

WHY I AM A DISPENSATIONALIST WITH A SMALL “d”

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I. WHY ASK WHY?

More than a decade ago at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society the ETS Dispensational Study Group held its inaugural meeting.¹ The goal of our meetings was to discuss various issues related to dispensationalism because those who launched the effort felt that such discussion would prove fruitful not only to dispensationalists but also to other Society members interested in eschatology. The effort began with the combined help of some who today might identify themselves either as progressive or traditional dispensationalists. The group was consciously committed not only to having discussion among themselves but also to having others participate as speakers who did not identify with dispensationalism but with other theological traditions. Talking to one another, not about one another, was and is a major goal of our meetings.

This essay's goal is similar. Why not engage in some reflection about what dispensationalism is as a movement? Why not make clear why dispensationalists identify with dispensationalism as a significant contributor to evangelical theology? What does dispensationalism contribute to evangelical theology? Why not reflect on its strengths, developments and potential weaknesses? That will be my goal. This is all the more important as some within our tradition have asked, even publicly, whether progressive dispensationalism is in fact dispensationalism at all. Some of these critics regard it instead as a troubling hybrid and an attempt to be covenant theology in sheep's clothing.²

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² For example S. J. Nichols, "The Dispensational View of the Davidic Kingdom: A Response to Progressive Dispensationalism," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 7 (1996) 213–239, which attempts to argue that the progressives' claim of an initial realization of Davidic promise shows that the position is not really dispensational, simply because it has not been made before in the history of the movement. He makes this claim not by examining texts but by examining history, conveniently ignoring the work of E. Sauer in the process. Nichols' defense of a spiritual kingdom in the NT as unrelated to Davidic promise ignores the fact that the imagery used in the texts that describe the spiritual kingdom come from OT and Davidic categories (see Rom 1:2–4 or Col 1:13 as compared to Luke 1:69–79 with their rich OT themes of hope). This shows how the creation of this category is motivated by theological and systemic concerns, not by the text. For a whole series of texts reflecting this background see D. L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment," *Trinity Journal* 15 (1994) 55–87.

I think it is important and appropriate to answer this question as directly as possible. I hope to affirm the strengths of this tradition and why I identify with it.

I also want all of us, whatever our tradition, to reflect on what the meaning and limitations of such traditional labels are. What does identifying with a tradition mean in a Biblically oriented group that is quite aware of Paul's rebuke in 1 Corinthians 1 about being of Paul or of Apollos or even of Christ? This is the explanation for the small "d." It is my contention that all of us, whatever our traditional roots, need to hold to our tradition with a sense that it possesses a small-letter dimension in recognition of the fact that many points we discuss with one another are points of debate between Biblically committed evangelicals. As we face much of the world that does not know Jesus, what we have in common is far more important than our differences. How one makes this distinction of priority is what this essay and its tone are all about, even as it affirms its identification with a major tradition in evangelicalism.

II. INTRODUCTION: THINKING ABOUT TRADITIONAL THEOLOGICAL IDENTITY

Identity, unlike vocation, is not always a simple thing to explain. The impact of background, events and my cultural environment play into identity in ways I probably underestimate. We are people made in God's image, and yet we are touched by God's divine work in a myriad of life's details. In my case I happened to grow up in Texas and selected Southern Methodist University for my freshman year in college because it was close to Houston, my home, and seemed a nice enough place. But God was also at work. By the luck of the draw my roommate, a Southern Baptist, lived out the great commission long before I really knew what it was. Such human details to our allegiances are often forgotten or unmentioned but also, I am sure, have a major part in determining our identity. There is a positive (and sometimes a negative), personal, human dimension to our theological identity and how we theologize. We ignore it to our peril if we do not recognize that it is there making an impact.

Identification with a theological tradition is a similar exercise. Many of us are who we are because we belonged to a church of a certain tradition when we came to Christ and have been satisfied with this association. For others, our traditional identities are a product of a reaction, sometimes quite intense, against the roots of our new beginnings. For still others it is far less shocking a transition and may not even be viewed in coming and leaving terms at all. Exposure to the body of Christ has led to reflection and the development of a sense of strength and weakness about the tradition or traditions with which we identify. In other words, some of us are who we are because we have been that way from our second birth, while others became who we are in conscious comparison to other traditions. Being good theologians and regardless of the route we take, we justify the associations we take with the claims and convictions that we are Biblical in holding to what we believe.

