

## A NARRATIVE DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

We in the Dispensational tradition have received a rich heritage in Bible Exposition, yet in recent year's evangelicalism as a whole has not acknowledged its contribution. Thus it is my desire to develop the foundation laid and in so doing highlight features in biblical interpretation that will enhance an expository ministry.

Lewis Sperry Chafer produced a classic multivolume Dispensational systematic theology. Building upon what is distinctive, I want to propose a narrative form of this biblical theology. It is my conviction that a historic-narrative form is to be preferred over the systematic form to highlight what is distinctive in dispensationalism. That distinctive contribution rests in God's progressive revelation. As God spoke creation into existence, so God speaks to his chosen partners in history as his goals are fulfilled in the progress of revelation. The narrative features God's governance through his **Word** and his chosen stewards who manage his revelation in the sequence of dispensations.

In addition, the narrative form will shape the overall view of history reducing the number of dispensations from seven to four. As such Genesis 1–11 sets the stage for the *progress in revelation*. The setting of the stage consists of *normative revelation* that frames the history that follows. This revelation: the creation account, the pronouncement of judgment on evil, the Noahic covenant, human government, and the division of languages – is normative, and unchanging throughout history.

This is distinct from *progressive developing revelation* which moves toward God's goal at the end of history. This consists of three dispensations advancing from Genesis 12 toward the dispensation of grace following Christ's first advent. This involves a series of plot-conflicts in history. The *Revelation* in the context of *Daniel* reveals the final dispensation and the complete fulfillment of God's goal in creation in the final conflict resolution.

In order to clarify the sense of value of this meta-narrative, we need to discuss three significant terms: theology, biblical, and narrative.

### Theology

In the most basic terms, theology is the study of God. The focus of this study is on one aspect of theology, namely God's role as Governor over the earth from the creation to the end of history. The meta-narrative of Scripture interprets who God is and what he does to accomplish his foreordained goals. Since this story rests on Scripture, the basis of our knowledge is special revelation which provides a solid foundation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See essays by Albert Mohler, "When the Bible Speaks, God Speaks: The Classic Doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy," and Kevin Vanhoozer "Augustine Inerrancy: Literary Meaning, Literal Truth, and Literate Interpretation in the Economy of Biblical Discourse," in *Five Views on Biblical Inerrancy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

The goal of this theological study is to apprehend what Scripture says about God and his ways. To apprehend is distinguished from to comprehend. Our goal is to be true to the meaning which the text reveals rather than rejecting meanings we cannot comprehend. The revelation goes beyond reason but is not unreasonable. As a result, our knowledge of God is both rational, filled with awe, and with personal love (Mk. 12:29-37). Caird comments on Paul's response that he "never had doubt that the power to which he surrendered was the constraint of love (2 Cor. 5:14, Gal. 2:20)."<sup>2</sup>

God's predestined plan involves mystery built into the creation. The predetermined plan in which God knew every detail included the participation of chosen human partners created in God's own image.<sup>3</sup> So when God created man, as a person, mankind shared self-awareness and self-determination with God.<sup>4</sup> The *Westminster Confession* (1646) states the combination well: "Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of the second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently."<sup>5</sup> And those secondary causes feature the partnership with chosen individuals. How this tension between sovereign determination and human self-determination is worked out is an aspect of the mystery.<sup>6</sup>

So God's governance is beyond full rational comprehension, a fact that places governance beyond any reason for human attempts to control (Job 38–42). Yet God's sovereign rule does not contradict what is reasonable. This means that partnership involves managing one's life<sup>7</sup> by faith in what God has said; living as a steward in obedience based on what God says. And in that partnership, the steward comes to love the One who chose him in love. Finally, it is a partnership in which the partner often is surprised by the revelation of God's glory

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<sup>2</sup> G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Predestination and foreknowledge are difficult terms to grasp. Since God is outside of his creation and thus outside of time, God's determination and knowledge are simultaneous. They exist before the creation. God is omniscient and knows all possible plans of creation in every detail. Upon determining his plan, he has knowledge of every detail in the plan. God then acts in the history of creation as he has determined according to what he knows

<sup>4</sup> Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster), 126.

