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# What Is Dispensationalism?

A PROPOSAL

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I have fond and vivid memories of my childhood church experiences. In a small, rural Mennonite church I learned the Bible stories through my teacher's use of flannel graph characters. As a young child, I came to understand that I was a sinner and only through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead could I have the hope of eternal life. I believed that message, I trusted in Christ alone, and I looked forward to spending eternity with Him.

In this church, the Sunday school hour was followed by a corporate worship experience. Most of the women sat on the left side, the men on the right, and the teenagers sat in the back couple of pews. My mother and father sat together, usually on the right side with the men, and my sisters and I sat with them.<sup>1</sup> It was a rite of passage when I was allowed to leave my father's side and sit with my peers and the older teenagers in the back pew.

The music in this church was not contemporary nor seeker-sensitive; it was led by a man with a pitch pipe and the congregation sang four-part a cappella harmony. Then the pastor would come to the pulpit, open his large King James

Version *Scofield Reference Bible*, and begin to preach. His sermons were heavily expositional and applicational, and a reading from the Scripture almost always included the explanation, “And the Scofield note says . . .”

I was trained in dispensationalism from the beginning of my life. Although I eventually came to understand that not everyone was a Christian, I still thought all Christians were dispensationalists. During elementary school I never understood why my public school friends did not attend the prophecy conferences or Southern gospel hymn sings my family regularly attended.

When I was old enough to make my own decision about attending church, because I had a driver’s license and a car, I began to attend an independent Bible church. The pastor of this church had been trained in the Scofield Correspondence Course.<sup>2</sup> He too preached expositionally and applicationally, and explained from the pulpit how to read the Bible as a dispensationalist. I learned to keep Israel and the church separate, that the hope of the church is the rapture, that the tribulation would be a terrible time on the earth, and that it would be followed by a millennium. During this thousand-year period, the promises made to Israel would be fulfilled literally and the church would be in heaven. Then, the end would come. The earth would be annihilated by fire and we would all go to heaven to be with Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

Yes, I am a dispensationalist, born into a dispensational home and brought to faith and nurtured in dispensational churches. I attended a dispensational Bible college where I was taught by several graduates of Grace Theological Seminary and Dallas Theological Seminary. I earned two degrees, a ThM and a PhD, from Dallas Theological Seminary and have been a full-time member of the teaching faculty since 2001.

I remain a dispensationalist, however, not merely because I have a heritage in the tradition. I have considered other theological positions. I have examined the history and the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. I have responded to questions and challenges from students over the years. I am not unaware of some of the problems and unresolved issues that still exist in my own theology. I believe, however, that a case can be made for dispensationalism from the text of Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

Dispensationalism is a popular, and populist, movement. It has had a huge influence in the evangelical Christian culture due to pastors and churches, pamphlets and books, seminars and conferences, radio and television programming, and mission agencies and parachurch ministries. Dispensational

teaching is so widespread that a lot of people read the Bible this way, even if they are unaware that their position is dispensational. For many of them, it is all they know.

The purpose of this chapter is to describe what dispensationalism is and to defend this hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures from the Scriptures. But since dispensationalism is widely misconstrued and sometimes caricatured, we will first address several misunderstandings.<sup>5</sup>

## WHAT DISPENSATIONALISM IS NOT

Dispensationalism is not a theological system—not in the same way that Calvinism, Lutheranism, Arminianism, and other theological traditions are systematic. Dispensationalists exist among Christians, including Protestants and those in the Reformed tradition. Dispensationalists confess the historic faith of the church, the Trinity, Chalcedonian Christology, the lostness of all humanity, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the resurrection of the dead, the bodily return of Christ, etc. Dispensationalists do not have distinctive views of the Godhead, salvation, Christology, or the gospel. Rather, they affirm the doctrines of evangelical Christian orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> The unique or distinctive beliefs of dispensationalism do not impact basic Christian doctrines. In short, dispensationalists confess orthodox Christianity.

Dispensationalism is not heterodox or heretical.<sup>7</sup> This charge persists in spite of numerous rebuttals.<sup>8</sup> No church council ever condemned the views found within mainstream dispensationalism, and no orthodox doctrines of the faith are compromised or denied in the tradition.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, dispensationalism does not teach multiple ways of salvation.<sup>10</sup> That God deals with His creation, especially people, differently from one era to the next does not imply that the means of salvation changes as the administrations change. Rather, like all Christians, dispensationalists believe that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Of course, it is not the case that people in every age were aware that salvation was provided through Christ, but their ignorance of the name of Jesus did not excuse them nor were they responsible for a content of beliefs that had not yet been revealed.<sup>11</sup> Dispensationalism affirms that the subject of the Scripture is the person and work of Christ in His first and second comings, that the Father sent the Son to accomplish His work in this world and

then sent the Spirit to continue the work the Son began. The work of redemption will culminate in a new creation, where the Triune God will dwell with His people forever (Rev. 21:1–5).

Dispensationalism is not monolithic but it is a diverse and developing tradition.<sup>12</sup> There has never been a standard set of dispensational interpretations of biblical texts. A cluster of beliefs tends to characterize these Bible readers, rather than a standard set of dispensational interpretations of biblical texts. Blasing emphasizes this unity in the midst of diversity:

There are a variety of dispensationalisms which one might encounter today. All of them emphasize the authority of Scripture, the importance of recognizing different dispensations for understanding Scripture, the distinctiveness of the church in the history of revelation, the importance of biblical prophecy and apocalyptic discourse, the imminent and premillennial coming of Christ, and a future for national Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Dispensationalism is not a hermeneutical approach that is imposed upon the Scriptures. It is, rather, a way of reading the Bible that can be supported by the Bible itself. Of course, not all Christians read the Bible this way. All do, however, read and interpret it with a set of preunderstandings and through an interpretive lens.<sup>14</sup> Dispensationalism is an interpretive lens.

Dispensationalism is not anti-tradition or sectarian nor “a cult or a sect since its basic ideas cross major denominational boundaries; it is not a new modern religion since it adheres to all basic elements of historic Christianity.”<sup>15</sup> Although it is true that early dispensationalists viewed the institutional church negatively, dispensationalism does not reject denominations and church traditions.<sup>16</sup> Dispensationalists are found in a variety of Christian denominations, as well as in nondenominational churches and parachurch organizations.

Dispensationalism is not individualistic, at least not any more so than other American evangelical traditions.<sup>17</sup> Dispensationalism recognizes that the church is the body of Christ, that world evangelization is a corporate responsibility, that spiritual giftedness is described through analogy to the human body (1 Cor. 12), and that sanctification or growth in godliness occurs in the context of the church. The important distinction between Israel and the church is rooted in the reality that both are corporate. Israel is not merely a group of individuals who relate to God; she is a nation composed of families, clans, tribes, villages, and communities. Similarly, the church is one body made up of many

parts. That dispensationalism recognizes a distinction between Israel and the church does not deny the unity of one people of God, saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.<sup>18</sup>

Dispensationalism is not primarily an eschatological position. Most dispensationalists believe in the pretribulation rapture of the church, at which time Christ will come to the earth, the dead in Christ will be raised, and those who are alive will be caught up and glorified (cf. 1 Thess. 4–5) seven years before Christ returns to the earth to establish a thousand-year reign over the earth from the throne in Jerusalem. Dispensationalism is rooted in premillennial eschatology, but since not all premillennialists are dispensational, it would not be accurate to equate dispensationalism and premillennialism. Further, there is much more to dispensationalism than a view on the end times.<sup>19</sup>

Dispensationalism does not necessarily pit the soteriological purpose of God against the doxological purpose.<sup>20</sup> Rather, dispensationalists agree with the Westminster Shorter Catechism in affirming “man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”<sup>21</sup> Further, dispensationalists understand the biblical story as the story of redemption. From creation through the fall and God’s work of redemption in a fallen world to the new creation when all the effects of sin have been removed, the Bible is the story of a Creator and Redeemer who is at work in His world. And His work of redemption glorifies Him.

