**Dispensationalism and the Nones**

**Introduction**

My topic asks this question. Can dispensationalism speak to our time, our current time with observations our evangelical tradition as a whole needs? I am going to have to dig deep through some major underbrush to get us back to this question. So like a captain on an airplane coming on over a loud speaker and saying fasten your seat belts we are flying through some challenging air, I am going to have to work my way to this core question with some serious prolegomena.

Our critics answer no to my question about the value of dispensationalism for God’s mission in the present time. Dispensational deferral to the future neuters the church in the present. Dispensationalists are so focused on the future they do not ask such questions except to note the gospel and Christ are the answer down the road. The result is a series of speculations that have diverted the church from her core mission with results rooted in predictions that have often proven wrong. The background to this broad critical conclusion either characterizes our position as you can’t help people on a sinking Titanic (something I have heard dispensationalists say over the years), or we preach a church that escapes this world in a rapture as our major hope and by doing so robs the church of a theology of suffering in a world that persecutes believers (something Jesus said we would experience), or we are so focused on the future that we give little or no energy to the world in which we live, failing to focus on a question like how can the church serve in the world not only presenting verbally the gospel but demonstrating concretely the heart of God for people outside the church by caring about things that show God’s love for people and challenging those things rooted in sin that cause people to abuse one another in ways that also is offensive to God. Asked baldly, do dispensationalists care about the present with anything to offer that might help the case for the gospel to those outside the church, including those who do not even give a thought about God? Do we have something to offer the religious none?

**How the Critiques Take Advantage of Our Internal Conversations and Difference**

The Hummel example: Hummel largely bypasses Progressive Dispensationalism because other dispensationalists question whether it is dispensationalism at all. It gave him a major excuse not to deal with what we are arguing is a biblical take on the administrative arrangements that make sense out of Scripture. This questioning from within in that more radical form of claiming PD is a denial of dispensationalism does not help our tradition at all. So let me try one more defense of how Progressive Dispensationalism fits within the tradition and why recognizing such helps the movement as a whole by negating a major charge against our entire tradition.

**On Dispensationalism**

All dispensational views are rooted in a recognition of the different administrative structures that drive the scriptural narrative. THAT is what makes them dispensational. Whether there are dispensations is not debated among dispensationalists. Something else other than being or not being dispensationalism drives the differences within dispensationalism.

The difference is not about the fact there are different administrative structures with Israel having a continuing role. All views hold this. The difference is in how the dispensations are seen and what gets emphasized in that discussion. The difference is in how those structures are seen (heavenly vs earthly originally) with a “parenthesis” in the plan for Israel (both original and revised) and how they relate to each other (there is a break in the kingdom program for original and revised dispensationalism as focus on Israel is the key lens), progressives see a connection and advance on one program and one story as each dispensation connects, builds, and advance toward consummation in the unfolding of the promise in history (as Genesis 12:3 sees hope for the world through the seed as a part of the original promise, so the key lens from the beginning of the promise is on how all relate to the promise as it unfolds). For progressives we do not have a parenthesis but the “appearance of one” that fails to see when the consummation’s presentation gets split into two comings, we are not getting plan B but the plan as it always was yet all of it, including what is “inbetween” as a part of what God was always doing for the world. Develop the “appearance but not real” idea).

This leads into the internal debate about the covenants and already/not yet. In original dispensationalism only the Abrahamic covenant was seen as inaugurated as a completion of promise tied to ultimate deliverance with Jesus’ coming. Of course, the very establishment of Israel as a people was an initial realization of elements of the Abrahamic promise. That was the key point of the Pentateuch. For the original expression of dispensationalism, only the Abrahamic covenant had a realization tied to Jesus’ first coming. For this view and for later revised dispensationalism, the Davidic Covenant awaited the earthly kingdom in Israel in the promised millennium (because Israel was THE lens) and the new was also for Israel and Judea (per Jer. 31 as Israel was THE lens). This led into a discussion of whether there were two new covenants, despite the argument of the book of Hebrews that talked about Jer. 31 in light of Jesus’ first coming. Revised then eventually said after some give and take over the two covenant option, yes, the New Covenant is initially realized, a break with older dispensationalism. As a result, the Davidic covenant alone remained orphaned in the unfolding of the plan. Progressives (at least many of them) came along and said the Davidic was inaugurated as well, because some of what is promised in the New Covenant the promised Messiah Jesus HAS executed. These are in the spiritual emphases, not in a spiritualize way but in real redemptive activity as Craig’s presentation has highlighted. Jesus’ activity in relationship to the covenants structures is not strictly one of waiting and being passive until the consummation comes and a saved Israel is again active in the program. Rather it is a mediated form of blessing that the Abrahamic Covenant had already alluded to in speaking of blessing to the world through a seed. In a sense this line continued through Solomon (1 Kings 8:15-20) and the dynasty, but it was always looking or more than they offered and provided. This “more” begins to be supplied when Jesus comes and the link is affirmed by Gabriel, Mary, and Zechariah when John and Jesus are born (see esp. Luke 1:31-33, 54-55, 68-79, where David and Abraham get specific mention). The ultimate goal is total shalom which only come with the full rule that arrives with the millennium and the consummation to follow as Jesus mediates the covenant realization in stages running from his first coming to the new heavens and new earth. What by the end of the Hebrew Scripture was seen as what remained of the promise now starts to be realized but in more elevated progressive stages. So why does this inclusion of the covenants, its progressive sequencing, and already/not yet matter today?

