

Covenant Theology Series #3

Dispensationalism

Introduction

There are two fundamental approaches to understanding the flow and structure of both redemptive history and God's commentary on it in biblical revelation. One approach is to emphasize the *discontinuity* between the stages and component parts associated with these two strands of biblical theology, and the other is to emphasize the *continuity* between these stages and parts. Covenant theology, when considered as biblical theology, emphasizes the continuity and sees this as the essential feature of both redemptive history and biblical revelation, an appreciation of which is crucial for understanding them properly. An extremely influential movement, especially in American Christianity, known as dispensationalism, is the principal *system* of biblical theology competing for dominance in forming a framework for redemptive history and biblical revelation. Although not all non-covenantal theologians — and everyone is a theologian — self-consciously subscribe to dispensationalism, anyone who approaches biblical theology by understanding it to any degree as fundamentally discontinuous is to that degree dispensational in his approach to these matters. For that reason, an overview and evaluation of dispensationalism is both proper and necessary at this point in our study.

Historical Background

Dispensational theology as a formal system originated in England around 1830, among an ecclesiastically Separatist group known as the Plymouth Brethren. Its beginnings have questionable aspects, not least the suggestion of an association with occult experiences.¹ It spread to America through the immigration of several members, most notably, J. N. B. Darby and C. I. Scofield. The latter produced, in about 1917, a reference Bible which contained interpretive notes on the same page as the text of Scripture. As it was disseminated among the Christian population of America, the interpretive system contained in the notes became associated without distinction with the content of Scripture, thus becoming a powerful inter-denominational influence on the understanding of the Bible among American Christians. Dispensationalism was officially declared a heresy by the American Presbyterian Church in the early twentieth century because of its teaching that there were different ways of salvation set forth in the Old and New Testaments. The New Scofield Reference Bible was produced to address this problem, with the notes revised to remove this assertion. Later as modernism and the rise of liberal theology, with its denigration of the historicity, authority, and inerrancy of Scripture, began to be ascendant in many of the mainline Christian denominations, rank and file Christians, who were receiving less and less biblical teaching from their liberal-influenced pastors and churches, became readers of the Scofield Bibles, dependent upon them for their understanding of the theology of Scripture, and were thus more and more influenced by the biblical theology of its system, and especially of its system of eschatology. As we will see, a

¹ For more on this, see Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, South Carolina: Millennium III Publishers, 1994).

salient factor in this process was the contrast between the typically allegorical approach to Scripture, and especially its historical narratives, as “myth” — which actually amounted to unbelief — and the literalistic approach of dispensationalists. As a result, the largest percentage of evangelical Christians not only approach Scripture from a dispensational perspective, especially with respect to eschatology, but many also regard anyone who challenges the system to be a theological liberal. In fact, despite the fact that this system was unknown to the Church and any Bible commentators for the first eighteen and one-half centuries since the completion of the canon of Scripture, many evangelical Christians have never been exposed to any other eschatological system, not to mention any other way of interpreting and handling Scripture. They simply have never heard anything else.

Overview of Dispensationalism

The essence of dispensationalism can be summarized in terms of three distinctive features, which together are responsible for generating the contents of the system:

