

An Evaluation of Charles C. Ryrie's *Sine Qua Non* of Traditional Dispensationalism

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Introduction

In the history of dispensationalism in the second half of the 21st century, Charles Ryrie holds a unique and important place. Of interest are his “long, influential academic and ministerial career that spanned several decades” and especially his “prolific writing career, in which he was both a pioneer in many of his writings as well as an apologist defending various positions of theology.”¹ Comparatively early in his career, he wrote a book entitled *Dispensationalism Today*.² In this work, he presented an exposition and apologetic for normative dispensationalism, which included a *sine qua non* of dispensationalism as an attempt to highlight the “fundamentals” of dispensationalism. While the work was updated by Ryrie in the mid-1990s³, the *Sine Qua Non* remained essentially unchanged. This paper evaluates, defends, and refines his *Sine Qua Non* to present a renewed defense of the validity and truth of traditional dispensationalism.

The Sine Qua Non and Dispensational History

The historic place of Ryrie's *Sine Qua Non* in dispensationalism is not generally questioned. However, the progressive dispensationalists of the later 20th and early 21st centuries argue that, among those of his time, Ryrie and his *Sine Qua Non* was a break from the earlier dispensationalists, and a significant break at that.⁴ While their concerns that earlier dispensationalists practiced more typological interpretation of the Scriptures⁵ are likely valid⁶, this does not mean that Ryrie's dispensationalism should be viewed as a “new” dispensationalism essentially different from the prior traditions.⁷

¹ Paul Weaver, “The Theological Method of Charles Caldwell Ryrie,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 17, no. 2 (2013): 46.

² Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*. (Chicago: Moody, 1965).

³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded*. (Chicago: Moody, 1995). Throughout this paper, I reference the 2007 edition of this work.

⁴ Mike Stallard, “Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1, no. 1 (1997): 7, 7n7, accessed from the Galaxie Theological Journal Database; and Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*. (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993), 9-56.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶ Mike Stallard, “Notes on Dispensational Theology,” Notes from TH501 Dispensational Premillennialism, Summer 2014, Baptist Bible College and Seminary, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://moodle.bbc.edu>. In this document, Stallard compares Reformed Theologians, Gaebelaine, and Ryrie in their interpretative approaches in both narratives and prophecy.

⁷ The historical matters involved in this point are well beyond the scope of this paper, but the following discussion sees Ryrie's *Sine Qua Non* as a natural growth and development that is not discontinuous with the stream of “classical dispensationalism.” This paper presumes the premise that the growth towards greater consistency in literal interpretation is a natural outgrowth of the roots of the founders of dispensational thinking. The failures of early dispensationalists to properly interpret non-prophetic literature is seen as just that—a failure.

Therefore, we can and should still view Ryrie as the peak of both classical and revised, viz. traditional, dispensational thinking.⁸ This is reinforced by his own criticisms of progressive dispensationalism's modifications.⁹ It does not appear that any major figure in traditional dispensationalism has arose to take traditional dispensationalism to the next step of development while still remaining true to its fundamentals. It is in this context that the content of the *Sine Qua Non* is worth consideration to both affirm that it distinguishes traditional dispensationalism from progressive dispensationalism and to demonstrate opportunities for further development of traditional dispensationalism.

A Summary of the Sine Qua Non

At this juncture, it is appropriate to state the *Sine Qua Non* as expressed by Ryrie.¹⁰ In the flow of his book, Ryrie's *Sine Qua Non* follows his discussion of the concept of a dispensation¹¹, and the discussion serves to transition from that point to the discussion of the number of dispensations in the following chapter.¹² Part of Ryrie's concern appears to be to show that the number of dispensations is not fundamental to dispensationalism by demonstrating what Ryrie believes are the fundamentals of dispensationalism. As presented by Ryrie,¹³ the *Sine Qua Non* is as follows.

1. "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct."
2. "This distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation."
3. "The underlying purpose of God in the world...[is] the glory of God.", commonly summarized as the doxological purpose of human history.

The remainder of this paper evaluates, defends, and refines these three points from Ryrie to demonstrate that traditional dispensationalism is an accurate reflection of Biblical truth.

Consistent Grammatical-Historical Interpretation: Defended and Refined

Ryrie's Defense Summarized

While not spending much time in a defense in the section where this point is enumerated, Ryrie gives three reasons for "literal hermeneutics" in chapter 5 of this point.¹⁴ They are (1) The purpose of language itself, (2) The literal fulfillment of prophecies about Christ's first advent, and (3) The preservation of objectivity by virtue of this hermeneutic. While admitting that the theory of grammatical-historical interpretation is not questioned by most,¹⁵ Ryrie then defends the dispensational position by demonstrating the inconsistency of the principles of spiritualization and theological

⁸ Note the purposeful merger of Blaising and Bock's separate categories of classical and revised dispensationalism. Hereafter, the term *traditional dispensationalism* is used to refer to this school to distinguish it as opposed to progressive dispensationalism.

