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## STRATEGY FOR DIALOGUE WITH DISPENSATIONALISTS

What happens when people get into arguments for and against dispensationalism? While the first skirmishes are usually theological, with disagreements over doctrine, eschatological events, the relation of the Old Testament law to the Christian, or some other such question, the arguments soon involve particular verses of Scripture. People disagree over exegesis (the meaning one assigns to a particular passage); yet exegesis is not enough. The essence of the difference is over hermeneutics (general principles for interpreting the Bible). Dialogue will not get far unless it confronts the hermeneutical issues directly.

### THE PERTINENCE OF EXEGESIS

Shall we then confine our arguments to the level of hermeneutical principle? No. Most dispensationalists are rightly suspicious of argument that appeals only to general principles, whether these principles are hermeneutical or theological. They want to see arguments based on particular texts. Hence observations with regard to hermeneutics are unlikely to be very useful or very effective unless they are tied in with exegesis (the interpretation of particular texts).

Exegesis, however, can easily become sidetracked by multiplying the number of texts under discussion. Well-trained dispensationalists and nondispensationalists alike have multitudes of texts at their disposal. When confronted with difficulties in the interpretation of one text, they appeal to another that they believe confirms their interpretation of the

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first text. The opponents quickly find themselves frustrated and often out of their depth because they not only cannot agree with the interpretation of even *one* of these texts, but they find themselves called on to reinterpret a large number of texts simultaneously. Since the texts can be discussed effectively and thoroughly only one at a time, the discussion may only confirm to each side the impression of its correctness and the obtuseness of the other side. Each side simply sees the text in the light of a gestalt, a system that itself is built up using many other texts. Those many other texts must be appealed to in order to explain the system thoroughly to the outsider.

As a nondispensationalist hoping to persuade dispensationalists, I have found two texts to be particularly useful in inviting classic dispensationalists to rethink some of their views: Hebrews 12:22–24 and, subordinately, 1 Corinthians 15:51–53. Classic dispensationalists are their own best judges of what passages they themselves would choose as a basis for discussion representing their side. Both kinds of discussion are helpful for the sake of learning from each other.

From here on, then, I will focus on Hebrews 12:22–24 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 and related hermeneutical questions, looking at ways that classic dispensationalists might be helped. Modified dispensationalists will also find these texts of interest in their dialogue with classic dispensationalists. Since modified dispensationalists and nondispensationalists display considerable variety among themselves, I am less certain which would be the best texts for a dialogue between them. Moreover, as we have seen (chapters 3 and 4), the views of the two groups approach each other closely at many points. Hebrews 12:22–24 and 1 Corinthians 15:51–53 will still be of considerable interest to them; but because of the greater measure of agreement, dialogue over these texts will take on a different complexion.

In the case of dialogue with classic dispensationalists, however, appeal to the texts in themselves is not enough. The texts need to be discussed in a way that appeals alternately to hermeneutical principles and to exegesis. Only in that way will the underlying hermeneutical principles come to the surface. By using the key texts, the interpreter can bring up the hermeneutical principles in a concrete way. This will help to show that hermeneutical practice in classic dispensationalism does not and cannot live up to its theory.

Aside from the above two texts, in general the best strategy

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for critics discussing particular texts is to admit freely that at least two interpretations of the text are possible: one that makes sense when one operates within a classic dispensationalist system, and one that makes sense when one operates within the critic's system. By operating this way critics can achieve two positive goals. First, they can build friendship with dispensationalist dialogue partners by showing that they are able to stand in the other person's shoes and listen sympathetically. They may learn more about the Bible, and they will learn more about what it is like to be a dispensationalist interpreter. They may say, "Yes, I see that by using these principles it makes sense to argue that the text means thus and so." This will help them not to make fun of things that seem unreasonable when viewed from *outside* the classic dispensationalist system. At the same time they can help make dispensationalists more aware of the way in which their system as a whole forms an all-important input for exegesis. Critics place over against one another two whole frameworks (a dispensationalist framework and their own nondispensationalist framework). Then they say, "Let us see how each system works when applied to a particular text." This approach makes it more apparent that the opponent's position is not simply a question of obtuseness over the meaning of one text, or lack of knowledge of the existence of some other supporting proof-text.

