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REVIEW ARTICLE

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AND DECISION-MAKING: A CRITIQUE OF THE DISPENSATIONALIST APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This is a text research which underscores the fact that although the Bible unites all Christians, its interpretation divides them. This is one of the many paradoxes in Christianity. Although all Christians accept the Bible as their source or reference book, they disagree so much in terms of how its contents should be interpreted. Essentially, therefore, the Bible is concomitantly the meeting point and the departure point of all Christians. The differences or disagreements on the interpretation of the biblical messages have led to the development of diverse approaches, styles and/or methodologies of interpretation usually determined by the diverse presuppositions of the interpreters. One of such approaches is Dispensationalism, which is the focus of this paper. The paper reveals the nature and presuppositions and/or assumptions of Dispensationalism as a biblical hermeneutic approach, and provides an example of the use of the approach, and thereafter, attempt a brief critique of the approach.

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INTRODUCTION

That the Bible unites all Christians but its interpretation divides them is one of the many paradoxes that characterize Christianity. Although all Christians accept the Bible as their source or reference book, they disagree so much in terms of *how* its contents should be interpreted. Essentially, therefore, the Bible is concurrently the meeting point and the departure point of all Christians. The differences or disagreements on the interpretation of the biblical messages have led to the development of diverse approaches, styles and/or methodologies of interpretation usually determined by the diverse presuppositions of the interpreters. One of such approaches is *Dispensationalism*, which is the focus of this paper. The intent here is to examine the nature and presuppositions and/or assumptions of *Dispensationalism* as a biblical hermeneutic approach, provide an example of the use of the approach, and thereafter, attempt a brief critique of the approach.

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Ramm (1956) traced the etymology of the term "hermeneutics" to the Hebrew words *pathar* (to interpret) and *pithron* (an interpretation); and the Greek words *hermeneia* (interpretation) and *harmonious* (to interpret), used in various forms in the New Testament. Defining it as a technical term, Jeanrond (1990:282) defines hermeneutics as "a theory of interpretation which contains all reflections on methods of biblical interpretation." Also, Ryrie (1953:34), defines it as "the science which teaches the principles of interpretation" and proceeds to distinguish biblical hermeneutics from any other by defining the former as "the science which determines the principles of interpretation of the Holy Scriptures." In other words, hermeneutics (biblical) theorizes on the various approaches to biblical interpretation. It must however be noted that hermeneutics, though a science, is more than a science. It is also an art. In the words of Ramm (1956:2-4), it is "the science and art of biblical interpretation. It is a science because it is guided by rules within a system; and it is an art because the application of the rules is by skill, and not by mechanical imitation". The purpose of hermeneutics is not only to ascertain the meaning of God's Word but also to bridge the gap between the *then* of the Bible records and the *now* of the interpreter.

It is in the sense of being both a science and an art that the term 'hermeneutics' is used in this paper.

Dispensationalism and its assumptions

Linder (1991:266) defines *Dispensationalism* as "an elaborate philosophy of history based on biblical prophecy in which all history is divided into separate eras or dispensations . . . , each of which contained a different order by which God worked out his redemptive plan." In other words, it is an approach to studying and interpreting biblical history and revelation which presupposes that biblical revelation could be best understood when studied with an awareness of 'natural' periods existing in the Bible. According to Harbin (1986:249), "Dispensationalism is an effort to interpret Scripture on the basis of the distinctive of God's demands for and relationships with mankind during different periods of history." Ryrie (1984:322) asserts that it is, therefore, "an acceptance of the progressive nature of biblical revelation which readily agrees that God did not reveal all truth at one time but through various periods and stages of revelation". These periods are tagged *dispensations*.

