

DISPENSATIONALISM

REVISED AND EXPANDED

CHARLES C. RYRIE

"No one, whether friend or foe of dispensationalism, can avoid consideration of this important work."

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Dispensationalism

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CHARLES C. RYRIE

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FOREWORD

The system of Bible interpretation known as dispensationalism has in recent years been subjected to much opposition. A growing literature of books and articles has vigorously attacked it. Some have called dispensationalism a heresy and have classed it among the cults. Others have even identified it with modernism. Not all, but much, of the criticism of dispensationalism has come from evangelical writers.

Thus far dispensationalists have done little to answer this criticism. Though they have been writing extensively, their work has not been apologetic but rather expository, particularly of the prophetic portions of Scripture. Moreover, dispensationalism has at times been the victim of its adherents who have pressed unwisely certain of its features.

Dr. Ryrie's book is the first book-length contemporary apologetic for dispensationalism to be written by a recognized scholar. As such it commands attention. The author, a graduate of Haverford College, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Edinburgh University, is well known for his expository and doctrinal writing. His broad experience includes service as dean of men at a Christian liberal arts college, the presidency of a leading college of Bible, and his work as dean of the graduate school of Dallas Theological Seminary. Among his distinctions is honorary membership in Phi Beta Kappa, conferred on him by Haverford College.

Dr. Ryrie deals fairly and courteously with the critics of dispensationalism. He faces honestly objections that have been raised against this system of interpretation. He displays mastery of the literature and writes from a perspective of history as well as contemporary theology.

Many who have based their condemnation of dispensationalism upon hearsay will be enlightened by Dr. Ryrie's lucid presentation of its nature and his thoughtful rebuttal of its critics. This book is an admirable contribution to better understanding among Christians who disagree about dispensationalism. Although Dr. Ryrie has deep convictions about

dispensationalism and the opposition to it, he has kept his temper and presented his case candidly and graciously. The last chapter is an eloquent and reasonable plea for tolerance.

As one for whom dispensationalism is not theology but rather a method of interpretation helpful in grasping the progress of revelation in the Bible, I do not find myself in agreement with every aspect of Dr. Ryrie's presentation. Yet I believe that this book is mandatory reading for those who have attacked dispensationalism and for all who would understand what it really is. As a reasonable and scholarly apologetic for dispensationalism, it cannot be ignored.

—FRANK E. GAEBELEIN 1965

MY THANKS

I could never thank all the people and influences that have affected my life and thinking. But in relation to understanding the Scriptures interpreted plainly, and thus dispensationally, and in relation to producing this book, I want to mention some to whom I am especially indebted.

First are my parents. For many years my father taught a Bible class in our home, and on occasion, as a boy in grade school, I was allowed to sit in—as long as I sat beside my mother. She not only insured my good behavior, but she also helped me in following the material Dad was teaching and in looking up Scripture references. One series I remember to this day was a study of C. I. Scofield's *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*. In those days it was a small, red book packed with Scripture references and outlines. That was my first exposure not only to the dispensations but to other important Bible doctrines as well.

Also, in those years and through high school, I would occasionally hear Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer when he came to speak in nearby St. Louis. Those visits were a shot in the arm, for my home church contributed little to my biblical education.

During my college days in a suburb of Philadelphia, I remember once trying to explain what the dispensations were to a classmate. I had to study some to come up with answers. When we could, my roommate and I would take the train into the city to hear Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, who himself was a dispensationalist and who saw to it that all the pew racks contained *Scofield Bibles*.

In time I attended Dallas Seminary, where the instruction was dispensational premillennialism. There I sat under the teaching of Dr. Chafer, Dr. H. A. Ironside, and other stalwarts. My later studies at the University of Edinburgh confirmed by contrast that dispensational premillennialism was the only way to understand the Bible.

After I graduated from public high school, I attended the Stony Brook

(Preparatory) School on Long Island for a semester because my father thought that I had not learned to study in public high school. There I came under the headmaster, Dr. Frank E. Gaebelin, who became a good friend in the years that followed. On one trip to Dallas in the early sixties, he told me about the impending revision of the *Scofield Reference Bible* and urged me to consider writing a book on dispensationalism to coincide with the release of that revision. I accepted the challenge but beat the revision by two years! That was the original edition of this book, and Dr. Gaebelin kindly wrote a helpful foreword.

In recent years I have had at the back of my mind revising and updating this book. I spoke about doing this with Mr. Greg Thornton, vice president in charge of Moody Publishers and one who has been a faithful friend for a number of years. He enthusiastically agreed and encouraged me to give the project priority. Now, thirty years after the original publication, this new edition is ready.

As with any book, a number of people deserve special thanks. Mr. Joe O'Day, who did the gigantic task of editing the expanded editions of my Study Bible, was assigned to this book. That made the process much easier and quicker, for though we have not yet met face-to-face, we work well with each other. But there are many others at Moody Publishers, unsung heroes in getting any book to the public, and I thank them sincerely.

Rev. Mark Toothman has helped this computer illiterate person (wrong generation!) to feel comfortable with that technology and was always ready to rescue me from trouble at the drop of a phone call (and there were many). Mr. Steve Nichols, a student in very recent years, patiently urged me to undertake the revision and keep at it, and he provided stimulation in conversation and by passing along materials he thought would be helpful to the book. Several, including Mark and Steve, have read portions, or all, of the manuscript. I thank them.

Many times when I was "stuck," the Lord would bring thoughts and passages to mind to include at just the right place, and I thank Him not only for doing that but for bringing all these good influences into my life and ministry. I hope this book will help His people to better understand His Word and thus honor Him.

DISPENSATIONALISM—HELP OR HERESY?

The mention of the word *dispensationalism* usually evokes an immediate reaction.

For many Christians it reminds them of the help and blessing the ministries and writings of dispensational Bible teachers have been to them. They recall Bible conferences, prophecy conferences, special meetings, or books that awakened in them their first real interest in studying the Bible seriously and in depth.

For others, however, dispensationalism is something to be avoided like the plague. Perhaps they do not even begin to understand what it is, but, if they have heard about it, it has been in a negative way. Indeed, they may have been told that dispensational teaching is heretical. Nevertheless, dispensationalists have occupied a significant place in the history of the church, and they continue to be an important group of earnest believers today.

Like all doctrines, dispensational teaching has undergone systematization and development in its lifetime, though the basic tenets have not changed. At times it has been aggressively attacked. Often caricatures and stereotypes misrepresent and ridicule the viewpoint. When this book was originally published in 1965 under the title *Dispensationalism Today*, its purpose was to present classic dispensational teaching in a positive way in order to correct misunderstandings and allay suspicions about it. I also wanted to show that earlier dispensationalists were more balanced in their statements than usually represented by those who quote them selectively.

This revision does not abandon, change, dilute, or minimize the basic teachings of normative, or classic, dispensationalism. The basic scheme involving the different dispensations remains the most helpful tool of consistent, noncontradictory interpretation of Scripture. References will be made to some books published since 1965, and the recent

developments in hermeneutics and the major changes being proposed by so-called progressive dispensationalists are addressed. But the positive presentation of normative dispensationalism remains a primary feature of this revision.

It should be remembered that dispensationalists are conservative, evangelical Christians. Many of the differences of opinion discussed in this book are between evangelicals with whom there is agreement in other important areas of doctrine. It is sincerely intended that what is said about these differences be factual, fair, clear, and in a spirit of helpfulness. I hope that every reader, before putting this book down, will read the last chapter, no matter how mildly or violently he or she may disagree with other parts of the book.

OPPOSITION TO DISPENSATIONALISM

The opposition to dispensational teaching has come from many quarters, and the attacks have been quite varied in their intensity.

The theological liberal quite naturally opposes dispensationalism, for he finds completely unpalatable its plain interpretation, which is based on a verbal, plenary view of the inspiration of Scripture. Neither would he agree with other beliefs and teachings that dispensationalists hold in common with other conservatives. Whatever else dispensationalists are, they are conservative in their view of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, an approach unsavory to the liberal.

But certain conservatives also are opposed to the teachings of dispensationalism. On the one hand, the amillennialist recognizes that dispensationalists are invariably premillennialists, which means their teaching cannot be a viable option, since premillennialism and amillennialism do not mix. A. W. Pink, for example, writes of dispensationalists as those who impose “their crudities and vagaries, and make their poor dupes believe a wonderful discovery had been made in the ‘rightly dividing of the word of truth.’ ... How dreadfully superficial and faulty their ‘findings’ are [is apparent] from the popular (far too popular to be of much value—Luke 16:15!) Scofield Bible.”¹ More recently John Gerstner labeled dispensationalism “a cult and not a branch of the Christian church,” associating dispensationalists with

“false teachers” and “heretics.”² On the other hand, those who might be called ultradispensationalists feel that normative dispensationalists have not gone far enough in their teachings and thus are unbiblical in their conclusions, which, therefore, must be rejected.

Opposition has also developed from those who are premillennial but not dispensational. (Generally they are covenant premillennialists who believe in a posttribulational Rapture.) Their point is that dispensational premillennialism is not historical but that premillennialism without dispensationalism is. Therefore, their attack centers on dispensational distinctives: “The present upsurge of Historical Premillennialism has challenged the Dispensational theory of a Pretribulational Rapture of the Church out of the world. Belief in a Pretribulational Rapture is ... a deviation.”³

These various attacks range from mild to severe. Philip Mauro, a premillennialist who abandoned the dispensational position, is bitter in his denunciation:

Indeed, the time is fully ripe for a thorough examination and frank exposure of this new and subtle form of *modernism* that has been spreading itself among those who have adopted the name “fundamentalists.” For evangelical Christianity must purge itself of this leaven of *dispensationalism* ere it can display its former power and exert its former influence.... The entire system of “dispensational teaching” is *modernistic* in the strictest sense.⁴

Only slightly more mild than Mauro’s charge of modernism is the conclusion of Oswald Allis that dispensationalism is a “danger” and is “unscriptural.”⁵ Daniel Fuller reached a similar conclusion, namely, that dispensationalism is “internally inconsistent and unable to harmonize itself with the Biblical data.”⁶

John Bowman, in a practically unrestrained attack on the original *Scofield Bible* and its dispensational teachings, said, “This book represents perhaps the most dangerous heresy currently to be found within Christian circles.”⁷ In a more temperate manner, the editor of *Presbyterian Journal*, in answer to a reader’s question, called dispensationalism “a conservative ‘heresy’” since, in his own words, “whatever else you may say about a dispensationalist, one thing you can say about him with great assurance: he is conservative in theology.”⁸

More recently reconstructionists (also known as dominion theologians or theonomists), who are postmillennial, have joined the fray. One calls dispensationalism “unbelief and heresy,”⁹ whereas another labels premillennialism “an unorthodox teaching, generally espoused by heretical sects on the fringes of the Christian Church.”¹⁰

Labeling dispensationalism as “modernism,” “unscriptural,” or “heresy” is not the only way it has been attacked. Some have practiced the guilt-by-association method. Bowman, for instance, associates dispensationalism with names like Hitler and National Socialism, Roman Catholicism, Christian Science, and Mormonism.¹¹ The book *The Church Faces the Isms*, written by members of the faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, includes dispensationalism along with such “isms” as Seventh-day Adventism and Perfectionism.¹²

Gerstner (while distinguishing basic differences) puts dispensationalists, in a certain respect, alongside Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons.¹³ And in the foreword to Gerstner’s book, R. C. Sproul draws an analogy between dispensationalists and Joseph Fletcher, father of modern “situational ethics.”¹⁴

Resort is often made to an *ad hominem* attack, which focuses on a person’s character rather than on his teachings. The person often singled out is John Nelson Darby, and the point of attack is usually his separationist principles and practices. He is pictured as the “pope” of the Plymouth Brethren movement, who excommunicated at will those who disagreed with him and whose separationist practices have characterized the entire dispensational movement for ill. Here is an illustration of this kind of attack: “There exists a direct line from Darby through a number of channels ... all characterized by and contributing to a spirit of separatism and exclusion. The devastating effects of this spirit upon the total body of Christ cannot be underestimated.”¹⁵

Sometimes this attack takes the form of pointing to cases in which division in churches was involved in some way or another with dispensational teaching. Of course, in the report of such instances the reader cannot be sure he has been given all the facts that may have contributed to the rupture. But dispensational teaching is usually made the primary, if not the sole, cause.¹⁶ Those who use such an argument in an effort to discredit the totality of dispensational teaching should call to

mind some of the basic and most obvious facts about the divisive aspects of the Protestant Reformation.

There is the “intellectual” attack. It is noted that the process of earning a doctor’s degree has delivered the person from the dispensational teaching in which he was reared.¹⁷ Needless to say, there are men with doctor’s degrees who support the dispensational approach. However, unworthy as it may be, the attack is a powerful one. It implies that, whereas dispensationalism is something that may inadvertently be learned in Sunday school or at a Bible school, greater intellectual maturity will certainly lead to its abandonment.

There is the historical attack. This will be examined in more detail later (see chapter 4). It seeks to prove that since dispensationalism in its present form is apparently recent it cannot be true, for surely someone would have taught it in the first eighteen centuries of the history of the church if it were true. Some who use this device to discredit dispensationalism are honest enough to admit that history is never the test of truth—the Bible and only the Bible is. But they persist in using the approach and leave the impression that history is a partially valid test, if not the final test. Dale Moody writes, “Dispensationalism with the modern form of seven dispensations, eight covenants, and a Pretribulation Rapture is a deviation that has not been traced beyond 1830.”¹⁸

There is the ridicule-of-doctrine attack. This is usually based on a straw-man construction of the dispensationalist’s doctrine or a partial statement of it. Some supposed teaching of dispensationalism is held up to ridicule, and by so much the entire system is condemned. For instance, the opponents of dispensationalism are quite sure that it teaches two (or more) ways of salvation. And they ask, What could be more unscriptural than that? Therefore, the system should be discarded. Or, again, they declare that dispensationalists will not use the Sermon on the Mount, and, since the Sermon obviously contains rich Christian truth, what could be more apparent than that the system refusing to use it is wrong? Indeed, Richard J. Foster, a conservative, says that “the heresy [there’s that word again] in Dispensationalism [is] that the Sermon on the Mount applies to a future age rather than today.”¹⁹ These charges will be discussed in due time (see chapter 5); they are

mentioned here only as examples of the method of attack used.

Another jabs at dispensationalism in this way: “The nondispensationalist usually finds eschatological factors least important. Evidently the dispensationalist feels that our church creeds are inadequate because they do not include pronouncements on such matters as a pretribulation Rapture or the identification of the 144,000.”²⁰ Some groups do deem it best for their ministry to have a pretribulation Rapture clause in their doctrinal statements, but I have never seen a creedal statement that considered it necessary to include the identification of the 144,000.

Bruce Waltke (formerly a dispensationalist, now an amillennialist, and always a friend) in a lecture given in 1991 predicted that dispensationalism has “no future as a system.” He went on to say that “unless a new, accredited theologian arises to defend historic dispensationalism, this aberration in Christian theology will die.”²¹

The new “progressive” dispensationalism (see chapter 9), while posing as a legitimate development within the dispensational tradition, appears rather to be a distinct change from classic dispensationalism since it seeks “dispensational structures that are more accurate biblically.”²² Does this not imply that classic dispensationalism is *less* accurate biblically? One progressive views classic dispensationalism as “the cloud” under which he lives.²³ But the changes of progressive dispensationalism will presumably dispel that cloud.

Of course, the ultimate test of the truth of any doctrine is whether it is in accord with biblical revelation. The fact that the church taught something in the first century does not make it true, and, likewise, if the church did not teach something until the twentieth century, it is not necessarily false. Tertullian, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Darby, Scofield, and the Westminster divines were all instruments in the hands of God to minister truth to His church, but none of them was perfect in all his thinking. People do not make a doctrine right or wrong. Defective life never enhances doctrine, but neither does it necessarily falsify it. Earning a doctor’s degree may make one an expert in a particular field of study, but it does not make one infallible or without need of further light on a given subject. An understanding of the truth of the Bible can be communicated by the Holy Spirit in and through the formal education

process and procedures, and it can be communicated apart from them.

If dispensationalism has been called everything from a “dangerous friend” to a “sworn enemy,” is there any point in examining it? What do the dispensationalists say for themselves that could make their teaching worth investigating? Could there be any help in that which is a heresy in the minds of some?

THE HELP GIVEN BY DISPENSATIONALISM

It Answers the Need of Biblical Distinctions

There is no interpreter of the Bible who does not recognize the need for certain basic distinctions in the Scriptures. The theological liberal, no matter how much he speaks of the Judaistic background of Christianity, recognizes that Christianity is nevertheless different from Judaism. There may be few or many features of Judaism that, in his mind, carry over into Christianity, but still the message of Jesus was something new. Therefore, the material of the Old Testament is distinguished from that of the New.

The covenant theologian, for all his opposition to dispensationalism, also makes certain rather important distinctions. However, it must be noted that his dispensational distinctions are viewed as related to the unifying and underlying covenant of grace. Nevertheless, within his concept of this covenant he does make some very basic distinctions. Louis Berkhof will serve as an example.²⁴ After rejecting the usual dispensational scheme of Bible distinctions, he enumerates his own scheme of dispensations or administrations, reducing the number to two—the Old Testament dispensation and the New Testament dispensation. However, within the Old Testament dispensation Berkhof lists four subdivisions, which, although he terms them “stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace,” are distinguishable enough to be listed. In reality, then, he finds these four plus the New Testament dispensation, or five periods of differing administrations of God. Thus, the covenant theologian finds biblical distinctions a necessary part of his theology, even though the covenant of grace is his ruling category.

The dispensationalist finds his answer to the need for distinctions in his dispensational scheme. The dispensations supply the need for

distinctions in the orderly progress of revelation throughout Scripture. His dispensations are not stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace but are God's distinctive and different administrations in directing the affairs of the world. It makes little difference at this point in the discussion whether there are seven dispensations or not; the point is that dispensations answer the need for distinctions.

All interpreters feel the need for distinctions. Obviously this does not prove that dispensationalists' distinctions are the correct ones, but it does demonstrate that the need for distinctions is basic to the proper interpretation of the Scriptures. There is some truth in the two statements "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."²⁵ That is true simply because every person who does not bring an animal sacrifice or who does not observe Saturday as his day of worship recognizes the need for distinctions in the interpretation of the Bible. The dispensationalist feels that his system supplies the answer to that need.

It Answers the Need of a Philosophy of History

The Scriptures per se are not a philosophy of history, but they contain one. It is true that the Bible deals with ideas—but with ideas that are interpretations of historical events. This interpretation of the meaning of historical events is the task of theology, and it is a task that is not without its problems. The chief problem is that both covenant and dispensational theologies claim to represent the true philosophy of history as contained in the Scriptures. The problem is further complicated by the fact that, if a philosophy of history is defined as "a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward ultimate meaning,"²⁶ then in a certain sense both systems of theology meet the basic requirements of the definition. However, the way in which the two systems meet these requirements affirms that dispensationalism is the more valid and helpful system. Notice that the definition centers on three things: (1) the recognition of "historical events and successions," or a proper concept of the progress

of revelation in history; (2) the unifying principle; and (3) the ultimate goal of history. Let us examine both systems in relation to these three features.

Concerning the goal of history, dispensationalists find it in the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth, whereas the covenant theologian regards it as the eternal state. This does not mean that normative dispensationalists minimize the glory of the eternal state, but they insist that the display of the glory of the God who is sovereign in human history must be seen in the present heavens and earth. This view of the realization of the goal of history within time is both optimistic and in accord with the requirements of the definition.

The covenant view, which sees the course of history continuing the present struggle between good and evil until terminated by the beginning of eternity, obviously does not have any goal within temporal history and is therefore pessimistic. Alva McClain points out this contrast very clearly when he says that according to covenant theology both good and evil continue in their development side by side through human history.

Then will come catastrophe and the crisis of divine judgment, not for the purpose of setting up a divine kingdom in history, but after the close of history.... Thus history becomes the preparatory "vestibule" of eternity.... It is a narrow corridor, cramped and dark, a kind of "waiting room," leading nowhere within the historical process, but only fit to be abandoned at last for an ideal existence on another plane. Such a view of history seems unduly pessimistic, in the light of Biblical revelation.²⁷

Progressive dispensationalists take a both/and view of the goal(s) of history by combining the millennial kingdom and the eternal state together in a single future dispensation. This is a mediating position between classic dispensationalism and covenant theology since most dispensational outlines see the dispensations operating only within time (and therefore would not include eternity in a dispensation as progressives do). Thus, in relation to goals in a proper philosophy of history, only normative dispensationalism with its consummation within history in the dispensation of the Millennium offers a satisfactory system.

A second requirement of a philosophy of history is a proper unifying

principle. In covenant theology the principle is the covenant of grace. This is the alleged covenant that the Lord made with man after the sin of Adam, in which He offered salvation through Jesus Christ. In short, the covenant of grace is God's plan of salvation, and therefore the unifying principle of covenant theology is soteriological.

In dispensationalism the principle is theological or eschatological or doxological, for the differing dispensations reveal the glory of God as He manifests His character in the differing stewardships, which culminate in history with the millennial glory. This is not to say that dispensationalism fails to give salvation its proper place in the purpose of God (see chapter 6). If the goal of history is the earthly Millennium and if the glory of God will be manifest at that time in the personal presence of Christ in a way hitherto unknown, then the unifying principle of dispensationalism may be said to be eschatological (if viewed from the goal toward which we are moving) or theological (if viewed from the self-revelation of God in every dispensation) or doxological (if viewed from the perspective of the overall manifestation of the glory of God).

In progressive dispensationalism the unifying principle is Christological because of the emphasis on Christ and on the Messianic, Davidic kingdom, already and not yet fulfilled.

Although the normative dispensationalists principle is much broader and therefore less confining, it must be admitted that this alone does not prove that it is the more valid one. We must also consider the third part of our definition of a philosophy of history.

Only dispensationalism does justice to the proper concept of the progress of revelation. Covenant theology does include in its system different modes of administration of the covenant of grace, and although these modes would give an appearance of an idea of progressiveness in revelation, in practice there is extreme rigidity in covenant theology. James Orr, himself a covenant theologian, criticizes the covenant system along this very line:

It failed to seize the true idea of development, and by an artificial system of typology, and allegorizing interpretation, sought to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old. But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the covenant as an

exhaustive category, and attempting to force into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds desirous of simple and natural notions.²⁸

Covenant theology, then, because of the rigidity of its unifying principle of the covenant of grace, can never show within its system proper progress of revelation.

Dispensationalism, on the other hand, can and does give proper place to the idea of development. Under the various administrations of God, different revelation was given to man, and that revelation was increasingly progressive in the scope of its content. Though similarities are present in various dispensations, they are part of a true development and not a result of employing the unifying principle of the covenant of grace. The particular manifestations of the will of God in each dispensation are given their full, yet distinctive, place in the progress of the revelation of God throughout the ages. Only dispensationalism can cause historical events and successions to be seen in their own light and not to be reflected in the artificial light of an overall covenant.

Thus, a correct philosophy of history with its requirements of a proper goal, a proper unifying principle, and a proper concept of progress is best satisfied by the dispensational system. Like the need for biblical distinctions, the proper concept of the philosophy of history leads to dispensationalism.

It Provides Consistent Hermeneutics

This subject will be dealt with later (see chapter 5). For now it suffices to say that dispensationalism claims to employ principles of literal, plain, normal, or historical-grammatical interpretation consistently.

Covenant theologians are well known for their use of nonliteral interpretation, especially when interpreting prophecy, and they are equally well known for their amillennialism, which is only the natural outcome of such a hermeneutic. Premillennialists who are not dispensationalists also have to depart from normal interpretation at certain points in their eschatology. For example, George E. Ladd, in order to add support to his posttribulational view, is forced to regard the 144,000 of Revelation 7 as referring not to literal Israel but to spiritual Israel, or the church.²⁹ Further, he cannot agree with the

dispensationalist's idea of the Jewish character of Matthew's gospel,³⁰ but he nowhere explains, for instance, how he can interpret in any normal way our Lord's words of commission to the Twelve recorded in Matthew 10:5–10. Anyone who attempts to interpret plainly this commission, which forbade the disciples to go to the Gentiles, and the commission that commands the same group to go to the Gentiles (Matt. 28:19–20) either (1) gives up in confusion or (2) resorts to spiritualizing one of the passages or (3) recognizes a dispensational distinction.

If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist. As basic as one believes normal interpretation to be, and as consistently as he uses it in interpreting Scripture, to that extent he will of necessity become a dispensationalist.

SUMMARY

Dispensationalism, then, claims to be a help in supplying the answer to the need for biblical distinctions, in offering a satisfying philosophy of history, and in employing a consistently normal principle of interpretation. These are basic areas in proper understanding of the Bible. If dispensationalism has the answers, then it is the most helpful tool in consistent biblical interpretation. If not, it ought to be minimized or discarded.

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26. Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), 1.
27. Alva J. McClain, "A Premillennial Philosophy of History," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 113 (April 1956): 113–14.
28. James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 303.
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30. *Ibid.*, 133–34.

WHAT IS A DISPENSATION?

There is no more primary problem in the whole matter of dispensationalism than that of definition. By this is meant not simply arriving at a single sentence definition of the word but also formulating a definition/description of the concept. This will require an examination of the scriptural use of the word, a comparison of the word *dispensation* with related words such as *age*, a study of the use of the word in church history, and some observations concerning the characteristics and number of the dispensations.

To say that there is a great lack of clear thinking on this matter of definition is an understatement. Both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists are often guilty of lack of clarity. Many from both groups are satisfied to use the well-known definition that appears in the notes of the original *Scofield Reference Bible*: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture.”¹ Dispensationalists use this definition without thinking further of its implications in relation to age, for instance, and without ever examining its basis or lack of basis in the scriptural revelation itself. Nondispensationalists use it as a convenient and useful scapegoat simply because it does not (and could not in two sentences) convey all that is involved in the concept of a dispensation. If this concise definition were all that Scofield had to say about dispensations, then it would be fair to concentrate an attack on it, but if he has more to say (which he does), then it is not.

The *New Scofield Bible*, though beginning the note on dispensations with the same sentence as the original *Scofield*, continues with four paragraphs of elaboration. Among other matters those added paragraphs focus on the concepts of (1) a deposit of divine revelation, (2) man’s stewardship responsibility to that revelation, and (3) the time period

during which a dispensation operates. Also it is made quite clear that dispensations are not separate ways of salvation; rather, there is only one way of salvation—"by God's grace through the work of Christ ... on the cross."² More recent nondispensationalists seem to prefer not to interact with this expanded definition/description in their discussions about dispensationalism.³

To draw an analogy in another doctrinal area, a conservative, when pressed for a concise statement of his theory of the Atonement, will answer, "I believe in substitutionary atonement." This is entirely accurate and probably the best concise answer that could be given. But liberals are well known for using this simple statement as a means of ridicule, for they point out that the work of Christ cannot be confined to a single aspect like substitution. That is true, and the conservative recognizes that the entire work of Christ cannot be fully expressed by the single word *substitution*. Nevertheless, all the work of Christ is based on His vicarious sacrifice.

In like manner, the nondispensationalist points out some lack in the old *Scofield* definition and with a wave of the hand dismisses dispensationalism on the basis of the weakness of the definition! Perhaps the earlier definition does not distinguish *dispensation* from *age*, but such failure does not mean that they cannot be distinguished or that they have not been distinguished by others. And it certainly does not mean that the entire system is condemned. John Wick Bowman resorts to this stratagem when he declares, "The word translated 'dispensation' in the Greek Bible ... never means nor does it ever have any reference to a period of time as such, as Scofield's definition demands."⁴ Though the accuracy of Bowman's statement may be questioned by the references in Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9, in making such a charge against Scofield's definition, Bowman attempts to discredit the entire system.

The popularity of the *Scofield Reference Bible* has focused considerable attention on the definition in its notes and has made it a prime target for attack by nondispensationalists. However, scholars who are critical of dispensationalism should recognize that Scofield is not the only one who has defined the word, and if there are lacks in his definition, they ought to recognize that his revisers and others have offered definitions that are more expanded. At any rate, any scholarly critique should certainly take

into account several definitions if the system is to be represented fairly. For instance, L. S. Chafer did not emphasize the time aspect of a dispensation in his concept,⁵ and long ago the present writer defined a dispensation entirely in terms of economy rather than age.⁶ Any critique ought to take into account such definitions as well as Scofield's.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD *DISPENSATION*

The English word *dispensation* is an Anglicized form of the Latin *dispensatio*, which the Vulgate uses to translate the Greek word. The Latin verb is a compound, meaning "to weigh out or dispense."⁷ Three principal ideas are connected to the meaning of the English word: (1) "The action of dealing out or distributing"; (2) "the action of administering, ordering, or managing; the system by which things are administered"; and (3) "the action of dispensing with some requirement."⁸ In further defining the use of the word theologically, the same dictionary says that a dispensation is "a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time.... Also, the age or period during which a system has prevailed."⁹ It is interesting to notice, in view of the usual criticism of Scofield's definition, that in this dictionary definition *dispensation* and *age* are closely related.

The Greek word *oikonomia* comes from the verb that means to manage, regulate, administer, and plan.¹⁰ The word itself is a compound whose parts mean literally "to divide, apportion, administer or manage the affairs of an inhabited house." In the papyri the officer (*pikonomos*) who administered a dispensation was referred to as a steward or manager of an estate, or as a treasurer.¹¹ Thus, the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household.

SCRIPTURAL USE OF THE WORD *DISPENSATION*

The Usage of the Word

The various forms of the word *dispensation* appear in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oiknomeo* is used once in Luke 16:2, where it is translated "to be a steward." The noun *oikonomos* appears ten

times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 4:10) and is usually translated “steward” or “manager” (but “treasurer” in Rom. 16:23). The noun *oikonomia* is used nine times (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4). In these instances it is translated variously (“stewardship,” “dispensation,” “administration,” “job,” “commission”).

The Features Displayed

Before attempting any formal definition, it might be useful to note some of the features connected with the word itself as it appears in the New Testament. These are not necessarily features of the dispensational scheme but are simply observable connections in which the word is used. In Christ’s teaching the word is confined to two parables recorded in Luke (12:42; 16:1, 3, 8). In both cases the parables concern the management of a household by a steward or manager, but the parable recorded in Luke 16 gives some important characteristics of a stewardship, or dispensational, arrangement. These characteristics include the following:

1 Basically there are two parties: the one whose authority it is to delegate duties, and the one whose responsibility it is to carry out these charges. The rich man and the steward (or manager) play these roles in the parable of Luke 16 (v. 1).

2 There are specific responsibilities. In the parable the steward failed in his known duties when he wasted the goods of his lord (v. 1).

3 Accountability, as well as responsibility, is part of the arrangement. A steward may be called to account for the discharge of his stewardship at any time, for it is the owner’s or master’s prerogative to expect faithful obedience to the duties entrusted to the steward (v. 2).

4 A change may be made at any time unfaithfulness is found in the existing administration (“can no longer be steward”).

These four features give some idea of what was involved in the concept of a dispensational arrangement as the word was used in the time of Christ.

The other occurrences of the word are all in the writings of Paul

except for the reference in 1 Peter 4:10. Certain features of the concept are evident from these usages.

1 God is the one to whom men are responsible in the discharge of their stewardship obligations. In three instances this relationship to God is mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 4:1–2; Titus 1:7).

2 Faithfulness is required of those to whom a dispensational responsibility is committed (1 Cor. 4:2). This is illustrated by Erastus, who held the important position of treasurer (steward) of the city (Rom. 16:23).

3 A stewardship may end at an appointed time (Gal. 4:2). In this reference the end of the stewardship came because of a different purpose being introduced. This reference also shows that a dispensation is connected with time.

4 Dispensations are connected with the mysteries of God, that is, with specific revelation from God (1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25).

5 Dispensation and age are connected ideas, but the words are not exactly interchangeable. For instance, Paul declares that the revelation of the present dispensation was hidden “for ages,” meaning simply a long period of time (Eph. 3:9). The same thing is said in Colossians 1:26. However, since a dispensation operates within a time period, the concepts are related.

6 At least three dispensations (as commonly understood in dispensational teaching) are mentioned by Paul. In Ephesians 1:10 he writes of “an administration [dispensation, KJV] suitable to the fullness of the times,” which is a future period. In Ephesians 3:2 he designates the “stewardship [dispensation, KJV] of God’s grace,” which was the emphasis of the content of his preaching at that time. In Colossians 1:25–26 it is implied that another dispensation preceded the present one, in which the mystery of Christ in the believer is revealed.

It is important to notice that in the first two of these instances *there can be no question that the Bible uses the word dispensation in exactly the same way the dispensationalist does*. Even Bowman admits that: “Actually, of all seven dispensations accepted by Scofield and his colleagues, there

are but two (Grace and the Fullness of Time) in connection with which the word 'dispensation' is ever used at all."¹² The negative cast of Bowman's statement must not obscure the importance of this point. The Bible does name two dispensations in the same way that dispensationalists do (and implies a third). Granted, it does not name seven, but, since it does name two, perhaps there is something to this teaching called dispensationalism.

Almost all opponents of dispensationalism try to make much of their claim that the Scriptures do not use the word *dispensation* in the same theological and technical sense that the dispensational scheme of teaching does. Two facts should be pointed out in answer to this charge. The first has already been stated in the preceding paragraph: Scripture on at least two occasions does use the word in the same way the dispensationalist does. Thus, the charge is simply not true.

Second, it is perfectly valid to take a biblical word and use it in a theological sense *as long as the theological use is not unbiblical*. All conservatives do this with the word *atonement*. It is a word that is never used in the New Testament, yet theologically all use it to stand for what is involved in the death of Christ. Biblically, the word *atonement* is not used in connection with the death of Christ, but, since it is used of the covering for sin in the Old Testament, it is not unbiblical to give it a theological meaning that is in reality more inclusive than its strict biblical usage. The dispensationalist does a similar thing with the word *dispensation*. The usage of the word and the features of the word, as outlined above, prove conclusively that the dispensationalist has in no way used the word in an unbiblical sense when he uses it as a designation for his system of teaching. Even Daniel Fuller admits this: "It is this latter sense which gives rise to the perfectly valid theological usage of the word 'dispensation' to denote a period of time during which God deals with man in a certain way."¹³

Definitions

As far as the use of the word in Scripture is concerned, a *dispensation* may be defined as a stewardship, administration, oversight, or management of others' property. As we have seen, this involves responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the

steward.

The theological definition of the word is based on the biblical usage and characteristics. Scofield's definition has been quoted: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God." As has been seen, the usual criticism leveled against this definition is that it is not true to the meaning of *oikonomia* since it says nothing about a stewardship but emphasizes the period of time aspect. Yet note that Fuller admits the validity of practically the same definition, namely, that the word may be used "to denote a period of time during which God deals with man in a certain way."¹⁴ However, there is a certain justification to the criticism, for a dispensation is primarily a stewardship arrangement and not a period of time (though obviously the arrangement will exist during a period of time). *Age* and *dispensation* are not synonymous in meaning, even though they may exactly coincide in the historical outworking. A dispensation is basically the arrangement involved, not the time involved; and a proper definition will take this into account. However, there is no reason for great alarm if a definition does ascribe time to a dispensation.

A concise definition of a dispensation is this: *A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.* If one were *describing* a dispensation, he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, responsibility, testing, failure, and judgment. But at this point we are seeking a definition, not a description. In using the word *economy* as the core of the definition, the emphasis is put on the biblical meaning of the word itself. *Economy* also suggests that certain features of different dispensations might be the same or similar. Differing economic and political economies are not completely different, yet they are distinguishably different. Communistic and capitalistic economies are basically different, and yet there are functions, features, and items in these opposing economies that are the same. Likewise, in the different economies of God's running the affairs of this world, certain features are similar. However, the word *distinguishable* in the definition points out that some features are distinctive to each dispensation and mark them off from each other as different dispensations. These are contained in the particular revelation

distinctive to each dispensation.

The phrase “the outworking of God’s purpose” in the definition reminds us that the viewpoint in distinguishing the dispensations is God’s, not man’s. The dispensations are economies instituted and brought to their purposeful conclusion by God. The distinguishing features are introduced by God; the similar features are retained by God; and the overall combined purpose of the whole program is the glory of God. Erich Sauer states it this way:

A new period always begins only when *from the side of God* a change is introduced in the composition of the principles valid up to that time; that is, when from the side of God three things concur:

1. A continuance of certain ordinances valid until then;
2. An annulment of other regulations until then valid;
3. A fresh introduction of new principles not before valid.¹⁵

To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.

Before leaving the subject of definitions, it may be helpful to append several other useful definitions of a dispensation. W. Graham Scroggie, a noted Scottish writer and pastor, gave this helpful definition:

The word *oikonomia* bears one significance, and means “an administration,” whether of a house, or property, of a state, or a nation, or as in the present study, *the administration of the human race or any part of it*, at any given time. Just as a parent would govern his household in different ways, according to varying necessity, yet ever for one good end, so God has at different times dealt with men in different ways, according to the necessity of the case, but throughout for one great, grand end.¹⁶

Harry Ironside, prince of dispensational preachers, defined it this way: “An economy is an ordered condition of things.... There are various economies running through the Word of God. A dispensation, an

economy, then, is that particular order or condition of things prevailing in one special age which does not necessarily prevail in another.”¹⁷

Clarence E. Mason Jr., dean for many years at Philadelphia College of Bible, includes descriptive features of dispensations in his definition:

The word *dispensation* means literally a *stewardship or administration or economy*. Therefore, in its Biblical usage, a *dispensation* is a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God’s mind and will which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God.

Associated with the revelation, on the one hand, are promises of reward or blessing for those responding to the obedience of faith, while on the other hand there are warnings of judgment upon those who do not respond in the obedience of faith to that particular revelation.

However, though the time period (*age*) ends, certain principles of the revelation (*dispensation* or stewardship) are often carried over into succeeding ages, because God’s truth does not cease to be truth, and these principles become part of the cumulative body of truth for which man is responsible in the progressive unfolding revelation of God’s redemptive purpose.¹⁸

Another definition also includes descriptive elements:

A dispensation is God’s distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life, or a responsibility for managing God’s affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation.¹⁹

The differentiation of viewpoints in this definition is a helpful distinction. A dispensation is from God’s viewpoint an economy; from man’s, a responsibility; and in relation to progressive revelation, a stage in it.

The more recent movement that calls itself progressive dispensationalism includes some important differences from normative dispensationalism. Though its adherents do not wish to be restricted by a *sine qua non*, they acknowledge the straightforward meaning of the word; namely, “The word dispensation refers to a particular arrangement

by which God regulates the way human beings relate to Him.”²⁰ However, they distance themselves from classic dispensationalists by describing themselves as understanding “the dispensations not simply as *different* arrangements between God and humankind, but as *successive* arrangements in the *progressive* revelation and accomplishment of redemption.”²¹ These differences will be discussed in [chapter 9](#).

THE RELATION OF THE DISPENSATIONS TO PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Progressive revelation is the recognition that God’s message to man was not given in one single act but was unfolded in a series of successive acts and through the minds and hands of many men of varying backgrounds. It is, so to speak, a theistic view of revelation rather than a deistic view. The pages of the Bible present “not the exposition of a revelation completed, but the records of a revelation in progress. Its parts and features are seen, not as arranged after their development, but as arranging themselves in the course of their development, and growing, through stages which can be marked, and by accessions which can be measured, into the perfect form which they attain at last.”²²

The principle of progressive revelation is evident in the Scriptures themselves. Paul told his audience on Mars Hill that in a former day God overlooked their ignorance, but now He commands repentance (Acts 17:30). The majestic opening of the book of Hebrews emphatically outlines the various means of progressive revelation (Heb. 1:1–2). One of the most striking verses that shows the different ways of God’s dealing with mankind is John 1:17: “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” Other examples may be found in John 14:16–17; 14:26; and 16:24. God’s truth was obviously not given all at one time, and the varying stages of revelation show that He has worked in different ways at different times. The Bible interpreter must observe carefully this progressiveness of revelation, and dispensationalism helps promote accuracy in this regard.