Dispensationalism is not an academic tradition, although there have been dispensationalists who have served Christ in the academy.<sup>22</sup> It is, rather, a grass-roots and populist movement. Dispensationalists are usually found in churches, colleges, mission agencies, television and radio ministries, and other practical ministries.<sup>23</sup>

Dispensationalism is not necessarily a pessimistic philosophy of history. Some dispensationalists emphasize that each dispensation includes a test and ends with human failure. Scofield, for example, wrote, “Each of these Dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure.”<sup>24</sup> But as Charles Ryrie points out, not every dispensation ends with failure. In fact, according to Ryrie, “The presence of a test, failure, and judgment is not the *sine qua non* of a dispensational government of the world.”<sup>25</sup> Perhaps more importantly, Ryrie argues that dispensationalism’s view of God’s redemptive work in history is “optimistic . . . [since] the dispensational pattern does not form a repetitive cyclical pattern, but rather an ascending spiral.”<sup>26</sup> He even contrasts the optimism of dispensationalism with the pessimism of other

views of history when he writes, “If there were not ‘cyclical’ interventions, then the course of human history would only be downward and entirely pessimistic.”<sup>27</sup> In short, dispensationalism’s view of history is optimistic; the trajectory of human history is improving, not because of evolutionary development, but because of God’s grace progressively revealed and experienced in history.<sup>28</sup>

Dispensationalism is a biblical theology. It is rooted in the teaching of the Scriptures and claims to be a way of reading the Scripture that is taught therein. Demonstrating that claim from the Scripture follows in this chapter. But first, I propose a working descriptive definition of dispensationalism.

### WHAT DISPENSATIONALISM IS

The covenant theologian Michael Horton argues that “covenant” is the “architectonic structure, a matrix of beams and pillars that hold together the structure of biblical faith and practice. . . . It is not simply the concept of the covenant, but the concrete existence of God’s covenantal dealings in our history that provides the context within which we recognize the unity of Scripture amid its remarkable variety.”<sup>29</sup>

Dispensationalists read the same Scriptures as covenant theologians and all other Christians. Dispensationalists recognize that God makes covenants with His people and that His faithfulness to those covenants is a major biblical theme. But dispensationalists, unlike covenantalists, do not believe that the “covenant” establishes the framework of the biblical story. This does not mean that dispensationalists deny the importance of covenants in the biblical story but that they believe that covenants are subsidiary to another structural construction.

The Scriptures reveal a God who is the sovereign Creator of everything that is. He not only brought the world into existence, He sustains it and cares for it. He is actively involved in the world that He has made. Like all good stories, the biblical story has a plot line that unfolds over time. The Bible tells the story of God’s work of redemption, from the fall (Gen. 3) to the new heaven and new earth (Rev. 21–22). As God interacts with His world, and particularly with the humans He created in His image and likeness, His relationship with His creation is mediated differently at different times. Although God is unchanging, His plan for His creation unfolds progressively over time.

Dispensationalism is rooted in a biblical word and a biblical concept. The

word “dispensation” (*oikonomia*), which is sometimes translated as “administration,” or “stewardship,” gives the hermeneutical approach its name. But more important than the label is that there are distinguishable eras or periods of time revealed in the biblical story.

## A Definition

In his classic work *Dispensationalism Today*—now simply *Dispensationalism*—Charles Ryrie defined a dispensation as a “distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”<sup>30</sup> Later he summarized:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, a dispensation is not merely a period of time, an age, but a distinguishable period of time during which God administers His plan of redemption differently from other eras or periods. This change happens in history; God brings one economy or administration to an end, and then inaugurates a new one. There is continuity between dispensations; there is only one God and He has one unified plan of redemption. There is discontinuity between dispensations; the way God administers the plan of redemption changes. Sometimes the changes are cataclysmic and other times they are more incremental, but there are clear institutional and administrative changes from one dispensation to the next.

Dispensationalism is characterized by a hermeneutical approach that interprets the biblical story as the progressive revelation of God’s unified work of redemption. Although dispensationalists recognize continuity in the plan of God, they believe that the Scriptures reveal distinguishable periods of time in the administration of God’s relationship with His creation. The elements of discontinuity in these eras do not indicate different means or ways of salvation, since salvation is always by grace through faith and based in the person and work of Christ. Some dispensationalists emphasize that each period of time includes a divine test and each dispensation ends with the failure of humanity. Some dispensationalists recognize seven periods while others see as few as

three. Dispensationalists believe that the Scriptures teach a distinction between Israel and the church within the unified people of God. Although in this dispensation believing Israelites become part of the church through faith in the Messiah, there is still the hope of future eternal blessings for believing ethnic Israel within dispensational theology.<sup>32</sup>

The label “dispensationalism” is rooted in the New Testament usage of the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is to an examination of the usage of that term we now turn. Then, a brief overview of the biblical story will illustrate the revelation of dispensations in the unfolding story of God’s work of redemption.

### Dispensationalism in Luke 16

In Luke 16, Jesus told a parable about a rich man and the steward or manager of his household. The rich man suspected his manager had misused his assets. So he summoned him and asked for an accounting of his stewardship. The unjust manager demonstrated shrewdness; he called his master’s debtors and decreased the amount each of them owed. The master commended this dishonest manager for his shrewdness in this matter yet, presumably, brought his administration to an end. The dishonest steward was replaced by a new steward, which meant there would be a new stewardship. A change in steward brings a corresponding change in administration.

Jesus’ application follows: “And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by how you use worldly wealth, so that when it runs out you will be welcomed into the eternal homes” (Luke 16:9 NET).<sup>1</sup> In this application, Jesus implies a dispensational change, from life in this world to the age of eternal dwellings.

This wealthy man has hired a manager of his household possessions. The manager does not own the assets; they belong to the rich man. The manager is accountable to his employer for his management. In this case, the manager has been unfaithful or unethical in his employment so he is dismissed from his position. His administration comes to an end and is replaced by another manager and another administration.

This is a parable rooted in the culture of the time, but could also be situated in a variety of cultural contexts. Wealthy people often hire others to manage their possessions. Those managers are not self-employed; they work for their employer. They are accountable to the owner for the way they handle the rich person’s possessions.

Dispensationalism views the world as a divine household, in which God is the owner and humans are stewards of God's possessions. In a way similar to a wealthy landowner who hires a manager to care for his possessions, God has entrusted the care of creation to humans. Everything we have has come from Him. Everyone is a steward of what God has created. Our "possessions" do not belong to us; we are merely stewards. This is explicitly taught in the creation mandate:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness, so they may rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move on the earth."

God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply! Fill the earth and subdue it! Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every creature that moves on the ground." (Gen. 1:26–28 NET)

Having been created to rule over God's creation, divine imagers will be accountable to God for their stewardship of His possessions. And, as Jesus taught in Luke 16, all Christians look forward to the eschatological hope of "eternal homes" (Luke 16:10).

### Dispensationalism in Paul's Epistles: Ephesians 3

In Luke 16, the word "dispensation" is used in a technical, or concrete, sense for an administration of a household. In the book of Ephesians, the apostle Paul uses the word *oikonomia* or "dispensation"<sup>33</sup> in a broader, theological sense. He uses it to describe eras in redemption history.

