirit” (YouTube video) at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUXfHaHUKvo>, viewed 8/19/2013.

⁹³ Frank Turk “Open Letter to Mark Driscoll” at <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2011/08/open-letter-to-mark-driscoll.html>, viewed 8/19/2013.

Driscoll's false dichotomy, though not as elegant as Piper's suggestive non sequitur, is not dissimilar to Piper's brand of non-cessationism, and is probably equally as influential.

Piper and Driscoll are only two among a host of contemporary examples illustrating the compatibility of TR methodology and open views on non-cessation. Piper and Driscoll also exemplify how present-day applications of TR methodology seem, in fact, to prefer non-cessationism, as these applications offer no means for objective grounding of cessationism.

Conclusion: As long as dispensationalism appeals to TR methodology for any of its doctrines, inconsistencies identifiable in TR eschatology and soteriology will be present within dispensational thought. With respect to the cessationism debate, this means dispensationalism will have increasing difficulty in arguing against non-cessationism unless it abandons TR methodology altogether.

The example afforded by MacArthur's soteriological and ecclesiological compatibility with TR thinking and incompatibility with Chaferian thinking underscores three key points. First, Chafer defends his views on the atonement with heavy reliance on TR thought, so when MacArthur defends his lordship, limited atonement, and cessationist views with appeals to the same authority as does Chafer, there appears little methodological difference between the two camps. Chafer builds large portions of his soteriology with TR materials, but where Chafer departs from TR thinking, MacArthur reproves Chafer with nothing more than TR ideas. The point here is that Chafer illustrates dispensationalism's reticence to apply the same method to soteriology and ecclesiology as to eschatology, and the result is theological inconsistency.

Second, these divergences in soteriology and ecclesiology betray a splintering in dispensational thinking. MacArthur's brand of TR soteriology and ecclesiology is a dominant strand in dispensational thought, in large part due to its historic appeal to widely appreciated TR thinking. MacArthur illustrates well the division, as he coolly rejects dispensational ideas that disagree with TR thinking, but only up to the point where there remains a distinction between Israel and the church. For some reason (indiscernible to me, since MacArthur is not grounded in a consistently literal hermeneutic), that is where MacArthur and his many followers draw the line. As lordship salvation becomes increasingly popular among younger evangelicals in general (see, New Calvinism, and the Young, Restless, Reformed), dispensationalists seem both increasingly sympathetic to lordship salvation and limited atonement, and increasingly unwilling to challenge the TR methodology that fosters these trends. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that the open-but-cautious and open-but-casual views on non-cessationism are gaining traction within dispensationalism, because they are derivatives of the same methodology employed in the grounding of lordship salvation and limited atonement.

Finally, the disagreements in soteriology and ecclesiology accentuate the point that if dispensationalism is to arrive at consistency, it cannot ignore the methodological problems embedded in our theology. These soteriological and ecclesiological discussions need to be addressed and resolved with the same vigor

dispensationalists have exerted in the eschatological debate. And we mustn't stop there. Dispensationalism needs a theological enema, to rid ourselves of the methodological σκύβαλον that so heavily influences us to place dispositive emphasis on extra-biblical authorities, and proportionally derive unsound conclusions.

We must realize that *Dispensationalism is not a hermeneutic*, nor can it be our final loyalty; it is merely an explanatory device of Scripture rightly interpreted. As such, dispensationalism should be comprehensively distinctive, and not merely an alternate perspective in narrow strands of eschatology and ecclesiology. As dispensationalists, we argue that the Bible determines our hermeneutic – that it decisively favors the literal-grammatical-historical model. With that understanding must come a great appreciation for history and theology – and any other context that informs our understanding regarding the lives and times of the writers God used to place His words in our hands. But when those disciplines become our dominant influences over and against the text itself – as they have in the aforementioned areas of soteriology and ecclesiology – then we have lost our way.

Lordship salvation, limited atonement, and the cessationism debate serve as important case studies to illustrate that until we address these issues with at least some degree of exegetical finality, we will continue to be encumbered by an amalgamation theology that will continually seek to resolve to the dominant strand. Continued dispensational acceptance of TR methodology means continued acceptance of TR error.

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