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, esp. 189-212, but all throughout the book he addresses this matter.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27-45.

¹² *Ibid.*, 51ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46-48.

¹⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 91-92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

hermeneutics used by various nondispensationalists in their deviations.¹⁶ He argues the other groups of superimposing their ideas on the texts, something he admits dispensationalists are accused of as well.¹⁷

Opportunities for Refinement

Before defending grammatical-historical interpretation afresh, there is opportunity for refinement in Ryrie's presentation and expression of this point. First, note that this paper addresses this element of the *Sine Qua Non* first, contrary to Ryrie's placing it second. I do not suggest that Ryrie committed to the Israel and the Church distinction first by ordering it this way. However, it may have been more helpful, especially in an apologetic work like *Dispensationalism*, to give this foundational principle first. Second, as found in Ryrie's discussion of consistency, this point may not adequately explain the differences between non-dispensationalists and dispensationalists. Both sides appear to talk past each other sometimes, especially now as there has been a trend over the last 50 years away from spiritualized interpretations amongst evangelical Christians,¹⁸ including non-dispensationalists. Blaising and Bock even suggest that "consistently grammatical-historical interpretation...is much closer to being realized in the hermeneutics of progressive dispensationalism."¹⁹ This indicates that this point needs further amplification.²⁰ However, in light of a diversity of views regarding hermeneutics and the New Testament use of the Old Testament,²¹ it remains to be seen where the precise boundaries should be drawn to distinguish traditional dispensationalism from progressive dispensationalism and other views not clearly covenantal in orientation. One might propose that a key line in the matter is that traditional dispensationalism does not practice or follow a theological hermeneutic that allows the New Testament to dictate the meaning of the Old Testament.

Defense of Consistent Grammatical-Historical Interpretation

Why should traditional dispensationalism continue to affirm the use of consistent grammatical-historical interpretation? While Ryrie was correct in affirming the linguistic philosophical argument for grammatical-historical interpretation, the use of this method is not the primary concern here.²² The dispensational understanding of consistency in this method and of interpreting the Old Testament first before interpreting the New Testament in theological synthesis is what is of concern.

Ryrie's point regarding the preservation of objectivity could be viewed as an over-simplification of the issues involved, nevertheless his point should not be entirely dismissed. Interestingly, one writer said,

For a text to have independent authority it must be shown to have some autonomy, a source independent from the reader. The extent to which the message originates with the reader is the extent to which the divine authority is compromised. If the reader brings the message and

¹⁶ Ibid., 93-97.

¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 35-37.

¹⁹ Ibid., 37.

²⁰ See full discussion in Stallard, "Essence of Dispensationalism," 27-35.

²¹ Robert L. Thomas, "The Principle of Single Meaning," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, ed.

Christopher Cone (Fort Worth: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), 97-114; Ibid., "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, ed. Cone, 165-188.

²² See point in previous section.

meaning to the text, that message and meaning carry only the reader's authority. *The importance of objectivity concerns not truth, but authority.*²³

Having established this background, the position to be defended is that grammatical-historical interpretation must be practiced in all genres and in both testaments.

Consistency in All Genres

Regarding the matter of genres, it is beyond the scope of this paper to address each genre in the Bible. However, two genres in particular must be discussed in regard to traditional dispensationalism. It has been suggested that covenant theology does not practice this method in prophecy, but some dispensationalists, especially older ones, have not practiced this method in the Old Testament narratives.²⁴ For the dispensationalist's part, the lack of a grammatical-historical method in historical narratives was a faulty method. Yes, there can be a use of types in Scripture. However, fundamentally the narratives ought to be interpreted with reference to the actual events and meaning of the words in the actual stories, rather than being read in light of a presupposed typological grid. The present author believes traditional dispensationalists are going in the right direction on this matter.²⁵

This being said, however, the matter of grammatical-historical interpretation in prophecy is still a major matter of debate and discussion. John H. Gerstner once accused a dispensationalist of inconsistency in the matter of literalism in prophetic literature because he interpreted Ezekiel's valley of dry bones, in a spiritualized way.²⁶ This is a common line of thinking in non-dispensationalists,²⁷ but it is not accurate to the traditional dispensational understanding. The dispensationalist critiqued by Gerstner simply viewed the valley of dry bones as a figure of speech. The dispensationalist's understanding of grammatical-historical interpretation is that we should interpret according to the "natural meaning"²⁸, which may include both a "normal-literal" and a "figurative-literal" meaning.²⁹

The present author recently heard a non-dispensationalist suggest that prophecy was obscure in meaning, and this was an argument based on the genre of prophecy. However, Ryrie's argument for the literal fulfillment of prophecies regarding the first advent³⁰ is noteworthy at this point. If those prophecies were clear enough to be understood, something the non-dispensationalists would generally agree with, then it does beg the question "How do we determine which prophecy is clear enough to be understood?" I do not suggest that non-dispensationalists have no answer on this point. Nevertheless, the issue suggests that the prophetic genre cannot be used in this manner. A more helpful category is

²³ J. H. Walton, "Inspired Subjectivity and Hermeneutical Objectivity," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 67, accessed June 10, 2014, <http://www.tms.edu/tmsj/tmsj13c.pdf>, emphasis mine. I originally noted this in Thomas, "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament," in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, ed. Cone, 181.