In Ephesians 3, Paul introduces his ministry for the sake of the Gentiles with a reminder of the "stewardship of God's grace" given to him for their sake (Eph. 3:2). This stewardship of the gospel (Eph. 3:7) was given to him by God's grace, "to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). This dispensation of God's grace "had for ages been hidden in God who has created all things" (Eph. 3:9) but now has been disclosed "to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). This dispensation of the gospel is not disconnected from the eternal redemptive plan of God; rather, it is "in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confident access through faith in Him" (Eph. 3:11–12).

If a dispensation was given to Paul, and this new dispensation is the gospel, the good news that Jesus has united Jews and Gentiles in one new man, then there must have been a dispensation prior to this one.<sup>34</sup> If this dispensation was accomplished in the work of Christ, it could not have existed in this form prior to the coming of Christ. Further, “new” implies there was an “old.”

The content of this dispensational change is explained in Ephesians 2 as the work of Christ in His incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. In that text, Paul expresses the contrast between Israel and Gentiles this way: “Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called ‘uncircumcision’ by the so-called ‘circumcision’ that is performed on the body by human hands—that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:11–12 NET). This state of hopelessness and godlessness does not mean that Gentiles were unable to experience the covenantal blessings promised to Israel. Many Gentiles did. It meant that, normatively, Gentiles would receive the blessings of God along with Israel by becoming part of the nation. And many did.

Things are different for both Jews and Gentiles after the coming of Christ. Paul continues, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were formerly far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments” (Eph. 2:13–15a). In the incarnation, but particularly in the work of atonement on the cross, Jesus took on Himself the hostility and opposition between Jews and Gentiles and He brought peace to the two through His own body. He created “in himself one new man out of two, thus making peace, and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near, so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:15b–18 NET).

One new man has been created out of two ethnic groups. The people of God has always been constituted by those who were joined to Him and to one another by grace through faith. Israel was God’s people by grace through faith. Gentiles, the nations, could come to God by means of the covenant YHWH had made with the nation of Israel, by grace through faith in this God. The law of Moses would have regulated their worship of and relationship with God. Now, in Christ

Jesus, God has created one new man, one people made up of Jews and Gentiles. Gentiles will no longer be required to undergo circumcision and become part of Israel. Rather, now, in the Israel whose name is Jesus, ethnic Jews and ethnic Gentiles are united together in Him. No longer separated by circumcision, they are together, at peace with God and one another in Christ. “So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph. 2:19–22).

From one people of God, known as Israel, to one people of God made up of people of all ethnicities, tongues, and nations, the Christ event results in a change of administration. No longer are practices like sacrifices, festivals, circumcision, dietary restrictions, and Sabbath regulations the means of identifying this people, the means by which their ongoing relationship with God is mediated. No longer does the Mosaic law regulate the ceremonial practice of the people. Now, through Christ, a new age has come. But the means by which people join the community of God’s people is by grace through faith, as has always been the case.

### Dispensationalism in Galatians 3–4

In the book of Galatians Paul also describes this dispensational change. He reminds the Christians in Galatia of the promise that God had made to Abraham. “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his descendant. Scripture does not say, ‘and to the descendants,’ meaning many, but ‘and to your descendant,’ referring to one, who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16 NET). God’s promises to Abraham were made, then, not to Israel but to Christ. Long before there was an Israel, even before Jacob was born, God promised to bless all nations through the seed of Abraham: “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed the gospel to Abraham ahead of time, saying, ‘All the nations will be blessed in you’ ” (3:8 NET).

God’s plan, culminating in the gospel of the resurrected Christ, has always been to bless the nations. In the old dispensation this occurred through Israel. In the new dispensation, blessing comes through and in Christ, the descendent of Abraham. “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of

you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise” (vv. 27–29). Of course, Paul is not denying that there are differences between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female; that would be silly. Rather, in Christ those differences do not matter like they did in the dispensation that immediately preceded the Christ event. In Christ, in this new dispensation, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women, are equal members of the people of God.

Then, Paul compares the dispensation of law to a minor who “is under guardians and managers [*oikonomous*] until the date set by the father” (Gal. 4:2). Although this child is an heir and “is owner of everything” (Gal. 4:1), he does not have access to his inheritance until the father gives management to him. In the same way, “we, when we were minors, were enslaved under the basic forces of the world. But when the appropriate time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we may be adopted as sons with full rights” (Gal. 4:3–5 NET).

Paul describes a change in dispensations, from stewardship by the law to the stewardship of the gospel of Christ, from the focus on Israel to the inclusion of all nations, from the old to the new. What does not change is the means of salvation; it is always by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. What does not change is that God has made promises to Abraham; these include the blessing of all nations. Both dispensations are rooted in the gospel, the promise that all peoples would be blessed through Abraham.

What does not change is that God remains gracious to His people—although the administration of His grace has changed, and things are better under the new dispensation than under the old. It is better to live after the resurrection of Christ than before Christ came, after His atoning sacrifice than when animals died to atone for sin, under His priesthood than under the Aaronic priesthood (cf. Heb. 7). Christ brings not only a new age but also a better age, because Christ is better than Moses, the angels, and the prophets.

## Dispensationalism in Ephesians 1

This redemptive trajectory, that each dispensation is better than the previous one, is also seen in one other text where Paul uses “dispensation.” In Ephe-

sians 1:10, he looks forward to the “administration suitable to the fullness of the times” in which God will sum “up all things in Christ, things in heaven and the things on earth.” All things in heaven and earth will one day be redeemed, all creation will be redeemed, sin and all its effects will be removed; Christ will be the head. In this, still future, dispensation, the prayer Jesus taught His followers will be realized, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Only in the eternal state will all God’s enemies be defeated and all things in heaven and earth be summed up or brought to submission under Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:25–28).

## CONCLUSION

Dispensationalism is defined as the view that the Bible teaches that there are distinguishable periods of time in which God administers His plan for creation differently. The coming of Christ inaugurates a new way of relating to God. If the gospel brings a new dispensation, then there was a dispensation that preceded it (Eph. 2–3; Gal. 3–4). Paul also looks forward to a dispensation of the fullness of times, when the work of redemption will be completed. Thus, there is biblical support for three dispensations. As Ryrie puts it, “There can be no question that the Bible uses the word dispensation is exactly the same way the dispensationalist does.”<sup>35</sup>

The doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary defines these three dispensations this way: “We believe that different administrative responsibilities of this character are manifest in the biblical record, that they span the entire history of mankind. . . . We believe that three of these dispensations or rules of life are the subject of extended revelation in the Scriptures, viz., the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom. We believe that these are distinct and are not to be intermingled or confused, as they are chronologically successive.”<sup>36</sup> There are biblical grounds for these three dispensations. That does not mean that others are not taught in Scripture, just that the Bible does use the term “dispensation” to describe these three in Ephesians and Galatians.

It is not the number of distinguishable administrations that defines dispensationalism.<sup>37</sup> Most dispensationalists defend more than these three. In what follows, I will defend seven.

## DISPENSATIONALISM IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

For many Christians, the dispensational hermeneutic appears to be self-evident. When they read the Bible, they observe that God's relationship with His people and with creation changes over time.<sup>38</sup> In fact, many have adopted a dispensational reading of the Scriptures without being aware of it.<sup>39</sup> Toussaint explains that dispensationalism "simply results from an investigation into the progress of God's plan as revealed in the Scriptures. It recognizes various administrations or economies in the outworking of God's plan in history."<sup>40</sup>

The earlier section argues for dispensationalism based upon the way the term *oikonomia* is used in the New Testament, particularly in Galatians and Ephesians. Dispensationalism can also be defended by observing the changes in the way God administers His sovereignty over creation. Several changes are seen in the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption. Roy Aldrich observes, "The dispensational position is not entirely dependent on the meaning of the word [dispensation] or its various uses in the New Testament. Even if no such word were found in the Bible, some term would have to be chosen to describe the concept of dispensational truth. Correct theological terms are not always Biblical words."<sup>41</sup>

### Creation: At Home in the Garden

The Bible begins with the account of the creation of heaven and earth. The eternal God, for reasons known only to Him, chose to create an earth; He separated land from water, created vegetation on the earth, and created living things to fill the land, seas, and skies. God is the source of everything that is.