<sup>5</sup> *The Westminster Confession* (1646: reprint ed; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1963), 5.2.200

<sup>6</sup> Man has creaturely self-determination. This entails limited freedom of choice. He cannot choose to become another person, a date of birth, or what talents he has. The mystery concerns how God allows genuine creaturely choice yet maintains his governing predestination. "By the very nature of the case there is not intermediate means between God (the primary efficient cause) and humans (the secondary efficient causes) of free actions. God is the cause of the fact of freedom and humans are the causes of the acts of freedom...God gives people power (of free choice), but they exercise it without coercion. Thus God is responsible for bestowing freedom, but humans are responsible for behaving with it" (Norman Geisler, "God Knows All Things," in *Predestination and Freedom*, ed by Basinger and Basinger [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1986], 79). At the fall of the human race into sin, man did not lose self-determination, but their self-awareness was darkened. No longer did man see himself as a servant of God, but as one who can be like god in his power. With his awareness fallen, he chose as a slave to lie and sinned.

<sup>7</sup> John K. Goodrich, *Paul as a Administrator of God in 1 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 152 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012).

and is in a position of awe as he worships. Thus the relationship of chosen partners involves a study resulting in personal knowledge including wonder and love.

These realities in the study of Biblical theology find their place within God's universal kingdom.<sup>8</sup> This kingdom extends over all reality which exists in tact without loss or challenge. From his position as universal Sovereign, God created the heavens and the earth. Then in the creation of Adam, he delegated to him the responsibility of mediating God's rule on earth. Yet in his self-determination, God permitted Adam to rebel which he did and sin entered the world in the human race.

Thus, it is God's mediatorial kingdom on earth that was challenged and lost. Adam had followed the word of the serpent who spoke as the enemy of God (Gen. 3:1-6). Now the fallen human race was ruled by the prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2), the ruler of the world (John 12:31). In God's plan to redeem captive mankind and to restore his mediatorial rule on earth, God chose Eve and her chosen offspring to partner in conflict against God's enemy (Gen. 3:15).

Later in the story, Paul saw himself and Apollos as a *steward* of God's revelation (1 Cor. 4:1-5). God's governance in a world under Satan's rule featured his progressive revelation. As God had spoken creation into existence (Gen. 1:1-2:3), so in history, God entrusted his historic revelation to *stewards* who were to *manage* their lives according to God's revelation in order to bring blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:3; Ex. 19:5, 6).

To begin with, this theological narrative forces us to face a puzzling question: How does the story indicate that God determines the direction of man who is free to determine his own course? How can that be?

## **Biblical**

There are a number of clues about how God directs human beings while preserving their freedom to determine their own direction. The first and most significant influence is **God's Word** spoken to form and direct chosen individuals. This **Word** is seen in the narrative as *historic-revelation* as God began to speak to Abraham (Gen. 12-22) and continued to speak to other historical characters. That historic revelation becomes a portion of *scriptural-revelation* composed for the benefit of later generations of elect individuals and the canonical collection of these books preserve the progress of historic revelation. A central part of God's communication involves that progress in revelation that guides the narrative and forms the meta-narrative. God's WORD expresses his will without forcing a conforming response.

But the question of God's direction still remains open because some hear and respond and others either disregard or reject what God says. This does give evidence of God preserving individual's self-determination. But the problem of this **tension** was even exasperated by the

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<sup>8</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1974).

rebellion of Adam to act in direct **opposition** against the Creator. This conflict incorporated into the plot structure of the biblical narrative, is introduced in the setting of creation.

### **Setting-Creation Narrative**

A prophetic interpretation in a narrative account includes sight of the natural world and the supernatural world and insight into unseen issues in the natural world. Genesis 1–11 sets the setting and includes such sight and insight. The issue of conflict is implied in the creation narrative (Gen. 1:1–2:3). The creation setting begins with a title (1:1). Then Genesis 1:2 introduces that conflict since the earth exists even though the days in which the heavens and the earth are created have not begun yet (1:3-31). Further, the earth that exists is without form and empty and in complete darkness. This forces the thoughtful reader to ask: how does the earth exist before it is created? How does it exist in such a decimated condition?

An answer is implied when the creation narrative is read. The first three acts of creation give it form (1:3-13). The act of creation in the last three days fill the heavens with birds and the water with fish as the earth is populated by animals and mankind (1:14-31). These acts of creation rather than completing the creation of a destroyed earth (1:1, 2), create the earth known to mankind by recreating what was decimated. The implication is that the earth is destroyed because of a judgment prior to Genesis 1:2. That judgment of the earth included a judgment of the earth's occupant-the enemy of God (Ezek. 28:12-17). Granting that implication, a natural explanation of the enemy of God that appears to tempt Adam and Eve is provided (Gen. 3:1-5).

