

Sunday, October 23, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 42 Confronting Dispensational Straw Men, Part 1

Introduction

- At this point in the class we are going to leave the historical flow of the institutional and denominational churches in order to focus our attention on the recovery of Pauline truth and the history of the so-called Grace Movement. Admittedly much more could be said about church history in general but it is outside of the specific focus of this class.
- In lesson six I introduced you to the following diagram regarding the loss and recovery of Pauline truth.

Pauline Truths Lost (Order of Loss)

- *First*—The Distinctive Message and Ministry of the Apostle Paul
- *Second*—The Pre-Tribulational Rapture of the Church, the Body of Christ
- *Third*—The Difference Between Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ
- *Fourth*—Justification by Grace Through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone

Pauline Truths Recovered (Order of Recovery)

- *First*—Justification by Grace Through Faith Alone, in Christ Alone. Recovered via the Protestant Revolution in the 16th century via Luther and others.
- *Second*—The Difference Between Israel and the Church, the Body of Christ. Recovered in the 1800's via John Nelson Darby, E.W. Bullinger, Sir Robert Anderson and others.
- *Third*—The Pre-Tribulational Rapture of the Church, the Body of Christ. Recovered in the 19th Century via John Nelson Darby and included and popularized by C.I. Scofield in his Reference Bible in 1909.
- *Fourth*—The Distinctive Message and Ministry of the Apostle Paul. Recovered from the middle of the 1900's via J.C. O'Hair, Charles F. Baker, Cornelius R. Stam and others. (Lewis, 1)
- While I understand why Fredrick Lewis used the word “recovery” when articulating the order in which key features of Pauline theology were brought back into popular theological discussion, I find the term somewhat misleading. Technically these truths were never lost, they could always be found on the pages of scripture from the time Paul wrote them in the first century until the 19th century when they began to be “recovered.” As we studied in lesson six, many of these truths were ignored or overlooked by the church while Paul was still alive. However, we have also seen that there have always been pockets of believers down through history to whom these truths were not lost. Saints such as the Paulicians and Waldensians stood for key features of the message and ministry of Paul regardless of the potential consequences.
- Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we will speak about Pauline truth being willfully “abandoned” in the first century while Paul was still alive. Likewise, Pauline truth (or elements thereof) experienced a systematic “resurgence” in the 1800s in that it once again, to varying degrees, gained an acknowledged place in the theological discussion and dialogue of the past two centuries.

- At this time there is no single resource, written from a Mid-Acts dispensational viewpoint, which attempts to present a comprehensive history of the movement. Works exist that chronicle the history of various organized groups within the Grace Movement such as the GGF or BBF. While these works are helpful they do not paint a complete picture of how the Pauline Grace Message developed before the time of Stam, Baker, and O’Hair. Nor do they touch on the Grace Life Movement or new developments in the past 25 to 30 years.
- Our goal is to bring a greater degree of clarity to this picture. Unfortunately, due to the constraints of time, money, and access to information, this study will still possess certain blind spots that will require further refinement and development in the future. In short, this class will be more comprehensive and complete than anything that has gone before it but does not claim, nor should it be viewed as the final word on the subject.

Review

- “As we have seen, there must have been a landslide from truth before the apostle Paul died, and through this the truth and the glories of the Mystery of Ephesians, and justification by faith were lost, the early fathers giving no clear testimony to either of these precious doctrines. The literal Second Advent of Christ which was taught by all the Apostles, and His literal reign for a thousand years was held fast for some two centuries, but as the Lord tarried, the hope of his coming to set up the earthly Kingdom began to fade away. Notwithstanding, the truth for the present age revealed through Paul’s writings, the key to this problem, was lost as well.” (Allen, 30)
- “The only way out seemed to be to spiritualize the promises to Israel and the prophecies which deal with the setting up of the earthly kingdom. The Roman Church seized upon these promises to Israel and appropriated them to herself by spiritualizing and regarding herself as the true Israel – the Israel of God, the only visible expression of God’s Kingdom on earth, disregarding the Scriptural fact that there has been only one visible organized church on earth, in the Scriptural sense, the literal nation of Israel. Alas many Protestant expositors continue with Rome’s error of spiritualizing and robbing Israel of her Scriptural place in the outworking of God’s purpose for the establishment of His Kingdom in this world of ours.” (Allen, 31)
- “After the Reformation, the truths that were made known through Paul’s ministry slowly began to be recovered. To expect a recovery of all the “good deposit” at the Reformation is to expect too much. The wonder of it is that so much of the basic truth of the gospel of God’s grace was brought to light again, when we remember the terrible spiritual darkness and bondage that had held sway for so long.” (Allen, 31)
- “It was the recognition of the dispensational principle of interpretation of the Scriptures that played a large part in bringing back the deeper truths, culminating with the high water mark of revelation – the truth of the Mystery connected with the joint-Body of Christ. This has not been without misunderstanding and opposition, as we well know. The critics, who have never really grasped the New Testament meaning of the word dispensation and its practical outworking, charge this principle with being new-fangled, divisive and destructive of the unity of the Bible, a product of Dr. E.W. Bullinger, Dr. C.I. Scofield and Charles H. Welch.” (Allen, 31)