God created a man and a woman in His image and likeness and gave them the responsibility to populate the earth and care for the creatures and the earth that He had made (Gen. 1:26–28). Their responsibility would be to represent God and reveal Him in and to creation. They will be the visible representation of the invisible God. God, who is perfectly capable of caring for the earth all by Himself and who would have done a more efficient and effective job than will billions of human caretakers, turns over the care of His precious possession to them. Since no one human could do this alone, they are commanded to reproduce and fill the earth (Gen. 1:26). They are placed in a garden, given access to anything they wanted to eat, except the fruit from one tree (Gen. 2:17),

and given the task of caring for God's world. God's plan for his Creation will be administered through them.

### Fall: Exiled from the Garden

Disastrously, the story quickly takes a tragic twist. An enemy of God, the serpent, comes into the garden. He entices the couple to follow his plan, to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. God's word was clear and direct: "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17 NET). Instead, according to the serpent, "Surely you will not die, for God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will open and you will be like divine beings who know good and evil" (Gen. 3:4–5 NET). God threatened death for eating; the serpent promises knowledge and life. The two humans listen to the serpent, eat the fruit, and experience the consequences of fear, shame, guilt, and ultimately, death.

After their act of rebellion, God comes to visit them (Gen. 3). He meets them in the world that He created for them. When they hide from Him, God finds them and confronts them with their rebellion. Then He pronounces judgment on them and exiles them from the garden, blocking the way back to ensure that they will never return to the place. The ground is cursed because of their sin and an animal dies to cover their nakedness (Gen. 3:21). Because they rebelled against God, they will return to the dust from which they were taken. They will die after a lifetime spent in painful toil (Gen. 3:19).

But this is not the end of the story. The man and woman, although exiled from the garden and the presence of God, remain alive on the earth.<sup>42</sup> That human life continues reveals that God's plan has not come to an end. Rather, God now administers His plan differently than He had prior to the fall. He does not destroy these rebellious creatures, He does not replace them with another species of caretakers, and He does not change their responsibility to fill the earth and care for it. Instead, it is the context of their task that changes; they will carry out their responsibility to care for the world in a world marked by sin and all of its effects. And in the end, they will die.

The author of Genesis does not use the term "dispensation" to describe the change that occurs in Genesis 3, but the alteration in the administration of God's plan is obvious. Human rebellion brings divine judgment and a corresponding modification in the relationship between the Creator and His world.

No longer are they living in the garden in a world of life and peace; they are kicked out of the garden to live in a world of painful toil that eventually ends in their death as well as the death of every other living thing.

### After the Flood: The Rise of Nations

With the worldwide flood comes another change in the administration of God's plan for His creation. God's heart was grieved and filled with pain (Gen. 6:6) because the earth was filled with violence (Gen. 6:11, 13). So, God promises to destroy all living creatures and the earth itself (Gen. 6:13, 17), except for Noah, his family, and the animals that Noah would take into the ark (Gen. 6:18–20).<sup>43</sup> He also preserved food for all the inhabitants of the ark (Gen. 6:21). As in Genesis 3, the failure of the caretakers of the earth leads to the destruction of all living things on the earth. The destiny of the earth is tied inextricably to the behavior of the human caretakers. These caretakers had failed in their stewardship of the earth, filling the earth with violence instead of blessing (cf. Gen. 1:26–28). As a result, they are judged, the earth is purged, and a new dispensation begins, as Noah and his family come out of the ark to repopulate the earth.

The preservation of Noah and his family, as well as every kind of living creature that lives on the earth, is a gracious act of God. Even in the midst of severe judgment, God preserves life and provides for the ongoing care of His creation. God's plan for the earth does not change, even though the means by which He administers it does change.

When Noah and the rest of his family begin a new dispensation, the patriarch builds an altar and sacrifices animals to the God who had delivered him from judgment.<sup>44</sup> He and his family hear the words, familiar to the reader of Genesis 1:

God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea into your hands are given. Every moving thing that is alive, shall be food to you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plants.” (Gen. 9:1–3)

Later, God says, “As for you, be fruitful and multiply; Populate the earth abundantly and multiply in it” (v. 7).

To the first humans, God had spoken blessing, commanded reproduction, and given responsibility to rule over the creatures on the earth, in the air, and

in the water (Gen. 1:28). Their diet was to come from “every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth and every tree which has fruit yielding seed” (Gen. 1:29). The animals had the same diet (Gen. 1:30). Now, things are different. The imagers still have the responsibility to rule over the world that God had made. But now, the creatures will live in terror of them. The reason for this terror might be very simple: because the animals have something to fear. Prior to the flood, humans and animals were vegetarian; after the flood, humans and animals will eat living things. This dietary change demonstrates a change in the way God administers His plan for creation. There is continuity; the divine imagers are still the means by which the plan is administered. But there is a change in the way it occurs. The dietary changes as well as the shortened life span of the caretakers are evidence of this (Gen. 6:3).

The writer of Genesis does not emphasize the change in administration. In fact, there is little attention devoted to this episode beyond the reason for the judgment and the devastating destruction the flood brought. But there clearly is a new day dawning. The flood does not destroy all life, it does not destroy the earth, and it does not bring an end to God’s plan. It does, however, radically change the way God’s rule over His earth is managed.

### Call of Abraham: Blessing of All Nations

Many dispensationalists see another administrative change in the call of Abraham. The descendants of Noah have settled in Shinar (Gen. 11:1–2). They have, apparently, been fruitful. They are not, however, filling the earth and ruling over it. Instead, they plan to build a tower in order to “make a name for ourselves. Otherwise we will be scattered across the face of the entire earth” (Gen. 11:4 NET). God confounds their language and scatters them (Gen. 11:9), resulting in a variety of people groups (Gen. 10).

Once again, there is failure that culminates in judgment. The rebellion at Babel deserves death, but God does not destroy these rebels. Instead, He confuses their speech. God is gracious and redemptive even in judgment. The multiplicity of languages and the corresponding cultural diversity will make communication difficult. Yet in the midst of this judgment, God gives humans the gift of multiculturalism (cf. Rev. 7:9).

A significant change in the administration of God’s plan occurs when He chooses Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:31), and promises to bless

him and through him to bless all peoples on earth (Gen. 12:1–3). Rather than dealing with individuals and families, God’s plan of blessing will be administered through one man and his descendants. God’s plan from the beginning has been to bless all creatures. He blessed living creatures created on the fifth day (Gen. 1:22) and then human beings created on the sixth day (Gen. 1:28). Now, this blessing of all peoples will be mediated through one man and his descendants. According to Paul (Gal. 3:8), this promise to Abram is the gospel.

### The Exodus: The Giving of the Law

The transition from the dispensation of Abraham and his family to the law of Moses is less climactic than the change that happens in the fall or the flood. This change is not based on failure and judgment of God’s people.<sup>45</sup> There is judgment on the Egyptians in the exodus. But the deliverance of God’s people, the promise of their return to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai, and the leadership under Moses seems designed more as a demonstration of God’s faithfulness than judgment on human failure. Yahweh declares, “They shall know that I am the LORD their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I am the LORD their God” (Exod. 29:46).