²⁴ Stallard, "Notes on Dispensational Theology." c.f. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 21.

²⁵ Note Stallard, *ibid.*

²⁶ John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 88.

²⁷ e.g. Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2005), 109.

²⁸ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1991), 61-64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 146-148. Also see helpful discussion in Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation: The Key to Understanding the Bible," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 25-28, accessed from the Galaxie Theological Journal Database.

³⁰ *Dispensationalism*, 92.

the category of figures of speech. Such figures do vary in terms of their ease of being understood, and such figures are not the exclusive property of prophetic literature, either. It is more helpful and accurate to understand, as mentioned prior, that some parts of the Bible should be understood in a normal-literal manner and others in a figurative-literal manner.

The bottom line is that we should practice grammatical-historical interpretation in all genres of the Bible, and in historical narratives and prophecy in particular. It is noteworthy that the Old Testament is full of sections of Scripture that fit under these two

Consistency in Both Testaments

Furthermore, the traditional dispensationalist affirms the importance of interpreting both the Old and New Testaments in a consistently grammatical-historical manner. This topic involves other disciplines and there is not universal agreement on some of these matters even amongst traditional dispensationalists. Nevertheless, on a basic level all traditional dispensationalism affirm that both testaments must be interpreted literally. Put differently, “the OT text has priority in OT interpretation and that the NT text has priority in NT interpretation.”³¹ On this point, much can be said, but two items will be discussed in the following.

The Old Testament is Background to the New Testament

In outlining the limitations of a literal interpretation, Oswald T. Allis said “[t]he fact that the Old Testament is both preliminary and preparatory to the New Testament is too obvious to require proof.”³² There is a sense that the Old Testament as a whole was preliminary and preparatory to the New Testament, but dispensationalists would not agree with the sense that Allis ascribes to the word “preliminary.” The progress of revelation affirms that each successive revelation builds on the prior revelation. Therefore, it is right to say that the Old Testament is background to the New Testament, and not the other way around. When a nondispensationalist states that the Old Testament means what the New Testament says it means, he is saying essentially that the background of the Old Testament text itself is the New Testament. Logically, the present author cannot accept this assertion. There is no building upon prior revelation in that model. The matter of consistency factors in on this point as well, because there are other doctrinal areas in which the New Testament does legitimately build on the Old Testament. That is to say, certain parts of the Old Testament are not preliminary, but other parts are. Additionally, when one suggests the revelation was preliminary, one wonders if that revelation was deficient in some way. Nondispensationalists would not suggest such an idea logically results from the concept of preliminary Old Testament revelation. However, such an idea is difficult to avoid in the present author’s judgment. To summarize, the fact that the Old Testament was revealed prior to the New Testament requires that it be allowed to speak for itself, and this prior revelation was not preliminary in the sense of needing further amplification. The Old Testament text means what the Old Testament text says it means, interpreted in a grammatical-historical manner.

The New Testament Does Not Reflect a Universally Applicable Theological Hermeneutic

A related question to these matters concerns the New Testament usage of the Old Testament. This topic is one of the major areas of scholarly discussion in recent times. If it can be conclusively

³¹ Stallard, “Essence of Dispensationalism,” 18.

³² *Prophecy and the Church*, 18.

shown that the New Testament authors did not interpret the Old Testament grammatical-historically and that we are justified to follow their practices, then it will unravel everything just said. The concern here is a major one.³³ It is worth consideration then of if the New Testament conclusively demonstrates a rejection of the grammatical-historical meaning of the Old Testament and that all Christians should follow such a practice.

There is not widespread agreement among all dispensationalists on the precise manner to understand the New Testament usage of the Old Testament.³⁴ One interesting synthesis is called inspired *sensus plenior* application, referring to the New Testament authors applying the Old Testament such that it is true because they were inspired by God, and not normal hermeneutical principles.³⁵ On this point, it is noteworthy that Douglas J. Moo suggests that the term “fulfilled” in the Greek New Testament has a broader meaning than the mere “historical occurrence of something promised or predicted.”³⁶ Therefore, it is acceptable and faithful grammatical-historical interpretation to not assume that New Testament authors or speakers are saying that something is fulfilled in accordance with the meaning of the original Old Testament text. Furthermore, the inspired *sensus plenior* application practiced by the New Testament writers answers the matter of whether we can follow their method today. It rejects such an idea, because we are not inspired like the apostles.³⁷ Now, in a sense a preacher might be able to use parts of the Bible in a an analogous way to this concept, but such a preacher must not suggest that he or she is explaining the actual meaning of that text.