This is not to suggest that those who have stayed within a tradition all their Christian life have not been reflective. Unless one lives in a hermeti-

cally sealed church it is impossible in our era not to be exposed to a variety of traditions, Biblical or otherwise. The simplest and least taxing answer to our exposure to this variety is simply to say that our tradition is Biblical and be done with it, satisfied that how we read the Bible is the way it should be read. We defend the association using whatever plausible reasons we can raise, not the least interested in how or why others see it differently. We all know in our hearts that this approach is not only inadequate but also un-Biblical. If theological exercise is to be anything, it is called to be reflective about Scripture and the world with a worshipful integrity in pursuing the truth, wherever it lies. That means being fair not only about what I believe but about what others believe as well. It may mean seeing truth in things said outside of my tradition.

Thus in what I am about to say about being a dispensationalist I am being as self-reflective as I can. I know that what I see is not all that there is to see. I have been in a theological environment for over twenty years. I have studied, heard, read and discussed what other traditions hold. I see things in other traditions that resonate with Biblical truth, but I also have been associated with the dispensational tradition all my Christian life. I am aware that dispensationalism seems unusually skilled in bringing out strong reactions both for and against it. I am a dispensationalist with a small “d” in part because I believe that dispensationalism possesses several important Biblical emphases. But I also know that no tradition sees it all, and so my pursuit of the truth in the community of faith should remain interactive, both positively and negatively, with other traditions. In saying what I do about dispensationalism I will make few comparisons to those other traditions, which also may have much to say to us Biblically. I have found dispensationalism beneficial in understanding what God is about in the world and with me.

Before explaining why I am a dispensationalist, however, I need to take some time to discuss the question raised by some that my expression of dispensationalism is really covenant premillennialism. It is an important question that deserves a detailed response and explains why I am a dispensationalist, why it is with a small “d,” and why we must be careful how we classify one another’s views.

III. OVERVIEW

I cover my survey of dispensationalism in four steps. First, I address the issue of covenant premillennialism and hermeneutics. Those who hesitate to accept a claim that one can be a progressive and a dispensationalist have suggested that a progressive’s reading of the text is either a covenant her-

menetic or reflects covenant premillennialism.³ I also want to make some important observations about how we label people in the process.

The second section treats the strengths and contributions to theology that have come to the Church from dispensationalism.

Third, I consider emerging new themes and emphases in the tradition that also make associating with dispensationalist dialogue beneficial. Here I speak with the glasses of a progressive, but I think the issues raised are of interest and importance to us all.

Last, I consider the potential weaknesses and pitfalls of our tradition, where strengths can get dispensationalism into trouble if we do not stay balanced in how we see ourselves.

IV. A COVENANT PREMILLENARIAN?

Why would a progressive dispensationalist claim to be a dispensationalist at all? Why not just become a covenant premillenarian? Two critiques of progressive dispensationalism require treatment under this topic: (1) the suggestion that complementary hermeneutic is Laddian, and (2) the way progressives have challenged the phrase "literal hermeneutics."

Many have suggested that the hermeneutics used in progressive dispensationalism is Laddian, or a reflection of what has come to be known as covenant premillennialism. Elliott Johnson was the first person I heard raise this connection to George Ladd.⁴ It has been repeated numerous times since.

Two factors contribute to the comparison. (1) The progressive dispensational conclusion that the kingdom today has an already form and that it is an initial expression of fulfillment of Davidic promise is certainly on the surface similar to Ladd's. If the conclusion is the same, then logically one might conclude that the interpretive method taken to get there must *ipso facto* be. (2) At the time of this proposal, the two major categories people had to work with were dispensationalism and covenant premillennialism. So if a conclusion looks more like covenant premillennialism, then that must be what the position is.