During this administration of God’s plan, the law of Moses is the constitution of God’s people. Among a myriad of examples that could be cited of a dispensational change<sup>46</sup> is the story of a man gathering wood on the Sabbath (Num. 15:32). Several witnesses bring him to Moses, who inquires of the Lord. The response is clear: “The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp” (Num. 15:35). This is the penalty for working on the Sabbath (Exod. 31:14–16; 35:1–2). Prior to the giving of the law, working on the Sabbath was acceptable. Now, working on the Sabbath made one a lawbreaker and subject to the death penalty.<sup>47</sup>

Another clear example of an administrative change is the dietary regulations of the Law. Of course, dietary regulations existed in previous dispensations. The instructions to Adam are clear: “You may freely eat fruit from every tree of the orchard, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17). Eating the fruit from one tree was thus a capital crime. All the rest of the vegetation was acceptable for food. Eating animal flesh was forbidden (Gen. 1:29–30).

After the fall, the diet remains the same, except that now “you will eat the grain of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat food until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you will return” (Gen. 3:18–19). The food provisions remain the same, except there will be no access to the trees in the garden, especially not the tree of life (Gen. 3:22–23). What changes is that the work of providing food will be through painful toil.

After the flood, the regulations change again: “You may eat any moving thing that lives. As I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat with its life (that is, its blood) in it” (Gen. 9:3–4 NET). In addition to eating plants and vegetation, humans are now allowed to eat meat, but not blood.

Now, in the Mosaic law, the regulations are much more extensive (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). Living creatures are divided into two categories: “This is the law of the land animals, the birds, all the living creatures that swarm on the land, to distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between the living creatures that may be eaten and the living creatures that must not be eaten” (Lev. 11:46–47 NET). In short, before the Law was given at Sinai, a member of the community of Israel could enjoy a delicious rabbit *stifado*. When the Law was given, eating that same dish is forbidden under penalty of defilement: “By these . . . you will be made unclean; whoever touches their carcass becomes unclean until evening, and whoever picks up any of their carcasses shall wash his clothes and be unclean until the evening” (Lev. 11:24–25).

This change in dietary regulations indicates a change in the administration of God’s plan for His world. It is one of many changes. The law of Moses adds a number of other requirements, including the construction of a place and objects to be used in worship, festivals and feasts, sacrifices and offerings, laws and ordinances for government, and legal and judicial requirements.

## The Spirit: Blessing of All Nations

All Christians acknowledge a transition from the old covenant to the new covenant. The coming of Jesus, the Messiah, in fulfillment of biblical prophecy introduces a new age. Jesus lived a perfect life, died as a substitute for sinners, and was resurrected to provide hope of life everlasting. His first advent ends with His ascension to the Father. The Spirit, promised to the disciples in the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17), is poured out on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).

In Christ, Jews and Gentiles are united in one new man, the body of Christ (Eph. 2). Salvation comes by grace through faith to those whose trust is placed in Christ. And then, having believed, they receive the gift of the Spirit (Eph. 1). Believers in Jesus are indwelt by the Spirit and baptized into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). In Ephesians 3, as argued above, Paul calls this a “stewardship [dispensation] of God’s grace” (Eph. 3:2).

With the transition from the dispensation of Mosaic law to the new covenant, the Sabbath and dietary regulations change again. No longer are people of faith required to keep the Sabbath or face execution, or keep strict dietary laws or risk excommunication. Rather, because of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, Paul instructs Christians: “Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival, or new moon, or a Sabbath day—things that are a mere shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:16–17).<sup>48</sup> The Sabbath and dietary regulations of the law of Moses are no longer in effect. Jesus makes that point explicitly when He explains to His disciples, “Are you so foolish? Don’t you understand that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him? For it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then goes out into the sewer” (Mark 7:18–19a NET). Mark explains, “This means all foods are clean” (v. 19b).

After the day of Pentecost, Peter is reminded of this change in dietary regulations when he sees a vision of a sheet carrying a variety of clean and unclean animals (Acts 10:9–16). A voice from heaven instructs him to eat. Three times the voice commands and three times Peter refuses. The command to eat comes with a rebuke: “What God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean” (v. 15 NET). When he arrives at Cornelius’s house, Peter explains what he had learned from the vision: “God has shown me that I should call no person defiled or ritually unclean” (v. 28 NET). Thus, the vision had broader application than to dietary laws, but it was based upon removal of those regulations. In other words, Peter now understands that the removal of the dietary restrictions is connected to the way he should view people. In light of the redemptive work of Christ, he can no longer view Gentiles as unclean.

That the rest of the apostles did not readily and easily accept this change is clear by their response. They summon Peter to Jerusalem to explain himself. They ask him why he shared a meal with a Gentile (Acts 11:2–3).<sup>49</sup> When they hear that the Spirit had come to these Gentiles, they “ceased their objections

and praised God, saying, ‘So then, God has granted the repentance that leads to life even to the Gentiles’” (Acts 11:18 NET).

Apparently these followers of Jesus did not yet understand that the Great Commission was a command to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). Nor did they really understand the promise that they would be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). It took Peter’s multiple visions and the repeated command from heaven to eat unclean animals and his trip back to Jerusalem to explain his visit to the house of a Gentile for the disciples to understand that a change had occurred in God’s administration of the work of redemption. It is now through the church that God will bless all nations, by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

This does not mean, as replacement theology, or supersessionism, teaches, that the church has replaced Israel, that God is through with Israel, and that God has no intention of keeping the promises He has made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>50</sup> Rather, God’s plan for ethnic Israel will be fulfilled in the future (Rom. 11:1).<sup>51</sup> The plan for Israel will be fulfilled in Jesus and, through Him, to those who are united to Him by grace through faith.

## The New Heavens and Earth: Redemption Completed

The final dispensation, from the millennium into eternity, begins with the return of Christ to the earth (Rev. 19). This event includes a great feast: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. . . . Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb!” (Rev. 19:7, 9).<sup>52</sup>

The writer of Hebrews predicts that “a Sabbath rest [remains] for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Therefore let us be diligent to enter that rest, so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience” (Heb. 4:9–11). The fulfillment of the Sabbath awaits the consummation of all things, when Christ will be all in all. Jesus is the fulfillment of the Sabbath and He provides rest for those who are in Him (cf. Matt. 11:28–30).<sup>53</sup> Those who came before Him, those who lived by faith in earlier dispensations, “did not receive what was promised. For God had provided something better for us, so that they would be made perfect together with us” (Heb. 11:39–40 NET). Together with that great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1), we look forward to receiving “a kingdom that cannot be shaken” (Heb. 12:28), “the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14).

Our hope, and the hope of all the redeemed, is found in “Mount Zion . . . the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:22–24).

In the Apocalypse, John sees the fulfillment of this promise.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.” (Rev. 21:1–7 ESV)

Thus, the prediction of the prophet Ezekiel will be experienced on the earth. This is a promise of an eternal covenant: “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an eternal covenant with them. I will establish them, increase their numbers, and place my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then, when my sanctuary is among them forever, the nations will know that I, the LORD sanctify Israel” (Ezek. 37:26–28 NET).

## God’s Plan for His Creation

From the beginning of the biblical story, God has been carrying out His plan for His creation. He created the heavens and the earth and created divine imagers to represent Him in the world. Their rebellion against Him did not catch

God by surprise. He had planned their redemption even before they fell. His plan is carried out in time and space. It is progressively revealed and progressively accomplished. There are distinguishable periods of time during which God administers His plan differently. Each dispensation, or administration, is better than the previous one, culminating in a new creation, a new heaven and earth in which God makes the earth His home forever.

The redeemed of all ages spend eternity with Him. Nothing could be better than that.

## THEOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

In 1965, Ryrie asserted that “dispensationalists are conservative and affirm complete allegiance to the doctrines of verbal, plenary inspiration, the virgin birth and deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, eternal salvation by grace through faith, the importance of godly living and ministry of the Holy Spirit, and hope for the future in the coming of Christ.”<sup>54</sup> Later he makes this point: “Whether nondispensationalists want to acknowledge it or not, dispensationalists do believe in the unity of the plan of salvation, the spiritual seed of Abraham, and even the possible validity of the covenant of grace!”<sup>55</sup>

In 1992, Blasing and Bock described dispensationalism very similarly:

We speak of dispensationalism as a tradition within American evangelicalism, sharing common features of evangelical orthodoxy. It is a tradition that has emphasized the universal church as the framework for Christian unity and spirituality, seeking its practical manifestation in ways that do not conflict with the concept of the local church. It has advocated the authority of Scripture and has emphasized the theological relevance of biblical apocalyptic and prophecy. It is a futurist premillennialism that has strongly maintained the imminent return of Christ and a national and political future for Israel. It is characterized by a canonical approach to Scripture that interprets discontinuities of the Old and New Testaments as historical changes in divine-human dispensations reflecting different purposes in the divine plan. As an element of dispensational change, it has emphasized unique features in grace of the present dispensation of the church.<sup>56</sup>

Dispensationalism is not a theological position that is rooted in denominationalism. It grew out of denominations, but it is not a denomination. It was

rooted in the conviction that denominations had lost their theological moorings. But dispensationalists hoped to purify and revive Christianity within those denominations. Dispensationalists played a major role in the rise of independent Bible churches. In planting such churches, the focus shifted from revitalizing existing churches and denominations to planting new, independent churches. Yet, dispensationalism is not antidenominations. It has an independent and entrepreneurial spirit which is nondenominational not antidenominational. In fact, many dispensationalists today serve in mainline denominational churches and organizations.

Dispensationalism, like the American evangelicalism where it has found a home, is a gospel-centered theological position. Dispensationalists are convinced that humanity is lost, “essentially and unchangeably bad apart from divine grace.”<sup>57</sup> The only solution to the condition of lost humanity is found in the good news that Jesus Christ took upon Himself the sin of the whole world, died as a substitute for sinners, was raised from the dead to give hope of eternal life, ascended to the Father who sent the indwelling Holy Spirit, and is coming back to the earth to complete the work of redemption. Christ gave to the church the Great Commission, the privilege and responsibility to communicate this gospel message to the whole world and to make disciples of Jesus. Dispensationalism emphasizes individual or personal evangelism and the worldwide missionary mandate given to the church. It is, thus, not surprising that many faith-based mission agencies were founded by dispensationalists.<sup>58</sup>

Related to dispensationalism’s emphasis on the Great Commission is its church and parachurch focus. The task of making disciples has been given to the church, but much of the work in making disciples is carried out through parachurch organizations. These are ministries, founded by Christians, which are designed to come alongside the church to perform ministerial tasks. Parachurch ministries do not replace the church; they serve alongside, as an arm of the church. Yet the relationship between the two has not always been harmonious. At times and in certain places, parachurch ministries sometimes seem as if they are more important than the church, as if they don’t need the church.<sup>59</sup> Dispensationalism’s strong entrepreneurial ethos and pragmatic bent have contributed to this. But in the best-case scenario, churches and parachurch organizations work together to accomplish the tasks of evangelism, training, teaching, discipleship, missions, and otherwise producing followers of Jesus who obey everything He commanded.<sup>60</sup>

Dispensationalists have a premillennial eschatology. Premillennialism is the view that Christ will return to the earth bodily (Acts 1:11) to inaugurate a one-thousand-year period of time during which He reigns over the earth from Jerusalem (Rev. 19–20). It is called premillennial because the return of Christ is prior to the millennium. All dispensationalists are premillennial but not all premillennialists are dispensational.<sup>61</sup> Most dispensationalists believe that seven years prior to the return of Christ to the earth, He will descend in the clouds and resurrect those who have died in faith and glorify believers who are still alive, and take both groups back to heaven with Him. This event is called the rapture of the church and because it precedes a seven-year tribulation period, it is called a pretribulation rapture position. This position is not limited to a dispensational reading of the Scriptures nor is it an essential view of dispensationalism.

## UNRESOLVED TENSIONS

The focus in this chapter has been on the views that dispensationalists hold in common, on what unites those who adopt the position, who willingly associate with the hermeneutical approach, who are comfortable within the fold. There is much that unites dispensationalists today, but there remain unresolved issues, and some views divide dispensationalists from one another.<sup>62</sup>

This chapter has not made much of the recent development described as progressive dispensationalism. The focus has been on what unites rather than what divides. To say it another way, what all dispensationalists hold in common is much more important than the nuances of distinction between dispensational views. Further, since dispensationalism has never been monolithic, there have always been areas of disagreement among dispensationalists.

### Understandings of the Covenants

A number of issues of disagreement or diversity remain within dispensationalism. Among them are the understandings of the covenants. Dispensationalists are united in seeing the Abrahamic covenant as foundational to the redemptive plan of God. Some see a covenant in Genesis 12 while others believe that the promises God made in Genesis 12 are put into a covenant in Genesis 15. Some believe that the promises are specifically limited to Israel while others

emphasize that God promises to bless Israel and the nations. Others emphasize that the promises are fulfilled in the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

How does the Mosaic covenant relate to the new covenant? Did the new covenant replace the Abrahamic covenant?<sup>63</sup> Are some aspects of the old covenant in force today? Will the old covenant sacrificial system be reestablished as a means of worship in the millennium?

Dispensationalists disagree in the way they understand the new covenant. Some insist that since the covenant was promised to Israel and Judah it can only be fulfilled to Jews. Others understand the New Testament to teach that the new covenant was inaugurated with the coming of the Spirit and that Jews and Gentiles receive new covenant blessings together, which still look forward to a future for ethnic Israel in God's plan in the future.

The Davidic covenant is acknowledged to promise an eternal kingdom under the reign of the Son of David, Jesus the Christ. But what about Christ's current reign? Is His reign from heaven an inaugurated fulfillment of that covenant promise or is the Davidic covenant reign only future?

## The Nature of the Kingdom

Dispensationalists also differ on the nature and definition of the kingdom, whether it is present or solely future, whether it is earthly or heavenly, whether it is material or immaterial, or both. Many dispensationalists understand the Gospels to teach that Jesus offered a kingdom to Israel and, because the people rejected their king, the offer was then withdrawn and the kingdom postponed. Others believe the New Testament to teach that Jesus did not merely offer a kingdom but He came bringing the kingdom or bringing a new stage of the kingdom.<sup>64</sup>

Dispensationalists universally believe that there is a future for ethnic Israel in the redemptive plan of God and that the church and Israel must be distinguished. What is not quite as clear is the variety of ways "Israel" is used in the Bible and within theological and biblical literature. Similarly, "church" is defined differently within dispensationalism. Like evangelicalism as a whole, dispensationalists need to devote attention to the definition and mission of the church. This is particularly seen when dispensationalists correctly affirm that the church is made up of both Jews and Gentiles.<sup>65</sup>

A variety of views of the eternal state are found within dispensationalism. Some believe that the Bible teaches that in the final judgment, the earth will be annihilated and pass out of existence. This earth will be replaced with a new

earth; there will be no essential connection between the old and the new.<sup>66</sup> Others believe that there will be some degree of continuity between this world and the new creation, that re-creation will not destroy and begin anew but the earth that was corrupted by sin will be redeemed and last forever. Dispensationalism has always had a strong earthly focus, at least for Israel, but it, like much of American evangelicalism, has sometimes viewed heaven as the final home of the redeemed.

