

This article is to allow a Dispensationalist to speak on their behalf. I do not agree with the position, but it does state what a dispensationalist believes.

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THE ARTICLE

The Sine Qua Non of Dispensationalism? – Ryrie and Feinberg (Revised)

Posted on 30 June 2020 by Paul Henebury

I made a bit of a hash of the initial post on this because I was in a rush. Here is an extended and revised version (which is what I should have posted). It questions the third essential of Ryrie's proposed sine qua non.

The picture of history that is constructed comes from the base of consistently applied principles of grammatico-historical (G-H) hermeneutics.^[li] The Bible is to read as one would read any other book. The presupposition here is not that the Bible *is* like any other book. Rather, when it is read like one would read another book it becomes apparent that it is unique. But only plain sense, literal interpretation yields the self-attestation of Scripture with its corollary of ultimate authority.

It is the consistency with which G-H interpretation is employed that makes one a dispensationalist.^[lii] This has been admitted even by those who have opposed it.^[liii] Consistent application of the principles of G-H interpretation, then, is the foremost trait of a dispensational theology. Ryrie, in his delineation of the essential aspects of the system, actually places this characteristic second behind a fundamental distinction between Israel and the Church.^[liii] This subject bears further investigation.

Ryrie, Feinberg, and the Sine Qua Non

On pages 38-41 of Ryrie's important book on *Dispensationalism*, the author provides what he believes are the three indispensable marks of a dispensationalist. The first of these essential beliefs is a consistent distinction between Israel and the Church. Ryrie states: "This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and the one who does will."^[lv]

The other two components of Ryrie's *sine qua non* are, as we have seen, a consistent use of normal, plain, or literal interpretation when studying the Scriptures, and, more controversially, a doxological (rather than a christological or soteriological) goal of God in human history.^[lv]

However, it should be pointed out that not all dispensationalists completely agree with Ryrie.^[lvii] One notable scholar who demurs is John Feinberg of Trinity Evangelical Divinity

School. Feinberg believes Ryrie's three essentials need nuancing.^[viii] He also thinks there are six things which, if properly defined, distinguish a consistent dispensationalist.^[ix] They are:

- Multiple senses of terms like "Jew," "seed of Abraham"
- Hermeneutics
- Covenant promises to Israel
- A distinctive future for ethnic Israel
- The Church as a distinctive organism
- A distinct philosophy of history.
- Interestingly, and which pertains more to the present discussion, Feinberg breaks down the traditionally cast distinction between the Church and Israel into the following:

Multiple Senses of the Term "Seed of Abraham."

1. First, he defines what he calls the ethnic or national sense, which relates to physical Israel.
2. Next is the political sense, which calls to mind the geo-political entity that was Israel. As a political state there were citizens who were not physical Hebrews.
3. Then there is the spiritual sense. Under this identification are those who are the Seed of Abraham because they share like faith in God. A person could be described this whether Jew or Gentile (Paul even uses this designation to distinguish saved from unsaved Jews in Romans 9:6ff.
4. Feinberg refers to the typological sense, wherein Old Testament Israel may function as a type of the Church (e.g. 1 Cor. 10:1-6).^[x]

With these more refined senses of what it means to be one of Abraham's seed, Feinberg writes,

"What is distinctive of dispensational thinking is recognition of all senses of these terms as operative in both Testaments coupled with a demand that no sense (spiritual especially) is more important than any other, and that no sense cancels out the meaning and implications of the other senses."^[xi]

This is a helpful development in view of the oft-cited passages routinely produced by covenant theologians to prove that the Church is now Israel (e.g. Rom. 2:28; 9:6-7; 11,16-25; Eph. 2:11-18; Phil. 3:3, etc.).

