

IS PENTECOSTALISM DISPENSATIONALIST? AN HONEST ANSWER TO A HARD QUESTION

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Introduction

A surging crisis on the current global horizon centers on so-called “Christian Zionism.” The controversy surrounding Christian Zionism arises from its association with political practices in the unceasingly and increasingly unstable Middle East region involving Israelis and Palestinians. Though an oversimplification, Christian Zionism is generally speaking a theological position with political implications. However, Christian Zionism is exceedingly difficult to address because it exists in variegated forms, ranging from individuals or groups who generally support the right of contemporary Israelis to exist in their ancient homeland to extensively organized political activists with agendas of varying degrees of radicalism.¹ The former usually cite biblical and humanitarian values in vindication of their support for Israel. Some of the latter tend to be completely uncritical of Israeli policies and practices, openly aggressive against their opponents, and either totally unaware of or unconcerned with the plight of Palestinians and religious others. Much of the basis for the latter position appears to be built upon a specific form of dispensationalist ideology.

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¹ Components of the wide ranging and diverging views on Christian Zionism may be experienced by surfing the competing websites of <http://christianzionism.org> and <http://christian-zionism.org>. Also, an excellent source of fairly balanced information and overview may be found at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ChristianZionism>.

As the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and the USA's War on Terror, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and possibly soon, in Iran, surely suggest, policies regarding the Mid East region can be volatile and even volcanic. The role of religion is of central significance. Investigating foundations of faith-based philosophies toward the regional and worldwide violence arising out of the current Mid East crisis seems appropriate. This paper focuses on one such philosophy, dispensationalism, and its role in the development of one movement, a major player on the world religious scene, Pentecostalism. My question is not whether some or even many Pentecostals are dispensationalists. That they are is an easily substantiated statistical fact. But I'm asking, more pointedly, whether Pentecostalism itself is dispensationalist. In other words, is there anything about Pentecostalism itself essentially, inevitably, or irretrievably entangled with dispensational ideas?

A Personal Testimony

My sudden introduction to dispensationalism came almost immediately after my conversion as a young adult. I was graciously given, by a devout Baptist deacon, a *Scofield Reference Bible* (C. I. Scofield, 1909), based on the dispensationalist teaching of John Nelson Darby (1800-82), and encouraged to digest its contents. Shortly thereafter, when visiting my Pentecostal preacher father in another state I took it with me to ask for advice on whether it was recommended reading. Dad wisely suggested I might profitably study it but that I needed to keep in mind that only the biblical text was divinely inspired and not the study notes and their interpretations. I devoured its contents. Thus I discovered dispensationalism, a system of biblical interpretation that divides biblical history and revelation into airtight compartments sealed off not only from our

contemporary era but even from each other. The dispensational approach was attractive to me because it seemed to make sense of some of the most complicated portions of Scripture, such as the Books of Daniel and Revelation, and to provide a pattern for understanding biblical prophecy, especially end-time events. But though initially thrilled at insights it seemed to provide, I was eventually disappointed to discover it firmly invalidated any continuing activity of spiritual gifts, including speaking in tongues, divine healing, or miraculous signs of any kind. This ran completely counter to my Pentecostal upbringing (cf. Acts 2, 10, 19:1-7; 1 Co 12-14). I also remember astonishment at being informed Jesus' glorious Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) is inapplicable today because it falls into a different dispensation. I slowly used my *Scofield* less and less, finally discarding it altogether.

However, a few years later I was pleased to be told that the *Dake Annotated Bible* (Finis Dake, 1961, 1963) included all the insights of the *Scofield Reference Bible* and more but still affirmed Pentecostal experience and the spiritual gifts. It was especially noted for its dispensational insights on eschatology or biblical prophecy. At some (sacrificial!) expense this time, I managed to acquire a copy. Again, I devoured its contents avidly. Now a Pentecostal pastor myself I knew many colleagues who also used a *Dake*. Nonetheless, and in spite of the almost encyclopedic knowledge of its author, I began to sense a somewhat inexplicable inner tension between its dispensationalist teachings, especially its proof text approach, and my own personal reading of the Bible. Again, I slowly used it less and less, finally discarding it altogether. In this case, however, the discarding was accompanied by guilt. After all, this was a *Pentecostal* study Bible. I wondered a bit about what was happening. I was therefore greatly relieved as a

pastor-student going through our denominational seminary (Church of God Theological Seminary) to hear some of our professors (e.g., Hollis Gause and Steve Land) finally explaining that Pentecostalism and dispensationalism are inherently and unquestionably incompatible.² Dispensationalist ideas, however, die hard. Though I have had to process it slowly, personally I have come to understand the ultimately unsatisfactory nature of dispensationalism both as a biblical hermeneutic and for Pentecostalism.³ But while I reject “Darbyism”, or “fundamentalist dispensationalism,” I still seek to retain the authentic eschatological energy of my beloved Pentecostalism.

