

Review of Theological Method

Recall the essential difference between dispensational and non-dispensational (everything else ...) is not so much literal interpretation (all conservative theological approaches would claim to use literal interpretation) but rather theological method. Theological method refers to the detailed procedure which is used to construct a complete systematic theology, of which eschatology is a category.

Historically, the debate between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists has focused on their understanding of what literal interpretation means. Each camp above would claim to employ literal interpretation, yet each arrives at different results. The essential difference therefore must not be how to interpret the text but rather how the OT and NT are to be harmonized. You see, dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists approach the harmonization of the OT and NT in different ways. Much of the arguing can be “traced to a misunderstanding of how biblical theology and systematic theology are related in the proper development of a theological position.”¹

It has been shown that dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists approach the harmonizing of the Old and New Testaments in different ways. That is, each has adopted a different methodology. The great departure of the two methods from each other is seen in the starting points used in each case. Which approach is right? This writer believes that the dispensational approach is superior because of its grounding in biblical theology. Much of the arguing in the later forms of the debate may be traced to a misunderstanding of how biblical theology and systematic theology are related in the proper development of a theological position.

Definition of Biblical Theology

What is meant by the term Biblical Theology? While there are numerous definitions, the one that is most helpful is the following:

“Biblical theology is that branch of theological science which deals systematically with the historically conditioned progress of the self-revelation of God as deposited in the Bible.”

Let’s unwrap that a bit. Biblical theology is the systematic compilation of all thoughts of God and doctrine, taking those thoughts and doctrines **only** from the Biblical text. This would be different than systematic theology which would include Biblical Theology as a proper background, but would also include general revelation, historical tradition, etc. every source of knowledge conceivable to the mind of man. In this regard, Biblical Theology is foundational to Systematic Theology.

So, for example, if we were going to develop a systematic theology in the area of angels, we would look at the text of scripture for each Biblical book that contained teaching on angels (this is Biblical Theology), incorporate any other information on angels (probably not a good idea for a believer in Christ), and synthesize all this information into a set of beliefs (production of a Systematic Theology). **How the dispensational and nondispensational theologian proceeds in this undertaking is profoundly different.**

Steps for a Dispensational Approach to Systematic Theology

1. The recognition of one’s own pre-understanding.
2. The formation of a biblical theology of the OT based upon the literal interpretation (grammatical–historical method of interpretation) of the OT text.
3. The formation of a biblical theology of the NT based upon the literal interpretation (grammatical–historical method of interpretation) of the NT text, which method includes the backgrounds and results arrived at via 2 above.
4. The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all inputs to theology including 2 and 3 above.

¹ Stallard, Mike, *Literal Hermeneutics, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism*, paper from the Pre-Trib Study Group (www.pre-trib.org).

