

## Presuppositional Dispensationalism

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This article will address four pillars of a framework necessarily foundational (in the author's estimation) to dispensational theology, and which contribute to matters including presuppositions, foundational truth, epistemology, and theological method. He does this through the incorporation of the presuppositional apologetic into the classical dispensational framework.

The intent is to provide within the dispensational system a development which, firstly, is not silent about and accurately represents and utilizes Biblical epistemology, and, secondly, which builds upon proper theological and philosophical foundations for the effective understanding, application, and defense of a dispensational worldview. The application of presuppositionalism to method, coupled with consistent Grammatico-historical interpretation, leads to a dispensationalism that is more robust in its conclusions.

### Introduction

Admittedly and without apology, this approach begins with circular reasoning. Specifically, it begins with the defining circle of self-authenticating truths upon which the system is (and will be) developed. While this might cause some to discount the approach, it must be realized at the outset that at issue here is not one option beginning with circular reasoning as opposed to another option which does not. Any approach to worldview necessarily begins with an application of circular reasoning. That is, a worldview must by definition begin with its own self-authenticating pronouncements of truth. Whether or not the pronouncements of the defining circle are valid is the question to consider, not whether such pronouncements are in fact made. The Biblical worldview claims exclusivity in its validity, never presenting an apologetic for its own validity, but rather assuming it as necessary and foundational truth. The positive assertions that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7) and wisdom (Prov. 9:10) provide the epistemological base for any effective theological method. In this *presuppositional dispensational* approach, the Solomonic epistemology will be adhered to.

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### Pillar I: The Existence of the Biblical God

#### Definition

As a first principal, the God of Scripture exists. Not merely as a deity, but as the One who has divinely disclosed Himself through means in which His exclusivity is decisively pronounced. He consistently claims uniqueness in bearing this attribute (i.e., Deut 4:35; Is. 45:5; Joel 2:27; Rev. 22:13, etc.). He exists exclusively as the Truth in contradistinction to any and every other proposed foundational or fundamental truth.

He is holy, holy, holy. This is the most emphasized description of God in Scripture (Is. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). The triplicate emphasis acknowledges the superlative nature of the holiness of God, and also seems to emphasize the perfections of the Trinity, identifying the holiness of the Three.

The holiness of God is not an isolated attribute, but rather a description of all that God is, in His character and His working. As it is the only descriptive used of Him three times consecutively in both Hebrew and Greek, and as such provides evidence of the centrality of holiness as God's self concept as His own superlative description of Himself.<sup>1</sup> Without Divine Self-disclosure mankind would be unable to know God.

#### Explanation

To begin the task of proving or demonstrating the existence of God, it must necessarily be assumed that there is (or needs to be) an objective ground of empirical or rational neutrality whereby there abides a framework of characteristics or rules to which God must Himself submit in order to verify of His own existence. If there exists such a ground, then the author of that ground (who would be by necessity superior to God) or even the ground itself must then be the true deity, with God as subservient and bound to it. If such a mythical scenario were to exist, then His existence would be summarily dismissed. Hence the effort to prove God's existence proves faulty in motivation (there exists no metaphysical reason to seek proof of the existence of God besides that of the primal desire to deny it), or in methodology (there exist no tools for accomplishing this task, and if the task is attempted it must

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utilize improper and inadequate tools). It is not insignificant that the Biblical writers provided no apologetic for the existence of God; rather His existence is stated, assumed, and necessary throughout the Biblical revelation as the reality-defining circle of foundational truth (Gen. 1:1; Ps. 14:1 etc.).

Therefore, the task here lies not in the realm of proving, demonstrating, or even defending His existence empirically or by independent reasoning, but rather in beginning with *the Beginning*: building upon the presupposition of His existence as the foundational and defining truth of reality. Belief in His existence is warranted due to His own self-authentication (in general, special, and personal [in Christ] revelation), and the knowledge of His existence is inescapable.<sup>2</sup>

God's existence is the necessarily foundational truth of the defined epistemology (Biblical theism per Prov. 1:7; 9:10), and as such is the

necessary element of “preunderstanding”<sup>3</sup> for further examination of the system.

In short: If the positive assertion of the existence of the Biblical God is an untrue assertion, then there could be no grounds for the legitimacy of the Biblically theistic system (or any system for that matter, for what would *any* absolute be based upon?<sup>4</sup>), but if the legitimacy of the system as a whole be logically warranted then belief in His existence likewise must be warranted, and therefore must be altogether acknowledged. Thus, belief in His existence is required as the basis for all human predication. If He exists, then He is the definer of epistemology. If He does not, then there can be no absolute definition of anything, let alone a coherent approach to epistemology. Van Til represents this truth cogently:

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All of the theistic arguments should really be taken together and reduced to the one argument of the possibility of human predication. Intelligent predication about anything with respect to nature or with respect to man were impossible unless God existed as the ultimate reference point of it all.<sup>5</sup>

*How then to escape the charge of methodological fideism?*

This approach *does not* advocate faith<sup>6</sup> as the sole or final source of dependence in the ascertaining of truth. Rather it simply finds its epistemological base defined in Scripture (i.e., the divine definition in Prov. 1:7; 9:10; and the human response in Rom. 1:18–21, etc.) and submits itself consistently to that definition, just as any epistemology must be founded upon principles of definition which must be maintained consistently throughout its application (again, a defining circle is found here, just as is necessary in any approach to epistemology).