A *dispensation*, according to Ryrie (1984:322), is "a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's program". This suggests that each dispensation is separate, and different from the others with identifiable peculiarities. The definition also implies that God has just one programme for all the dispensations. From another perspective, Bowman (1950:173) defines a dispensation as "a span of time in which there is a revelation of God and a test of man's obedience." This definition places more emphasis on *time* and *test* instead of an *economy* as Ryrie's definition has done. Whereas Ryrie agrees with the biblical use of the word, Bowman (1950) seems to better describe its use in Dispensationalism. It is in fact the recognition of this fact that is revealed in Haldeman's (1904:7) poignant words, defining a dispensation as "a definite period of epoch in which God makes manifest some characteristic dealing with man; dealing in one age or epoch distinctly from that of another and with different individuals or classes; revealing in each of these distinct dealings and administrations various and separate principles, various objectives and purposes." Essentially then, as the dispensations change, God's dealings with man and His purposes for such dealings change. Only God remains unchanging; everything else changes.

On the issue of how many dispensations there are in the biblical revelation, there is little or no consensus among Dispensationalists. While Bowman (1950) and Ryrie (1965) identify seven dispensations, Ironside (1967) identifies six and Haldeman (1904) identifies eight. Scofield (1967) notes that in spite of these disagreements, each of the writers warns against confounding the dispensations. Whatever number is chosen, a characteristic common to all the dispensation seems to be that each of them terminates in man's failure under the responsibility given to him by God with the purpose of testing his obedience. Consequently, borrowing Haldeman's (1904:16-17) words, "At the close of each dispensation, God takes off the restraint of evil and allows it to head itself up in some particular form of judgment". Moreover, Scofield (1967) notes that despite the peculiarity of each of the dispensations, they all overlap.

In view of all this, Berkhof (1941:290-293), rejecting the Dispensationalists' proposals for between three and seven (or eight) dispensations, asserts that "it is preferable to follow the traditional lines by distinguishing just two dispensations . . . namely, that of the Old, and that of New Testaments..." It is germane to note here that although Berkhof's argument rejects the numbers suggested by dispensational writers, it allows for the classification of biblical revelation in a sense, thus implying that the idea of 'dispensations' or 'epoch' or 'era' is not totally avoidable. Perhaps it is the use that Dispensationalist make of the categorization that differentiates them from others, not merely the numbering of the dispensations.

The bases of Dispensationalism have been summarized by Linder (1991) as the idea of divine stewardship (or economy), the doctrines of human depravity and God's sovereign grace, a pre-millennial understanding of Scripture (in the categorization of the dispensations), and the principle of progressive revelation. In the light of all that has been said so far, Ryrie (1984:43) infers that a Dispensationalist is one who recognizes and accepts that "God has distinguishably different economics in governing the affairs of the world" and engages, there from, in Laney's (1992:7) words, in "consistently literal or plain interpretation" of the entire Scripture. This inclusively refers to all who interpret the Scripture literally, whether partly or wholly.

Consequently, Haldeman (1967:7) asserts that the principle underlying the Dispensationalist's approach is the use of literalism in biblical interpretation, including "a belief that every biblical figure of speech should, if practical, be interpreted literally". Ryrie (1984:322) submits that the Dispensationalist even claims that the only thing that distinguishes him from all other 'literalists' is "A consistent use of the hermeneutical principle of normal, plain, or literal interpretation . . . (which) does not exclude the use of figure of speech . . . (since), behind every figure is a literal meaning." Chafer (1915) postulates that, for the Dispensationalist also, an understanding of the 'dispensational truths' is indispensable to 'rightly dividing the Word of truth'.

This literalism is, according to Dispensationalism, as applicable to prophecy as it is to history. This may have been responsible for the strict differentiation between historical Israel and the church in all dispensational interpretation of prophecy. Chafer (1915:15) even goes to the extent of claiming that "no progress can be made (in the interpretation of prophecy) . . . unless plain words are taken in their obviously plain meaning."

Consequently, Allis (1947:16) argues that, for the Dispensationalist, "there can be but one true system of interpretation," be it of history or of prophecy, and that is "consistent literalism." In that spirit, every 'spiritualizing', 'allegorizing' or figurative interpretation should be rejected and avoided. Ryrie (1984:86-87) has attempted to equate this literalism with what he calls "the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation, since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations." Blaising (1988), in the same spirit, identifies Dispensationalism, in terms of its literal interpretation of Scriptures, with orthodoxy.