This explanation of the background of the creation account, highlights the role of man in the creation of the present earth (3:1-5). Man is created to mediate God's rule on earth (1:24-26). In this sense, man replaces the prior ruler, the enemy of God who had been judged. That also explains why man is attacked by the enemy speaking through a serpent seeking to undermine God's present creation. The serpent speaks to dethrone man and to restore his former position as ruler on the earth. So the conflict in the biblical narrative is not just the *tension* between the sovereign determination of God and the self-determination of Adam. The tension intensifies to become a *conflict* as Adam determines to follow the serpent as having a greater advantage for himself. As a result of that choice, Adam's self-awareness was darkened and all subsequent choices would be controlled by a self-serving attitude. And, Adam was also subject to death. This raises two further questions. How can man ever mediate God's rule? Has God's creation plan been thwarted?

### **Setting-Plot Conflict**

The two questions above are answered in a counter plot intended to resolve the conflict. That plot is introduced in God's judgment pronounced against the serpent-enemy of God (Gen. 3:15). While the pronouncement has vague elements, the use of conflict to pronounce judgment seems clear.

As already implied from the creation account (1:1–2:3), an ultimate conflict already existed between God and the serpent who then spoke to undermine God’s plan (3:1-5). It is the enemy speaking to restore his former position as ruler of the earth. Rather than challenging God directly, he attacks the weak link of mankind. Eve is tempted and she is deceived and Adam is induced to join her and he sinned. As a result of this sin, depravity and death are passed on to the human race. So God permits sin to enter the creation and allows the enemy to set the terms of the conflict.

It is within these terms that God pronounces a plot to resolve the conflict. While the resolution is certain because the judgment of God has been pronounced against the serpent, the terms of final resolution are vague. If it is to be realized, it will only be accomplished because God has spoken and the fulfillment will display God’s glory in its fullness based on what he determined at the outset of creation.

Based on the conflict and Adam’s fall, it seems very improbable that the conflict can be resolved on the enemy’s terms. These terms are now highlighted to accentuate the marvel of the stated judgment.

*The terms involve a weak link* which consists of man overcoming evil. (3:15a). Eve is chosen to do conflict with the serpent. No indication is provided by the text of this struggle until the next generation.

*The terms involve conflict and death* (3:15b; 4:1-26). The conflict is continued indefinitely as indicated by the term “seed” (3:15b). As a collective noun, it implies an indefinite series of generations. In addition, the seed of the serpent is unclear. Since the serpent is an animal, is the seed an animal?

The text of Genesis 4:1-26 discusses the next generation of Eve's offspring which clarifies the answer to the question regarding the "seed." Eve bears a son and names him Cain, believing he is the promised offspring.<sup>9</sup> Then Abel is born. The identity of either one as seed of the serpent is not known until they each bring an offering to God. Cain brings an offering which is the produce of his own efforts. Abel brings an animal sacrifice from his flocks. Cain's is rejected while Abel's is accepted. For Abel followed the pattern of the skins God provided for his parents (3:21). While this interpretation is debated, it naturally explains the flow of the narrative. Cain in his anger at his rejection is warned that he must reject evil which crouches before him and desires to control him (4:7). At that moment, he brings Abel into the wilderness and kills him (4:8). Death is the power of the serpent, whose life now courses through Cain. By contrast, Abel is the seed of the woman who is replaced by Seth (4:25, 26). The descendants of the woman are then included in the genealogies of the setting (5:1-32); 11:10-32), one per generation, as the years are recorded when each descendant is born.

*The terms involve the serpents return* (3:15c). Perhaps it is the unresolved conflict that prompts the serpent's return. More likely, it is the person of the seed of the woman of that generation that couples with an unresolved conflict that prompts the return. Yet nothing is mentioned except that the woman's seed is an individual descendant (he, him).

Nevertheless, the conflict is intense involving the same blow, a death blow at the heel of the seed of the woman and a death blow at the head of the serpent. How this is a resolution of the conflict is not clear. What is clear is that God has pronounced judgment against the serpent-animal (3:14) and the serpent-enemy (3:15). The plot has been cast in vague terms but the resolution clearly involves God's judgment of the serpent.