It is important to appreciate that this comparison also has a more cynical historical and sociological background to it. George Ladd and John Walvoord had a famous debate over eschatology that ran through the 1950s and

time and has its details filled out by events within divine history. If we had deleted meaning that had been originally present, then his charge might have merit. But this is explicitly what we have not done. There is no evidence of hermeneutics of that kind that he developed or argued in his dispensationalism. In fact, there is in 1965, before the charge, a complementary and original dispensationalist Bible held all Old Testament subjects that fit complementary reading, and on the integrity of that text as for their own contribution to the expansion of the book of Revelation. It is wise when the complement is revised dispensationalists engage of complementary readings of the OT.

⁴ This association was made in his response to my paper to the 1987 Dispensational Study Group meeting. My paper later was published as "The Reign of the Lord Christ," *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: A Search for Definition* (ed. C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992). My initial response to this association appears on p. 54.

gicalism over the future of fundamentalism/evangelicalism, the role of es-

chatology, and competing views of Scripture that later emerged in the 1970s into the full-fledged inerrancy/infallibility dispute.

For Walvoord, the disagreement with Ladd was not only about eschatology but also about a hermeneutics that would lead to a denial of Scripture if literalism were abandoned. I suspect that for those dispensational institutions that are uncomfortable with considering progressives for faculty positions it is the hermeneutical and Scriptural issues that are just as important as the eschatological ones. The roots of this nervousness are often underappreciated by those looking at this history from the outside. In noting this point I am not saying I agree with the analysis that Ladd’s approach reflects a liberal reading of Scripture, though it does reflect in my view a loss of meaning for the text.⁵ I do see problems in the way he allows the NT to define OT promises in ways I believe end up denying part of what the OT is saying. But it is one thing to see an approach having interpretive problems because it underplays possible Biblical meaning, and it is quite another to see it as so Bibliologically dangerous that it is an inherent reflection of liberalism. In any event, the comparison between Ladd’s method and his covenant premillennialism with complementary hermeneutics and progressive dispensationalism was more than descriptive: It was an attempt to suggest prescriptive concerns.⁶

⁵ It is progressives’ refusal to redefine Israel, for example, that makes unfair such critiques as that of R. Thomas about multiple-meaning hermeneutics. It will not do to compare the claims of older evangelical texts on hermeneutics with a discussion of progressive theory. Most of these texts do not cover in detail how one handles the progress of revelation between texts of OT hope and NT realization. Ultimately the Biblical texts of the covenant promise have to be studied and discussed in context to see how they present fulfillment. Thomas’ article is unhelpful because it attempts to be theoretical and prescriptive while not discussing clearly the exegesis of key NT texts where OT passages are used with notes of fulfillment. The refusal by progressives to redefine Israel also means that the hermeneutical standard set by C. Ryrie for dispensationalists has been met, despite his complaints otherwise; see *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) 43 n. 43 for his appropriate assessment of Ladd’s hermeneutics. Interestingly, Ryrie rightly commends the work of Sauer while complaining about the views of progressives—an amazing paradox, given that Sauer made similar observations about Davidic promise.

⁶ Such efforts can be seen in the titles some have tried to bring into the discussion, which have moved beyond the descriptive titles “traditional,” “revised” and “progressive” that we used with historical grounds. The recent unfortunate choice to use “normative” dispensationalism by some who hold to what we have called “revised” dispensationalism is an attempt to be prescriptive in ways that selectively cite the historical evidence of the history of dispensationalism, ignoring the position of a recognized dispensationalist like Sauer on the weak grounds that he is a continental dispensationalist and by not dealing with notes like that in the *Scofield Reference Bible* on Matt 3:2.

Curious as well is the fact that many of Ladd's specific critiques made of specific dispensational views—for example, two new covenants, or his view of the sermon on the mount—represent positions that even many traditional dispensationalists today would accept, even though they would not adopt all of Ladd's hermeneutical route in getting there. Somehow those suggestions were acceptable because they dealt with soteriology and ethics while the proposals surrounding Davidic promise and kingdom were not. The likely reason for the different response is that when one discussed Davidic kingship it was Israel as an institution that was being talked about. The OT does seem to teach that Israel has a future that extends into the resolution of history. Dispensationalism has always had a tender spot in its heart for Israel, so that affirming the initial realization of Davidic promise without a major role for national Israel (as Ladd had done) seemed to separate what should not be separated. If David or his promises could get into the Church, what need did one have for Israel? Reformed theologians, including covenant premillenarians, ask me the same question on this point as the traditionalists, but they argue that Israel and the Church are one and the same—a view I reject as an oversimplification of the text, even though I appreciate what it is in NT teaching that causes covenant theologians to affirm it. The traditionalists prefer to let David stay where he belonged: in a national Israel that has a central role in the future. Progressives are arguing for a nuancing of the discussion that falls between the other two stark options.