Nondispensationalists would generally not agree with this path of development of these points. For example, G. K. Beale, explains *sensus plenior* as the idea that “the Old Testament authors did not exhaustively understand the meaning, implications, and possible applications of all that they wrote.”³⁸ It may be true in a sense that the Old Testament authors did not fully understand everything about the topics they were writing and even more valid that they did not know how the texts might be applied by others. However, this does not mean that God was have to mean that God was revealing more in the Old Testament revelations than what was known to them. 1 Peter 1:10-12 does not provide a justification for the idea that things were revealed in the Old Testament text that the authors. The verses are better understood in the context of theological integration and synthesis and not exegesis.

Also, it is common to suggest that Jesus and the redemption he brings is the theme of the Bible, and that therefore we are justified to understand the Old Testament in such a light. The authors of *Kingdom through Covenant*, in summarizing their hermeneutical approach to the covenants, appear to

³³ It is noteworthy that this matter actually goes beyond hermeneutics, but becomes a problem of the unity of God’s revelation in Scripture.

³⁴ Thomas, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, ed. Cone, 175-183 and 187-188.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 165-174

³⁶ D. J. Moo, “The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 184, cited by Thomas, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, ed. Cone, 179.

³⁷ Thomas, “The New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond*, ed. Cone, 185.

³⁸ “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?” in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts: Essays on the use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. G. K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 393, cited in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 85.

follow such a methodology in their view of Jesus as the fulfillment of all the Biblical covenants.³⁹ Luke 24:25-27 is often the proof text for this type of hermeneutical approach. However, the verses are easily understood within the traditional dispensational framework that has been defended above. Jesus explained the portions of the Scriptures that were about himself. He did not say that all the Scriptures were about Him. More will be said about this issue of the central theme of the Bible later, but at this point it is affirmed that Luke 24:25-27 does not advocate the Christocentric hermeneutical approach to the Old Testament.

Conclusion

Traditional dispensationalism rightly calls for the consistent grammatical-historical interpretation of all the Bible. Ryrie was correct in his defense of a consistent grammatical-historical method of interpretation. Traditional dispensationalists must ensure they protect the integrity of the grammatical-historical method, rightly understood, in all genres of the Bible and in both testaments. To do otherwise is to lose some of the objectivity of our interpretive process, and is a sure road to introduce error into theology.

The Distinction between Israel and the Church: Defended and Refined

Ryrie's Defense Summarized

In his section on the *Sine Qua Non*, Ryrie appears to identify this element in part because of its descriptive value in describing dispensationalists. He focuses on the fact that dispensationalists have always upheld differing purposes of God through these two peoples of God. Yet, he uses the grammatical-historical interpretation as the basis for this dispensational distinction. Later in his chapter on the church in dispensationalism,⁴⁰ he defends further this distinction by virtue of the uniqueness of the church as explained in the New Testament and explicitly by demonstrating the references to national Israel in the New Testament.

Opportunities for Refinement

Ryrie is correct to affirm the clear distinction of Israel and the church as a fundamental of dispensationalism. While discussed in some of his proofs, three issues in the discussion would seem to be warranted in terms of emphasis and discussion, each listed from most important to least important. First, and most importantly, traditional dispensationalism does appear to have a core belief regarding the church's relationship to the Davidic Kingdom inasmuch as it rejects the concept that it has been inaugurated. Second, traditional dispensationalism does have a core understanding that the Mosaic law does not apply to the church in the same way it did for Israel. Third, the matter of the church's birthdate is worthy of inclusion inasmuch as the opponents of dispensationalism may not distinguish traditional dispensationalists from the ultradispensationalists' understanding of the church's birthdate, the emphasis on certain epistles containing the doctrine of the church, and their explanations of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Each of these points are implied in some ways by this point of the *sine qua non*, but it is worthy to point them out in the overall framework of dispensationalism.

³⁹ Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 126.

⁴⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 144-150.

Defense of the Israel and the Church Distinction

The words continuity and discontinuity capture well the issues at stake in this point of the *sine qua non*. An entire volume⁴¹ has been written using those ideas as the points of contrast between dispensational and non-dispensational systems. Dispensational systems are generally marked by discontinuity, whereas non-dispensational systems are generally marked by continuity. The very word *distinction* even shows this. It is not a proper method to merely assume one side or the other in this question. As was already pointed out, Ryrie's original formulation emphasized that this distinction, a useful "mark" of dispensationalists, flows from the grammatical-historical method of interpretation. Thus, the discussion that follows will follow the basic principles that were just defended in the previous section about consistent grammatical-historical interpretation in all genres and both testaments. It will be shown that Scripture indeed supports the concept that God has two separate programs for Israel and the church even amidst the interaction that exists between them.