*The terms of judgment are clear to Adam* (3:20, 21). Adam is faced with a stark decision. God had said that when you eat of the tree you shall surely die (2:17). Now that they both had eaten, God pronounced that the woman would have offspring (3:15, 16). Adam believed God's word and named the woman, Eve, mother of the living (3:20). He believed God would address the curse of death and would give the woman the promised offspring. And God did as he sacrificed substitute animals to cover both Adam and Eve with skins (3:21). While Adam and Eve will in time die physically (5:3), their immediate death in God's presence was addressed by the skin coverings. And man could approach God through sacrifice

Based on God's sovereign predestination and according to his foreknowledge, God casts the climax in the terms of judgment. In the prophetic statement of the judgment God commits himself to assure the outcome. Apart from a sovereign God speaking, this outcome seems very improbable, after Adam had fallen and passed on the life of a darkened self-awareness. What could possibly reverse the destiny of human life? Only the **Word of God** provides any

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<sup>9</sup> Syntactically, should  $\tau\alpha$  be understood as a direct object marker ("I have acquired a man—the Lord") or a preposition ("with the help of the Lord"). Luther argued for the former with the sense that Eve believed that she had given birth to the Lord that would bruise the Serpent's head. However, many modern commentators and translations (NASB, NIV, RSV) prefer the latter option.

assurance. But the story needs to be heard before we can spell out the ironic reversal of fortunes.

### The Resolution of Tension and Opposition

The resolution that God brings comes into focus in the lives of God's chosen ones clarified by Jesus. Jesus acknowledged that "no one can come to Me" without divine enablement (John 6:44a). And that enablement originates with God's election of who would come to him. But does the divine enablement replace the self-determination in the elect? Does the divine assistance provide the faith response in place of the individual response? Jesus assures his followers that the "Father *draws* those who respond" (6:44b). The text then adds the quotation from Isaiah 54:13 in which ones *drawn* are taught by God (6:45). It seems clear that draw does not mean *force*. Rather the one drawn listens, reflects and learns from God's Word. Then the individual responds as the **Word** molds his self-determination.

Moses had explained from his generation the necessity of this work of God: "the Lord has not given a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear to this very day" (Deut. 29:4). Such a work of God provides eyes to see, ears to hear and a heart to perceive the **Word** God has spoken. That **Word** then *draws* a self-determined faith response to what God has said. Like the man born blind, Jesus' **revelation** in *sign* and in *word* guides him to believe and to receive the Son of Man as Lord (John 9:1-38).

In a similar fashion, Jesus joins two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In his questions and explanations he opens their eyes to see and ears to hear that Messiah ought to have suffered *these things* (they talked about) and to enter his glory (Luke 24:25-27). In reflection they describe their experience of their hearts burning within them. Then they saw and believed.

So the answer to our question of the resolution of the tension and opposition was clarified as the Father *drew* them to see and to believe. These words of Jesus seem to be normative of the work which Moses referred to for his generation (Deut. 29:4). However, this answer suggests two further questions. First, what right did God have to choose and to use individuals from a fallen race? And second, would God's drawing of numerous individuals, generation after generation, be sufficient to resolve the plot conflict? The answers to these questions demand a consideration of the narrative as a whole.

### Narrative

Based on these *theological* and *biblical* considerations, the point of the narrative as a whole has been clarified: The management of life because of and through the **Word** by the elect, in partnership with God, reveals God's governance through the progress of revelation in the plan for salvation history.

God's GOVERNANCE involves the partner's management of their lives *because of and through* God's WORD. In the progress of revelation, Gods' WORD appeared in two forms. First, the *spoken expression* of God's WORD appeared in history which was collected in the canon of

Scripture. At the time of the end, the *Personal appearance* of Gods' WORD appeared in Jesus Christ. The BASIS of God's choosing and salvation of individuals from a fallen race rest in *Personal appearance* of God, keeping the commitment of his WORD. The MEANS of God's drawing and salvation of the elect features his *spoken* WORD in history or in Scripture. Thus, the conflict with evil is so intense, no elect individual nor generation overcame evil or fulfilled Gods' plan. That is until the WORD became flesh to partner with **God the Father** to serve in perfect obedience. In his surrender to the **Father**, he became **God's provision** for man's salvation and for the mediation of God's **governance** on earth

This summary will be outlined briefly in the progress of revelation.