One of the disturbing things progressive dispensationalism seemed to be doing was making a mess of the clean lines of distinction that covenant theologians and dispensationalists had made in their sometimes noisy debates in the middle third of this century. The resultant muddle made people who desire clean categories uncomfortable. I was quite aware of this tension in 1987 since I had to wrestle through it hermeneutically in even considering the proposal. I think some of this reaction is perfectly understandable, given that theology is colored by the history of its battles, the temporal location of events, and the desire to know which side one is on. When progressives challenged the viability of the term “literal” in the recent debate and whether literalism really was an historical *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, all that did was confirm to many that our desire was to shed dispensationalism of its distinctive and thus in effect to join with or defect to the other side.⁷

Unfortunately the claim of a connection missed the point. It made associations that on the surface were understandable but were both incorrect and gravely misleading. Theological assessment needs not only to consider what the conclusion is but how it was reached and what is being addressed. Craig Blaising has made three cogent points about “literal” interpretation.

1. *The term is a poor one to use for a definition* since one still has to define how one finds the “literal” in the text.⁸ Charles Ryrie also acknowledged this difficulty when he expressed preference for the term “normal” or “plain.”⁹

⁷ One should note the battle language being used and the misdirected attempt to read motive here.

This approach has been better known as historical-grammatical interpretation, a description that evangelicals have adopted and that Ryrie also accepted.¹⁰ This last concept is the best phrase for defining what interpretation should involve. The additional contention Blaising made was that all evangelicals are trying to do this, so that different conclusions are not the reflection of a different method but of a difference in integrating the texts.

2. *A claim for consistent literal interpretation was not an historically clearly defined sine qua non for dispensationalism until the polemical debates of the middle of this century.* Blaising’s point about consistent literal interpretation was that this claim did not reflect the earliest dispensational writers, who clearly were comfortable with readings that were spiritualizations.¹¹ They often engaged in typological readings of the text that were something less than what “literal” meant when it became a term of definition for Ryrie. Blaising’s words summarize the historical situation well:

Consequently, Ryrie’s remark [about consistently literal interpretation as a *sine qua non*], even though it failed as a description of dispensationalism’s unchanging essence, nevertheless pointed a direction in which dispensational hermeneutics was to develop. The old principle of spiritualization has been left behind, and dispensationalists, first revised and then progressive, have pursued the goal of consistent historical-grammatical hermeneutics even as they developed it in meaning and method and in consultation with other evangelicals.¹²

3. *The issues of interpretation in the latter part of the twentieth century show that all evangelicals are wrestling to understand the ways the text is integrated into a theological whole.* There used to be in Reformed circles a claim for a “special” hermeneutics where many Reformed theologians accepted the description of their interpretation as “spiritual” because they believed such a reading was Biblically based.¹³ But the discussion today is changing on both sides. Many covenant theologians today are not trying to interpret the text allegorically or unnaturally when they argue that Hebrews shows a heavenly-earthly dualism in which the heavenly form transcends the earthly. To charge them with allegorical interpretation is morally unfair to their view. The debate concerns emphasis and relationship of the parts, not literal versus allegorical interpretation. When they take the example expressed in Hebrews with reference to heaven and the temple and apply it across the board to the various other Biblical categories I pause and want to ask why, as I did in critiquing Vern Poythress’ discussion.¹⁴ The effort by progressives to drop “literal” from the discussion was not to say we agree

⁸ C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993) 35–37.

⁹ C. C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 45; see also Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* 40.

¹⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* 86–87.

¹¹ *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church* (ed. Blaising and Bock) 26.

¹² Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 37.

¹³ W. E. Cox, *Amillennialism Today* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966) 14, 24–25.

with the covenantal approach or desire to integrate as they do. By understanding where the real issues were, not just the different conclusions, we might actually learn something about how to advance the discussion of those differences.

