LEARNING HOW TO TALK ABOUT SIGNIFICANT THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Evaluating & Responding to What We Have Learned

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 29 June 2025 Steve Stairs

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THE STRENGTHS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

- The Covenant of Works adequately and logically explains mankind's culpability for sin and the continuing presence of sin in our world.
- It has a clear logical arrangement that reinforces its central theme.
- The Covenant of Redemption gives great attention to the central place of Jesus Christ in bringing to pass the redemption of the elect from sin through his obedient life, sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection.



THE STRENGTHS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

- It connects New Testament theological themes to their Old Testament theological roots.
- It gives a strong trinitarian explanation of the role of each person in the Godhead in the plan for redeeming the lost.
- The Covenant of Grace draws significant attention to the work of God through the person of the Son in providing salvation from sin to the elect.

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THE WEAKNESSES OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

- It uses two different principles of interpretation the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic for most of the Scripture and then the analogy of faith (allegorical / spiritualizing) for future prophetic passages.
- The idea of the Covenant of Redemption between the members of the Godhead is (1) unnecessary and (2) insulting to the character and nature of the persons of the Trinity.

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THE WEAKNESSES OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

- The idea of the Covenant of Redemption foists a structure used by God in the Scripture to encourage people to have confidence in His promises upon the members of the Trinity who already have perfect confidence and partnership with one another.
- The Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace have no biblical base but are logical projections from biblical concepts that are crafted into the status of being covenants. They are ultimately derived from theological speculation.

THE STRENGTHS OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensational theology. . .

- attempts to consistently employ the same method of interpretation that the Biblical writers – the prophets and the apostles – employed in their interpretation of Old Testament texts.
- properly recognizes both the distinction that the Bible makes between Israel and the Church and the points of continuity that exist between them as two expressions of the people of God.



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THE STRENGTHS OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensational theology. . .

- adequately explains how the prophecies of Scripture that are presently unfulfilled will be completely fulfilled as the created order moves forward in time.
- honours the continual unfolding and development of the written Biblical revelation as it has come to mankind throughout the history of the created order.
- acknowledges and explains the increasing responsibility of mankind to respond properly in trust of God as the amount of special written revelation from God increased over time.



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THE STRENGTHS OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensational theology. . .

 focuses on a theme for the history of the created order that is deep enough and broad enough to take into account everything that is created and everything that happens in the universe during its existence – namely, the glory of God as the One who is sovereign over everything.



THE WEAKNESSES OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensational theology. . .

- takes a structure that God uses to describe how He works in some specific ages of history and impresses that structure on all of history.
- lacks simplicity. It is quite complicated in the details of how each suggested dispensation works differently from the other dispensations.



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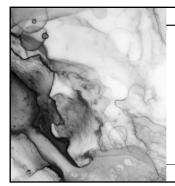
THE WEAKNESSES OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensational theology. . .

- appears at times to be saying that God required different ways for people to be saved from sin in different dispensations.
- attempts to unravel and separate themes in the Scriptures that God seems to have purposefully woven together in the way that he communicates them to mankind through the Scriptures.



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Drawing Proper Conclusions

- Both systems are attempting to provide a systematic way to order the content of the text of the Scriptures that they believe to be logically coherent and solidly Biblical.
- We must remember that there is a strong human component in the development of systematic theologies. They are human and personal and therefore are fallible and potentially in error.
- Both systems recognize that the central person in all of history in Jesus Christ. They believe that his life, death, resurrection, ascension and return are the foundation for the salvation of people from their sin.
- Both systems take biblical structures that are used in specific places in the Scriptures and present them as the organizing structures for properly interpreting and understanding biblical revelation.

Conclusions Concerning Both Systems of Theology

- The root of the differences between these two systems rest in the hermeneutical decision to treat the interpretation of prophetic passages in two different ways.
- The different hermeneutical approaches yield differing understanding of the nature of the church and the fulfillment of the prophetic portions of the Scriptures with leads to radically different understanding of the doctrine of last things (eschatology).
- Both systems attempt to unravel ideas and themes in Scripture that the Spirit of God through the biblical writers intentionally braided together in the way the biblical revelation was given to us.
- Examples: Covenant / Dispensation; Election / Belief (Romans 9 -10)
- Is it possible that both systems are attempting to untwist and separate something that God intends for us to understand together?

