

A Dispensational View of Theological Order: Why It Offends Covenant Theologians

by Charles A. Clough

In a previous article¹ I noted that dispensationalism grew out of a nineteenth century situation. From the late 1800s until the present day, it has been a major point of contention inside Reformed circles with covenant theologians. Why do these two theologies that otherwise agree on the great body of orthodox christology and soteriology, disagree so vigorously in ecclesiology and eschatology?²

In my previous article I noted a pattern in previous great theological debates during past Church history. "Both specific Scriptural texts and basic organizing 'models' (or 'presuppositions' or 'preunderstandings')"³ played vital roles. This latest debate appears to be no different.

EMERGING AWARENESS OF ROOT DIFFERENCES

Both covenant and dispensational theologians after many decades of trying to debate primarily over specific texts, increasingly are probing for the source of conflict at the presuppositional level also.

Even the polemical book by John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991) insists that there is a fundamental logical structure in dispensationalism that, he thinks, *necessarily* leads to multiple ways of salvation *regardless* of whether or not individual teachers actually teach that view (pp. 149-169). An earlier book by a more gracious covenant theologian Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Zondervan, 1987) also pointed out the dominating role of presuppositions. His fifth chapter entitled "The Near Impossibility of Simple Refutations" noted: "A system that is carefully and thoroughly elaborated, whether right or wrong, will almost certainly include answers to standard objections; and different parts of the system 'come to the aid' of any part that is challenged" (p 52). (Poythress was not thereby denying that his covenant theology had its own presuppositions.)

Advocates of dispensationalism agree that presuppositions play a vital role but increasingly disagree over what those presuppositions are. Dallas Seminary professor Craig Blasing found fault with Charles Ryrie's triadic *sina qua non* (doxological purpose of God, literal hermeneutics, the Israel-Church distinction) but didn't offer a replacement.⁴

Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary prof David Turner discussed the literal hermeneutic issue that traditionally is seen as a defining difference between covenant theology and dispensationalism. He noted, however, that its actual use in specific textual situations was determined by the presuppositions of the exegete, not by an arbitrarily chosen hermeneutical system.⁵

So we see an emerging awareness that dispensational and covenant theologies differ because of deep rooted presuppositions. The trick is to define where they are and what they are. In the following sections I will attempt to contrast the "classical" forms of each system to discover their different senses of theological order.⁶

THEOLOGICAL ORDER

Let's look how a Bible student might set the "data" of special revelation in some systematic order. First, imagine the history of the created universe as a series of states

denoted by "S_i" where "i" goes from "0" (origin in Gen. 1:1) to "T" (terminal state in Rev. 21-22). S₀, S₁, , S_T

Then the following five propositions can be defended:

1. A predetermined terminal state, S_T, will one day come into existence and be experienced.
2. God's sovereignty moves history from S₀ to S_T "after the counsel of His own will" (Eph 1:11).
3. Therefore, S_T expresses the most complete revelation of the ultimate will of God for mortal existence.
4. Therefore, all preceding states, S₀, . . . , S_{T-1}, express less complete revelation of God's will.
5. Therefore, S_T is the vantage point from which to interpret the historical meaning of any single one or group of the antecedent states, S₀, . . . , S_{T-1}.

This set of propositions provides the rationale for doxology at the end of mortal history. I'll refer to this sort of thinking at history's end as "retrospective interpretation." By it historical revelation may be fully interpreted (within the finite limits of the creature).

A second set of propositions may be added to the first set. Because of the Creator-creature distinction, we have:

6. God is eternal and immutable.
7. Therefore, the plan of God for S_T existed in the mind of God "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4), *viz.*, S₀.

Propositions 1-7 outline a way of setting in order Scriptural revelation. I will use them as a field on which to compare classical covenant theology with classical dispensationalism.

THE STRUCTURE OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

Covenant theologians *love* the covenant form of structure. In the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) God is said to have made two covenants with mankind. The first covenant was "of works" and promised life if Adam obeyed (VII, 2). The second was the "covenant of grace" which "offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ", promised to the elect "his Holy Spirit to make them willing and able to believe", and "was differently administered" in past ages by various means "which were for that time sufficient and efficacious" (VII, 3-5).