The foundationalist approach that a proposition must be either fundamental to knowledge or based on evidence in order to be rationally justifiable<sup>7</sup> will generally conclude that the existence of God does not fit these qualifications<sup>8</sup> and therefore must be discounted or shown to be supported within a better defined Foundationalism. However, if the Biblical God exists, then He has defined that which is fundamental to knowledge - precisely His own reality, and thus the first pillar is not a fideistic pillar, but an epistemologically presuppositional pillar. Accusations of fideism here are unjustified.

Van Til has been criticized for developing a theology rather than an apologetic, and with this assessment I partially agree: the presuppositional apologetic (perhaps best stated by Van Til) is an epistemological beginning to theological method. It never presumes to make a defense of the existence of God by arguing to God. The Biblical mandate of *apologia* is in context of the believer’s hope (1 Pet. 3:15) with specific reference to the gospel (Php. 1:7 & 16), but never in reference to presenting arguments for the existence of Yahweh as God.

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## Importance to the Dispensational System

The existence of the Biblical God is the foundational truth whereby reality is measured. Any legitimate attempt at human predication and interpretation of the universe must be founded upon this premise, and as a result, the myth of an empirical neutral ground becomes apparent. Any theological method which depends on a non-existent empirical or rational neutrality is ultimately flawed at the base and thus wholly unfit for the epistemological task of theological development<sup>9</sup>.

The logical necessity of belief in the existence of the Biblical God as the starting point for theological method is demanded by Kuyper as he identified faith in the existence of the object to be investigated as the *conditio sine qua non* of investigation.<sup>10</sup> One would not begin any course of study without a basic understanding of certain ground rules from presupposition. Without the positive assertion of the existence of the Biblical God as the primal foundational truth, what are the basic ground rules in theological method? And who determines them? An approach so subjective as to operate from any other starting point than that of God’s reality would hardly be efficacious for producing a legitimate result.

## Pillar II: Divine & Authoritative Self-Disclosure

### Definition

God has divinely and authoritatively disclosed Himself, for the purpose of His own glorification<sup>11</sup> Via His creation of and action in history (*general revelation*), by communication through language (*special revelation*), and by sent representation (*personal revelation*).

### Explanation

God continuously makes Himself known<sup>12</sup> in *general (natural) revelation* (Acts 14:14–17) divinely by [1] the initial creative work itself (Is. 40), [2] by other

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marvelous divine activities using that which has been created (Ex. 15:1–21), and [3] within the creation itself (Ps. 19:1–6; Rom. 1:20). Solomonic epistemology recognizes God’s self-disclosure in this manner and the resultant imprint on the hearts of men: “He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their heart, yet so that man will not find out the work which God has done from beginning even to end.” (Ecc. 3:11). Pauline epistemology also recognizes the function of general revelation as resulting in the universal understanding of God’s invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature (Rom. 1:18–20<sup>13</sup>).

With these divinely inspired epistemological descriptives Calvin agrees, citing man’s innate sense of deity as stemming from an act of *implanting* on the part of God:

There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity. This we take to be beyond controversy. To prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretense of ignorance, God has implanted in all men a certain understanding of His divine majesty.<sup>14</sup>

Van Til also acknowledges the efficacy of general revelation to the end that natural man knows that he is the creature of God, knows that he is responsible to God, and knows that he should live to the glory of God.<sup>15</sup>

One accomplishment then of general revelation is man's inescapable awareness of God, as impressed upon him by God <sup>16</sup>, resulting in man's awareness of man's responsibility to God. Yet despite the profundity and efficacy of general revelation, it possesses intrinsic limitation in that it is sufficient to provide only enough revelation of God to leave every man without excuse (Rom. 1:20). It is intentionally incomplete and ineffective<sup>17</sup> for the task of presenting the content necessary for application of grace resulting in regeneration. This is no inherent flaw, but rather a designed feature facilitating the need for and provision of further revelation, thus representing the first processive step in the execution of God's methodology for self-disclosure.

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Following *general revelation*, God also has revealed Himself (in non-continuous fashion <sup>18</sup>), in many portions and in many ways (Heb. 1:1), through men moved by the Holy Spirit who spoke from God (2 Pet. 1:21), in *special revelation* by the cumulative progress of God-breathed<sup>19</sup> (2 Tim. 3:16) Scripture. This Scripture is inerrant (as the word of truth, 2 Tim. 2:15) in its original text and as such is necessarily authoritative for all aspects of life<sup>20</sup>. God's chosen vehicle for this authoritative special revelation was language. God used language to communicate with Himself before man was created. He blessed creation (Gen. 1:22), thereby using language to reveal Himself to creation. He gave imperatives (1:24, etc.), and finally He communicated with man. Human language does not have human origin, but rather originates with God, and for His purposes. The whole earth spoke His language (11:1) until He confused the language (11:9). This basic argument for the origin of language is central to the issue of authority, relating to human origin, and ultimately to the authority of the revelation itself.<sup>21</sup> Due to the divine origin of human language, Lockhart's axiom stands: Language is a reliable medium of communication<sup>22</sup>. Insofar as God used language to communicate Himself to man it is evident that He intended His revelation to be cognitively understood by those to whom it was directed.

The means of special revelation by way of language varied (as expressed in Heb. 1:1), but included theophanies, dreams and visions, direct

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interaction, miracles and signs, and prophets.<sup>23</sup> In each methodological approach, inarguably God sufficiently made Himself understood in the cognitive sense.