The Ladd critique also missed the point, understandable as it was to make. Our goal was not to argue that the initial fulfillments of the NT redefined terms in such a way that they no longer meant what they had seemed to mean in the OT. Nor do we argue for a refining of meaning that in effect changes the meaning from what it originally appeared to be. *Sensus plenior* was not what was being appealed to here, as George Ladd and Daniel Fuller seemed to use the term. The “complementary” hermeneutic of progressive dispensationalism meant that what the NT gives us comes in alongside what God has already revealed in the OT. God can say more in his development of promises from the OT in the NT, but not less. He can also bring in fresh connections in the development of promise as more revelation fills it out. It is this dynamic of the multitemporal dimension of promise that some dispensationalists have underplayed, while covenant theologians have overplayed the NT element. Texts raising the note of fulfillment define the scope of its realization and its timing. The covenant integration argues that the OT hope has been transcended and/or more clearly articulated by the NT. Progressives argue that the NT indicates a complement to the OT promise, with more fulfillment also to come within the ethnic structures the OT had already indicated. This means that in both views the Church can exist as a distinct institution in the plan of God and yet can share in promises originally given to Israel, because God brings them into the promise through his plan involving Christ the seed of Abraham, who also was the promised vehicle through whom the world would be blessed (Galatians 3–4).

Ladd remained unclear on his view concerning a future program involving national Israel except for articulating that there was one redemptive program and people of God in the plan.¹⁵ He correctly appealed to Romans 11 for this emphasis on unity. One plant is in view that starts with Israelites, grafts in Gentiles, and looks forward to the day of Israel’s return. Ladd did believe that Israel would turn back to God in the end, but he did not speak of the institution of national Israel in the process. For him, for example, the 144,000 of Revelation 7 reflect the Church of the end.¹⁶ The pres-

¹⁴ D. L. Bock, review of V. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, *JETS* 32 (1989) 542–544. Poythress’ update of this work argues that progressives are caught in a hermeneutical dilemma because of their affirmation of soteriological unity in texts like Galatians 3 and Romans 11. But this ignores a consideration of the very kind of nuancing that my question about Hebrews also raised. Biblical theology will only advance when both continuities and discontinuities are appreciated and properly defined in appropriate categories. The pursuit of such nuancing in the debate over the law between Reformed theologians and theonomists, a move required by Reformed critique of theonomy, also needs to be brought into the discussion of soteriology and eschatology. If it can help in discussion of the law, it can also help us delineate the structures in God’s program as the various dispensations come and go.

¹⁵ G. E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959 [reprint 1981]) 117–122.

¹⁶ G. E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 114–115.

ence of blessing in Christ through Israel and to the nations is a key aspect of OT hope that is evoked here. There is oneness of blessing, but there is evidence of national reconciliation in Christ at the same time. Progressives, however, see the 144,000 as reflecting Jewish witnesses to Jesus in a reconstituted Israel being set up for the last era.¹⁷ Thus progressives clearly articulate (1) a future for ethnic Israel and (2) distinguish between the Church and Israel as functioning institutions throughout the plan of God. There are distinctions here being maintained in the midst of the articulation of soteriological and kingdom continuities about the progress of promise and the

realization of covenant hope. These developments nuance our eschatological discussion both within dispensationalism and across the various lines of tradition within evangelicalism. They are fresh proposals of synthesis, specifying where continuities and discontinuities exist in God’s plan.

Our point has been that initial fulfillment in the Church now does not require the end of a central role for believing, national Israel in the future. Neither should this be read as a “separate but equal” proposal but as a “distinguished but reconciled” structure that shows how God has reconciled that which was previously divided.¹⁸ Nevertheless all who share in the blessings of salvation share in the oneness of blessing that comes from Christ. Recent covenant theologians discuss texts like Romans 11 and whether there is a future for national Israel, expressing shame at having missed the point previously in the tradition.¹⁹ Some are decidedly premillennial, or at least have expressed agnosticism on the question in light of Revelation 20. Others, like Anthony Hoekema, speak of a physical, literal fulfillment on the earth.²⁰

What is needed is not to see how quickly we can categorize where a view fits in the old scheme of things but to reflect on how the fresh combination is Biblically and textually put together. Thus I do not identify with covenant premillennialism, even though I have some similar conclusions and appreciate some of its critique of older expressions of dispensationalism. My conclusions reflect a dispensational structure, which is why I am a dispensationalist with a small “d.”