Moreover, Ryrie (1984:96), perhaps expressing the view of other Dispensationalists, states categorically that “the no literalist is the non Dispensationalist, and the *Consistent Literalist* (emphasis mine) is a Dispensationalist”. In other words, it is not enough to be literal. As a Dispensationalist, one must be consistently literal.

However, despite all the emphasis on literal interpretation and its significance for Dispensationalism, Blaising (1988) proposes that consistently literal exegesis alone is inadequate to describe the essential distinctive of Dispensationalism. He submits (in the same spirit with Ryrie, and even using the Ryrie’s words) that there are three distinctive elements of Dispensationalism. Ryrie (1984:47) asserts that “The essence of Dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church. This grows out of the Dispensationalist’s consistent employment of normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well”.

The application of the ‘plain interpretation’ by the Dispensationalist is not limited to prophecy or to the understanding of God’s purpose for dealing with mankind, as the quotation above suggests. It is employed in other areas of biblical interpretation, ethical matters inclusive. It is in relation to the latter that we shall examine the Dispensationalist’s teaching on divorce and remarriage in the light of the principle of literalism.

Divorce and remarriage: Dispensationalist’s hermeneutics

An example of the application of the Dispensationalist’s literalism is pertinent here. The subject matter is divorce and remarriage, and the source is an article written by Laney (1992), a professor of Biblical Literature at the Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon. The article is clearly and accurately representative of the mainline Dispensationalist position, hence its selection. This writer is not oblivious of the fact that there are others who hold fairly divergent views on this issue, notably Dwight Small.

Examining Deuteronomy 24:1-4, Laney (1992:3-15) asks some guiding questions, namely: “Is there adequate textual evidence for this interpretation? Did Moses affirm the right of divorce for sexual sin? Is the remarriage of a divorced person without moral consequence? (and) what application may Christians make of the legal precepts found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4?” These look like leading questions. Yet, we are more concerned about the nature of the answer to them than we are about the characteristics of the questions.

Laney (1992:4) highlights the significance of Deuteronomy 24:1-4 for a rather concise teaching on divorce and remarriage, because, according to him, “it served as background for the Pharisees’ comments on divorce when they questioned Jesus (Mk. 10:1-10; Mat.19:1-12)”. In attempting to answer his first question, Laney (1992:4-5) submits that the passage “does not institute or allow for divorce with approval, (but) . . . merely treats divorce as a practice already existing and known.” Thus, he contends that “Grammatically the intent of this law is not to

give legal sanction to divorce or to regulate the divorce procedure. The intent of the passage is to prohibit the remarriage of a man to his divorced wife in cases of an intervening marriage by the wife”. The implication of these comments seems clear enough: divorce is permitted, but remarriage is not, to the divorce wife. Consequently, Laney (1992:8) answers his second question affirmatively, arguing however, that “the grammar makes clear that Moses was describing a case, not prescribing a course of action for dealing with an offensive wife”.

Answering the third question, Laney (1992:9-13) concludes that from textual evidence, a case of remarriage is unethical since the wife is not only considered ‘defiled’, but the act itself is considered an ‘abomination’ to the Lord. Thus, for him, “Deuteronomy 24:4 suggests that remarriage following divorce is placed on a par with adultery.” This perspective, according to him, “is consistent with Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10:11-12, where divorce and remarriage by either husband or wife is regarded as adulterous”.

In relation to his last question, Laney (1992:14-15) first considers what others perceive as God’s purpose for permitting divorce and rejecting remarriage. He then attempts what he calls a ‘synthesis’ of the views in these words: “First, this restriction seems to guard against divorce becoming a legal form of adultery. Second, the prohibition against remarrying . . . would also serve as a moderating influence on divorce”.

Laney (1992:15), consequently concludes that “remarriage after divorce brings moral defilement not unlike that of adultery . . .” (Matthew 19:9) and “since there is nothing in the New Testament that modifies or abrogates this clear command, there seems to be no biblical basis for doing away with its present application”. In the same spirit while commenting on the issue of ‘exception clauses’ in Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Laney (1992:14) affirms that it “is an issue of great debate” but proceeds to identify himself with what he calls the ‘consanguinity view’ which holds that “divorce is (only) allowed in cases of incestuous marriage, but remarriage is forbidden.” A similar position is held by Glasscock (1983), Scofield (1967) and Carson (1984).