*Special revelation* functions as furthering the glorification of God, particularly in communication of the reconciliatory plan with stated impact of restoring the soul, and bringing wisdom, joy, and enlightenment (Ps. 19:7–8), and more precisely directed as [1] giving the unregenerate man wisdom leading to salvation (2 Tim. 3:15), and [2] giving the regenerate man adequacy and equipping for every good work (2 Tim 3:17). In short, God's revelation of this type makes possible the *gnosis* necessary for positional relationship with Him -the knowing unto salvation<sup>24</sup>, and provides the hortatory means whereby one can properly walk in a manner worthy of that positional relationship. The Old and New Testaments together provide the *special revelation* of God to the sinner, without which a true ethical interpretation of life is an impossible proposition.<sup>25</sup>

If the central purpose of *special revelation* is the glory of God, and the central theme of God within it is the reconciliatory plan, then the central Character is Jesus Christ. Thus, at the base *special revelation* points to God's *personal revelation* (Jn. 5:39) in His Son, Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:18; Heb. 1:1). The Christ, as the *personal revelation* of God, is both representative (Col. 1:13–18; Heb. 1:3) in that He represents God as God (being very God) to man, and hortatory (Jn. 1:18), in that He teaches the means of rightful positional relationship with God - namely belief in Him. He is therefore both the Revealed and the self-disclosing Revealer.

As self-disclosing, God naturally speaks with absolute authority. Therefore the Bible does not appeal to human reason in order to justify what it says. It comes to the human being with absolute authority.<sup>26</sup> It bears the mark of truthful self-authentication "as white and black things do of their color, or sweet and bitter things do of their taste"<sup>27</sup>. As authoritative, all elements of His revelation require human response, and man is held accountable for his response.

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## Importance to the Dispensational System

Of particular importance here is the characterization of God's revelation as *authoritative*. The presupposition of propositional revelation is necessitated by the first pillar. It is the *worthiness* of revelation that is at issue in the second pillar.

In all forms of revelation, that which God has communicated of Himself is done so effectively and accomplishing with certainty the result which He desires.

As authoritative, God's *special revelation* (as that which is profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness) demands human submission, and is never subject to any authority on the interpreter's part (2 Pet. 1:20–21).

## Pillar III: Incapacity of Man to Comprehend Revelation

### Definition

Once man has a proper perspective and understanding of the reality of and the essentially communicated identity of God, he can begin to have a proper understanding of himself<sup>28</sup>. As man is a reflection of his Creator, he can not successfully grasp his own nature without having first ascertained that of his Creator, thus the understanding of natural man's incapacity to comprehend (to willfully receive as truth) even while cognitively understanding God's revelation must come after the first pillar recognition of the Biblical God, which of course presumes the necessity of and authority of Scripture, the foundation of the second pillar.

How then does man respond to divine revelation? How *can* he respond to divine revelation? First, in the cognitive sense man has understood God's general revelation (Rom. 1:18–23). There is no doubt here that man's failure is not one of lacking understanding of the character of God, rather it is lacking the proper response to submission to Him as God. The cognitive fundamental of His existence has been resisted by the fallen human mind, and has been replaced by worship of the creation itself, the failure here not being a lack of understanding, but a lack of fearing Him as God, and thus man possesses ultimately an innate inability to arrive at wisdom.

In the second place, in the cognitive sense man has understood God's special revelation through Scripture. As revealed using the tools of language, Scripture is grammatically understood by the unbeliever (although with remarkably increasing difficulty), yet the unbeliever understands the self authenticated truths to be foolishness (1 Co. 2:14) and thus fails to respond positively<sup>29</sup>, ultimately rejecting the claims of Scripture.

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Third, in the cognitive sense has understood God's personal revelation in Christ Jesus. Every man has been enlightened by the incarnation of Christ (Jn. 1:9) - Christ has explained the Father, and while understood cognitively<sup>30</sup>, He is not received, for darkness is preferred by humanity over the light He provides (Jn. 3:19).

Why then does man, while understanding cognitively the revelations of God, consistently fail to grasp them in the personal sense without His divine aid?

### **The Noetic Effects of Sin.**

The death promised in Gen. 2:17 was a result of disobedience to the command not to eat of the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil. The epistemology of the human race was changed at the moment Adam ate, accompanied by the spiritual death - the separation of man from fellowship with God. This change in the mind was certainly not for the better, despite Satan's promise that the offenders would be like God, knowing good and evil. Satan was half right - as humanity from that point forward would indeed know evil, yet would be fully incapable of grasping good. Roughly fifteen hundred years after Adam's sin, God described the thoughts of the human heart as "only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Later, God characterizes the human heart as more deceitful above all else and desperately sick (Jer. 17:9). The Satanic promise of *knowing good* proved to be a deception - the following of which left humanity without the capacity to rightly think and appraise reality. The spiritually dead man was no longer able (as the pre-fall Adam surely seemed to be, Gen. 2:16, 19) to understand, appraise, or respond positively to God's revelation (1 Cor. 2:14). Although creation pours forth truth and revelation of God (Ps. 19), that truth, being understood and clearly seen in natural revelation (Rom. 1:19), has been suppressed (Rom. 1:18) by the human mind.