### PARTICULAR THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

The theological issues separating dispensationalist Evangelicals from nondispensationalist Evangelicals are difficult to discuss briefly because they often involve the integration of the contents of a large number of biblical texts. Serious wrestling about theological integration is, in general, best left for times of reading and meditation on the Bible. But it is still helpful to set forth as succinctly as possible the theological issues so that dispensationalists can have the opportunity to reflect on them later. Three areas of reflection seem to me to be the most fruitful.

First, there is the issue of the church's inheritance of Old Testament promises.<sup>1</sup> The essence of the theological issue here

<sup>1</sup>I am indebted to Edmund P. Clowney for this argument.

can be posed very simply. To which Old Testament promises is Christ heir? Is he an Israelite? Is he the offspring of Abraham? Is he the heir of David? The answer must be, "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ" (2 Cor. 1:20). Now to which of these promises are Christians heirs in union with Christ? Theologically it is hard to resist the answer "All of them." After all, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority" (Col. 2:9–10). One cannot neatly divide between heavenly and earthly blessings because there is only one Christ, and we receive the whole Christ. The resurrection of the body and the renewal of creation in Christ touch also the physical aspects of existence (Rom. 8:22–23). As Paul says, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along *with him*, graciously give us *all things*" (Rom. 8:32, emphasis mine). It is no exaggeration, then, when Paul says that the "world" (which must include the land of Palestine!) is ours (1 Cor. 3:21–23). We will return to this issue in chapters 12 and 13.

A second theological issue is that of the nature of Old Testament symbolism. The atmosphere of God's revelation in the Old Testament was an atmosphere suffused with eschatological hope. This hope focused on the last days and was oriented to God's heavenly dwelling. In that context the most literalistic reading of eschatological prophecy is not the best. We will take up this issue at greater length under the discussion of literalness (chapters 8–11).

Third, there is the issue of how the Bible itself is to be used in the controversy. Can we agree that one of the issues, perhaps the key issue, most distinguishing dispensationalists from nondispensationalists is the interpretation of the Old Testament? This issue includes within itself the question of dispensations or redemptive epochs, the question of Israel and the church, and the question of literalism in interpretation. Among all the types of Old Testament texts, Old Testament prophecy is the most in dispute. Hence, interpretation of prophecy is a key theological issue to consider.

How do we go about finding the Bible's own teaching on the interpretation of the Old Testament? By reading the Bible, of course. But that is a big project. Is there some particular passage of the Bible that addresses this issue more directly and

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speaks to it at great length? I believe there is: the whole Book of Hebrews. Thus we should carefully base our interpretation of the Old Testament *primarily* on this book. In the case of the doctrine of justification, for instance, we start with the two great passages of Romans 3-4 and Galatians 3. Then we integrate into the doctrine minor passages like James 2. What would happen if we reversed the procedure? Suppose we tried to fit the major passage or passages into a scheme that we had derived almost wholly from a few verses, verses whose implications might not be absolutely clear in themselves. We would be much more liable to error and distortion that way.

I propose, then, both to myself and to my dispensationalist friends, the following discipline. Let us all devote ourselves to reading, studying, and meditating on the Book of Hebrews. Let us ask the Lord to teach us how to interpret the Old Testament correctly, and how to properly understand the relation of the Old Testament to the New Testament. Let us not struggle to have Hebrews simply *confirm* our already existing views. Rather, let us cast those views aside so far as we genuinely can. Let us subject them to criticism wherever things in the Book of Hebrews point us in that direction. Let us be humble listeners, following wherever Hebrews leads us.

I do not think there is any danger in this discipline. The Bible is able to protect us from going astray. We do not need to cling tightly to our previous beliefs in order to be safe. In fact, we will not be safe if we are not open to having the Bible challenge even views that we dearly cherish.

Moreover, I think that something like this procedure is probably the ideal way for people who are unsure of their own position to make up their minds. No doubt one of the reasons God has provided us with the Book of Hebrews is so that we would have a safe and sure starting point and guide into the complexities of interpreting the Old Testament. It has proved to be that in my life: the above discipline helped me to make up my mind. I sincerely believe that it will be equally effective in many other lives, too.

The extensive size of the Book of Hebrews (thirteen chapters) precludes giving a full discussion of it here. Chapter 12 of this book, however, focuses attention on a key passage of Hebrews, namely 12:22-24.