V. THE VALUE OF DISPENSATIONALISM²¹

Dispensationalism is of value to the larger Church. What I am about to say is not a claim that dispensationalism is distinctive in the areas I discuss. The tradition reflects Biblical concerns and has emphases that benefit

¹⁷ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 272.

¹⁸ I respond here to the description that R. Mouw gave my proposal in responding to the original presentation of this essay.

¹⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2.448 n. 2.

²⁰ A. A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) 205, 274–287; cf. also V. S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* 38, 47–51.

²¹ For reasons of space I have radically abridged the next three sections. For a more complete treatment of these themes, one can get the original version of this essay from me through the Dispensational Study Group.

all evangelicals. Other traditions could compile similar lists. Here I wish to highlight six areas of value.

1. *Apocalyptic.* Dispensationalism has always sought to come to grips with apocalyptic without attempting to demythologize or domesticate it. I know theologians who have shied away from the book of Revelation as either too difficult or esoteric. But the reason apocalyptic is so important is that it affirms many basic themes that are central to God's involvement with us.

First, from Adam to the end, God is forging out a plan that will come to a triumphant resolution within the current progress of history.

Second, apocalypticism unashamedly affirms the cosmic struggle that is really going on in our world. Though some can make too much of the seeming dualism, the fact is that for most of our modern world the problem is an underappreciation of the unseen forces at work in our world and in us. Apocalypticism challenges all of this by reminding us that we are on one side or the other of a huge cosmic struggle in a story of accountability whose end is not in doubt.

Third, apocalypticism is unashamedly antinaturalist. Part of the reason many are hesitant to reflect on apocalyptic themes is that such themes are so antimodernist. To see God radically breaking into our world has been out of vogue since the Enlightenment. Many of us are left uncomfortable with apocalypticism's disturbing images of cosmic judgment. We prefer a clean victory in which losers are better forgotten than dealt with. Apocalypticism challenges this falsely sanitized worldview at its core.

2. *God's grace.* The dispensational portrait of salvation and the fateful journey of Israel is a presentation of God's grace and faithfulness to his promises. The account is of a God who does not abandon his plans or give up on the sinner. God's grace makes Israel's story to the end very important, as Romans 9–11 shows. An emphasis on God's grace reminds us that God is "forbearing, not wishing that any should perish, but that we all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). Reflecting on God's grace means taking our sin seriously as something God went to great lengths to pay for. It also means remembering that we are God's because of Christ and not because of an inherent work we performed.

The story of Israel, the unworthy object of promise, is also significant in portraying the faithfulness of God. That he will win her back again one day is a picture of the constancy of God we must never forget.

3. *Holistic reading of Scripture.* Dispensationalism embraces the story of Scripture as a whole and seeks to integrate it. Our tradition, like others, has its points of discussion about how integration works in its detail. Yet the tradition remains committed to reading the progress of the Biblical story as something to which one gives careful attention. It is important to see where one era is both like and unlike other eras. In saying that today is not like

yesterday, dispensationalism challenges the Church to read Scripture with an eye to the uniqueness of what God is doing in a particular period.

4. *Church and world.* Dispensationalism has always made a distinction between the Church and the world. Some see this as a weakness that leads to escapism. But I do not. Many of the Church’s great missionary organizations originated with dispensationalists who believed the Church was where God was especially at work. The social activism of dispensationalism has focused on a different direction because of the perception of this priority. This distinction has promoted evangelism and has argued that God’s work in the Church is where real reform and redemption are found. This is not to say that engagement with the world is unnecessary. We need to remember, however, as Israel’s history also shows, that without a transformation of the heart a new law risks being a dead letter.

5. *Cultural distinctions within the body.* Another point not often appreciated about dispensationalism in its sensitivity to cultural distinctions in the Church. We are all one in Christ, but we are also made up of Jew and Gentile. Part of the gospel includes the powerful portrait of horizontal reconciliation. The gospel does not seek to have us forget that when God brought us together he did it despite the fact that we are very different people of widely diverse backgrounds. The Church needs to model cultural reconciliation, a unity in the midst of God’s wonderful creative diversity.