After Westminster, Reformed theologians developed the covenant form further. Charles Hodge, for example, in his 1872 systematic theology wrote of the "*eternal* covenant of grace."⁷ This enlargement of Westminster's second covenant virtually equated theological order with the structure of the covenant of grace. Followers of this tradition take offense at dispensationalism because they view it as destructive of the unity of the Bible, which for them has essentially become the unity of the eternal covenant of grace.

Let's map their position onto the seven propositions listed above for analysis. Since the terminal stage, S_T, hasn't come into existence yet, everyone is limited to the prophetic data in Scripture as the only means of knowing about it. Covenant

theologians are assured, however, that the covenant of grace reveals the essence of this terminal state. The covenant of grace, they believe, has been so thoroughly revealed in the New Testament exposition of the New Covenant that we can rest assured we now have the essential form of the end state of God's plan. So, in place of S_T we may substitute the covenant characterization of it that we denote by c_T . The lower case "c" reminds us that the covenant form depicts only *part* of S_T .

The covenant form now completely dominates all five propositions of retrospective interpretation:

1. The predetermined terminal state is essentially characterized by the covenant of grace, c_T .
2. God's sovereignty moves history from S_0 to the fulfillment of the covenant of grace "after the counsel of His own will" (Eph 2:11).
3. Therefore, c_T expresses the most complete revelation of the ultimate will of God for mortal existence.
4. Therefore, all preceding states, S_0, \dots, S_{T-1} express less complete revelation of God's will.
5. Therefore, c_T is the vantage point from which to interpret the historical meaning of any single one or group of antecedent states, S_0, \dots, S_{T-1} .

THE REDUCTIONIST PROBLEM AND HERMENEUTICS

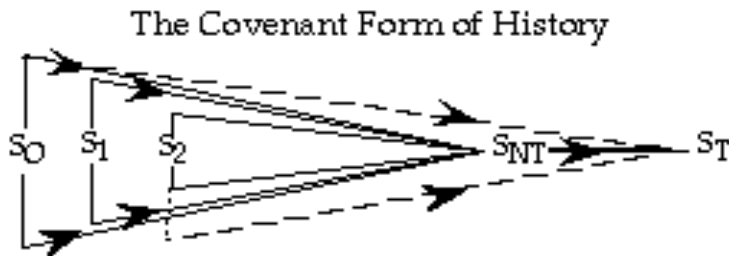
Let's look further at logical implications of making c_T a stand-in for S_T . We recall that it arose, not from S_T , but from an antecedent state of creation history—from the New Testament stage. It is the covenant "behind" the New Covenant revealed by Jesus and the apostles. If we denote the New Testament stage by S_{NT} , then we have: $S_0, \dots, S_{NT}, \dots, S_T$. By Proposition 4, S_{NT} expresses revelation less complete than S_T . How can something arising out of the NT stage of revelation, like c_T , be used as a stand-in for the supreme vantage point of retrospection at the end of mortal history? In my terms, how does it warrant the premature start of retrospective interpretation?

And make no mistake about it. The covenant of grace *does* come out of reflection upon the New Testament and *therefore is limited by the boundaries of New Testament revelation*. Here's an example of one such limitation. Social and political policy revelation is nearly all located in the Old Testament and almost completely intertwined with the nation Israel. What, then, is God's will for His covenant *Gentile* people regarding their earthly citizenship, especially in a participatory democracy? Trying to answer this question has led to the theonomy debate of recent years.⁸ Proposed solutions range from extending Mosaic policies as covenantally binding in all national situations to extracting from the Old Testament general "equity" or "wisdom" principles for creative, contemporary application.

Regardless of the attempted solution, the very debate shows the widespread agreement that New Testament revelation lacks social and political policy revelation directly from our risen Lord and His apostles. One must, therefore, think of the possibility that for some reason the New Covenant may not yet be fully revealed in S_{NT} .

Of course, we have come to what others have concluded about covenant theology: it suffers from a reductionism. It tries to look at all history, including Old Testament history, from the fleeting moment of New Testament history. It *has to* ignore the

possibility that there could be Old Testament themes prior to S_{NT} that have their fulfillment in the future—fulfillments lying within the horizon of S_T but not even within the scope of the S_{NT} . Let's picture matters in this fashion:



All revelatory themes (solid lines) must pass through S_{NT} . No themes can "skip" S_{NT} (dashed line). These restrictions on history, I believe, are *implicit* in theology that centers on the eternal covenant of grace concept.

