

DISPENSATIONAL STUDY GROUP DISCUSSION

The meeting was given to a discussion of Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. Papers of response were prepared and read by Dr. Paul Karleen and Dr. Robert Saucy. Dr. Poythress prepared and read responses. The three men were joined by Dr. Craig Blaising, chairman of the Dispensational Study Group, for a panel discussion with questions from the floor. Approximately 100 people participated in the session.

The following is a summary of the panel discussion and question period.

Dr. Blaising asked if moderate Ds and moderate Cs are not closer to each other than either are to classic Ds or classic Cs. It seems both are moving toward each other in rapprochement. That was generally agreed.

He also asked how common Hoekema's version of amillennialism (which Dr. Poythress shares) is. Dr. Poythress noted old C was oriented toward salvific issues so eschatological, prophetic questions were not central to the discussions. With the new discussions arising from biblical theology and the relevant appreciation of biblical diversity, there has been renewed discussion of prophetic issues. Many covenantalists see this more as new areas of discussion than as concessions or movement. He noted his book *Symphonic Theology* with its discussions of the legitimacy of multiple approaches to theological thinking.

Does Dr. Poythress have a presupposed covenant of grace in his theology as Dr. Karleen suggests? He responded that he sees it taught in the Bible, but that Dr. Karleen is right that he works out from the salvific issues to the prophetic and other issues.

Is history the realm in which God's purposes are fulfilled rather than in eternity, the new heavens and new earth? Dr. Poythress responded that he sees a continuity with this earth. If there is radical disjunction between this earth and the new earth, then this is a large objection to amillennialism. The Davidic kingdom does represent a historical continuity from the present history to the eternal state which is without end. Further, Isaiah 65 shows a considerable continuity

with the past, present and future earth. Similarly, the empty tomb shows both continuity and discontinuity of present and future body.

Dr. Poythress laughingly referred to himself as an optimistic premillennialist: It is so good that it goes on forever.

Dr. Karleen agreed to the weakness of a temporal Davidic kingdom, one limited only to millennium.

Dr. Blaising described classic Ds as seeing the new earth basically in Platonic terms, as timelessness. The modified Ds are seeing temporality in the new earth. Thus the argument that promises must be fulfilled in history because the new earth is not temporal is not valid. So the argument is that there must be a phase of kingdom where a different kind of promise can be fulfilled.

Dr. Saucy sees the blurring of millennium and new earth in Isaiah 65 as a result of the complete fulfillment of God. However, he sees a discontinuity when God finishes His work of reconciliation. In the amillennial understanding, the Lord smashes all opposition and the new earth is begun. The Romans 11 portrait where Israel brings tremendous blessing to all nations also needs a time frame where the earth is ruled by humans in righteousness under Christ's mediatorial reign followed by a giving to the Father in 1 Corinthians 15.

Dr. Poythress noted if there is present fulfillment of prophecy, then the difference is one of degree rather than of kind in fulfillment. He cited Ridderbos and Murray in their treatments of Romans 11. He also sees more possibility for postmillennialism as he thinks further.

There is certainly not a simple alternative between dispensational and covenant theologies. When is a D not a D? What defines a D? Last year's discussion focused on a national future for Israel in history and a really new event happening at Pentecost forming the body of Christ.

Do D's have a different hermeneutic? Virtually all agree that there is not. The point is a different outcome because of different assumptions in the thinking rather than a different hermeneutical approach. Dr. Saucy noted that it is not too difficult to see why in early history the church took over for Israel in light of the judgment on Israel and its end as a nation. Presently the holocaust and founding of Israel has brought up the question of Israel with renewed impact, causing all people to reevaluate their understanding of prophecy concerning a national future for Israel.

What distinctions between peoples exist in the new earth? Dr. Poythress affirmed ethnic differences with spiritual, religious, priestly unity, but noted lack of information as to specifics of the distinction. The cultural diversities of present day church may be a foretaste of the future diversity. To be human means having an individuality of identity which forms a part of our destiny where we uniquely reflect

the glory of Christ forever. The picture of thrones, knowing each other, and fellowship shows a saving of the entire person with personal memories and unique personality going into eternity. The Jews are not only one nation among nations, but a unique nation from whom Messiah came. Jews do not lose their Jewishness in the future life. They do come into the new earth Christian Jews, integrated into the unity of the body of Christ.

What can't I believe and still be a dispensationalist? A fascinating question which should be the topic of further thought.

What are the basic presuppositions in language? Don't we assume ordinary commonality in language, leading to a "common sense," literal hermeneutic. No specific response was given. It seemed evident that it is so.

Aren't there really different hermeneutics between classic D and classic C? Probably so.

Ladd said he could not understand the OT only in light of the OT. Only in light of the NT can one properly understand the OT. Dr. Poythress responded that this classic polarization is too simple. The eschatological material is somewhat open-ended. It is like an out of focus camera lens where details are not clear until the NT sharpens the focus. It is like trying to understand Gen 3:15 in its own light. How much enlightening is needed? It is a frightfully difficult question. He suggested reading the OT first in its own light and then in light of the NT, with neither approach overwhelming the other. In his own experience, the NT has opened his eyes to see what was there in the OT all the time. The NT brings out the depth inherent in the OT, expressed there symbolically. Symbolic depth in tabernacle, for example, foreshadows the majesty of God's heavenly tabernacle. But the details of the working out are still unclear. He feels loosened up in his interpretation of OT prophecy. The fuzzy dimensions suggested in the OT are now seen more clearly.

Dr. Saucy agreed with Ladd that the NT teachers are his authority for how to interpret the OT. We cannot disagree with their interpretation. "What do the apostles teach?" is the question. We all start with the flat meaning. That does not rule out figures, of course. We should stay with the flat meaning unless some other flat meaning forces us to eliminate it. Does the NT force us to give up a national future for Israel? No. Dr. Saucy allows history into new earth. If Israel does not fulfill OT prophecy now, and there is no priestly distinction in new earth, then there must be a millennial stage to allow this fulfillment. Dr. Karleen agrees to stay with flat until forced. But we must be moved by the text, not presuppositions.

Dr. Poythress sees a possible difference here. What happens when metaphors are not so obvious? He sees some of the places where this is the case as noted in the book. He does not operate under

force, but under what seems to be best in light of the text. There was some irony in his voice as he heard himself use phrases very like classic Ds might.

Dr. Saucy agrees that there are allusions, illustrations, but does not see NT negating the promise for a national future for Israel.

Dr. Blaising noted that literal hermeneutic died as an issue with development of science of hermeneutics. Preunderstanding of interpreter significantly affects what is understood to be the clear meaning of the text. How is it that the one in a tradition emphasizing the clear meaning looks back on what was clear a generation ago and finds it not clear at all? What forced that change?

What demands that one begin with NT rather than following a chronological order, correcting only as forced? Dr. Poythress sees a spiral process where one asks God in all parts of the Bible what is correct. Where one starts is not all that essential as long as spiral continues. Everyone begins with Christ and experience of Christianity in their personal interpretative history—as did the Apostles. But that is not a definitive ordering. He referred to his article in Westminster Journal concerning the divine author's meaning in the text.

Respectfully submitted,

Gerry Breshears
Secretary