

BACKGROUNDS TO DISPENSATIONALISM: A Study in Contemporary Theology.
By Clarence B. Bass. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids,
Mich. 1960. 184 pp. \$3.50.

Improvement may or may not be involved in change. The atomic age has brought certain changes in the treatment of cancer and changes in waging war. A change of mind may or may not result in an improvement. That depends on what the resultant conclusion is, for it is the results of a change, not the fact of a change, that is all-important.

One of the defects of the contemporary emphasis on intellectualism is the glorifying of the fact of changes of position and the consequent obscuring of the contents and effects of those changes. The fact that a man has changed his mind about certain doctrines becomes a cause for self-glorification or loud cheering by the group the new convert has just joined. "Cashing in on the new convert" can be just as much of a sin among some intellectuals as among certain evangelists. If a conservative turns liberal this is hailed far and wide in liberal circles. If a premillennialist embraces amillennialism, this is news. If a dispensationalist rejects dispensationalism, he is paraded far and wide. It has become the thing to do to rethink one's position and then publicize the change.

Let no one misunderstand. Intellectual stagnatism is not therefore desirable. The ultimate in all mental growth in Biblical truth is conviction. Many today have mistakenly equated settled conviction with stagnatism, and change with progress. Rethinking generally brings a state of constant flux; stagnatism will mean failure; but real mental growth under the guidance of the Spirit will lead to conviction of the truth.

Books proclaiming the changes of mind are not uncommon. The format is the same. The author was reared in something old-fashioned. Through independent study he has progressed beyond this elementary position into a more advanced position which involves rejecting the former view. In our day that "progress" is usually made during the author's doctoral study and research. The degree having been granted, the thesis then becomes the basis for a book and the authority for the accuracy of the views expressed therein.

Such a book is Backgrounds to Dispensationalism by Clarence B. Bass. The author's own testimony is as follows:

"I was reared in the dispensational system, and the formative years of my spiritual development occurred under the ministry of a godly pastor who taught it, complete with charts. I progressed through my entire college and seminary career without ever knowing that there was a distinction between dispensationalism and premillennialism. When I began a doctoral program of research on J. N. Darby's doctrine of the church I was a confirmed dispensationalist. . . .

"I have not found the way out of dispensationalism easy, and I sometimes wonder if even now I have left it completely. The inward struggle to orient oneself to the historic faith only, intensely involves many emotions. Moreover, readjusting theological patterns sometimes leaves one uncomfortable. Even today some of my dearest friends are convinced that I have departed from the evangelical faith."

The book argues that dispensationalism as a system does not antedate the 19th century but was formulated by J. N. Darby in the midst of controversy and that this background is significant in understanding (and for the author, condemning) dispensationalism (p. 7).

With this thesis the reviewer (and other dispensationalists) agree-- as a system dispensationalism was largely formulated by Darby; these were controversies; and this helps our understanding. But with the development of the argument and with the author's conclusion (that dispensationalism must therefore be rejected) we take exception. The development of his thesis in this book is built upon and saturated with four basic errors.

The first is the straw man error. The author creates a straw man by saying that dispensationalists assert that the system is found in post-apostolic times. Informed dispensationalists do not claim that. All that is maintained is that certain features of the dispensational system are found in the teaching of the early church. A sample of the author's fallacious argument is: Pretribulationism is not apostolic; pretribulationism is dispensationalism; therefore dispensationalism is not apostolic. Such a straw man is easy to create. Dispensationalists do not claim that the system was developed in the first century. But neither were a lot of other doctrines. Development of any doctrine is to be expected in the history of the church.

This leads to the second fallacy--the error of the wrong use of history. Suppose that dispensationalism is shown to be different from what the author calls "historic premillennialism" as taught by the apostolic fathers in their non-canonized writing (not the apostles in the Scriptures), does that prove dispensationalism unscriptural and "historic premillennialism" to be Biblical? Of course not. All it proves is that some people taught one thing and others another at various times. The author surely knows that baptismal regeneration was widely taught in the early centuries, and yet he would not include

it in his theological system simply because it is historic. Likewise, covenant theology and amillennialism in their present forms were unknown in the early centuries. This does not determine whether they are right or wrong. After all, the ultimate question is not, Is it historical? but, Is it Scriptural? Bass recognizes this and devotes two sentences to it on page 47. Occasionally elsewhere there are references to Scriptural arguments, but the main thrust of the book seeks to discredit dispensationalism simply because as a system it is of recent origin. One would guess that the author's doctoral thesis on which this book was based concerned Darby's doctrine of the church (with necessary background in the life of Darby), for although the historical data has been carefully collected, the use of history to try to discredit doctrine falls flat--especially in the opening and closing chapters. A man's life may credit or discredit his teaching but it does not prove or disprove its accuracy.

The third fallacy is the use of non sequitur argument. This is particularly evident when the author discusses Darby and separatism. He points out that Darby was involved in controversy and then concludes:

"One need not scrutinize contemporary evangelical church life too closely to see this principle at work today. Nor does it take more than a casual survey of the history of theology since Darby's day to trace the continuity of his view of separation to our day" (p.99).

Why does it follow that because Darby separated from the Established Church separatist groups today are the result of dispensational teaching? And yet this is the non sequitur implications of Bass. Surely he knows that most of the groups affiliated with the American Council of Christian Churches today are not dispensational. Furthermore,

he must realize that the Reformation was a separatist movement (unrelated to dispensationalism) and that its leaders were involved in controversy not only with the Roman Catholic church but also with each other. How then shall we judge the Reformation or many of our established and recognized denominations in the light of this statement by Bass?

"Any theological system which causes a part of the church to withdraw from the larger fellowship in Christ and, by isolationism and separatism, to default its role, is wrong" (p. 154).

The fourth error is a wrong hermeneutical principle. Actually this is the crux of the matter though Bass has not made it so. He apparently accepts literalism (as opposed to allegorical interpretation) as a basic principle but rejects it as a workable principle, particularly in eschatology. What to substitute for it, however, he is not sure. He finds at the moment most satisfaction in an amillennialist's four principles for the interpretation of prophecy (p. 151). He should face the fact that amillennial principles of hermeneutics will hardly lead him to "historic premillennialism." Indeed, anything but plain interpretation will lead to inconsistencies. Witness Bass' own statement as to the meaning of the blessed hope:

"I bear testimony, however, that the unity of the divine redemptive plan is now meaningful to me. The church, as the body of Christ providentially redeemed, is the epitome of the whole structure of God's purposes on the earth. This is truly the blessed hope" (p. 9). Actually, he seems to approve of any hermeneutical principle that avoids extremes even though it involves inconsistencies.

"Logically carried out, this principle involves the dispensationalist in these extremes: all Israel (presumably every Israelite) will be saved; the boundaries of the land given in the promise to Abraham will literally be restored during the millennium; Christ will return to a literal theocratic, political kingdom on earth with a government patterned after existing national governments, with David as his regent; Christ will sit on a physical throne in the city of Jerusalem, in the state of Israel; the beast, Antichrist, and other persons mentioned in Revelation will literally appear; a city will actually descend from heaven, in which God will have an eternal throne, and from which will flow the river of life--all of which are inherent in the system of contemporary dispensationalism" (pp. 150-151). At least he does recognize that dispensationalists are consistent.

This book will undoubtedly be well received by others who feel that they have been liberated from the yoke of dispensationalism. Let anyone who intends to join this group carefully examine the errors involved in this book and, above all, the positive teachings of the Scriptures.