I now realize that my personal push-pull experience with dispensationalism is an individual reenactment of the overall Pentecostal movement’s encounter with dispensationalism as well. As Pentecostal historian Dwight Wilson insightfully records, Pentecostal interpretation of history, admittedly heavily “influenced by their premillennialist belief that the restoration of Israel to Palestine is a sure sign of the imminent return of Christ”, has still struggled with applying dispensationalism to developments regarding the region, alternately embracing and eschewing significant aspects.⁴ Both my personal testimony and Pentecostalism’s history imply an underlying and irreparable discontinuity between traditional Darbyite dispensationalism and contemporary Pentecostalism. And yet Pentecostals have displayed a peculiar fascination

² I also remember a pivotal conversation with a fellow student and friend, now Dr. Robert Debelak of Lee University, Cleveland, TN, who insisted biblical revelation is characterized by continuity rather than the discontinuity so evident in dispensationalism. Recently, Rob pointed out that, while beyond the scope of this paper, the (now dated) text by Dave McPherson, *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1975), sticks out as a critique of the Darby-Irving emphases in eschatology.

³ I still have positive appreciation for the motives of many dispensationalist teachers in attempting an in depth approach to Bible study, and I am aware of various more flexible versions of a more classic and historic dispensationalism in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Joachim of Fiore, John Fletcher, Jonathan Edwards, etc, that have valuable features.

⁴ D. J. Wilson, “Eschatology, Pentecostal Perspectives on”, *The New International Dictionary of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements (NIDPCM)*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess and assoc. ed. Eduard M. van der Mass (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 601-05.

with dispensationalism. Over the years, I have sat in several Pentecostal “prophecy conferences” or “prophecy seminars,” not to mention local church Bible studies, with an amazing array of colorful charts spread before the group as a “prophecy teacher” enthusiastically explained the entire course of world events according to a dispensationalist paradigm.

A Puzzling History

Pentecostal biblical scholar French Arrington details the popularization of dispensationalism by John Nelson Darby and by C. I. Scofield. Arrington describes dispensationalism as “an interpretive scheme grafted onto the traditional body of Christian doctrine.” He defines it more specifically as a “basic assumption that God deals with the human race in successive dispensations.” A dispensation is a period of time marked by a beginning, a test, and termination in judgment through human failure or sin. Though dispensationalism has influenced Pentecostal theology, probably because of the avid attachment of both to eschatology, “the earliest pentecostal teachings were not tied to directly to dispensationalism.” In Arrington’s opinion, the statements of faith of major Pentecostal denominations do “commit them to premillennialism but not necessarily to dispensationalism.” But many Pentecostals have indeed adopted a dispensationalist paradigm. He links the appeal of dispensationalism for many Pentecostals to its being a convenient but complicated puzzle that organizes biblical history and prophetic Scripture. Arrington openly assesses the “marriage of the pentecostal emphasis to dispensationalism” as “strange” because of the latter’s denial of the continuing validity of spiritual gifts (cessationism) such as divine healing or speaking in tongues—important practices for Pentecostals. Nevertheless, Arrington admits the influence of

dispensationalism upon Pentecostalism has not been negligible. Yet Pentecostal writers using dispensationalist paradigms have not usually done so uncritically or unequivocally, and the movement's recent scholars increasingly show still less dependency on dispensationalism.⁵ Continuing Pentecostal attraction to dispensationalism becomes even more puzzling in light of explicit and even acidic rejection of Pentecostals by dispensationalist fundamentalists.⁶

Dispensationalism, especially of the popular Darby-Scofield type, evidences innate elements essentially at odds with the authentic ethos of Pentecostal spirituality and theology. Pentecostalism is not dispensationalist.⁷ Elements of dispensationalism militate against Pentecostalism. An unfortunate fact is that Pentecostals allowed themselves to be lured into accepting a dispensationalist theology that literally *by definition* undermines their own identity. An important challenge of the maturing movement is straightening out this error and its implications. If we deem dispensationalism deficient, then what are appropriate alternative approaches to interpreting biblical history and addressing current and future events from a point of view affirming scriptural inspiration and authority, including its prophetic or predictive elements, but avoiding esoteric and exclusivist hermeneutics and ideology (see below)?