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Conclusions Concerning Covenant Theology

- Covenant theology flows out of the background of the Protestant Reformation through the impact of that movement on the churches in Switzerland, Holland & England in the early to mid 1600s.
- It was first expressed as a system of theological understanding as the Dutch Reformed Church responded to the Remonstrant's critique of specific aspects of how that denomination was proclaiming the ideas of the Reformers.
- Though the Reformers' (Zwingli, Calvin, and Luther) theologies served as foundation for Covenant Theology, none of them were Covenant theologians.
- Covenant Theology has a logically coherent structure that is simple and understandable. However, it is based on using the illustration of a covenant as an allegory through which the structure of all Biblical revelation is to be understood.

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 Covenant Theology was not expressed accurately in writing until after the Synod of Dort (1618). It was refined in the work of Cocceius and Witsius in the Netherlands and the Westminster Confession (1648) in England. Covenant Theology uses a dual hermeneutic when it employs what it calls "the analogy of faith". It understands some passages literally and others allegorically. The real question is who determines when to use which hermeneutical principles to understand the Scriptures.

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Conclusions Concerning Dispensational Theology

- Dispensational ideas and understandings are found throughout the early church fathers but they do not seem to be systematized well and recognized as a theological system until John Nelsen Darby in the mid 1800s.
- Darby in reacting against the wedding of Covenant Theology to the Civil Government became committed to a literal-grammaticalhistorical hermeneutic as the way to understand the Scriptures.
- In proposing that the ordering structure for understanding God's revelations was dispensations (economies of governance) rather than covenants Darby provided a logically coherent structure that helped explain better some of the complex details of the Scriptures.

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Conclusions Concerning Dispensational Theology

- Dispensational Theology does a better job of holding consistently to the hermeneutical principles that the Biblical writers (the prophets and apostles) used – the literalgrammatical-historical hermeneutic principle of interpretation.
- Dispensational Theology has a logically coherent structure that because it is quite detailed and complex sometimes causes people to feel confused.

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Enacting Proper Practices in Personal and Church Relationships

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8 Points of Application

All of us (both Dispensationalists and Covenant Theologians) need to remember that our disagreements are disagreements between brothers and sisters in Christ who are both enlisted as soldier's in Christ's battle for the hearts of people who are rebelling against God in this world. There is much more that we are in agreement about that what we differ about and we must not let our differences eclipse our faithfulness to our God-given task of proclaiming His gospel.

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8 Points of Application

The kindness, civility, gentleness, reasonableness, patience and love that we are commanded to use in our relationships with the people of the world we are attempting to win to Christ must be displayed in the words we speak, the attitudes we hold, and the deeds that we do as we relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ, especially when we find ourselves in significant disagreement with them about how to understand the Scriptures.



8 Points of Application

It is imperative that we listen to one another to understand one another. Only after we can clearly articulate what the other side of the difference believes should we then begin to construct arguments to point out possible weaknesses in their position and construct arguments to point out what we believe to be the strengths of our own position.

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8 Points of Application

We must approach one another in any disagreement with an attitude of humility rather than arrogance. We must remember that neither of us is God and therefore neither of us is exhaustive in our understanding of truth and reality. It is more likely both of us is wrong in some aspect of what we believe that it is that either of us is totally correct in what we believe. We must learn to say, "I could be wrong" and be willing to change our position when the Scriptures dictate that we do so.

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8 Points of Application

The degree to which local churches that have a Covenant theological perspective or a Dispensational theological perspective can work together in a ministry enterprise will depend on the theological statement that ministry is making. If the nature of the ministry is something in which both are in essential agreement such as a home for unwed mothers or a feeding scheme for the poor then there could be a high degree of cooperation. In matters where there is theological disagreement such as a prophecy conference or evangelistic meetings conscience would dictate a much lower level of cooperation.



8 Points of Application

We must give ourselves personally and corporately to the systematic, consistent study of God's Word. Before we will be able to patiently teach, accurately expound and passionately proclaim what we believe to be the truth that God's Word teaches, we must know learn it ourselves. This means being disciplined in reading the Word of God, praying about what it says, and living it out in the daily moments of our lives.

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8 Points of Application

We must remember that differences in our understanding of the Scriptures stem from the fact that we as finite, unholy, created beings are trying to understand the revelation of truth that an infinite, holy, uncreated God has given to us. Because he has not created us as robotic machines we can be mistaken and fallible in our understanding and interpretation of God's Word. However, we also must remember that His revelation is never mistaken or fallible in any way. Because this is so we must show grace to those who conscientiously hold to different understandings of God's Word and trust God to correct either us or them, or both of us.

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8 Points of Application

We must pray for the effective, accurate proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the salvation of people through the ministries of both churches that hold to a dispensational theological perspective and those that hold to a covenant theological perspective. Both believe that the Scripture alone proclaims salvation to be available by grace alone, through faith alone in the work of Jesus Christ alone for the glory of God alone.

Romans 11:33-36

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." (ESV)