The noetic effects of sin result in more than simply the lack of ability to appraise "spiritual things" (1 Cor. 2:14–16), there is, in the human mind, a bent to suppress and reject the truth of God, as men love the darkness rather than light (Jn. 3:19). As a result, God has given the ungodly over to a depraved mind (Rom. 1:28), and further, the minds of the perishing are blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:3–4), continuing the contrast between the natural mind and the regenerated mind (Jam. 3:13–18). The freedom of neutrality that Satan seemed to offer was nothing of the sort; rather it proved to be bondage to faulty thinking, as none are disposed to fear God (Rom. 3:18), and since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7), there are none who can claim a right epistemology without the intervention of God. The supplementing of human reason with divine revelation is not effective for bringing about the

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positional knowledge<sup>31</sup> of God. Rather, as Van Til notes, the fundamental conclusions of the fallen mind (as suppressing the truth of God) must be reversed.<sup>32</sup>

This is why the four pillars (the fourth yet to be identified), if employed by the unbeliever, will not and cannot translate of their own accord to saving faith. The right use of the four prerequisites by the unbeliever can only allow perhaps a mere glimpse of the unity and beauty of God's revelation, and therefore the unbeliever's need to receive it, and therefore an awareness of his need of Divine assistance in doing so. Van Til explains that the only way to see is to first believe:

[T]his God cannot be proved to exist by any other method than the indirect one of presupposition. No proof for this God and for the truth of His revelation in Scripture can be offered by an appeal to anything in human experience that has not itself received its light of the sun for the purposes of seeing by turning to the darkness of a cave.<sup>33</sup>

So how then does the incapable natural man believe in order to see? How then does God communicate in special revelation His truth to the human mind? For who can rightly appraise His revelation? His ways are higher, yet His word accomplishes what He desires, namely the revelation of Himself to those who are lower, despite their inherent limitations (Is. 55:8–9). How then does He overcome the effects of sin?

### **The Drawing Work of the Father**

Based on His choosing (Rom. 9:15–16), the Father draws to Himself those whom He wishes (Jn. 6:44). None can come of personal volition, and even if any could, they would not, for there is none who seeks after Him (Rom. 3:12–18). He has chosen those whom He will draw, even before the foundations of the world (Eph. 1:4–6), and His drawing work is efficacious, ultimately resulting in the glorification of those whom He has chosen (Rom. 8:30). His drawing work seems best equated with His calling work (Gal. 1:4–6, 15), and refers to His active involvement in bringing man to Himself, creating in man the ability to respond positively to His revelation. Also note Mt. 16:15–17 - the truth regarding Jesus Christ is revealed by the Father - Jesus is the Logos, the Word, the very Idea of God (Jn. 1:1–5) and Jesus Christ reveals the Father.

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### **The Revealing Work of Christ**

By virtue of His relationship with the Father, only Christ can adequately explain or reveal Him ( Jn. 1:18). There is no other who possesses this divine relation (as only begotten God), and there is therefore no other to whom humanity can look for the explanation of God's character. Christ claimed to be the only access to the Father (Jn. 14:6). His revelation of the Father is both representative (as the very image of God, Col. 1:15; as the exact representation, He. 1:3), and hortatory (in teaching about the character of the Father, Jn. 16; 12; 17:4–8). As the revelation of the Father, Christ is the primary topic of special revelation (Lk. 24:27, 45; Jn. 5:39). Without His revealing work, man would have no enlightenment (Jn. 1:9), no explanation of the Father (1:18).

## The Illuminating Work of the Holy Spirit

The Spirit guides into all truth (Jn. 16:7–11, 13). He is given to the believer so that<sup>34</sup> the believer will have comprehension<sup>35</sup> of that given by God (1 Cor. 2:12). Chafer emphasizes on this point that "...in so far as He opens the understanding to the Scriptures, He unveils that which He has originated"<sup>36</sup>. By virtue of the anointing of the Holy Spirit, which every believer possesses, He is the Divine Teacher of the believer (1 Jn. 2:27). Without Him the individual is simply 'worldly-minded (Jn. 19). Without His convicting work (Jn. 16:8) and divine enablement (1 Co. 12:3) the individual would be fully incapable to respond with repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25).

## Importance

John Whitcomb adroitly identified a significant flaw in certain apologetic approaches, saying,

it must be admitted that Christians have too often been guilty of building systems of apologetics on *other foundations than the one set forth in Scripture*. Instead of giving the impression that men are eagerly waiting for proof that Christianity is true, the Bible exposes men's hearts as sealed shut against any and all finite pressures for conversion.<sup>37</sup> (emphasis mine).

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Whitcomb's characterization is also applicable to theological method. If the apologetic foundations are flawed, then by virtue of the apologetic relation to theological method, the theological foundations are equally flawed. Both methodologies - apologetic and theological - must find their base, form, and function in Scripture.

Man's incapacity cannot be overcome by an achievement of the mind. The great chasm between man and God can only be bridged by the hand of God through His work, both allowing and enabling man to respond in faith. Yet, as He revealed Himself with the tools of language, He does not work in counteraction to the basic principles of language (i.e., hermeneutic principles). Therefore, there is dual responsibility borne in developing proper apologetic and theological method: (1) God's part: He must reveal Himself to and illuminate those whom He has chosen to know Him (positionally), and (2) the believer's part: the believer must be (a.) dependant upon God's divine guidance and (b.) diligent to rightly utilize the tools of language in order to understand His revelation.

## Pillar IV: Utilization of a Consistent Hermeneutic

### Definition

Due to the fixity of special revelation (1 Cor. 12:10; Heb. 2:2–4), the use of language as the chosen vehicle, and the intrinsic authority of Scripture, the utilization of a consistent hermeneutic approach to Scripture is demanded.<sup>38</sup> Ryrie offers three evidences for the legitimacy of a consistent literal hermeneutic: (1) Biblical - based on the clearly literal fulfillments of prophesy historically fulfilled, (2) Philosophical - based on the purpose of language as

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given by God to communicate with man, and (3) Logical - based on the need for objective interpretation and the absence of objectivity which parallels the absence of a consistent literal hermeneutic.<sup>39</sup> Paul Tan likewise identifies the consistent use of the literal hermeneutic is good hermeneutics.<sup>40</sup>

It is maintained here that not only is a consistent application of hermeneutic method *good* (as Ryrie and Tan suggest), but it is additionally both *possible* <sup>41</sup> and *necessary*.

