

The Dispensational Dilemma

Last fall Roger presented a workshop titled “The Reformed Issue Today,” in which he pointed out that 85-90% of churches today are influenced by Reformed theology. He also addressed four reasons why Reformed theology is popular – It is easier, taking less work than a strictly literal model; It allows for immediate application to the reader, even if it isn’t plain in the text; It has a mystical appeal, projecting a spiritual guise for those who follow it; Human philosophy is easily integrated into its allegorical interpretations.

I want to follow on the tails of his workshop to address some of the problems we face as dispensationalists. If 85-90% of churches have been influenced by Reformed theology, that implies that dispensationalism may be under attack, or at the very least, that it is waning in its influence. If you were to ask young people in your own church to explain dispensationalism, you would probably get either an “I don’t know” answer, or a declaration that dispensationalism is some sort of heresy. Why is that? For one, even though we teach from a dispensational perspective, we may not always clearly say so. A second reason is that with the rise of Reformed theology has come a rise in attacks on dispensationalism. Whether you realize it or not, dispensationalism is actively targeted by many popular writers, teachers, and social media producers.

Dr. Peter Goeman, in a blog post from January 2022, said, “Not too long ago while I was on social media I stumbled across a quote by a Christian cultural apologist who said, ‘Wherever dispensationalism has gained ground, Christian culture has lost ground.’ Although the claim that dispensationalism has hurt the church is not new, it was interesting to see how much agreement the post garnered in the comments. Some commenters labeled dispensationalism as the worst heresy the church has seen. Others said dispensationalism is a damnable heresy which has single-handedly lost the American culture war.”ⁱ

Why is dispensationalism seen as heresy and a plague on the church? One reason is the eschatological expectation that the world will get worse and worse, with the church being removed via the rapture before the end. This is portrayed by Reformed proponents as an “escapist” outlook which promotes a pessimistic view of the future and a shallow Christianity which is more focused on “fire insurance” than Christian growth or endurance. It is said that dispensationalists don’t care about the culture, nor about bringing it into the kingdom of Christ. On the other hand, proponents of Reformed theology boldly claim that the church will usher in the kingdom of Christ, winning the culture wars and converting the world. They claim that Reformed theology is an optimistic, victorious faith in contrast to the self-defeating faith of dispensationalists.

Popular teachers such as Doug Wilson and Gary DeMar regularly cast dispensationalists as short-sighted and ignorant, and the use of the social media machine by their followers echoes their opinion and magnifies it, resulting in a rapid rise in popularity of Covenant and Reformed theology among the young adults in America. Whether we know it or not, the term “dispensational” has become almost a cussword in a significant portion of Christian society.

According to Dr. Cory Marsh, “Common descriptions of dispensational thought include ‘recent invention,’ ‘anti-intellectual,’ ‘antinomian,’ ‘false gospel of prosperity,’ ‘oppressive,’ ‘dangerous,’ ‘guilty of societal neglect’ and a ‘selfish non-concern for the world.’ ...One fleeting remark concerning dispensational thought appears in Grenz and Olson, placing it within ‘a retreating fortress of anti-intellectual emotion’ and juxtaposing it with the charismatic movement.”ⁱⁱ

In the book “Christian Nationalism: A Biblical Guide to Taking Dominion & Discipling Nations”, authors Andrew Torba (founder of Gab) and Andrew Isker state “If we change our eschatology, we will change the world—and take dominion of it for the glory of God. That is the single most important task in all of Christendom second only to spreading the Gospel.’ Torba and Isker believe that supersessionism (that the Old Testament promises God made to Israel have all been fulfilled in Christ and the Church), was the theology of most Christians until the introduction of dispensationalism in the 19th century.

Dispensationalism, they proclaim, is an eschatology of defeat and needs to be replaced with one of victory. The recommended eschatology is that of postmillennial preterism, which views the prophecies of the New Testament, including the book of Revelation, as fulfilled in 70 AD when Rome destroyed Jerusalem. Presently, Satan is bound and Christ’s kingdom on earth is slowly growing and will ultimately dominate the world.

How ought we to respond to this, particularly within our churches and circles of influence? One thing is to keep current on thoughts and trends within the larger context of American Christianity. Follow the various forums where this is discussed, whether at conferences, on blogs, podcasts, or elsewhere. I joined a group on Facebook called “Discovering Dispensationalism” which presents ongoing discussions in the theological realm, with resources that can be very helpful. Two of the people I quoted earlier, Drs. Cory Marsh and Peter Goeman, are active in that group, and are teaching in seminaries which hold a firm dispensational view. Dr. Marsh and James Fazio, the admins of that group, are also the editors of a book by the same title, which traces the development of dispensational thought from the first century to the present. Why is this important? Because the Reformed detractors of Dispensationalism claim that dispensationalism is a 19th century innovation.

Renald Showers, in his book “There Really is a Difference” points out that even Covenant Theology can’t be shown to be an ancient system. “Covenant Theology did not begin as a system until the 16th and 17th centuries. It did not exist in the early Church. Louis Berkhof, a prominent Covenant Theologian wrote, ‘In the early Church Fathers the covenant idea is not found at all.’ Nor was the system developed during the Middle Ages or by the prominent Reformers Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, or Melancthon. According to Berkhof, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) was the real founder of a well-developed Covenant Theology in which the concept of the covenant became for the first time the constitutive and determinative principle of the whole system.”

There are other helpful resources which I will mention at the end, but another thing we need to do is be consistent and accurate in our terminology.