**Promise**, as stated in the Abrahamic Covenant, introduces the purposes of God's overall plan. Two additional features need to be focused on. First, the promises are made from the perspective of two foundational goals (Gen. 1-3), namely, (1) to restore the mediatorial kingdom, and (2) to redeem believers to become God's partners. Thus the promises to Abraham address the blessings needed to fulfill these goals. Second, the promise incorporates God's commitment of himself necessary to provide these blessings. Before these blessings appear, they need to be received by faith as Abraham had. In Genesis 15:6, Abraham was declared righteous by faith and in Genesis 22:1-22, God's necessary provision of a substitute sacrifice to deliver Isaac his son in response to Abraham's obedience and faith. This was Abraham managing his life because of and through the **Word of Promise**.

**Law**, in the Mosaic covenant, was added to **promise** because without obedience, God would not keep his **promise**. This does not mean that obedience could earn God's blessings but obedience of the steward would provide the occasion in which God would bless. This happened with Abraham (Gen. 22:16-18). Yet in the self-determination of Israel, would a generation be willing to partner with God under his **theocratic rule**.

Eventually, Israel in frustration, desired to be like other nations in addressing their geopolitical conflicts and asked for a **monarchy**. When David arose to be king, being a man after God's heart, God revealed the Davidic covenant. In the process, God pronounced a **theocratic monarchy**. The covenant contained promises that one of David's sons would arise to mediate God's rule on earth. This introduced the question of who this mediator would be. That is, who would arise to be the Davidic descendant that would allow God to rule his life completely? Not even David had done that!

For about four hundred years no such king arose. In the midst of Israel's return from captivity and survival under Roman rule, the **Word** who had spoken took on flesh to dwell in the land. The **Word** who had spoken to commit God to act became the **Word** who partnered with God to keep his commitments to act through his life. What no earlier generation had been willing to do nor any individual had done, Jesus the Christ did. In his willingness to keep Israel's legal commitments (Matt. 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13), the **Son** allowed the **Father** to keep his **promised** commitments to him. While earlier generations had experienced limited degrees of fulfillment, now Jesus Christ experienced complete fulfillment in resurrection from the dead. However, this was the first stage fulfillment as this descendant of the woman overcame death



in order to strike the serpent in the head in final judgment (Gen. 3:15). What earlier generations had been unwilling to do, God in flesh was willing to surrender to the Father's will and word (Matt. 26:39, 42, 45, 46). Jesus lived as a Steward of the **Word**, managing each decision in obedience to the **Word** he had previously spoken. And he experienced God's blessing in overcoming death in resurrection and ascension as Heir.

**Grace** marks the next stage in the progress of revelation. It involves the **Word** of blessings that are based upon the finished work of Christ. In addition, the reception of the down payment of the **Son's** inheritance, the Holy Spirit formed the body of Christ, the church on earth. The epistles fleshed out the **WORD** of the blessings in Christ which had a responsibility for believers as stewards of God's revelation. Believers are responsible to manage their lives according to the **WORD** addressed to the Church. And in faithful obedience in the Spirit's power, Christ's body will be living on earth as the living expression of the resurrected **Head** (Acts. 6:8-15; 7:55, 56, 59, 60).

**Kingdom** brings the final stage of fulfillment of the progress of revelation. What God designed in the creation of Adam is accomplished in the last Adam who will mediate God's reign on earth. The will of God on earth will be what the will of God in heaven has always been (Matt. 6:10). The stewards of God's **Word** will manage their lives under Christ's reign and according to the prophetic **Word** being fulfilled in the climax.

## Conclusion

The biblical account of salvation history takes the shape of a narrative from creation to climax. There is a story line having a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning is a setting of the stage, the middle consists of a series of plot-conflicts, and the end features a resolution of the conflict. These are conventions of storytelling in general but not of writing fiction.<sup>10</sup> Finally, the literary convention of characterization, that is, how characters are portrayed in a story, is also part of the narrative of salvation history. How biblical characters are depicted have an important function in helping the reader see how they should apprehend God and apprehend themselves through the lives of historic stewards. This metanarrative can enable the elect to see life biblically and be transformed by the story and thus be conformed to God's will.

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<sup>10</sup> While the genre of fiction often uses storytelling techniques, not all storytelling is fictional. Indeed, most ancient examples of history use storytelling techniques. One must be careful not to equate method and result. Yet the veracity of Biblical history stands apart even though the genre is similar.