Out from this presupposition come forces that shape hermeneutics. A covenant theologian doing exegesis will select a literal *or* metaphorical approach so as to assert the "vantage point" of c_T . For example, he takes as a "given" that the pattern of New Testament uses of the Old Testament is exhaustive—no other usage schemes are possible. He also believes that the New Testament emphases in Old Testament theme selection are normative for all history.

Matters are a bit more complex, therefore, than simply distinguishing covenant hermeneutics from dispensational hermeneutics as being less "literal". They may be so, *or may not*, but one thing will always be true: the covenant hermeneutic is a literary expression of a distinct presuppositional concept of theological order in history. Any revelatory theme found in a specific text, in this view, will be interpreted to fit into the state of affairs in S_{NT} whether a literal, typological, or allegorical meaning is assigned. A fundamental reductionism thus shapes covenant hermeneutics.

THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE PROBLEM AND PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Besides reductionist-caused hermeneutic effects, the covenant view of theological order leads into another problem area--the significance of history. Let's consider the span of history from New Testament times until the end of mortal history:

S_{NT+1}, \dots, S_T

Since S_T is already characterized by c_T as known from S_{NT} , it follows that this post-New Testament historic period cannot be expected to add significant content to S_T (*e.g.*, new themes or climaxes to as yet unresolved Old Testament themes). If it could, then the all-encompassing nature of c_T would be undermined. Post-New Testament history is an era that in this view has lost any fundamental significance.

But the matter goes further. Because c_T has been substituted for S_T , our supreme vantage point—which was to have been an experienced state at the termination of mortal history—has been turned into an intellectual abstraction. Premature retrospective interpretation of present history has already begun in terms of this abstraction. Propositions 6 and 7 above have become, under the covenant concept:

6. God is eternal and immutable which is revealed in His administration of cT.
7. Therefore the plan of God, cT, existed in the mind of God "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4).

The cT-for-ST substitution has made substantial alterations in these propositions. Proposition 6 has become much narrower. God's eternal immutability has become so identified with the *final* features contained in cT that His historic interaction with man *leading up to that point* seems peripheral. Actions like His "negative repentance" over creating man in the days of Noah (Gen. 6:7); His "positive repentance" after Moses' intercessory prayer (Exod. 32:14); and His readiness to send twelve legions of angels to rescue Jesus from Gethsemene (Matt. 26:53-54), even the preaching of the gospel to those who will never believe (the non-elect) seem, in this view, beside the point.

Interestingly, this consequence was clearly seen at Westminster Seminary by Cornelius Van Til. He warned some of his fellow Reformed thinkers about their abstract logic in treating historical progress in God's works. Concerning the example of His gradual differentiation of the elect and non-elect, he wrote:

We may, like the impatient disciples, anticipate the course of history and deal with men as though they already were that which by God's eternal decree they one day will be. Yet God bids us bide our time. . . . We are to think of non-believers as members of the mass of humankind in which the process of differentiation has not yet been completed. It is not to the righteous and to the unrighteous as fully differentiated that God gives His rain and sunshine. . . .⁹

Van Til recognized that there was significance to the progressive unfolding of God's plan in history ("the process of differentiation"). Negation of this significance, he points out, comes not from the high Reformed view of God's sovereignty but from abstract, non-Christian logic.

I would add the proposal that the gateway through which much of such corrupt logic enters is the single, abstract covenant model of theological order.

Proposition 7 is now made to assert that God's infinite plan is virtually identical with man's statement of cT. The intellectual abstraction constitutes a "higher" system of theological order than the Scripture itself. From here it is but a short step into thorough-going idealistic, anti-historical rationalism like that of Reformed philosopher Gordon Clark.

Clark so identified God's and man's reasoning that he virtually denied that sensory (and therefore historical) experience belonged to "truth." Recognizing his basic error of erasing the Creator-creature distinction in epistemology, Van Til fought a bitter debate within the Orthodox Presbyterian Church against Gordon Clark during the 1940s.¹⁰

Covenant theology, therefore, has a second structural problem. Its abstract one-covenant system of theological order, eternalized, relegates history with its progressive revelation to the periphery of serious theological vision. Theological order is thus treated separately from historical order. In so doing, we shall shortly discover, it has retarded efforts to solve a very serious post-Reformation crisis over the relation of the Bible to history. Covenant theology as a result has been very slow to offer a comprehensive answer to unbelief of the modern type.