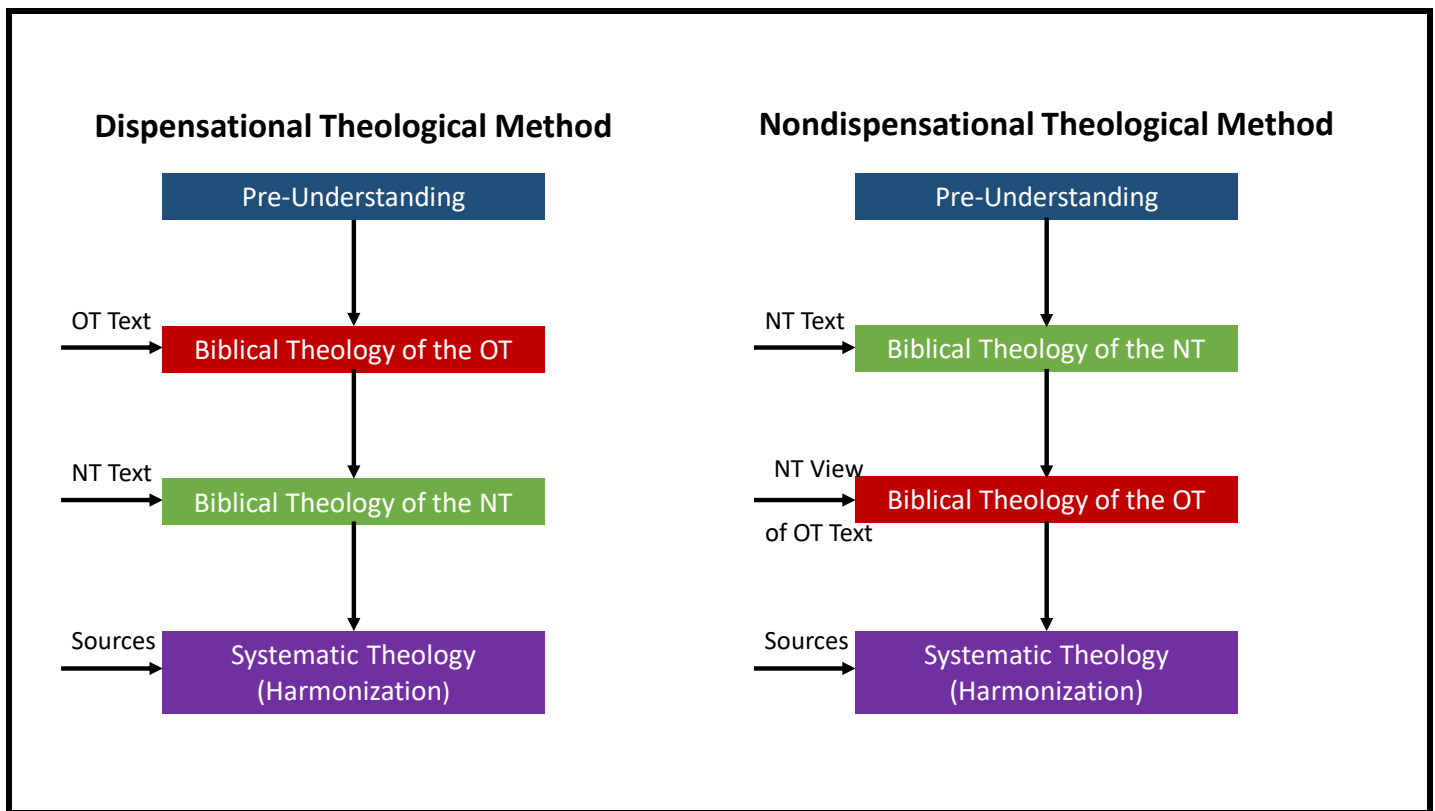
It should be noted that these steps are not performed in a linear fashion to a final conclusion. A theologian cycles through the list over and over again making adjustments based upon new inputs (such as improved exegesis of certain passages). **Note that the output of step 2 is a proper input into step 3.**

**** The important distinction in this approach is that the sequence indicates a dependence upon what has been previously arrived at. ****

Steps for a Nondispensational Approach to Systematic Theology

1. The recognition of one's own pre-understanding.
2. The formation of a biblical theology of the NT based upon the literal interpretation (grammatical–historical method of interpretation) of the NT text.
3. The formation of a biblical theology of the OT based upon the NT understanding of the OT text.
4. The production of a systematic theology by harmonizing all inputs to theology including 2 and 3 above.

The differences are highlighted in the following slide:



With this sequence for the nondispensationalist approach, we can immediately see problems in the construction of a systematic theology. First, because the nondispensationalist begins and prioritizes their approach in the NT, it would be easy to minimize OT background to the NT text. Second, in the production of results in step 3, the OT is subordinated to the conclusions drawn from the NT Biblical Theology in step 2. This has the effect of rendering any results that would have come from the construction of a true Biblical Theology of the OT as secondary. Too much room is given for “undoing” or “replacing” the results that would have been obtained if a true Biblical Theology of the OT was produced. Finally, the errors that are made by the nondispensationalist are quite profound in step 4. As a result of step 3, the nondispensationalist actually has no true biblical theology of the OT which serves as an input to the synthesis step.

So What?

