

Marsh, Cory M., and James I. Fazio, eds. *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century*. El Cajon, CA: SCS Press, 2023. 372pp. + 10pp. (front matter) + 13pp. (back matter).

Unlike many recent works that caricature dispensationalism, *Discovering Dispensationalism* assembles twelve scholars from eleven academic institutions to present a sympathetic, researched, and well-documented study outlining the threads of dispensational thought that appear through church history. Each chapter employs a subject-area expert to examine the characteristic traits of dispensationalism. In so doing, the authors dismantle specious and libelous charges made by dispensationalism's opponents, while leaving intact the reality that Christians tend to choose theological and hermeneutical systems based on a complex set of factors including personal background, church tradition, preferred logical approach (inductive/deductive), and personally resonating biblical themes (redemption/glory of God). In other words, the book does not present an attack on covenant theology but a refutation of inaccurate claims against dispensationalism. An extensive bibliography follows each chapter so that the reader can see at once the primary sources that each contributor utilized.

In chapter 1, Cory Marsh cites some of the oft-repeated falsehoods leveled against dispensationalism. These include the following:

- (1) it is an entirely recent innovation (the historical argument of the book refutes this charge);
- (2) it is anti-intellectual (the academic caliber of the scholars involved refutes this charge; moreover, intensive inductive study of Scripture is hardly anti-intellectual);
- (3) it is antinomian (this charge is impossible to sustain when nearly all early dispensationalists were Calvinists);
- (4) it is a prosperity gospel (this charge is libelous and a straw-man argument); and
- (5) it encourages societal neglect (this charge is ironic since it contradicts the fourth charge above and is provably false given the missional emphasis of dispensationalism that dwarfs the outreach of its theological counterparts).

Marsh identifies the purpose of the book: “to demonstrate the historical fact that so-called ‘dispensational’ ideas are not novel and they were not invented by the gentry class of western thinkers in the nineteenth century” (9). Along with his co-authors, he argues that “hermeneutics is the perennial issue at play,” while simultaneously contending that dispensationalism is more than a hermeneutic; it is a biblical theology (11, cf. 355). Marsh concludes the first chapter by surveying the contributions of the other authors.

In chapter 2, James Fazio addresses the precursors to dispensationalism that appear in the NT era. He analyzes the meaning of the NT word for *stewardship* (οἰκονομία) from which the concept of dispensation arises. The point of this exercise is to demonstrate that the later use of the word *dispensation* by dispensationalists is consistent with apostolic usage. Darby, for example, focused on human stewardship of divinely delegated administrations (41). Fazio concludes the chapter with a summary of what he considers to be the six defining features of a properly constituted dispensation.

In chapter 3, Paul Hartog deploys his considerable knowledge of patristics to compare and contrast Larry Crutchfield's and Charles Hill's perspectives on the presence and absence of dispensational features among the ante-Nicene fathers. Hartog displays an irenic tone and unrelenting logic that readers of his previous works have come to recognize. He proves conclusively that premillennialism (chiliasm) was the earliest doctrine of the church regarding eschatology. Specifically, all the extant witnesses of the apostolic church were premillennial. Hartog shows that Hill has failed to demonstrate his primary claim—that there is a necessary connection between millennialism and an intermediate state of the righteous in Hades—and that Hill tends to twist the available evidence to suit his agenda (Hartog identifies Hill's primary fallacy as begging the question, 78–79, 82). For example, Hill frequently levels the libel at early chiliasts that they acquired their premillennialism from Judaistic and pagan sources although those same early chiliasts claim they received this teaching from the apostle John himself. Basically, Hill urges his reader not to believe eyewitness testimony but his own theological agenda nearly 2,000 years later. Hill repeats Augustine's error in which he blended Manicheanist dualism into Christianity, then accused literal interpreters of being Judaistic. Finally, Hartog concludes that while it is impossible to identify dispensationalism as a fully developed system in the early church, several key traits (consistent with dispensationalism and inconsistent with the theological alternatives) were present (e.g., consistent interpretation).

In chapter 4, Jeremiah Mutie contends that dispensational precursors are evident in the Nicene era. His argument is particularly important because allegorical interpretation of prophecy had superseded literal interpretation in this era, but many church fathers insisted that literal interpretation and premillennialism were correct in the face of growing pressure to conform to an allegorical method. Mutie, like the other contributors to the volume, does not assert that dispensationalism existed in any developed form but that the traits and characteristics that constitute dispensationalism were present. It can hardly be reasonably asserted that Darby invented dispensationalism *de novo* in the 1800s if the parts and pieces that make up dispensationalism existed throughout church history. One of the most telling evidences in the Nicene era comes from the reaction of Dionysius of Alexandria. Dionysius admitted that the Book of Revelation teaches chiliasm (in his critique of Nepos); so he attacked the authenticity of Revelation. That is, some allegorists of the Nicene era recognized Revelation is properly premillennial (93). To such church fathers, the only way to institute amillennialism was to dispense with Revelation altogether by rejecting its canonicity. By the end of the chapter, Mutie has collected a list of chiliasts including Cyprian, Nepos, Lactantius, Methodius, Hilary, Hesychius, and Sulpicius Severus, with some additional traits later recognized in dispensationalism that appear in Jerome and Augustine.

