

Where is Dispensationalism Going? (Part 2)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

Is dispensationalism dead? Well, to paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of its demise have actually been greatly exaggerated.

As I write this series of articles, I have just returned from The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry's international staff conference, which was held in early May at the Sandy Cove Conference Center. The Friends of Israel will turn 85 years old this December, and I can attest that the organization remains thoroughly and carefully committed to traditional dispensational theology. At our core, we stand on the same foundational truths that undergirded men like Lewis Sperry Chafer and Harry Ironside when they formed this ministry beginning in 1938.

As we gathered with our “fellow laborers” (Philem. 24) from points around the globe, the experience was almost surreal. Some of these dear people labor diligently right there in Israel. Other brave men and women have spent much of the past year rescuing Jewish people from the horrors of war-torn Ukraine. As one of my colleagues noted, these international workers have little time or motivation to amend their theology.

One of the reasons, in fact, that I pursued service with The Friends of Israel is that I aspire to remain on the cutting edge of the dispensational premillennial movement as it has been handed down to us today.

In June, Lord willing, I will be attending the national convention of IFCA International—exhibiting there for FOI for the third consecutive year. Several hundred people will gather in Covington, Ky.—almost all of them Christian leaders and their spouses. Nearly every one of them will be dedicated to traditional dispensational theology—and can explain why.

After more than 90 years, the IFCA remains vibrantly committed to its dispensational heritage. Executive director Dr. Richard Bargas has made it abundantly clear that this is a flag worth planting—as he is wont to say—and one which will serve to define his time in office. While certainly not alone in this regard, the IFCA is positioned to lead in demonstrating the significance of traditional dispensational theology in today's world.

There are other notable events that also raise the dispensational flag high each year, such as the Pre-Trib Study Group Conference, as well as the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics. These groups each continue to produce a wealth of information for scholars and laymen, alike.

As we evaluate the state of dispensationalism in our time, we would have to affirm that there is no single flagship organization that sends out marching orders to the rest of the movement. There's no brain trust distributing talking points. There's not one gigantic seminary that unifies the movement. In fact, there seems to be a rather robust

discussion ongoing among various dispensational seminaries regarding some of the finer—and sometimes not-so-fine—points of theology.

Perhaps it is time for us to embrace these realities and celebrate them, especially in light of our history. Consider the upside to the fact that there is no particular entity or institution which has the capacity to alter the whole movement. Instead, this movement thrives in many smaller schools, in countless (mostly smaller) churches, promoted by faithful pastors (most of whom will never come close to being famous), exegeted in home study groups and through conferences that attract people to sacrifice their weekends in exchange for in-depth instruction on the Scriptures. In short, the current situation harkens back to dispensationalism's humble beginnings—born out of intensive Bible study by individuals, in homes, in churches and in conferences.

And, mind you, there are millions of copies of study Bibles, theology books and other volumes from a dispensational perspective—many produced by major publishing companies—that are still in circulation in our society.

And, if you think that everything in the world of Reformed theology has been streamlined for success, think again. Major issues are under discussion in their camps—and some of them are incredibly divisive. Not the least significant of these involve the rise of new covenant theology and progressive covenantalism. There are also ever-changing attempts to explain and describe how the church replaces Israel—a rather fundamental element of any non-dispensational system, in my opinion.

Samuel admonished King Saul with the reality that it was “when (he was) little in (his) own eyes” (1 Sam. 15:17) that he was at the height of his spiritual capability. The same could arguably be said about his successor, King David, as well. Jesus endearingly referred to His followers as a “little flock” in Luke 12:32. “Do not fear,” He said on that basis, “for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”

Yes, many of us persist in traveling on “the old paths” (Jer. 6:16) of dispensationalism. Perhaps the movement still has more momentum than we commonly ascribe to it. The real issue is where we should go from here.

And I will discuss that specific subject further in the next installment in this series.

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