To sum up: covenant theology's presupposition of theological order requires a certain kind of hermeneutic (due to its reductionism) and isolates theological order from historical development (due to its rationalistic tendencies). Dispensationalism, we shall see, differs fundamentally on both issues.

THE CALVINIST WOMB OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Both sides in the present covenant-dispensational debate seem to be avoiding the Calvinistic origins of dispensational theology. For example, Dispensationalist Blaising questions the legitimacy of its Reformed heritage.¹¹ The Reformed sponsor of a recent "social concerns" conference attended by the *Biblical Perspectives* editor and myself had to be asked to change his seating labels which distinguished the covenant speakers as "Reformed" from our group as "Dispensational".

That dispensationalism came out of the womb of Calvinism has been shown in a recent study of fundamentalism by George Marsden. Its first thorough-going systematizer, John Nelson Darby, according to Marsden, was "an unrelenting Calvinist". In America the growing movement "had strong Calvinist ties" and followed the Puritan tradition of striving for precision in Bible interpretation.¹² Thus the question is: what new presupposition arose *inside Calvinist thought* that led to the formulation of dispensationalism?

Marsden's study proved that dispensationalism was a major presuppositional or paradigmatic shift because it provided "a new historical scheme", "anti-humanist and anti-developmental", that was "a negative parallel to secular concepts of progress" and "opposed the liberal trends at almost every point."¹³ It reversed liberal attempts to explain biblical faith in terms of historical development by explaining historical development in terms of biblical faith.

THE SCOPE OF PREDISPENSATIONAL FRUSTRATIONS

Such paradigmatic shifts usually occur only after a long series of failures with using a previous presupposition (or paradigm or model). Therefore, I would like to go beyond Marsden and identify a few examples of the "long series of failures" that frustrated predispensational Calvinist thought. Before identifying them, however, I need to point out why this post-Reformation crisis differs from similar crises in earlier Church history.

The two major, earlier Church crises were the christological debates (leading to Chalcedon) and the soteriological debates (leading to the Reformation). Being debates about "heavenly things", these earlier crises necessarily occurred almost exclusively within the area of special revelation and involved primarily only theologians. This is not to say there weren't historical or "earthly" (political and ecclesiastical) after-effects, but the debates themselves centered on "heavenly things"—matters such as the very Throne of God and the awful work accomplished within the darkness of Golgotha. The panorama of history from creation to judgment was not a major player.

An important result of the Reformation, however, would forever change the scope of all subsequent such debates. With the *person* of Christ more clearly understood (*via* the Trinity model) and *his saving work* (*via* the Atonement and Legal/Justification models), redeemed mankind now had a clear grasp of reconciliation with the Creator of the all things. Freed from preoccupation with alleviating His wrath, redeemed Adam could return to the matter of "earthly things"—seeking dominion over the works of His hands. This Reformation "open door" revolutionized Christian attitudes toward the sciences and arts.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that the next crisis in Church history would involve the Church's relationship to earthly things as well as to heavenly things. This time around not only would theologians be involved but specialists from other fields as well. The scope would necessarily expand to encompass the sciences and arts. It follows, then, that the "long series of failures" in predispensational Calvinist thought occurred in the matters where redeemed Adam was trying to "name" correctly the earthly things of God's creation.

To grasp what was happening, we need to visualize the two different categories of revelation: special and general. *Special revelation* since the last apostle died consists of the Bible. *General revelation* consists of man and nature. These two "books of God" confront believing man with major questions. First, how do they relate one to the other? (Let's call this question, "Q#1") On one hand, to understand the Bible we need to know things from general revelation such as sheep, water, trees, and our history. On the other hand, to understand ourselves and our world correctly we need to know things from special revelation such as God's imperatives and crucial historical specifics such as origins, destiny, and His "mighty works" in earthly history.¹⁴

Figure One shows the possible relationships of these two books to each other in terms of a Venn diagram. The Bible is divided into two parts--the "religious" imperatives ("r") and the historical specifics ("h"). Relationship "A" pictures total "intersection" (total identity, inerrancy) between biblical facts and history. Relationship "B" pictures partial intersection where the imperatives are valid truth to be obeyed but the historical specifics are not considered to correspond to "real" history (a neo-orthodox type of situation). "C" pictures total separation wherein the Bible becomes a quaint religious story book whose imperatives, as well as historical details, are ignored. "A", "B", and "C" constitute the three possible answers to Q#1.