William Watson carries the argument forward in chapter 5—demonstrating that core traits of dispensationalism were preserved even in the medieval era by some of the church fathers whose literal interpretation of Scripture would later lead to the Reformation. The organized Roman Catholic Church of the medieval era suppressed inductive study and literal interpretation of Scripture. Both are perilous to magisterial authorities, who brook no rivals. Watson shows that individuals such as Andrew of Caesarea, Aspringius, Cyril of Alexandria, Isidore of Seville, Theodoret, and others held certain

biblical truths on the basis of a natural hermeneutic. Once that hermeneutic revived in the church, the Reformation was inevitable.

Ron Bigalke points in chapter 6 to the reemergence of a more widely used literal hermeneutic as a key factor in the Reformation. While the Reformers adopted a literal interpretation of wide swaths of Scripture, they retained a Roman Catholic hermeneutic in regard to prophecy with a resultant Roman Catholic eschatology. Thus, Bigalke observes, “A consistent application of the Reformation’s hermeneutical principle would be the catalyst for what would later become known as dispensationalism” (158). If the same hermeneutic that led to the Reformation were applied consistently by the Reformers and their followers, the outcome in their eschatology would be widely different.

Mark Snoeberger argues in chapter 7 that “the distinction between Israel and the church is the watershed between dispensationalism and non-dispensationalism” (188). Snoeberger then shows how Calvin interpreted Romans 11:16 in an entirely novel fashion in order to subvert what Paul transparently says, namely, that there will be “a restoration of the Jewish people in the eschaton” (189). Bucer and Beza disagreed, and “John Owen sharply disavowed Calvin’s (Augustinian) interpretation of Romans 11:26,” as well observing that if Calvin is correct, then Paul is incoherent (192). The remainder of Snoeberger’s chapter shows how a distinct hope for Jewish restoration persisted in the Puritan and other Reformed communities, and this hope is more consistent with dispensationalism than with its theological alternatives.

Max Weremchuk presents the lengthy chapter 8 on John Nelson Darby. He collects crucial background information that shows Darby’s “novelty” does not lie in the invention of new doctrines (as asserted by some critics) but in an insistent return to inductive study of Scripture as the foundation for theology (213). Darby restructured long-held biblical doctrines into a particular coherent form.

A series of chapters brings the book into the present. In chapter 9, Larry Pettegrew traces the movement of dispensationalism to America and shows its revivalist and missionary tendencies. Phillip Long addresses the Mid-Acts movement in chapter 10. This subset of dispensational thought lies between the ultra-dispensationalism of Bullinger and the traditional or moderate dispensationalism of Dallas Theological Seminary. Thomas Ice provides chapter 11 as a survey of the ascendance of dispensationalism in the twentieth century. He demonstrates that virtually all early dispensationalists were Calvinists (surely a shock to the many Arminian dispensationalists today). Ice also shows that wherever a literal hermeneutic is adopted, premillennialism results, but established theological traditions serve as one of the greatest obstacles to the adoption of a literal hermeneutic (321). Darrell Bock contributes chapter 12 as an explanation of progressive dispensationalism. Bock also offers several cautions regarding the sensationalism that some popular teachers have resorted to in teaching about the future. Such sensationalism allows those who object to dispensationalism to make a false equation between the system as a whole and the unbridled pronouncements of a few. Marsh and Fazio collaborated on a final, summary chapter that emphasizes the biblical-theological nature of dispensationalism (in specific contrast to systematic or historical theology). The editors insist that dispensationalism is not identical with a consistent hermeneutic but that a consistent hermeneutic leads to something approximating dispensationalism. The one is the cause; the other, the effect.

This reviewer found only a few items of critique in regard to the book. First, one might wish to see a more thoroughly edited text. The number of misspelled, omitted, or repeated words surpasses what the reader might be accustomed to in an era of spell checks and grammar checks. Other readers will find the case inconclusive. Though the authors and editors admit they cannot demonstrate a developed form of dispensationalism earlier in church history, one could always hold out hope that an alternative system might have developed from premillennialism, consistent interpretation, a distinction between Israel and the church, and inductive reasoning. The book, then, does not prove that these four traits *must* lead to dispensationalism but that some of the features of dispensationalism also appear in the earlier centuries of the church. Yet since this critique lies outside the scope of the authors' stated intent, the reader should be content to let them demonstrate their own chosen point.

Discovering Dispensationalism ought to have its place among studied theological texts precisely because it helps dispensational theologians understand the heritage of their theology, and it helps covenant theologians avoid unnecessary missteps in their assertions about the origins and nature of a competing description of God's work in this world. The reader must recognize the intended purpose of the work to profit best from it. He will not find a comprehensive explanation of dispensationalism or developments within the dispensational community. He will find evidence that dispensationalism is not a fringe, novel, or unfounded system but a fruition of sound hermeneutics, emphasis on Scripture, and inductive reasoning based on the evidence that God has chosen to reveal and then preserve in his Word.

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