Dispensational Straw Men

- Clarence E. Mason, author of *Eschatology*, states the following regarding the origins of dispensationalism:
 - “It has been asserted or assumed by almost all opponents of the dispensational viewpoint that the whole idea is of comparatively recent origin. Some of the lesser informed have attributed its origin to Dr. C.I. Scofield or/and some anonymous conferences. Those who consider themselves better informed knowingly and unctuously affirm that Scofield got his idea from John Nelson Darby with perhaps an assist from Dr. James H. Brookes, with whom he studied privately after his conversion in St. Louis in 1879. It is also assumed that if they but knew the “facts” (that is, of its recent and Plymouth Brethren origin), most of the present-day adherents of dispensationalism would be shocked and, very probably, reconsider the advisability of retaining their view.” (Mason, 20-21)
- J.E. Bear begins his treatment of dispensationalism with the following statement:
 - “Dispensationalism as we know it today is of comparatively recent origin, having had its beginning in England in the last century among the Plymouth Brethren.” (quoted in Mason, 21)
- Charles C. Ryrie, author of *Dispensationalism Today*, does an excellent job addressing the origins of dispensationalism. Ryrie states:
 - “A typical statement about dispensationalism goes like this: “Dispensationalism was formulated by one of the nineteenth-century separatist movements, the Plymouth Brethren.” This is a loaded statement. It contains two charges: 1) since dispensationalism is recent, it is therefore unorthodox. 2) it was born out of a separatist movement and it is therefore to be shunned. The implication in these charges is clear: If the poor misguided souls who believe in dispensationalism only knew its true origin they would turn from its teachings like the plague.” (Ryrie, 65)
- Ryrie cites the work of Daniel P. Fuller to prove that his comments are not too sarcastic:
 - “Ignorance is bliss, and it may well be that this popularity would not be so great if the adherent of this system knew the historical background of what they teach. Few indeed realize that the teaching of Chafer came from Scofield, who in turn got it through the writings of Darby and the Plymouth Brethren.” (quoted in Ryrie, 65)
- “A further implication in a statement like Fuller’s is that dispensationalism is obviously man-made, and a person would never arrive at such ideas from his own personal Bible study.” (Ryrie, 66)
- *Straw Man Number 1*—“The first is the straw man of saying that dispensationalists assert that the system was taught in the post-apostolic times. Informed dispensationalists do not claim that. They recognize that, as a system, dispensationalism was largely formulated by Darby, but that outlines of a dispensationalist approach to the Scriptures are found

much earlier. They only maintain that certain features of the dispensational system are found in the teachings of the early church.” (Ryrie, 66)

- *Straw Man Number 2*—“Another typical example of the use of a straw man is this line of argument: pretribulationism is not apostolic; pretribulationism is dispensationalism; therefore, dispensationalism is not apostolic. But dispensationalists do not claim that the system was developed in the first century; nor is it necessary that they be able to do so. Many other doctrines were not developed in the first century—including covenant theology which is seventeenth century. Doctrinal development is a perfectly normal process in the course of church history.” (Ryrie, 66)
- “This straw man leads to a second fallacy—the wrong use of history. The fact that something was taught in the first century does not make it right (unless taught in the canonical Scriptures), and the fact that something was not taught until the nineteenth century does not make it wrong unless, of course, it is unscriptural. Nondispensationalists surely know that baptismal regeneration was taught in the early centuries yet many of them would not include that error in their theological systems simply because it is historic.” (Ryrie, 66-67)
- “The charge of newness was leveled long ago at the doctrine of the Reformers. Calvin answered it with characteristic straightforwardness, and his answer is one which defends dispensationalism equally well against the same charge. He wrote:
 - First, calling it ‘new’ they do great wrong to God, whose Sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty. . . That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man’s impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God’s goodness, its claim to antiquity ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery.” (quoted in Ryrie, 67)
- God has always been a dispensationalist regardless of man’s knowledge of it. The Greek word *oikonomia* has been in the Bible since the first century when the New Testament was written.
 - Luke 16:2-4—stewardship
 - I Corinthians 9:17—dispensation
 - Ephesians 1:10—dispensation of the fullness of times
 - Ephesians 3:2—dispensation of grace
 - Colossians 1:25—dispensation of God
- *Strong’s Concordance* defines the word *oikonomia* as follows:
 - the management of a household or of household affairs
 - a) specifically, the management, oversight, administration, of other's property
 - b) the office of a manager or overseer, stewardship
 - c) administration, dispensation
- It is interesting to note that Paul is the only Biblical writer to name specific dispensations. Moreover, as we have already seen the church is in its present sorry condition because of

the widespread departure from Pauline authority while Paul was still alive (II Timothy 1:15).