## The Hermeneutical Approach

Finally, dispensationalism is a hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures. Ryrie has described the hermeneutics of dispensationalism as “consistently literal, or plain . . . historical-grammatical hermeneutics.”<sup>67</sup> This is the second of his *sine qua nons*. He explains, “The word *literal* is perhaps not as good as either the word *normal* or *plain*, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation often does.”<sup>68</sup> Blaising and Bock describe their hermeneutical approach as “historical-grammatical-literary-theological.”<sup>69</sup> They also emphasize that Bible reading is not an individual task:

Scripture’s role is to transform us daily as we address it and look for it to challenge us. But our dialogue does not occur in a vacuum, nor should our deliberations be private. Others read the text with us. Though we do not always agree with others on what the Bible says, these differences reflect our limitations in understanding. Sometimes our dialogue with others helps us see our own blind spots.<sup>70</sup>

As Ryrie notes, the term “literal” might not be the best descriptor of the hermeneutical approach. But dispensationalists continue to use it to describe their hermeneutics. For example, Elliott Johnson defends its use and defines it this way: “*Literal* interpretation entails those meanings which the author intended to communicate in the expressions of the text (grammar) in the original setting (historical). *Literal* thus works with a text within the frame of an author and his communication.”<sup>71</sup>

The strength of dispensationalism is that it is a biblically based system. Like evangelicalism, “as a community, we share a heritage that takes the divine message of the Bible seriously.”<sup>72</sup> At its best, dispensationalism has been a community of biblical scholars, theologians, historians, pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and other Christian ministers wrestling with the issues facing them in this world

under the authority of the Word of God. Since there are real enemies of the gospel we all face together, our goal should be to join with like-minded Christians with dispensational convictions, as well as with the bigger community of orthodox Christianity, in order to love and serve God and call others to follow Him in discipleship. Dispensationalism has been a place where such discussions take place “among biblical students and scholars who seek to handle the Word of God carefully and continue to evaluate their findings under its authority.”<sup>73</sup> And these discussions continue as we together seek to submit to the authority of the Scriptures and reach the world with the good news of a resurrected Savior.

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## NOTES

1. My parents were part of a transitional generation that changed this practice of separating men and women in the worship service. It might be too strong to call their decision to sit together an act of rebellion, but it certainly was a violation of the social mores in the church.
2. This pastor was an excellent biblical expositor, even though the Scofield course was the only formal theological training he had. On the history of Scofield’s course see Glenn R. Goss, “Cyrus Ingerson Scofield and the Scofield Reference Bible, 1843–1921,” <http://www.ebccnet.com/scofield.php>.
3. Of course, this is not a summary of dispensational teaching, merely the summary of what I learned growing up dispensationalist.
4. None of the contributors to this book would argue that dispensationalism is the only legitimate hermeneutic, but all believe that it is a legitimate way to read the Bible and, not surprisingly, that it is preferred to other options.
5. Darrell L. Bock argues, “Dispensationalism has been the object of caricature for at least four decades.” Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment,” *Trinity Journal* 15 (1994): 55.
6. Blaising and Bock write, “We speak of Dispensationalism as a tradition within American Evangelicalism, sharing common features of evangelical orthodoxy,” in Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 379. Mark S. Sweetnam, “Defining Dispensationalism: A Cultural Studies Perspective,” *Journal of Religious History* 34 (2010): 198, lists “a commitment to evangelical doctrine” as one of the “markers” of dispensationalism.
7. One of the most strident of those charges is by John Wick Bowman, “The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism,” *Interpretation* 10 (1956): 172–73. Bowman wrote: “Here is a teaching which, regardless of the amount of incidental true doctrine which it may contain, is—by virtue of certain dominant concepts which ramify the teaching at every point . . . something other than the historic faith of the Christian church.” He argues the dispensationalism of the *Scofield Reference Bible* “is to be classed with the type of Pharisaism that opposed our Lord and the Judaizing branch of the early church that hounded Paul across the Roman Empire.”
8. See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 111–31; cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 122–40. Although he does not use the term “heresy,” Sam Storms charges that premillennial dispensationalism is a view that “*the New Testament explicitly denies*” (italics in the original). Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2013), 137.
9. On the charges of heresy brought against Lewis S. Chafer, see R. Todd Mangum, *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936 to 1944*, Studies in Evan-

- gelical History and Thought (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007).
10. For one example of this charge, see John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991), 262. Gerstner concludes, “If we have shown anything in this present volume, it is that Dispensationalism does teach more than one way of salvation—and that in doing so it teaches no salvation at all.” In spite of consistent and repeated denials by dispensationalists, the charge continues to be leveled. More recently, Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 149, characterizes dispensationalism as holding to the view that “commits old covenant Israelites to salvation by works in contrast to salvation by grace in the new covenant.”
  11. Thus the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary reads, “We believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God, and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ.” <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/>. Yet Walter C. Kaiser Jr. claims that this dispensational view means that one can be saved today “by simply saying, ‘I believe there is a God! ‘I am a theist’ ”; in “Is It the Case that Christ Is the Same Object of Faith in the Old Testament? (Genesis 15:1–6),” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55/2 (2012): 292. This is a caricature of the dispensational view.
  12. Sweetnam, “Defining Dispensationalism,” 193, asserts: “Dispensationalism is very far from being a monolithic system of belief.” Darrell L. Bock, “Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise,” 55, writes, “Dispensationalism has never been as monolithic as its opponents have portrayed it.”
  13. Craig A. Blaising, “Contemporary Dispensationalism,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 36 (Spring 1994): 13.
  14. Harold W. Stone and James O. Duke observe: “The biblical text does not speak for itself; every reading is someone’s interpretation of it,” in *How to Think Theologically* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 46. Also see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 6.
  15. Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002), 2.
  16. Charles C. Ryrie, “Update on Dispensationalism,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 17, summarizes Darby’s view that “the established church was in ruins and apostasy.” On Darby and dispensationalism, see Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992). See also Mark Sweetnam and Crawford Gribben, “J. N. Darby and the Irish Origins of Dispensationalism,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52 (2009): 569–77.
  17. See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Stephen J. Nichols, *Jesus Made in America: A Cultural History from the Puritans to “The Passion of the Christ”* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008).
  18. Early dispensationalists sometimes made too sharp a distinction between the church and Israel, between the heavenly people and the earthly people. According to Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 146, “Any apparent dichotomy between heavenly and earthly purposes is not actual.”
  19. Craig A. Blaising, “Premillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 155–227; and Blaising, “A Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” in *Three Views on the Rapture*, ed. Alan Hultberg, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 25–73.
  20. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 46–47, has argued that dispensationalism holds to a doxological purpose while covenant theology holds to a “man-centered” soteriological purpose. This is inaccurate and unhelpful. See John S. Feinberg, “Systems of Discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), 84–85.
  21. “Westminster Shorter Catechism,” <http://www.reformed.org/documents/WSC.html>.