1. A distinctive *hermeneutic* — This refers to its approach to the interpretation and application of Scripture, which can be described as *literalistic*. This is to be distinguished from the desirable approach of interpreting Scripture *literally*, which most dispensationalists assert is what they are doing. However, to interpret the Bible literally means to interpret it *as literature*, which involves taking into account the distinctive features of its literary genres (or “types”), often including figurative and symbolic expressions as a common convention.² Dispensational literalism has been defined by dispensationalists themselves as the principle that a given statement of Scripture should be assumed to be a literal statement unless it cannot possibly be understood in this way, although an examination of their interpretations indicates that they are far from consistent in the application of this principle.
2. A distinctive *ecclesiology* — This refers to their understanding of the Church, particularly in terms of its relationship to the nation of Israel. Traditional dispensationalists assert that there are two distinct and separate redemptive communities in Scripture, Israel and the Church, with separate and distinct revelation and promises, and separate and distinct destinies. In other words, there is no *continuity* between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalism sees the Bible’s program as mainly about Israel, and the Church as a “mystery parenthesis” in God’s program. This assertion either leads to or proceeds from a profound “chopping up” of the Bible in terms of its contents and promises, which some dispensationalists proudly claim as their conformity to what II Timothy 2:15 (KJV) describes as “rightly dividing the Word of truth,” which is a faulty and misleading translation of the verse.
3. A distinctive *redemptive historiography* — This refers to the way in which dispensationalists portray history, specifically redemptive history as it is revealed in the Bible. “Historiography” is defined as “the writing of history, especially...based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The salient feature of the way

² For more on this, see R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), 48-53.

dispensationalists “synthesize” the details of Scripture is in terms of rigidly separate epochs or “dispensations” (hence the term), in which God deals with mankind in radically different ways and in terms of radically distinct requirements which constitute tests of a sort. According to this system, in each dispensation man fails the test, resulting in God’s judgment, the eradication of the former dispensational economy, and establishment of an entirely new economy. The word “dispensation” is a translation of the Greek word οικονομία (transliterated *oikonomia*), from which we get the English word “economy.” In other words, dispensationalists frame the story of redemptive history as a series of radically distinct epochs, with radically different “economies” (the systems of rules which govern God’s relations with mankind), which are thus fundamentally *discontinuous*.

Evaluation

We will be addressing what we believe to be the errors of the dispensational approach to biblical theology throughout our study through a positive presentation of the biblical evidence and reasons for structuring our understanding of the Bible and of redemptive history and our relationship to God in terms of covenant theology. However, it is appropriate at the start of that presentation to give an overall evaluation and critique of the dispensational approach.

In the first place, it must be acknowledged that the assertions that what is clearly meant to be understood as historical narrative is instead “myth,” that it is not literally true, and that it should be accordingly be understood and applied allegorically, are fundamentally wrong and should be rejected. However, it must be understood that this is true precisely because of proper literary analysis. This is because such a procedure violates the nature of Scripture as it presents itself to us: a collection of literary works encompassing multiple genres, some of which cannot be faithfully interpreted in terms of the authors’ intents without understanding them literally. But this is precisely the point at which dispensationalists also violate Scripture, since they insist on interpreting as literal statements verses and passages which are, in terms of the genre of literature in which they occur, possibly not literal. In fact, many such passages are interpreted by the inerrant and infallible New Testament Scriptures in non-literal ways. Examples include:

- Ezekiel 34:23, 24 (compare verse 15) and 37:24, 25 predict that *David* shall be shepherd and rule over the people of God in a future kingdom, but this is universally understood to be fulfilled in terms of the *Son* of David, Jesus, as He claims this role in John 10:11, 16 and 12:34, and in terms of the principle illustrated by Peter in Acts 2:22-36 as he interprets and applies Psalm 16:8-11.
- The celestial phenomena in Joel 2:30, 31 are also interpreted by Peter in Acts 2:16-21 in non-literal ways, yet the same terminology as employed in Matthew 24:29 is invariably insisted by dispensationalists to be referring to literal celestial phenomena.
- Jesus frequently spoke in non-literal categories to his disciples and others and was misunderstood because He was speaking in Scriptural categories. Examples are Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 5:39; Mark 9:11-13; John 11:11-13. Notable among these in light of the former point is the Mark 9 passage, in which Jesus, alluding to the prophecy of Malachi

4:5, calls John the Baptist “Elijah” without clarification, as Malachi himself did. The identification is made clear in Matthew 11:11-15 and 17:9-13.