In this matter of the correct observation and interpretation of the progress of revelation, we see the close connection between dispensationalism and hermeneutics. A standard text on hermeneutics,

which first appeared in 1883 and which has no dispensational ax to grind, says, "With each new series of generations some new promise is given, or some great purpose of God is brought to light."²³ It is the marking off of these stages in the revelation of the purpose of God that is the basis for the dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures. Even Bernard Ramm, who later moved from a dispensational position, admitted that a clearer realization of progressive revelation has been largely due to the "beneficial influence of dispensationalism."²⁴

Nondispensational interpreters (of the covenant theology school) have been guilty of reading back (and sometimes forcing) the teaching of the New Testament into the Old, especially in an effort to substantiate their doctrine of salvation in the Old Testament. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, sometimes make such hard and fast distinctions between the ages and characteristics of the various dispensations that they, for instance, have said very little about grace in the Old Testament. However, the covenant theologian's faulty interpretation is a result of a basically inherent defect in his system (because he subsumes everything since the Fall under the one covenant of grace), whereas the dispensationalist's lack is not in the system but in the expounding of it. Covenant theology allows for and even demands this reading back of the New Testament into the Old. Dispensational theology, while recognizing definite and distinguishable distinctions, asserts the basic unity of the unfolding plan of God in the Scriptures.

Nevertheless, dispensationalists have not always asserted this unity as they might have, and therefore it has become a common thing to indict dispensationalism on this matter. "Dispensationalism destroys the unity of the Bible" is the cry. Because of the dispensational scheme, one writer declares, "The Bible ceases to be a self-consistent whole."²⁵ "This theory," charges Louis Berkhof, "is also divisive in tendency, dismembering the organism of Scripture with disastrous results."²⁶ More popularly, this objection is expressed by the charge that dispensationalists see no value in the Sermon on the Mount or that they will not pray the Lord's Prayer.²⁷

An interesting historical fact: In the second edition of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1917, and retained in the *New Scofield*, 1967), a new section entitled "A Panoramic View of the Bible" was added to "show the

unity of the Book,” which listed seven marks of this unity.

Even though dispensationalists may not have clearly communicated the teachings of their system along these lines, it must be remembered that the system is not at fault. Dispensationalism alone has a broad enough unifying principle to do justice to the unity of the progress of revelation on the one hand and the distinctiveness of the various stages in that progress on the other. Covenant theology can only emphasize the unity and, in so doing, overemphasizes it until it becomes the sole governing category of interpretation. Any seeming disunity in the dispensational scheme is superficial, and in reality one feels that the much publicized supposed conflicts of dispensationalism exist in the minds of the covenant theologians and are aggravated by their own unwarranted and forced unified approach to the Scriptures. *Variety can be an essential part of unity.* That is true of God’s creation; it is also true of God’s revelation; and only dispensationalism can adequately account for the variety of distinguishable economies or dispensations in (not apart from) the outworking of God’s purpose.

To summarize: Progressive revelation views the Bible not as a textbook on theology but as the continually unfolding revelation of God given by various means throughout the successive ages. In this unfolding there are distinguishable stages of revelation when God introduces new things for which man becomes responsible. These stages are the economies, stewardships, or dispensations in the unfolding of His purpose. Dispensationalism, therefore, recognizes both the unity of His purpose and the diversity in the unfolding of it. Covenant theology emphasizes the unity to the point of forcing unwarranted, inconsistent, and contradictory interpretations of the Scriptures. Only dispensationalism can maintain unity and diversity at the same time and offer a consistent system of interpretation.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A DISPENSATION

Primary Characteristics

What marks off the various economies in the outworking of God’s purpose and distinguishes each from the other? The answer is twofold: (1) the different governing relationship with the world into which God

enters in each economy; and (2) the resulting responsibility on mankind in each of these different relationships.

These characteristics are vitally bound up with the different revelations God gave throughout history and show again the link between each dispensation and the various stages in the progress of revelation. Without meaning at all to prejudge the question of how many dispensations there are, let us see if this answer is valid, using several unquestioned dispensations as illustrations.

Before sin entered at the fall of man, God's governmental relationship with Adam and Eve was direct. Their responsibility was to maintain that direct fellowship with Him, and this involved specifically caring for the garden and abstaining from eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. After sin entered at the Fall, God's relationship was no longer always direct, for a barrier had come between Him and man.

At the giving of the law to the Israelites through Moses, God's government was mediated through the various categories of the law. This does not mean that He never spoke directly, but it does mean that His principal mode of government was the Mosaic code, which was a new thing introduced at that time. It also means that the responsibility upon mankind was conformity to that code—*again* a new responsibility, for prior to the giving of the law, people were obviously not held responsible for something that did not exist.

After the coming of Christ, God's governing relationship with mankind was no longer through the Mosaic law. The rent veil and the end of approach to God through the sacrificial system show this. Witness, too, the distinguishable difference in relation to justification as summarized by Paul in his sermon at Antioch in Pisidia: "Through Him everyone who believes is freed [justified] from all things, from which you could not be freed [justified] through the Law of Moses" (Acts 13:39). Here is unquestionably a distinguishable and different way of running the affairs of the world regarding man's responsibility in relation to the most important area of justification. Whatever his responsibility was under the Mosaic law may be left unspecified at present (see [chapter 6](#)), but with the coming of Christ the requirement for justification became faith in Him. This, too, is obviously a distinctive stage in the progress of revelation. Therefore, we conclude that a new dispensation was

inaugurated, since the economy and responsibility changed and the new revelation was given.

Thus, the distinguishing characteristics of a different dispensation are three: (1) a change in God's governmental relationship with man (though a dispensation does not have to be composed entirely of completely new features); (2) a resultant change in man's responsibility; and (3) corresponding revelation necessary to effect the change (which is new and is a stage in the progress of revelation through the Bible).

Secondary Characteristics

Thus far nothing has been said about the usual characteristics listed for a new dispensation: namely, a test, a failure, and a judgment. The test is practically the same as the human responsibility. Obviously, whenever God gives revelation concerning His method of running the affairs of the world, there is also given a corresponding responsibility or test to people as to whether or not they will align themselves with God's economy and the revelation of it. Opponents of dispensationalism, who insist that such testing on God's part makes Him little more than an experimenter apparently not knowing how things will turn out, in reality fail to understand the purpose of testing in general.²⁸ After all, a dispensational test is no different essentially from the tests spoken of by James in chapter 1 of his epistle. Such tests are not for the purpose of enlightening God but for the purpose of bringing out what is in people, whether faith or failure.

In one sense every dispensation contains the same test: Will a person respond favorably toward the responsibility of the particular economy under which he is living? Specifically, this general test is particularized in each dispensation by the nature of the revelation God gave in each instance concerning man's responsibility. Actually, every part of the revelation belonging to each dispensation is a part of the test, and the totality of the revelation is the test. Dispensationalists have often in their writings tried to isolate the particular test of each dispensation. Whereas this may be helpful to the student, it can only be at best a partial statement of the entire responsibility.²⁹

Is failure a necessary part of each dispensation? It is a fact of biblical history that mankind has failed throughout all the ages of time. Each

dispensation is filled with failures simply because history is. The failures are in at least two realms—the realm of governmental economy and the realm of salvation. In both areas not all people have failed, but in both realms most have. Sin often seems to come to a climax at certain points in human history, and such climaxes mark the end of the various dispensations. The crucifixion of Christ was the climax of rebellion of the nation that had been given the privilege of the law and the service of God. It also marked the end of a dispensation. The present age will be climaxed by rebellion and a turning away from God in force. The millennial kingdom will be climaxed by widespread rebellion against the personal reign of Christ the king (Rev. 20:7–9).

Does each dispensation have a judgment? Actually each may have many judgments, just as it may have many testings and failures. But if there is a climactic failure, then there is also a climactic judgment. Though the matters of testing, failure, and judgment are not the basics that mark off the dispensations, they seem to be part and parcel of them. If, however, there were no decisive test, there still could be a dispensational arrangement. If there were no climactic failure and judgment, there still could be a change in the dispensational arrangement. The presence of a test, failure, and judgment is not the *sine qua non* (absolute essential) of a dispensational arrangement.

Objections

Do not these characteristics seem to dissect history and compartmentalize its eras? From one viewpoint dispensationalism does appear to do so. This cross-sectional perspective of the dispensational scheme is the view usually presented in dispensational charts. Although *there is nothing erroneous about it*, it is not the whole story. There is also what may be called the longitudinal or spiral perspective in dispensationalism.³⁰ This includes the continuing principles through all dispensations that give coherency to the whole course of history. The distinctive governmental arrangement that distinguishes the various dispensations in no way conflicts with the unities of Scripture.

The longitudinal perspective, for example, emphasizes the fact that God is, has been, and will be a God of grace. The cross-sectional perspective emphasizes the administration of grace that prevails today.

The longitudinal perspective is that of the progress of revelation; the cross-sectional is that of any given point of time. Both perspectives are not only valid but necessary in understanding God's revelation.

Thus, it is an unwarranted objection to say, "If ... God is always gracious, then it is confusing to distinguish a particular age by a term that characterizes all ages."³¹ One might ask if God has not always been a God of law. And if so, is it wrong to delineate a period called the Law? Does not God Himself through John make these distinctions (John 1:17)? The objection is based on a false premise that Fuller reveals in this further statement: "It is impossible to think of varying degrees of grace, for God either is or is not gracious."³² The fact is that there are varying degrees of the *revelation* of God's grace, even though when there is less revelation God Himself is not less gracious than when there is greater revelation of His grace. Otherwise, God could be construed not to be very holy and just and righteous whenever He delays or defers immediate and justifiable judgment. He simply reveals His wrath more specifically at certain times in human history than at others. But periods of silence do not make Him less righteous any more than a veiled revelation of grace makes Him less gracious. Only dispensationalism with its cross-sectional and longitudinal/spiral perspectives can recognize the wealth, mobility, and complexity of the history of God's running the affairs of this world.

Before either the covenant or dispensational systems had been developed, Calvin wrote these appropriate words:

It is not fitting, they say, that God, always self-consistent, should permit such a great change, disapproving afterward what he had once commanded and commended. I reply that God ought not to be considered changeable merely because he accommodated diverse forms to different ages, as he knew would be expedient for each. If a farmer sets certain tasks for his household in the winter, other tasks for the summer, we shall not on this account accuse him of inconstancy, or think that he departs from the proper rule of agriculture, which accords with the continuous order of nature. In like manner, if a householder instructs, rules, and guides his children one way in infancy, another way in youth, and still another in young manhood, we shall not on this account call him fickle and say that he abandons his purpose. Why, then, do we brand God with the mark of inconstancy because he has with apt and fitting marks distinguished a diversity of times?³³

Covenant theology with its all-encompassing covenant of grace glosses over great epochs and climaxes of history lest they disturb the “unity of Scripture” and introduce something so distinguishable that a dispensation might have to be recognized. Especially is this true in connection with the church as a new entity. The cross-sectional view emphasizes the distinctive importance of each event in its historical setting and for its particular purpose; the longitudinal view places all events in their proper relationship in the total progress of revelation. Dispensationalism avoids confusion and contradiction and at the same time unites all the parts into the whole.

The distinguishable yet progressive character of dispensational distinctions prohibits that they should be intermingled or confused as they are chronologically successive. But it has been alleged that these characteristics of test, failure, and judgment form a repeated cyclical pattern of history like that of the pagan Greeks. For instance, Kraus says, “The philosophy of history is essentially the Greek concept of cycles, each cycle ending in apostasy and judgment. God is not represented as working out His plan *in the historical process*, but as appearing intermittently, as it were, to begin a new cycle by supernatural intervention.”³⁴ Chapter 1 pointed out that only dispensationalism presents a properly optimistic philosophy of history. Furthermore, the charts notwithstanding, the dispensational pattern does not only form a repetitive cyclical picture but also an ascending spiral. Erich Sauer, whose books combine so ably both the cross-sectional and the longitudinal perspectives of dispensationalism, summarizes the matter in this way:

But a fresh Divine beginning is never merely a return to the old. In each reformation born out of collapse lay at the same time the seed of a life-program for the future. Revelation and development are in no case opposites but belong together. In the sphere of the Bible, as elsewhere, there is an ascent from lower to higher, from twilight to clearness.³⁵

This spiral concept is readily seen by imagining the confusion of inverting the dispensational order and placing the Millennium first. Just as illogical would be the reversing of Law and Grace (or whatever names you wish to attach to that which came through Moses and that which was revealed through Christ). Dispensationalism reveals the outworking

of God's plan in the historical process in a progressive revelation of His glory. It magnifies the grace of God, for it recognizes that true progress can come only from God's gracious intervention in human society. If there were not "cyclical" interventions, then the course of history would be only downward and entirely pessimistic.

To summarize: The principal characteristic of a dispensation is the economic arrangement and responsibility that God reveals in each dispensation. Such responsibility is a test in itself. Most men fail the test, and then judgment follows. The dispensational scheme has two perspectives: a cross-sectional aspect (which is sometimes misconstrued as cycles but which is in reality a spiral) and a longitudinal aspect (which emphasizes the unfolding progress of revelation and continuing principles throughout the ages of the dispensations).

THE *SINE QUA NON* OF DISPENSATIONALISM

What marks off a person as a dispensationalist? What is the *sine qua non* (the absolutely indispensable part) of the system? Even though certain later discussions must be anticipated in order to answer that question, it seems appropriate to give an answer at this point.

Theoretically, the *sine qua non* ought to lie in the recognition of the fact that God has distinguishably different economies in governing the affairs of the world. Covenant theologians hold that there are various dispensations (and even use the word) within the outworking of the covenant of grace. Charles Hodge, for instance, believed that there are four dispensations after the Fall—Adam to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, Moses to Christ, and Christ to the end.³⁶ Berkhof writes, as we have seen, of only two basic dispensations—the Old and the New, but within the Old he sees four periods and all of these are revelations of the covenant of grace.³⁷ In other words, a person can believe in dispensations, and even see them in relation to progressive revelation, without being a dispensationalist.

Is the essence of dispensationalism in the number of dispensations? No, for this is in no way a major issue in the system, as will be discussed in the next chapter. It is not that Scofield taught seven dispensations and Hodge only four that makes the former a dispensationalist and the latter

not.

Perhaps the issue of premillennialism is determinative. Again the answer is negative, for there are those who are premillennial who definitely are not dispensational. The covenant premillennialist holds to the concept of the covenant of grace and the central soteriological purpose of God. He retains the idea of the millennial kingdom, though he finds little support for it in the Old Testament prophecies. The kingdom in his view is markedly different from that which is taught by dispensationalists, since it loses much of its Jewish character due to the slighting of the Old Testament promises concerning the kingdom. Many covenant premillennialists are also posttribulationists, and that seems to be a logical accompaniment of the nondispensational approach.³⁸ At any rate, being a premillennialist does not necessarily make one a dispensationalist. (However, the reverse is true—being a dispensationalist makes one a premillennialist.)

What, then, is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism? The answer is threefold.

1 *A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct.* This is stated in different ways by both friends and foes of dispensationalism. Fuller says that “the basic premise of Dispensationalism is two purposes God expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction throughout eternity.”³⁹ A. C. Gaebelien stated it in terms of the difference between the Jews, the Gentiles, and the church of God.⁴⁰ Chafer summarized it as follows:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.... Over against this, the partial dispensationalist, though dimly observing a few obvious distinctions, bases his interpretation on the supposition that God is doing but one thing, namely, the general separation of the good from the bad, and, in spite of all the confusion this limited theory creates, contends that the earthly people merge into the heavenly people; that the earthly program must be given a spiritual interpretation or disregarded altogether.⁴¹

This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a

person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.⁴²

Though God's purpose for Israel and God's purpose for the church receive the most attention in Scripture, God has purposes for other groups as well. He has a purpose and plan for the angels, which in no way mixes with His purposes for Israel or the church (2 Peter 2:4; Rev. 4:11). He has a purpose for those who reject Him, which also is distinct from other purposes (Prov. 16:4). He has a plan for the nations, which continues into the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2), and those nations are distinct from the bride of Christ. God has more than two purposes even though He reveals more about His purposes for Israel and His purpose for the church than He does about the other groups.

Progressive dispensationalists seem to be blurring this distinction by saying that the concept is not in the same class as what is conveyed by the concepts of Gentiles, Israel, and Jews. What this means is not completely clear. (See the more complete discussion in [chapter 9](#).) However, it does seem to imply that the classic Israel/church distinction is less clear.

*2 This distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation. Therefore, the second aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is the matter of historical-grammatical hermeneutics. 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. The spiritualizing may be practiced to a lesser or greater degree, but its presence in a system of interpretation is indicative of a nondispensational approach.*⁴³

Consistently literal, or plain, interpretation indicates a dispensational approach to the interpretation of Scripture. And it is this very consistency—the strength of dispensational interpretation—that seems to irk the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.⁴⁴ 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. This does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation.

3 A third aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is a rather technical matter that will be discussed more fully later (see [chapter 5](#)). It concerns *the underlying purpose of God in the world*. The covenant theologian, in practice, believes this purpose to be salvation (although covenant theologians strongly emphasize the glory of God in their theology), and the dispensationalist says the purpose is broader than that; namely, *the glory of God*. Progressives have a Christological center, apparently to undergird their emphasis on the Davidic covenant and on Christ as the already reigning Davidic ruler in heaven.

To the normative dispensationalist, the soteriological, or saving, program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center. The Bible itself clearly teaches that salvation, important and wonderful as it is, is not an end in itself but is rather a means to the end of glorifying God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). John F. Walvoord, Chafer's successor at Dallas Theological Seminary, puts it this way: "The larger purpose of God is the manifestation of His own glory To this end each dispensation, each successive revelation of God's plan for the ages, His dealing with the non-elect as with the elect ... combine to manifest divine glory."⁴⁵ In another place he says:

All the events of the created world are designed to manifest the glory of God. The error of covenant theologians is that they combine all the many facets of divine purpose in the one objective of the fulfillment of the covenant of grace. From a logical standpoint, this is the reductive error—the use of one aspect of the whole as the determining element.⁴⁶

The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well.

NOTES

1. *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), 5.
2. *New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1967), 3.
3. E.g., John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 152, 270.
4. John Wick Bowman, "The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism," *Interpretation* 10 (April 1956): 174.
5. L. S. Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), 8–9.
6. Charles C. Ryrie, "The Necessity of Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (July 1957): 251.
7. W. W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 174.
8. *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), 3:481.
9. *Ibid.*
10. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 562.
11. J. H. Moulton and George Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 442–43.
12. Bowman, "The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism," 175.
13. Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 20.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Erich Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 194.
16. W. Graham Scroggie, *Ruling Lines of Progressive Revelation* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1918), 62–63.
17. H. A. Ironside, *In the Heavenlies* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., n.d.), 67.
18. C. E. Mason Jr., "Eschatology" (mimeographed notes for course at Philadelphia College of Bible, rev. 1962), 5–6.
19. Paul David Nevin, "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), 97.
20. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 14.

21. Ibid., 48.
22. T. D. Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 20.
23. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 568.
24. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Boston: Wilde, 1956), 158.
25. Oswald T. Allis, "Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God," *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (15 July 1936): 272.
26. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 291.
27. For example, T. A. Hegre, *The Cross and Sanctification* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1960), 6. Cf. the entire chapter entitled "Have You Lost Your Bible?" which devotes two pages to the disastrous effects of liberalism on the Bible and five pages to the "damaging" results of dispensationalism!
28. Bowman, "The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism," 176.
29. C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (New York: Revell, n.d.).
30. H. Chester Woodring, "Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956), 33–38.
31. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 164.
32. Ibid.
33. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: Wolfe & Harison, 1561), II, XI, 13.
34. C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* (Richmond: John Knox, 1958), 126.
35. Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption*, 54.
36. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 2:373–77.
37. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 293–300.
38. H. Phillip Hook, "The Doctrine of the Kingdom in Covenant Premillennialism" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1959). Cf. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 363–64.
39. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism," 25.
40. Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Our Hope, 1910), 1:4.
41. Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, 107.
42. There can be rare exceptions, as with C. E. B. Cranfield (*Commentary on Romans* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979], 448n2), who rejects the teaching that Israel has been replaced by the church.
43. Cf. George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 126–34. Even though

Ladd believes in a future for the nation Israel (cf. “Is There a Future for Israel?” *Eternity*, May 1964, 25–28, 36), that does not mean that he is a dispensationalist, for he fails to meet the criterion concerning the consistent use of the literal principle of interpretation. In this same article (p. 27) he declares that “although the Church is spiritual Israel, the New Testament teaches that literal Israel is yet to be saved.” In other words, he distinguishes the church and Israel in the future millennial age, but he does not distinguish them in the present age. Since Israel and the church are not kept distinct throughout God’s program, Ladd fails to meet this test of dispensationalism.

- 44. Arnold B. Rhodes, ed., *The Church Faces the Isms* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), 95.
- 45. John F. Walvoord, “Review of Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God, by George E. Ladd,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110 (January 1953): 3–4.
- 46. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959), 92.

WHAT ARE THE DISPENSATIONS?

THE NUMBER OF DISPENSATIONS

The Importance Of The Question

In the previous chapter we have seen that covenant theologians (such as Hodge and Berkhof) list four and five dispensations in their concept of the outworking of the covenant of grace. This points to the fact that recognizing dispensations does not automatically make a person a dispensationalist. The essence of dispensationalism is (1) the recognition of a consistent distinction between Israel and the church, (2) a consistent and regular use of a literal principle of interpretation, and (3) a basic and primary conception of the purpose of God as His own glory rather than the salvation of mankind.

On the basis of these statements and conclusions, it would follow that the number of dispensations in a dispensational scheme and even the names of the dispensations are relatively minor matters. Presumably one could have four, five, seven, or eight dispensations and be a consistent dispensationalist as long as the scheme is true to the three essentials of dispensationalism. Some opponents of dispensationalism recognize that these matters of number and name are relatively minor. Daniel Fuller, for instance, admits that “the number or names of the dispensations to which one holds is not essential to Dispensationalism.”¹ Others, like J. W. Bowman, use numbers to imply that the system is wrong because it teaches seven dispensations when the Bible connects only two with the word itself.² Seven is generally the number of dispensations most hold to, but that does not make the system five-sevenths wrong if Bowman’s implications be allowed. Suppose there were a dispensationalist who held to three dispensations. Then by Bowman’s inference he would be two-thirds right.

However, in general, it seems to make very little difference to opponents of dispensationalism how many dispensations the

dispensationalist has in his system after he goes beyond two. Two is the dividing line, for most covenant theologians hold to two at least and usually object to more. And yet even the covenant theologians are not quite sure what the two are. They may on occasion ridicule the fact that dispensationalists cannot agree on the number in their scheme, but they should realize that they are not united themselves. As has been pointed out, Berkhof equates the two basic dispensations with the Old and New Testaments. (Incidentally, such designations as “Old Dispensation” and “New Dispensation” are not scriptural names!) Ernest F. Kevan, when principal of London (England) Bible College, was just as sure that the two dispensations are the Mosaic Law and Grace. Both of these he sees as the outworking of the single covenant of grace:

God’s covenanted purpose with sinful man has ever been one of grace; but the covenant of grace was based on a double plan, or to use scriptural terminology, was revealed in two dispensations. The first of these was the Mosaic dispensation, sometimes called the “Old Covenant,” and the second is the Christian dispensation, usually called the “New Covenant.” Strictly the covenant (q.v.) is one and the same covenant of grace.³

Two—whatever they are called—is the limit for covenant theologians (though the Old is usually subdivided further by covenant theologians), and when a dispensationalist goes beyond two, it makes little difference even to the covenant theologian how many more he has.

Nonetheless the question of how many dispensations there are is a pertinent and practical one and worthy of consideration. Though it is not determinative, it is a part of the dispensational presentation.

Some Answers to the Question

Most dispensationalists see seven dispensations in God’s plan (though throughout the history of dispensationalism, they have not always been the same seven). Occasionally a dispensationalist may hold as few as four, and some hold as many as eight. The doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary (Article V) mentions only three by name (the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of Grace, and the future dispensation of the Millennial Kingdom). Why is there this difference? Probably the answer lies in the fact that the three—Law, Grace, and Kingdom—are the subject of much of the material in the Bible, whereas

the others, however many there may be, are not. In other words, the difference of opinion as to number is not due to a defect in the dispensational scheme but rather is due to lack of detailed revelation concerning the earliest periods of biblical history. We do not have preserved in the written record all that God may have said or revealed to man in those early periods. Nevertheless, on the basis of the definition of a dispensation as a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose, it is not difficult to deduce how many dispensations are revealed in Scripture.

If one is a premillennialist, the distinguishable economy of God in the Millennium, during which Christ is visibly present, is easily recognized. This present dispensation, whose principal, not exclusive, characteristic is grace, also is easily justified by the definition. The same is apparent with the Mosaic dispensation of the law, and the point need not be labored. It is the time between the beginning of creation to the giving of the law that gives rise in some minds to the question of the validity of all the dispensations that are said to belong to that period. However, before the fall of man the arrangement was certainly distinguishably different from that after the Fall.

Already we have accounted for five dispensations: (1) Pre-Fall, (2) Post-Fall to the time of Moses, (3) the Law, (4) Grace, and (5) the Millennial Kingdom. The very fact that it is difficult to find a suitable name to cover the entire economy from the Fall to Moses ought to make one examine carefully the validity of trying to view that entire period as having only one dispensation. It should be apparent that up to the time of Abraham God's administration concerned all nations, whereas with Abraham He began to single out one nation, and in the singling out He made a very distinctive covenant with Abraham. Therefore, the distinguishable characteristic of God's dealing with Abraham in promise seems sufficient to delineate what is often called the dispensation of promise (or of the Patriarchs).

The only question that remains is whether or not the dispensations popularly called Conscience and Government are valid. Suppose there was only one dispensation during that period—what is it to be called? If there were two, what were the distinguishing features that justify two? The problem is complicated by the fact that the revelation of Scripture

covering this long period is very brief. It seems that there is sufficient warrant in God's new arrangement for human government in the time of Noah to distinguish a dispensation at that time (cf. Gen. 9:6 with 4:15). If this be agreed with, then there are seven dispensations, and one must admit that the more one studies in the light of a basic definition, the more inclined he is to conclude that there are seven dispensations. There seems to be a tendency these days to avoid this conclusion, or at least to minimize the earlier dispensations, but if one has a consistently workable definition and if one applies it throughout all history, then it seems hard not to arrive at seven.

SOME QUESTIONS

Some further questions arise in relation to the typical sevenfold dispensational picture in Scripture. These are questions, not problems, and they in no way affect the system as a whole. Neither are they basic, though they are worthy of consideration.

The Noahic Economy

In viewing the usual sevenfold outline, a question arises as to whether one can distinguish what are called the dispensations of Conscience (from the Fall to Noah) and of Government (from Noah to Abraham). It is quite plausible to consider that Noah lived under the basic stewardship responsibilities instituted after the Fall. This led one of my students to suggest that this entire period be called the dispensation of Justice, since this was the distinctive revelation of God in His relationship with people during that time.

However, some distinct and new arrangements were instituted with Noah and mankind after the Flood. To be specific, four are recorded in Genesis 9:1–7. (1) A fear of mankind is put in the heart of animals (v. 2). (2) People are permitted to eat the flesh of animals, whereas prior to that time apparently people were vegetarians (v. 3). (3) The principle of capital punishment is instituted (v. 6). (4) God binds Himself to a promise of never causing another flood on the earth such as occurred in the time of Noah (vv. 8–17). When one views these four arrangements with mankind after the Flood, they seem to mark off a new economy

from God's viewpoint, a new responsibility from man's, and they certainly constitute new truth in the progress of revelation. Therefore, they apparently mark off a new dispensation. Whether or not the title "Human Government" is the best is not the point at the moment.

The Eternal State

Another question that has arisen in some writings is whether or not the eternal state is to be considered a dispensation.⁴ Most commentaries that are not premillennial refer the phrase "the dispensation of the fullness of times" (Eph. 1:10 KJV) to the present gospel age, while those that are premillennial refer it to the millennial kingdom.⁵ However, it would seem from the concept of a dispensation as related to God's running the affairs of His household (the world) that, when temporal history ends, the household arrangement, which is the basis for a dispensational stewardship, also ends. In other words, the dispensational economies are related to the affairs of this present world, and they are no longer needed when the history of this world comes to a conclusion. Thus, in eternity there is no need for the economic arrangements of a dispensation as they are known in history. Progressive dispensationalists place the eternal state as the second part of their final dispensation (the first part being the millennial kingdom), which is called either "the future dispensation" or the "Zionite dispensation."

The Mosaic Law

Another question concerns the Mosaic Law. This dispensation was operative over a long period of time if it was inaugurated with Moses and continued until the crucifixion of Christ. During that extended period Israel's change in spiritual condition might seem to indicate a change in dispensation. Specifically, when God began to send His message through the prophets, did He change the dispensational relationship? The answer seems to be no for two reasons. First, the prophets always called Israel back to the Mosaic Law, for this was the governing arrangement under which they lived during the entire period. Second, the Lord Jesus considered the law still operative and incumbent on the Jewish people; therefore, it could not have been abrogated or replaced by the message of the prophets. If the Mosaic Law was still the operating principle during Christ's lifetime, then the dispensation of the

Law did not end until the Cross.

Of course, it is not difficult to show that Christ lived under the law and that He expected His hearers to follow its teachings too. When He cleansed the leper He told him to present himself to the priest “and present the offering that Moses commanded” (Matt. 8:2–4). He further exhorted the people to obey the commands of the law as they were taught them by the scribes and Pharisees but not to follow the examples of their lives (23:2–3). He also declared that He did not come to destroy the law (5:17). This statement would lose meaning if the law had been superseded by a dispensation of the Prophets.

The Tribulation

Where does the tribulation period fit into the usual dispensational scheme? Three possibilities have been suggested by dispensational writers.

First, Chafer suggested that the period will be akin to the Mosaic Law and will include a revival of the principles of that economy.⁶ For instance, the Sabbath day will apparently be observed strictly during the period (Matt. 24:20). Furthermore, it will be a time when God will deal specially with Israel again. It is the seventieth week of Daniel, and since the first sixty-nine weeks were part of the economy of the Law, it will be also.

The principal objection to this view is simply that no other dispensation comes back into effect again once it has ended, and there is no question that the Mosaic Law ended with the first advent of Christ (Rom. 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:7–11). It would be a very unusual thing to reinstate a dispensation after a lapse of two thousand years or more. Of course, God could do that, but it seems highly doubtful.

The second possibility is that the Tribulation is itself a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose. In the scheme usually presented, it would then become the seventh of eight dispensations.⁷ There are many characteristics to commend such a view. The Tribulation is a time of wrath; it distinctly deals with Israel again; assuming that the Rapture is before the Tribulation, the true church is absent from the earth; and the gospel to be preached during that period is the gospel of

the kingdom (Matt. 24:14). These features seem to characterize a different dispensation.

But these are not the only considerations. To be sure, the Sabbath will be observed during that time, but by whom? By those Jewish people who find themselves in their land again and who set up their ancient worship once more. They do this not because they are obeying the responsibilities of a Tribulation economy, which includes worship on the Sabbath as a requirement. After all, many Jews today both in and out of Palestine observe the Sabbath, but that does not mean that we are no longer under the dispensation of Grace. God has not ordained this observance for today, nor will He in the tribulation period; therefore, its observance does not indicate a dispensational change.

To be sure, it will be a period of the outpouring of the wrath of God. But it will also be a time of much salvation. Many Jews and multitudes of Gentiles will come to know the Lord (Rev. 7:9–17). So it will be a time during which grace will not be absent but rather manifestly present. Even if one makes a distinction between the gospel of the cross and the gospel of the kingdom, that does not mean that the gospel of the kingdom will not include the message of the cross. It will add the aspect of good news that announces the coming kingdom along with the message of the cross. Also, the gospel of the kingdom was preached by the Lord during His earthly ministry (Matt. 4:17) while the dispensation of the Law was still operative. Thus, the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom was not then, nor will it be later, a distinctive enough feature to mark off a new dispensation.

The same is true of the argument based on the seventy weeks. They are not in themselves determinative of a dispensational change. After all, they began about a thousand years after the law was given to Israel without inaugurating a new dispensation, and even though God turns His attention to Israel again during the Tribulation, He does not do this to the exclusion of others.

Therefore, it seems that the Tribulation with its many judgments is from the dispensational viewpoint the end of the economy of Grace. This is the third view. From the perspective of the seventy weeks for Israel, it is their last week. From the viewpoint of the true church, there is no relation, since the church will be Raptured before the Tribulation begins.

But from the dispensational viewpoint of God's running the affairs of the world, it seems more natural to consider the Tribulation as that time when He is bringing to a conclusion the economy of Grace, with judgments on men who have rejected Him and grace upon the many who will accept Him, rather than to consider it a separate dispensation. The church will not be subject to the judgments, just as Noah was not judged by the Flood in his day. But in both cases the dispensation does not end until the judgments are completed.

Remember, these questions are minor in relation to the main tenets of dispensationalism. The fact that there are questions is not the fault of the system but is due to lack of detailed revelation, and differing answers to these questions will not make or break the system.

The matter of a unique dispensation given to Paul, distinct from that which began at Pentecost, will be discussed in the chapter on ultradispensationalism.

THE NAMES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISPENSATIONS

Obviously, a sevenfold scheme of dispensations is neither inspired nor nonnegotiable. Nevertheless, one must have some scheme, and it seems difficult to get away from the concept of seven distinguishable economies in the outworking of God's purpose. Using this format, then, let us look at some of the characteristics of these economies.

1. The Dispensation of Innocency

This first dispensation is usually called Innocency. Although this term is not a good description of Adam's condition before the Fall, it may be the best single word. Yet the word *innocent* seems too neutral. Adam was not created merely innocent but with a positive holiness that enabled him to have face-to-face communication with God. Nevertheless, his holiness was not the same as the Creator's, for it was limited by virtue of Adam's being a creature. Also, his holiness was unconfirmed until he could successfully pass the tests placed before him. Therefore, it seems that Adam's moral condition before God in those days of "innocency" was that of "unconfirmed creaturely holiness." But that is too long a

phrase for the name of a dispensation; therefore, we are back to calling it the dispensation of Innocency.

Nevin suggested that the dispensation be called the dispensation of Freedom.⁸ The word *freedom* does characterize the condition of man before he became a slave to sin, and, as much as a creature can have freedom, Adam had it before sin enslaved his will.

In this economy the key person was Adam; indeed, we ought to consider it a dispensation, or stewardship, to Adam (as all the dispensations from the human viewpoint are stewardships). His responsibilities involved maintaining the garden and not eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He failed the test about eating, and, as a result, far-reaching judgments were pronounced on him, his wife, mankind, the serpent, and the creation. At the same time that God pronounced judgment, He also graciously intervened, promised a Redeemer, and made immediate provision for the acceptability of Adam and Eve in their sinful condition before God.

Oddly, progressive dispensationalism does not include this dispensation in its scheme but begins the dispensations with the entrance of sin into the human race.⁹ The Scripture revelation concerning this economy is recorded in Genesis 1:28–3:6.

2. The Dispensation of Conscience

The average dispensationalist has been schooled to designate the second economy as Conscience. The title comes from Romans 2:15 and is a proper designation of the stewardship. The title does not imply that man had no conscience before or after this time, any more than the dispensation of Law (which even covenant theologians recognize) implies that there was no law before or after the period. It simply means that this was the principal way God governed mankind during this economy, and obedience to the dictates of conscience was man's chief stewardship responsibility.

Erich Sauer suggests that this dispensation might be called the dispensation of "Self-determination."¹⁰ Clarence Mason calls it the dispensation of "Moral Responsibility."¹¹ These designations have much to commend them but may not be sufficiently better than "Conscience"

to try to reeducate the majority of dispensationalists who have been taught by the Scofield notes.

During this stewardship man was responsible to respond to God through the promptings of his conscience, and part of a proper response was to bring an acceptable blood sacrifice as God had taught him to do (Gen. 3:21; 4:4). We have a record of only a few responding, and Abel, Enoch, and Noah are especially cited as heroes of faith. We also have the record of those who did not respond and who by their evil deeds brought judgment on the world. Cain refused to acknowledge himself a sinner even when God continued to admonish him (Gen. 4:3, 7). So murder came on the scene of human history. Unnatural affection was widespread (Gen. 6:2). Finally, there was open violence and corruption and widespread evil desire and purpose of heart (Gen. 6:5). The longsuffering of God (1 Peter 3:20) came to an end, and He brought the Flood as judgment on the universal wickedness of man. But at the same time God graciously intervened; Noah found grace (the first use of the word in the Bible) in His sight (Gen. 6:8), and he and his family were saved. The revelation of this economy is preserved in Genesis 4:1–8:14.

3. The Dispensation of Civil Government

The propriety of a new dispensation after the Flood has already been discussed. The chief personage during this economy was Noah. The new revelation of this time included animals' fear of man, animals given to man to eat, the promise of no further floods, and the institution of capital punishment. It is the latter that gives the distinctive basis to this dispensation as that of human, or civil, government. God gave man the right to take the life of man, which in the very nature of the case gave man the authority to govern others. Unless government has the right to the highest form of punishment, its basic authority is questionable and insufficient to protect properly those it governs.

Failure to govern successfully appeared on the scene almost immediately, for Noah became drunk and incapable of ruling. The people, instead of obeying God's command to scatter and fill the earth, conceived the idea of staying together and building the tower of Babel to help achieve their aim. Fellowship with man replaced fellowship with God. As a result, God sent the judgment of the tower of Babel and the

confusion of languages. He also graciously intervened in that He did not utterly destroy the nations but chose to deal graciously with Abraham and his descendants. The scriptural revelation of this stewardship is found in Genesis 8:15–11:9.

4. *The Dispensation of Promise, or Patriarchal Rule*

The title *Promise* comes from Hebrews 6:15 and 11:9, where it is said that Abraham obtained the promise and sojourned in the land of promise. The title emphasizes the revelation of the economy. The governmental feature of the economy is best emphasized by the designation *Dispensation of Patriarchal Rule*. Until this dispensation, all mankind had been *directly* related to God's governing principles. Now God marked out one family and one nation and in them made a representative test of all.

THE DISPENSATIONS			
Name	Scripture	Responsibilities	Judgment(s)
Innocency	Genesis 1:3–3:6	▣ Keep garden ▣ Do not eat one fruit ▣ Fill, subdue earth ▣ Fellowship with God	▣ Curses, and physical and spiritual death
Conscience	Genesis 3:7–8:14	▣ Do good	▣ Flood
Civil Government	Genesis 8:15–11:9	▣ Fill earth ▣ Capital punishment	▣ Forced scattering by confusion of languages
Patriarchal Rule	Genesis 11:10–Exodus 18:27	▣ Stay in Promised Land ▣ Believe and obey God	▣ Egyptian bondage and wilderness wanderings
Mosaic Law	Exodus 19:1–Acts 1:26	▣ Keep the law ▣ Walk with God	▣ Captivities
Grace	Acts 2:1–Revelation 19:21	▣ Believe on Christ ▣ Walk with Christ	▣ Death ▣ Loss of rewards
Millennium	Revelation 20:1–15	▣ Believe and obey Christ and His government	▣ Death ▣ Great White Throne Judgment

The responsibility of the patriarchs was simply to believe and serve God, and God gave them every material and spiritual provision to encourage them to do this. The Promised Land was theirs, and blessing

was theirs as long as they remained in the land. But, of course, there was failure soon and often. Finally, Jacob led the people to Egypt, and soon the judgment of slavery was brought on them. But God again graciously provided a deliverer and in the process of deliverance killed their oppressors. The Scripture involved in this dispensation is Genesis 11:10–Exodus 18:27.