### Definition

The hermeneutical principles utilized must honor the authoritative revelation of God as such, and therefore cannot enthrone the interpreter, but must instead acknowledge the enthronement of the Revealer.

The task of the interpreter is that of rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). The interpreter is not a collaborator in the recording of the word of truth, and thus possesses no authority to eisegete his own understandings into the text or to modify in any way the words and meanings given by the Author.

If this be so, then an acknowledgment must be made of the hierarchy within the dual authorship of Scripture. Men were moved by the Spirit to write, but their words were God's words (2 Pet. 1:20–21). Undoubtedly, the words of Scripture themselves were inspired (2 Tim. 3:16), and not the men God used to pen them. It is therefore the interpreter's task to submit to the authority of the Revealer, and thus to accept, as they stand, the Scriptures' assertions as truth.

Proportionate to the level of authority the interpreter allows himself, there are three hermeneutical methodologies that bear consideration. The three approaches will here be referred to as accommodation, partial-accommodation, and non-accommodation.

The accommodation hermeneutic encompasses any hermeneutic methodology which fully accommodates the authority of the interpreter over revelation. In particular, full accommodation is characterized by one of two assertions (or both): [1] language is of human origin, and does not



provide a vehicle conducive to absolute understanding of propositional revelation, and therefore the hermeneutical process, like human language, is subject to

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advancement and must evolve, and [2] in such a view the writings of Scripture are not themselves propositional revelation, but rather contain some degree of revelation, and it is the interpreter who must determine what is revelation, what is not, and must likewise delineate meaning either by experiential interpretation (enthroning the heart of the interpreter) or by rational interpretation (enthroning the mind of the interpreter). The accommodation hermeneutic can be consistently applied, yet, clearly it causes the second pillar of self-authentication to crumble. Therefore, in this approach the accommodation hermeneutic is not a viable option.

The mediating approach is the partial-accommodation hermeneutic, which uses a sometimes literal approach, but at other times elevates the authority of the interpreter either by (in extreme cases) outright distaste for conclusions arrived at through literal methodology, or indirectly and unintentionally by (in moderate cases) seeking to alleviate seeming discontinuities by a methodology that lends itself more toward reliance on a deductive, eisegetical approach.

To differing degrees, and with differing motivation, each variant of the partial-accommodation hermeneutic wanders from the literal historical-grammatical system. Alexandrian allegorism, multilayer hermeneutic<sup>42</sup>, phenomenological hermeneutic<sup>43</sup>, double-revelation<sup>44</sup> ramifications, genre override, and canonical process/ complementary<sup>45</sup> are a few notable nuances of partial-accommodation hermeneutical method. Each of these approaches to some degree or another enthrone the interpreter in issues where clarity of interpretation is seemingly difficult, and thus results (often unintentionally) in an unwarranted collaboration of interpreter with writer in the revelatory process. This type of collaboration violates the Author's divine right of singular authority over His revelation. Partial-accommodation approaches are inconsistent both in method and in practical submission to divine revelatory authority due to varying levels of interpreter authority. Partial-accommodation violates the fourth pillar (due to inconsistency) and sometimes crushes the

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second (due to occasional enthroneing of the interpreter); therefore it is not a viable option.

The non-accommodation hermeneutic makes no room for the enthroneing of the interpreter. Rather it squarely and consistently requires in theory the submission of the interpreter to the authoritative revelation and requires in practice an inductive and exegetical application, pulling out of the text the fixed and singular meaning placed there by the Divine Author. Only the literal grammatical historical method consistently acknowledges fixity, singularity, and authority of revelation. The non-accommodation approach is the only one of the three options that does not infringe upon the second pillar, and therefore (in this approach) it is the only viable option.

## Importance

The conclusions of the literal method are soundly dispensational-premillennial. Even opponents of dispensational conclusions readily admit them as necessary results of the literal methodology. Berkhof argues against the literal method in such cases of difference only because its conclusions are "entirely untenable"<sup>46</sup> in his estimation. He further states that literalism results in "all kinds of absurdities"<sup>47</sup>, based upon conclusions (with straw-men added) he cares not to accept. Gerstner admits that "on points where we differ, there is a tendency for the dispensationalists to be literalistic where the non-dispensationalist tends to interpret the Bible figuratively".<sup>48</sup> The literal approach is less concerned with conclusions and more concerned with a hermeneutical method that submits to the revelatory authority, yet the conclusions of the literal approach are distinctive. Ryrie emphasizes the relation between the methodology and the conclusions:

[I]f literalism is the valid hermeneutical principle then that is an approach to the Scriptures which if consistently applied can only lead to dispensational theology... only dispensationalism consistently employs the principles of literal interpretation.<sup>49</sup>

It is from within the framework of conclusions of a non-accommodation approach that Ryrie's *sine qua non* <sup>50</sup> emerges, not as a set of theological presuppositions, but as characteristic results.

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Four results of a literal grammatical-historical approach are particularly notable:

1. Consistent and practical submission in the interpretive process to the divine authority, inerrancy, and infallibility of Scripture.