A critique of the dispensationalist approach

As Virkler (1981) rightly postulates, Dispensationalism is an approach to biblical interpretation which forces Christians to take definite positions: for it, or against it. According to Virkler (1981:122), “few take a neutral position.” Representative examples include Allis, in his *Prophecy and the Church*; Bowman (1950), in his “The Bible and Modern Religions II: Dispensationalism,” *Interpretation*; Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, and a host of others. While there are those who argue against it outright, there are, on the other side, its ardent proponents and supporters. There are many in this category also. But strong representatives would include Scofield, in his *The New Scofield Reference Bible*; Chafer, in his *Dispensationalism*; and more recently, Ryrie, in his *Dispensationalism Today*, with all the articles of the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, a strong Dispensational journal of Dallas University, U.S.A.

Thus, while Scofield (1967) describes Dispensationalism as an approach which is bent on *rightly dividing the Word of Truth*, it is equally not too difficult for a strong critic of Dispensationalism, like Bowman (1950:172), to describe it as “the most dangerous heresy currently to be found within Christian circles.” One area of Dispensationalism that has been constantly criticized is the use of the word ‘dispensation’ itself. For instance, Berkhof (1941) argues that, despite the fact that the Greek word *oikonomia* is in the Bible, its use in the Bible is different from the way Dispensationalists use it. Bowman (1950) asserts that *oikonomia* does not translate into ‘dispensation’ “as Scofield (1967) and company suggest,” but into “stewardship,” “administration,” or “the office of a steward” in the Bible. Essentially then, the Dispensationalist is accused of a misuse of scriptural terminology.

Dispensationalism has also been criticized on the account that it destroys the unity of the Scripture by unnecessarily over-emphasizing its diversity at the expense of its unity. Linder (1991) accuses Dispensationalists of grounding their basic beliefs on a few scriptural passages taken out of context. He maintains that this approach ultimately renders their theology “arbitrary and unbiblical.” This, according to him, has led to selective relegation of some New Testament Scriptures to the ‘next age’ – a good example being The Sermon on the Mountain. Also, Berkhof (1941) has noted that this approach of “dismembering the organism of Scripture” has brought “disastrous results” because the teachings of the Old Testament (belonging to different dispensations from ours, as the Dispensationalists claim) do no longer apply to us. He thus rejects the approach, describing it as mere ‘proof texting.’ Bowman (1950) notes that additionally, Dispensationalism has been criticized for its ‘over-schematization’ of the Scriptures. Berkhof (1941) contends that not only is it difficult for the dispensationalists to agree on an acceptable number and nature of the dispensations, when they even concur that the dispensations overlap, their distinctions are “highly arbitrary.”

Furthermore, the tendency for Dispensationalism to present man as having always been on probation since creation, and thereby making salvation somehow dependent on man’s ‘obedience’ rather than God’s grace, has been strongly criticized. The contents of the ‘tests’ which Dispensationalists talk so much about are also not clearly spelt out. In the same mood Linder (1991:267) rejects the Dispensationalist’ idea “that God’s kingdom will be a racial nationalistic Jewish one.”

Besides, it has been argued against Dispensationalism that the assumptions underlying its approach are grossly unscriptural. Three of such basic assumptions have been identified by Bowman (1950). The first of these is the assumption that God’s primary relationship with man is that of a Judge. While Bowman (1950) does not deny that God is revealed as a Judge, he rejects the primacy of this image, contending that God is primarily man’s Maker, Sustainer and Saviour. The second assumption is that each dispensation is peculiar to itself with little or no relation to the others. This tends to over-emphasize discontinuity to salvation history. The third assumption is that God’s dealings with man have been varied in each of the dispensations. This tends to suggest that God has been inconsistent in His programmes and purposes.

