

Where is Dispensationalism Going? (Part 4)

By PAUL J. SCHARF

How should our dispensational movement attempt to move forward?

That is the vital question of this series. And I began my attempt at tackling it last week, looking at the issue in terms of what you might call its philosophical foundation. In essence, I provided some very basic and practical direction for the revival of dispensationalism—drawing on its historical roots from the time that it began to grow in popularity as a system of theology.

Surely, there is more to be done—much more that must be done in these, perhaps the closing days of the church age. The words of Christ to the seven churches are most applicable and poignant here:

Hold fast what you have till I come. (Rev. 2:25)

Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain. (Rev. 3:2)

Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown. (Rev. 3:11)

I cannot give direction to all dispensationalists, however—especially since, in total, they would be very unlikely to follow my guidance. Instead, I would like to set forward some more very practical concepts which, if pursued, would move us toward the revitalization of the dispensational movement. In this way, perhaps I can influence the thinking of even one reader who will consider these words and benefit from them.

In my service for The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry and, even before that, through ministering in other capacities, I have spoken in a great number of churches that represent a wide range on the spectrum of dispensationalism.

One manner of feedback I have received in a variety of forms—after teaching on Bible prophecy or explaining dispensational theology—is a statement that goes something like this: “I have not heard anything like that in a long, long time.”

Spoken musingly, the announcement is bittersweet. It is at once meant to be both a compliment for me as well as, I suppose, a reflection on that church’s teaching. But the obvious question I have in my mind as I listen is, “Why not?”

Could it be that one reason for a dearth of dispensational preaching and teaching is the lack of men who have been skillfully trained to provide such instruction. Why is this?

I would assert that one observable cause is that dispensational churches have been inconsistent, at best, in locating and employing dispensational ministers.

I suppose there are a myriad of explanations for this. A noticeable one is that church boards and pulpit committees are often either misinformed or simply oblivious to such issues during the process of calling a new pastor.

Some innocently assume that anyone who preaches the Bible must naturally teach what their local church has always taught. Others may recognize a different emphasis on the part of the new preacher, but lack the skill to discern the rationale behind the difference.

I am sure that many others have called pastors based on the reputations of their alma maters. But this assumes that the individual graduate is carrying forward the heritage he acquired from his school. Often, this is not the case. The pastoral candidate—excited to accept a position—may not be so eager to point out technical differences in his theology. More nefariously, he may have a strategy of revealing them later, with a view toward changing the trajectory of that church body. It appears to me that these issues have become more prevalent in recent years.

Along the same lines, church leaders may be trusting the reputation that a particular Bible college or seminary enjoyed many decades ago, and might be dangerously out of touch with the reality on the ground in that school as it exists today.

People usually do not fall into good health, or out of debt. So also, it would be rare indeed for a local church congregation to fall into dispensational theology. This is a direction that must be consistently chosen and rigorously maintained. It requires repeated emphasis and continual explanation. Church board and committee members must become more theologically astute, and seek counsel when needed, rather than remaining silent as decisions are made—then later wondering what happened.

To dispensational pastors who have been well trained in these areas yet, somehow, rarely speak on them, I would like to share this word of encouragement: Pastor, you hold in your hands a rare “treasure” (Matt. 13:52). Please don’t hide or waste it. Please don’t be afraid to expound these precious truths from your pulpit. I believe you’ll find, in fact, that there are many who hunger to understand the convictions you have to share.

If, as I asserted previously, dispensationalism offers a method of thinking and a course of living, then it is time for us to go beyond survival and rebuild a culture of dispensationalism in our churches—drawing on the best of our heritage and traditions.

And that is where we will resume next time.

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