As a result of respectful consideration of the self-authenticating nature of special revelation, the approach to Scripture is exegetical rather than eisegetical, and is primarily inductive (beginning with the text to find the theology) rather than primarily deductive (beginning with the theology in order to determine the text). Here the interpreter avoids the error of enthroneing himself as authoritative over God's revelation.

2. A recognition of the cumulative nature of revelation, applied in the interpretation of the New Testament in light of the Old Testament (and not vice versa)<sup>51</sup>.

Stallard identifies this as a paramount principle in his four steps<sup>52</sup> of theological method, rightly prioritizing the OT vs. the NT, simply as a product of cumulative revelation. Ryrie declared this recognition "an imperative"<sup>53</sup> without which will be raised "unresolvable contradictions"<sup>54</sup>.

Notice Christ's approach to handling OT revelation in His appearance to the two on the road to Emmaus: "And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:27). His listeners later described His process as "explaining the Scriptures" (24:32). Christ makes reference to this order within Scripture on

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other occasions as well, and His characterizations are not simply acknowledgments of the commonly held structure of the OT revelation. It is significant that in order to explain the Scriptures, Christ Himself started at the beginning.

If the NT is postulated by the OT, as Kuyper suggests<sup>55</sup>, by logical conclusion the NT must be interpreted on the basis of the revelation given in the OT. While there is inconsistency regarding the acknowledgment of the cumulative nature of revelation among those of non-literal persuasion<sup>56</sup>, there can be none for those holding to a literal hermeneutic.

### 3. Awareness of the doxological center

Even as Christ is the central Character in special revelation (Jn. 5:39), His primary purpose is doxological and not redemptive (Jn. 17:4; 1 Pet. 4:11)<sup>57</sup>. The redemptive plan is a means to the accomplishment of God's revealed purpose: specifically, His own glorification<sup>58</sup>. The doxological purpose extends further than the Westminster assertion<sup>59</sup> regarding the chief end of man. It is God's self proclaimed purpose in all of (human) history.

### 4. Recognition of the complete distinction between Israel and the church

To Israel belong the covenants (specifically Land, Davidic, and New Covenants as fulfillment of the Abrahamic) which ensure a future of restoration and literal fulfillment for Israel. The church is entirely distinct from national Israel, yet benefits (in fulfillment of Gen 12:3c, etc.) from blessings promised to Abraham through his descendants. Specifically, the church benefits from the New Covenant promise to Israel regarding forgiveness of sin (Jer. 31:34).<sup>60</sup>

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A.C. Gaebel recognized that both Jew and Gentile would participate in the Kingdom Age, but *not as one body*,<sup>61</sup> yet the mystery is revealed (Eph. 2:11–3:6) that in the current age exists a body (the body of Christ) - distinct from national Israel, made up of both Jew and Gentile. God's purpose in and for the two distinct groups are made evident in Romans 9–11, and in that same context the distinction between the two groups can readily be seen.

Chafer highlights the distinction, identifying twenty-four specific differences between Israel and the church.<sup>62</sup> The distinction is really at the heart of Ryrie's *sine qua non* (strategically identified as the first element), and until only recently<sup>63</sup> has been a universally agreed upon principle in dispensational thought. It must be noted that this principle of distinction is not a theological presupposition, but rather an inevitable result of the consistent application of the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic brings about this conclusion, a fact that non-dispensationalists readily admit<sup>64</sup>.

## Conclusion

These four pillars, with their associated results provide an essential framework for presuppositional dispensationalism, an attempt to build theological method upon the proper foundational elements (i.e., a Biblical epistemology, recognizing the existence and authority of the Divine Revealer), and to further develop and positively assert dispensational conclusions as those arising naturally from the natural, plain-sense reading of Scripture.

The purpose in view here is not to move toward a mediating position, nor is it to justify any particular system, but rather to approach God's word with necessary humility and to unashamedly stand firm on the assertions made therein.

This approach seeks to provide an apologetic synthesis within the theological method - the Biblically theistic worldview must be the stated basis

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of the theological framework. We must begin at the beginning, by casting off the shackles of atheistic modes of thought that so presently invade our theological (and apologetic) method, and build the base from a Biblical epistemology.

This approach seeks to provide a cohesive, consistent framework of approach to Biblical revelation, one that can deal cogently with historical and contemporary issues, proposing Biblical solutions using consistent hermeneutical methodology.

And finally, this approach seeks to encourage revitalization and renewed passion for the value of God's word as that which is entirely profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness - as the *sole standard* of thought and conduct for the believer.

Oh that my ways may be established  
To keep Thy statutes!  
Then I shall not be ashamed  
When I look upon all Thy commandments.  
Psalm 119:5–6

<sup>1</sup>Dabney succinctly sums up the centrality of His holiness to any accurate description of Him: "Holiness, therefore, is to be regarded, not as a distinct attribute, but as the resultant of all God's moral attributes together. And as His justice, goodness, and truth are all predicated of Him as a Being of intellect and will, and would be wholly irrelevant to anything unintelligent and involuntary, so His holiness implies a reference to the same attributes. His moral attributes are the special crown; His intelligence and will are the brow that wears it. His holiness is the collective and consummate glory of His nature as an infinite, morally pure, active, and intelligent Spirit." - Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, (Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985) 272-273.