Is this a dispensation distinct from that of the Mosaic Law, or is it merely a preparatory period? The answer seems to be clear from Galatians 3:15–29. Though it is true that God was dealing with the same people during both the Patriarchal and Mosaic dispensations, that is not the determining factor. After all, up to the call of Abraham, God had been dealing in different ways with the same group—the entire population of the earth. In the first and second dispensations, God was dealing with the same people—Adam and Eve. So the fact that He was dealing with Israel during both the patriarchal and legal eras is not determinative. What does determine the distinguishability of the two dispensations is simply the different bases on which He dealt with them. Promise and law are sharply distinguished by Paul in Galatians 3 even though he maintains that the law did not annul the promise. And the Mosaic Law is kept so distinct from the promise to Abraham that it is difficult not to recognize a different dispensation. This is the essence of the definition, and if anything is kept distinct in that chapter, the law is. Therefore, the separate dispensation of Promise, or of the Patriarchs, is justified.

Though recognizing that the long period from Creation to the law may be divided into several dispensations, progressive dispensationalists in one place lump them together, labeling the entire period the Patriarchal dispensation, whereas in another they group everything up to the time of the first coming of Christ (including the law)¹² under the label “Past Dispensations.”

5. The Dispensation of the Mosaic Law

To the children of Israel through Moses was given the great code that we call the Mosaic Law. It consisted of 613 commandments covering all phases of life and activity. It revealed in specific detail God’s will in that economy. The period covered was from Moses until the death of Christ,

or from Exodus 19:1 to Acts 1:26.

The people were responsible to keep all the law (James 2:10), but they failed (Rom. 10:1–3). As a result, there were many judgments throughout this long period. The ten tribes were carried into Assyrian captivity; the two tribes were carried into Babylonian captivity; and later, because of their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth, the people were dispersed into all the world (Matt. 23:37–39). All during their many periods of declension and backsliding, God dealt with them graciously from the very first apostasy with the golden calf, when the law was being delivered to Moses, to the gracious promises of final regathering and restoration in the millennial age to come. These promises of a glorious future are guaranteed secure by the Abrahamic promises, which the law in no way abrogated (Gal. 3:3–25). We are also told clearly in the New Testament (Rom. 3:20) that the law was not a means of justification but of condemnation. Its relation to salvation and the dispensationalist's view of salvation under the law will be discussed later.

6. The Dispensation of Grace

The apostle Paul was principally, though not exclusively, the agent of the revelation of the grace of God for this dispensation. Christ Himself brought the grace of God to mankind in His incarnation (Titus 2:11), but Paul was the one who expounded it. To be sure, the dispensationalist does not say that there was no grace ever displayed before the coming of Christ (any more than he says there is no law after His coming), but the Scriptures do say that His coming displayed the grace of God in such brightness that all previous displays could be considered as nothing.

Under Grace the responsibility on man is to accept the gift of righteousness that God freely offers to all (Rom. 5:15–18). There are two aspects of the grace of God in this economy: (1) the blessing is entirely of grace and (2) that grace is for all. God is no longer dealing with just one nation as a sample but with all mankind. The vast majority have rejected Him and as a result will be judged. The dispensation will end at the second coming of Christ since, as suggested, the tribulation period itself is not a separate dispensation but is the judgment on those living persons who are Christ rejecters at the end of this present dispensation.

The Scripture involved is Acts 2:1 to Revelation 19:21.

7. The Dispensation of the Millennium

After the second advent of Christ, the millennial kingdom will be set up in fulfillment of all the promises given in both Testaments and particularly those contained in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. The Lord Jesus Christ, who will personally take charge of the running of the affairs of the world during that age, will be the chief personage of the dispensation. It will continue for a thousand years, and man will be responsible for obedience to the King and His laws. Satan will be bound, Christ will be ruling, righteousness will prevail, overt disobedience will be quickly punished. Yet at the end of the period enough rebels will be found to make a formidable army that will dare to attack the seat of government (Rev. 20:7–9). The revolt will be unsuccessful, and the rebels will be cast into everlasting punishment.

This is a survey of the dispensations. But there is one other answer to the question asked by the chapter title that is an important and often overlooked consideration. The dispensations are likely seven in number; they can be designated as we have suggested; they exhibit certain characteristics. But above all, dispensations are stewardships, and each stewardship has its stewards. One man usually stands out, particularly at the beginning of each dispensation, and with the exception of the first and last dispensations, that chief personage does not live throughout the period covered. The stewardship responsibility, therefore, is not restricted to one man but in some sense is placed on all who live under the economy.

Let us relate this idea to the dispensation of Grace. Though Paul was a chief agent of revelation of the grace of God, many others are stewards under the economy. The other apostles and prophets (Eph. 3:5) and all believers (1 Peter 4:10) are also stewards of that grace. This means for every Christian a personal involvement in the grace of God. It is not as though we are spectators sitting in the audience watching the grace of God on the stage. We are participants in the drama, and, more than that, we have a lead role in witnessing to and displaying the grace of God under this stewardship. A dispensational responsibility means involvement for those who respond to the principles of the

administration. The same responsibility means judgment for those who reject its principles.¹³

THE MATTER OF “CARRYOVERS”

The question: Does a dispensation in fact completely end when a new one is inaugurated, or in what sense does it end? Some matters to consider:

1 Clearly some promises given in one dispensation are not fulfilled in that same economy. All the promises about the first coming of our Lord given in the Old Testament were not fulfilled until He came. Promises about the coming millennial kingdom will not be fulfilled until Christ's second coming (including the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant, Gen. 15:18–21).

2 Some things instituted in one dispensation continue on throughout subsequent history. Man's creation in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), though terribly marred by sin, continues to this day (James 3:9). The rainbow as a sign that God will never again bring a worldwide flood on the earth has assured, and continues to assure, mankind.

3 Something instituted may be elaborated or changed in subsequent dispensations (though always to be interpreted literally). When God instituted capital punishment, it was for murder only (Gen. 9:6). Under the Mosaic Law it was to be used as punishment for a number of crimes in addition to murder (e.g., adultery, Lev. 20:10; false prophesying, Deut. 13:1–10; rape, Deut. 22:25). Under Grace it is debated whether or not Romans 13:1–7 justifies capital punishment, but, if it does, no crimes for which it should be used are specified.

4 Even though a dispensation ends, certain commands may be reincorporated into a later era. Nine of the Ten Commandments are restated as part of the economy of Grace. So also is the law to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18; cf. Rom. 13:8).

5 But some things are completely changed. Mosaic restrictions on foods are lifted under Grace (1 Tim. 4:3). Circumcision, first commanded to Abraham in the Patriarchal age (Gen. 17:9–14) and continued under the Law (Josh. 5:2), is of no benefit today (Gal. 5:2).

What is the answer to the question? As a code of conduct and a specific revelation from God complete for its time, a dispensation ends. But some things may become part of succeeding codes in one way or another in the dispensations that follow. That is how, for example, Scripture can say that the law, and specifically the Ten Commandments, have been done away with (2 Cor. 3:7–11) and yet incorporate nine of those Ten Commandments plus other commandments in the law into the code of the dispensation of Grace.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Daniel P. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism” (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 23.
2. John Wick Bowman, “The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism,” *Interpretation* 10 (April 1956): 175.
3. Ernest F. Kevan, “Dispensation,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 168.
4. William Evans, *Outline Study of the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1913), 30–37.
5. Cf. L. S. Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1935), 49–50.
6. L. S. Chafer, *Major Bible Themes* (Chicago: Moody, 1942), 100.
7. Evans, *Outline Study of the Bible*, and Clarence E. Mason, “Eschatology” (mimeographed notes, Philadelphia College of Bible, 1962), 52–54.
8. Paul David Nevin, “Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), 111.
9. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 122.
10. Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* (London: Paternoster, 1954), 21.
11. Mason, “Eschatology,” 45a. The *New Scofield* calls this dispensation “Conscience or Moral Responsibility.”
12. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 122, 51.
13. Erich Sauer (cf. *From Eternity to Eternity*, 24), who has been an able contributor to dispensational thought, also holds to seven dispensations exactly as outlined in this chapter. The only difference in his scheme has been noted; i.e., he calls the second dispensation that of “Self-determination.” He relates these periods to the history of salvation in the unfolding

progress of revelation.

14. For further explanation of this, see Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1981), 304–6.

THE ORIGINS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

A typical statement about dispensationalism goes like this: “Dispensationalism was formulated by one of the nineteenth-century separatist movements, the Plymouth Brethren.”¹ This is a prejudicial statement implying two charges: (1) since dispensationalism is recent, it is therefore unorthodox; (2) it was born out of a separatist movement and is therefore to be shunned. The implication in these charges is clear: If the poor misguided souls who believe in dispensationalism only knew its true origin, they would turn from its teachings like the plague.

If that sounds too sarcastic, listen to this statement by Daniel Fuller:

Ignorance is bliss, and it may well be that this popularity [of dispensationalism] would not be so great if the adherents of this system knew the historical background of what they teach. Few indeed realize that the teaching of Chafer came from Scofield, who in turn got it through the writings of Darby and the Plymouth Brethren.²

A further implication in a statement like Fuller’s is that dispensationalism is obviously man-made, and a person would never arrive at such ideas from his own personal Bible study. The idea came from Darby through Scofield and Chafer, and certainly not from the Bible.

THE CHARGE OF RECENCY

Straw Men

In discussing the matter of the origins of dispensationalism, opponents of the teaching usually set up two straw men and then huff and puff until they are destroyed. The first straw man is to say that dispensationalists assert that the *system* was taught in postapostolic times. Informed dispensationalists do not claim that. They recognize that, as a system, dispensationalism was largely formulated by Darby,

but that outlines of a dispensationalist approach to the Scriptures are found much earlier. They only maintain that certain features of what eventually developed into dispensationalism are found in the teachings of the early church.

Another typical example of the use of a straw man is this line of argument: pretribulationism is not apostolic; pretribulationism is dispensationalism; therefore, dispensationalism is not apostolic.³ But dispensationalists do not claim that the system was developed in the first century; nor is it necessary that they be able to do so. Many other doctrines were not developed in the early centuries—including covenant theology, which originated in the seventeenth century. Doctrinal development is a perfectly normal process that has occurred in the course of church history.

This straw man leads to a second fallacy—the wrong use of history. The fact that something was taught in the first century does not make it right (unless taught in the canonical Scriptures), and the fact that something was not taught until the nineteenth century does not make it wrong, unless, of course, it is unscriptural. Nondispensationalists surely know that baptismal regeneration was taught in the early centuries, and yet many of them would not include that error in their theological systems simply because it is historic. After all, the ultimate question is not, Is dispensationalism—or any other teaching—historic? but, Is it scriptural? Most opponents of dispensationalism realize that this is the issue, but they still persist in using the historical argument with its fallacious implications. C. B. Bass's entire book is a good example of such an approach. He devotes two sentences to the recognition that the test is Scripture, not history,⁴ and he devotes most of the remainder of the book testing the validity of dispensationalism by history and by Darby's church activities.

The charge of newness was leveled long ago at the doctrine of the Reformers. Calvin answered it with characteristic straightforwardness, and his answer is one that could be used to defend dispensationalism equally well against the same charge: "First, by calling it 'new' they do great wrong to God, whose Sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty.... That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man's impiety. Now when it is restored to us by God's goodness, its

claims to *antiquity* ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery.”⁵

Early Dispensational-like Concepts

Dispensationalists recognize that as a *system* of theology it is recent in origin. But there are historical references to that which eventually was systematized into dispensationalism. There is evidence in the writings of men who lived long before Darby that the dispensational concept was a part of their viewpoint. If that is true, it would scarcely be appropriate to say, as one opponent of dispensationalism, George Ladd, does,

It is not important for the present purpose to determine whether the views of Darby and Kelly were original with them or were taken over from their antecedents and made popular by them. Sources to solve this historical problem are not available to the present writer. For all practical purposes, we may consider that this movement—for dispensationalism has had such wide influence that it must be called a movement—had its source with Darby and Kelly.⁶

Sources are available and have been available for many years. The writings of the church fathers were translated and in print long before Ladd was born, and Ehlert’s work, “A Bibliography of Dispensationalism,” was in print several years before Ladd’s book was published.⁷ At any rate, evidence is available and shows that dispensational concepts were held early and throughout the history of the church.

Justin Martyr (110–165) held a concept of differing programs of God. In the *Dialogue with Trypho*, while discussing the subject that God always taught the same righteousness, he said,

If one should wish to ask you why, since Enoch, Noah with his sons, and all others in similar circumstances, who neither were circumcised nor kept the Sabbath, pleased God, God demanded by other leaders and by the giving of the law after the lapse of so many generations, that those who lived between the times of Abraham and of Moses be justified by circumcision and the other ordinances—to wit, the Sabbath, and sacrifices, and libations, and offerings.... (XCII)

Earlier in the same work he spoke of the present dispensation and of its gifts of power (LXXXVII).

Irenaeus (130–200) wrote of reasons why there are only four Gospels.

One of them is as follows:

The Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord. For this reason were four principal covenants given to the human race: one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom. (*Against Heresies*, III, XI.8)

He did not call these periods dispensations in this place, though he often spoke of the dispensations of God and especially of the Christian dispensation (see *Against Heresies*, V, XXVIII.3).

Clement of Alexandria (150–220) distinguished three patriarchal dispensations (in Adam, Noah, and Abraham) as well as the Mosaic. Samuel Hanson Coxe (1793–1880) backed up his own sevenfold dispensational scheme by Clement’s fourfold one.⁸

Augustine also reflects these early dispensational concepts in his writings. Although his oft-quoted statement, “Distinguish the times, and the Scripture is in harmony with itself,” does not in its context apply to his dispensational ideas, he elsewhere makes some applicable statements.

The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now. For the change suitable to the present age has been enjoined by God, who knows infinitely better than man what is fitting for every age, and who is, whether He give or add, abolish or curtail, increase or diminish, the unchangeable Creator of mutable things, ordering all events in His providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, the component parts of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some ineffably wise master of song, and those pass into the eternal immediate contemplation of God who here, though it is a time of faith, not of sight, are acceptably worshipping Him.... There is no variableness with God, though in the former period of the world’s history He enjoined one kind of offerings, and in the latter period another, therein ordering the symbolic actions pertaining to the blessed doctrine of true religion in harmony with the changes of successive epochs without any change in Himself....

If it is now established that that which was for one age rightly ordained may be in another age rightly changed,—the alteration indicating a change in the work, not in the plan, of Him who makes the change, the plan being framed by His reasoning faculty, to which, unconditioned by succession in time, those things are simultaneously present which cannot be

actually done at the same time because the ages succeed each other. (*To Marcellinus*, CXXXVIII, 5, 7)

One historian states of Joachim of Fiore (ca. 1135–1202) that “his tripartite scheme of history [the Age of Law, the Age of Grace, and the future Age of the Spirit and righteousness] anticipates in rudimentary form the dispensationalism popularized by British and American prophecy writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which similarly segments history into a series of divinely ordained stages, or ‘dispensations.’”⁹ But because he taught that the third dispensation would begin in 1260, during which the world would be converted, he was postmillennial in his eschatology.

It is not suggested, nor should it be inferred, that these early church fathers were dispensationalists in the later sense of the word. But it is true that some of them enunciated principles that later developed into dispensationalism, and it may be rightly said that they held to primitive or early dispensational-like concepts.

From this time until after the Reformation, there were no substantial contributions to that which was later systematized as dispensationalism. After important doctrinal issues of the Reformation were settled, theologians were able to turn their attention again to these matters involving God’s dealing with humanity.

Developing Dispensationalism, or the Period Before Darby

Pierre Poiret was a French mystic and philosopher (1646–1719). His great work, *L’Économie Divine*, first published in Amsterdam in 1687, was translated into English and published in London in six volumes in 1713. The work began as a development of the doctrine of predestination, but it was expanded into a rather complete systematic theology. In viewpoint it is sometimes mystical, represents a modified form of Calvinism, and is premillennial and dispensational. Each of the six volumes is devoted to a particular economy, though his dispensational scheme does not exactly follow the title of each volume. The scheme as set forth in these volumes is as follows:

I. Infancy—to the Deluge

- II. Childhood—to Moses
- III. Adolescence—to the prophets (about the time of Solomon)
- IV. Youth—to the coming of Christ
- V. Manhood—“some time after that”
- VI. Old Age—“the time of man’s decay”
(V and VI seem to be the early and latter part of the Christian dispensation.)
- VII. Renovation of all things—the Millennium¹⁰

Ehlert correctly assesses the importance of this man’s work as follows:

There is no question that we have here a genuine dispensational scheme. He uses the phrase “period or dispensation” and his seventh dispensation is a literal thousand-year millennium with Christ returned and reigning in bodily form upon the earth with His saints, and Israel regathered and converted. He sees the overthrow of corrupt Protestantism, the rise of Antichrist, the two resurrections, and many of the general run of endtime events.¹¹

John Edwards (1637–1716), a Calvinistic minister in the Church of England, published in 1699 two volumes, totaling about 790 pages, entitled *A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations*. His purpose in the books was “to display all the Transactions of Divine Providence relating to the Methods of Religion, from the Creation to the end of the World, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last of the Revelation.”¹²

He believed in a millennium, but he understood it to be a spiritual reign. “I conceive,” he said, “He may Personally Appear above, though He will not Reign Personally on Earth.”¹³ His dispensational scheme was as follows:

- I. Innocency and Felicity, or Adam created upright
- II. Sin and Misery, Adam fallen
- III. Reconciliation, or Adam recovered, from Adam’s redemption to the end of the world
 - A. Patriarchal economy
 - 1. Adamical, antediluvian
 - 2. Noahical

- 3. Abrahamic
- B. Mosaical
- C. Gentile (concurrent with A and B)
- D. Christian or Evangelical
 - 1. Infancy, primitive period, past
 - 2. Childhood, present period
 - 3. Manhood, future (millennium)
 - 4. Old age, from the loosing of Satan to the conflagration

Isaac Watts (1674–1748), best known as a hymn writer, was also a theologian (possibly with Arian tendencies) whose writings fill six large volumes. In a forty-page essay entitled “The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all his Dispensations towards them,” he defined his concept of dispensations and presented his system. His definition is as follows:

The public *dispensations* of God towards men, are those wise and holy constitutions of his will and government, revealed or some way manifested to them, in the several successive periods or *ages* of the world, wherein are contained the duties which he expects from men, and the blessings which he promises, or encourages them to expect from him, here and hereafter; together with the sins which he forbids, and the punishments which he threatens to inflict on such sinners, or the *dispensations* of God may be described more briefly, as the appointed moral rules of God’s dealings with mankind, considered as reasonable creatures, and as accountable to him for their behaviour, both in this world and in that which is to come. Each of these dispensations of God, may be represented as different religions, or at least, as different forms of religion, appointed for men in the several *successive ages* of the world.¹⁴

His dispensational outline is as follows:

- I. The Dispensation of Innocency, or the Religion of Adam at first
- II. The Adamical Dispensation of the Covenant of Grace, or the Religion of Adam after his Fall
- III. The Noahical Dispensation, or the Religion of Noah

- IV. The Abrahamic Dispensation, or the Religion of Abraham
- V. The Mosaic Dispensation, or the Jewish Religion
- VI. The Christian Dispensation

Except for the exclusion of the Millennium (he did not consider it a dispensation), this outline is exactly like that in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and it is Watts's outline, not Darby's! Thus, throughout this period there was significant thinking and considerable literature on the subject of God's dealings with mankind throughout the ages. This was a period of developing dispensationalism.

Systematized Dispensationalism, or Darby to the 1980s

There is no question that the Plymouth Brethren, of which John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) was a leader, had much to do with the systematizing and promoting of dispensationalism. But neither Darby nor the Brethren originated the concepts involved in the system, and even if they had, that would not make them wrong if they can be shown to be biblical.

Darby was born in London of Irish parents, was educated at Trinity College, Dublin (from which he graduated at the age of eighteen), and was admitted to the bar at the age of twenty-two. He was converted, abandoned his legal career after one year, and was ordained in the Church of England. He worked vigorously and with remarkable success in his first parish, with the result that at one time Roman Catholics were “becoming Protestants at the rate of 600 to 800 a week.”¹⁵

Because of the alliance of the Church of England with the state, Darby soon felt that he must leave that ministry and seek a fellowship that emphasized a more spiritual and intimate communion. He began to meet with a group of people who belonged to the Church of England in Dublin and who because of their dissatisfaction with that church were seeking more personal communion and Bible study. These early meetings were begun before Darby became dissatisfied. He was not the founder of this group, and the meetings were in no way a protest but, rather, a spontaneous gathering.

After some traveling, Darby settled in Plymouth, England, where in

1831 the breaking-of-bread service was begun. By 1840 some eight hundred people were attending these services, and it was inevitable that the group, whom Darby had insisted should be known not by any denominational name but simply as brethren, would be called Plymouth Brethren. Many groups subsequently sprang up in Britain and later in other parts of the world. Darby himself spread the movement by his own travels to Germany, Italy, the United States, and New Zealand. He was an indefatigable worker.

His written ministry incorporates some forty volumes of six hundred pages each, including a translation of the Bible. His works show a breadth of scholarship in his knowledge of the biblical languages, philosophy, and ecclesiastical history. The early assemblies had their problems, and Darby figures largely in the disputes of those years.¹⁶

Darby's dispensational scheme (though not always easily discerned from his writings) was as follows:

- I. Paradisaical state to the Flood
- II. Noah
- III. Abraham
- IV. Israel
 - A. Under the law
 - B. Under the priesthood
 - C. Under the kings
- V. Gentiles
- VI. The Spirit
- VII. The Millennium¹⁷

His philosophy of dispensationalism is stated in the following words:

This however we have to learn in its details, in the various dispensations which led to or have followed the revelations of the incarnate Son in whom all the fullness was pleased to dwell.... The detail of the history connected with these dispensations brings out many most interesting displays, both of the principles and patience of God's dealings with the evil and failure of man; and of the workings by which He formed faith on His own thus developed perfections. But the dispensations themselves all declare some leading principle or interference of God,

some condition in which He has placed man, principles which in themselves are everlastingly sanctioned of God, but in the course of those dispensations placed responsibly in the hands of man for the display and discovery of what he was, and the bringing in their infallible establishment in Him to whom the glory of them all rightly belonged.

... In every instance, there was total and immediate failure as regarded man, however the patience of God might tolerate and carry on by grace the dispensation in which man has thus failed in the outset; and further, that there is no instance of the restoration of a dispensation afforded us, though there might be partial revivals of it through faith.¹⁸

Only one comment is necessary concerning Darby's teachings—it was obviously not the pattern Scofield followed. If Scofield parroted anybody's scheme, it was Watts's, not Darby's. Although we cannot minimize the wide influence of Darby, the glib statement that dispensationalism originated with Darby, whose system was taken over and popularized by Scofield, is not historically accurate.

Recent Neodispensationalism

Beginning in the 1980s a group from within the dispensational camp have been promoting significant changes in normative, or traditional, dispensationalism. The tenets include the following: (1) the kingdom of God is the unifying theme of biblical history; (2) Christ has already inaugurated the Davidic covenant and is now reigning in heaven on the throne of David (right hand of the Father = the throne of David); (3) the concept of two purposes and two peoples of God (Israel and the church) is not valid; (4) thus, the church is not a separate group of redeemed people, nor was it unrevealed in the Old Testament (just unrealized); (5) there is one divine plan of holistic redemption for all people and all areas of human life (personal, societal, cultural, and political).¹⁹

This new teaching proposes four primary dispensations in biblical history and charts them as follows.²⁰

Patriarchal to Sinai

Mosaic to Messiah's Ascension

Ecclesial to Messiah's Return

Zionic

1. Millennial
2. Eternal

Progressives wish to call their teachings “developments” within dispensationalism so that they can still call themselves dispensationalists, but they clearly seem to include changes (that is, essential differences from dispensationalism). This new departure will be discussed more fully in chapter 9.

The Progress of Dogma

That the systematizing of dispensationalism is recent should not be surprising. It would not be unexpected that a subject whose primary distinctions have to do with eschatology should not have been systematized until eschatology began to be refined seriously by the church. Most agree that the history of dogma has followed a certain pattern of unfolding development and discussion. Orr, in his classic work *The Progress of Dogma*, shows how the doctrines taken up for theological study by the church throughout her history chronologically correspond with the general order followed in most systematic theologies. In chronological order the doctrinal discussions were on apologetics, theology proper, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, and after the Reformation, eschatology.²¹ Undoubtedly the recency of systematic eschatology partly accounts for the relative recency of systematic dispensationalism. This is not to say that eschatology or even a primitive dispensationalism was not considered before post-Reformation times, but it is to say that systematic development of doctrine in these areas did not come on the scene until then. Thus, the toil of eschatological study has borne the good fruit of dispensational distinctions in this modern period of the progress of dogma.

To sum up: In answer to the charge that dispensationalism is recent and therefore suspect, we have tried to show two things: (1) dispensational concepts were taught by men who lived long before Darby; (2) it is to be expected that dispensationalism, which is so closely related to eschatology, would not be refined and systematized until recent times simply because eschatology was not an era under discussion until then. The conclusions drawn from the charge of recency by opponents of dispensationalism are therefore unjustified. In all of this discussion, too, it is necessary to remember that the verdict of history is not the final authority. Every doctrine, whether ancient or recent, must,

in the final analysis, be tested by the light of the revelation of Scripture.

REPRESENTATIVE DISPENSATIONAL SCHEMES						
Pierre Poiret 1546–1719	John Edwards 1639–1716	Isaac Watts 1674–1748	J. N. Darby 1800–1882	James Brookes 1830–1897	James M. Gray 1851–1935 (Pub. 1901)	C. I. Scofield 1843–1921 (Pub. 1909)
Creation to the Deluge (Infancy)	Innocency	Innocency	Paradisaical state (to the Flood)	Eden	Edenic	Innocency
	Adam Fallen Antediluvian	Adamical (after the Fall)		Antediluvian	Antediluvian	Conscience
Deluge to Moses (Childhood)	Noahical	Noahical	Noah	Patriarchal	Patriarchal	Human Government
	Abrahamic	Abrahamic	Abraham			Promise
Moses to Prophets (Adolescence)	Mosaical	Mosaical	Israel— under law under priesthood under kings	Mosaic	Mosaic	Law
Prophets to Christ (Youth)						
Manhood and Old Age	Christian	Christian	Gentiles	Messianic	Church	Grace
			Spirit	Holy Ghost		
Renovation of All Things			Millennium	Millennium	Millennial	Kingdom
					Fullness of times	
					Eternal	

THE CHARGE OF DIVISIVENESS

Dispensationalism is not only charged with being recent but also with having originated in divisiveness. The inference is that anything that is factious in origin cannot be valid. Darby was a separatist; Plymouth Brethrenism is a separatist movement; and many adherents of dispensationalism today are found in movements that have separated from the larger denominations of Christendom; therefore, dispensationalism is a teaching that causes nothing but dissension in the church.

One need not scrutinize contemporary evangelical church life too closely to see this principle at work today. Nor does it take more than a casual survey of the history of theology since Darby's day to trace the continuity of his view of separation to our day. There exists a direct line from Darby through a number of channels—prophetic conferences, fundamentalistic movements, individual prophetic teachers, the Scofield Reference Bible, eschatological charts—all characterized by and contributing to a spirit of separatism and exclusion. The devastating effects of this spirit upon the total body of Christ cannot be underestimated.²²

This kind of attack is built on two basic premises: (1) ecclesiastical separatism is always wrong, and (2) dispensationalism has been the

principal (the inference is “only”) factor causing ecclesiastical separation in the modern period. Both premises are fallacious.

Is ecclesiastical separation always wrong? Bass thinks that there is no question as to what the answer is: “Any theological system which causes a part of the church to withdraw from the larger fellowship in Christ and, by isolationism and separatism, to default its role, is wrong.”²³ In a similar vein E. J. Carnell says, “A spirit of divisiveness is not prompted by the Holy Spirit, for love is the law of life, and love remains unsatisfied until all who form the body of Christ are united in one sacred fellowship.”²⁴

To be sure, a party spirit is condemned in the Scriptures as carnality (1 Cor. 3). But the same epistle declares that factions or sects do occur within the church in order to mark off those who are approved (1 Cor. 11:19²⁵). Schism and separatism are not synonymous concepts. One can be schismatic and still remain *within* a group, which does not make his schism right simply because he did not break away from that group. And one can be a separatist and break away from a group *and be right*. Whether or not organizational unity is maintained or broken is not the criterion for judging the rightness or wrongness of an action. To say that ecclesiastical separation is always wrong is not to think clearly about the biblical concepts involved.

To say that ecclesiastical separatism is wrong is to condemn some of the most beneficial movements of church history. To try to classify the Reformation as “an eviction” in order not to have to classify it as a separatist movement is wishful thinking.²⁶ The plain, unvarnished fact is that Martin Luther broke with the Roman Catholic Church and formed a new fellowship of believers. Therefore, he was a separatist, but he vigorously denied that he was a schismatic. A man can abhor schism and be a separatist—as many of the Reformers did and were. If Bass’s statement quoted above is true, then the theological system of the Reformation is wrong. There is no other conclusion to be drawn, for there is no way to view the Reformation as anything but a separatist movement.

It is not necessary to speak of others like Thomas Chalmers, Abraham Kuyper, or J. Gresham Machen, all of whom were separatists but all of whom rejected the charge of being schismatics.²⁷ Were their actions

wrong? Are the movements they initiated to be condemned? Was not the Holy Spirit guiding them all? If the Reformers and others like them were not guided by the Holy Spirit, then we had all better make a contrite pilgrimage back to Rome and do it quickly. But if any of these separatist movements were right in their day, then conceivably separatist movements might be right today.

The second premise underlying the charges against the divisive nature of dispensationalism is that it alone, or chiefly, has been the cause for divisions in the church. In none of the examples just cited from history was dispensationalism a factor in the separation. But, someone may say, those examples were not from the recent modern period when dispensationalism had gained some prominence in theological discussion. That is true, but even in the contemporary scene dispensationalism has not been an issue at all in many of the separatist movements.

The American Council of Churches and its worldwide affiliates are almost entirely nondispensational in theology. Indeed, they are covenantal in their theological viewpoint. They could not possibly be charged even with getting their doctrine of the apostate church from dispensationalism. The separatist Baptist groups did not originally separate from the larger denomination because of dispensationalism. The issue was modernism and that the symptoms of modernism were departures from very basic doctrines, such as the Virgin Birth and the deity of Christ. Even in this present hour the only separatist group that officially makes dispensationalism a part of its doctrinal basis is the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (though modernism, not dispensationalism, was originally the cause of the separation of the churches in this fellowship). Contemporary church history will not support the oft-repeated statement or inference that dispensationalism has been the cause of ecclesiastical separation.

Even in the first prophetic conference in this country in 1878, dispensationalism scarcely figured in the messages and discussions.²⁸ That conference and those that followed were not convened because of a desire to promote dispensational truth. They grew as a protest to the rapid takeover of existing denominations by modernism and the social gospel. The teaching not only opposed modernism but also

postmillennialism, annihilationism, and perfectionism. Inevitably, dispensationalism came into the messages of these conferences, for the attention given to prophetic themes focused men's minds on the literal interpretation of Scripture and the distinction between Israel and the church. An "any moment" coming was linked to premillennialism. But there is little evidence that these men were borrowing from Darby, and the Plymouth Brethren were not prominent in the leadership of these conferences. The leaders were denominational men.

In the 1878 prophetic conference a speaker from England did give an address that was "explicitly dispensational," and in the 1886 conference another dispensational message was given. But generally this was not the primary emphasis. The results of these early prophetic conferences were (1) an emphasis on literal interpretation of Scripture, (2) the imminency of the coming of Christ, (3) an emphasis on evangelism and missions, and (4) a firm stand against postmillennialism with its teaching of world conversion. Understanding of dispensationalism as it had been taught for fifty years by Darby before the first prophetic conference was only a by-product of the conferences and not an immediate one at that.

Notice should be taken also of the fact that the doctrine of the apostate church arose in these prophetic conferences as a reaction to postmillennialism's false optimism. Dispensationalism also taught the doctrine, but it originally entered the stream of American fundamentalism through the prophetic conferences more than through Darby. In any case, the doctrine of the apostate church was not the exclusive possession of dispensationalism. If this doctrine can be said to be "the most serious of all their [dispensationalists'] errors," then it could at one time have been said to be the most serious error of denominationalists too!²⁹

Modern opponents of dispensationalism have found it convenient to make dispensationalism the scapegoat and whipping boy for all the separatist movements in the church. This cannot be substantiated from history, and, even if it were true, it would not necessarily be wrong. Separatism does not necessarily have to be schism, whether it is caused by a desire for a pure doctrine of justification (as in the Reformation) or a pure doctrine of the church (as often in the modern era). After all, the Scriptures do teach an apostasy in the church during the last days that

will lead to a great ecumenical superchurch (1 Tim. 4:1–3; 2 Tim. 3:1–5; Rev. 17). Suppose dispensationalism had never developed beyond its unsystematized form as existed before Darby. Would this mean that there would have been no separatist movements in the recent history of the church? The answer is apparent.

In light of the history of separatist movements, it seems evident that the cause of separatism is deeper than any aspect or any one system of theology. Many factors have entered into each movement. Undoubtedly in no case could all the factors be justified. But underlying all these movements and coalescing all the factors is a common denominator, and that single factor, which is justifiable, is the desire to return to the Scriptures as the sole authority for faith and practice. That does not condone the dissension found in most separatist movements, particularly at the time of actual rupture, but it is to say that there is a proper and justifiable cause for separation. If in a larger segment of the church, Bible truth or some aspect of it has been lost, and if within that segment, a group attempts to emphasize that truth again, there is almost always bound to be a separation. Dispensationalism does foster Bible study, and if with that comes a dissatisfaction with an existing fellowship, that is not surprising. If the Reformers felt that they could best serve the Lord outside the Roman Church, or Scots outside the Church of Scotland, or Baptists outside the state church, or dispensationalists outside a denomination, is that necessarily wrong?

To sum up: Opponents of dispensationalism are quite inaccurate in bringing their charges that dispensationalism is recent and that it was born out of divisiveness. Dispensational concepts antedate Darby, although he played a large part in the systematizing and popularizing of dispensationalism. That such systematizing should occur late in the history of the church is to be expected in the chronological progress of doctrinal discussions. Although there were difficulties and factions within the early Brethren groups, the very first groups that met did not meet as a protest against anybody nor did they embark on an aggressive campaign against the established church. The lives of the men connected with any movement may credit or discredit its teachings, but they do not prove or disprove its truthfulness. Only the Bible does that.

One of the finest tributes to the beneficial effect of dispensationalism

on American Christianity was paid by one whose own theology was nondispensational. George E. Ladd wrote,

It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity.³⁰

This is high praise for any system of theology.

NOTES

1. E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 117.
2. Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 136.
3. C. B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 39–43. Dale Moody (*The Word of Truth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 549–50) believes that historic premillennialism (posttribulational premillennialism taught in the early centuries) has shaken the foundations of dispensationalism.
4. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 47.
5. John Calvin, "Prefatory Address to King Francis," in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: Wolfe & Harison, 1561), 4.
6. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 49.
7. Arnold H. Ehlert, "A Bibliography of Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January 1944–January 1946): 101:95–101, 199–209, 319–28, 447–60; 102:84–92, 207–19, 322–34, 455–67; 103:57–67.
8. A. C. Coxe, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (New York: Scribner's, 1899), 2:476.
9. Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 52.
10. Pierre Poiret, *The Divine Economy: or An Universal System of the Works and Purposes of God Towards Men Demonstrated* (London, 1713).
11. Ehlert, "A Bibliography of Dispensationalism," 101:449–50.
12. John Edwards, *A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations and Methods of Religion* (London, 1699), l:v.
13. *Ibid.*, 2:720.

14. *Watts' Works*, 2:625 (Leeds ed.); 2:543 (London ed.).
15. For documentation, see Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 50.
16. Cf. *ibid.*, 48–99. Bass's factual account of the life and ministry of Darby is excellent, though his inferential conclusions are not always so.
17. *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (London: G. Morrish, 1867), 2:568–73.
18. *Ibid.*, 1:192–93.
19. Craig A. Blaising, "Contemporary Dispensationalism," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 36, vol. 2 (spring 1994): 11–13.
20. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 123.
21. James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 24–30. Orr, a covenant theologian, has also written, "Existing systems are not final; as works of human understanding they are necessarily imperfect.... I do not question, therefore, that there are still sides and aspects of divine truth to which full justice has not yet been accorded; improvements that can be made in our conception and formulation of all the doctrines, and in their correlation with each other" (pp. 30–31).
22. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 99.
23. *Ibid.*, 154.
24. Carnell, *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, 137.
25. The word used in this verse originally meant a school of thought or a sect, not necessarily in a bad sense. Transliterated into English it comes out "heresies."
26. As Carnell does in *The Case for Orthodox Theology*, 136–37.
27. Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) in 1843 led about one-third of the ministers of the Church of Scotland out of the General Assembly to organize the Free Church of Scotland. Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) withdrew from the Dutch Reformed Church and founded in 1886 the Free Reformed Church. J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) left Princeton Theological Seminary because of modernism and founded Westminster Theological Seminary and the Independent Board of Missions.
28. Even C. Norman Kraus (*Dispensationalism in America* [Richmond: John Knox, 1958], 83) admits this. His attempt to link the prophetic conferences with dispensationalism is in reverse gear. He tries to show that since there was some dispensational teaching in the conferences this was the cause of their being convened. The truth is that the calling of prophetic conferences as a protest to modernism was the cause, and a gradual understanding of dispensationalism was the effect. The conferences led to dispensationalism, not vice versa.

To be sure there was an inevitable and eventual link between the conferences and dispensationalism, but dispensationalism grew out of the *independent* study that resulted from the interest in prophecy. Cf. also C. E. Harrington, “The Fundamental Movement in America, 1870–1920” (doctor’s diss., Univ. of California, 1959), and J. B. Behney, “Conservatism and Liberalism in the Late Nineteenth Century in American Protestantism” (doctor’s diss., Yale Univ., 1941).

29. Arnold B. Rhodes, ed., *The Church Faces the Isms* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), 100.

30. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, 49.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Hermeneutics is the science that furnishes the principles of interpretation. These principles guide and govern anybody's system of theology. They ought to be determined *before* one's theology is systematized, but in practice the reverse is usually true. At least in the awareness of most people, hermeneutics is one of the last things to be considered consciously. Most people know something of the doctrines they believe but little of the hermeneutics on which they have been built. Principles of interpretation are basic and preferably should be established before attempting to interpret the Word so that the results are not only correct interpretations but a right system of theology growing out of those interpretations.

SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Since the first edition of this book in 1965, there have been at least three developments in the field of hermeneutics.

1 The area of linguistics has contributed an understanding concerning language structure and general semantics that has aided biblical interpretation.¹

2 There has been a focus on a literary approach to Scripture, or a focus on the different genres found in Scripture. (Genre is "a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.") This focus has increased the study of comparative literature from the ancient Near East and from the intertestamental and Greco-Roman periods.

But the study of genre brings both "promises" and "pitfalls."² It promises a better understanding of the historical and cultural background of the Bible, which is part of historical-grammatical interpretation. But one of the pitfalls is to claim that "each genre

represents truth in its own way and makes unique demands for how it should be read,”³ and that “meaning is genre dependent.”⁴ The writer then provides a different list of hermeneutical principles for each of the genres found in the Bible. Another is not taking into full account that there are significant limitations to parallels made between the monotheism of Israel and her God-given Scriptures and the polytheism of other Near Eastern religions and their solely human documents.

3 Attention has also been given recently to the role of preunderstanding in one’s approach to interpretation.⁵ This means that we bring to our interpretation of Scripture not only a set of interpretive principles (hermeneutics) but also theological presuppositions, as well as personal and cultural predispositions. The process of engaging these three aspects has been called the hermeneutical spiral—we spiral from our predispositions and hermeneutics to the exegesis of Scripture and developing our theology, and then cycle through again, expecting that each cycle will help us grow into a better understanding of God’s Word.

THE DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS

Historically, among evangelicals, there have been two basic and distinctive hermeneutical positions—dispensationalism and covenantalism. Recently a third position has appeared, that of progressive dispensationalism, which is somewhat of a mediating position and which does not fully share the hermeneutics of normative dispensationalism.