- Therefore, dispensationalism is not new; it is as old as the Bible itself. What happened in the 19th century with dispensationalism is the same as what happened in the 16th century Reformation with justification by faith. Luther did not invent a “new” doctrine; rather he restored a very old doctrine back to its right place of prominence. It is inconsistent to charge Darby and other early dispensationalists with inventing a new doctrine but then not hold Luther to the same standard.
- “It is granted by dispensationalists that as a system of theology dispensationalism is recent in origin. But there are historical references to that which eventually was systematized into dispensationalism. There is evidence in the writings of men before Darby that the dispensational concept was a part of their viewpoint.” (Ryrie, 68)
- George E. Ladd tries to stack the deck against dispensationalism by making it appear that there is no historical record of dispensational thinking prior to Darby. Ladd writes:
 - “It is not important for the present purpose to determine whether the views of Darby and Kelly were original with them or were taken from the antecedent and made popular by them. Sources to solve this historical problem are not available to the present writer. For all practical purposes, we may consider that this movement – for dispensationalism has had such wide influence it must be called a movement – had its source with Darby and Kelly.” (Ladd, 49)
- Not only is Ladd’s statement misleading, but it is certifiably false. Arnold D. Ehlert’s *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* was published in volumes 101-103 of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, between January 1944 and January 1946. Ladd’s book *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, was not published by Eerdmans until 1952.
- Ehlert’s work is indispensable because it furnishes evidence that dispensational concepts were held early and throughout the history of the church.

Understanding Ehlert’s Approach

- Since Ehlert’s *Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* will play such a large part in our studies moving forward, it is important to understand his general approach.
- “Biblical exposition of the subject (dispensationalism) abounds. But there are those who shy away from teaching which is not expressly covered in the creeds and dogmas of the Church, no matter how appealing the Biblical exposition may be. To such there will be some comfort in learning that dispensationalism is not too “modern,” and that it was acknowledged, in one form or another, by many able men, whose general teaching is accepted, in different branches of the household of faith.” (Ehlert, 6)
- “Some may expect to find works referred to that will not appear. Due to the immensity of the literature on limited phases of the whole subject, it was necessary to eliminate all works dealing with only one or two dispensations, with the millennium as such, with Israel, and with the law-grace controversy. Only such works as mention *three or more*

dispensations or economies of God's redemptive dealings with men can be admitted.” (Ehlert, 7)

- “It seems likely that the roots of the whole doctrine of ages and dispensations will have to be traced back to the six creative days, and the seventh day of rest, of Genesis, which have been considered prophetically symbolic of a number of periods of development to be followed by a period of utopia, as the Sabbath follows the six days of work. David Gregory, a learned mathematician and astronomer of Oxford England, who died in 1710, says: “. . . Because God was six days about the creation, and a thousand years with him are but one day; . . . therefore after six days, that is 6,000 years duration of the world, there shall be a seventh day, or millenary Sabbath of rest.” (Ehlert, 8)
- Rabbi Baal Katturim said, “There are six millenniums in the first verse of the first of Genesis, answering to the 6,000 years which the world is to continue.” This tradition is traceable throughout pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Mohammedan theology. While it is not dispensationalism, it seems to be related basically to the main features of the larger doctrine of dispensationalism.” (Ehlert, 8)
- D.T. Taylor is credited for citing a large part of the literature dealing with the six and seven thousand year tradition in his book, *The Voice of the Church*. According to Taylor, this tradition can be found in many ancient religious writings.
 - “The Chaldeans (Babylonians), according to Plutarch, believed in a struggle between good and evil for the space of 6,000 years; ‘and then Hades is to cease, and men are to be happy, neither wanting food nor making shade.’”
 - “The Tuscans had an opinion which the Persians still hold, that God has appointed twelve thousand years to his works, the first 6,000 were employed in creation, the other six are appointed for the duration of mankind.”
 - “Among the Egyptians, Hermes Trismegistus, originator of Egyptian art, science, magic and religion taught a similar doctrine.”
 - Etruscan cosmology sees twelve millenniums assigned to each one of the twelve signs of the Zodiac. In the first chiliad he created heaven and earth; in the second, the firmament; in the third, the sea, and the waters upon the land; in the fourth, the great lights of heaven—sun, moon, and stars; in the fifth, everything in the air, earth, and water that creeps and flies and runs upon four feet; and in the sixth, man. Six thousand years had thus elapsed before the creation of man, and the human race should endure for six thousand years more.
 - Zoroaster, the ancient Persian philosopher (500-1000 B.C.) taught that there would be 6,000 years of the world's duration, after which in the last times people would be afflicted with much evil. In the end, after a struggle between two supernatural powers, the Sosioch (very similar to the Hebrew word *Mashiach* - Messiah) comes at which time the dead are raised, judgment takes place and the earth is renovated and glorified. (Ehlert, 8-10)
- These ideas can also be found in the writings of the Greek historian Theopompus, the Sibylline Oracles, and Darius king of the Medes.