The Inductive Argument: Israel is not the Church and the Church is not Israel

According to non-dispensationalists, the necessary unity of God's people across all ages is often stressed.⁴² However, it is the position of traditional dispensationalism that this is an unwarranted emphasis that does not pass the test of the exegesis of individual passages according to the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. Numerous studies have been put forward, and I will not repeat them here except to give the conclusions. First, the present writer some years ago wrote an unpublished paper in Bible College that demonstrated that Israel and the church had different origins, missions, and destinies.⁴³ Second, Ryrie has demonstrated⁴⁴ by focus on the New Testament that physical Israel and physical Gentiles are distinct, that physical Israel and the Church are distinct, and Israelites in the church are distinct from gentiles in the church.⁴⁵ Third, Robert Saucy affirms this distinction by the following method:⁴⁶ (1) Identifies Israel as ethnic Israel in the OT and the NT respectively, (2) Points out areas of continuity as well as discontinuity between the church in the NT and Israel, and (3) Conclusively shows that Israel has a future in God's plan. If studied inductively, Israel, from the OT and the NT, and the church, in the NT and especially in Ephesians, emerge as necessarily being distinct from each other, regardless of how they may interrelate in terms of God's plan. Robert Saucy's chapter begins with a brief discussion on the "people of God" concept, and it is that concept to which must be discussed next in terms of both the discontinuity and the continuity between the two people groups.

Relationships between Israel and Church in God's Plan

While traditional dispensationalism affirms a clear distinction between Israel and the church, there still remains an inter-relatedness between the two groups. This relationship is affirmed even amidst of the Israelite emphasis earlier in history and the present emphasis on the church prior to the

⁴¹ John S. Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments, Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988).

⁴² Witherington, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 109.

⁴³ This work was entitled *Israel and the Church: Differing Origins, Missions, and Destinies*, but unfortunately has since been lost.

⁴⁴ *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Dubuque: ECS Ministries, 2005), loc. 887. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁵ An acceptance of this point in no way suggests that Jews and Gentiles are not united in Christ in one body. It merely affirms that saved Israelites in this age maintain their "Jewishness" in some sense.

⁴⁶ "Israel and the Church: A Case for Discontinuity", in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. Feinberg, 239-259.

Second Advent. The following discussion shows that Israel and the church have a common relationship in reference to their common salvation and the common kingdom, even amidst distinctions.

Unity and Diversity in Common Salvation

Israel and the church certainly experience a common salvation. Ryrie himself went to great lengths to demonstrate that there is one way of salvation.⁴⁷ From the outset, it needs to be noted that salvation was uniquely of the Jews (John 4:22) and for the Jews first (Rom. 1:16b). This is important to uphold in order to have a proper understanding of God's purposes for both groups. This being established, there are several means of supporting the unified salvation both share in. First, the picture of the olive branch in Romans 11:17ff, at a very basic level, suggests that both entities experience blessings, including soteriological blessings, because they both are in the same "root." The Abrahamic covenant also lends support to this, especially as developed by Paul in Galatians 3, as Gentiles are promised to receive blessings through Israel. Finally, these blessings to Gentiles are affirmed throughout the OT prophetic literature (e.g. Isa. 2:1-4). Both groups did have a common salvation program, even though they were distinct groups and may have had other purposes in God's plan that the other didn't.

This being said, however, some points of discontinuity can be pointed out. It isn't logically necessary to assume or conclude that the experience of the OT believers were identical to that of NT believers.⁴⁸ Also, it is very important to understand that not every Jew who has lived is a saved person. This may be the best way to understand Paul's statement that "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." (Rom. 9:6)⁴⁹ Traditional dispensationalism does not contradict Jesus who told Jews they would be lost if they did not respond correctly to Him (John 8). As was pointed out above, what dispensationalism does affirm is that there is a necessary future plan for Israel. Part of that plan does include a total national revival and salvation in the Messianic Kingdom. (Rom. 11:26ff) However, that is a far cry from affirming that every Jew that has ever lived will be saved. Israel and the church do share in a common salvation, but this does not require that they are the same group nor does it require that both groups have the same precise salvation experience at all points in their history.

Unity and Diversity in the Coming Kingdom

The kingdom of God concept also provides a case in which the continuity and discontinuity of Israel and the Church may be demonstrated. As with salvation, the kingdom should be understood as primarily Israelite. This is a logical result of the statements mentioned above about the Israelite source of salvation and the redemptive aspects of the kingdom.⁵⁰ Connected with this idea is the understanding that the kingdom is not only a physical reality, but a spiritual one and in fact is fundamentally spiritual.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 121-140.

⁴⁸ For example, see a dispensational position that OT believers experienced neither regeneration or indwelling in the same way the NT saints did in Ken Gardoski "Spirit Regeneration and Indwelling of OT Saints: A Study in Dispensational Distinctions", a modified paper first presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Baptist Bible Seminary, September 21, 2011, accessed June 21, 2014, http://www.bbc.edu/council/documents/2011/3A_Gardoski_Spirit%20Regeneration%20and%20Indwelling%20of%20OT%20Saints%20Revised%201011.pdf.

⁴⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Exposition*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 149.

⁵⁰ Note the usage of the term "redemptive kingdom" in Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology, Three Volumes in One*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 348 and other places.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 348-349.