We often equate the terms “Reformed” and “Covenant” – but we really should clearly distinguish them if we are to be historically and theologically accurate. Dr. Marsh states: “Dispensationalism is not opposed to Reformed thinking. I am not saying covenantal. If dispensationalists are known for anything, it is making distinctions. Yet sometimes we use that term *Reformed* too broadly. The dispensational movement was birthed out of Reformation thinking. They emphasized interpretation and Biblical languages and the glory of God. We make the case in the book (“Forged from Reformation”) that we are the truest, most consistent heirs of the Reformation and the Reformed legacy. I think we do a disservice when we polarize that Reformed is on one side and dispensationalism is on the other. That is not true. It is true that covenantal theology is on the other side from dispensationalism. But we are *Reformed* – in the broad sense that we were birthed out of the Reformation. I am not saying anything to stir the pot in

any sense. I am trying to bring some clarity to the discussion. What we are not is covenant theologians. That is a subset of the Reformed legacy – just like dispensationalism is.”

We also need to be advocates for our beliefs. Perhaps you don't relish the thought of engaging in online debates, or have the ability to answer the attacks made by popular preachers, teachers, and media types, but you do have the ability to engage with people on a personal level. In whatever forum you are able, present your beliefs as clearly and emphatically as possible, emphasizing the reasons for them. People need to know there is another side to the debate, and it has strong answers to the challenges thrown. Know the challenges – that means you may need to do a bit of homework. That's where forums like the Dispensational group on Facebook can help – they tell you what some of the current arguments are about. Get and read newer books on the subject. Your old stand-bys from 30-70 years ago may not address some of the questions and challenges being presented now. When you know the challenges, you will be able to respond intelligently and confidently to questions asked by others.

(Input from Tobin's email)

Without getting too far into the argument side of things, I do think it could be beneficial to include why it has become so appealing to young people, especially young men. From what I've read and witnessed with some of my friends, covenant theology strongly emphasizes masculinity and being a man for God. It presents the idea that we need to go out as warriors and fight to take back our country and world, which is very appealing to men my age. Young men want to be warriors, be heroes, and be strong. So when they are presented with the choice of covenant theology or dispensationalism, many choose covenant theology simply because (like you said in your notes) they don't want to be a part of a "weak religion". So one of the things that I think churches could emphasize in order to push back against this is taking the young men in their church and teaching them Biblical manhood. Even if it is already a part of what they're doing I really think it needs to be pushed even harder, because covenant theology is teaching that you can't really be a man if you hold to dispensationalism.

Another thing that came to mind is that many young people these days are drawn to social activism. They want to feel like they are making a difference in the world and being a part of change. I think that covenant theology has become more appealing to young people because they can physically see the progress they are making. I'll try to explain what I mean. I believe that we should focus on trying to change people by spreading the gospel, which in turn will start to change society. However, the covenant approach, it seems to me, is to take over and *then* people will change because their government is Christian. I think that the first approach is less appealing to young people because they can't really quantify the difference that they're making. Seeing people elected in government is quantifiable though because you can look at how many people are on your side and how many people are against you. All that being said, I'm not saying we shouldn't care about who is office, I'm just saying that it is easier to say "I'm doing my job as a Christian because I voted for such and such" and feel like you're making a difference, than it is to tell someone on the street about Jesus and feel like you're making that same amount of progress.

The last thing I'll throw in is that I think covenant theology makes it easier to justify bad behavior, and therefore it is more appealing to young people. Some examples I've seen in young people I know who hold to covenant theology: Putting up "Let's Go Brandon" flags and wearing apparel with that slogan on it. Bullying, bashing, and making fun of gay people. Making fun of other Christians. Men abusing their wives and saying it's okay. Now I don't say these things to present dispensationalists as though they are perfect, but I think it's important to show the mindset that those who hold to covenant theology have which is, "It's okay for me to do things or say things that are hurtful because I'm telling them the truth." I think it's a much more appealing lifestyle for young people because it takes less discipline. For example, even though I agree with them that being gay is wrong, I don't believe that gives me the right to put them down.

Note that the things he points out are not strictly a result of Covenant theology, but are clearly part of the cultural pattern created by the most outspoken proponents of it. They have "taken control" of the manhood imagery and the yearning to impact culture. In that, perhaps we ought to seriously examine how we engage with the culture for the cause of Christ.

This brings us to the last portion – recommended resources. Here's a short list of books that can be helpful: "There Really is a Difference" by Renald Showers; "Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths" by Michael Vlach; "Forged from Reformation" by Christopher Cone & James Fazio; "Discovering Dispensationalism" by Cory Marsh & James Fazio; "Dispensationalism Revisited" by Kevin Bauder & Bruce Compton. Another great resource within our IFCA fellowship is Dr. Gary Gilley's ministry, "Think on These Things" (tottministries.org). Gary is a voracious reader, and presents book reviews and articles on current trends in Christian thought. His website is one of my go-to resources if I want to know about a particular issue, author, etc. Dr. Peter Goeman, who I referenced earlier, has a blog (petergoeman.com) in which he addresses a wide variety of theological questions and thoughts. The Pre-Trib Research Center (pre-trib.org) is another great place to find articles, books, and more on a wide variety of subjects. The "Discovering Dispensationalism" Facebook group I mentioned earlier does a great job of presenting other resources which are helpful.

ⁱ Petergoeman.com/does-dispensationalism-hurt-the-church/ January 29, 2022

ⁱⁱ "Discovering Dispensationalism" paper presented at the 29th Pre-Trib Study Group Conference, https://www.pre-trib.org/pretribfiles/pdfs/2020-Cory_Marsh-Discovering_Dispensationalism-FirstCent-Paper.pdf