⁵ F. L. Arrington, "Dispensationalism," *NIDPCM*, pp. 584-86 (585). Cf. Gerald T. Sheppard, "Pentecostalism and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism: The Anatomy of an Uneasy Relationship", *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 6 (Fall 1984), pp. 5-34.

⁶ Cf. H. V. Synan, "Evangelicalism," *NIDPCM*, pp. 613-16 (615) and "Fundamentalism," *NIDPCM*, pp. 655-658 (657-58).

⁷ A sort of general dispensationalism identifying the present 'Age of the Spirit' including eschatological and prophetic elements may indeed be intrinsic to Pentecostalism, at least in its early, North American, classical form. See M. D. Palmer, "Ethics in the Classical Pentecostal Tradition," *NIDPCM*, pp. 605-610 (606). If so, distinctions between fundamentalist dispensationalism are still sharp.

A Promiscuous Spirituality

Before discussing an adequate alternative for Pentecostals to fundamentalist dispensationalism, showing that the Pentecostal movement has had a tendency toward a spirituality overflowing the banks of expected (respectable!?) boundaries may be helpful. This overflowing energy is particularly indicative of Pentecostalism's innate ability to mitigate the harshness and narrowness of the typical dispensationalist mindset, and illustrates an incompatibility of its authentic and original ethos with obvious exclusive and reclusive tendencies in dispensationalism. In spite of some sharp history to the contrary, Pentecostalism at times displays a surprising and delightful tendency to be ecumenical and inclusive.⁸ For instance, the Azusa Street Revival and Mission clearly incorporated several streams of spirituality in an eclectic (and electric!) energizing force. African-American and Wesleyan-Holiness spiritualities met and meshed with American revivalism and Southern mores to produce a potent form of pragmatic biblical primitivism and restorationism.⁹ Eclectic and ecumenical tendencies are further exemplified in the rise and reach of the mid-twentieth century Charismatic Renewal, and in the vitality of current non-Western (Africa, Latin America, and Asia) varieties of Pentecostalism.¹⁰ In fact, in a discussion of the eclectic and ecumenical nature of Pentecostalism titled "Three Streams—One River", historian and analyst of

⁸ See Tony Richie, "'The Unity of the Spirit': Are Pentecostals Inherently Ecumenists and Inclusivists?" *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 26.1 (2006), pp. 21-35.

⁹ Cf. Cecil M. Robeck, Jr. *Azusa Street Mission & Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), Douglas Jacobsen, *Thinking in the Spirit: Theologies of the Early Pentecostal Movement* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (London, Eng: Harvard University Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Cf. Harold D. Hunter and Peter D. Hocken, editors, *All Together in One Place: Theological Papers from the Brighton Conference on World Evangelization* (JPTSUP 4, Sheffield, Eng: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) and Allan Anderson and Walter J. Hollenweger, editors, *Pentecostals after a Century: Global Perspectives on a Movement in Transition* (JPTSUP 15, Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

Pentecostalism Vinson Synan predicted that “the future of Christianity will be molded by the developing Third-World, indigenous pentecostal churches interacting with the vigorous charismatic elements in the traditional churches.”¹¹ These words now seem almost prophetic nearly twenty-five years later.

Clearly an argument may be made that Pentecostalism cannot be strictly contained within the restrictive confines of dispensationalist ideology. Therefore, though some, or even many, Pentecostals have been and are dispensationalists, Pentecostalism itself refuses to be bound to or by dispensationalism. The overflowing energy of Pentecostal rivers of the Spirit (cf. John 7:37-39) reaches fertile fields in all kinds of surprising places and doctrinal paradigms. Therefore, being a Pentecostal and not being a dispensationalist is not only possible but perhaps quite preferable. The freedom of the liberating presence of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Co 3:17) breaks the bands of arid dispensationalist dogmatism. Doors and windows are opened for the Spirit’s blowing wind (cf. John 3:8) to breathe fresh air into all the halls, rooms, and corners of the Pentecostal household. Without denigrating Pentecostals who see dispensationalism as integral for their world outlook, Pentecostalism itself will not be denied a wider reach.