Yet, we cannot ignore the promises of earthly blessing in the OT. In reality, the consummation of salvation requires an earthly element (e.g. Rom. 8:19ff), but one cannot imagine a fully renewed and consummated salvation without the spiritual renewal that the gospel brings. Thus, as pointed out in the previous section, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26) at the time the Messianic Kingdom is established.

However, this does not explicitly address the matter of the church’s involvement in the Kingdom. Traditional dispensationalism, generally speaking, prefers to uphold the concept of delay in the establishment of the Davidic Monarchy and the Kingdom.⁵² Yet, it is noteworthy that there are times that we find church activities being described using kingdom language.⁵³ Even in Jesus’ ministry, we can find times that he speaks of the kingdom in this way, and not in terms of the offered kingdom.⁵⁴ In these places, the traditional dispensational affirmation of the kingdom not being inaugurated and being yet future is not denied.⁵⁵ The church will indeed participate in the kingdom, as suggested by the statements that the church will reign with Christ (e.g. Rev. 20:4-5 and compare with 1 Cor. 6:2). But, this participation will not be as Israel. The statement “He has...transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col. 1:14) refers to our place being secured in the coming kingdom, not that the kingdom is already present. Likewise, Christians proclaim the kingdom of God (e.g. Acts 8:12) because our response today will determine whether we find a place in it in the future, not because it is already present. Therefore, the church finds a place in the coming kingdom of Israel, and thus both groups share a common hope. But, that does not mean both groups have the same role in that coming kingdom.

Conclusion

The distinction between Israel and the Church is upheld by the several inductively determined aspects of both groups as described in the OT and the NT and by the relationships of both groups to each other as found in explicit usage in the NT, in the common salvation experienced by both, and in the common hope of the future kingdom, the Messianic Kingdom of Israel.

The Doxological Purpose of World History: Defended and Refined

Ryrie’s Defense Summarized

Interestingly, Ryrie calls the doxological purpose of history “a rather technical matter.”⁵⁶ Yet, it is an important argument for dispensationalism as seen in Ryrie’s his early defense of dispensationalism by virtue of its philosophy of history.⁵⁷ He offers a full defense of the concept of the unifying theme of the Bible in his chapter on hermeneutics.⁵⁸ After defending dispensational unity through distinction by comparison to other Bible doctrines such as the Trinity, Ryrie offered three primary arguments that the unifying theme of Scripture is doxological, rather than soteriological, as in covenant theology, or Christological, as in progressive dispensationalism. These three points are that (1) Salvation is to God’s

⁵² For a sample discussion, see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 180-183.

⁵³ Lewis and Demarest, 350. Also see summary of their beliefs about Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom in *Ibid.*, 327-329.

⁵⁴ One example would be his saying about the necessity to receive the kingdom as a child in Matt. 18:3.

⁵⁵ Contrary to Lewis and Demarest, 349.

⁵⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 48.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-23.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 103-109.

glory, and is therefore “but one facet of the multifaceted diamond of the glory of God[,]” (2) All theologies recognize God’s plan for the angels, and therefore admit to a purpose of God that is outside of human redemption or Christ Himself, and (3) God’s purposes for the kingdom, in premillennialism, include dimensions that are outside of individual redemption. He concludes his chapter on hermeneutics with this summary of the matter: “Dispensationalism sees the unity, the variety, and the progressiveness of this purpose of God for the world as no other system of theology.”⁵⁹

Opportunities for Refinement

On the doxological purpose of history, the opportunity is one of emphasis and exploration for the purpose of refinement. It has been pointed out that this point of the *sine qua non* has been neglected more than the other two.⁶⁰ This exploration and refinement must take place without fundamentally changing or denying the previous two points of the *sine qua non*.

Defense of the Doxological Purpose of History

In the present author’s judgment, the doxological purpose of history can be considered the win or go home point of dispensationalism, and traditional dispensationalism in particular. The way that dispensationalism is often said to undermine the Bible’s unity⁶¹ disappears entirely when the doxological purpose of history is understood as the unifying theme of the Bible. In light of the importance of this idea, God’s overall purpose in the world matter should be explainable in simple terms, even if it is a highly technical matter.

Some major concerns that are in discussion right now in the postmodern culture and the evangelical church pertain this issue. These issues include the role of the metanarrative and the role of social action in the life of the church. It may be demonstrated that dispensationalism presents a metanarrative and that this metanarrative, the glory of God in multiple ways, gives the foundation to give both the gospel of salvation and social change their appropriate places.

The Existence of the Biblical Metanarrative

In the current world-climate, the very idea of a metanarrative is being questioned, undermined, and, in many cases, rejected. Postmodernism is shaping the thinking of many in the world today, and generally speaking that philosophical approach rejects the existence of the metanarrative.⁶² In this context, it is not surprising that evangelical Christians are interested in presenting the Biblical metanarrative,⁶³ and this flows from the Bible’s universal authority.⁶⁴ So, the aforementioned emphasis on proclaiming the Biblical metanarrative is a worthy one. Indeed, there is some truth to the concept that the Bible must be approached in terms of the whole and not in terms of its individual parts.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁰ Stallard, “Essence of Dispensationalism”, 38.