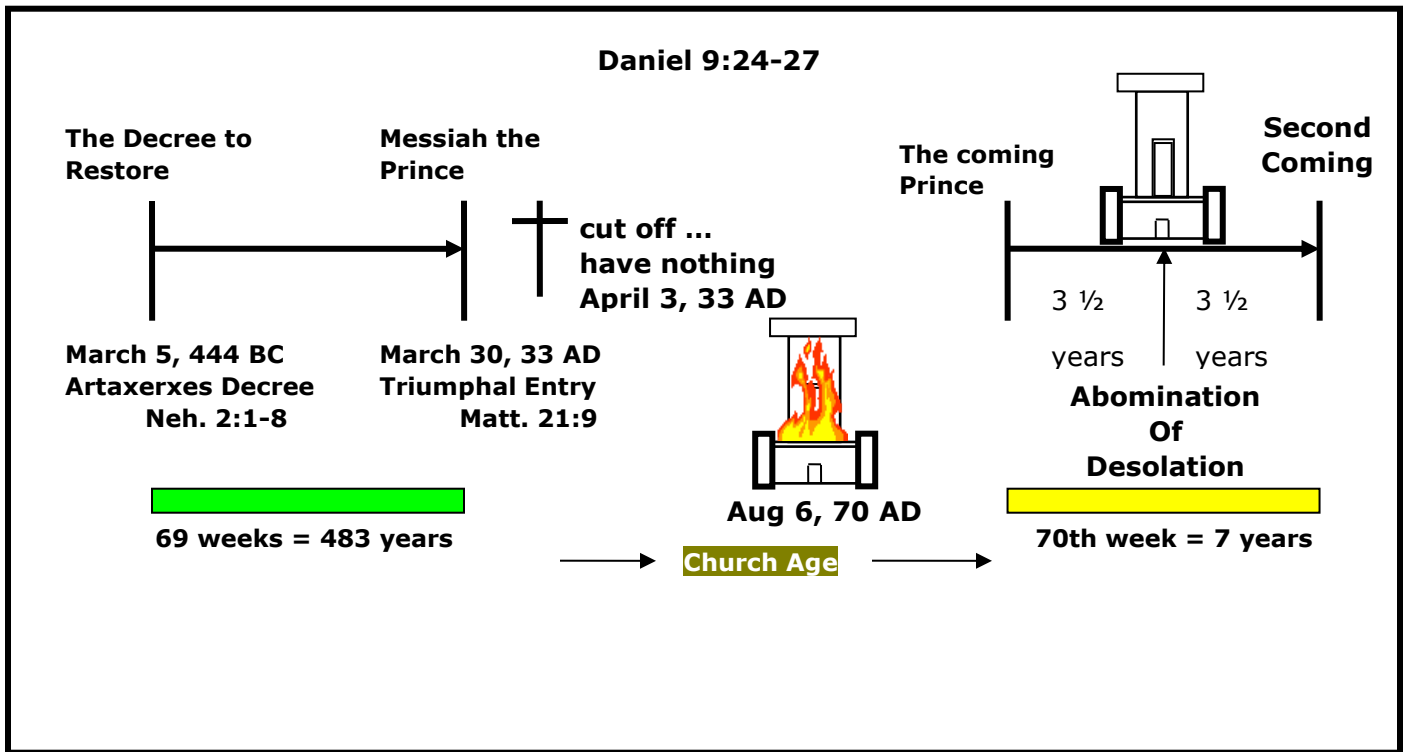
We must now ask the question ... why is the dispensational scheme the best? The answer lies in the nature of the progress of revelation. By its very nature, and as depicted in the chronological aspects of the Bible, revelation builds upon that which has

been given previously. For example, New Testament revelation of Jesus Christ relies heavily upon the revelation of Israel given in the OT. Why should it be surprising that theological formation should recognize this sequence as well?

The point of all of this introductory discussion is that we have spent the last year developing our eschatology (mainly from Daniel) and we have a solid framework already. All of those tedious results from that study are now a proper input into our study of NT eschatology. It provides the starting point.

For example, we know from Daniel *when* the kingdom of God comes? The coming of the Son of Man in the clouds in conjunction with the destruction of the little horn associated with the fourth Gentile Roman kingdom. How are the last days organized? Into a seven-year period characterized by persecution of the Jewish nation by the “little horn, willful king, ...” Our entire framework for eschatology comes from the OT scriptures and we will bring that framework forward into the gospels.