The Dispensational Position

Literal hermeneutics. Dispensationalists claim that their principle of hermeneutics is that of literal interpretation. This means interpretation that gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking.⁶ It is sometimes called the principle of *grammatical-historical* interpretation since the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations. The principle might also be called *normal* interpretation since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated *plain*

interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech. Symbols, figures of speech, and types are all interpreted plainly in this method, and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.

The *literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.⁷

Many reasons are given by dispensationalists to support this hermeneutical principle of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. At least three are worthy of mention at this point.

Philosophically, the purpose of language itself seems to require literal interpretation. Language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with mankind. As Gordon Clark says,

If God created man in His own rational image and endowed him with the power of speech, then a purpose of language, in fact the chief purpose of language, would naturally be the revelation of truth to man and the prayers of man to God. In a theistic philosophy one ought not to say that all language has been devised in order to describe and discuss the finite objects of our sense-experience.... On the contrary, language was devised by God, that is, God created man rational for the purpose of theological expression.⁸

If God is the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to humanity, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell mankind. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense. The Scriptures, then, cannot be regarded as an illustration of some special use of language so that in the interpretation of these Scriptures some deeper meaning of the words must be sought. If language is the creation

of God for the purpose of conveying His message, then a theist must view that language as sufficient in scope and normative in use to accomplish that purpose for which God originated it.

A second reason why dispensationalists believe in the literal principle is a biblical one: the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the first coming of Christ—His birth, His rearing, His ministry, His death, His resurrection—were all fulfilled literally. That argues strongly for the literal method.

A third reason is a logical one. If one does not use the plain, normal, or literal method of interpretation, all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretations that man's imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard, which the literal principle provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting. Literalism is a logical rationale.

Of course, literal interpretation is not the exclusive property of dispensationalists. Most conservatives would agree with what has just been said. What, then, is the difference between the dispensationalist's use of this hermeneutical principle and the nondispensationalist's? The difference lies in the dispensationalist's claim to use the normal principle of interpretation *consistently* in *all* his study of the Bible. He further claims that the nondispensationalist does not use the principle everywhere. He admits that the nondispensationalist is a literalist in much of his interpretation of the Scriptures but charges him with allegorizing or spiritualizing when it comes to the interpretation of prophecy. The dispensationalist claims to be consistent in his use of this principle, and he accuses the nondispensationalist of being inconsistent in his use of it.

Notice, for instance, the predicament one writer gets himself into by not using the literal principle consistently.⁹ He recognizes that some insist on a literal fulfillment of prophecy, whereas others see only a symbolic meaning. His suggestion is that prophecy should be approached "*in terms of equivalents, analogy, or correspondence.*"¹⁰ As an example of the application of this principle, he mentions the weapons cited in Ezekiel 39 and states that these will not be the exact weapons used in the future war; rather, equivalent weapons will be used. But suppose this

principle of equivalents were applied to Micah 5:2. Then any small town in Palestine would have satisfactorily fulfilled the prophecy of where Christ were to be born. If the Bible says “like chariots” or “like Bethlehem” (which it does not), then there may be some latitude in interpretation. But if specific details are not interpreted literally when given as specific details, there can be no end to the variety of meanings of a text.

Consistency. In theory the importance of the literal principle is not debated. Most agree that it involves some obvious procedures. For one thing, the meaning of each word must be studied. This involves etymology, use, history, and resultant meaning. For another thing, the grammar, or relationship of the words to each other, must be analyzed. For a third thing, the context, immediate and remote, must be considered. That means comparing Scripture with Scripture as well as the study of the immediate context. These principles are well known and can be studied in any standard text on hermeneutics.

However, in practice the theory is often compromised or adjusted and, in effect, vitiated. The amillennialist does this in his entire approach to eschatology. For instance, Floyd Hamilton, an amillennialist, confessed,

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal kingdom interpretation of the Old Testament promises.¹¹

Having admitted this, he naturally arrives at a different picture of the kingdom on the basis of different hermeneutics. He feels, of course, that he has found justifiable reasons for spiritualizing the concept of the kingdom, but the important point is that his resultant picture stems from a principle of hermeneutics that is not literal (for, by his own admission, if he followed the literal principle, he would be a premillennialist). The change from a literal procedure is not difficult to see in amillennialism.

More recently Vern Poythress, a covenant theologian, differentiates between eschatological and preeschatological fulfillments of prophecy, though he maintains that both are based on grammatical-historical interpretation:

I claim that there is sound, solid, grammatical-historical ground for interpreting eschatological fulfillments of prophecy on a different basis than preeschatological fulfillments. ... It is therefore a move away from grammatical-historical interpretation to insist that (say) the “house of Israel” and the “house of Judah” of Jeremiah 31:31 must with dogmatic certainty be interpreted in the most prosaic biological sense, a sense that an Israelite might be likely to apply as a rule of thumb in short-term prediction.¹²

But a few verses farther on in that passage, God links the certainty of His promises to the “nation” to the fixed order of the sun, moon, and stars. Does this not demand a literal or prosaic (which means “everyday” or “ordinary”) interpretation of the meaning of the house of Israel and the house of Judah? Does not Poythress’s distinction between preeschatological interpretation (which is literal) and eschatological interpretation (which is not) arise from his theological framework imposed on the text, rather than from the text itself?

The premillennialist who is nondispensational also compromises the literal principle. This is done by what Daniel Fuller, a representative of this group, calls “theological interpretation”: “In Covenant Theology there is the tendency to impute to passages a meaning which would not be gained merely from their historical and grammatical associations. This phase of interpretation is called the ‘theological’ interpretation.”¹³

This is quite an admission, for it means that the covenant premillennialist is not a consistent literalist by his own statement. If he were, he would have to be a dispensationalist, and he seems to know it! An example of this hybrid literal-theological principle in action is given by Fuller in connection with the promises made to Abraham. He states (correctly) that the dispensationalist understands the promises to require two seeds, a physical and a spiritual seed for Abraham. He notes that the amillennialist “depreciates the physical aspect of the seed of Abraham so much that the promises made to Abraham’s physical seed no longer mean what they say, but are interpreted strictly in spiritual terms. This mediating position [that of the covenant premillennialist] still asserts that a literalistic procedure, which also interprets theologically by regarding progressive revelation, is the basic hermeneutical approach.”¹⁴

Thus, the nondispensationalist is not a consistent literalist by his own admission but has to introduce another hermeneutical principle (the

“theological” method) in order to have a hermeneutical basis for the system he holds. One suspects that the conclusions determined the means used to arrive at them—which is a charge usually hurled at dispensationalists.

Fuller’s problem is that apparently his concept of progressive revelation includes the possibility that subsequent revelation may completely change the meaning of something previously revealed. It is true that progressive revelation brings additional light, but does it completely reverse to the point of contradiction what has been previously revealed? Fuller’s concept apparently allows for such, but the literal principle built upon a sound philosophy of the purpose of language does not. New revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation mean something different. It may add to it or even supersede it, but it does not contradict it. A word or concept cannot mean one thing in the Old Testament and take on opposite meaning in the New Testament. If this were so, the Bible would be filled with contradictions, and God would have to be conceived of as deceiving the Old Testament prophets when He revealed to them a nationalistic kingdom, since He would have known all the time that He would completely reverse the concept in later revelation. The true concept of progressive revelation is like a building—and certainly the superstructure does not replace the foundation.

In spite of this fallacy, however, Fuller does plead for “the patience to pursue the inductive method of Bible study. The inductive method of Bible study, which is nothing more than the scientific method, seeks to gain all the facts before drawing some general conclusions from them.”¹⁵ This is a worthy plea, for such an approach to Bible study is the only safe one. But to do an induction on the basic words “Israel” and “church” would have been in order. He might then have seen more easily why the dispensationalist believes that God has two distinct purposes—one for Israel and one for the church. In the progress of revelation there has been no change in the meaning of these words, and they are kept distinct. The “theological” principle of hermeneutics may allow a blending of the two, but true progressive revelation does not. After all, the same hermeneutical principles must be applied to all

revelation, regardless of the time in which it was given.

To pursue the illustration of Israel and the church further, the amillennialist's hermeneutics allow him to blur completely the meanings of the two words in the New Testament such that the church takes over the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. In that view true Israel is the church. The covenant premillennialist goes halfway. The church and Israel are somewhat blended, though not amalgamated in this age (they are kept distinct in the Millennium). The dispensationalist studies the words in the New Testament, finds that they are kept distinct always, and therefore concludes that when the church was introduced God did not abrogate His promises to Israel or enmesh them into the church. That is why the dispensationalist recognizes two purposes of God and insists on maintaining the distinction between Israel and the church. And all of this is built on an inductive study of the use of two words, not a scheme superimposed on the Bible. In other words, it is built on a consistent use of the literal, normal, or plain method of interpretation without the addition of any other principle that will attempt to give respectability to some preconceived conclusions.¹⁶

Classic dispensationalism is a result of consistent application of the basic hermeneutical principle of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. No other system of theology can claim this.

The Nondispensational Position

The interpretation of prophecy. One of the key features of nondispensational hermeneutics is to interpret prophecy and sometimes nonprophetic portions of Scripture figuratively. This, often called a "spiritual" hermeneutic, allows for a symbolic meaning of a passage. In criticizing literal hermeneutics Louis Berkhof says, "The theory [of premillennialism] is based on a literal interpretation of Israel and of the Kingdom of God, which is entirely untenable." To support his spiritual hermeneutic he states that the New Testament "does contain abundant indications of the spiritual fulfillment of the promises given to Israel."¹⁷ This approach has led nondispensationalists to equate, or at least to merge, Israel and the church, which in turn has resulted in spiritualizing the yet unfulfilled blessings promised to Israel by having them fulfilled presently by the church.

Oswald Allis, a champion of covenant theology and amillennialism, and a vigorous opponent of dispensationalism, argues in the same vein:

One of the most marked features of premillennialism in all its forms is the emphasis which it places on the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is the insistent claims of its advocates that only when interpreted literally is the Bible interpreted truly; and they denounce as “spiritualizers” or “allegorizers” those who do not interpret the Bible with the same degree of literalness as they do. None have made this charge more pointedly than the dispensationalists.¹⁸

In his words, the issue between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists is “the same degree of literalness” or consistency in the use of literalism. Specifically this has to do with the interpretation of prophecy. The dispensationalist claims to apply his literal principle to all Scripture, including prophecy, whereas the nondispensationalist does not apply it to prophecy. He does apply it to other areas of truth, and this is evident from the simple fact that there is no disagreement with dispensationalists over these doctrines. Allis himself admits that “the Old Testament prophecies if literally interpreted cannot be regarded as having been yet fulfilled or as being capable of fulfillment in this present age.”¹⁹

Of course, there are nondispensational premillennialists. But they, like the amillennialist, do not apply the literal principle consistently. They apply it more extensively than the amillennialist but not so extensively as the dispensationalist.²⁰ In other words, the nondispensationalist position is simply that the literal principle is sufficient except for the interpretation of prophecy. In this area, the spiritualizing principle of interpretation must be introduced. The amillennialist uses it in the entire area of prophetic truth; the covenant premillennialist uses it only partially.

Many years ago George Peters warned of the dangers of any sort of spiritualizing in interpreting the Scriptures. His words are still appropriate:

The prophecies referring to the Kingdom of God, as now interpreted by the large majority of Christians, afford the strongest leverage employed by unbelievers against Christianity. Unfortunately, unbelief is often logically correct. Thus, e.g., it eagerly points to the

predictions pertaining to David's Son, showing that, if language has any *legitimate* meaning, and words are *adequate* to express an idea, they *unmistakably* predict the restoration of David's throne and kingdom, etc., and then triumphantly declare that it was not realized (so Strauss, Baur, Renan, Parker, etc.). They mock the expectation of the Jews, of Simeon, the preaching of John, Jesus, and the disciples, the anticipation of the early Church, and hastily conclude, sustained by *the present faith* of the Church (excepting only a few), that *they will never be* fulfilled; and that, therefore, the prophecies, the foundation upon which the superstructure rests, are false, and of human concoction. The manner of meeting such objections is *humiliating* to the Word and Reason; for it discards *the plain grammatical sense* as unreliable, and, to save the credit of the Word, insists upon interpreting all such prophecies by adding to them under the claim of spiritual, a sense which *is not contained in the language*, but suits the religious system adopted. Unbelief is not slow in seizing *the advantage* thus given, gleefully pointing out how this introduced change makes the ancient faith an ignorant one, the early Church occupying a false position, and the Bible a book to which man adds any sense, under the plea of spiritual, that may be deemed necessary for its defense.²¹

Building on the contemporary emphasis on genre, nondispensationalists are pointing to the extensive use of symbols and metaphors that are used in prophecy and arguing that these give clues to the reader that such material is to be interpreted symbolically. For example, Bruce Waltke, in critiquing Ladd's premillennialism, wrote, "Note the many symbols in verse 1 [of Rev. 20]: 'key,' 'abyss,' 'chain,' and then in verse 2 'dragon,' the only interpreted symbol. If 'key,' 'chain,' 'dragon,' 'abyss,' etc. are symbolic, why should the number 1000 be literal, especially when numbers are notoriously symbolic in apocalyptic literature?"²²

Here is another recent example concerning the use of symbolism in prophecy: "This may mean that Matthew 24:29/Mark 13:24 is referring not to the literal destruction of *physical* entities in outer space, but to the upheaval and overthrow of *political* entities and/or *spiritual* forces on earth."²³

To be sure, apocalyptic literature does employ symbols, but they stand for something actual. Furthermore, much of the Apocalypse is perfectly plain and clear, and sometimes explains in the text itself the meaning of a symbol (Rev. 1:20; 11:8; 12:5; 17:15; 20:2). At other times the text will say "like," "as," or "as it were," indicating a real correspondence between what John saw and the reality he was trying to describe. These

are all useful and common means of normal communication and in no way require abandoning plain interpretation.

The use of the Old Testament in the New. Some nondispensationalists argue against dispensationalism and a literal hermeneutic on the basis of their understanding of how the New Testament authors use the Old. According to Berkhof, “It is remarkable that the New Testament, which is the fulfillment of the Old, contains no indication whatsoever of the reestablishment of the Old Testament theocracy by Jesus ... while it does contain abundant indication of the spiritual fulfillment of the promises given to Israel.”²⁴

Others, while not agreeing with the view that all the Old Testament promises are now fulfilled spiritually in the church, are saying that these promises have been inaugurated and begun to be fulfilled now in the church age and will be consummated in the new heavens and new earth (the already/not yet concept).²⁵ Whereas half of this viewpoint is the same as that taught in progressive dispensationalism (i.e., the promises have already been inaugurated), the second half is not the same (since covenantalists believe that the consummation will be only in the eternal state and progressives say it will be in the Millennium and eternal state).

The presupposition of the covenant of grace. It is quite obvious that the presupposition of the covenant of grace controls the covenant theologian’s handling of texts and issues involved in his criticism of dispensationalism. Van Gemeren plainly says, “The Reformed exegete approaches the prophets from the perspective of the unity of the covenant [of grace].”²⁶ Similarly Moisés Silva has written, “The organic unity of God’s people throughout the ages is a distinctive emphasis of covenant theology. This emphasis in turn has profound implications for our understanding of ecclesiology (including questions of church government, baptism, etc.), of the Christian’s use of the Old Testament, and much more.”²⁷

The bottom-line questions are these: (1) Is the covenant of grace stated in Scripture? (2) Even if it is, should it be the controlling presupposition of hermeneutics and theology? (3) Even if there is a unity of redeemed peoples, does that remove disunities in God’s program for His creations?

The Progressive Dispensational Position

Its discontinuity with normative dispensationalism. Clearly, progressive dispensationalists are distancing themselves from the consistent literal hermeneutics of normative dispensationalism by introducing “complementary hermeneutics.” In speaking of the issues still on the table to be discussed by covenant theologians and progressive dispensationalists, Blaising and Bock say, “The final issue on the table is hermeneutical. The issue is not a distinct hermeneutic but debate about *how to apply the hermeneutic that we share.*”²⁸ This sharing is between covenantalists and progressives, not progressives and normative dispensationalists, further demonstrating the distance progressives wish to have between themselves and classic dispensationalists. Unquestionably, a literal hermeneutic consistently used has been a key feature of normative dispensationalism. Both nondispensationalists and dispensationalists acknowledge this. “The first tenet of dispensationalism is that the Bible must be interpreted literally.”²⁹

Progressives are moving away from the literal hermeneutic of normative dispensationalism. Although they still want to come under the umbrella of a grammatical-historical hermeneutic, they (in their own words) embrace ideas developed “in sophistication beyond that which was practiced by classical dispensationalists....

Furthermore, a number of dispensationalists who today practice consistent grammatical-historical interpretation (in its more developed sense) have revised some of the distinctive interpretations of earlier dispensationalism. Literary interpretation has developed so that some things which earlier interpreters thought they “clearly” saw in Scripture, are not “clearly” seen today at all.³⁰

Bruce Waltke sees this as a very basic difference: “This already-not yet model of [progressive] dispensationalism, entailing a less than one-for-one correspondence between Old Testament covenants and prophecies and the partial fulfillment in the church, shakes the very foundations of [normative] dispensational hermeneutics, which includes a *consistent* literalistic interpretation of the Old Testament, another sine qua non of the system.”³¹

Some questions arise from this distancing. (1) Does the progressives’ modification or redefining of literalism permit them to proclaim honestly their continuity with the dispensational tradition? (2) Is the umbrella of

literalism large enough to cover their expanded historical-grammatical hermeneutic? (3) Is it progress to see things in Scripture not so clearly today as before? (4) If the literal hermeneutic of normative dispensationalism is not adequate to interpret all of Scripture, especially the prophetic and apocalyptic parts, what may happen to other characteristic teachings of dispensationalism in the ongoing work of the progressives?

Complementary hermeneutics. In order to give a hermeneutical base to certain interpretations of the progressives (e.g., Christ is now on the throne of David in heaven, and the somewhat indistinctiveness of Israel and the church), they have introduced what they call *complementary hermeneutics*. This means that “the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.”³² The first sentence of their definition opens the door for their already/not yet view of the Davidic kingdom. The last two sentences keep them from becoming amillennialists. More will be said about this hermeneutic and the yet unspecified limitations on the use of it in chapter 9.

THE RESULTS OF LITERAL INTERPRETATION

If literal interpretation is the correct principle of interpretation, it follows that it would be proper to expect it to apply to all the Scriptures. This, as we have tried to show, is the reason the matter of consistency in the application of plain interpretation is so important. The nonliteralist is the nonpremillennialist, the less specific and less consistent literalists are the covenant premillennialist and the progressive dispensationalist, and the consistent literalist is a dispensationalist.

Literal interpretation results in accepting the text of Scripture at its face value. Based on the philosophy that God originated language for the purpose of communicating His message to man and that He intended man to understand that message, literal interpretation seeks to interpret that message plainly. In the prophecies of the Old Testament, plain interpretation finds many promises that, if interpreted literally, have not

yet been fulfilled. The amillennialist says that they will not be fulfilled literally but are being fulfilled spiritually in the church. The covenant premillennialist who does not use consistently the literal principle that he believes in sees some of them fulfilled literally and some not. Daniel Fuller makes a startling confession when he says that “the whole problem of how far a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophets is to be carried is still very perplexing to the present writer.”³³ The admission is even more surprising when one realizes that it is made in the last paragraph of his chapter on conclusions. The consistent application of literal interpretation would solve his problem, for the Scriptures would speak to him as they did to the prophets—plainly and at face value.

Since literal interpretation results in taking the Scriptures at face value, it also results in recognizing distinctions in the Bible. No interpreter of Scripture denies this fact, but the extent to which he recognizes distinctions is the evidence of his consistent use of the literal principle of interpretation. It is not a matter of superimposing a dual purpose of God on the Scriptures, but it is a matter of recognizing that in the New Testament the word *Israel* does not mean the church and vice versa. The dispensationalist, then, recognizes the different peoples of God simply because of the distinction maintained by the text as literally interpreted.

Taking the text at face value and recognizing distinctions in the process of revelation leads to the recognition of different economies in the outworking of God’s program. In other words, consistent literalism is the basis for dispensationalism, and since consistent literalism is the logical and obvious principle of interpretation, dispensationalism is more than justified. It is only by adjusting or adding to the principle of literal interpretation that dispensationalism is avoided. Face-value understanding incorporates distinctions; distinctions lead to dispensations. Normal interpretation leads to the clear distinction between words, concepts, peoples, and economies. This consistent hermeneutical principle is the basis of dispensationalism.

THE UNIFYING PRINCIPLE OF THE BIBLE

The distinctions resulting from the application of the literal principle have brought the charge that dispensationalism destroys the unity of the Bible. From the more scholarly opponents of dispensationalism, the charges run like this: Dispensationalism is “unable to display the unity of the Bible,”³⁴ or, “The Bible ceases to be a self-consistent whole.”³⁵ More popularly the charge is expressed in words like T. A. Hegre’s:

[Satan] advanced a much more modified form of dispensationalism—a form so mild and so moderate that by the great majority of fundamentalists it was accepted. In fact, fundamentalism and *mild dispensationalism* are today almost synonymous. Yet in its tendencies, fundamentalist dispensationalism is, we believe, dangerous and mischievous, robbing us of much of the Bible, especially of the words of Christ.³⁶

In the same chapter (which incidentally is entitled “Have You Lost Your Bible?”), Hegre names destructive higher criticism as an additional example of Satan’s efforts to rob people of parts of the Bible. This is another example of an unfair method of attacking dispensationalism—the use of guilt by association. Surprisingly this unworthy tactic is used by no less a scholar and gentleman than O. T. Allis, who makes the same comparison between dispensationalism and higher criticism:

Dispensationalism shares with higher criticism its fundamental error.... In a word, despite all their differences, higher criticism and dispensationalism are in this one respect strikingly similar. Higher criticism divides the Scriptures up into documents which differ from or contradict one another. Dispensationalists divide the Bible up into dispensations which differ from and even contradict one another.³⁷

It is scarcely necessary to say how unjust such a comparison is. But the charge, however stated, boils down to an accusation that dispensationalism so compartmentalizes the Bible that its unity is completely destroyed.

Undoubtedly dispensationalists have given the impression that the dispensations are so many compartments, like separate post office boxes, which have no connection with each other. But dispensationalists have also had much to say about the unity of the Bible, and there is no excuse for nondispensationalists to recognize only one side of what dispensationalists say, except to make a straw man that is easier to attack. Dispensationalists have emphasized the unity of the Scriptures

whether the nondispensationalist wishes to acknowledge it or not.

Scofield, who does not have one word to say about dispensations in his introduction to the *Scofield Reference Bible* (which is specifically designated “TO BE READ”), does have quite a bit to say about the unity of the Bible:

*First, The Bible is one book. Seven great marks attest this unity. (1) From Genesis the Bible bears witness to one God. ... (2) The Bible forms one continuous story.... (3) The Bible hazards the most unlikely predictions concerning the future.... (4) The Bible is a progressive unfolding of truth.... (5) From beginning to end the Bible testifies to one redemption. (6) From beginning to end the Bible has one great theme—the person and work of the Christ. (7) And, finally, these writers, some forty-four in number, writing through twenty centuries, have produced a perfect harmony of doctrine in progressive unfolding.*³⁸

Other dispensationalists, such as Erich Sauer and W. Graham Scroggie (*The Unfolding Drama of Redemption*), give strong emphasis to the unity of the Bible and prominence to God’s redemptive purpose.

Unity and distinction are not necessarily contradictory concepts. Examples abound. The human body is not disunited because the hand is distinct from the ear. The unity of a building is not impaired by carefully observing the distinctions between the iron and wood that go into it. Furthermore, in the process of building, each part must wait its proper time and order of entering into the overall development. “The unity of a touchdown by a football team is not destroyed by the making of several separate and distinguishable first downs by different methods during the connected march toward the goal line.”³⁹

Even in areas of theology that nondispensationalists do not dispute with dispensationalists, they recognize that distinctions do not necessarily mean disunity. “The unity of the Trinity is most certainly admitted by conservative opponents of dispensationalism; yet these theologians are very careful to maintain distinctions in the three Persons comprising the Godhead! This unity with distinctions is recognized also in the doctrine of the hypostatic union of the two natures in the one Person of the incarnate Christ!”⁴⁰ Even the nondispensationalist does not consider the unity of his sermon destroyed by the compartments of its divisions: “Sameness does not always produce unity nor differences disunity. A more impossible situation could not be imagined than a

jigsaw puzzle composed wholly of circles.”⁴¹ Unity and distinction are not necessarily incompatible concepts. They may be quite complementary, as indeed they are in dispensationalism.

Even though dispensationalists do speak of the unity of the Bible, and even though nondispensationalists fail to recognize that distinctions may be involved in unity, the charge that dispensationalism destroys the unity of the Bible still persists. What is this unity that is supposedly destroyed? It is, in the nondispensationalist’s opinion, the unity of the overall purpose of redemption. The so-called covenant of grace is the governing category by which all Scripture is to be understood. God’s purpose in the world is to redeem, and men have been, are, and will always be redeemed in the same manner throughout all time.

Any distinctions recognized by the covenant theologian are merely aspects of the outworking of this single purpose controlled by the covenant of grace. “Everything in history and life is subservient to spiritual redemption,” says one covenant writer.⁴² More recently Clarence Bass, an opponent of dispensationalism, states that “the church, as the body of Christ providentially redeemed, is the epitome of the whole structure of God’s purposes on the earth.”⁴³ Fuller makes it equally clear: “There are those, on the one hand, who see the Bible as the outworking of God’s one purpose of redemption, whose focal point is in the cross of Christ. This is the traditional view voiced by the conservative elements within the major denominational groups.”⁴⁴

No dispensationalist minimizes the importance of God’s saving purpose in the world. But whether it is God’s total purpose, or even His principal purpose, is open to question. The dispensationalist sees a broader purpose in God’s program for the world than salvation, and that purpose is His own glory. For the dispensationalist the glory of God is the governing principle and overall purpose, and the soteriological program is one of the principal means employed in bringing to pass the greatest demonstration of His own glory. Salvation is part and parcel of God’s program, but it cannot be equated with the entire purpose itself. John F. Walvoord says it succinctly:

All the events of the created world are designed to manifest the glory of God. The error of covenant theologians is that they combine all the many facets of divine purpose in the one

objective of the fulfillment of the covenant of grace. From a logical standpoint this is the reductive error—the use of one aspect of the whole as the determining element.⁴⁵

Thus, as stated in chapter 1, the unifying principle of covenant theology is, in practice, soteriological. The unifying principle of normative dispensationalism is doxological, or the glory of God, for the dispensations reveal the glory of God as He manifests His character in the differing stewardships given to man.

In progressive dispensationalism, the overall purpose of God has shifted from a doxological to a Christological purpose. This better fits the progressives' emphasis on a Messianic and unified concept of kingdom and Christ's present rule in heaven on the throne of David.

But, someone may object, are these in reality not simply minor distinctions? Are not the glory of God, the saving work of God, and the Christological/Messianic purpose practically the same concept? Not at all. The different emphases resulting from the Christological purpose of progressive dispensationalism are discussed in chapter 9. The glory of God is manifesting God for who He is. God as a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29) reveals the judicial side of God's character, and it is not a display of redemption. Without getting involved in all the questions concerning salvation during the period of the Mosaic Law, it is quite clear that God had some purposes under the law besides the soteriological. Otherwise, how can we take at face value Paul's statement that the law was "the ministry of death" and "the ministry of condemnation" (2 Cor. 3:7, 9)? These are not descriptions of salvation to say the least!

How do we know that the glory of God is the purpose of God above and beyond His saving purpose? First, the plain statement of Scripture declares that salvation is to the praise of God's glory, which simply means that redemption is one of the means to the end of glorifying God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). Salvation, for all of its wonder, is but one facet of the multifaceted diamond of the glory of God. Second, all theologians of whatever persuasion realize that God has a plan for the angels. It does not involve redemption, for the elect angels do not experience it and the nonelect angels cannot. And yet for the angels God has a distinct program—a distinct purpose—and it is not soteriological. Third, if one is a premillennialist (not even necessarily of the dispensational variety), he

recognizes that in the kingdom program God has a purpose that, though it involves salvation, is not confined to redemption. Obviously God has other purposes in this world besides the redemption of mankind, though with our man-centered perspective we are prone to forget that fact.

It is recognized that covenant theologians declare clearly and strongly that the glory of God is the chief purpose of God. For instance, Charles Hodge says that “the final cause of all God’s purposes is His own glory.”⁴⁶ William G. T. Shedd is more specific: “Neither salvation nor damnation are ultimate ends, but means to an ultimate end: namely, the manifested glory of the Triune God.”⁴⁷

But covenant theology makes the *all-encompassing* means of manifesting the glory of God the plan of redemption. Thus, for all practical purposes, covenant theology uses redemption as its unifying principle. This is undoubtedly partly due to the spiritualizing of the text of Scripture so that there is little or no future for Israel, thus obliterating the distinctive purpose God has for that people. If that were not obliterated, then the covenant theologian would see that the glory of God is to be realized fully not only in salvation but also in the Jewish people and in His purpose concerning angels.

God does have various ways to manifest His glory, redemption being one—a principal one but not the only one. The various economies with their stewardship responsibilities are not so many compartments completely separated from each other but are stages in the progress of the revelation of the various ways in which God is glorified. And further, dispensationalism not only sees the various dispensations as *successive* manifestations of God’s purpose but also as *progressive* manifestations of it. The entire program culminates, not in eternity but in history, in the millennial kingdom of the Lord Christ. This millennial culmination is the climax of history and the great goal of God’s program for the ages.

In accord with the general thesis of Biblical theism, the achievement of this goal in the historical process is effected only by divine aid, for fallen man is helpless in the conflict of good and evil apart from the grace of God. A unique feature of dispensationalism is that this conflict does not assume a more or less fixed pitch. Rather it rises in a mighty crescendo, as in ever new forms by historical and experimental proof is demonstrated through respective dispensations man’s supreme need of grace to attain to the glory of God.⁴⁸

Dispensationalism sees the unity, the variety, and the progressiveness of this purpose of God for the world as no other system of theology.

ADDENDUM:

THE SERMON

ON THE MOUNT

In relation to the matter of dispensational interpretation, one of the favorite targets of attack is what opponents consider to be the dispensationalist's view of the Sermon on the Mount. One critic asserts that dispensationalists teach that "the Sermon on the Mount is neither the Church's duty nor privilege. It is not for now."⁴⁹ C. Norman Kraus echoes the "party line" and misrepresents dispensationalism by insisting that in it "Jesus' life and teachings are lost to the Church."⁵⁰ An expositor who is highly respected by many, including myself, correctly summarizes the classic dispensational teaching on the Sermon but then vitiates what he has said by adding that dispensationalists teach that the Sermon "has nothing whatsoever to do with Christians in the meantime."⁵¹

The picture of dispensational teaching given the Christian public is that of a knife that not only makes hairsplitting distinctions but actually cuts away parts of the Bible. On the basis of this picture Christians are urged to reject dispensationalism. As Ladd put it, "A system which takes this great portion of Jesus' teaching away from the Christian in its direct application must receive penetrating scrutiny."⁵²

Why is the Sermon on the Mount made the focus of the attack? Nobody ever criticizes the dispensationalist for teaching that the dietary regulations of the Mosaic Law have no application to the Christian. The Sermon on the Mount, however, is different. It contains the Golden Rule, the Lord's Prayer, and other favorite passages. Even to suggest that its direct relation to the Christian is open to question inevitably involves people's emotions before their doctrine. Of course, the dietary laws are

just as much inspired Scripture as the Sermon on the Mount—a fact that emotions easily overlook.

VARIOUS VIEWPOINTS

It Is a Message of Salvation

Interestingly enough, both liberals and avowed dispensationalists accept this view (though each may understand salvation in different ways). Adolf Harnack (1851–1930), a well-known German liberal, views the Sermon as a works-salvation, saying that in it Jesus goes through “the several departments of human relationships and human failings so as to bring the disposition and intention to light in each case, to judge man’s works by them, and on them to hang heaven and hell.”⁵³ A similar view states that “in all this it is made clear that what matters is character and conduct. Salvation comes to those who turn with a single mind to worship and obey God, walking in the way that has been opened up by Jesus.”⁵⁴

John MacArthur Jr. objected strenuously to my question in the original edition of this book. Where in the Sermon on the Mount is the Christian gospel stated? He asserted that the Sermon “is pure gospel, with as pointed an invitation as has ever been presented.”⁵⁵ Granted, the discourse contains several pointed invitations, but invitations to what? To believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins and rose again? Impossible to prove. To repent? Definitely. Who were to repent? The Jewish people to whom He was speaking. About what were they to repent? About their disobedience to God’s law. What law? The law of Moses. That repentance was with a view to what? To entering the kingdom of heaven, which was at hand. What would those people have understood the kingdom of heaven to be? The Messianic, Davidic kingdom on this earth in which the Jewish people would have a prominent place.

This kingdom was not the body of Christ, nor was it heaven itself. It was not some dynamic reign apart from a concrete expression of that reign in a realm, which in the audience’s understanding of the Sermon would have been the Davidic kingdom on this present earth. Summarizing well, Mark Saucy says,

First, at the beginning of Jesus’ career He proclaimed and offered to Israel the restoration of

the rule of Yahweh in their land, which would bring His peace and righteousness, and through which they would be a blessing to the rest of the world. This kingdom of which He spoke is physical, glorious, and powerful, compelling the wicked either to repent or to feel its wrath.⁵⁶

If the sermon is “pure gospel,” is it not presenting a works-salvation gospel?

It Is for the Church

By “for” is meant that the message is to be interpreted as directly binding on the church, not merely by application of its principles but by primary interpretation of its words. For example, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones plainly says that the Sermon “is something which is meant for all Christian people. It is a perfect picture of life in the kingdom of God.” Then he describes the kingdom of God as “essentially spiritual” in contrast to the “materialistic,” “political,” and “military” conception held by the Jews of Jesus’ time.⁵⁷

If the Sermon is directly for the church, it will be difficult if not impossible to interpret all of it completely and in a consistently literal manner. George Ladd, for example, who believes that the Sermon on the Mount is God’s standard for righteousness for this church age, resolves the interpretive dilemma by warning against understanding the teaching with strict literalness. As proof he cites the fact that even Jesus did not turn the other cheek (John 18:23); therefore we need not understand Matthew 5:39 with “wooden literalness.”⁵⁸ Might one observe (facetiously!) that “wooden literalness” might also be called “fudging literalness”? If the laws of the Sermon are to be obeyed today, I know of no one who interprets them in a consistently literal manner, let alone obeys them that way. Every businessman and all Christian schools would go bankrupt if they gave to all who asked anything of them (Matt. 5:42). All interpreters face this dilemma: if it is “for” the church, how can it be interpreted with consistent literalness?

After reading a number of books on the Sermon in preparation for a series I taught on that passage, my impression was (and still is) that Martyn Lloyd-Jones does one of the best jobs in interpreting and applying the Sermon on the basis of consistent literal interpretation as

anyone (even though he does not accept dispensational distinctions).

Some who accept this interpretation of the Sermon point out that James's letter contains at least fifteen allusions to the teachings of the Sermon. Therefore, they conclude, the Sermon is church truth.⁵⁹ But what about the fifteen or more other teachings in the Sermon that James does not mention? Does it follow that they, and thus all the teachings of the Sermon, are church truth? Suppose we use the same logic with regard to the Mosaic Law. We know that nine of the Ten Commandments plus several other commandments outside the Decalogue are repeated in the writings of Paul. Does this mean that Paul gives his imprimatur to the entire Mosaic Law as binding on the church?

Others argue that since Matthew wrote after the church was fully established, why would he include the Sermon unless he expected the church to obey it?⁶⁰ Remember, we are not speaking of application but interpretation; i.e., it is to be interpreted *for* the church, not simply applied *to* the church. If this is inescapable logic, shall we also interpret other teachings of Christ that Matthew records as for the church? How about Matthew 10, especially verses 5–15 and 34–36? Or 15:26? Or 19:21? Or 24:20? If one does not recognize dispensational distinctions in the Gospels, including the Sermon on the Mount, consistent literal interpretation will be abandoned to a lesser or greater degree.

It Is Related to the Kingdom

I have purposely used the word *related* to rather than *for* to be able to include under this heading several somewhat similar dispensational interpretations that relate the Sermon to some aspect of the kingdom. Again, this has to do with interpretation, not application, for all dispensationalists that I have ever read say, even insist, that the Sermon contains teachings whose principles apply to the church.

Therefore, it is certainly wrong to say of this dispensational/kingdom interpretation that the Sermon “has nothing whatsoever to do with Christians in the meantime [before the kingdom comes].”⁶¹ The original *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) explicitly stated that the Sermon “clearly has a beautiful moral application to the Christian.”⁶² L. S. Chafer said essentially the same thing: “A secondary application to the church means that lessons and principles may be drawn from it.”⁶³ The distinction is

between understanding the Sermon as the rule of life for those in the church (in which case its prescriptions must be taken word for word) and applying principles and lessons from it. There are three basic views.

1 *The Sermon relates only to the millennial kingdom.* This is the view nondispensationalists generally associate with dispensationalism. It was clearly the view of the original *Scofield Bible* and of Chafer. In other words, only when the millennial kingdom is established on this present earth under the kingship of Christ will the Sermon become the rule of life. Such an understanding takes the Sermon in its strict literal sense.

One question about this view is simply, If the Sermon will be the new rule of life for the millennial kingdom, what will be the purpose of praying “Thy kingdom come” if it has already come (Matt. 6:10)? Another is this: If the Sermon is for the future kingdom when righteousness will reign, why will some be persecuted (Matt. 5:10)?

2 *It relates to any time the Messianic kingdom is offered.* Thus, it is a detailed explanation of the Lord’s call to Israel to repent. The time when the kingdom is offered includes both the time when the Lord spoke it and the future time in the Tribulation, when the kingdom is about to be established at Christ’s second coming. This view is supported by verses in the Sermon that anticipate the coming of the kingdom (Matt. 5:11–12, 44; 6:10; 7:15). To make this the exclusive purpose of the Sermon seems weakened by sections that demand obedience in the context of a righteous government (5:38–42). Nevertheless, this view would also interpret the Sermon literally.

3 *It relates both to any time the kingdom is offered* (that is, during our Lord’s earthly ministry as well as during the coming tribulation period) *and to the time when the millennial kingdom is functioning on this earth.* This combines views 1 and 2 above and allows for the literal interpretation of verses that anticipate the kingdom coming as well as those that relate to conditions when it will be established.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, what does this dispensationalist (at least) say about the Sermon on the Mount? I suggest four things: (1) It is a detailed

explanation of what the Lord meant by repentance. It called the Jewish people to an inner heart change that they had dissociated from the requirements for the establishing of the Messianic kingdom. Therefore, (2) it relates to any time that the kingdom is offered. But (3) it also relates to life in the millennial kingdom. And (4) as with all Scripture, the Sermon is applicable and profitable to believers in this age.

The dispensationalist does recognize the relevance and application of the teachings of the Sermon to believers today regardless of how much nondispensationalists want to make him say otherwise.⁶⁴ The dispensationalist, however, views the primary fulfillment of the Sermon and the full following of its laws as related to either the offering or the establishing of the Messianic kingdom. After all, there are many other passages of Scripture that all conservative interpreters recognize are not primarily applicable to believers today but that have relevance today. Dispensationalists believe that anger, lust, divorce, and murder are sin, and they believe this on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount as well as other Scriptures. Dispensationalists believe that the Golden Rule and the Lord's Prayer are excellent guides to be used. But they also believe that the full, non-fudging, unadjusted fulfillment of the Sermon relates in several ways to the kingdom of Messiah, while at the same time not postponing the relevance of the Sermon to a future age.

This is the heart of the dispensationalist's interpretation of the Sermon. Is it so bad? At least it does justice to literal interpretation, and the consistency of one's hermeneutical principle is far more important than the defense of one's theological system. It in no way disregards the importance of the ethical teachings of the Sermon for today, and it gives proper recognition to the ultimate purpose of the Sermon.