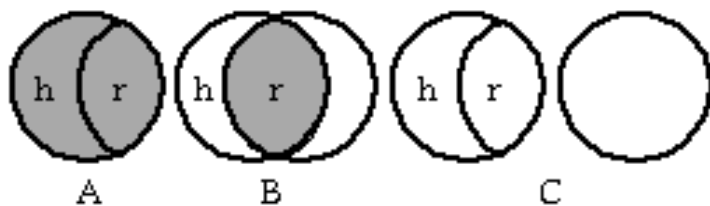


FIGURE 1.--Three possible relationships between the Bible (consisting of religious imperatives, "r", and historical specifics, "h") and the "book" of nature (general revelation).

Closely related to Q#1 is a second one: how are these books properly read and interpreted? (Call this question "Q#2") Are they really open to any reader with an "objective" mind or does total depravity affect the interpretative process in *both* books?

Because post-Reformation man sought dominion in the sciences and arts, he had to give answers to Q#1 and Q#2; he couldn't interpret his Bible or his experiments or observations without doing so. In particular, the kind of earthly things that most seriously demanded these answers were in the area of historical studies. During the three centuries between the Reformation and Darby, he had to learn "the hard way" about how crucial these answers were. I will now give two examples of "failure series", both in historical areas that had direct impact on the Bible's authority.

PREDISPENSATIONAL FRUSTRATIONS IN THE SCIENCES

It is now well known that for 150 years prior to Darby post-Reformation teachers were constructing comprehensive schemes of biblical history based upon a sequence of distinct eras or ages. Several of these schemes were *remarkably* similar to that of later classic dispensationalism. Three such "protodispensational" systems are described by Ryrie--those by Jonathan Edwards (1639-1716), Pierre Poiret (1646-1719), and Isaac Watts (1674-1748).¹⁵ It is also now known that the Church-Israel distinction was already being talked about at Trinity College, Dublin where Darby attended as a student.¹⁶ These were all products of theological interests.

Less known is the struggle going on during these same 150 years in the new science of *historical geology*. Table One shows what happened.¹⁷ The left column lists the "Flood Geologists" who founded the science. To Q#1 these men gave answer "A" of Fig. 1. Specific biblical reports of past *and future* geological events established the framework for "reading" the strata of nature (general revelation). Fossils, they showed, were not "in situ" productions as medieval Aristotelians believed; they were evidence of the Noahic Flood.

The middle column of Table One lists the "Catastrophists". Their position can be illustrated by the intellectual shift of the English clergyman and naturalist Thomas Burnet (1635?-1715) from Flood Geology to Catastrophism.

On the surface his work, *Sacred History of the Earth* (1681), seemed orthodox. He divided earth history into three stages based upon II Peter 3:5-7: Creation to Deluge (Antediluvian Age); Deluge to Conflagration (Present Age); and Conflagration to Eternity (Millennium). Below the surface, however, he made a mistake that was to cost him his victory--a mistake which has been repeated hundreds of times since. He adopted the idea of the absolute uniformity of processes inside nature, and he claimed that what appeared miraculous in the biblical account could be explained by science as products of naturalistic processes.

Predictably his critics showed that known present processes could not explain events like a global flood recorded in the Bible. Faced with the choice between biblical [historical] evidence and naturalistic type evidence, Burnet surrendered biblical authority, making visible his previously hidden humanistic presuppositions. By 1691, in his *Archeologia Philosophicae*, he explicitly abandoned biblical authority by 'reinterpreting' Genesis allegorically.¹⁸

Catastrophists following Burnet kept reducing the scale of catastrophes and increasing the age of the earth. They were having serious problems with Q#1. If they were to move in the direction of answer "B", they would explicitly falsify the Bible's historical truth that was something few in their generation were prepared to do. If they held to answer "A", they had to confront Q#2: how could the Biblical record of a short Adamic genealogy and a world-wide flood be "reinterpreted" in an opposite sense?

The right column lists the "Uniformitarians". Even more than the catastrophists they were in trouble with both Q#1 and Q#2. In their zeal to anchor themselves to a clearly naturalistic footing, not only did they have to posit the uniformity of natural law (such as heat transfer, energy conservation) but also the uniformity of systems or arrangements of those laws that operate within what are called "boundary conditions" (such as the current atmospheric circulation operates between its boundaries of outer

space and the planetary surface). To get firm intellectual dominion, they committed themselves to a uniformitarian "hermeneutic" with which to read the book of nature.