22. Sweetnam, "Defining Dispensationalism," 192, notes, "Dispensationalism has, for most of its existence, remained below the academic radar; with the exception of a handful of historical and sociological works its cultural power has remain unacknowledged and unexamined."
23. John D. Hannah, *An Uncommon Union: Dallas Theological Seminary and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 292–93, describes the connection between Dallas Theological Seminary and the Bible conference movement. Much of what he says about the seminary could also be said about dispensationalism. See also Glenn R. Kreider, "Dispensationalism," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, 4 vols., ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Routledge, 2004), 2:599–600.
24. C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Findlay, OH: Fundamental Truth, 1947), 13.
25. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 39; cf. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 42.
26. *Ibid.*, 44. Surely he overstates the case when he claims, "Only Dispensationalism presents a properly optimistic philosophy of history?"
27. *Ibid.*, 43. Ryrie is responding to the claim of C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958), 126. Kraus wrote: "The final answer of the dispensationalist to the problem of development in history seems to be an implicit denial of the possibility of progress, claims to the contrary notwithstanding. Reacting against a false optimism and the assumption of inevitable evolutionary progress, Dispensationalism reverted to an equally pagan concept of history which denies the possibility of progress and asserts the inevitability of futility on the historical level."
28. Paul David Nevin, "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation," PhD dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1965, 196, wrote, "If Dispensationalism is to have an adequate philosophy of history, it must not only have unity and diversity, it must also have progress. God must not only have a goal in history, He must be getting there." He then demonstrates five ways that the dispensations show historical progress (197–204).
29. Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 13. Later he explains, "The covenant is the framework" of Reformed theology (14).
30. First published in 1965, the book is still in print fifty years later; it was retitled *Dispensationalism* in 1995 and further revised in 2007. Ryrie's definition appears on page 33 of *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 2007).
31. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 34–35. In the foreword Frank E. Gaebelein calls dispensationalism a "system of Bible interpretation" (7).
32. This paragraph is adapted from my article "Dispensationalism," in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. Hans-Josef Klauck et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 6:923–24.
33. *Oikonomia* can be also translated as "stewardship," "management," and "administration."
34. The gospel had been announced in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3:8) but was accomplished in the work of Christ (Eph. 2:11–22).
35. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 32. Italics removed. Ryrie reiterates this point one paragraph later: "The Scripture on at least two occasions does use the word in the same way the dispensationalist does."
36. At <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/>.
37. See the chart in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 81. See also Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 118–19.
38. Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (Oct–Dec 1936): 391, surely overstates the case when he claims, "Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice . . . and any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh." Yet, his basic point is accurate; for a period of time, God required sacrifices and the keeping of the Sabbath. He no longer does.
39. Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 15, observes

- that “many ideas and concerns associated with dispensationalism have become part and parcel of mainstream evangelicalism.”
40. Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 109.
  41. Roy L. Aldrich, “A New Look at Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (1964): 42.
  42. The man, Adam, will live for 930 years (Gen. 5:5).
  43. Clearly, this language is hyperbolic: “I have decided that all living creatures must die, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. Now I am about to destroy them and the earth” (Gen. 6:17). The earth was not destroyed. When the floodwaters subsided, the ark settled, and Noah and the rest of the inhabitants came out of the ark and settled on the earth. In 1 Peter 3, Peter compares the destruction by water in the flood to the destruction by fire in the day of the Lord. See Gale Z. Heide, “What Is New about the New Heaven and the New Earth? A Theology of Creation from Revelation 21 and 2 Peter 3,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997): 3–56.
  44. One of the reasons for the command to Noah to take seven (or seven pairs of) clean animals onto the ark (Gen. 7:2–3) is to provide animals for these sacrifices. God provided what Noah would need after the flood, both for food and sacrifice.
  45. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 42, explains, “The presence of a test, failure, and judgment is not the *sine qua non* (absolute essential) of a dispensational government of the world.”
  46. As explained earlier, in Ephesians 3, Paul uses the term “dispensation” of this period of time.
  47. This puts Sabbath breaking in the same category as murder (Exod. 21:12–15), kidnapping (Exod. 21:16), cursing parents (Exod. 21:17), sorcery (Exod. 22:18), adultery (Lev. 20:10), incest (Lev. 18:22), and blasphemy (Lev. 24:14–16). Only murder (Gen. 9:5–6) is specifically condemned as a capital crime prior to the giving of the Law.
  48. Norman Geisler, “Colossians,” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983): 678, argues that the Sabbath regulations have passed away.
  49. Their reaction here is eerily similar to their response when they saw Jesus talking to a Samaritan woman (John 4:27).
  50. See Michael J. Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville: B&H, 2010). For a Reformed view of the future for Israel and a nuancing of “replacement theology,” see Brian Warner, “Replacement Theology,” <http://replacementtheology.org>.
  51. See J. Lanier Burns, “The Future of Ethnic Israel in Romans 11,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 188–229.
  52. There is no menu given for this banquet, but perhaps it will include rabbit stifado.
  53. Ray C. Stedman, “Jesus Is Our Sabbath Rest,” <http://www.ldolphin.org/sabbathrest.html>.
  54. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (1965), 210–11. In the revised edition, the list is different: “hope for the future in the coming of Christ” is replaced with “the future coming of Christ, and the eternal damnation of the lost.” Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 212. The list remains the same in the 2007 edition (p. 247).
  55. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 211. This list is also revised in the new edition: “Dispensationalists do believe in the unity of the plan of salvation, the unity of God’s people of all ages, the present aspect of the kingdom of God, the single basis of salvation, and the spiritual seed of Abraham.” Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (1995), 212. This list, too, remains unchanged in 2007 (p. 247).
  56. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Blaising and Bock, 379.
  57. The doctrine of total depravity is expressed this way in “DTS Doctrinal Statement,” <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/>.

58. For a list of ministries rooted in dispensationalism, see Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-to-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 10–14.
59. See B. L. Shelley, “Parachurch Groups (Voluntary Societies),” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid, Robert D. Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 863–65.
60. Sometimes parachurch organizations function to unite the church, as members of a variety of denominations join together to achieve a common ministry goal.
61. See, for example, the defense of historic premillennialism in *A Case for Historic Premillennialism*, ed. Craig L. Blomberg and Sung Wook Chung (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).
62. For one attempt to address several areas of disagreement see Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999). In a concluding essay, “Dispensationalism Tomorrow,” Bateman writes: “This tradition is not monolithic, as some have believed. . . . Dispensationalists are, however, agreed and like-minded in their stress on the uniqueness of the church and their confidence that a future exists for national Israel” (309).
63. This is not “replacement theology,” the view that the church replaces Israel as the recipient divine blessing. Rather, it is the view that the old covenant was fulfilled in Christ and the new covenant is the means by which God blesses Israel and the church together in this dispensation.
64. My view is that the kingdom has always been, that from the creation of the world God mediated His rule over the world through humans. He has never stopped being the king and He has mediated His reign in a variety of increasingly better ways. In the incarnation, God Himself came to the earth. When He left, He sent the Spirit, which is better than when the King was present. One day He will return to the earth and reign for a thousand years. But that is not the end, for the millennium will be followed by an eternal reign over the earth on the earth by the eternal King.
65. For example, the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary: “We believe that by the same Spirit all believers in this age are baptized into, and thus become, one body that is Christ’s, whether Jews or Gentiles, and having become members one of another, are under solemn duty to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, rising above all sectarian differences, and loving one another with a pure heart fervently.” <http://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinalstatement/>.
66. Earlier dispensational views of two peoples and two destinies has largely disappeared from the tradition. On this development see Stanley D. Toussaint, “Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist,” in *Three Central Issues*, ed. Bateman IV, 228–30.
67. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (2007), 47. This language is unchanged from the 1965 edition.
68. *Ibid.* The language is unchanged from the 1965 edition, although Ryrie adds a qualification not found in the first edition: “To be sure, literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is.”
69. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 77.
70. *Ibid.*, 104–5.
71. Elliott E. Johnson, “A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic,” in *Three Central Issues*, 65. Robert L. Thomas, “The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Ron J. Bigalke, Jr. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 2, describes the hermeneutics of progressive dispensationalism as “a hermeneutical shift away from literal interpretation.”
72. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 76.
73. Charles R. Swindoll, “Foreword,” in *Three Central Issues*, 11.