A few other matters remain. One is this: It is usually charged that dispensationalists teach that the Sermon is all law and no gospel.⁶⁵ To those who object to this claim, we merely ask, Where can one find a statement of the gospel in the Sermon? One answer to that question is this: "The standpoint of grace dominates the whole biblical revelation after the fall."⁶⁶ Nevertheless, a straightforward statement of the gospel cannot be found in the Sermon.

Another matter is this: Dispensationalists often point out the absence of church truth from the Sermon. It is readily admitted that this does not

prove that the Sermon is not primarily for the church, but it is very strange that this most complete of all the teachings of Jesus does not mention the Holy Spirit once or the church per se or prayer in the name of Christ. These things were taught by Christ on other occasions during His ministry but not in the Sermon (cf. John 14:16; 16:13, 24; Matt. 16:18). Concerning prayer, the Lord said later that it was to be offered in His name—a rather important fact that the Sermon nowhere reveals. This is a serious omission if the Sermon is “the rule of *daily* life for the *Christian* believer” (italics added).⁶⁷

The usual nondispensationalist reply to these assertions is that the Sermon must be supplemented by the teaching of the remainder of the New Testament. But such supplementation appears to involve some major differences that make one suspicious of any interpretation that sets forth the Sermon as the believer’s rule of life.

Thus, the dispensational interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount simply tries to follow consistently the principle of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. It results in not trying to relegate primarily and fully the teachings of the Sermon to the believer in this age. But it does not in the least disregard the ethical principles of the Sermon as being not only applicable but also binding on believers today. Can this truthfully be called “cutting out pages from the Bible”?

NOTES

1. For examples of the application of linguistics to interpretation, see D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), and Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).
2. Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).
3. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 77.
4. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991), 9.
5. See Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 74–76.
6. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde, 1956), 89–92.
7. J. P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Revelation* (New York: Scribner’s, 1872), 98.

8. Gordon Clark, "Special Divine Revelation as Rational," in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. C. F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 41.
9. A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 296–305.
10. *Ibid.*, 296.
11. Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 38.
12. Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 105–6.
13. Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 147.
14. *Ibid.*, 238.
15. *Ibid.*, 372.
16. For such an inductive study of the meaning of the words *Israel* and *church*, see Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1953), 62–70. Most nondispensationalists make no such study. Also see Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 113–29.
17. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 712–13.
18. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presb. & Ref., 1945), 17.
19. *Ibid.*, 238.
20. Cf. the interpretation of the 144,000 in George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 126, and J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 63. Literalism would end their uncertainty in interpretation of this point!
21. George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1:167–68. Quoting this in no way implies that amillennialists are in the same category as unbelievers. They certainly are not, for they are conservative in other areas of theology. But the quotation does show in a striking way the dangers of anything but consistent literal interpretation.
22. Bruce K. Waltke, "Kingdom Promises as Spiritual," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 273.
23. Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* (Wheaton: Victor, 1994), 220; cf. 134.
24. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 713.
25. O. Palmer Robertson, "Hermeneutics of Continuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, 106–8. Also Willem VanGemenen, *The Progress of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), and Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 274–87.

Hoekema argues that the view of seeing fulfillment in the new earth answers the contention by dispensationalists that nondispensationalists spiritualize Old Testament promises (pp. 275–76).

26. Willem VanGemeren, “Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy (II),” *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 269.
27. Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 266.
28. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392.
29. Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 115, and Thomas Ice, “Dispensational Hermeneutics,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 29–46.
30. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 36.
31. Blaising and Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 348.
32. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 392–93.
33. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 374.
34. *Ibid.*, 371.
35. Oswald T. Allis, “Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (15 July 1936): 872.
36. T. A. Hegre, *The Cross and Sanctification* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1960), 3–4.
37. Oswald T. Allis, “Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of the Scriptures,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (January 1936): 24.
38. *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), v. This section is also included in the *New Scofield* (New York: Oxford, 1967), ix.
39. James E. Rosscup, “Crucial Objections to Dispensationalism” (master’s thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1961), 74.
40. *Ibid.*
41. H. Chester Woodring, “Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant” (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956), 28.
42. Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 14.
43. C. B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 9.
44. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 6.

45. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959), 92.
46. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1940), 1:535.
47. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 889), 1:448.
48. Woodring, "Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant," 42.
49. Hegre, *The Cross and Sanctification*, 6.
50. C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* (Richmond: John Knox, 1958), 133.
51. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:15.
52. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 104.
53. A. Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1904), 72.
54. Major, Manson, and Wright, *The Mission and Message of Jesus* (London: Nicholson & Watson, 1937), 470.
55. John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 179. Yet later in the same book he acknowledges that Jesus' gospel "was not yet fully completed until His death and resurrection" (p. 214).
56. Mark Saucy, "The Kingdom-of-God Sayings in Matthew," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (April–June 1994): 196.
57. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:16.
58. George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 88.
59. Cf. John A. Martin, "Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986), 48.
60. *Ibid.*, 38n.17, and 47.
61. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:15.
62. *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1000.
63. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 5:97.
64. Cf. Charles Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 81–82.
65. Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 287.
66. *Ibid.*, 290.
67. *Ibid.*, 308.

SALVATION IN DISPENSATIONALISM

Without doubt the most frequently heard objection against dispensationalism is that it supposedly teaches several ways of salvation. In particular, dispensationalists are said to teach salvation by works in some dispensations and salvation by grace in others. This is a very serious charge and must be examined carefully.

THE CHARGE

Statement of the Charge

The charge that dispensationalism teaches multiple ways of salvation is repeated with the regularity of a dripping faucet. John Wick Bowman declared in 1956,

If any man is saved in any dispensation other than those of Promise and Grace, he is saved by *works* and not by faith! [The dispensationalist] is clearly left with two methods of salvation on his hands—*works* for the majority of dispensations, faith for the rest—and we have ... to deal with a fickle God who deals with man in various ways at various times.¹

In 1960 Clarence Bass put similar words into the mouths of dispensationalists by concluding that “the presupposition of the difference between law and grace, between Israel and the Church, between the different relations of God to men in the different dispensations, when carried to its logical conclusion, will inevitably result in a multiple form of salvation—that men are not saved the same way in all ages.”²

In 1957 Daniel Fuller acknowledged in his dissertation that dispensationalists deny this charge. But he called this denial the “new emphasis in dispensationalism” and described it as unwillingness to follow the logic that led L. S. Chafer and C. I. Scofield to teach, so he claims, two ways of salvation.

Even as recently as 1991 John Gerstner aired this charge again.³ However, Vern Poythress does not raise the issue at all.⁴ That there are two ways of salvation appears to be a conclusion that nondispensationalists have tried for decades to force on dispensationalists, for even earlier dispensationalists did not teach what they are charged with. Nevertheless, the attack persists despite repeated denials on the part of dispensationalists. It's almost as if antidispensationalists do not want to hear what is being said because it is more convenient to attack the so-called "logical" conclusions they force on dispensationalism.

Reasons for the Charge

There are undoubtedly reasons—whether justified or not—why the attack persists. For one thing, the labeling of the present dispensation as that of Grace has been taken to mean that dispensationalism teaches that there was no grace in any other age. Antidispensationalists will not even allow the dispensationalist to speak of less or more grace in various dispensations; it has to be an all or nothing proposition: "It is impossible to think of varying degrees of grace, for God either is or is not gracious."⁵ But the Scriptures declare that even within the confines of a single dispensation God "gives more [*meizon*] grace" (James 4:6). Perhaps, then, there have been varying degrees of the display of God's grace throughout history, and perhaps it might even be proper to label one dispensation that of Grace because of its more abundant availability. Of course, some dispensationalists label the dispensation of Grace the dispensation of the Church.

For another thing, nondispensationalists often misunderstand the entire concept of dispensations, thinking that they are equivalent to ways of salvation. The stewardship includes a revelation of the requirement for a right relation with God, but that is not all that is involved in a dispensational arrangement. (Progressive dispensationalists are not making this distinction as clear as it needs to be. They seem to describe the various dispensations more in relation to the history of salvation and the accomplishment of redemption than to the different codes that governed many aspects of life as revealed through the total stewardship arrangement instituted by God in each dispensation.) The

use of the word *test* by dispensationalists in connection with stewardship responsibilities of a dispensation has undoubtedly given some cause for the charge.

Undoubtedly the charge persists because dispensationalists have made unguarded statements that would have been more carefully worded if they were being made in the light of today's debate. Antidispensationalists are never quick to allow for refinement in the statement of dispensationalism, particularly if it dulls their attack. Scofield did write, "The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ."⁶ But Scofield also wrote some other things, and what would he write today if he were alive and answering present-day critics of dispensationalism? The *New Scofield Bible* clarified the note:

Under the former dispensation, law was shown to be powerless to secure righteousness and life for a sinful race (Gal. 3:21–22). Prior to the cross man's salvation was through faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3), being grounded on Christ's atoning sacrifice, viewed anticipatively by God ...; now it is clearly revealed that salvation and righteousness are received by faith in the crucified and resurrected Savior.⁷

Not so incidentally, nondispensationalists have made a few unguarded statements themselves about salvation under the Mosaic Law. Oswald Allis wrote, "The Law is a declaration of the will of God for man's salvation."⁸ Louis Berkhof wrote in one place, "Grace offers escape from the law only as a condition of salvation," and in another place, "From the law ... both as a means of obtaining eternal life and as a condemning power believers are set free in Christ."⁹ If, as these covenant theologians clearly state, the law was a means of salvation and of obtaining eternal life, then covenant theology must teach two ways of salvation—one by law and one through Christ!

However, though these unguarded statements by covenant writers indicate two ways of salvation, we know full well that covenant theology insists on a single way of salvation, and it would be unfair to insist or imply otherwise. Similarly, antidispensationalists who seize on one unguarded statement of Scofield's ought to have the same consideration and not leave people with the wrong impression. Dispensationalism does *not* teach two ways of salvation, and there are sufficient statements by

dispensationalists to prove this fact. Let the opponents be fair and present the entire picture.

THE REPLY

The positive teaching of dispensational writers is that salvation is always through God's grace. Chafer asserted this position clearly:

Are there two ways by which one may be saved? In reply to this question it may be stated that salvation of whatever specific character is always the work of God in behalf of man and never a work of man in behalf of God. This is to assert that God never saved any one person or group of persons on any other ground than that righteous freedom to do so which the Cross of Christ secured. There is, therefore, but one way to be saved and that is by the power of God made possible through the sacrifice of Christ.¹⁰

In the latter years of his life Chafer was charged with teaching "various plans of salvation for various groups in various ages" by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S. In reply to the charge Chafer asserted in no uncertain terms,

The Editor has never held such views and ... he yields first place to no man in contending that a holy God can deal with sin in any age on any other ground than that of the blood of Christ. The references cited by the Committee from the Editor's writings have no bearing on salvation whatever, but concern the rule of life which God has given to govern His people in the world. He has addressed a rule of life on the ground that they are His covenant people. Observing the rule of life did not make them covenant people.¹¹

This statement was made in direct answer to the charge that Chafer taught two ways of salvation, and Chafer himself said that the other statements so often quoted to show that he taught two ways of salvation had no bearing on that subject. May we not take him at his word as being his own best interpreter, especially when he is speaking to the specific point on which he was being attacked? In another place, and twenty years *before* the Presbyterian church leveled the charge against him, Chafer said with equal clarity, "The law was never given as a means of salvation or justification."¹²

Scofield, too, was equally clear that the law was not a means of salvation: "Law neither justifies a sinner nor sanctifies a believer,"¹³ and,

“It is exceedingly important to observe ... that the law is not proposed as a means of life.”¹⁴ William Pettingill, another older dispensationalist, also declared clearly, “Salvation has always been, as it is now, purely a gift of God in response to faith. The dispensational tests served to show man’s utter helplessness, in order to bring him to faith, that he might be saved by grace through faith plus nothing.”¹⁵

These avowals of the single method of salvation by dispensationalists do not satisfy many nondispensationalists. The reason is simple: the nondispensationalist cannot reconcile such statements with the dispensationalists’ distinction between law and grace. The problem partly goes back to the designations “Law” and “Grace” (which are entirely biblical, Rom. 6:14). But it also stems from many antithetical statements that dispensationalists make concerning the distinctions between the economies that are, for better or for worse, designated Law and Grace. One can see how important this matter of designation is by noting the different reaction and impression one receives by simply renaming the two economies the dispensation of Moses and the dispensation of Christ.

Nevertheless, covenant theologians still believe that dispensationalists are talking out of both sides of their mouths. Calling the avowals of only one way of salvation in all the dispensations the new emphasis in dispensationalism, Fuller wants to know how it harmonizes with the duality he insists on seeing in Scofield and Chafer:

How is this new emphasis in dispensationalism to be understood? Does it follow naturally from dispensationalism’s hermeneutical basis? Or is it an idea that is simply superimposed on a structure that, otherwise, would teach in the manner of Scofield and Chafer? The answers to these questions are not easy to gain merely from listening to the contemporary dispensationalists, for as yet they have done little to show how this new emphasis rises naturally from their basic hermeneutical approach.¹⁶

His questioning is fair. Dispensationalists (and nondispensationalists) would do well to show in a systematic way how grace was displayed under the Mosaic Law, something that is not easy to do. We do not merely need more brief declarations that we believe in only one way of salvation (though these should not be ignored), but we must expound the doctrine of salvation under the law. As a friend and former student

said in his doctoral dissertation,

Lamentable is the practice of dispensationalists who imagine that a simple categorical statement about salvation by grace through faith under the law suffices to meet the exigencies of the situation.... What dispensationalists must appreciate is that those who are not dispensationalists have difficulty understanding how they can hold salvation by faith and yet say what they say about the clean-cut distinction between grace and law. In other words, how is salvation by grace in the Old Testament to be reconciled with the Mosaic law viewed as an antithetical system of legal obedience and merit? This question must be answered not by expostulation but by exhibition, not by theoretical statements but by systematic theology. Moreover, any solution that omits the clear-cut distinction between law and grace will immediately be declared suspect by critical covenant controversialists.¹⁷

THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE

In stating the proper doctrine it is necessary to ask and answer two questions: What was the relation of the Mosaic Law to grace? and What grace was there under the Mosaic Law?

The Relation of Law and Grace

In relation to the first question, dispensationalists have given the impression that grace ended when the law was given at Sinai. A. C. Gaebelien wrote, "They had received grace, they needed grace. With the vow they made, they had put themselves under law."¹⁸ Chafer, too, in his usual antithetical style, wrote in the same vein: "Israel deliberately forsook their position under grace, which had been their relation to God until that day, and placed themselves under the law."¹⁹ Such statements and the impression given by charts of the dispensations present a picture of grace ending with the beginning of the law. The implication has thus been made that because of this the law was a retrogression in God's purpose.

If our concept of the dispensations is correct, this is the wrong impression; for if the dispensations build on each other, each one is an advance over the preceding one, culminating in the millennial state. How could this be so in the case of the law? It is best seen by looking at the departure from the Promised Land into Egypt, with which the preceding dispensation ended. That showed that Israel needed a detailed

code by which to live. Their need to be amalgamated into a nation also necessitated the giving of the law. Therefore, it was an advance in God's program for them, not a retrogression into a legal system that the Israelites imposed upon themselves when in reality God wanted them to stay under grace.

The very giving of the law itself was that which made Israel famous among the nations (Deut. 4:6–8; 33:1–4). Furthermore, God did not give it because Israel deserved it, for her past actions had proved just the opposite. Her promotion to theocratic statehood was completely an act of grace “and hence not a *suntheke*, a bargain between two equal parties, but a *diatheke*, a divinely ordained agreement [Gal. 4:24].”²⁰ From the very institution of the law Israel was not allowed to think or imagine that her privileged position was the result of her own meritorious action. The people were instructed to recognize it as a gift from God (Deut. 8:18). Reliance on the flesh was emphatically discouraged (Isa. 40:29–31; Zech. 4:6–7; Neh. 8:10).

Thus, the giving of the law did not abrogate grace. Paul's argument in Galatians 3:17–19 is simply that the law was never intended to annul any of the features of the Abrahamic covenant. It could not make void those promises; rather, it was given to mark out the particular character of transgressions until the Seed, Jesus Christ, should come. The law was to lead the Israelites to Christ. In the accomplishing of these purposes for which the law was given, grace was not excluded, and for these purposes the law was “added alongside” the promise in order to advance Israel's relationship with God for that time.

In answer, then, to the first question as to the relation of the Mosaic Law to grace, it was built upon what preceded without abrogating previously made promises, and it introduced a distinctive economy in God's dealings with the world. This is not double-talk, for we have already noted that a dispensation often reincorporates features found in others. There is no reason why the law should not incorporate grace and in no way change the promises made in a previous economy. After all, the promise to Noah concerning no further flooding of the earth was not abrogated by succeeding dispensational arrangements. The law, too, was added alongside the promise made to Abraham (Gal. 3:14–18).

It is interesting to notice that the covenant theologian is not without

problems in stating his view of the relationship between the law and his covenant of grace. He denies any antithesis between the two, but at the same time he admits an antithesis. Berkhof describes the age of the Mosaic Law in this manner:

The Sinaitic covenant is an interlude, covering a period in which the real character of the covenant of grace, that is, its free and gracious character, is somewhat eclipsed by all kinds of external ceremonies and forms which, in connection with the theocratic life of Israel, placed the demands of the law prominently in the foreground (cf. Gal. 3). In the covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, the promise and the faith that responds to the promise are made emphatic.²¹

All writers, of whatever theological persuasion, are sensitive to the antithetical nature of law and grace, and at the same time they all desire to maintain the doctrine of salvation by grace at all times. Both emphases are necessary, for there is an antithesis between the law and grace (or what do John 1:17; Rom. 6:14; and Gal. 3:23 mean?), and salvation has always been by grace.

The Display of Grace Under the Law

The second question that needs to be considered is, What grace was there under the law? Do dispensationalists really teach that grace was present during the economy of the Mosaic Law?

In another book, I have pointed out six ways grace was displayed under the Mosaic economy.²² A brief summary of these will suffice to show that God did manifest grace during that dispensation and to answer the charge that dispensationalists teach that grace was veiled under the Mosaic economy.

1 *Grace was displayed by God's electing of Israel.* This was an act of unmerited favor. It brought with it certain promises that made available to the individual Israelite a multitude of blessings (Lev. 26:4–8; Deut. 7:14–16).

2 *Grace was displayed in God's frequent restoration of His sinning people.* The law had not even reached the people before it had been broken, and yet God, because of His grace, did not cast them off. During the conquest

of Canaan, in the lives of David and Solomon, and even during the captivities, God's grace was never absent from His people (Jer. 31:20; Hos. 2:19).

3 *The giving of the new covenant, which was announced during the law period, was also a display of grace.* The promise of a new age was given during the time when the law lay broken and trampled beneath the feet of the people who had proved themselves unworthy in every way (Jer. 31:32).

4 *God displayed His grace under the law by the enablement He gave.* Dispensationalists have often pictured the law as a period when enablement was completely lacking.²³ It is true that there was a sharp contrast between the enabling under the law and the work of the Holy Spirit today (John 14:17), but it is not accurate to say there was no enabling under the law. The Spirit indwelt many (Dan. 4:8; 1 Peter 1:11) and came upon many others for special power (Ex. 28:3; Judg. 3:10; 1 Sam. 10:9–10), but there was no guarantee that He would permanently or universally indwell God's people as He does today.

5 *It was during the period of the law that God revealed Himself experientially to His people as Yahweh.* The name is associated with many specific acts of God's grace toward His people (Ps. 143:11; Jer. 14:21).

6 *The great covenant with David was made during the Mosaic economy, and its very institution was an act of great grace on God's part.* The steadfast loving-kindness of God (*hesed*) is linked with the Abrahamic covenant (Mic. 7:20), with the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 34:6–7), with the new covenant (Jer. 31:3), and with the Davidic covenant (Isa. 55:3). The covenant was not only established on God's *hesed*, but David was assured that God's *hesed* would not be thwarted and that the covenant would not be altered (Ps. 89:33–34). A promise like this was one of the most evident displays of God's grace.

These displays of grace under the law did not lessen the exacting demands of that law. The law did not cease to be law simply because God was gracious during that economy. Neither does this display of grace during that period lessen the proper antithesis between the Mosaic economy and the economy introduced by Christ. The Bible reveals the antithesis and at the same time asserts these displays of grace during the

Law dispensation. No system of theology can ignore either emphasis, contradictory as they might seem, even in the interest of theological logic.

With his usual insight Erich Sauer has caught these aspects of law and grace, and particularly grace under the law:

Therefore even in the Old Testament the prophets and psalmists exult (Ps. 32:11; 33:1; 68:4) over the blessings and lifegiving effects of the Law. For them the Law was not only exposure of guilt and a leading on to despair (comp. Rom. 7), but “joy of heart” (Ps. 19:8), “delight” (Ps. 119:47; 36:9), “bliss” (Ps. 32:1).

“Knowledge of sin,” says Paul (Rom. 3:20):

Of “crowning with grace” speaks David (Ps. 103:4).

“The letter kills,” says the apostle (II Cor. 3:6):

“The law is refreshing [quickenning],” says the psalmist (Ps. 19:8).

“Miserable man!” is read in the epistle to the Romans (Rom. 7:24):

“Blessed is the man,” says the Psalter (Ps. 1:1; 32:1).

Of the “curse,” the one-time Pharisee speaks (Gal. 3:13):

“The Lord bless thee,” says the high priest (Num. 6:24).²⁴

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Pointing out these displays of grace, however, does not solve the problem of salvation under the Mosaic Law economy.

The Covenant Position

Covenant theology with its all-encompassing covenant of grace does not have the solution. It has simplicity on its side, for nothing could be more simple and nothing could seemingly preserve the unity of the Bible better than to say that all people are saved in exactly the same way during all ages. And this is what covenant theology does say. Notice Charles Hodge’s statement: “From the Scriptures, therefore, as a whole, from the New Testament, and from the Old as interpreted by infallible authority in the New, we learn that the plan of salvation has always been one and the same; having the same promise, the same Saviour, the same condition, and the same salvation.”²⁵ Another covenant premillennialist says, “There is but one, unified testament, God’s sole

plan of salvation, through which Christ offers a redemption that is equally effective for the saints of both dispensations.”²⁶

These statements alone do not seem to be too inaccurate until one realizes that covenant theologians always include faith in Christ in their concept. Again Hodge asserts,

It was not mere faith or trust in God, or simple piety, which was required, but faith in the promised Redeemer, or faith in the promise of redemption through the Messiah.... The covenant of grace, or plan of salvation, being the same in all its elements from the beginning, it follows ... that the people of God before Christ constituted a Church, and that the Church has been one and the same under all dispensations. It has always had the same promise, the same Redeemer, and the same condition of membership, namely, faith in the Son of God as the Saviour of the world.²⁷

John 8:56; Psalm 16:11; and Job 19:25–26 are always cited as proof texts, and much is made of the illustrations of redemption in the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. However, little is said of how much the Israelites understood what those illustrations represented. The reason for this is plain—it is very difficult, if not impossible, to prove that the *average* Israelite understood the grace of God in Christ. Even J. Barton Payne, who labors in one book to prove perception on the part of the Old Testament saints in order to reinforce the dogma of the unity of salvation, admits in another book, “That, to satisfy God, God must die, that men might inherit God, to be with God, was *incomprehensible* under the Old Testament seminal knowledge of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the crucifixion followed by the resurrection” (*italics added*).²⁸ Apparently one can see more from a theological perspective than can be seen from a historical viewpoint!

The obvious fallacy in the covenant theologian’s solution to this problem is that it is an a priori approach that has yielded artificial results. The assumption is that everything about salvation must be the same; therefore, the conscious object of the faith of Old Testament saints must have been Christ. That is not to imply that covenant theologians do not recognize a limitation on the revelation of the Old Testament, but they do everything possible to obliterate the resulting effect that any limitation of revelation might have on the doctrine of Old Testament salvation.

One of the passages used by covenant theologians to support their position is John 8:56, which says that Abraham saw Christ's day. They believe this to mean that Abraham understood redemption through Christ. However, there are different interpretations of the meaning of Christ's "day."

One question is, From what position and time did Abraham see it? During his lifetime on earth (this would more support the covenant view if "day" means Christ's redemptive work), or after he was in heaven (in which case the verse would say nothing about Abraham's knowledge of the coming Savior during his lifetime)? The other question is, What does "day" mean? The answers vary: it refers to Christ's appearing in glory or to His incarnation or to His resurrection or to the heavenly city. Whatever one's preference of interpretation, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to be dogmatic about any of the suggestions supporting the idea that Abraham saw Christ's redemption. Also, we must not forget that Abraham did not live under the Mosaic Law; therefore, whatever he "saw" does not necessarily prove anything about what people under the Mosaic Law understood.

But under the law did not Moses see Christ (Heb. 11:26–27)? Yes, if Christ means the individual we know as Jesus Christ. But it likely refers to Moses himself who "decided that the temporal wealth of Egypt was far less valuable than 'the stigma that rests on God's Anointed' (NEB)."²⁹ Even if Moses understood about the coming Christ, did the average Israelite?

Additionally, one must consider Acts 17:30, which calls Old Testament days "times of ignorance" in comparison with New Testament revelation, and 1 Peter 1:10, which also places limits on the Old Testament prophets' understanding. On this latter passage, an exegete (who had neither a dispensational nor covenantal ax to grind) wrote,

They were aware that they were speaking of a Messiah; but who the man should be who would hold that office, or at what period of their history he would arise, this was what they longed to know. They foresaw a Christ, but they could not foresee Jesus; they could give to their Christ no definite position in future history.³⁰

The Dispensational Position

This dispensationalist's answer to the question of the relation of grace and law is this: The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations. It is this last point, of course, that distinguishes dispensationalism from covenant theology, but it is not a point to which the charge of teaching two ways of salvation can be attached. It simply recognizes the obvious fact of progressive revelation. When Adam looked upon the coats of skins with which God had clothed him and his wife, he did not see what the believer today sees looking back on the cross of Calvary. And neither did other Old Testament saints see what we can see today. There have to be two sides to this matter—that which God sees from His side and that which man sees from his. That is what is meant by the Dallas Seminary doctrinal statement when it declares concerning this question of salvation,

We believe that according to the “eternal purpose” of God (Eph. 3:11) salvation in the divine reckoning is always “by grace, through faith,” and rests upon the shed blood of Christ. We believe that God has always been gracious, regardless of the ruling dispensation, but that man has not at all times been under an administration or stewardship of grace as is true in the present dispensation.... We believe ... that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, 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 (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ. (Article V)

For Fuller, this statement of the seminary is quite a problem.³¹ But in reality it is a problem that does not exist. He simply has not distinguished the basis of salvation (which is by grace) from the content of revelation (which was not the same under the law as it is today). As has been pointed out, although God is always gracious, *He does not always reveal grace in the same manner or in the same amount*. Different revelation does not affect His character. One must see two aspects to this entire matter—the unchanging basis of salvation in the grace of Christ and the changing content of revelation, which affects the conscious object of faith.

The covenant theologian does not see the latter and consequently

raises his own problems, i.e., how to account for biblical passages that do speak of the grace now operative as distinct from the grace that was operative during the Mosaic economy. John 1:17 does not mean that there was no grace before the coming of Christ, but it does mean that, in comparison with the grace of Christ, all previous revelations of grace were as nothing. And this antithesis the covenant theologian cannot harmonize with his unified doctrine of grace and unitized construction of the Bible. First Peter 1:10 does not mean that there was no grace before the coming of Christ, but it does mean that there was grace that was never known or experienced by Old Testament saints in their lifetimes. Only dispensationalism can harmonize these two aspects of truth.

Another reason covenant theologians do not comprehend the dispensational answer is that they confuse the *tests* under a dispensation with the *way of salvation*. Capitalizing on the fact that most dispensationalists regard each dispensation as having a test, they equate the test with the way of salvation. Therefore, it is easy for them to conclude that, since each dispensation has its own test and since there are several dispensations with their obvious differences, the dispensationalist must believe that there are several different ways of salvation—that there was a way of salvation revealed in each dispensation and that people's response to that particular revelation was a test of that economy. But there are many other tests in every dispensation. Every bit of revelation carries with it a test of whether people will respond positively or negatively to the particular thing revealed. One side of the coin is revelation or dispensation and the other side is responsibility or stewardship.

Response to the revelation of the way of acceptance before God is but one test in any dispensation. Response to other aspects of the economy involves other tests. Under the law, God provided a way whereby people could be eternally acceptable before Him. (The specifics of that way we have not yet discussed.) He also provided ways whereby people could be temporally acceptable before Him. Breaking the Sabbath was punishable by death. Keeping the Sabbath meant continuance in the present life. But keeping the Sabbath did not mean eternal life.

Therefore, it is entirely harmonious to say that the means of eternal

salvation was by grace and that the means of temporal life was by law. It is also compatible to say that the revelation of the means of eternal salvation was through the law and that that revelation (though it brought the same results when believed) was not the same as the revelation given since the incarnation of Christ. Thus, the revelation concerning salvation during the Mosaic economy did involve the law, though the basis of salvation remained grace.

This has to be the case, contradictory as it may seem to some. The law could not save, and yet the law was the revelation of God for that time. That the law could not save is perfectly clear. People were saved under the Law economy but not by the law. Scripture is plain concerning this fact—Romans 3:20 and 2 Corinthians 3:6–7. And yet the law contained the revelation that brought people to a realization that their faith must be placed in God the Savior. How did it do this? Primarily by the worship it instituted through the sacrificial system. The sacrifices were part of the law; the keeping of them did not save, and yet a person could respond to what they taught so as to effect eternal salvation.

The Purpose of the Sacrifices

It would be helpful, then, to examine more carefully this “gospel emphasis” in the sacrificial system. Is it clear enough to see the “same promise, the same Saviour, the same condition, the same salvation,” as the covenant theologian believes? Or is it so limited as to change the content of faith, as the dispensationalist says? To put the question theologically, it is simply this: What was the Christological content of the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law, and what relation did it have, if any, to Old Testament salvation?

Three views are generally held concerning the efficacy of the sacrifices instituted under the law.

- 1 Some hold that their efficacy extended to full remission of sins, but such remission depended on the offerer having faith (since there was not inherent virtue in the sacrifices themselves).

- 2 Others believe that the efficacy of the Levitical sacrifices extended only to the remission of temporal penalties involved in the theocratic

governmental setup of the nation Israel. This temporal remission was automatically effective whenever the offerer made a sacrifice; it did not depend on his having faith. He was “saved” from governmental penalties as long as he brought the offerings.

3 The third view combines ideas from the first two and holds that the sacrifices were automatically efficacious for theocratic forgiveness but were related to spiritual salvation when offered in faith. Just how much knowledge was involved in that faith is difficult to determine.

Unquestionably the Old Testament does ascribe efficacy to the sacrifices. Again and again the Scriptures declare that when the sacrifices were offered according to the law it shall “be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf” (Lev. 1:4; 4:26–31; 16:20–22). In none of these passages is there any indication that the effectiveness of the sacrifices depended on the spiritual state of the person offering them. Neither do the Scriptures imply that the offerer had to have some glimmer of understanding of the prefigurative purpose of these sacrifices for them to be effective for him. The face-value interpretation of these passages assigns a genuine atonement for sins to the sacrifices simply because they were offered and not because the offerer was either worthy in himself or perceptive of something the sacrifices pictured.

On the other hand, the New Testament is equally emphatic in asserting that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb. 10:4), and “the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near” (v. 1). Such statements appear to be completely contradictory to those in the Old Testament.

The resolution of this apparent difficulty lies in distinguishing the primary relationship of sin in the Old Testament to that in the New. Under the law the individual Israelite by birth was related to God through the theocratic state. He sustained this relationship regardless of his spiritual state, and his relationship to the government had to include a certain relationship to the head of that government—God. There was no way in which he could disenfranchise himself, and, as long as the government was theocratic, there had to be a relation to God. When sin

occurred, it was both a governmental and a spiritual offense because of the nature of a theocracy. Thus, an Israelite's sin has to be viewed as "affecting the position and privileges of the offending party as a member of the ... commonwealth of Israel."³² All Israelites were related to God theocratically; some were also related spiritually. The bringing of the sacrifices restored the offender to his forfeited position as a Jewish worshiper and restored his theocratic relationship.

In the present economy there is no theocracy, and thus there is no theocratic relationship between people and God. All relationships are direct and spiritual in contrast to governmental. Today a person's sin must be viewed in direct relationship to God, and the efficacy of the offering of Christ affects a person's spiritual relationship with God. The writer of the book of Hebrews does not say that sins were not forgiven by the Old Testament sacrifices, but he does say that those sacrifices were inadequate to remove absolutely and finally the spiritual guilt of a person before God. This was done only by the death of Christ and not by the Levitical offerings. The offerings themselves could not automatically effect spiritual salvation.

But was this theocratic adjustment the only purpose of the offerings? Apparently not, for there seem to have been in the offerings that which could point a believing worshiper to a better sacrifice that would deal finally with the entire sin question. This might be called an ulterior efficacy in the sacrifices that did not belong to them as sacrifices but as prefigurations of a final dealing with sin. However, it cannot be implied that the Israelite understood what that final sacrifice was. For if he had sufficient insight, to the extent of seeing and believing on the finished work of Christ, then he would not have had to offer the sacrifices annually, for he would have rested confidently in what he saw in the prefiguration. If the sacrifices had given a clear foreview of Christ, the offerer would have understood the truth of a completed atonement and would not have had any consciousness of sins every year. But, since the Scriptures say that he did have consciousness of sins (Heb. 10:2), he must not have seen very clearly "the same promise, the same Saviour, the same condition, and the same salvation" as the believer today sees. If so, the covenant position is a historical anachronism, a reading back of the New Testament revelation into the Old and a failure to recognize the

progress of revelation and the distinctions in God's economies. Jesus Christ was not the conscious object of their faith, though they were saved by faith in God as He had revealed Himself principally through the sacrifices that He instituted as a part of the Mosaic Law.

I think there was also a third function of the sacrificial system. It served as a way for the redeemed Israelite to show his obedience to and love for God. One whose heart was right before God would certainly not ignore the requirements of the sacrificial system but would bring those sacrifices willingly, gladly, out of love for God, and thereby show the change God had made in his heart and life. Bringing the sacrifices was, for the redeemed person, like bearing fruit for God's glory.

This conclusion is exactly the teaching of the New Testament. On the Areopagus, Paul summarized the Old Testament understanding of salvation and called the period "the times of ignorance," which God "overlooked" (Acts 17:30). That does not imply a clear comprehension of the Christological content of their faith! Paul again summarized the situation concerning salvation in the Old Testament as "remission of sins that are past through the forbearance of God" (Rom. 3:25 KJV). The understanding of the average Israelite concerning Messiah at the time Jesus walked the earth was very feeble (John 1:21; 7:40), and even the prophets lacked comprehension (1 Peter 1:10–11). These passages make it impossible to say that Old Testament saints under the law exercised personal faith in Jesus Christ.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The charge of the covenant theologian that dispensationalism teaches two ways of salvation is often based on what he thinks ought to be the logical teaching of dispensationalism rather than what is the actual teaching of dispensationalism. It is a charge that arises partly from the antithetical nature of the Mosaic period and the period of grace and truth through Jesus Christ. However much the covenant theologian might wish to put every dealing of God into the straitjacket of his covenant of grace, he himself admits that there is an antithetical dealing of God in the administration of the law. Whereas dispensationalists sometimes may have overemphasized the differences between law and

grace, the covenant man has failed even to admit differences.

To show that dispensationalism does not teach several ways of salvation, we emphasized that (1) the law was brought in alongside and did not abrogate the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, and (2) there were many displays of grace under the law. Dispensationalism alone among theological systems teaches both the antithetical nature of law and grace and the truth of grace under the law (and, incidentally, law under grace). Grace was shown to be displayed in several ways, but the crux of the matter was the display of grace in salvation.

In examining salvation under the Mosaic Law, the principal question is simply, How much of what God was going to do in the future did the Old Testament believer comprehend? According to both Old and New Testament revelation, it is impossible to say that he saw the same promise, the same Savior as we do today. Therefore, the dispensationalist's distinction between the content of his faith and the content of ours is valid. The basis of salvation is always the death of Christ; the means is always faith; the object is always God (though man's understanding of God before and after the Incarnation is obviously different); but the content of faith depends on the particular revelation God was pleased to give at a certain time. These are the distinctions the dispensationalist recognizes, and they are distinctions necessitated by plain interpretation of revelation as it was given.

If by "ways" of salvation is meant different content of faith, then dispensationalism does teach various "ways" because the Scriptures reveal differing contents for faith in the progressive nature of God's revelation to mankind. But if by "ways" is meant more than one basis or means of salvation, then dispensationalism most emphatically does not teach more than one way, for salvation has been, is, and always will be based on the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ.

NOTES

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21. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 296–97.
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30. A. J. Mason, "The First Epistle of St. Peter," in *A Bible Commentary for English Readers*, ed. C. J. Ellicott (London: Caswell & Co., n.d.), 8:392.
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THE CHURCH IN DISPENSATIONALISM

The nature of the church is a crucial point of difference between classic, or normative, dispensationalism and other doctrinal systems. Indeed, ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, is the touchstone of dispensationalism (and also of pretribulationism). Not only has the dispensational teaching concerning the church been the subject of controversy, but also the ramifications of that teaching in ecclesiastical life have been attacked. Antidispensationalists, rather than examining the validity of the dispensational teaching on this subject, simply dismiss it as heretical because they know of this or that instance where some dispensationalist was connected with a local church split.

Clarence Bass is quite accurate, however, in stating that “whatever evaluation history may make of this movement, it will attest that dispensationalism is rooted in Darby’s concept of the church—a concept that sharply distinguishes the church from Israel.” But he is off target when he makes his chief criticism of Darby’s doctrine the “practical effects, rather than ... theological arguments.”¹ We must be constantly reminded that the test of any doctrine is whether or not it is scriptural. It is probably safe to say that most doctrines have been abused in practice, and if tested by their practical effects, they would all have to be discarded. Nevertheless, this doctrine of the church is a watershed in dispensationalism and must be examined as to its scriptural accuracy.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE CHURCH

The Church Has a Distinct Character

The distinct character of the church is rooted in its unique relationship to the living Christ as the body of which He is the Head. God “gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22–23). “He is also the head of the body,

the church” (Col. 1:18). “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

The distinctiveness of the character of the church as the body of Christ is twofold. It is distinct because of who are included within that body (i.e., Jews and Gentiles as fellow heirs), and it is distinct because of the new relationships of being in Christ and of Christ’s indwelling the members of that body. Both of these distinctives are unique with the church and were not known or experienced by God’s people in Old Testament times or even during the earthly lifetime of our Lord. Speaking of the new relationships that would begin with the Day of Pentecost, our Lord said just before His crucifixion, “In that day [after Pentecost] you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (John 14:20).

The inclusion of Jews and Gentiles in the same body is a mystery, the content of which is “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6). It is a mystery that “in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (v. 5).

The amillennialist tries to undermine the importance of this declaration by insisting that the word *as* in verse 5 shows that this mystery was partially revealed in Old Testament times and therefore is not distinctive to the church age.² Even if the *as* could be so construed, that does not mean that the body composed of Jews and Gentiles was in existence in Old Testament times. Paul has just written in the same Ephesian epistle that only in Christ was the dividing wall broken down between Jew and Gentile so that He could “reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross” (Eph. 2:16). That was not done before the cross; therefore, it is clear that the new man, the one body, was not in existence in Old Testament times. Even if it had been partially revealed, as some claim, that did not bring it into existence. The body of Christ could not have been constituted until after the death of Christ, and the time of the revelation of that truth does not affect the institution of it. The Old Testament does predict Gentile blessing for the millennial period (Isa. 2:1–4; 61:5–6), but the specific blessings do not include equality in the body of Christ. Great blessing is promised Gentiles in the

prophecies of the Old Testament but not on the basis of equality of position with the Jews. This equality is the point of the mystery revealed to the apostles and prophets in New Testament times.³

The other aspect of the distinctiveness of the character of the church as the body of Christ is the indwelling presence of Christ in the members of that body. That is the mystery revealed in Colossians 1:27: “To whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” This mystery is expressly said to have “been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to His saints” (v. 26). The immediate context speaks of the body of Christ three times (vv. 18, 22, 24), leaving no doubt that it is the members of the body who are indwelt by the living Christ. That is what makes the body a living organism, and this relationship was unknown in Old Testament times.