**Why Now Not Yet Matters**

Like Salvation, so Eschatology and Promise

Isa 53 Tells Me So. Isaiah is about a deliverance that looks at shalom in all the world (Isa 2:1-4 =19:23-25; i.e., the progressive lens on all the world, not just Israel, rooted in the original Abrahamic promise and its theme of mediation)

Luke 11:20 and 17:20-21 matter. John 6:44-45; So do Acts 2:30-38 and Col. 1:14.

God can expand the promise to include others. That intention is set up from the start. What matters here is that the original recipient does not get lost in that expansive inclusion (as all dispensationalists have contended-Israel remains in view in the program). This is how to engage other covenant traditions whose lens becomes the church in Christ is all that matters for the kingdom (and that inclusion of Gentiles was built into the promise from the start- Israel, world and seed). What those other traditions miss and what makes them not dispensational is that the church becomes misread as the decisive permanent structure. And the whole, including the church and the millennium, are seen as distinct people groups when in fact the kingdom program is not about a distinct people group but rather a trans-national grouping layered on top of people groups and incorporating them into the kingdom ‘s fresh structure that seeks to form a different perspective on both the difference and unity within humanity at a corporate level. In addition, the millennium with Christ visibly present operating in the world to come is a new structure different from his physical absence now in the church. Israel is not the church is not the millennium is how to think about this. The last two entities both do have Christ at the hub but in structurally distinctive ways that makes the kingdom in its two stages somewhat distinct from the church, even as the kingdom program incorporates the church into the kingdom program. In other words, the kingdom is bigger than the church when thought through dispensationally. The church is the spiritual communion of kingdom peoples, with an emphasis on the unity of the peoples formed in Christ. The shared nature of this spiritual union across the current era and the one to come builds a progressive realization into the sequence and connects this era to the next. But Christ is not present in the same way he will be present in the millennium, a dispensational difference. And yet the tribulation and millennium involve peoples in Christ, just as it does now, moving toward ultimate shalom and glorification, a process that started when God called Abraham and accelerated to a new level when Christ came and that goes up yet another level when he returns. Full realization arrives when final judgment comes at the end of the millennium with evil totally and permanently eliminated and everything is made eternally new in what follows the millennium. These nuances need to be a central part of our theology. In fact, we could argue we should call our approach kingdom theology, as the unified kingdom program is being realized in its distinct, progressive and connected stages.

With all that as underbrush and background I can now turn to my core question by noting a set of outcomes Progressive Dispensationalism gives to us that shows the critique of not caring about the present just is not so for this particular expression of dispensationalism. PD not only addresses that question but offers some things about its pursuit that serve the gospel and the church’s hope and mission well.

The ethical implications of this difference in reading and appreciating the value of already/not yet for the present are immense. There is still a need to develop our understanding of the gospel-prophets link and its dispensational character as they provide an ethical core for all of these eras of realization, including the present. In this reading the prophets and gospels come ethically to be in play throughout the eras both present and future. The result is a remedy for an Achilles heel of older forms of dispensationalism, where debating things like does the Sermon on the Mount apply to today directly or not goes away and Jesus’ teaching about discipleship is not segmented in a way that has current believers unconcerned for what he taught about how we are to be his followers or how we should love our neighbors (part of the Great Commandment) regardless of the dispensation we find ourselves in. Not only is the program of God unified but so are kingdom ethics. As a result this unifying biblical ethic rooted in Jesus and the prophets can set up our testimony to the world about the gospel. The implication of this reestablished linkage is huge for all of evangelical theology, regardless of sub-tradition. It is a way dispensationalism can contribute to biblically rooted theology and serve the church.

**Means Dispensationalism Has Something to Say about the Now and It Is Distinctive**

If the critiques I hear from outside of Dispensationalism are true, that is, concern for our world in the present really does not exist… then I should not have my job in cultural engagement at DTS! My job in engagement is driven by this premise: in the midst of a fallen world and in service to the gospel, we are to show there is a better way that shows the heart of God for people.

I am arguing that there is a biblical and dispensational take on Jesus’ ethics as shown in the prophets, which he often cites, and in the gospels. We need to formulate more fully a biblical theology of reconciliation and especially of restoration. Reconciliation becomes a mammoth topic for reflection. Public space and witness for the gospel is recovered from the black hole it has been for many believers in since the fundamentalist-modernist controversy. Let me explain using Eph 2 and the imagery of reconciliation as between Jew and Gentile as a model for all reconciliation. Explain the new man in Christ. Start with Eph 2:8-9, then 2:10, then 2:11-22.….one spiritual network of people who themselves are made up of peoples not as a replacement for nations or ethnicities but weaving them together in a fresh and different way. One people yet still in a sense Jew and Gentile, preserved for how God made them when they were created and yet redeemed into a fresh network that transcends nations or ethnicities.