Ryrie's Third *Sine Qua Non* Revisited

In contrast to covenant theology, which, because of its slavish adherence to the "covenant of grace", must view *all things* soteriologically, dispensationalists believe the over-arching plan of God is the promotion of His glory through multifaceted means. As Ryrie puts it, "...covenant theology makes the *all-encompassing* means of manifesting the glory of God the plan of redemption."^[xii] Elsewhere he declares that, "The Bible itself clearly teaches that salvation, important and wonderful as it is, is not an end in itself but is rather a *means* to the end of glorifying God."^[xiii]

In another place Ryrie comments:

Scripture is not human-centered, as though salvation were the principal point, but God-centered, because His glory is at the center. The glory of God is the primary principle that unifies all the dispensations, the program of salvation being just one of the means by which God glorifies Himself. Each successive revelation of God's plan for the ages, as well as His dealings with the elect, nonelect, angels, and nations all manifest His glory.^[xiv]

Nevertheless, we think Ryrie has overreached himself on this third point. While the first two are certainly essentials if one is to be a normative dispensationalist, the third is not. Stallard, for example, has shown that, "the doxological center for the Bible in Ryrie is replaced by a redemptive center in Gaebelein's statements about the purpose of revelation."^[xv]

It is very clear that one can be a dispensationalist and not believe that the glory of God demonstrated in a multifaceted scheme is a critical belief of the system, just as one can be a covenant theologian and believe that it is - albeit the other matters definitely play second fiddle to salvation.^[xvi] In fact, I would argue that most dispensationalists are unsure just what the third strand of Ryrie's *sine qua non* means! Also, while belief in a consistently applied literal interpretation and a clear distinction between God's purposes for Israel and the Church hang or fall together, the same is not *necessarily* true for the doxological purpose. If a person ignores this third point (and we don't say they should)^[xvii] it will not make a difference as to whether or not they end up a dispensationalist. Surely that is precisely what a *sine qua non* does do?

Furthermore, it is hard to ignore the tremendous work which some Reformed scholars have done to stress the doxological purposes of God, even if they have confined those purposes unduly by their covenant theology. For example, more than anyone else, the great Puritan pastor Jonathan Edwards was concerned with showing Christian people the transforming vision of God glorified in His works. It was Edwards who said,

"For God to glorify himself is to discover himself in his works, or to communicate himself in his works, which is all one."^[xviii]

All that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God's works is included in that one phrase, the glory of God...The beams of glory come from God, and are something of God and are refunded back again to their original. So that the whole is *of* God, and in God, and to God, and God is the beginning, middle and end in this affair.^[xix]

These are profound and deep truths indeed, and it is a treasure to the whole Church, whatever differences separate them, to have such a man as Edwards help us appreciate this great subject.^[xx]

[i] Cf. Charles Lee Feinberg, "The Rebuilding of the Temple," in Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Prophecy in the Making*, (Carol Stream, IL: Creation House, 1971), 92-93.

[ii] Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 20, 40, 84-85, 146-147.

[iii] Ryrie, *ibid*, cites Hamilton (83), Berkhof (85) and Allis (86).

[iv] *Ibid*, 38f.

[v] *Ibid*, 39.

[vi] *Ibid*, 40.

[vii] Neither should they have to. One of the dangers of trying to converge upon a *sine qua non* is that it is apt in the wrong hands, to introduce an unwelcome rigidity within the system; a rigidity which may make future development (though *not* a la progressive dispensationalism) very difficult.

[viii] John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity", in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), ed. John S. Feinberg, 71-72, 84-85.

[ix] *Ibid*, 337-338 n. 30.

[x] *Ibid*, 72

[xi] *Ibid*, 73

[xii] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 95.

[xiii] *Ibid*, 40. My emphasis.

[xiv] Ryrie, "Dispensationalism," in Mal Couch, ed. *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 94.

[xv] Stallard, "The Theological Method of Arno C. Gaebelein," 358.

[xvi] An example of a covenant theologian who does just this is John Brown of Haddington in his "*Compendium*" of *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2002 reprint [1782]), see especially page 147ff.

[xvii] See the comments on the dispensationalist philosophy of history.

[xviii] Edwards, quoted by Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 176.

[xix] J. Edwards, "Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," quoted in John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds. *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 23.

[xx] I am, of course, aware that for Edwards, as for covenant theologians generally, God's glory is exclusively tied up with the redemption of His elect. - See J. I. Packer, "The Glory of God and the Reviving of Religion: A Study in the Mind of Jonathan Edwards," in Piper & Taylor, *A God-Entranced Vision of All Things*, esp. 88-90.