- The promises to give to Abraham and his descendants (literally “seed”) the land of Canaan in, for instance, Genesis 12:2, 7; 15:1-5, are said to be fulfilled in a non-literal way, namely in the Church, in Galatians 3:26-29 and Romans 4:13. Notice in the latter passage that the promise of the land to Abraham is said to be “the world,” an assertion that is nowhere to be found in the promises to Abraham recorded in Genesis. The fulfillment is thus non-literal, in accord with the general flow of biblical theology.
- See the next point for overlapping examples of this point.

In the second place, it is clear from multiple Scriptures that Israel and the Church are one and the same entity, and that the *nation* of Israel is simply the covenant community prior to its establishment as an *officially* multi-national, multi-ethnic community under the New Covenant. In other words, Israel is the Church of the Old Testament and the Church is Israel in the New Testament. Just a few of the Scriptural proofs of this include:

- Romans 11 teaches that Gentiles (“non-natural branches”) are specifically grafted into a community (olive tree) which formerly consisted only of Jews (the “natural branches”), some of which were “broken off” (OT “cut off” or “circumcised,” excommunicated) because of unbelief. There is only one olive tree, not two. This can hardly refer to anything other than the covenant community, which is *continuous* from Old Testament to New Testament. It has always been covenant, not religion *per se*, nor ethnicity, that defined the identity of Israel.
- Ephesians 2:11-22 confirms this when it explicitly declares that Gentiles have been made members of “the commonwealth of Israel” (or have received “citizenship in Israel”). This passage also confirms that, as a result of the work of Christ, there is no longer a distinction between “Jew and Gentile,” since Gentiles have been brought *en masse* into the covenant community (Israel/Church).
- The word for “church” (meaning “called out assembly”), the same Greek word used in the New Testament for the Church, is, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), used constantly to refer to Israel. It translates the word קהל (transliterated *qahal*), usually translated “assembly.” Thus Israel is called “church” multitudinous times in the Old Testament.
- The Church is called “Israel” in Galatians 6:16.
- Israel, from its beginnings as a nation, contained persons who were Gentiles or non-Israelites (e.g., Exodus 12:38; I Chronicles 11:10-47).
- The fulfillments of Old Testament covenant promises are explicitly applied to Gentiles in the New Testament (e.g., Hosea 1:9-11/Romans 9:24-26; Genesis 12:2, 7; 15:1-5/Galatians 3:26-29).
- The Old Testament declares that Gentiles shall be declared to have been “born in Zion” (Psalm 87:4-6).
- The same terms that are applied exclusively to Israel in Exodus 19:3-6 are applied to the New Testament Church in I Peter 2:9, 10.
- In Revelation 7, the 144,000 who are sealed “from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (John *hears*) are identified with the “great multitude that no one could number, from every

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,....” (John *sees*; compare Revelation 5:5, 6). In light of Genesis 15:5 and Galatians 3:26-29, this should hardly be surprising.

- And many, many others.

In the third place, the way that the Old Testament quotes and uses the Old Testament demonstrates that the *fundamental economy* is the same, to wit:

- When the New Testament writers talk about salvation and how God deals with His people, they quote the Old Testament and adduce principles drawn from it (e.g., Romans 4:1-12; Hebrews 3:1-4;11).
- When Jesus appeared, those who observed the child spoke of the significance of His appearance in connection with the fulfillment of Old Testament covenant promises and in terms of His participation in that One Covenant (Luke 1:46-56; 67-79).
- See the connections established in the next study tracing the unity of the Covenant of Grace, and in the rest of this study as a whole.

In summary, it is accurate to say that dispensationalism is a system that was formulated prematurely out of a cursory reading of Scripture. This system, once outlined, was calcified in the minds of its developers and devotees, who proceeded to squeeze the non-conforming Scriptural elements and passages into its mold, with the result that the system, especially with respect to its eschatology, became intolerably and unintelligibly complex, because of the need to invent ways to reconcile it with the Bible. The principle of Occam’s Razor, though not infallible, certainly testifies powerfully to the erroneous nature of dispensationalism.