The development of historical geology, therefore, shows a series of failures in trying to "name" nature and at the same time trying to retain answer "A" to Q#1. The theologians working only with the Bible might have made up their biblical "histories", but their scientific brethren had the responsibility of linking the Bible and nature. Classical Calvinism attempted to solve the frustration by extending accommodation trends found in Calvin's writings.¹⁹ The idea here was to retreat from historical details of the text to avoid what was considered "unnecessary" conflict with historical science. This accommodation, however, only promoted the drift to answer "B" and eventually set the stage for nineteenth century higher criticism with its answer "C".

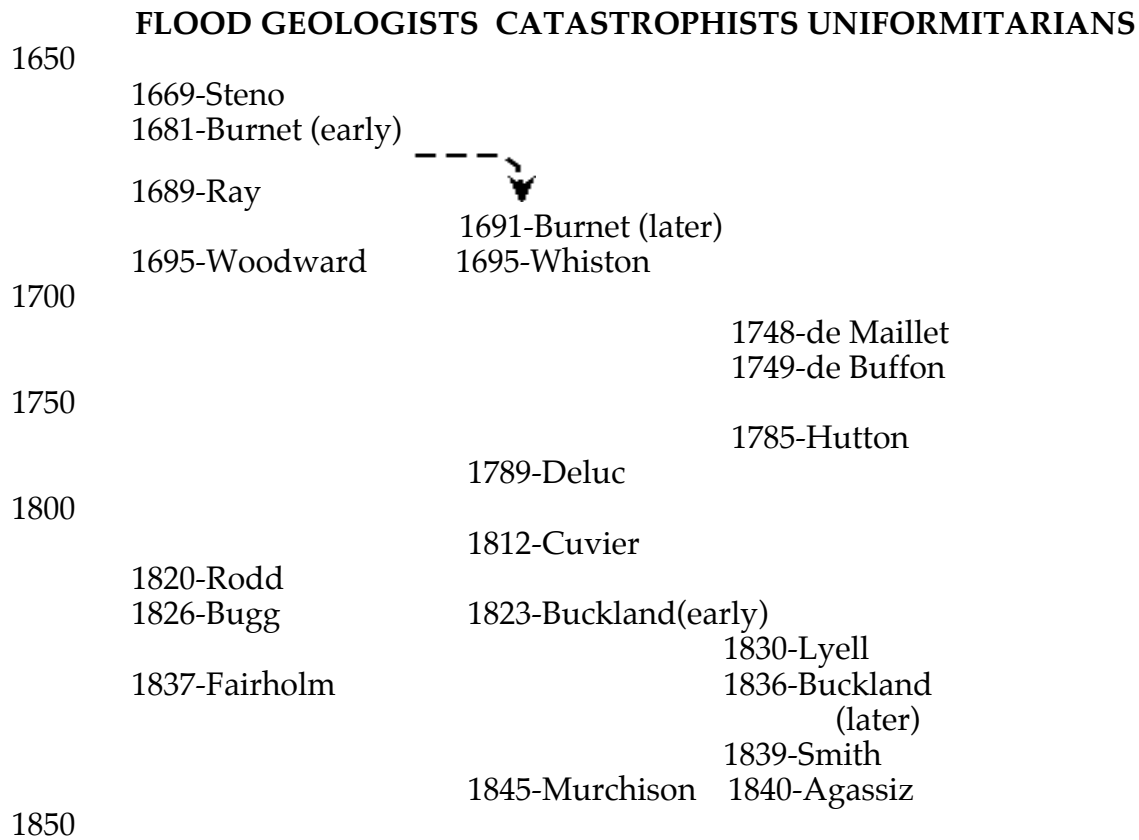


CHART ONE. Some representative names with dates of their most relevant work for each of the three schools of geological interpretation.

PREDISPENSATIONAL FRUSTRATIONS IN THE ARTS

A second example of a series of failures in post-Reformation thought, this one in the arts, was the "euhemerist" movement. Euhemerism is the belief of certain Christian historiographers between 1650 and 1800 that pagan gods were really mythological memories of post-Noahic patriarchs. Euhemerist scholars include both Frenchmen (Samuel Bochart and Paul Pezron) and Englishmen (Andrew Tooke and Jacob Bryant). (Many of us are familiar with a later writer in this tradition, Alexander Hislop.)