6. *All believers are ministers.* One of the more perplexing developments of our century is the rise of the parachurch organization. It is an innovation, like Sunday school, that is probably here to stay. At the base of this movement stands the belief that the Church is not a building, nor is it located on a particular corner. It is people of faith seeking to minister for the living God they serve and love. Dispensationalism helped to contribute to the origin of many parachurch organizations. This emphasis benefits us all.

A second example of this phenomenon is the home Bible study, another expression of the fact that God calls all of us to be serious in learning as his disciples.

Now in noting these categories I do not want to be misunderstood. I am not saying that these teachings are necessarily absent in other traditions or that many of these themes do not appear there. I do not claim these emphases are distinctive to my tradition but simply that my tradition strikes a helpful note in the way it looks at such questions. What I have presented here are emphases that resonate with important Biblical themes in ways that offer something of value to the rest of the evangelical community.

VI. THE VALUE OF NEW EMERGING DISPENSATIONAL EMPHASES
AND HOW THEY AROSE

There are other more recently emerging reasons why I am a dispensationalist. One of the greatest commitments of my tradition is to go where Scripture goes, a view that implies a willingness to take a serious, internal look at itself. Critical self-reflection is always a difficult exercise. Sometimes such reflection needs the input of those outside the tradition to help us consider where our blind spots may exist. At other times it needs some from within to raise questions and suggest solutions. In principle, a tradition that does not give room for reflection will fossilize.

Commitment to a tradition is a commitment not only to preserve, protect, and defend but also to consider the need to reform and reshape when such reshaping is more Biblical. The fact that we can engage in reflection within our tradition and across traditions is a sign of our health. Some of the more recent themes emerging from our internal reflection are healthy in their own right. I want to note two that represent emphases that make it an interesting time to be a dispensationalist.

1. *Considering themes of unity.* One fresh emphasis is assessing unity in the Scriptural message in the midst of dispensationalism's well-known pursuit of distinctions. This has happened probably in part in response to questions those outside our tradition have posed to us. In any case, the result has been a new, Biblically focused dialogue with many of the other traditions.

Some who are skeptical of these developments think that this was the goal all along—namely, to recast dispensationalism in a way that made it more acceptable to outsiders and that in the process no longer made it dispensationalism. They also are uncomfortable with the new rapprochement found with those of other positions, seeing truth compromised for the sake of a false unity. But those who react to these developments only with a desire to exclude and dismiss risk hurting themselves by separating themselves from a potentially fruitful discussion.

2. *The broad scope of salvation.* Recent developments in dispensationalism focus on God's call to reform humanity in all their relationships as a result of salvation in Christ. True reform outside of Christ is an impossibility. The reintroduction of the study of the gospels and the prophets for their ethical thrust within dispensationalism makes this possible. The new focus moves beyond an appeal to the demands of being made in the image of God. It emphasizes giving consideration to both how God calls people to relate to one another and how that now becomes possible, but only in Christ. It insists that salvation and sanctification are not only issues of a private vertical relationship to God but also involve a corporate reconciliation in a variety of life's contexts. Involvement in these corporate spheres protects us from two false emphases.

One false approach basically withdraws from the world and its issues, leaving them largely unaddressed. In effect the choice is to leave the secular person to sink in their own mire as society degrades around us, going for change of heart instead. But how can one see where the heart is unless the issues of the choices of life are put up to Biblical scrutiny? God risks being made irrelevant to whole areas of human endeavor.

The second false emphasis also risks a dangerous dualism by subtly suggesting that the mere passage of certain laws or the raw exercise of political clout will improve society. Israel had the best law heaven could provide, and yet at points her society was also thoroughly corrupt. To march into the arena of the public square without offering God’s grace risks presenting only one side of God that ends up being an ugly distortion of him. Alongside attempting to call transgression sin and seeking to raise the standards of our society, we must also hold out the hope of God’s forgiveness and grace.

What a salvific focus brings is a stress on the fact that the place where God’s activity is to be most evident in modeling is in the Church. If genuine reform is possible only in Christ, then it should be seen in and among Christians. The fresh dispensational emphasis on the current authority of Christ in this era and the recognition that he is said to be pouring himself into the Church means that all of these implications of our involvement in the world need to be worked out sensitively.