That framework is depicted in the following chart from last semesters class ...



Introduction

There are really two approaches to surveying NT eschatology. We could either look at the *chronology of the writings* themselves using the following timeline ...

- AD 48–55 → [Mark](#)
- AD 49–51 → Paul writes [1 & 2 Thessalonians](#)
- AD 55–60s → [Luke](#) then [Acts](#)
- AD 60s → [Matthew](#)
- AD 95 → John writes [Revelation](#)

or ... we could start with *chronology of the teachings* ... and we would begin in the NT with Jesus in the gospels. Since Matthew and Mark are parallels, with Matthew contains far more details, we begin with Matthew and ultimately want to compare this with Luke. We will then move on to the Thessalonians ... and to Revelation; Lord willing.

Kingdom in Matthew

The first topic in the eschatology of Matthew is the simple statement that encompasses John’s preaching in Matt. 3:2 and Jesus preaching in Matt. 4:17 (parallel in Mark 1:15). The essence of that preaching was “repent, for the kingdom of God/heaven is at hand.” Now, what would a Jew in Jesus’ day understand about the coming kingdom? Was it to be a literal kingdom? Would it

co-exist with earthly kingdoms? Would a Jew understand that the kingdom is just a “kingdom in the heart?” No. What is it that we understand about the ME understanding of a king and his kingdom? There was no distinction ... “You are that head of gold ... and after you will come another kingdom ...”

If you were to go to every occurrence of the word kingdom in Matthew, you would be hard pressed to find an understanding of the word that does not mean anything other than what a Jew at the time would understand it to mean; a literal earthly kingdom in which the Messiah rules on the throne of David.

The Preliminary Passages – Matt. 10, Matt. 13

Matt. 10:16–23

Recall Jesus is about to send the apostles out on a preaching tour. He instructs them ... “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Then starting in verse 16, Matthew records some additional instruction that do not seem to apply to the task at hand ... but rather, will apply later in their lives. Three clues lead us to believe these latter instructions pertain to their ministries later on. First, Jesus says their testimony will be to the Gentiles (verse 18). But previously He told them not to go to the Gentiles. Second, He mentions endurance to the end, which seems out of place for just a preaching tour in which all of them returned. Finally, in verse 23 Jesus says that “you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.”

This final saying could not mean that the Second Coming would occur before they finished their preaching tour in the Jewish cities. It likely means that evangelistic efforts of disciples in the future would not be completed until the Second Coming of Christ, no matter how vigorous the efforts.

Matt. 13 – Parables of the Kingdom

The parable of the wheat and the tares is an important introduction to the eschatology of Matthew and it gives some important details that integrate with the framework we have obtained during our time in the book of Daniel. Recall the judgment of the nations at the end of the age from Daniel's visions. The last Gentile kingdom will be done away with, along with the “little horn,” the last Gentile ruler. Since judgment is the theme of the Second Coming, what is to become of unbelievers after the Second Coming. The parable of the wheat and the tares explains it. Recall the parable in Matt. 13:24–30. Many Christians have taken this to be a prediction of false converts within the church. But the context here, as will be seen from the explanation, is the harvest after the Second Coming. It is the separation of the righteous left on the earth and the wicked left on the earth.

Vs. 41, “the Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire ... then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their father. Notice the capitalized words in this passage. What does that signify? It signifies a quotation from the OT text. What text is being quoted here? It is from Daniel 12:3 ... let's go back to Daniel momentarily.

Recall Daniel 12 talks about the final period of distress for the nation of Israel. From our Daniel timeline we know that happens at the Second Coming where those who are written in the book will be rescued. Verse 3 describes these Jews who are rescued as having a general characteristic of having insight into these events. As a result, they will shine like the brightness of the expanse of heaven. Notice that Matthew quotes Daniel 12 in the context of that final separation of unbelievers and believers at the end of the age.

Next week we will consider the end of Matthew 23, which provides another piece of background information that we need before venturing into 24.