⁶¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 103-104.

⁶² R. Albert Mohler, *He is not Silent: Preaching in a Postmodern World*, (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 118-119.

⁶³ e.g., Mohler devotes an entire chapter to presenting the Biblical metanarrative in Ibid., 89-103; similarly, in a much larger work, D. A. Carson spends three chapters in *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 141-314, Kindle Edition.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 141-192.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 130-131, and also note effective illustration of this in Mohler, 89-90.

However, this point requires caution. The metanarrative concept need not reject the principle of consistent grammatical-historical interpretation. Indeed, it is best to view the metanarrative as built on the individual parts of the Scriptures, suggesting that the way to approach the Bible in this way is to first approach each text in an atomistic way and then fit it together. This is analogous to the concept that systematic theology should be based on the Biblical theology of each author and book of the Bible.⁶⁶ In the context of Ryrie's 3rd point of the *sine qua non*, it is important to recognize that Ryrie's point is a statement about the nature of the Biblical metanarrative. Yes, it is appropriate to consider traditional dispensationalism a distinct form of the Christian worldview. The question then is whether it rightly explains the Biblical metanarrative as being diverse, but unified in its goal to God's glory.

The Diversity of the Biblical Metanarrative

The current evangelical scene is very telling in the absence of traditional dispensationalists⁶⁷ from the "gospel-centered" movement and the emphasis on social action at the present time.⁶⁸ These two elements are being upheld by proponents as essentials of the Biblical metanarrative to various degrees. However, sometimes it seems that the emphases by these movements may not faithfully express all the diversity that is affirmed in Scripture without diminishing or taking away parts of the Biblical metanarrative. Traditional dispensationalism's doxological theme of history may provide the key to ably explaining the Biblical metanarrative that does not diminish gospel or neglect social action both today and in the future.

Individual Redemption in Evangelicalism

After pointing out postmodernism's rejection of the metanarrative as mentioned before, Al Mohler then proceeds to affirm that the Biblical metanarrative is gospel-focused, and by that he means redemption-focused.⁶⁹ He says, "Christianity is the great metanarrative of redemption."⁷⁰ From that section, it may not be explicit whether he has in view individual redemption, but the emphasis is not on the gospel as social reformation. In a chapter on the metanarrative of Scripture, Mohler includes consummation in its cosmic aspects as the final portion of the Bible's story line, but the discussion was not specific enough in terms of how it relates to today.⁷¹ What should be noted is Together for the Gospel, of which Dr. Mohler is one of the founders. That group's Affirmations and Denials⁷² reflect Mohler's emphasis on individual redemption. There is a lack of emphasis on social action, but it is not

⁶⁶ Mike Stallard, "Notes on Systematic Theology," Notes from TH501 Dispensational Premillennialism, Summer 2014, Baptist Bible College and Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, accessed April 30, 2014, <https://moodle.bbc.edu>.

⁶⁷ I note the social action activities of students at the traditional dispensational college Baptist Bible College & Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, in the Spring 2014 semester as an example of an exception. This may become more common as dispensationalists become more faithful to the LORD. See "Stand for Freedom," Baptist Bible College and Seminary, posted May 2, 2014, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://www.bbc.edu/college/news.asp?ID=2980>.

⁶⁸ This paper does not attempt to fully analyze the "gospel-centered" movement or other movements, but I did find adequate points of comparison in viewing Together for the Gospel as being more focused on individual redemption and The Gospel Coalition as having a broader view of the metanarrative which included social action in the gospel.

⁶⁹ Mohler, 118.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Mohler, 101-102.

⁷² "Affirmations and Denials", Together for the Gospel, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://t4g.org/about/affirmations-and-denials-2/>.

entirely absent, either.⁷³ The group does not explicitly reject a dual track of God's purposes, but its emphasis is on the soteriological and Christological unity across God's dealings with mankind.⁷⁴ The point is that Mohler, and others like him, often demonstrate similarities to covenant theology's central motif of redemption as the central part of God's purposes,⁷⁵ viz. God's metanarrative.

Social Action in Evangelicalism

While there are veins of individual redemption motif in evangelicalism right now, there are also strengthening currents for social action as essential parts of the metanarrative. As an example, some of The Gospel Coalition's literature⁷⁶ demonstrates the inclusion of social action in the gospel by a banner at the top of their "About" page that said "the gospel for all of life" and this was reflected in a "Mandate [to]...integrate the gospel in to daily life."⁷⁷ Additionally, a summary mission statement says, "We yearn to work with all who...seek the Lordship of Christ over the *whole of life* with unabashed hope in the power of the Holy Spirit to transform individuals, *communities, and cultures*."⁷⁸ This emphasis of the organization appears to be similar to progressive dispensationalism on holistic redemption by calling for social transformation, but rooted in a strong understanding of the gospel of Christ through the cross.⁷⁹ Now, this trend toward social action is hardly new. One recalls liberals in the early 20th century rejecting individual redemption for social action.⁸⁰ In non-reformed circles, one detects this trend through Scot McKnight's work *The King Jesus Gospel*.⁸¹ Among other things, McKnight criticizes a "salvation-culture" he perceives in Christianity, as opposed to a broader concept of a "gospel-culture." This charge may be understood as answering the individual-redemption motif as found in covenant theology and the popular expressions of it within the gospel-centered movement.