Whereas the Flood Geologists had begun to assemble a coherent history of the earth,

the euhemerists were trying to compose a coherent history of the origin of civilization. Like the Flood Geologists, they also believed in the total intersection of special and general revelation (answer "A"). Genesis 9-11, they believed, provided keys to interpret folklore and mute relics of ancient history.

Unfortunately they, too, met with eventual defeat. Their "monogenetic" concept of civilization's origin out of the single family of Noah was overwhelmed by early anthropological schemes that refused to accept the relevancy of biblical data (answer "B" to Q#1). Pilkey, who has studied intensively this movement for over twenty-five years, writes:

The failure of Bryant, Faber, and others to develop a satisfactory Noahic science around 1800 was one of the greatest disappointments of Protestant history and one of the first hints that Protestantism, like Catholicism, had 'come short of the glory of God'. . . .The collapse of many Protestant leaders into Liberal infidelity was inexcusable but followed logically from one of the greatest scientific failures of modern times.²⁰

THE STRUCTURE OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

By the nineteenth century, therefore, a major new Church crisis had begun. Redeemed Adam had obediently started to seek dominion through the sciences and arts only to find that God's two books apparently were irreconcilable in their depictions of history. *Theologically*, he was bound to answer "A" because the faithfulness of God can only be shown where general and special revelation intersect in historical detail. Without trust in God's faithfulness, post-Reformation man could not walk by faith and do all to the glory of God.

Scientifically and historically he observed seemingly irresistible trends toward answers "B" and "C" within his own Calvinist circles. It was as though the past 300 years of Protestant cultural growth had taken a wrong turn somewhere. The very fruit of Christian effort had strangely boomeranged back against the Bible.

The only option now was to go back to Reformation basics and begin anew, benefiting this time from the three centuries of botched reading of the book of nature. *This new approach could no longer avoid the linkage between theological order and historical order as older "accommodating" theology had done and as covenant theology still tends to do.* "A" was the only allowable answer to Q#1. So the crisis focused attention on Q#2, how to interpret both books so that "A" was secure. For "A" to be secure, general revelation had to be "controlled" by a *comprehensive universal history built from special revelation.*

In *theology* that meant going back through the Bible in a different way. Instead of looking only for answers to heavenly doctrines, the Church now had to look also for any and all historical details that might intersect general revelation. (The more clues, the easier the puzzle is to solve.) I suggest this need caused the so-called "literal" hermeneutic so characteristic of dispensationalism. It simply is the way historical records are to be read by anyone believing that theological and historical order coincide after the manner of "A"! The terms "literal" and "spiritual" are used by Scofield, for example, in just this sense.²¹ By the twentieth century this phase has been largely completed with dispensational pretribulational premillennialism and its discontinuous progress through a series of distinct stages.

In the *historical* studies things would be more difficult. Redeemed man would have to devote great creativity and effort in linking details of the book of nature to this universal history. Mistakes like Burnet made would have to be avoided. The matter of

total depravity's effect on the "hermeneutics" of nature and theory construction (Q#2) would have to be thoroughly investigated (Van Til's presuppositionalism is a major contribution toward this end.). This revision in historical studies is only just beginning 150 years after Darby in a sort of academic underground that is initiating creation studies in many disciplines. Prominent in the "new hermeneutics" of the book of nature are punctuated power explanations that replace the older uniformitarian rules.

Dispensationalism, then, differs from covenant theology in that it works from *this side* of the post-Reformation crisis. Its new model ties theological order inseparably to historical order and requires a universal history encompassing both. In terms of our seven propositions we have:

1. The terminal state, S_T , is characterized only insofar as specific prophecies are projected forward. Its "unity" will be that of the universe itself, a network involving redeemed and non-redeemed creatures.
2. God sovereignly moves history from S_0 to the fulfillment of all His specific prophecies and any as yet unrevealed counsels in a discontinuous fashion.
3. Therefore, S_T , expresses the most complete revelation of the ultimate will of God for mortal existence.
4. Therefore, all preceding states, S_0, \dots, S_{T-1} express less complete revelation of God's will, including S_{NT} .
5. Therefore, S_T is the vantage point from which to interpret the historical meaning of any single or group of antecedent states, S_0, \dots, S_{T-1} . No retrospective interpretation is attempted from earlier states.
6. God is eternal and immutable in such a way that He can genuinely reveal Himself through changing historic situations.
7. Therefore, the plan of God for S_T existed in the mind of God "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4), *viz.*, S_0 . Actual creature existence of His plan, however, unfolds through historical pathways at the boundary of "present" time, not before.