- Jewish tradition of the six thousand years, followed by the Sabbath millennium, dates at least from the second century B.C., the approximate date of Rabbi Elias, according to Bishop Russell of Scotland. He taught that the world would be “2000 years void of the law; 2000 years under the law; and 2000 years under the Messiah. In the seventh millenary “the earth would be renewed and the righteous dead raised; that these should not again be turned to dust, and that the just then alive should mount up with wings as the eagle. . .” (Ehlert, 10-11)
- Numerous other Rabbis and the *Midrash* contain similar views to the ones described above. Lying on the fringes of orthodox Christian tradition, there are examples of the septa-millenary tradition in the *Epistle of Barnabas* and *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*. Amongst the Ante-Nicene fathers Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Cyprian, Lactantius along with Jerome, Hillary Bishop of Poitiers, and Augustine from the Post-Nicene era all articulate the septa-millenary view to varying degrees. For a complete treatment of Augustine’s view one should consult pages 14-18 of *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism*. (Ehlert, 14-18)

Unsystematized Dispensationalism or Early Dispensational Concepts

- *Justin Martyr (110-165)*—in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr states the following when discussing the subject that God always taught the same righteousness. Earlier in the same work he spoke of the present dispensation and of its gifts and power.
 - “For if one should wish to ask you why, since Enoch, Noah with his sons, and all others in similar circumstances, who neither were circumcised nor kept the Sabbath, pleased God, God demanded by other leaders and by the giving of the law after the lapse of so many generations, that those who lived between the times of Abraham and Moses be justified by circumcision and the other ordinances – to wit, the Sabbath, and sacrifices, and libations, and offerings. . .” (quoted in Ryrie, 68-69)
- *Irenaeus (130-200)*—wrote about the reason there are four gospels. While he did not call these time periods dispensations, he often spoke of the dispensations of God and especially of the Christian dispensation.
 - “. . .and the Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord. For this reason were four principal covenants given to the human race; one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom.” (quoted in Ryrie, 69)
- *Clement of Alexandria (150?-220?)*—clearly distinguishes four patriarchal dispensations in Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. (Ehlert, 26) “Samuel Hanson Coxe (1793-1880) backed up his own sevenfold dispensational scheme by Clements’s fourfold one.” (Ryrie, 69)
- *Pelagius (360?-420?)*—“In his discourse on *Original Sin*, Augustine takes Pelagius and Coelestius to task for “dividing the times” so as to say that “men first lived righteous by

nature, then under the law, thirdly under grace,—by nature meaning all the long time from Adam before the giving of the law.” Augustine then quotes Pelagius as having stated the following:

- “For then, say they, the Creator was known by the guidance of reason; and the rule of living rightly was carried written in the hearts of men, not in the law of the letter, but of nature. But men’s manners became corrupt; and then, they say, when nature now tarnished began to be insufficient, the law was added to it whereby as by a moon the original luster was restored to nature after its original blush was impaired. But after the habit of sinning has too much prevailed among men, and the law was unequal to the task of curing it, Christ came; and the Physician Himself, through His own self, and not through His disciples, brought relief to the malady at its most desperate development.” (quoted in Ehlert, 26-27)
- *Augustine (354-430)*—reflects early dispensational concepts in his writings. “Although his oft-quoted statement, “Distinguish the times, and the Scripture is in harmony with itself,” does not in its context apply to dispensational ideas, he elsewhere makes some applicable statements.” (Ryrie, 69)
 - “The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now. For the change suitable to the present age has been enjoined by God, who knows infinitely better than man what is fitting for every age, and who is, whether he give or add, abolish or curtail, increase or diminish, the unchangeable Governor as He is the unchangeable Creator of mutable things, ordering all events in his Providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, the component parts of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some ineffably wise master of song, and those pass into the eternal contemplation of God who here, though it is a time of faith, not of sight, are acceptably worshipping Him.” (quoted in Ehlert, 28)
 - “If it is now established that that which was for one age rightly ordained may be in another age rightly changed,—the alteration indicating a change in the work, not the plan, of Him who makes the change, the plan being framed by His reasoning faculty, to which unconditioned by succession in time, those things are simultaneously present which cannot be actually done at the same time because the ages succeed each other.” (quoted in Ehlert, 29)

- Continued in Lesson 43

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