<sup>2</sup>Van Til communicates this skillfully: "Everything in the created universe therefore displays the fact that it is controlled by God, that it is what it is by virtue of the place that it occupies in the plan of God. The objective evidence for the existence of God and of the comprehensive governance of the world by God is therefore so plain that he who runs may read. Men cannot get away from this evidence. They see it round about them. They see it within them. Their own constitution so clearly evinces the facts of God's creation of them and control over them that there is no man who can possibly escape observing it. If he is self-conscious at all he is also God-conscious. No matter how men may try they cannot hide from themselves the fact of their own createdness. Whether men engage in inductive study with respect to the facts of nature

about them or engage in analysis of their own self-consciousness they are always face to face with God their maker.” - Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1955), 195.

<sup>3</sup>This is a favorite term with Progressive Dispensationalists. With them it means an assumption or belief that may be altered or developed. Here it refers to presupposition.

<sup>4</sup>See George Smith's denial of God based on his argument against the necessity of first cause. - George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), 223–225.

<sup>5</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 102

<sup>6</sup>Besides that of the necessary defining circle of faith as is required by any system

<sup>7</sup>James Beckwith, “Philosophy and Belief in God: The Resurgence of Theism in Philosophical Circles”, *Masters Seminary Journal* 2, (Spring 1991), 61–77

<sup>8</sup>“Foundationalism is the view that a belief is a rational belief only if it is related in appropriate ways to a set of presuppositions which constitute the foundations of what we believe. It assumes, from the outset, that belief in God is not among these foundational propositions.” - D.Z. Phillips, *Faith After Foundationalism* (London: Routledge, 1988), 3.

<sup>9</sup>Historically, dispensationalism, while not positively asserting the neutral middle ground, has seemingly done little to positively deny it. As a result, the system faces increasing epistemological challenges, particularly related to hermeneutic theory.

<sup>10</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1980), 48

<sup>11</sup>Here is present the third element of Ryrie's *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, namely that the underlying purpose of God in all of His creation is the glory of God. -Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 46. This is in full agreement with the Biblical record as evidenced in: Ps. 19:1; 21:5; 97:6; 106:47; 115:1; Is. 6:3; 43:7; 49:3; Jer. 33:9; Hab. 2:14; Jn. 17:1; 2 Cor. 4:15; 8:19; Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; Php. 1:11; 2:11; Rev. 4:11; 5:12–13; 15:4. This is the doxological center: The glorification of God as the understood purpose for all things.

<sup>12</sup>B.B. Warfield, *Revelation & Inspiration*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 5

<sup>13</sup>For a thorough handling of the ramifications of Rom. 1:18–21 in presuppositional thought see David L. Turner, “Cornelius Van Til and Romans 1:18–21, A Study in the Epistemology of Presuppositional Apologetics” in *Grace Theological Journal*, Vol 2 *GTJ2A* (Spr 81), 45–81

<sup>14</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1940), 43

<sup>15</sup>Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 111

<sup>16</sup>W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1980), 1.63

<sup>17</sup>Warfield, *Revelation & Inspiration*, 7

<sup>18</sup>*Non-continuous* here meaning that at a certain point (that point identified in 1 Cor. 13:10, in this writer's estimation), His special revelation was complete, and that beyond that point He has not added to it or altered it, nor presently does He add to it or alter it, nor will He ever add to it or alter it.

<sup>19</sup>It is vital here to understand clear definition: that the writings themselves were inspired, not the writers, rather the human authors were moved of God and spoke from the Holy Spirit (despite F. Turretin's assertion to the contrary).

<sup>20</sup>For further definition, see the nineteen articles of *The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978), with which this writer agrees.

<sup>21</sup>Terry says: “The origin of human speech has been a fruitful theme of speculation and controversy. One's theory on the subject is likely to be governed by his theory of the origin of man. If we adopt the theory of evolution according to which man has been gradually developed, by some process of natural selection, from lower forms of animal life, we will very naturally conclude that language is a human invention, constructed by slow degrees to meet the necessities and conditions of life. If, on the other hand, we hold that man was first introduced on earth by a miraculous creation and was made at the beginning a perfect specimen of his kind, we will very naturally conclude that the beginnings of human language were of supernatural origin.” - Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 69.

<sup>22</sup>Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light, 1915), 20

<sup>23</sup>Rene Pache, *The Inspiration & Authority of Scripture*, (Salem, WI: Sheffield, 1992), 20–22

<sup>24</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes* 1:6:1

<sup>25</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Theistic Ethics* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1974), 15

<sup>26</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969), 15

<sup>27</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes* 1:7:2

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, 1:1:2

<sup>29</sup>Although there are varying levels of understanding with varying usages/misusages (Neh. 8:8; Mt. 21:45; Lk. 20:19; Php. 1:15–17; 1 Ti. 1:6–7; 2 Tim. 3:5–7; Ja. 1:22; Ju. 4)

<sup>30</sup>Note that His opponents clearly understood His claims, yet failed to acknowledge them as truth (Jn. 5:18, 39–40; 8:57–59)



<sup>31</sup>*ginosko* as defining a relationship involving eternal life in Jn 17:3, in contradistinction to the *ginosko* of Rom. 1:21.