The church as a living organism in which Jew and Gentile are on an equal footing is the mystery revealed only in New Testament times and able to be made operative only after the cross of Christ. It is the distinct character of the church—a character that was not true of the body of Old Testament saints.

Progressive dispensationalism teaches that the mystery character of the church means not that the church was unrevealed in Old Testament times but only that it was unrealized. The view also makes the baptism of the Spirit more of a metaphor related to Messianic times in general, including the nation of Israel when it turns to Christ in the future. (These matters will be discussed more fully in chapter 9.)

The Church Has a Distinct Time

It is quite evident from what has been said that the dispensational understanding of the church limits its building to this present age. It was something unknown in Old Testament times; it is a distinct entity in this present age. The proofs of the distinctiveness of the church to this age are three.

1 *There is the proof from the mystery character of the church.* This is the natural corollary of what has been discussed in the preceding section. If

the distinctive character of the church as a living organism indwelt by Christ in which Jews and Gentiles are on an equal basis is described as a mystery unknown in Old Testament times, then the church must not have been constituted in those Old Testament days. Indeed, Paul says very clearly that this entity is a “new man” (Eph. 2:15) made possible only after the death of Christ.

2 The church is distinctive to this age because of what Paul has to say about the beginning and completion of the church. Concerning its beginning, Paul is emphatic in placing stress on the necessary relation of the church to the resurrection and ascension of Christ. It is built upon His resurrection, for the Lord was made Head of the church after God “raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:20; cf. vv. 22–23). Furthermore, the proper functioning and operation of the church is dependent on the giving of gifts to the body, and the giving of gifts is, in turn, dependent on the ascension of Christ (4:7–12). If by some stretch of the imagination the body of Christ could be said to have been in existence before the ascension of Christ, then it would have to be concluded that it was a nonfunctioning body. In Paul’s thought the church is built on the Resurrection and Ascension, and that means it is distinctive to this age. Concerning the completion of the church, when saints will be translated and resurrected, Paul uses the phrase “dead in Christ” (1 Thess. 4:16). This clearly distinguishes those who have died “in Christ” in this age from believers who died before Christ’s first advent, thus marking the church off as distinct to this age and a mystery hidden and unrevealed in Old Testament times.

3 The baptizing work of the Holy Spirit proves that the church did not begin until Pentecost. The Lord had spoken of this work of the Spirit just before His ascension (Acts 1:5) as being yet future and unlike anything they had previously experienced. Although it is not expressly recorded in Acts 2 that the baptism of the Spirit occurred on the Day of Pentecost, it is said in 11:15–16 that it did happen on that day in fulfillment of the promise of the Lord as recorded in 1:5. Paul later explained the doctrinal significance of the baptism as placing people into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). In other words, on the Day of Pentecost men were first placed into the body of Christ. Since the church is the body of Christ

(Col. 1:18), the church could not have begun until Pentecost, and it did begin on that day.

The distinctiveness of the church to this age as emphasized in dispensationalism does not mean (1) that dispensationalists believe that no people were rightly related to God in Old Testament times or (2) that Christ is not the Founder of the church. All that was said in chapter 6 concerning salvation in the Old Testament shows clearly the dispensational position concerning Old Testament saints. Nevertheless, dispensationalism insists that the people of God who have been baptized into the body of Christ and who thus form the church are distinct from saints of other days or even of a future time. Dispensationalists fully recognize that the church is Christ's church (Matt. 16:18). He chose and trained its first leaders during His earthly ministry. Some of His teaching was in anticipation of the formation of the church. His death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation were the necessary foundation on which the church was to be built. But, although the Lord is the Founder of the church and the one who laid the groundwork during His earthly life, the church did not come into functional and operational existence until the Day of Pentecost. It is distinctive to this time.

The Church Is Distinct from Israel

All nondispensationalists blur to some extent the distinction between Israel and the church. Such blurring fails to recognize the contrast that is maintained in Scripture between Israel, the Gentiles, and the church. In the New Testament, natural Israel and the Gentiles are contrasted.

Israel is addressed as a nation in contrast to Gentiles *after* the church was established at Pentecost (Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28). In Paul's prayer for natural Israel (Rom. 10:1), there is a clear reference to Israel as a national people distinct from and outside the church. He also wrote, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (1 Cor. 10:32). If the Jewish people were the same group as the church or the Gentiles, then certainly there would be no point in the apostle's distinction in this passage. In addition, Paul, obviously referring to natural Israel as his "kinsmen according to the flesh," ascribes to them the covenants and the promises (Rom. 9:3–4). That these words were written after the beginning of the church is proof that the church does

not rob Israel of her blessings. The term *Israel* continues to be used for the natural (not spiritual) descendants of Abraham after the church was instituted, and it is not equated with the church.

In addition, believing Jews and believing Gentiles, which together make up the church in this age, continue to be distinguished in the New Testament, proving that the term *Israel* still means the physical descendants of Abraham. “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (Rom. 9:6) does not say that the spiritual remnant within Israel is the church. It simply distinguishes the nation as a whole from the believing element *within the nation*. This kind of distinction within the nation was often made in the Old Testament and thus would be familiar to Jews reading such a statement as Romans 9:6. The servant of the Lord in the Old Testament is sometimes called “blind” and “deaf” (Isa. 42:19); other times the term obviously refers to the righteous remnant within Israel (44:1; 51:1, 7). In the Romans passage Paul is reminding his readers that being an Israelite by natural birth does not assure one of the life and favor promised the believing Israelite who approached God by faith.

More frequently nondispensationalists use Galatians 6:15–16 to attempt to show that the church is the new, spiritual Israel: “For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” The question is, Who compose the Israel of God? The amillennialist insists that these verses equate the Israel of God with the entire church. The premillennialist says that Paul is simply singling out Christian Jews for special recognition in the benediction.

Grammar in this instance does not decide the matter for us. The “and” in the phrase “and upon the Israel of God” can be understood in three ways.

First, it could be *explicative*; that is, it can mean “even,” in which case the phrase “Israel of God” would be a synonym for the “new creation” and would thus make the church the Israel of God. Lenski is typical of those who so interpret the passage: “‘As many as will keep in line with the rule,’ constitute ‘the Israel of God.’”⁴ The *New International Version* also translates the “and” as “even.”

On the other hand, if the “and” is understood in an *emphatic* sense, it has the meaning of “adding a (specially important) part to the whole” and is translated “and especially” (cf. Mark 16:7; Acts 1:14).⁵ Third, the “and” might be a simple *connective*, which would also distinguish the Israel of God as Jewish Christians but not identify them as the whole church. The connective force would be less emphatic than the “especially” meaning, but both interpretations would distinguish Jewish and Gentile believers. The King James, *New King James*, and *New American Standard* versions all translate with “and.” Only the explicative interpretation (“even”) identifies the church and Israel. The *Revised Standard* and *Revised English* Bibles avoid the matter by not translating the “and” at all.

Although the grammar cannot of itself decide the question, the argument of the book of Galatians does favor the connective or emphatic meaning of “and.” Paul had strongly attacked the Jewish legalists; therefore, it would be natural for him to remember with a special blessing those Jews who had forsaken this legalism and followed Christ and the rule of the new creation. One might also ask why, if the New Testament writers meant to equate clearly Israel and the church, they did not do so plainly in the many other places in their writings where they had convenient opportunity to do so.

Historically, “the word ‘Israel’ is applied to the Christian church for the first time by Justin Martyr c. A.D. 160” in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, where the church is equated with the “true Israel” (not labeled “the Israel of God” as in Gal. 6:16).⁶

Use of the words *Israel* and *church* shows clearly that in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and that the church is never equated with a so-called “new Israel” but is carefully and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age.

The Teaching of Covenant Theology on the Distinctiveness of the Church

The covenant theologian denies the distinctiveness of the church to this present age. His viewpoint is based on his premise that God’s program for the world is the salvation of individuals; therefore, the saved people of God in all ages may be called the church. If the church is God’s redeemed people of all ages, then the church must have begun

with Adam, though most covenant writers are reluctant to say that. They usually begin the church with Abraham in order to found it on the Abrahamic covenant, link it to the olive tree of Romans 11, preserve the idea of a group fellowship, and be able to use the label “Israel” for the church. The church in the New Testament is the “new Israel,” and the church in the Old Testament is Israel. But before Abraham, what was the church? Louis Berkhof does recognize the church as existing in godly families before the calling out of Abraham.⁷ Would one call this phase of the church the “families church” or “pre-Israel” church, or what?

The covenant amillennialist defines the church as “a congregation or an assembly of the people of God.”⁸ In this view there is no real difference between the church in the Old and in the New Testaments. “The Church existed in the old dispensation as well as in the new, and was *essentially* the same in both, in spite of acknowledged institutional and administrative differences.”⁹ To the covenant amillennialist the church is the people of God in every age, whether pre-Israel, Israel, or new Israel (today).

Covenant premillennialists see no distinction in God’s purpose until the Millennium suddenly begins, and they do not agree as to who are included in the church. J. Barton Payne apparently accepts completely the covenant concept of the church in the Old Testament, particularly beginning with Abraham and culminating in the “new Israel” in the New Testament.¹⁰ George Ladd takes a viewpoint near to that of the dispensationalist:

There is therefore but one people of God. This is not to say that the Old Testament saints belonged to the Church and that we must speak of the Church in the Old Testament. Acts 7:38 does indeed speak of the “church in the wilderness”; but the word here does not bear its New Testament connotation but designates only the “congregation” in the wilderness. The Church properly speaking had its birthday on the day of Pentecost, for the Church is composed of all those who by one Spirit have been baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13), and this baptizing work of the Spirit began on the day of Pentecost.¹¹

Daniel Fuller insists on one people of God while recognizing some distinction in the terms *Israel* and the *church*:

Thus it appears that the olive tree analogy yields the natural interpretation that there is but

one people of God throughout redemptive history. Prior to the Cross, this people was composed largely of Jews who through faith and obedience inherited the promises made to Abraham. Since the Cross, this group has comprised Gentiles who are made equally the heirs of the promises to Abraham. The term “Church” applies properly only to that group since the Cross, just as “Israel” applies properly to the group before the Cross and to the ethnic entity who traces its descent from Abraham.¹²

In other words, Fuller sees the one redeemed people as beginning with Abraham. What about those who were rightly related to God and who lived before Abraham? They would not have been heirs of the “promises made to Abraham,” yet they were redeemed. Do they (like the family of Noah) represent another people of God with different promises from those given to Abraham? He also sees the New Testament church as part of that continuing redeemed people and yet somewhat distinct. Here again is seen the inconsistency in application of the literal principle of interpretation in the covenant premillennialist’s position.

In relation to pre-Abrahamic saints, another question may be asked. If God was saving people before the call of Abraham, why did He call out and mark off a national group? If spiritual salvation was being experienced by people before Abraham, why not carry on this redemptive work in the same manner without the national distinction that was made when Israel was singled out from the other nations? The very calling out of Israel must indicate some national purpose for that nation as well as the continuing of the work of spiritual salvation. Certainly one cannot say that the New Testament church is national Israel fulfilling the promises given to that nation. Therefore, one must conclude that the church is not the continuation of Israel and her purpose in being called out from among the nations. Even the covenant premillennialist admits that the national promises to Israel are not fulfilled by the church (he reserves their fulfillment for the millennial period), but he will not conclude that God might have a different purpose entirely in the calling out of the church. He is completely blinded by the premise that the one death of Christ must mean one people of God saved in the same way and called out for the same purpose.

Let it be said emphatically at this point that dispensationalism does not deny that God has His own redeemed people throughout all ages.

But that these constitute a people rather than peoples of God we do deny. The fact that God saved people from among the Israelites and today saves people from among the Gentiles does not make the church equal to Israel or make the church the fulfillment of Israel's purposes and promises. That does not follow any more than God's saving of Noah and his family and His saving of Israelites make Israel the family of Noah or make Israel fulfill the purposes of Noah. Israel is distinct from the godly line that preceded the calling out of Abraham, and Israel's promises were different. The godly from both groups are redeemed, but they do not necessarily have the same promises or fulfill the same purposes.

The same is true in comparing Israel and the church. But such obvious and necessary distinctions the covenant theologian (whether premillennial or amillennial) fails to recognize. He has formed a mold into which he pours all the redeemed, and nothing, not even Scripture, must break that mold. That God is continuing His work of redemption in calling out a people for His name in the church, the body of Christ, we gladly affirm, but we also insist that this body of Christ is distinct from any previous body of redeemed people in its nature, characteristics, time, and promises.

The Teaching of Reconstructed/Modified/Progressive Dispensationalism on the Distinctiveness of the Church

In recent days this newer form of dispensationalism has modified or clouded the classic, or normative, dispensational distinction between Israel and the church in four ways.

1 *By introducing different facets to the concept of the church, the church in this new view is less distinct.* For example, Craig Blaising writes, "Progressives do not view the church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel.... The church is neither a separate race of humanity [true] ... nor a competing nation [perhaps not competing, but a nation nevertheless, 1 Peter 2:9].... The church is precisely redeemed humanity itself."¹³ What exactly is meant is not clear to me. Blaising also says that the church is not another "people-group" in connection with the future promises to Israel, the evidence being that a

Jewish Christian today “does not lose his or her relationship to Israel’s future promises ... [but] will join the Old Testament remnant of faith in the inheritance of Israel.”¹⁴ But does not a Jewish person who accepts Christ today belong to the body of Christ and inherit the blessings of that position, rather than Israel’s? Or, as the quote implies, does he inherit both? Though not holding to all the teachings of the new dispensationalism, another writer says that the church is an “independently valid historical entity even though it is not an ontologically distinct entity.”¹⁵ One feels that such a distinction will not clarify matters for the average reader but may, in fact, blur the distinction between Israel and the church.

Another progressive, Robert Saucy, maintains that the church is included in the concept of “the people of God,” which began with the nation of Israel. (Again, what about pre-Israelite redeemed people like Abel, Noah, Melchizedek—were they not also people of God?) The people of God are

one people because all will be related to him through the same covenant salvation. But this fundamental unity in a relation to God through Christ does not remove Israel’s distinction as a special nation called of God.... Nor does it define the totality of the people of God as “Israel,” requiring that the church is somehow a “new Israel.”¹⁶

This statement is not entirely dissimilar to what has been traditionally taught by dispensationalists, for it does not obliterate the distinction between Israel and the church nor does it replace Israel by the church, which is conceived as the new Israel.

2 By redefining the concept of the church as a mystery, the church has a less distinctive purpose in God’s plan. As previously stated, classic dispensationalism has understood the mystery of the church to be Jews and Gentiles as joint-heirs in the body of Christ and joint-sharers of the promises in Christ, something unknown in the Old Testament (Eph. 3:4–6).

Amillennialists say that this mystery “was new and unknown in a relative sense only, being in its essentials an important theme from the time of Abraham.”¹⁷ In other words, the mystery of the church, the body of Christ, was only relatively unknown in the Old Testament, being revealed in kernel form. Essentially the same viewpoint is found in

covenant premillennialism: “The Greek noun *musterion*, ‘mystery,’ does not necessarily imply discontinuity.... A ‘mystery’ need not even have been unknown or unappreciated previously, except perhaps relatively so.”¹⁸

In a similar vein revisionist/progressive dispensationalists view the mystery as unrealized but not completely unrevealed in the Old Testament. Thus, Saucy writes, “A mystery may be hidden in the sense that its truth has not yet been realized. The corresponding revelation consists not in making the truth known in an objective or propositional sense but in bringing it to reality or existence.”¹⁹ The argument is buttressed by interpreting “the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4) as the general plan of salvation, citing Old Testament passages that predict Gentile blessing but that in no way predict the truth of the body of Christ (e.g., Isa. 12:2–4; 42:6; Zech. 9:9–10). The progressive sees himself in a mediating position between traditional dispensationalists (who understand that mystery as unrevealed in the Old Testament) and nondispensationalists (who, like the progressives, see it as only relatively unknown in the Old Testament and who anticipate “one grand Messianic fulfillment” to the exclusion of any Millennium).

Clearly, then, the progressives and the amillennialists agree on the relation of the mystery to Old Testament revelation (as being partly revealed) but disagree on a millennial fulfillment. Saucy affirms this:

Although we thus agree with the nondispensationalist that Paul’s teaching concerning the mystery of the composition of the Church in the union of Jew and Gentile in Christ is a fulfillment of the OT predictions, we must hasten to add that such fulfillments do not require us to understand all of the prophecies related to the Messianic salvation and kingdom as thereby fulfilled.²⁰

Does the term *mystery* mean something not revealed in the Old Testament, or can it mean something partly or relatively revealed? In classical Greek the meaning of *mystery* was something hidden or secret. In the plural form, the word was used to designate the sacred rites of the Greek mystery religions—secrets that only the initiated shared.

In the Old Testament, the Aramaic equivalent of *mystery* appears only in Daniel 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47; 4:9. In the second chapter of Daniel the mystery was the dream and its interpretation; in 4:9 it was

only the interpretation. In all instances the mystery was something unknown. In the Dead Sea Scrolls two synonymous words for *mystery* indicate not only something unknown but also wisdom that is far above finite understanding.

In the New Testament the word occurs twenty-seven times and includes ideas of something both deep (Matt. 13:11) and secret (Col. 1:26). The Greek scholar J. B. Lightfoot gives the meaning of the word as “simply ‘a truth which was once hidden but now is revealed,’ ‘a truth which without special revelation would have been unknown.’” He expands on this definition: “But the one special ‘mystery’ which absorbs St. Paul’s thoughts in the Epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians is the free admission of the Gentiles on equal terms.... This, though hidden from all time, was communicated to him by a special revelation.”²¹

The mystery in Ephesians 3:6 is that Gentiles are fellow heirs, fellow members of the same body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ. This is the detail of the “mystery of Christ” in verse 4. The mystery is more than the fact that Gentiles are included in God’s salvation, for there is little mystery in that, since the Old Testament revealed this (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 42:6–7). If this only is the mystery, then Paul was wrong to label it a mystery, for it is neither something new nor something higher. The heart of the mystery is the one body into which both Jews and Gentiles are placed.

A concordance examination of the word *body* indicates that the idea of a body into which redeemed people are placed is nowhere found in the Old Testament. The first occurrences of the word *body* in connection with the body of Christ is in 1 Corinthians 12:12–25 and the next is in Romans 12:5. The remainder occur in Ephesians and Colossians. This further supports the truth that the mystery of the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the one body of Christ was unknown and unrevealed in the Old Testament.

3 *By abandoning the concept of the church as an intercalation or parenthesis.* Classic dispensationalism used the words *parenthesis* or *intercalation* to describe the distinctiveness of the church in relation to God’s program for Israel. An intercalation is an insertion of a period of time in a calendar, and a parenthesis in one sense is defined as an

interlude or interval (which in turn is defined as an intervening or interruptive period). So either or both words can be appropriately used to define the church age if one sees it as a distinct interlude in God's program for Israel (as clearly taught in Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks in 9:24–27).²²

Progressive/modified/revisionist dispensationalism wishes to discard the word *parenthesis*, implying that it means that the church is something lesser in God's plan, an afterthought. Of course, the dictionary definition does not support this meaning. Instead, the church is submerged into the broader kingdom concept and called a “functional outpost of God's kingdom” and a “sneak preview” of the future kingdom.²³

4 *By a new concept of the meaning of the baptism with, or by, the Spirit.* Classic dispensationalism has understood this particular ministry of the Holy Spirit as forming the body of Christ, the church, in this dispensation (Acts 1:5; 11:15–16; 1 Cor. 12:13). Progressive dispensationalists do not believe that the baptism is a unique ministry only for the people of the present church age and understand the body metaphor as applicable to believers who are not in the church.²⁴

Whereas these changes have not led the revisionists to deny all distinctions between the church and Israel or to embrace “replacement theology” (the teaching that the church is the new Israel), one wonders if some day that may not happen. Already one progressive dispensationalist has done this: “[The number twelve] is perhaps the most familiar number in the Bible, most frequently associated with the sons of Jacob, the twelve tribes of Israel, and the twelve apostles of the ‘new Israel,’ the church.”²⁵

THE RELATIONSHIPS OF THE CHURCH

The truth of the distinctiveness of the church does not deny that she has relationships with other purposes of God. Although dispensationalists recognize the church as distinct in the plan of God, that does not mean that she is isolated from the plan of God. The church is related and integrated into the plan of God while maintaining her distinctive purpose. These ideas are not contradictory, and both sides of

the coin need to be examined.

The Relation of the Church to the Kingdom

Because of the distinctions dispensationalists draw between the programs of God for the church and for the kingdom, it is often assumed that there is no relationship between the two. In relation to the future millennial kingdom, dispensationalists have always taught that the church will share in the rule of that kingdom. Chafer believed that the church would “reign with Him on the earth.”²⁶ Erich Sauer pictured the church as the “ruling aristocracy, the official administrative staff, of the coming kingdom.”²⁷ At the same time, dispensationalists maintain the separate place and distinct blessings of national Israel restored and regenerated in the millennial kingdom. The church, while distinct in the millennial kingdom, is not apart from it.

In relation to this present age and the kingdom in mystery, the position of believers in the church is well summarized by Sauer: “As to their persons they are citizens of the kingdom; as to their existence they are the fruit of the message of the kingdom; as to their nature they are the organism of the kingdom; as to their task they are the ambassadors of the kingdom.”²⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost writes in the same vein:

During this present age, then, while the King is absent, the theocratic kingdom is in abeyance in the sense of its actual establishment on the earth. Yet it remains as the determinative purpose of God. Paul declared this purpose when he was “preaching the kingdom of God” (Acts 20:25). Believers have been brought into “the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13) through the new birth. Unbelievers are warned they will not have part in that kingdom (1 Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5). Others were seen to have labored with Paul “unto the kingdom of God” (Col. 4:11)... Such references, undoubtedly, are related to the eternal kingdom and emphasize the believer’s part in it.²⁹

How can the church be distinct from the kingdom purpose and yet be related to it? We must not try to understand such a seeming paradox by obliterating the distinction between the two purposes (as the antidispenationalist does) any more than such a procedure would satisfactorily harmonize sovereignty and responsibility. The truth must stand even though it may seem, to the human mind, to involve paradox. And yet if our concept of the kingdom were as broad as it appears to be

in the Scriptures and if our definition of the church were as strict as it is in the Scriptures, perhaps nondispensationalists would cease trying to equate the church with the kingdom and dispensationalists would speak more of the relationship between the two.

As noted above, progressive dispensationalists submerge the church into a broader concept of kingdom without clearly defining and distinguishing various kingdoms in the Scriptures. They show that classic dispensationalists have exhibited some differences in their discussions of the concept of kingdom and then conclude from this that their own view (that the Davidic/Messianic kingdom has already been inaugurated by Christ, who is reigning now in heaven on the throne of David) is justified as simply another variation that is still within the parameters of legitimate dispensationalism. Their concept of the inaugurated Davidic kingdom will be discussed in more detail in chapter 9.

The Relation of the Church to Saints of Other Ages

Again, because of the distinction between God's purpose in the church and His purpose for Israel, dispensationalists are thought to teach that the Israelite saints have no heavenly hope or future. Dispensationalists have sometimes made a sharp distinction between the heavenly future of the church and the earthly future for national Israel. For instance, Chafer wrote, "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes; one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity."³⁰

The apparent dichotomy between heavenly and earthly purposes means this: The earthly purpose of Israel of which dispensationalists speak concerns the yet unfulfilled national promises that will be fulfilled by Israel during the Millennium as they live on the earth in unresurrected bodies. The earthly future for Israel does not concern Israelites who die before the Millennium is set up. The destiny of those who die is different. Believing Israelites of the Mosaic age who died in faith have a heavenly destiny. Unbelieving ones will be confined in the lake of fire. Jews today who believe in Christ are members of the church, His body, and their destiny is the same as Gentile believers during this

age. But to those Jews who will be living on the earth in earthly bodies when the Millennium begins and to those who will be born with earthly bodies during the period will fulfill the promises made to Israel that have remained unfulfilled until the Millennium. These include possession of the land (Gen. 15:18–21), prosperity in the land (Amos 9:11–15), and the blessings of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34).

That dispensationalism denies a heavenly hope and future for redeemed Israel is simply not true. Many dispensational writers, as well as others, recognize this heavenly place for Old Testament saints in the assertion of Hebrews 12:22–23:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.

They understand “the spirits of righteous men made perfect” to refer to Old Testament believers who have their place in the heavenly city along with the church of firstborn ones.³¹ Their eternal place in the heavenly Jerusalem is certain, and in that heavenly state they are distinguished from the church. Distinction is maintained even though the destiny is the same.

To sum up: the earthly-heavenly Israel-church distinction taught by dispensationalists is true, but it is not everything that dispensationalists teach about the ultimate destiny of the people included in these groups. Pentecost has summarized the whole picture well:

The conclusion to this question would be that the Old Testament held forth a national hope, which will be realized fully in the millennial age. The individual Old Testament saint’s hope of an eternal city will be realized through resurrection in the heavenly Jerusalem, where, without losing distinction or identity, Israel will join with the resurrected and translated of the church age to share in the glory of His reign forever. The nature of the millennium, as the period of the test of fallen humanity under the righteous reign of the King, precludes the participation by resurrected individuals in that testing. Thus the millennial age will be concerned only with men who ... are living in their natural bodies.³²

The Relation of the Church to the Seed of Abraham

Nondispensationalists, particularly amillennialists, often argue that, since the church is the seed of Abraham and Israel is the seed of Abraham, the church equals Israel. What is the relation of the church to the concept of the seed of Abraham? In a word, the answer is this: the church is a seed of Abraham, but that does not mean that the church is Israel.

The entire matter is clarified by the simple realization that the Scriptures speak of more than one kind of seed born to Abraham. (1) There is the natural seed, the physical descendants of Abraham—"But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, Descendant [seed] of Abraham My friend" (Isa. 41:8). (2) There is Christ—"Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as referring to many, but rather to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Christ" (Gal. 3:16). (3) Christians are Abraham's seed—"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring [seed], heirs according to promise" (Gal. 3:29). Notice that in Galatians 3:8 Paul focuses on only one promise in the Abrahamic covenant, namely, "All the nations shall be blessed in you."

In general, the amillennialist minimizes the physical seed aspect. Premillennialists, whether dispensational or covenant, recognize the physical seed as well as the spiritual seed, but the covenant premillennialist agrees with the amillennialist in equating Israel and the church. The crux of the matter is this: Is the spiritual seed of Abraham also called Israel?

It is quite obvious that Christians are called the spiritual seed of Abraham (v. 29). But that is so only because when one believes, he or she is baptized (by the Holy Spirit) into Christ (v. 27), who is the seed of Abraham, thus making believers in Christ also Abraham's seed. But the New Testament nowhere says that they are the heirs of the national promises made to the physical descendants, or seed. It is this recognition of the future fulfillment of those promises to natural Israel that makes a person a premillennialist in contrast to an amillennialist. But the term *Israel* is not the appellation given to the spiritual seed of Abraham. It is correct to call *some* of the spiritual seed of Abraham spiritual Israel, but not all. Believing Jews in Old Testament times were spiritual Israel and both the physical and spiritual seed of Abraham. But faith, not race, is

the determinative reason for being called the spiritual seed of Abraham. Only when a believer belongs also to the Jewish race can he in any sense be called a spiritual Israelite.

To carry this designation *Israel* over to believers in the church is not warranted by the New Testament. It is interesting to note that those who want to do this and thus to try to make Israel equal to the church do not carry the same principle back before the time of the delineation of Israel as a nation. Abraham was justified when he was neither a Gentile nor a Jew and when he represented the whole of mankind, not merely the Jewish people. Before Israel ever came into being as a nation through Isaac and Jacob, Abraham became the pattern for the justification of all people, including those who would believe from among the Jewish nation that would later arise. Faith and justification are personal and individual matters, and belonging to the spiritual seed of Abraham is also a personal and individual matter unrelated to race. The spiritual seed of Abraham does not mean Israel, for Abraham is related to Israel as a national father, and he is related as a spiritual father to believing individuals of all nations (including the Jewish nation) who believe. But believers *as a group* are not called spiritual Israel.

The Relation of the Church to Apostasy

Most opponents of dispensationalism attack in one way or another the dispensational teaching concerning apostasy in the church. W. D. Chamberlain, representing the faculty of the Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, wrote concerning the doctrine of the apostate church: "Dispensationalism appears in its most vicious form in this doctrine." Then he goes on to cite two cases from his own experience in which churches were split because of dispensational teaching. Only after citing these examples, which would inevitably involve his readers emotionally in the matter, does he examine any biblical data. He dismisses the teaching of the central passages—1 Timothy 4 and 2 Timothy 3—by asserting that they were "intended to guide Christians in Ephesus in the first century."³³

Similarly, Bass begins and ends his chapter on Darby's doctrine of the church with criticism of the emphasis on apostasy. There is little, if any other, criticism of Darby's doctrine in this area except as it affects

separatism.³⁴

Most people, like Chamberlain, cannot discuss the doctrine without being emotionally involved in some practical case. Many also reason that if the effect (the practical instance they experienced) was so bad, then certainly the cause (dispensational teaching) must be heretical. This makes it difficult to discuss the subject objectively, but that is what must be done. After all, if every doctrine that brought division among professing Christians were condemned on that score, most doctrines would have to be judged heretical. Many Christians today are divided over the matter of the inspiration of the Bible. Does that make inspiration a dangerous doctrine that should be rejected because it has caused divisions? Such things ought to drive us to the Scriptures to see what is really taught, and the same is true of the doctrine of apostasy.

Basically there are two questions concerning apostasy that must be answered. The first is this: Does the Bible indicate that there will be apostasy in the church? The second is, What should be the Christian's attitude toward it?

The New Testament records five instances where religious apostasy is mentioned. The first is a proper apostasy from Judaism to Christ (Acts 21:21). The second warns of *the* apostasy, which was not yet present when Paul wrote (2 Thess. 2:3). The other three instances all use the verb "to depart" or "to apostatize" (Luke 8:13; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:12). Departure or apostasy can be from (1) the Word of God, (2) Christian doctrine, or (3) the living God, according to the three verb usages. Therefore, a definition of *apostasy* is this: "A departure from truth previously accepted, involving the breaking of a professed relationship with God." Apostasy always involves willful leaving of previously known truth and embracing error.

Beyond any question, apostasy is both present and future in the church. It was present when Paul wrote to Timothy, and Paul looked forward to a future great apostasy distinctive enough to be labeled "*the* apostasy." This present-future concept is similar to that of the present-future antichrist. There were antichrists present in the church in John's day, and still he looked forward to *the* coming great Antichrist (1 John 2:18). Apostasy is something that plagues the church in every generation, though at the end of the church age *the* great apostasy will

come on the scene before the Day of the Lord. Dispensationalists, therefore, are not crying wolf when they speak of the great apostasy or when they may see indications of apostasy in any generation. This is entirely scriptural.

In 1 Timothy 4:1 Paul speaks of the apostasy “in later times,” whereas he uses the phrase “in the last days” in 2 Timothy 3:1. C. J. Ellicott says that the difference between these phrases is this: “The term ‘last days’ points more specifically to the period immediately preceding the completion of the kingdom of Christ: the former only to a period future to the speaker.... In the Apostasy of the present the inspired apostle sees the commencement of the fuller apostasy of the future.”³⁵ Apostasy is both now and coming.

Dispensationalists usually connect the future apostasy with mystery Babylon of Revelation 17. Older commentators have identified Babylon with the evil world, making little distinction between the viewpoints of Revelation 17 and 18. The city with its commercial activities is the main emphasis in this view. Others have identified Babylon in Revelation 17 with Rome, that is, with the power of imperial Rome. This identification is based on the reference to the seven hills in 17:9. Since the time of the Reformation many commentators have identified Babylon with the papacy. Some do not restrict the identification to the papacy but, rather, see in the Babylon of Revelation 17 an apostate religious “church.” This is the view of most dispensationalists, but it is not restricted to dispensationalists. T. F. Torrance, for instance, whose understanding of Babylon emphasizes the evil world aspect of it, nevertheless calls it “an imitation Kingdom of God, based on the demonic trinity.”³⁶

It is not necessary to identify mystery Babylon with the future apostasy to prove that there will be a future apostasy. Other Scriptures show that without a doubt (2 Thess. 2:3 and “last days” in 2 Tim. 3:1). But if Revelation 17 can also be identified with the future apostasy, that adds further details to an already revealed truth in Scripture. However many details one may or may not insist on in any identification of Revelation 17, it does seem clear that mystery Babylon, the mother of harlots, is a vast spiritual power so ecumenical or worldwide that it can enter effectively into league with the rulers and forces of the world and so anti-God as to bend its force to persecute to death the saints of God.

Thus, the answer to the first question is clear: the Bible does definitely and clearly teach that there was, is, and will be apostasy in the professing church. The doctrine is not a figment of the dispensational imagination.

The second question is, What should be the true believer's attitude toward apostasy and apostates? No fixed formula answers the question. It goes without saying that, in general, he will abhor apostasy. However, what to do in the complex relationship of one's individual fellowship with other professed Christians is not a simple matter. In some relationships the servant of the Lord must in patience and gentleness seek to win the apostate from his error back to the truth (2 Tim. 2:24–26). In other cases, apparently, apostates can go so far down the wrong road that the believer must avoid all contact with them. After describing the apostates of the last days, Paul clearly advises, "Avoid such men as these" (2 Tim. 3:5). Actually, there are two commands in this passage: (1) know that apostasy comes (v. 1), and (2) avoid (v. 5). To keep on realizing and avoiding such apostates, Paul says, is the only safe course of action. In other words, in some cases contact should be kept; in others, it should be broken. To be an ecclesiastical isolationist is wrong; never to be a separatist may be equally wrong too. This is not to say that all the separatism that may in one way or another be linked to dispensational teaching is justified; but neither can antidispensationalists justify their emphasis that separatism is always wrong (1 Cor. 11:19).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The principal emphasis of dispensationalism's doctrine of the church is its understanding of the church as distinctive in the purposes of God. Her character is distinct as a living organism, the body of Christ. The time of her existence is distinctive to this present dispensation, which makes the church distinct from Israel and not a new spiritual Israel. Dispensationalists recognize that the saving work of God today is being done in relation to the church and that there is a continuity that the redeemed of this dispensation share with the redeemed of other dispensations. Nevertheless, that does not make the church a new Israel any more than those redeemed before Israel was called a nation could be called a "pre/old-Israel." The redeemed in the body of Christ, the church

of this dispensation, are the continuation of the line of redeemed from other ages, but they form a distinct group in the heavenly Zion (Heb. 12:22–24).

Though emphasizing the distinctiveness of the church, the dispensationalist also recognizes certain relationships that the church sustains. He does not say that there is no kingdom today but insists that it is not the fulfillment of Old Testament kingdom promises nor is it the Davidic kingdom inaugurated (as revisionists say). He does not imply that there were no redeemed in other ages. He recognizes believers in this age as the seed of Abraham but not the only seed. He seeks to be a realist concerning the course of this age and the church's program in the midst of increasing apostasy. All his viewpoints stem from what he feels to be a consistent application of the literal principle of interpretation of Scripture.

If the dispensational emphasis on the distinctiveness of the church seems to result in a “dichotomy,” let it stand as long as it is a result of literal, historical-grammatical interpretation. There is nothing wrong with God's having a purpose for Israel and a purpose for the church and letting these two purposes stand together within His overall plan. After all, God has a purpose for angels, for the unsaved, and for nations that are different from His purposes for Israel and the church. Yet no antidispensationalist worries about a “dichotomy” there.³⁷ The unifying principle of Scripture is the glory of God as revealed in the variegated purposes revealed and yet to be revealed. To pick out one of these purposes and force everything else into its mold is to warp the revelation of God. That is the error of the nondispensationalist.

NOTES

1. Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 127.
2. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presb. & Ref., 1945), 90–110.
3. The implication that the *as* clause in Ephesians 3:5 might imply a partial revelation in the Old Testament has been allowed to stand only for the sake of argument. That it does not mean this has been made clear in John F. Walvoord's discussion of the passage in *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959), 232–37. He points out that the *as* clause

is not restrictive (qualifying the preceding statement, as Allis hopes), but it is adjectival (merely giving additional information), the *as* itself being purely descriptive and not qualifying. He also calls attention to the rather amazing omission by Allis of any discussion of the similar passage in Colossians 1:26, where the mystery is stated in no uncertain terms as completely hidden. A quotation from James M. Stifler (*The Epistle to the Romans, a Commentary Logical and Historical* [Chicago: Moody, 1960], 254) is worth reproducing here, for it states the matter explicitly:

The contrast here, as Colossians 1:26 shows, is between the other ages and “now.” It may be further remarked on this Ephesian passage that the “as” does not give a comparison between degrees of revelation in the former time and “now.” It denies that there was any revelation at all of the mystery in that former time; just as if one should tell a man born blind that the sun does not shine in the night as it does in the daytime. It does not shine at all by night. Certainly there is no comparison by “as” in Acts 2:15.... “As” with a negative in the preceding clause has not received the attention which it deserves. It is sometimes almost equivalent to “but” (1 Cor. 7:31).

It is also possible that *as* may be causal; i.e., the mystery was not revealed in Old Testament times because it is only now revealed (see this meaning in Matt. 6:12 and John 19:33).

4. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, and to the Philippians* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1946), 321.
5. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 392.
6. Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969), 1.
7. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 570.
8. *Ibid.*, 571.
9. *Ibid.*
10. J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 91. It is interesting to notice that Payne recognizes that natural Israel is distinguished from the church (p. 483).
11. George E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 117.
12. Daniel P. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism” (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 362.
13. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 49.
14. *Ibid.*, 50.

15. Ramesh E. Richard, *The Population of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 141n.25.
16. Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 190.
17. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 97.
18. J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 126.
19. Robert L. Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 144.
20. Robert L. Saucy, "The Locus of the Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 1, no. 2 (1987): 399.
21. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 166.
22. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:41; H. A. Ironside, *The Great Parenthesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1943); Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, 227–30; and J. Randall Price, "Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 141–50.
23. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 155, 382.
24. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 183, 186.
25. David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 22:1–22:5: Consummation of a Biblical Continuum," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 288.
26. L. S. Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), 30.
27. Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* (London: Paternoster, 1954), 93.
28. *Ibid.*, 92–93.
29. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), 471.
30. Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, 107.
31. Cf. William Kelly, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: Weston, 1905), 250–51.
32. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 546.
33. Arnold Black Rhodes, Frank H. Caldwell, and L. C. Rudolph, eds., *The Church Faces the Isms* (New York: Abingdon, 1958), 106, 108.
34. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 100–127.
35. C. J. Ellicott, *The Pastoral Epistles of St. Paul* (London: Longmans, 1864), 54.
36. T. F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 115.
37. Vern S. Poythress (*Understanding Dispensationalists* [Philadelphia: Presb. & Ref.], 43) says that this argument is "not fully relevant" since angels "were never united under Adam's

headship” nor “united to Christ by faith.” But were not all people originally under the headship of Adam, some of whom were the elect and some the nonelect? The fact remains that God has a purpose for angels, elect and fallen, for people, righteous and wicked (cf. Prov. 16:4), and for Israel.

DISPENSATIONAL ESCHATOLOGY

Eschatology is the study of future things (either future when written or future from the reader's time), and it is through this area of biblical studies that many have their first exposure to dispensational teaching. Because of this, some have consciously or unconsciously supposed that dispensationalism is primarily an outline (surely on a chart!) of the events of the future. Although it is true that dispensational teaching and prophetic study have been interrelated in recent years especially, it was not always so.