The point of this summary is that various groups calling for more social action over the last 100 years have often been doing so on the basis of refuting the individual redemption emphasis of evangelicals, especially conservative reformed evangelicals. Another conclusion is that the word *gospel* is often broadened to include social responsibility at best or redefined such that the soteriological aspects of the gospel are removed.⁸² Do we have to choose one or the other? We do not, and traditional dispensationalism may help provide the answer through the doxological purpose of God's plan in history.

The Multi-Faceted Plan of God Unites Social Action and Gospel

⁷³ Note, however, Article XVII which discusses racial reconciliation but again the context of the article emphasizes the church as the place where that racial reconciliation takes place, and not the world at large.

⁷⁴ "Affirmations and Denials," Article XI.

⁷⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 48.

⁷⁶ While a sister organization to Together for the Gospel, I did detect a slight difference in emphasis in comparing their literature.

⁷⁷ "About," The Gospel Coalition, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/about>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 56.

⁸⁰ Yet, fundamentalism generally was perceived as ignoring that aspect, note from a conservative perspective Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁸¹ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

⁸² This is the basic idea in Mike Stallard, "Gospel Centeredness, Jesus, and Social Ethics," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 15, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 5-24.

When the Scriptures are studied according to the grammatical-historical hermeneutic outlined prior, the diversity of God's plan becomes evident. Ryrie's three point defense regarding the doxological purpose of history is valid, and especially so within the broader dispensational framework of the distinction between Israel and the church. Mike Stallard even considers the doxological purpose to be a corollary of the Israel-church distinction.⁸³ The focus of these two groups may be seen to be a focus on holistic redemption on the part of Israel and individual redemption on the part of the church. While God's plan does intermingle the two redemptive goals to some extent, the essential distinction is that Israel through the final form of the Messianic Kingdom will bring holistic redemption to the whole earth and that the church today proclaims individual salvation through the gospel. This distinction provides the framework for a proper understanding of both gospel and social action for the church today.

By affirming this distinction, the church can allow the Scripture to emphasize that the gospel is the redemption of individual human souls. The ethical teaching of the Bible as applicable to the church and even to society at large is not denied, and the church thus still maintains a responsibility to do good in the world, but not on the basis of the church's gospel mandate as such.⁸⁴ The accusations against fundamentalists, which included many dispensationalists, may have been valid. But such practices are the result of sinful dereliction of God given duties in this world to "do good to everyone." (Gal. 6:10) Likewise, the distinctive role of Israel provides the basis of future transformation of the social order. God does want to redeem the earth to bring glory to His name, but such transformation is a part of the future Kingdom age and not the goal of this age. We look to a future such transformation, but that will not prevent us from taking opportunity to help in such things today. The difference is in emphasis.

Conclusion

As the revelation of God, the Bible presents a metanarrative. This metanarrative must be understood in terms of the entire revelation, but with reference to the individual parts. There is a very real tension in the differing emphases of individual redemption and holistic redemption, such that either Biblical concept can be ignored or perhaps changed into something the Bible does not teach. Traditional dispensationalism's understanding of the diversity of the metanarrative as all unified under the glory of God provides the framework to properly understand the Biblical concepts of individual redemption and ultimate holistic redemption and to preserve the proper priorities for the church today.

Conclusion

Fifty years ago Dr. Charles Ryrie presented the essentials of traditional dispensationalism. These essentials were an apologetic for dispensationalism and a refinement of dispensationalism. They were founded on sound Biblical principles, and today they still stand as worthy principles that merit further study and revision. In light of recent progressive dispensational developments and a surge of covenant theology, the principles of traditional dispensationalism should continue to be emphasized and defended. This paper has sought to do this by summarizing, affirming, and defending afresh the essentials of dispensational theology. It has also sought to point out and address areas of potential refinement. Fresh affirmation of a theological system in fact facilitates refinement of the system, as long

⁸³ "Prophetic Hope in the Writings of Arno C. Gaebelein: A Possible Demonstration of the Doxological Purpose of Biblical History", *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1998): 207, accessed from the Galaxie Theological Journal Database.

⁸⁴ For Ryrie's perspective on the church's responsibility, see his own comments in *Dispensationalism*, 207 and his full work on the subject, *What You Should Know about Social Responsibility*, (Chicago: Moody, 1982).

as such refinement remains within the bounds of Ryrie's original essentials. At the end of the day, the present writer concurs with Dr. Ryrie. "[Traditional] dispensational premillennialism [is] the only way to understand the Bible."⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 10.

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