All of this has implications for the gospel as does the idea of restoration, a restoration that causes the gospel to look back at Genesis 1 as the hub reference point for the gospel instead of Genesis 3 alone. Only a rootage in Genesis 1 can take us back to an articulation of the gospel that helps with religious nones, who lack the categories to appreciate what the gospel offers them without telling the story not just of redemption but restoration. For redemption alone is not the goal of the gospel as that goal also includes restoration. Restoration assumes an origin that one has to reconnect with and renew. That tis part of what being born again and renewed to new life is designed to do. By going back to Genesis 1 (and by extension to Genesis 10 where nations emerge as part of the created order) we also go forward. Just as by going forward (to the worship of the Lamb by many tribes and nations in Revelation) we also come back to the present by showing as a believing community where we are headed by how we treat people from those spaces.

**The Task Tied to the Nones: It is about Location and Genesis 1**

The Four Questions and Restoration of Peoples with the Bible’s Core Ethic. These four questions or positions are assumed underneath the gospel for that message to make sense but we cannot assume these as given in our engagement with 30% of the American population that now self identifies as nones. And the impact of their presence will only grow as their children will lack biblical awareness that many of the 30% possess. Here are these four assumptions that have to be in place for the gospel to make sense:

1. Is there one God?
2. What should we make of revelation in a Bible? Put crassly, what does a none hear when you say God says or the Bible says? In short,

nothing.

1. Do you realize what a leap it is to say Jesus is THE Son of God? The absolute uniqueness of the Son out of all the humans who have ever existed is a challenge in the theologically none world. How do we show who he is?
2. Do you appreciate that nones do not recognize the truth that you are accountable to God whether you recognize it or not and yet it is a gospel given? How do we get there with them?

How do we present the foreign language of the gospel in a way that new categories can be created for people who do not have those categories now? A key way in is how we engage in public space, showing the outreach of God. An element of this is presenting a God who seeks shalom and gives us a oneness of formerly estranged peoples through the gospel and yet with a preservation of how we were created that always shows the reconciliation. That reconciliation has to be relational and be seen in order to be appreciated by those outside the church. That relational dimension cannot be seen unless the church walks into public space in a way that seeks reconciliation in a way that unifies all of this. …. It is why the Sermon on the Mount begins with this beatitude, Blessed are the peacemakers, etc. Those outside the church, including the nones, are to see our light and glorify God.

Ultimately reconciliation is about God and us not just God and me. Reconciliation is an anti-tribal take on a tribal world. That approach does not destroy the tribes to create another tribe, but relates the tribes in a healthy way to one another and Christ than makes them more than a mere tribe, but a people also in touch with how God made all of them from the start, a restoration coming through reconciliation.

This leads into the offer of a flourishing life in the ways of God where people are respected for how God made them within the diversity that emerged in humanity and with an ability to cooperate and collaborate with one another in ways that reflect mutual respect and appreciation for one another.

This preserves respect for cross cultural differences that are not about theological departure. It invites an attitude that seeks to get to know one another better. It avoids seeing the world as a zero sum game where the only way my tribe wins is if your tribe loses. No, the reconciliation and restoration reconnects us to each other in ways that say we need one another.

This eschatology recalls creation and moves us toward a restoration rooted in a location of who we are and will be in the core creator-creature relationship that drives it. In humans we have both a likeness that ties us all to God as being made in his image and distinctiveness of the different shades we were born with. Both those elements play into how reconciliation is seen as restorative act of God taking us back to him AND to each other now and forever. So the church lives out within the kingdom and through its current, already expression of the church the original stewardship we received in Genesis 1 to collaborate together and manage our creation well together. It also previews what is to come later in both the millennium and beyond. What we will be is what we are to strive to be now in our communities as a testimony to what God is doing and a preview of what God will do.

And the means of witness is helping people see categories like these that they currently do not possess. That bridge is built relationally and in SHOWING God’s care by how we walk and live in these areas with a heart of God engagement in public space. This is a comprehensive ministry to those outside the church who are the goal of the Great Commission and not the enemy to be overrun. I am arguing in part that dispensationalism has much to offer today for the sake of the gospel, not just for biblical understanding but for what the Bible drives us to, our mission in the world and why we were created to begin with in the image of God to steward and collaborate so that the creation functions well, so that it hums. We are made in the image of God to image God. In sum, dispensationalism can serve the church at large by showing the heart of God. Because we appreciate what the future will bring, we visibly witness to that hope now by how our community functions not just in our community space but in public space, showing how we love well in a fallen world with how we serve that world. Whatever the world does with that effort, our calling is to be faithful in showing the ways of God. We illustrate Christ’s value for a life that is designed by God to be abundant and flourishing. In the unique way dispensationalism sees the program of God in reconciliation and restoration and in the engaged way it helps the church testify to that hope in word and deed, hopefully it can make something of lasting value to those nones who think there is nothing. By doing so dispensationalism operates in the center of the heartbeat of God. By doing so, dispensationalism reflects a tradition rooted in the current and eternal mission of God’s kingdom program. That makes it kingdom theology *par excellance*.