Even opponents of dispensationalism realize that Darby's original dissatisfaction with the Church of England was not over teaching on prophecy. His dissent was over the concept of the church and his desire for more intimate fellowship with Christ, which he felt was becoming increasingly impossible in the established system. In explaining why he left the Church of England, he said,

It was that I was looking for the body of CHRIST (which was not there, but perhaps in all the parish not one converted person); and collaterally, because I believed in a divinely appointed ministry. If Paul had come, he could not have preached (he had never been ordained); if a wicked ordained man, he had his title and must be recognized as a minister; the truest minister of Christ unordained could not. *It was a system contrary to what I found in Scripture.*¹

It was not until several years after leaving the Church of England that Darby became interested in prophecy. His interest was piqued through conferences at Albury, out of which the Irvingian movement grew. "Darbyism" was first a protest over the practice of the established church, not the propagating of a system of eschatology.

Likewise, there was little, if any, connection originally between dispensationalism and the earliest prophetic conferences in America (the first being in 1876). They were not called to promote dispensationalism but to oppose postmillennialism, annihilationism, and perfectionism, and

to promote premillennialism, the unity of the body of Christ, and Bible study. The Bible studies were based on what some speakers themselves described as a grammatical-historical method of interpretation. If dispensational ideas were presented, they were incidental to the main purpose of the gatherings.

Nevertheless, these conferences inevitably did promote dispensationalism because of the insistence on the absolute authority of the Scriptures, the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and the expectation of the imminent coming of Christ.² However, in the 1886 Chicago prophetic conference, a speech was given that included a dispensational scheme, emphasis on the literalness of the characteristics of the millennial kingdom, the withdrawal by Jesus of the kingdom in the latter part of His earthly ministry, and the pretribulation Rapture of the church.

Although these early conferences were called to oppose postmillennialism and to promote premillennialism, today progressive dispensationalists focus on them as examples of ecumenicity in order to justify their interest in finding a rapprochement between dispensationalism and covenant theology. The early conferences in America sought no such rapprochement between themselves and postmillennialists or annihilationists or perfectionists.

In due time dispensationalism and a certain system of eschatology were wedded. But it was a system of eschatology, not merely an outline of future events. Indeed, it would be more accurate to call it a system of interpretation, for dispensational premillennialism not only includes a description of the future but also involves the meaning and significance of the entire Bible. It is not an alternate view of eschatology but a complete system of theology affecting many parts of the Bible other than Revelation 20.

THE FEATURES OF DISPENSATIONAL ESCHATOLOGY

What, then, are the salient features of dispensational premillennialism?

The Hermeneutical Principle

The hermeneutical principle is basic to the entire dispensational system, including its eschatology. It affects everything, and, as we have tried to show in chapter 5, dispensationalism is the only system that practices the literal principle of interpretation consistently. Other systems practice literalism, but not in every area of theology or on all parts of the Bible. An amillennialist wrote, “We must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.”³

In covenant premillennialism, literalism is abandoned at certain places in the Gospels. The Davidic, earthly kingdom is said not to be seen in the Gospels in Jesus’ preaching. George Ladd, for instance, declares that, although the Jews understood Jesus to be offering the Davidic kingdom, in reality they misunderstood what He was saying, for according to Ladd’s interpretation there is no literal earthly kingdom for Israel in view in the Gospels.⁴ Consistent literalism is at the heart of dispensational eschatology.

Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecies

The literal interpretation of Scripture leads naturally to a second feature—the literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. That is the basic tenet of premillennial eschatology. If the yet unfulfilled prophecies of the Old Testament made in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are to be literally fulfilled, there must be a future period, the Millennium, in which they can be fulfilled, for the church is not now fulfilling them. In other words, the literal picture of Old Testament prophecies demands either a future fulfillment or a nonliteral fulfillment. If they are to be fulfilled in the future, then the only time left for that fulfillment is the Millennium. If they are not to be fulfilled literally, then the church is the only kind of fulfillment they receive, but that is not a literal one.

The amillennialist says the latter—that is, that the fulfillment is in and by the church. The covenant premillennialist and the progressive dispensationalist say both—that is, the church fulfills or begins to fulfill some of the prophecies, but there is also a fulfillment in a future millennial kingdom. The dispensational premillennialist says that the

church is not fulfilling these prophecies but that their fulfillment is reserved for the Millennium and is one of the principal features of it.

A Clear and Consistent Distinction Between Israel and the Church

This understanding of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies quite naturally leads to a third feature—the clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church, which is a vital part of dispensationalism. All other views bring the church into Israel's fulfilled prophecies except dispensationalism. The amillennialist says that the church completely fulfills Israel's prophecies, being the true, spiritual Israel. The covenant premillennialist views the church as fulfilling in some senses Israel's prophecies because both are the people of God, while at the same time preserving the millennial age as a period of fulfillment too. The progressive dispensationalist believes that prophecies concerning the Davidic rule of Christ have begun to be fulfilled now in heaven. The understanding of the how and when of the fulfillment of Israel's prophecies is in direct proportion to one's clarity and consistency in distinguishing between Israel and the church.

Pretribulation Rapture

The distinction between Israel and the church leads to the belief that the church will be taken from the earth before the beginning of the Tribulation (which in one major sense concerns Israel). Pretribulationism has become a part of normative dispensational eschatology. Originally this was due to the emphasis of the early writers and teachers on the imminency of the return of the Lord; more lately it has been connected with the dispensational conception of the distinctiveness of the church. Amillennial eschatology, as far as the Rapture is concerned, is posttribulational; covenant premillennialism is usually posttribulational also. Progressives claim to be pretribulational, though some covenant critics of progressive dispensationalism think their revised system will eventually lead to posttribulationism. Pretribulationism has been a regular feature of classic dispensational premillennialism.

The Millennial Kingdom

Of course, the thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth is also a

feature of dispensational eschatology, as it is of nondispensational premillennialism. The difference between the dispensational and nondispensational views of premillennialism is not in the fact of the coming millennial kingdom (for both include it in their systems) but in the integration of the kingdom into their overall systems. The doctrine of the millennial kingdom is for the dispensationalist an integral part of his entire scheme and interpretation of many biblical passages. For the nondispensationalist the millennial kingdom is more like an addendum to his system. In representing the covenant premillennial viewpoint, Ladd has been justly criticized along these lines by another nondispensationalist who says that covenant premillennialism as represented by Ladd “is open to criticism not because of its premillennialism as such, but because it leaves the impression that the doctrine of the millennium is not sufficiently integrated into the author’s overall view of the kingdom.

Ladd’s case for this doctrine rests solely upon two New Testament passages, Revelation 20:4–6 and 1 Corinthians 15:20–26, both hotly disputed. A firmer foundation might have been Old Testament prophecy. If merely the thousand-year duration were in question, then obviously Revelation 20 would be the only relevant text. But if the point at issue is the glorious reign of Messiah upon the earth, the renewal of nature, and the restoration of Israel, then the Old Testament is an important witness to this period and should not be neglected, even though prophetic perspective may not distinguish clearly among church age, millennium, and eternal state. If there are no Old Testament prophecies which demand a literal, earthly fulfillment, then the purpose of the millennium becomes partially obscure. In his effort to mediate, Ladd will be criticized on one side for making the millennium a mere appendix to his system, and on the other for retaining it at all!⁵

Bruce Waltke, now himself an amillennialist, criticizes reconstructed dispensationalists (his label, and an appropriate one) for holding to a Millennium at all. He points out that some statements being made by certain progressives would logically eliminate the necessity for a Millennium.⁶ A millennial kingdom fully integrated into the whole theological system is a feature of normative dispensational premillennialism.

These are the principal characteristics of dispensational eschatology. Against these features of the dispensational scheme, certain objections

have been raised and charges made. Some of these charges against dispensational eschatology must now be examined.

IS THE CROSS MINIMIZED?

The Charge

A charge that is invariably leveled at dispensational eschatology is that the Cross is minimized. It is related to the dispensationalist's teaching concerning the offer of the kingdom to Israel when Christ was on earth. The objection goes something like this: You dispensationalists teach that when Christ came to earth He offered Israel the Davidic kingdom promised in the Old Testament. But you do not answer the question, How could that offer be one that was made legitimately and sincerely if Christ knew that He had to go to the Cross? If you still insist that it was a genuine offer, you have to admit the possibility that Israel could have accepted the offer; and if they had, then the Cross would have been avoided and unnecessary. Antidispensationalist Philip Mauro puts it this way:

When we press the vital question, what, in case the offer had been accepted, would have become of the Cross of Calvary and the atonement for the sins of the world, the best answer we get is that in that event, "atonement would have been made some other way." Think of it! "Some other way" than by the cross.⁷

Mauro does not document his supposed quote. He puts words in the mouths of dispensationalists. It is the answer he wants to try to force them to make, but it is a fabricated one.

Amillennialist O. T. Allis, who tries to force the same point, is more genteel in his manner: "If the Jews had accepted the kingdom would there have been any place, any necessity for the cross? ... The question raised by the Dispensational interpretation ... amounts to this, Could men have been saved without the cross?"⁸ Clarence Bass voiced a similar objection: "Such an extreme emphasis on the 'postponed' kingdom, or even the 'offered, but not set up' kingdom ultimately detracts from the glory of the church, which glory stems from the crucified and resurrected Christ."⁹

The Reply

It cannot be said too emphatically that dispensationalism has not taught and does not teach what is stated or implied in these quotations. The antidispensationalist's objection is based strictly and solely on what he hopes to be able to convince people that dispensationalists do say, or on what he wishes they would say. *But it is not based on quotations from dispensational writings.* Dispensationalists do not say that the postponed kingdom concept makes the Cross theoretically unnecessary or that it detracts from the glory of the church. What we do say is the following:

But, it will be asked, if the Davidic kingdom is postponed that means that had it been received by the Jews it would not have been necessary for the Lord Jesus to have been crucified. The postponement of the kingdom is related primarily to the question of God's program in this age through the Church and not to the necessity of the crucifixion. The crucifixion would have been necessary as foundational to the establishment of the kingdom even if the Church age had never been conceived in the purposes of God. The question is not whether the crucifixion would have been avoided but whether the Davidic kingdom was postponed.¹⁰

There is no kingdom for Israel apart from the suffering Savior, as well as the reigning King. The Crucifixion was as necessary to the establishing of the kingdom as it was to the building of the church. The kingdom has a redemptive as well as legal and political aspects. L. S. Chafer taught the same thing:

But for the Church intercalation—which was wholly unforeseen and is wholly unrelated to any divine purpose which precedes it or which follows it—Israel would be expected to pass directly from the crucifixion to her kingdom; for it was not the death of Christ and His resurrection which demanded the postponement, but rather an unforeseen age.¹¹

Notice well that Chafer did *not* say that Israel would have passed directly from receiving Christ's message to the kingdom, but he *did* say that they would have passed directly from the Crucifixion to the kingdom had not the church been included in God's program for the ages. One could scarcely ask for clearer statements of the dispensational position, and it is a position that in no way minimizes the Cross and its place in relation to the church and to the kingdom.

In addition to the clear avowals of dispensationalists, it is usually and rightly pointed out that this matter of a bona fide offer of the kingdom, which God foreknew would be rejected, is only one of several similar situations in the Bible. These involve that which is ultimately inscrutable. One example is the relation of the choice of people to the foreordained purposes of God. But even if we cannot fully understand or explain how there can be a genuine offer of the kingdom by the One who knew and planned that it would be rejected, we must not suggest that the offer was insincere. Chafer has pointed out similar situations in the Bible:

With reference to other situations in which God's sovereign purpose seems for a time to depend on the freewill action of men, it will be remembered that God ordained a Lamb before the foundation of the world and that Lamb to be slain at God's appointed time and way. By so much it is made clear that God anticipated the sin of man and his great need of redemption. God, however, told Adam not to sin; yet if Adam had not sinned there would have been no need of that redemption which God had before determined as something to be wrought out. Was God uncertain whether He would save life on the earth until Noah consented to build an ark? Was the nation Israel a matter of divine doubt until Abraham manifested his willingness to walk with God? Was the birth of Christ dubious until Mary assented to the divine plan respecting the virgin birth? ... Was the death of Christ in danger of being abortive and all the types and prophecies respecting His death of being proved untrue until Pilate made his decision regarding that death? ... Could God promise a kingdom on the earth knowing and so planning that it would be rejected in the first advent but realized in the second advent? Could God offer a kingdom in the first advent in sincerity, knowing and determining that it would not be established until the second advent?¹²

Such illustrations put the sincere offer of the kingdom and its preplanned rejection in its proper perspective and should keep one from running to illogical conclusions as the nondispensationalist does. It is particularly astounding that a Calvinist like Allis should stumble on this point when he would not even suggest questioning the sincerity of God in offering salvation to nonelect people. One may grant that in the final analysis such matters are inexplicable, but one does not need to charge God with insincerity. To sum up: The Cross is in no way minimized by the teaching of the postponement of the kingdom.¹³ The postponement relates to the outworking of God's purpose in the church, the body of

Christ, and certainly the Cross is central to this work of God. Further, even if there had been no church as a part of God's program, the Cross was necessary to the establishing of the Messianic kingdom. In both purposes of God—the church and the kingdom—the Cross is basic. That is the teaching of dispensationalism, and instead of minimizing the cross of Christ it magnifies it.

Turning the Tables

Let us suppose for sake of discussion that the dispensational interpretation of Jesus' offer of the Davidic kingdom in the Gospels is not correct. If He were not preaching about the millennial kingdom when He said, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17), then He must have been talking about a spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men (for there are no other choices). This is, of course, the kind of kingdom that both the amillennialist and the covenant premillennialist say Jesus was offering in the Gospels. Ladd, for instance, says,

Jesus did not offer to the Jews the earthly kingdom any more than he offered himself to them as their glorious earthly king.... God's kingdom was first to come to men in a spiritual sense, as the Saviour-King comes in meekness to suffer and die, defeating Satan and bringing into the sphere of God's kingdom a host of people who are redeemed from the kingdom of Satan and of sin; and subsequently it is to be manifested in power and glory as the King returns to judge and reign.¹⁴

Allis, representing the amillennial view, holds the same viewpoint about the kingdom offered in the Gospels (although Allis would not agree with Ladd in seeing a future reign on earth for Messiah):

What was the nature of the kingdom which [John the Baptist and Jesus] announced? ... The kingdom announced by John and by Jesus was primarily and essentially a moral and spiritual kingdom. It was to be prepared for by repentance.... It was to be entered by a new birth.... Such passages as the above indicate with unmistakable plainness that from the very outset Jesus not merely gave no encouragement to, but definitely opposed, the expectation of the Jews that an earthly, Jewish kingdom of glory, such as David had established centuries before, was about to be set up.¹⁵

Very clearly, the amillennialist and the covenant premillennialist both agree that Jesus was not offering the earthly, Davidic kingdom during

His earthly ministry. Instead, they say, He was offering a spiritual kingdom. Furthermore, the condition for receiving that spiritual kingdom, Allis says, was repentance and the new birth. Both the repentance and new birth Allis is talking about were the subject of Jesus' teaching *before* the Cross. Therefore, the dispensationalist might turn the tables on the amillennialist and the covenant premillennialist and ask two questions similar to those he is often asked.

The first is this: If the Jews living during the earthly ministry of Jesus had received His teaching and had repented and been born again, does that mean there was in those days a way of salvation that was different from salvation through the death of Christ? It seems as if it would mean this, and one would be forced to conclude that the amillennialist and the covenant premillennialist teach more than one way of salvation.

The second question is this: If the Jews had received this alleged spiritual kingdom and had been saved, does that not mean that the Cross might have been unnecessary? If the Jews had immediately accepted the spiritual kingdom Jesus offered, what would have happened to the Cross?

Without doubt the amillennialist and covenant premillennialist would reply to both these questions that they are theoretical and do not demand an answer. These questions view the whole plan of God from a strictly human viewpoint and are therefore not entirely fair questions. And with such a reply from the amillennialist and covenant premillennialist, the dispensationalist would agree. These are foolish questions. Perhaps the same is true of the similar questions asked of dispensationalists.

IS THE KINGDOM DESPIRITUALIZED?

The Charge

A second objection always raised about dispensational eschatology is that it makes the doctrine of the kingdom so materialistic that it is unscriptural. It is said that dispensationalists despiritualize the kingdom with their materialistic notions of the political and earthly reign of Christ. The charge assumes that *materialistic* is the opposite of *spiritual*, and since the millennial kingdom is earthly it is materialistic and

therefore cannot be spiritual.

The Basis for the Charge

This charge against dispensationalism persists because dispensationalists have undoubtedly emphasized the millennial kingdom and its relation to the fulfillment of Israel's promises almost to the point of neglecting other aspects of the doctrine. The emphasis on the millennial kingdom has had a tendency to place in the background truth concerning the eternal kingdom of God. Emphasis on the relation of the millennial kingdom to the nation Israel has perhaps led to a spotlighting of the aspects of the earthly glory of that kingdom, which has been construed as emphasizing exclusively its material aspects. The very fact that the millennial kingdom is earthly lends itself to a highlighting of the material aspects of that kingdom.

Although the emphasis on the millennial kingdom might be called by some an overemphasis, it was a natural one that grew out of the lack of any teachings on the subject in the days in which dispensationalism began to flourish. Though it was not a new truth discovered by Darby in Britain or by the participants in the prophetic conferences in America, it was a truth that was brought to light again at that time and given the natural emphasis of any rediscovery. Though that does not necessarily excuse any erroneous overemphasis, it may explain it.

Dispensational Teaching Concerning the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God

As implied above, the nondispensationalist tries to build his case against dispensationalism on some dispensationalists' distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God. For instance, Ladd says that "the dispensational position is maintained on the basis of the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of heaven."¹⁶ It is true that dispensationalists have sometimes pinned the label "kingdom of heaven" to the earthly, millennial kingdom and the label "kingdom of God" to the eternal, spiritual kingdom. However, the antidispensationalist has created a straw man by insisting that the entire position is maintained on the basis of a distinction of this sort. Within the ranks of dispensationalists there are those who hold to the distinction and those who do not.¹⁷ It is not at all determinative.

More than forty years ago John F. Walvoord showed this very clearly in his review of Ladd's book *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*:

Another major confusion in this discussion is the mistaken notion commonly held by nondispensationalists that the distinction often affirmed between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven is essential to the dispensational argument. Actually one could maintain this distinction and be an amillenarian or deny it and be a dispensationalist. The distinction as usually presented is between the kingdom of heaven as an outward sphere of profession and the kingdom of God as a sphere of reality including only the elect.... As far as affecting the premillennial or dispensational argument, in the opinion of the reviewer it is irrelevant. The issue is not whether the kingdom of heaven is postponed but whether the Messianic kingdom offered by the Old Testament prophets and expected by the Jewish people in connection with the first advent was offered, rejected, and postponed until the second advent. We believe the author is therefore incorrect in building the dispensational doctrine of a postponed kingdom on the distinction between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. It depends rather upon the distinction between the present form of the kingdom and the future form of the kingdom, which is entirely a different matter.¹⁸

Progressive dispensationalists note that some dispensationalists who held to a distinction between the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God later abandoned it. They conclude, in the words of one, "Again this shows that dispensationalism is not a fixed set of confessional interpretations but that development is taking place."¹⁹ But the abandonment of this distinction is minor league and unimportant stuff compared to the major-league changes progressives are making in dispensationalism. And it certainly gives no justification for the kind of changes revisionists are making.

It is worth noting that quite recently Carl F. H. Henry stated that the distinction between the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God has validity and significance: "The kingdom of God comes to us from this heavenly realm, and hence it is appropriately depicted as the kingdom of Heaven, as Matthew's gospel routinely designates it."²⁰

Whether the kingdom in present form is the church or whether during this age the Davidic theocratic kingdom has been postponed depends on one's view of the kingdom preached by Jesus. Although Bass disagrees with the postponed kingdom idea, he states the crux of the matter clearly:

The postponed-kingdom idea grows out of the basic concept of what the kingdom was to be, and what it shall yet be. This is held [by dispensationalism] to be a literal restoration of the national kingdom, and since no such covenanted kingdom with the Davidic throne has appeared, it must have been postponed. The kingdom and the church can in no way be paralleled in the plan of God.²¹

In Bass's nondispensational view the kingdom in present form is the church—"the recipient of the covenantal relation with God"—and because Israel rejected Christ "the 'spiritual Israel' in the form of the church was instituted."²² If Jesus preached and offered the Davidic kingdom, then, as Bass rightly declares, it was obviously postponed, for it simply has not been established according to the picture of the Old Testament promises.

Often there is lack of precision in defining the concept of kingdom, delineating the various kingdoms, and relating the church to a kingdom concept. We recognize a universal kingdom over which God rules the entire world (1 Chron. 29:11; Ps. 145:13). We recognize the Davidic/Messianic kingdom over which our Lord will rule in the present-earth Millennium. (Reconstructed dispensationalism teaches that Christ has already begun that rule on the Davidic throne in heaven.) We understand a mystery form of the kingdom as announced and illustrated in Matthew 13. And there is the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13) into which believers enter by the new birth.

It is one's understanding of the Davidic/Messianic kingdom that differentiates various theologies. The amillennialist sees that kingdom as the church ruled by Christ. The covenant premillennialist understands the church as the new Israel but also recognizes the future reign of Christ in the millennial kingdom. Almost all progressive dispensationalists do not say that the church is the new Israel, but they teach that the Davidic/Messianic kingdom has been inaugurated and is now operative with Christ on the throne of David in heaven and will operate on this earth in the future Millennium. The normative dispensationalist also does not see the church as the new Israel but understands the fulfillment of the Davidic kingdom promise not happening now but in the Millennium.

It was this Davidic kingdom that Jesus offered and not the general rule

of God over the earth or His spiritual reign in individual lives. If it were the spiritual kingdom Christ was offering, then “such an announcement would have had no special significance whatever to Israel, for such a rule of God has always been recognized among the people of God.”²³ The kingdom the Lord preached was something different from either the general rule of God in His overall sovereignty or the rule of God in the individual heart. Therefore, when a dispensationalist says that the kingdom is postponed, he is speaking of the Davidic kingdom, but he also affirms the continuing presence of the universal kingdom and the spiritual rule of God in individual hearts today. God does not rule in only one way or through only one means.

Even the amillennialist recognizes the universal kingdom and the Israelite kingdom of the Old Testament. The covenant premillennialist includes in addition the millennial kingdom. The dispensationalist recognizes all of these various ways in which God has ruled but keeps distinct the church as another purpose of God in addition to His kingdom purposes. The antidispensationalist will not allow the dispensationalist to maintain this last distinction, though he himself maintains others within the general subject of the kingdom.

This discussion started with the matter of a distinction between the phrases *kingdom of heaven* and *kingdom of God*. This distinction is not the issue at all. The issue is whether or not the distinctiveness of the church in this age as recognized by dispensationalists is a *sine qua non* of the system. One sees again how the ecclesiology and eschatology of dispensationalism are closely related.

Dispensational Teaching Concerning the Spiritual Character of the Millennial Kingdom

Can dispensationalism be properly charged with envisioning the Davidic kingdom as “material” and “carnal”? The answer is emphatically no. To do this is to misrepresent dispensationalism grossly. Simply because the kingdom is on the earth does not mean that it cannot be spiritual. If that were so, no living Christian could be spiritual either, for he is very much a resident of the earth. Neither is it necessary to spiritualize the earthly kingdom in order to have a spiritual kingdom. If that were so, then again no Christian could be spiritual until he is spiritualized. The contrast is not between “materialistic” and “spiritual”

but between the presence and absence of the King on this earth.

This charge against premillennialism (for it is really not distinctive to dispensationalism) is not new. George Peters countered it half a century ago, and contemporary writers are doing it today.²⁴ So much has been written concerning the spiritual character of the Millennium by dispensationalists that it seems unnecessary to reproduce the same facts here. If anything is obvious from the literal interpretation of these passages concerning the millennial kingdom, it is that the period will be a rule of God that includes the highest ideals of spirituality. Righteousness is the descriptive word for that time. Holiness, truth, justice, glory, and the fullness of the Spirit are all used in Scripture to characterize the kingdom on earth. Alva McClain and Erich Sauer both devote many pages in their respective books to the spiritual characteristics of the millennial kingdom.²⁵ It is a time when God harmoniously joins the spiritual and the earthly in a final display of the glory of the King *on* this earth.

A humorous illustration from McClain will serve as a fitting conclusion to this discussion of the charge that dispensationalism despiritualizes the kingdom:

During a church banquet a group of preachers were discussing the nature of the Kingdom of God. One expressed his adherence to the premillennial view of a literal kingdom.... To this a rather belligerent two-hundred-pound preacher snorted, "Ridiculous! Such an idea is nothing but materialism." When asked to state his own view, he replied, "The Kingdom is a *spiritual* matter. The Kingdom of God has *already* been established, and is *within* you. Don't you gentlemen know that the Kingdom is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost?" And the speaker reached hungrily across the table and speared another enormous piece of fried chicken! ... At the risk of being thought tiresome, let me recite the obvious conclusion: If the Kingdom of God can exist now on earth in a two-hundred-pound preacher full of fried chicken, without any reprehensible materialistic connotations, perhaps it could also exist in the same way among men on earth who will at times be eating and drinking under more perfect conditions in a future millennial kingdom.²⁶

SUMMARY

Dispensational eschatology in no way minimizes the Cross or despiritualizes the millennial kingdom. The contingent offer of the

Davidic kingdom by Jesus was bona fide, and it was not a spiritual kingdom that He announced. That does not mean that dispensationalists fail to recognize the rule of God in the heart today, but the body of believers today constitutes the church, not the Davidic kingdom. The sometime distinction between the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God is not an issue at all. All shades of theological thought recognize different kingdoms or different aspects of the rule of God even though different labels may be attached to them. The question is whether the church is recognized as a distinct purpose of God today and whether or not a place is given for the literal fulfillment of the Davidic, Messianic, earthly, and spiritual kingdoms in the future Millennium on this present earth. The recognition of the distinctiveness of the church and consistently literal interpretation of Israel's promises are the bases of a dispensational eschatology.

NOTES

1. W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby* (London: G. A. Hammond, 1944), 18.
2. Nathaniel West, ed., *Premillennial Essays of the Prophetic Conference* (1878) (Chicago: Revell, 1879), 8. See page 74 in chapter 4 for more on the prophetic conferences.
3. Floyd E. Hamilton, *The Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1942), 38.
4. George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 112–14.
5. J. Ramsey Michaels, "Review of *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, by George Eldon Ladd," *Westminster Theological Journal* 23 (November 1960): 48.
6. Bruce Waltke, "A Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 356.
7. Philip Mauro, *The Gospel of the Kingdom with an Examination of Modern Dispensationalism* (Boston: Hamilton Bros., 1928), 23.
8. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presb. & Ref., 1945), 75.
9. Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 33.
10. Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 88.
11. L. S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 5:348–49.
12. *Ibid.*, 5:347–48.

13. One readily admits that the dispensational concept concerning the offer and rejection of the kingdom at the first advent of Christ is inadequately described by the word *postponed*. That word views the matter from a human standpoint and in relation to the kingdom program for Israel only. From the divine perspective, of course, nothing is ever postponed, for all events are taking place according to God's perfectly preplanned order and right on schedule. Also, from God's viewpoint the fulfillment of Israel's promised kingdom was never scheduled until the second advent, though it was offered at the first advent. The word *postponed* is justified only from the human viewpoint and only in relation to the kingdom purpose. Nevertheless, its use does have justification, and it has been found helpful in conveying the idea involved. Though one could wish for a more inclusive word, there does not seem to be sufficient reason for rejecting it completely. See the discussion by Stanley D. Toussaint ("The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 226–27).
14. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, 114.
15. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 69–71.
16. Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, 106.
17. Erich Sauer (*The Triumph of the Crucified* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952]) and Alva J. McClain (*The Greatness of the Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959]) do not maintain a distinction, and both men are recognized dispensationalists.
18. John F. Walvoord, "Review of *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God*, by George Eldon Ladd," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 110 (January 1953): 6.
19. Craig A. Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July–September 1988): 262.
20. Carl F. H. Henry, "Reflections on the Kingdom of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 35 (March 1992): 43.
21. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 32.
22. *Ibid.*, 30.
23. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 303.
24. George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 3:460. The work was originally published in 1884. Cf. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), 482–87.
25. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 519–26; Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity* (London: Paternoster, 1954), 143–44, 157–61. Also see Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor, 1982), 510–11.
26. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 519–20.

PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

Whether or not this is the best title for such a chapter awaits the verdict of a longer historical perspective. Labels other than “progressive” have been suggested for this new viewpoint, including “reconstructed,” “modified,” “new,” “revised,” “kingdom,” and “changed.” All of these accurately indicate some facet of this new form of dispensationalism, so any one of them would be appropriate titles. But since “progressive” is the word most often used thus far in the literature of the proponents, it will serve to label clearly the content of this chapter.

ORIGIN OF THE MOVEMENT

The public debut was made on November 20, 1986, in the Dispensational Study Group in connection with the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Atlanta, Georgia.¹ The group has continued to gather at those annual meetings, and several proponents have published books and articles in the succeeding years. Actually the label “progressive dispensationalism” was introduced at the 1991 meeting, since “significant revisions” in dispensationalism had taken place by that time. Darrell L. Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary (New Testament) and Craig A. Blaising, formerly a professor of Systematic Theology at Dallas, have been in the forefront of the movement, along with Robert L. Saucy (Systematic Theology) of Talbot Theological Seminary. So far three books have been published: *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (edited by Bock and Blaising, 1992), *Progressive Dispensationalism* (written by the same two men, 1993), and *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (written by Saucy, 1993).

In the overall historical picture of dispensational theology, this new movement inaugurates an era clearly distinguished from previous eras of dispensational thought. The initial period started with J. N. Darby and continued through the publication of L. S. Chafer’s *Systematic Theology* in

1948. Progressives label this the classical period. (I personally think it makes better sense to divide the early/Darby era from the Scofield/Chafer period.) The second (or third) era extends from the 1950s almost to the 1990s and includes the writings of Alva McClain, John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and myself. This was first called by progressives the essentialist period (from my listing of the essentials—the *sine qua non*—of dispensationalism), but more recently it has been changed to the revised period. The third (or fourth) present period differs from the previous ones because it includes “a number of modifications” and “sufficient revisions.”²

Many who formerly had been associated with the normative dispensational camp have embraced the revised view, especially in academia. Much of the dialog has been between progressives and covenant theologians, who have openly expressed pleasure that progressives have moved away from normative dispensationalism, though covenant theologians clearly have not moved from the tenets of their position.

In an attempt to justify their movement away from normative dispensationalism, progressives have pointed to differences in some interpretations among normative dispensationalists. They conclude that, if normatives can do it, their revisions are justified also. However, the crucial consideration is not that there are some differences, but what those differences are. Are they minor or major? In general, differences in interpretations and emphases among normative dispensationalists do not change the overall system of dispensationalism, whereas the differences advanced by progressive dispensationalists do form a new and revised system that some (both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists) believe is not dispensationalism anymore.

DESCRIPTIVE DEFINITIONS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

The subtitle of *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* is “The Search for Definition.” One has to conclude after reading the book that the search was unsuccessful and will have to be ongoing. In *Progressive Dispensationalism* the definition of a dispensation is “a particular

arrangement in which God regulates the way human beings relate to Him” (a normal way to define the word). Later on in that book the *system* of progressive dispensationalism is described as understanding “the dispensations not simply as *different* arrangements between God and humankind, but as *successive* arrangements in the *progressive* revelation and accomplishment of redemption.”³ Although differences and discontinuities among the dispensations are recognized, samenesses and continuities are emphasized and linked to the theme of redemption throughout all of human history.

Though clarity is somewhat lacking in the area of definition, progressives do make some descriptive statements that help explain their system.

1 “Progressive dispensationalism advocates a *holistic* and *unified* view of eternal salvation.”⁴ This means that all the redeemed will be blessed with the same salvation with respect to justification and sanctification. One wonders if this is not similar to the concept and purpose of the covenant of grace in covenant theology.

2 The church is not “an anthropological category” in the same class as terms such as *Israel* and *Gentiles*, nor is it “a competing nation” (what about 1 Peter 2:9?), but it is redeemed humanity in this present dispensation. These phrases seem inadequate and unclear, for they do not convey the differences in the progressives’ concept of the church (and there are major differences). One divergence seems to be this: normative dispensationalists distinguished the future heavenly promises for Jewish Christians who become part of the body of Christ from the future promises for national Israel in the earthly Millennium; progressives do not (“A Jew who becomes a Christian today does not lose his or her relationship to Israel’s future promises”).⁵

Another major change in revisionist dispensationalism (as previously discussed in [chapter 7](#)) is that the mystery character of the church does not mean that the church was unrevealed in the Old Testament but only that it was unrealized. Also, the church is submerged into an overall kingdom concept. [Chapter 7](#) noted that one progressive dispensationalist called the church “the new Israel.” Whether others will follow remains to be seen. But to do so further blurs the distinction between Israel and

the church in this present dispensation and actually seems to place one in the covenant premillennial camp.

3 The “blessings [promised in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants] are given [today] in a partial and inaugurated form.”⁶ Thus, progressive dispensationalism can be described as understanding these covenants as already inaugurated and beginning to be fulfilled. Why is no mention made of an already inaugurated Palestinian covenant (Deut. 29–30)?

Is it possible to construct a definition from these three statements? Clearly revisionists do not want to be constricted by the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism proposed in [chapter 2](#). Nevertheless, to help the reader see more clearly the differences between normative and revised dispensationalism, I want to construct a definition/description of progressive dispensationalism following the outline of my *sine qua non*. Progressive dispensationalism (1) teaches that Christ is already reigning in heaven on the throne of David, thus merging the church with a present phase of the already inaugurated Davidic covenant and kingdom; (2) this is based on a complementary hermeneutic that allows the New Testament to introduce changes and additions to Old Testament revelation; and (3) the overall purpose of God is Christological, holistic redemption being the focus and goal of history.

BASIC TENETS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

It seems best simply to list what seem to be the basic tenets of progressive dispensationalism and to elaborate and evaluate them in the next section. In this way the reader can have an overall view of the forest before focusing in on the trees. This list is compiled from books, tapes, and articles of the progressives, but the phrasing and order in the listing is my own choice.

1 The kingdom of God is the unifying theme of biblical history.

2 Within biblical history there are four dispensational eras.

3 Christ has *already* inaugurated the Davidic reign in heaven at the right hand of the Father, which equals the throne of David, though He

does not yet reign as Davidic king on earth during the Millennium.

4 Likewise, the new covenant has already been inaugurated, though its blessings are not yet fully realized until the Millennium.

5 The concept of the church as completely distinct from Israel and as a mystery unrevealed in the Old Testament needs revising, making the idea of two purposes and two peoples of God invalid.

6 A complementary hermeneutic must be used alongside a literal hermeneutic. This means that the New Testament makes complementary changes to Old Testament promises without jettisoning those original promises.

7 The one divine plan of holistic redemption encompasses all people and all areas of human life—personal, societal, cultural, and political.

ELABORATION AND EVALUATION OF THESE TENETS

The Kingdom

One of the major emphases in revisionist dispensationalism is on the kingdom as the unifying theme of biblical history. One of the major weaknesses in the system is not defining the kingdom and not distinguishing the various kingdoms in the Bible. In general, progressives speak of a single, or unified, kingdom of God in both Testaments, with major emphasis on the “eschatological kingdom,” defined as the kingdom of God in the last days (which began with the first coming of Christ). Thus, their exposition of the kingdom of God in the Old Testament (though the actual phrase does not occur in the Old Testament text) focuses largely on the Messianic reign, especially in the future, millennial kingdom. In the New Testament the discussion breaks down into the kingdom related to the life of Christ, to the church, and to the future. All these are aspects of the eschatological kingdom, since the last days begin with the first coming of Christ. The discussions are accompanied by numerous charts.

It would not be practical in a single chapter to attempt to sort out all the facets of the kingdom discussions in revisionist dispensationalism. Nevertheless, two significant areas need investigation.

First, because the focus is largely Messianic, whether discussing the

psalms, prophets, the life of Christ, or the epistles, various kingdoms are blurred and their characteristics merged because Christ is the one involved in each. At least two results follow from this. One is the blurring of the distinction between the church and the Davidic kingdom by asserting that Christ is now reigning from heaven on the throne of David and that the church is the present revelation of the eschatological kingdom.⁷ The second result identifies the goal and purpose of history as Christological in contrast to normative dispensationalism's focus on the glory of God. A Christological purpose is less comprehensive (than the glory of God purpose in normative dispensationalism) but goes hand in hand better with the Messianic, eschatological, unified kingdom emphasis.

Second, this unifying kingdom emphasis places a different cast on the place of the church in the program of God. The church is called a "sneak preview" of the kingdom and "a functional outpost of God's kingdom."⁸ The church is "a Present Revelation of the [Messianic] kingdom."⁹ This emphasis comes from focusing on the Lord's present reign and authority as Messianic—enthroned and reigning in heaven on the Davidic throne in inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and incarnate as the son of David and "not as generic humanity." Therefore, progressives conclude that the church is the "present reality of the coming eschatological kingdom." It is the kingdom today.¹⁰

In American evangelicalism the writings of George E. Ladd widely promoted views of the kingdom that are now embraced by progressive dispensationalism. Although progressives try to distance themselves from Ladd and disclaim any dependence on his theology, they are espousing the same views. When Bock was asked if Ladd would disagree with his views, he replied, "I think the fundamental thrust of the structure he would not disagree with."¹¹ The major similarities, if not sameness, between Ladd and progressives are these: (1) the focus on the kingdom of God as an overall, all-encompassing theme; (2) the already/not yet, progressively realized nature of the kingdom; and (3) the present position of Christ reigning in heaven as the Messianic /Davidic king.¹²

The Dispensations

Progressive dispensationalism charts four primary dispensations.¹³ The

first is the Patriarchal (from creation to Sinai). Although they acknowledge that other dispensationalists see distinct dispensations within this broad period, it seems odd not to distinguish the pre-Fall arrangements God made with Adam and Eve as a separate dispensation. By every measurement this was a different stewardship. Furthermore, it seems necessary to distinguish the arrangement God introduced with Abraham in view of Paul's emphasis on the Abrahamic promises (Gal. 3:8–16) and in view of revisionists' own emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant. To lump pre-Fall conditions, post-Fall conditions, and the Abrahamic covenant under a common stewardship arrangement or dispensation is artificial, to say the least.

The second dispensation is labeled the Mosaic (from Sinai to Messiah's ascension). This certainly is a clearly distinguishable arrangement. But why extend it to the ascension of Christ? Why not end it with the death of Christ as Colossians 2:14 indicates? The answer may relate to the fact that progressives mark the Ascension as the inauguration of Messiah's reign on the Davidic throne in heaven.

The third is called the Ecclesial (from the ascension to Messiah's second coming). This is the one that has commonly (and more understandably) been labeled Church, or Grace.

THE DISPENSATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM				
PATRIARCHAL	MOSAIC	ECCLESIAL	ZIONIC	
Adam to Sinai	Sinai to Ascension of Messiah	Ascension to Second Coming	Part 1: Millennium	Part 2: Eternal State

The fourth is the Zionic, which is subdivided into (1) millennial and (2) eternal. (This is the only one subdivided, though the Patriarchal can be.) The eternal aspect is the culmination of the eschatological kingdom on “a renewed earth,” and the millennial kingdom is an intermediate kingdom—intermediate between the inaugurated Davidic rule now in heaven and the fullness of the kingdom of God on the new earth.¹⁴ Thus, the new dispensationalism sees eternity as a dispensation (as a minority of dispensationalists have in the past) and the Millennium “as a step

toward the final fulfillment of the everlasting promises.”¹⁵ With this placing of the Millennium and the new earth together in one overall dispensation, little wonder that one covenant theologian, Vern Poythress (while acknowledging that he does not speak for all), concludes that “provided we are able to treat the question of Israel’s relative distinctiveness in the Millennium as a minor [!] problem, no substantial areas of disagreement remain [between progressive dispensationalism and covenant theology].”¹⁶ A question to ponder: Does he make this statement because covenant theologians have now embraced a literal, present-earth Millennium (no, they have not), or because he perceives revisionist dispensationalists as having given ground in their eschatological statements (yes, they have)?