VII. DANGERS FOR DISPENSATIONALISM

There are pitfalls in all of this. One must be careful that strengths are not overplayed into disappointing and damaging weaknesses. I therefore want to name three potential dangers of the tradition.

1. *Handling the truth and others.* A high commitment to Scripture is both a gift and a responsibility. The gift comes in having access to the truth and a precious revelation from God, for which the Church is a custodian. The pressure on theologians of all persuasions is great to remain faithful to that truth and reflect it in what we teach. Because dispensationalism is committed to the truth of the Word it has always had a strong desire to be careful about how doctrine is articulated.

But being committed to Scripture also bears a responsibility. Having access to the truth in an inspired text and knowing the truth are two different things. They can easily be confused. Faithfulness to the truth is important, but so is how we interact with others. Our responsibility is to be faithful to the Word and be fair about what we really know.

2. *Handling the future.* Dispensationalism’s commitment to what God will do in his grace in the future is an important element of the tradition. But if all of us were honest, we know of many instances within our tradition where the desire to know the future has gone too far. In our zeal and certitude about what Scripture teaches about the rapture and return we have

painted scenarios over the last few centuries that have turned out to be wrong. It is possible that Jesus could come today. But we must be careful to remember the history of the Church at this point. People within our tradition have attempted to argue in each generation that theirs is the last generation. Yet that generation has now extended many generations. The danger in the desire to date and in the temptation to all but date is that we will make identifications that have nothing to do with the divinely determined end plan. In doing so, we risk constructing a worldview that is false because the wrong identification is made.

One final point needs to be made about Jesus' return. The "blessed hope" for me involves a pretribulation rapture. But that is a deduction, and I treat it as such. I give it what I believe is the appropriate emphasis in light of the totality of Scripture's teaching about the future.

For me the blessed hope is not as tied to the timing of the event that kicks it off as to what it represents. I look forward to the coming and completion of our transformation and redemption as our glorious God fully manifests his power and executes his judgment. It is no accident that Titus 2:13, a text so loved and cited by dispensationalists, occurs in an ethical context where we are being exhorted to reflect the ethical character of our faith until Jesus comes.

3. *Handling the issue of promise in the Word.* My final concern is that in our search for distinctions we risk separating our Lord Jesus too much from the theology of his bondservant Paul. It is no accident that two of the Biblical books discussing the relationship between the gospel and OT promise begin by asserting in the strongest and clearest terms the continuity of the message the Church brings with that hope of old. Romans 1:1–4 and Heb 1:1–2 affirm that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of OT hope. Romans discusses the topic at the level of promise, law, soteriology, and the relationship between Jew and Gentile. Romans 9–11 is not a parenthesis in the book but an essential part of the argument. Hebrews considers the theme from the standpoint of the superiority of Christ based on his current activity. It also considers the cessation of a need for repeated sacrifice, picturing substitution as an expression of new-covenant inauguration, something the Lord's table also commemorates. I believe that too great a separation of Paul from Jesus is not healthy for theology.

VIII. CONCLUSION

I am a dispensationalist with a small "d" for a series of reasons. Some of them have to do with events related to my own conversion. Others have to do with a correspondence I see between the tradition's emphases and what I believe I see in Scripture. Still others relate to the benefit I see dispensationalism giving to the theological tasks of our day. That does not mean that I am beyond discussing these issues with those of other traditions, nor does it mean I think that the tradition does not have potential pitfalls in the way

it expresses these emphases. But I remain a dispensationalist because I truly believe that much of what it teaches reflects enough of what Scripture teaches that I accept and embrace the identification. In fact I commend dispensationalism to others, not in the hope of winning a theological battle with others but in the hope that such a theological view helps all of us see our world, ourselves and our God more clearly. But my identity in this regard will always be with a small “d,” because in the end my allegiance is not to a system of theology or to a tradition but to my God and his teaching, whose redemption is so wonderfully portrayed in the truth he teaches. This means that as I speak about what I believe I remain open to listening for more of him. In the end it is his voice I want most to follow, because I know that I have not heard the last of his voice yet.