However, Ryrie (1953) insists that the area mostly criticized in the Dispensationalists’ approach is that which they claim differentiates them from non-Dispensationalists- that is, the consistent literal interpretation of scriptures. Against the background of this lofty claim and its concomitant rejection of any spiritualized, allegorized or figurative interpretation, Allis (1947) has rebuffed what he calls the ‘inconsistent consistency’ of the Dispensationalists who proceed to use typology (a form of allegorization) in their interpretation with reckless abandonment. Allis (1947:21-25) submits that “No literalist, however thoroughgoing, takes everything in the Bible literally. Nor do those who lean to a more figurative method of interpretation insist that everything is figurative”. In fact, Ryrie (1953) contends that Scofield identified more than eight ‘types’ of Christ in the Old Testament! That sounds highly self-contradictory. Thus, Allis (1947:17) concludes, and reasonably too, that “while Dispensationalists are extreme literalists, they are very inconsistent ones.”

Ryrie (1953), perhaps one of the most ardent Dispensationalists of our time, has however attempted, albeit sometimes unconvincingly, to counteract most of these criticism of Dispensationalists, and that, in a highly polemical way. He has attempted to explain what he calls ‘misconceptions’ about Dispensationalism and to present the nature, contents and significance of ‘modern Dispensationalism’.

Conclusion

From all the foregoing, one may submit that there is only one principle upon which Dispensationalism stands or falls, namely, literal interpretation of Scripture. This, either directly or indirectly, is responsible for the other two distinctives postulated by Ryrie (1953). Over-insistence on complete separation of Israel of prophecy from the church is only possible in extreme literalism. Also, any attempt to treat salvation as separation from God’s glory-bringing purpose of His self-revelation in the Scriptures can only arise in a semantic game. Salvation, as the purpose of revelation, expresses God’s love for man, and reveals God’s glory.

Looking at the example above, one may reasonably surmise that the acceptance of divorce as ‘permitted’ (even though not ‘mandated’), and the concurrent total rejection of remarriage (as held and taught by the mainline Dispensationalists), could only arise from absolute dependence on the letters of the word, not the spirit. For, if Jesus, like Moses, ‘permitted’ divorce (as the Dispensationalists would want us to believe), because of the exception clauses of Matthew and a cursory, textual understanding of Deuteronomy 24:1-4, while at the same time truth’ with the Pharisees, with little or no different flavour. It is therefore obvious that the only way Jesus’ teaching on divorce and remarriage could have been so different from that of the Pharisees to the extent of attracting the kind of reaction it did, even from the disciples, was if it was drastically different from what the Pharisees had been teaching. Jesus, therefore, must have forbidden both divorce and remarriage, referring the people back to God’s initial purpose for marriage in the beginning, and informing them that the ‘allowance’ by Moses (in Deut. 24:1-4) was due to the ‘hardness’ of their hearts (Mat. 19:1-12).

There are many others who hold that Jesus taught that both divorce and remarriage were never in the original plan of God for marriage. Such include Maston (1967) and Carson (1984). But that position would still require that one should explain the 'except' clauses of Matthew. One may fairly conjecture that the clauses represent Matthew's own way of expressing a new truth in the well-know language of the old. This position would suggest that Jesus could not (or may not) have added the except clauses Himself, considering their closeness to the Mosaic 'permission' and their presence in Matthew alone. The reasons given for this position may sound new, but the position itself is not. Although, the position posits seemingly unreachable ideal, reaching it or not is not the issue. The issue is totally and 'rightly dividing the Word of truth'.

If all that has been said so far is to be taken seriously, one may be tempted to say that Dispensationalism has its useful sides. After all, every Christian is, in one way or the other, and in differing degrees, a Dispensationalist. Yet, on the other hand, and viewed more critically, Dispensationalism seems to have failed in respect of its claim of 'consistently interpreting the Scriptures literally.' It does fail because, despite its insistent rejection of spiritualizing and allegorizing, it copiously employs typology, itself another form of figurative interpretation. Yet, if one accepts Ryrie's defensive definition of 'literalism,' Dispensationalism immediately loses any claim to exclusive use of consistent literalism. That leaves it standing on a sinking sand.

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