A Provocative Theology

R. Hollis Gause, a prominent Pentecostal theologian (Church of God, Cleveland, TN), elucidates an alternative to fundamentalist dispensationalism through a careful comparison-contrast of dispensational theology and a theology of progressive revelation. Gause explains that progressive revelation does not divide up biblical history as dispensationalism. It does not hermeneutically distinguish between the Church, Israel,

¹¹ Vinson Synan, *In the latter Days: The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1984), pp. 135-46 (145).

and the kingdom of God. The nature of God, the history of salvation, and the character of the people of God are progressively revealed. Earlier events anticipate and predict later events. The inspiration of the Holy Spirit gives Scripture a progressive and even prophetic or predictive quality. In stark contrast to the hermeneutical compartmentalizing of dispensationalism, progressive revelation affirms a more unified approach to biblical interpretation and understanding. Gause concludes that “the view of progressive and unified revelation of the history of salvation offers the better interpretation of Scripture.” For Gause, considerations of the unchangeableness and unity of God and God’s Word consistently lead to this conclusion.¹² Interestingly, Gause does not sacrifice Pentecostalism’s staunch emphasis on premillennial eschatology through his espousal of progressive revelation. The premillennialism, however, explicated in his study of the Book of Revelation is of a decidedly different flavor than the Darby-Scofield-Dake type. It is less esoteric, more open. It is concerned with God’s activity and sovereignty throughout history and its providentially teleological redemptive consummation rather than with designing elaborate last days predictive schemas of events.

Progressive revelation, therefore, based solidly on the ubiquitous and unified character of God and of God’s Word rather than on the frailties and vicissitudes of human knowledge and nature, is for Pentecostalism a more attractive option than dispensationalism. It is also provocative in a positive sense. It is provocative for Pentecostals because it calls for serious rethinking and substantial revision of political and theological ideologies inordinately tied to dispensationalism. This would, of course, among many other matters, include covertly and overtly aggressive attitudes toward

¹² R. Hollis Gause, *Revelation: God’s Stamp of Sovereignty on History* (Cleveland: Pathway, 1983), pp. 18-21. Significantly, this book was published by the Church of God denominational publishing house.

world politics and religious others regarding the Mid East, particularly between Israelis and Palestinians or Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It is also provocative for many non-Pentecostal Christians because its maturity and moderation call for reconsideration of an all-too-often casual casting away of the central significance of eschatology in Christian faith and life. This would include, of course, how political and theological ideologies ought to be appropriately centered in and shaped by conviction that the consummation of human history is ultimately directed toward a divinely ordained destiny in Christ.

Conclusion

We have deemed dispensationalism to be deficient for Pentecostalism due to divergent identities. When we apply this assertion to the surging crisis in the Mid East concerning Christian Zionism and its international implications certain responsibilities become clearly incumbent upon us. Regrettably, war rages on in our world, raping and ravaging it without reprieve. To the extent that our theological positions direct and shape our political practices, including issues of war and peace, truly devout people cannot and should not avoid addressing the role of religion in the reality of war. Obviously, Christians are called and commanded to be peacemakers and pursuers of peace (Matt 5:9; Heb 12:14).¹³

We have already observed that our theological positions have political ramifications. This, of course, is the case for both Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. Accordingly, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Christians, including so-called conservatives, liberals, moderates, or progressives, are called upon to provide a viable

¹³ I am not here advocating or arguing for absolute pacifism, though some Pentecostals have and do. See D. J. Wilson, "Pacifism," *NIDPCM*, pp. 953-55. Cf. Pentecostal Charismatic Peace Fellowship at <http://www.pentecostalpeace.org>. Personally, I am here simply stressing a strong preference for peace so far as is possible.

alternative to fundamentalist dispensationalism for our people in the pews. In my opinion, the shape of our response ought to include the following minimal elements. First, it should take seriously the biblical teaching on eschatology. Second, it should apply biblical eschatology with ethical responsibility to today's local and global societal settings. Third, it should candidly confess the limitations of all our paradigmatic models. Fourth, and finally, it should center its doctrine and practice in a stress on the temporal and eschatological preeminence of love. All of the above principles are simply amplifications of an eschatologically underrated biblical chapter from Apostle Paul—1 Corinthians 13. Lord, grant us sufficient grace to thus think, speak, and act; in Jesus' name. Amen!