<sup>32</sup>Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 15–16

<sup>33</sup>Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 109

<sup>34</sup>Note the *hina* purpose clause of 1 Cor. 2:12

<sup>35</sup>*eidomen* rather than *ginoskomen*, highlighting accurate *cognitive* rather than *experiential* understanding, reversing enslavement to the noetic effects of sin, providing the believer with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:12–16)

<sup>36</sup>L S Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Vol 6* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), p. 37

<sup>37</sup>John C. Whitcomb, "Contemporary Apologetics and Christian Faith," Part I, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 134, 104

<sup>38</sup>A significant point of departure in progressive dispensational thought is evident in disagreement with this assertion of need for a fixed hermeneutic: Blaising argues: "Given the nature of biblical literature and a history of practicing historical-grammatical exegesis, hermeneutical developments are inevitable, including distinctions of various levels of hermeneutical certainty and the exploration and testing of multiple hermeneutical options. It is the actual practice of historical-grammatical exegesis by dispensational scholars that is proving this fixed-interpretation view of dispensationalism inadequate" [Craig Blaising, *Developing Dispensationalism, Part 2: "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:579 (Jul 88) 258]. It seems to be upon this ground that Blaising (along with Bock) refers later to the complementary hermeneutic as a refinement of literal interpretation [Blaising & Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 52]. Blaising again suggests that although there have been many dispensational works which directly or indirectly imply a fixed or confessional method of interpreting Scripture, no "scholarly advocate of dispensationalism" has specifically made the claim as to the legitimacy of such. - Craig Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," 145:579 (Jul 88) p. 256.

<sup>39</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 88–89

<sup>40</sup>Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Dallas: Bible Communications, 1974), 21

<sup>41</sup>Some, like covenantalist John Gerstner, have suggested that it is impossible to maintain a consistently literal hermeneutic, particularly in approaching Biblical prophecy, and that dispensationalists in practice are inconsistent in their hermeneutic approach. - John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing The Word Of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Sole Deo Gloria, 2000), 93, 96, 110. While these accusations can be readily dealt with, they are valuable still in that they provide the interpreter pause and a reminder to avoid interpretive carelessness.

<sup>42</sup>E.g., Origen's literal, moral, spiritual; Clement's natural, moral, mystical, prophetic; Cassian's fourfold: literal, moral, allegorical, anagogical; Swedenborg's natural, spiritual, celestial; etc.

<sup>43</sup>As utilized by Calvin in his commentary on Genesis, particularly in 1:6 as he refers indirectly to the literal hermeneutic here as lacking 'common sense' and that Scripture here only deals with the "visible appearance of the world" and that no truths pertaining to astronomy are therein presented.

<sup>44</sup>As identified and critiqued by John C. Whitcomb, Jr. in, "Biblical Inspiration and the Double-Revelation Theory," *Grace Theological Journal*, Vol. 4,1, (Winter, 1963)

<sup>45</sup>With some variations by Childs, Bock & Blaising, Saucy, et al. The characterization as a partial-accommodation approach is explained in footnote under the results of a literal-grammatical approach

<sup>46</sup>Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1941), 712

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 713

<sup>48</sup>Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 93

<sup>49</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, "The Necessity of Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114:455 (Jul 57)

<sup>50</sup>1. distinction between Israel and the church, 2. literal hermeneutic, and 3. doxological purpose of God. - Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, AA-A1.

<sup>51</sup>at this point progressive dispensationalism is seen to utilize a partial-accommodation hermeneutic, as Blaising, Bock, Saucy, *et al* demonstrate in practice a re-definition of cumulative revelation and suggest that the resultant complementary hermeneutic is actually a refinement of the literal hermeneutic, when in fact, it is simply a different hermeneutical method entirely. See Robert Saucy, *The Case For Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 20–29, 70–71; Blaising & Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 100–105; Herbert Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 89–94.

<sup>52</sup>Stallard's four principles are adapted as follows: 1. recognition of one's preunderstanding. 2. formulation of Biblical theology of the Old Testament from a literal grammatical historical interpretation of the Old Testament. 3. formulation of Biblical theology of the New Testament from a literal grammatical historical interpretation of the New Testament. 4. production of systematic theology by harmonizing input from 2 and 3. Adapted from Mike Stallard, "Literal Hermeneutics, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism."

<sup>53</sup>Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, Victor Books, 1986), 114

<sup>54</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>55</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology* (Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1980), 461

<sup>56</sup>E.g., see Berkhof's practical struggle with this issue. - Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1941), 715.

<sup>57</sup>The non-dispensationalist generally argues that the redemptive center provides continuity/ unity within Scripture, and emphasizes only one people of God, and thus provides a significant evidence against the distinction between Israel and the church. -E.g., O.T. Allis, *Prophecy And The Church* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1945), 17–18;

<sup>58</sup>Ps. 86:9, 12; Eze. 39:13; Jn. 17:3–4; Rom. 11:36, 12:1–2; 1 Co. 6:20, 10:31; Eph. 2:8–10; 1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Pet. 4:11; Is. 6:3 & Rev. 4:11, etc.

<sup>59</sup>Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever. [Shorter Catechism, 1]

<sup>60</sup>This element of blessing as bestowed on the church is highlighted in Eph. 2:11–3:6, and 1 Jn. 2:25), and does not (1) replace the church with Israel, (2) include the church in any other aspects of the New Covenant, or (3) invalidate or alter in any way the covenant promises made to Israel.

<sup>61</sup>A.C. Gaebelain, *The Annotated Bible: Romans-Ephesians* (NY: Our Hope, n.d.), 252

<sup>62</sup>Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 6. 47–53.

<sup>63</sup>The advent of progressive dispensationalism has brought a blurring of the lines between Israel and the church, epitomized by Saucy's assertion that "there is a mediating position between non-dispensationalism and traditional dispensationalism...and it denies a radical discontinuity between the present church age and the messianic kingdom promises." - Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 20, and identified in Lanier Burns' characterization that "The difference between traditional and progressive dispensationalists is the extent to which Old Testament covenants are realized (in other words, fulfilled) in the church age." -Bateman, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 290.

<sup>64</sup>See Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 712; A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1947), 1011; O.T. Allis, *Prophecy And The Church*, 54; etc.

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