The new model has a self-limiting chronology with time scales on the order of thousands of years based upon genealogies, the millennial reign length, and its universal history claim. In natural history this feature forces historical change explanations to include punctuated power intervals that show more general forms of presently-observable laws and systems. In anthropology it compels serious attention to the high longevity, low-chronology data of Genesis 11.

CONCLUSION

Covenant and dispensational theology compete for allegiance within Reformed circles. Surface differences over specific texts conceal the deeper differences at the presuppositional level. In fact the two theologies belong to two different eras of Church history. Covenant theology is a modern survival of Reformation style thinking about heavenly matters (soteriology) which kept theological order separate from historical details. In its classical form, it fundamentally ignores the post-Reformation crisis over reconciling general and special revelation. As a result it finds itself reductionist in hermeneutics, vulnerable to abstract logic, and weak in reading the Bible and the book of nature together.

Dispensationalism is the completed theological portion of a universal history still being written that ties together theological and historical order in response to post-Reformation problems. Its hermeneutic searches for historical order to validate the faithfulness of God as well as to feed on the more heavenly traditional doctrines. It establishes the Church in relation to the rest of creation and therefore involves ecclesiology and eschatology. It awaits completion of the non theological portion of its universal history by godly work in the arts and sciences.

Dispensationalism's offense to covenant theology is that of a supplanter. As a new paradigm it calls believers to give up an old model that didn't work and come help confront unbelief with a new total answer. Today is not the time for its friends to look backward as Lot's wife did.

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles A. Clough, "A Dispensational View of Christ and Culture," *Biblical Perspectives*, IV:6 (Nov-Dec 91).

² For those not familiar with these terms: *christology* means the study or doctrine of Christ; *soteriology* means doctrine of salvation; *ecclesiology* means doctrine of the church; *eschatology* means doctrine of the "last things."

³ Clough, "A Dispensational View of Christ and Culture":2.

⁴ Craig A. Blasing, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, CXLIX, 579 (July-Sept 1988):266-279.

⁵ David L. Turner, "The Continuity of Scripture and Eschatology: Key Hermeneutical Issues," *Grace Theological Journal*, VI:2 (1985):276.

⁶ I will not attempt to discuss the varying modifications introduced into both positions by the Dispensational Study Group and its covenant theologian participants because these are part of ongoing dialogue and remain in a state of flux.

⁷ Charles A. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1872), II:354-373.

⁸ Two good discussions are: (from the dispensational perspective) H. Wayne House & Thomas Ice, *Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?* (Portland, OR.: Multnomah Press, 1988); and (from the covenant perspective) *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed., William S. Barker & W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1990).

⁹ Cornelius Van Til, *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Nutley, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. C., 1972):83-84.

¹⁰ For an insightful summary of this debate, see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1987):21-40.

¹¹ Blasing:267.

¹² George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980):46, 60.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 54, 63.

¹⁴ It's instructive to notice that God "initializes" Adam's vocabulary and hence his presuppositions about naming things by doing the first naming Himself in Genesis 1:5, 8; the rest is left to Adam.

¹⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965):71-74.

¹⁶ This research was done by Floyd S. Elmore at Dallas Theological Seminary and is discussed by the *Biblical Perspectives* editor in *Dispensational Distinctives*, Vol I, No. 2 (Mar-Apr, 1991).

¹⁷ Material taken from Charles A. Clough, "A Calm Appraisal of *The Genesis Flood*", Th.M. Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968. The part of this work crucial to my point here was subsequently republished as "Biblical Presuppositions and Historical Geology: A Case Study" in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Summer 1974):35-48.

¹⁸ Clough, "Biblical Presuppositions. . .," :38f.

¹⁹ See the approving discussion of R. Hooykaas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972):114-124.

²⁰ John Pilkey, *Origin of the Nations* (San Diego: Master Book Publishers, 1984):268f.

²¹ See the way he opposes "spiritual" (non-historical) views of Christ's Second Advent in *Rightly Dividing*

the Word of Truth (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1896):14.