The Davidic Reign

One of the major departures, if not *the* major one, of progressive dispensationalism from traditional dispensational and premillennial teaching is that Christ, already inaugurated as the Davidic king at His ascension, is now reigning in heaven on the throne of David. “The Davidic throne and the heavenly throne of Jesus at the right hand of the Father are one and the same.”¹⁷ This present reign is the first stage of His Davidic rule, the second being during the Millennium on the throne of David from the earthly Jerusalem on this present earth.

Other systems of theology have also taught that Christ is now reigning on the throne of David in heaven. This teaching is not new or exclusive to progressive dispensationalism. Covenant premillennialist George E. Ladd wrote in 1974, “The exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God means nothing less than his enthronement as messianic King.” He then cites as proof Peter’s use in Acts 2 of Psalm 132:11 and 110:1, just as Bock, representing the progressives, does years later.¹⁸ Covenant theologian O. Palmer Robertson wrote, “A reading of the early chapters of the book of Acts indicates that Jesus Christ does indeed now reign in fulfillment of the promises spoken to David.... God’s throne and Jesus’ position as heir to David’s throne seated at God’s right hand merge in the new covenant.”¹⁹ Bock might just as well have written those words.

This already/not yet bifurcation is not new in theological parlance. Nor is it always used in the two-pronged concept of the Davidic rule

(now in heaven, later on earth). Introduced by C. H. Dodd in 1926, it meant generally that the kingdom of God was already present, even though in some way it was also future. In George Ladd the “already” relates to Christ’s reign in salvation and the “not yet” to His future reign in the Millennium. In Hoekema (an amillennialist) it means Christ’s present heavenly reign on earth and His future reign in the new heavens and new earth.²⁰ In Sproul (an amillennialist) the “already” is the present age and the “not yet” is the eternal state.²¹ In progressive dispensationalism, the “already” is Christ’s present reign in partial fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and the “not yet” is His millennial reign.

To substantiate this requires four beliefs: (1) understanding Acts 2 as teaching not only who Jesus of Nazareth is (God, Messiah, and ultimate fulfiller of the Davidic covenant) but also what He is now doing (reigning on the Davidic throne in heaven = the right hand of the Father); (2) interpreting the phrase “the kingdom has drawn near” to mean “is here” or “present”; (3) understanding Psalm 110 as teaching exaltation to the throne of David in heaven; and (4) in general concluding that associated concepts, “clear allusions” (an oxymoron?), and similarities produce identity (e.g., our Lord reigns and the Davidic king will reign; therefore, the Lord has already begun to reign as the Davidic king in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant).

Regarding Acts 2–3, progressives argue that, since Peter states that Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father and since Jesus is the ultimate heir to the Davidic throne, He must now be reigning as the Davidic king in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (the right hand of the Father being the throne of David in heaven). However, Bock acknowledges that the key texts only “allude to” or are “not clear” or are a “pictorial description” eight times in his discussion of Acts 2. Bock clearly states that Psalm 132:11 (quoted in Acts 2:30) is “the crucial linking allusion” and “strongly Israelitish and national in tone.”²²

Actually, what Peter is arguing for is the identification of Jesus of Nazareth as the Davidic king, since Jesus, not David, was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father. He does not add that He is reigning as the Davidic king. That will happen in the future millennial kingdom. If it is so *clear* that our Lord is reigning now as the

Davidic king in inaugural fulfillment of the Davidic covenant, why is that only *alluded to* in Acts 2? Links and similarities between reigns do not make clear an equality between the Davidic reign and Christ's present rule.²³

As for the meaning of *engkien* ("drawn near" or "is present"), most translations and commentaries understand it to mean "drawn near." Bock takes it to mean "here"—i.e., the kingdom has already arrived—and, of course, he understands this to mean the Davidic kingdom.

[Bock] argues from the fact that the verb is used with *epi* in Luke 10:9, ... [but] this construction ... occurs not because the kingdom was present but because the kingdom is always said to come from above.... Interestingly, none of the illustrations used by Bock to support the meaning of "arrival" are in the perfect tense.... Lane concludes, "The linguistic objections to the proposed rendering 'has come' are weighty, and it is better to translate 'has come near.'"²⁴

If Christ inaugurated His Davidic reign at His ascension, does it not seem incongruous that His first act as reigning Davidic king was the sending of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33), something not included in the promises of the Davidic covenant? Furthermore, the writer of Hebrews plainly declares that Christ "sat down at the right hand of the throne of God," not the throne of David (12:2). That does not deny that our Lord has all authority in heaven and earth or that He rules in the world and in the church; rather, it denies that He is ruling on David's throne now and that the Davidic covenant has already been inaugurated. To conclude otherwise confuses the various rules in the Bible. Remember, too, that David himself was designated and anointed to be king some time before he began to reign as king. Christ is the Davidic king, designated before His birth to reign over "the house of Jacob," not the church (Luke 1:31–33), though He will not be reigning as Davidic king until His second coming.

Does Psalm 110 prove that Christ is now reigning as the Davidic king? Progressives think so, but others believe that the evidence does not support that conclusion. Elliott E. Johnson points out that in Psalm 110 Messiah is presently waiting for a future conquest and victory. His present position is one of honor in the presence of His enemies. Further, Messiah's present position does not include any of the activities that

accompanied the coronation of a king; only His priestly activity is mentioned. Also, David's earthly throne and Yahweh's heavenly throne should be distinguished (though progressives attempt to equate them on the basis of Peter's use of Psalm 132:11 in Acts 2:30). "However, it is preferable to see David's earthly throne as different from the Lord's heavenly throne, because of the different contexts of Psalms 110 and 132. Psalm 110 refers to the Lord's throne (v. 1) and a Melchizedekian priesthood (v. 4) but Psalm 132 refers to David's throne (v. 11) and (Aaronic) priests (vv. 9, 16)."²⁵

A word should be said about the progressives' revised interpretation of Acts 3:19–21 and the phrases "times of refreshing" and "restoration of all things." The former phrase, they say, refers to the present time (the "already" aspect of the kingdom) and the latter to the future return of Christ (the "not yet" phase). But that would not have been what Peter's audience understood, nor is it supported exegetically. The "that" (*hopos*) in verse 20 introduces a purpose clause; i.e., repent for the purpose of or with a view to. The purpose involves two things happening—the coming of "times of refreshing" and the coming of Christ. Progressives believe that the times of refreshing refer to the present time, preceding the return of Christ. But the construction links the two events: the times of refreshing (the millennial, Davidic kingdom) will come when Christ returns and not before. The two clauses (with two subjunctive verbs) that follow *hopos* cannot be separated, as progressives do, in order to support their already (present Davidic kingdom, the "times of refreshing") and not yet (future Davidic kingdom, "restoration of all things") concept. Nothing grammatically separates the promises; in fact, they are joined together by the connective *kai*. Therefore, both expressions refer to the promised restoration of the nation Israel in the Millennium.²⁶ This teaching of an already inaugurated Davidic reign in revisionist dispensationalism is far from firmly established by clear exegesis of the relevant texts.

The New Covenant

Progressives view the new covenant (like the Davidic covenant) as *already* inaugurated by Christ, who is dispensing certain of its blessings in this age, even though its provisions will *not yet* be fully realized until

the Millennium. Furthermore, the new covenant will be mediated by the Davidic king, since the new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant blessing will be fulfilled.²⁷ Exactly how this can be established is unclear, though what it intends to establish seems to be an attempt to interrelate the major covenants of Israel under the supremacy of the Davidic king (and the Davidic covenant) as well as making the Abrahamic and new covenants progressively fulfilled so that the Davidic can be said to be fulfilled also. Even if the Abrahamic and/or the new covenant has been inaugurated, that does not prove that the Davidic has been. But notice again that the Palestinian covenant is nowhere to be found in the discussion.

Revisionists attempt to buttress the inauguration of the new covenant by the death of Christ by showing that some of the blessings of the new covenant as promised in the Old Testament to the house of Israel and the house of Judah are similar to certain blessings promised to believers in this age. Nevertheless, even progressives have to admit that certain of those blessings can only be partially realized today. For instance, the promise of the new covenant “to remove the heart of rebel lion” and give us “hearts fully compliant” is not fulfilled today in the experience of believers.²⁸ The progressives’ need to qualify the fulfillment as being “not fully free” from resistance to God’s will is not at all similar to the promise of the new covenant (to remove rebellion). Bock claims that Peter’s “allusion” to Joel 2 in Acts 2 and the coming of the Spirit in Acts 2 “fulfills the new covenant” and that the coming of the Spirit is “a key promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31.”²⁹ Therefore, if the new covenant is fulfilled beginning at Pentecost, and thus inaugurated in this present age, then so also is the Davidic covenant inaugurated in this present time.

In this way progressives link the rule of Christ as Davidic king over Israel in the Millennium with the fulfillment of the new covenant with Israel in that same period (Ezek. 37:24–28) and the inauguration of both the Davidic and new covenants in the present church age. But this linkage hardly proves that Christ is reigning as Davidic king now or that He is fulfilling (however incompletely) new covenant promises now. Also, progressives acknowledge that the few similar new covenant promises allegedly being fulfilled today are being fulfilled only partially

and by analogy. However, some new covenant promises are clearly not being fulfilled or even inaugurated in any sense today. Here are some examples: (1) taming of beasts (Ezek. 34:25), (2) increased productivity of the land (vv. 26–27), and (3) no necessity to teach one another (Jer. 31:34). All agree that these blessings will not be fulfilled until the Millennium, but, because none of them have been inaugurated now, at best progressives can say that only part of the new covenant has been inaugurated.

Is it true to say that any part of the new covenant as promised in the Old Testament has been inaugurated? Putting all the Old Testament passages together, one finds these new covenant promises: (1) putting God's law into Israelites' hearts; (2) no necessity to teach His people; (3) forgiveness of Israel; (4) Israel restored to favor and guaranteed everlasting existence; (5) God's Spirit upon the people; (6) material blessing in the land of Israel; (7) peace; and (8) God's sanctuary rebuilt. Of course, none of these promises has been inaugurated for the house of Israel and the house of Judah today. But are any of them similar to what God is doing for the church today?

Yes, forgiveness and the ministry of the Spirit are being experienced today. But as specifically promised in the new covenant passages, even these are not being fulfilled today. After all, both these promises (a ministry of the Spirit and forgiveness of sins) were realized by Israelites under the Mosaic covenant, but that in no way connects the Mosaic covenant with subsequent covenants any more than their experience today connects a supposed inauguration of the new covenant with a future, clearly fulfilled new covenant.

What is the relation of the new covenant to the present time? Has it been inaugurated? Does that mean it is operative now? If so, how do we decide which parts are operative and to what extent? How can the church fulfill a promise given to the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31)? How does the death of Christ relate to the matter?

Amillennialists understand that the church fulfills the provisions of the new covenant made with Israel. Premillennialists have not always dealt with questions about the new covenant uniformly. Some have taught that the church has no relation to the new covenant, only Israel does. Others see two new covenants, one with Israel and another with the

church. Others acknowledge that the church receives some of the blessings (or similar blessings) promised in the Old Testament revelation of the new covenant but not all of them. Progressives make these similar blessings evidence that the new covenant has been inaugurated. All premillennialists agree that there will be a future fulfillment of the covenant for Israel at the second coming of Christ (Rom. 11:26–27; cf. Heb. 10:16).

New Testament references to the new covenant include (1) referring to the cup as the blood of the covenant (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), (2) contrasting the better new covenant with the obsolete Mosaic covenant (but not saying that the church fulfills the new covenant, Heb. 8:6–13), and (3) declaring us as ministers of “a new covenant,” as the *Revised Standard*, *New American Standard*, *New International*, and *New English* Bibles translate it (because there is no definite article, “the,” in 2 Cor. 3:6).

Perhaps some of the confusion surrounding the church’s relation to the new covenant can be dispelled by focusing on the word *payment* rather than *fulfillment* or *inauguration*. In other words, clearly our Lord paid for sins that will be forgiven when the new covenant is in force. He also paid for sins committed under the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Palestinian covenants, as well as for those committed in the church age. If that were not so, then there would have to be multiple deaths of Christ, one for each group whose sins have been, are, or will be forgiven. The blood shed to pay for the sins of those who experience the new covenant also pays for sins of those who believe in all ages. It is not a matter of inauguration but payment. New Testament references focus on the blood as payment. In the Upper Room that payment is clearly related to the future fulfillment of the new covenant. This is to be expected since those gathered there did not understand that there would even be an intervening church age. The references in Hebrews 10:29; 12:24; and 13:20 also focus on the blood.

Remember, revisionists see only one new covenant, which has been inaugurated with the death of Christ, some of its blessings being fulfilled now but the complete fulfillment awaiting the second coming of Christ. They use this to help substantiate the same idea with the Davidic covenant; i.e., that it has already been inaugurated, though not yet fully

fulfilled. Obviously, not all the provisions of the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament have been inaugurated, as, for example, no need of teaching (Jer. 31:34) and Israel being firmly and safely planted in its own land (32:41).

Two of the blessings of the new covenant for Israel in the future are similar to those experienced by the church today—forgiveness of sins and the ministry of the Spirit. But note carefully that those two particular blessings were given to Israel under the old Mosaic covenant (Ps. 51:11; Neh. 9:20). Does this mean that, in reality, the Mosaic covenant was a preinaugural stage of the inaugurated stage of the new covenant? Not at all, and progressives would agree. Similarity of blessings (even partial similarity) does not mean equation of covenants. Furthermore, even if the new covenant has been inaugurated and is partly fulfilled now, that does not prove that the Davidic covenant follows the same pattern unless the text specifically says so. Already/not yet aspects of salvation (in a new covenant) do not prove already/not yet aspects of the Davidic reign (in the Davidic covenant).

What about 2 Corinthians 3:6–11? Here are some matters to notice:

1 A major purpose of the passage is to contrast the *kind of ministry* based on a wrong use of the Mosaic Law, which promoted works and self-effort, with one that is dependent on the Holy Spirit.³⁰ This contrast between a ministry that kills and one that gives life is vividly seen by comparing the old Mosaic covenant with a new covenant to show the superiority of the new and the inferiority of the old: the letter of the old kills, while the Spirit of the new gives life; the old is a ministry of death, the new a ministry of the Spirit; the old came with glory, the new with more glory; the old had fading glory, the new surpassing glory; the old has been done away, the new remains; the old brings hiddenness, the new boldness; the old hardens hearts, the new saves.

2 If the only new covenant is with the house of Israel and has not been inaugurated with the church, we still minister some things about that new covenant. What? At least two things. First, we minister the payment made for the sins of all time by the blood of Christ. Second, the eschatological promises contained the new covenant, which will be fulfilled in the Millennium. After all, the new covenant tells us about

many of the conditions in the millennial kingdom as well as promises about Israel and her future. These matters people need to hear today as we include them in our ministry and do so in dependence on the Spirit. This approach understands only one new covenant.

3 The reference to “new covenant” is without the definite article. The text does not say we are ministers of “the new covenant” but of “a new covenant.” The definite article is also absent in Hebrews 9:15 and 12:24. This may not be significant at all, or it may indicate that Paul is focusing on a new covenant made with the church, which, of course, is based on the death of Christ as is also the future new covenant made with Israel. If so, there are two new covenants, perhaps even more if one understands a covenant related to each dispensational change in the outworking of God’s plan and purpose.³¹ In this view the two new covenants are distinct and not merged into one, which has already been inaugurated (as progressives teach).

To sum up: In what ways are we today ministers of a new covenant? In the sense that we (1) minister in the power of the Spirit to bring life, and not with self-righteous works of the law to bring death, (2) place the substitutionary death of Christ (the blood of a new covenant) central in all our ministry, and (3) proclaim the eschatological promises of the new covenant made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

The Distinctiveness of the Church

Progressives do not see the church as completely distinct from Israel as normative dispensationalists have maintained. Neither do they consider the mystery concept of the church to mean that the church was not revealed in the Old Testament, only that it was unrealized. A corollary of this new view erases the idea of two purposes of God—one for the church and one for Israel. These matters have been discussed in [chapter 7](#).

A Complementary Hermeneutic

While not denying the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, which has been a hallmark of normative dispensationalism, revisionist dispensationalism has introduced what is called “complementary hermeneutics”:

The New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.

Old Testament promise has not been replaced; it has been opened up, clarified, expanded, and periodized in the progress of apostolic reflection on Jesus' teaching and actions.³²

Certainly in the progressive nature of revelation (not all was given at one time, but progressively), the New Testament reveals matters not communicated in the Old Testament. But one must beware of the word "change" in the revisionists' definition of complementary hermeneutics. Amillennialists, for example, understand change to mean that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament are fulfilled by the church in New Testament times, without any future fulfillment (since amillennialists do not believe in a future, present-earth Millennium). Progressives do not say this, for the last two sentences in their definition guard against change going that far. What kind of change do they consider legitimate? Principally a change in the Davidic covenant, which in the Old Testament concerned only promises to be fulfilled in the Millennium on an earthly throne but now in the New Testament reveals Christ presently sitting and reigning on the Davidic throne in heaven.

As an example of the slippery nature of this complementary hermeneutic if applied to other concepts, consider the concept of "temple." In the Old Testament it regularly referred to a building where God was worshiped. This meaning continues to be used in the New Testament, but other meanings are revealed. Our Lord referred to His own body as a temple (John 2:19–21). The body of an individual Christian is the temple of the Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). The local church is a temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), as is the universal church (Eph. 2:21). What, then, is the meaning of *temple* in Revelation 11:1–2? A literal hermeneutic answers that it refers to an actual building in the tribulation period since there is no indication in the text that points to any other interpretation. But using the complementary hermeneutic, one could conclude that it refers to a community of believers (since that meaning is found elsewhere in the New Testament), thus placing the church in the tribulation period. Progressives have not used their complementary hermeneutic to conclude this, though it could be so used. However, one

nondispensational premillennialist has proposed this understanding: “This interpretation understands the temple to stand for the church, the people of God (as in I Cor 3:16–17; II Cor 6:16; Eph 2:19–22).... It means that God will give spiritual sanctuary to the faithful believers against the demonic assault of the Antichrist.”³³ One could support this interpretation further by pointing to the Qumran community, which had developed the idea of the community as a new temple.³⁴

The important question is simply this: Are there limits on the use of a complementary hermeneutic, and, if so, how are these limits to be determined and by whom?

Holistic Redemption

Holistic redemption means a redemption that “covers personal, communal, social, political, and national aspects of human life.”³⁵ Revisionists give more attention to social action than they feel normative dispensationalists did or do. This total, or holistic, redemption will only be realized in the Millennium, but it can and should be begun in the church, which then “becomes the workshop in which kingdom righteousness is pursued in the name of Christ.”³⁶ But promoting kingdom righteousness in the present time is not the mandate of the church, though progressives and others make it so.³⁷ In their discussion of the internal and external social and political ministry of the church, many broad-stroke slogans are used—such as pursuing righteousness, peace, justice (which are good)—and some specific suggestions are put forth—such as being concerned about power structures in the church. But the many particulars and any prioritizing on the basis of biblical references to social responsibilities are absent. In fact, in *Progressive Dispensationalism* only two Scripture references are included in the discussion of this subject.³⁸

The Scriptures contain many specifics about the social responsibilities of believers in areas such as the use of money, civic responsibilities, and vocation. But there are other clear and specific commands. How to catalog and prioritize them will differ. My own prioritized agenda is this: first, the cultivating of personal holiness; second, spreading the gospel; third, being involved in building Christ’s church; fourth, having a generous lifestyle.³⁹ The Scriptures call us to obey church ethics, not kingdom ethics, and to do good to all people as we have opportunity,

but especially to the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). Holistic redemption can easily lead to placing unbalanced, if not wrong, priorities on political action, social agendas, and improving the structures of society.⁴⁰

SOME SIGNIFICANT MATTERS SLIGHTED OR OMITTED

Now that enough books and articles have been written by progressive dispensationalists, it is fair to highlight some important matters omitted or slighted in their system.

1 The minimizing of a clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church results in ignoring the great prophecy of the seventy weeks in Daniel 9:24–27. Nowhere in the progressives' writings to date have I found any discussion of the passage, only very brief and occasional citations of the reference itself. Why is this so?

For one reason, the passage clearly distinguishes God's program for Israel (v. 24), which runs throughout the seventy weeks (and were decreed "for your people and your holy city"), from what occurs in the interval between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth weeks, which we now know to be God's program for the church. For another related reason, revisionists do not care for the concept of "parenthesis," which is too clearly part and parcel of the premillennial interpretation of Daniel 9:24–27. They seem to infer that to speak of the church as a parenthesis makes the church somehow less important in God's program. But, remember, one of the dictionary meanings of parenthesis is "interval," which is further defined as "a space of time between events." So the church can properly be called a parenthesis in God's program for Israel. And since it is, then God must have at least two programs within His overall plan. Recall, too, that there are many other scriptural examples of similar intervals.⁴¹

2 Noncharismatic Progressive Dispensationalists have not faced the question as to why signs and wonders are not characteristic of the church age if in fact Christ is already on David's throne. During our Lord's earthly life many signs validated His claim to be the promised Davidic king for Israel. Now that He is allegedly reigning as Davidic king

(according to progressives), why are there not miraculous signs happening today in the “already” stage of His Davidic reign?

3 While not denying the pretribulation Rapture or the literal tribulation period, revisionists do not give much attention to these aspects of eschatology. Blaising and Bock do not take obvious opportunities to mention the Rapture, and in one place (discussing 1 Thess. 5) they say only that the Rapture “would appear to be pretribulational.”⁴² They decry (as do many of us normative dispensationalists) the sensationalism of some interpreters of prophecy. But abuse of a doctrine is no reason for playing down the truth of that doctrine. Rather, it ought to make us more zealous to present it accurately and in a balanced fashion. Furthermore, there exists already in the writings of progressives a thrust toward positioning the Revelation as a book that is “difficult” to interpret. Playing up the imagery in that book, as some revisionists do, seems to play down a plain interpretation of it. The locusts in chapter 9 and Babylon in chapters 17 and 18 are examples of such “literal/symbolic difficulty” in interpreting the book.⁴³

4 The Millennium and the eternal state (particularly the new earth) seem to be less distinct in revisionism. Recall that in the progressive scheme of the dispensations, the last one, the Zionitic, was subdivided into two aspects: the Millennium and the Eternal State. Coming at this matter from the side of the amillennialist, recall that Poythress concluded that “provided we are able to treat the question of Israel’s relative distinctiveness in the Millennium as a minor problem, no substantial areas of disagreement [between progressive dispensationalism and covenant theology] remain.”⁴⁴ Couple this with some amillennialists’ view that Israel’s yet unfulfilled promises will be fulfilled on the new earth, and one wonders if eventually the need for a Millennium will be increasingly minimized by progressives. Bock (contrasting progressive with normative dispensationalism) reportedly said in 1992 that progressive dispensationalism is “less land centered” and less “future centered.”⁴⁵

One expects that there will be further revisions and changes in progressive dispensationalism as time passes. Where it will all lead and whether or not it will be understood and received by those who have

embraced normative dispensationalism, no one knows. But already progressive dispensationalism certainly appears to be more than a development within normative dispensational teaching. Some so-called developments are too radical not to be called changes.

Little wonder that some nondispensational critics of progressive dispensationalism see it as having already changed to covenant premillennialism or, at the least, clearly leading to that view. Willem VanGemeran (a covenant theologian) pointed out that “Bock agrees with covenant theology that the eschatological kingdom was inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus.”⁴⁶ Bruce Waltke, in appraising David Turner’s essay, says that his “position is closer to covenant theology than to dispensationalism.”⁴⁷ Walter A. Elwell thinks that progressive dispensationalism “will be warmly received by nondispensationalists” and concludes that “the newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference.”⁴⁸ And more, Poythress predicts that the progressives’ position “is inherently unstable. I do not think that they will find it possible in the long run to create a safe haven theologically between classic dispensationalism and covenantal premillennialism. The forces that their own observations have set in motion will most likely lead to covenantal premillennialism after the pattern of George E. Ladd.”⁴⁹

A concluding thought:

O wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!⁵⁰

NOTES

1. However, Kenneth L. Barker’s presidential address at the 33d annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on December 29, 1981, was a precursor of some of the views of progressive dispensationalism. His address, “False Dichotomies Between the Testaments,” appeared in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 1 (March 1982):3–16.
2. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 22–23.

3. Ibid., 14, 48.
4. Ibid., 47.
5. Ibid., 49–50.
6. Ibid., 53.
7. Ibid., 257–58.
8. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 53, 155.
9. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 257.
10. Darrell L. Bock, “Evidence from Acts,” in *A Case for Premillennialism*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 194.
11. Question and answer session at the Evangelical Theological Society, 22 November 1991.
12. Stephen J. Nichols gives detailed evidence of these similarities by means of side-by-side quotations from Ladd and Bock in an unpublished paper (“Already Ladd—Not Yet Dispensationalism: D. Bock and Progressive Dispensationalism”) read at a regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 2 April 1993. See also David A. Dean, “A Study of Enthronement in Acts 2 and 3” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, May 1992).
13. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 123.
14. Ibid., 270, 283.
15. Ibid., 271.
16. Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 51.
17. Darrell L. Bock, “Evidence from Acts,” in *A Case for Premillennialism*, 194.
18. George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 344.
19. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 220–21.
20. Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 229.
21. R. C. Sproul, “The Object of Contemporary Relevance,” in *Power Religion*, ed. Michael Horton (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 317.
22. Darrell L. Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 36–67. See especially p. 49.
23. See Zane C. Hodges, “A Dispensational Understanding of Acts 2,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 174–78. Hodges points out technical and theological errors in Bock’s use of Acts 2.
24. Stanley D. Toussaint, “The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 231–

32. The quote from William L. Lane is from *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 65n.93.
25. Elliott E. Johnson, “Hermeneutical Principles and the Interpretation of Psalm 110,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (October–December 1992): 434.
26. Toussaint, “The Contingency of the Coming of the Kingdom,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, 228–30. See also J. Randall Price, “Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 134–35.
27. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 170.
28. *Ibid.*, 209.
29. Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 48–49. But the coming of the Spirit is not mentioned in the promises prophesied in Jeremiah 31. It is mentioned in Isaiah 59:21.
30. This is the view of John R. Master (“The New Covenant,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 100–101). As supporting this view, he cites N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 176.
31. *Ibid.*, 102.
32. Blaising and Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 392–93, 59.
33. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 219–20.
34. Bertil Gartner, *The Temple and the Community in Qumran and the New Testament* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965).
35. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 56.
36. *Ibid.*, 289.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, 285–91. The two references are 2 Corinthians 4:7 and 1 Corinthians 13:12.
39. See my full discussion in *What You Should Know About Social Responsibility* (Chicago: Moody, 1982).
40. Note the revisionists’ use of the phrase “structural sin” in Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 287.
41. J. Randall Price, “Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 159–60 (where twenty-six examples are listed).
42. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 317n.15.
43. *Ibid.*, 91–96.
44. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 51.

45. Darrell Bock, quoted in "For the Love of Zion," *Christianity Today*, 9 March 1992, 50.
46. Willem VanGemeren, "A Response," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 334.
47. Bruce Waltke, "A Response," in *ibid.*, 348.
48. Walter A. Elwell, "Dispensationalisms of the Third Kind," *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, 28.
49. Poythress, "Postscript to the Second Edition," in *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presb. & Ref., 1994), 137.
50. Robert Burns, "To a Louse" (1786).

COVENANT THEOLOGY

Throughout this book a number of references have been made to covenant theology. Many of its features and characteristics have been noted and discussed, but the subject has nowhere been presented systematically. At this point there is, therefore, a need to systematize and emphasize some aspects of covenant theology. Remember, just because some covenant writers speak of dispensations (see chapter 2) and just because some dispensationalists embrace some of the Calvinism of Reformed theology does not make covenant, Reformed, and dispensational theologies less distinguishable.

DEFINITION OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

Formal definitions of covenant theology are not easy to find even in the writings of covenant theologians. Most of the statements that pass for definitions are in fact descriptions or characterizations of the system. The article in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* comes close to a definition when it says that covenant theology is distinguished by "the place it gives to the covenants" because it "represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by covenants: (1) the covenant of works, and (2) the covenant of grace."¹ This is an accurate description of the covenant system. Covenant theology is a system of theology based on the two covenants of works and grace as governing categories for the understanding of the entire Bible.

In covenant theology the covenant of works is said to be an agreement between God and Adam promising life to Adam for perfect obedience and including death as the penalty for failure. But Adam sinned and thus mankind failed to meet the requirements of the covenant of works. Therefore, a second covenant, the covenant of grace, was brought into operation. Louis Berkhof defines it as "that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God

promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience.”²

Some Reformed theologians have introduced a third covenant, the covenant of redemption. It was made in eternity past and became the basis for the covenant of grace, just described, between God and the elect. This covenant of redemption is supposed to be “the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given him.”³ These two or three covenants become the core and bases of operation for covenant theology in its interpretation of the Scriptures.

Of course, the labels “Reformed,” “Covenant,” and “Dispensational” are not completely mutually exclusive. Those who would accept one of these labels as characterizing his theology may also accept some of the teachings that fall under one of the other labels. Some covenant theologians speak of certain dispensations. Some dispensationalists mention the covenant of grace. Noncharismatic dispensationalists accept some of the points of Reformed theology, whereas charismatic dispensationalists would not. Therefore, though these labels are not totally mutually exclusive, they do serve the legitimate and helpful purpose of distinguishing systems of theology.

HISTORY OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

We should remind ourselves again that the antiquity of a doctrine does not prove its truth, nor does the recency of a doctrine prove its falsehood. James Bear, a covenant theologian, rightly said in an article against dispensationalism:

Doctrines may be new and yet not untrue. We believe that the Holy Spirit can lead the Church into new apprehensions of truth. Again, a doctrine may be new in the sense that it is the further development of a previously held doctrine, or it may be new in the sense that it contradicts the previously held views. Even in the latter case it may not be untrue, but certainly its validity must be subjected to a much more searching scrutiny.⁴

In the next section we will examine the scriptural support offered for covenant theology, but first we will survey the history of the development of what has come to be known as covenant theology. After

all, nearly every antidispensational writer attempts to make something of the relative recency of systematized dispensationalism. Those who are of the Reformed tradition always attempt to imply that dispensationalism is a mere infant compared to the ancient and wise man of covenant theology. Let us examine the “antiquity” of covenant theology, the causes for its development, and the refinements, if any, that have been made to the original system.

Systematized covenant theology is recent.⁵ It was not the expressed doctrine of the early church. It was never taught by church leaders in the Middle Ages. It was not even mentioned by the primary leaders of the Reformation. Indeed, covenant theology as a system is only a little older than dispensationalism. That does not mean it is not biblical, but it does dispel the notion that covenant theology has been throughout all church history the ancient guardian of the truth that is only recently being sniped at by dispensationalism.

Covenant theology does not appear in the writings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, or Melanchthon, even though they discussed at length the related doctrines of sin, depravity, redemption, and so on. They had every opportunity to incorporate the covenant idea, but they did not. There were no references to covenant theology in any of the great confessions of faith until the Westminster Confession in 1647, and even then covenant theology was not as fully developed as it was later by Reformed theologians. The covenant (or federal) theory arose sporadically and apparently independently late in the sixteenth century. The first proponents of the covenant view were reformers who were opposed to the strict predestinarianism of the reformers of Switzerland and France.

It is true that Calvin, for instance, spoke of the continuity of redemptive revelation and of the idea of a covenant between God and His people, but that was not covenant theology. The only way covenant theology can be discovered in the major Reformers is to do what one covenant theologian does, namely, not restrict the term “covenant theology” to “the more fully developed covenant theology of the seventeenth century.”⁶ But, of course, dispensationalists would never be allowed to point to any kind of undeveloped dispensationalism in any thinker before Darby!

The earliest traces of the covenant, or federal, idea are found in secondary reformers such as Andrew Hyperius (1511–1564), Kaspar Olevianus (1536–1587), and Rafael Eglinus (1559–1622). William Ames (1576–1633), who ministered in England and Holland and was a teacher of Cocceius, taught the covenant of works. Up to the time of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669), any teaching of covenant theology was not widespread, and its exponents were men whose influence was definitely secondary to the great reformers of the time and who were protesting the strict predestinarianism of those reformers.⁷

Cocceius was a German who was influenced by the teaching of Melanchthon. His training was in the less strict school of thought concerning predestination. As a teacher in Holland he was much concerned about the problems of Arminianism, on the one hand, and the harsh ways of the rigorous Calvinists on the other hand. He wanted to find a way to take theology back to the Bible and find its doctrines there rather than in the teachings of the strict Calvinism of his day. He was definitely of the Reformed group but desirous, along with others, of finding some way to blunt the sharp and highly debated views on predestination current in his day.

The great aim of his life was to lead theology back to the Bible, as its only living source, and to supply it with a vital foundation, gathered from the Bible itself. He believed that he found such a basis in the idea of a twofold covenant of God with man (*foedus naturale*, BEFORE, and *foedus gratia*, AFTER the fall). Thus he became the author of the federal theology, which made the historical development of the Revelation the ruling principle of theological inquiry, and of theology as a system, and thus became the founder of a purely biblical theology (as a history of Redemption). He adhered as closely as possible to predestinarian theology, but it was only a mechanical adhesion. It is not the idea of *election* of grace, but of a guidance of grace, which predominates in his whole system.⁸

Cocceius set forth his views in a work published in 1648. (Poiret's systematic work on dispensationalism was dated 1687.) In it Cocceius expounded the concept of two covenants: the covenants of works and of grace. In both, he said, man had a part to play and a responsibility to meet. He made these covenants the basis, background, and substance of all God's dealings with man for his redemption. Thus, Cocceius's contribution was a detailing and systematizing of the idea of the

covenants, giving a more prominent part to man in contrast to the rigorous predestinarianism of his day and making the covenant idea the governing category of all Scripture.

Cocceius, though the systematizer of covenant theology, was not entirely the father of it. Not only were some of the ideas of covenant theology found in earlier writers, as indicated above, but also the Westminster Confession's covenant of works and covenant of grace appeared one year before the publication of Cocceius's work on the subject. In the Westminster Confession the covenants are used more in the nature of general divisions of the purpose of God; in Cocceius the covenant idea received "an extension and systematic development which raised it to a place of importance in theology it had not formerly possessed. It not only is made by him the leading idea of his system ... but in his treatment the whole development of sacred history is governed by this thought."⁹

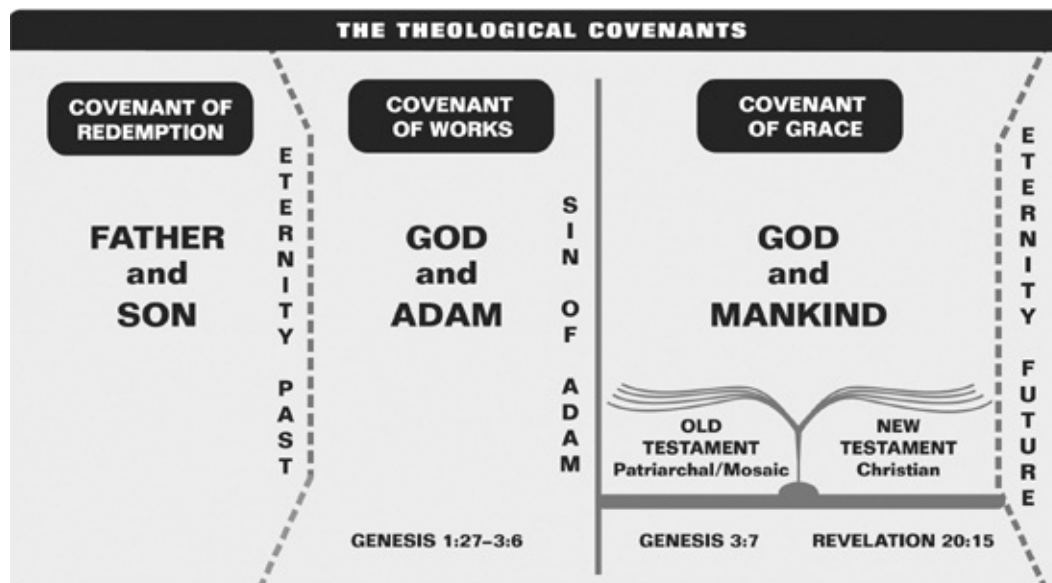
But whatever good Cocceius's work had done in countering the excesses of the Calvinism of his day was short-lived. Herman Witsius (1636–1708) was mainly responsible for extending the covenant of grace concept back into eternity. He paralleled the covenant idea with the decrees and extreme predestinarian position against which Cocceius was protesting. The Cocceian party repudiated Witsius's views, but they gained acceptance among subsequent covenant theologians.

The linking of the covenant of grace with the eternal decrees led some to introduce the third covenant of redemption made in eternity past between the persons of the Godhead as the basis for the covenant of grace. But that was a later development of the covenant scheme and is not in Cocceius or the Westminster Confession.

Covenant theology came to America with the Puritans through the writings of Francis Turretin and Herman Witsius, and was championed in the New World in the works of John Cotton and others. However, although the idea of the covenant of grace was often referred to, there was no agreement on the practical aspects of the doctrine, especially the position of children. This gave rise to the Halfway Covenant (Stoddardeanism), compromising practices in the churches, and a shift from a substitutionary view of the atonement to governmental and moral theories. Opposition to these unorthodox ideas and a reappearance of

covenant theology came in the writings of Charles and A. A. Hodge of Princeton.¹⁰

To sum up: Covenant theology is a post-Reformation development in doctrine. It began as a reaction to extreme Calvinism but soon became the handmaid of Calvinism. The covenant statement in the Westminster Confession is undeveloped; it was Cocceius who developed the idea and Witsius who made it a governing category of scriptural interpretation. Covenant theology as taught today is a development from both the theology of the Reformers (who did not teach a covenant scheme at all) and the teachings of Cocceius and the Westminster Confession. Covenant theology is not the theology of the Reformers; neither is covenant theology today the same as it was when originally introduced. Covenant theology is a refinement—and the refining did not antedate Darby by many years. Covenant theology cannot claim much more antiquity than dispensationalism, and in its present form it is considerably refined. If lack of antiquity is detrimental and refinement is disallowed for dispensationalism, then by the same two criteria covenant theology is discredited. And if these matters are basically nonessential for covenant theology, then they are likewise irrelevant in the critique of dispensationalism.



BIBLICAL BASIS FOR COVENANT THEOLOGY

The ideas and concepts contained in the covenants of works and grace are not unscriptural.¹¹ But they are ideas that are not systematized, formalized, and stated by Scripture as covenants. At least the dispensationalist finds the word *dispensation* used of one or two of his specific dispensations (Eph. 1:10; 3:9); the covenant theologian *never* finds in the Bible the terms *covenant of works* and *covenant of grace*. This does not prove that the concepts are not warranted, but it ought to make a covenant theologian go slow before he makes unfounded charges against dispensationalists for using the term *dispensation*. If the dispensationalist is in error in this regard, the covenant theologian is in gross error!

Nevertheless, the question is, What is the scriptural proof for the covenant of works and the covenant of grace? O. T. Allis wrote as follows concerning the scriptural basis for the covenant of works:

The relationship established in Eden has been properly called the covenant of works. That it promised life as the reward for obedience is not immediately stated. But it is made abundantly clear elsewhere, notably in Deuteronomy. The First Psalm is a poetical expounding of this covenant, and it has its counterpart in Romans 2:7–9.¹²

The passages from Deuteronomy that he cites in a footnote are 6:5, 10–12ff; 30:15–20. They have to do with life *in the Promised Land*, not in heaven.

His proof for the covenant of grace is this:

This covenant is first set forth cryptically in the words of the protevangel [Gen. 3:15], which promised Eve ultimate triumph over the enemy of her race. In this covenant, the emphasis is on faith. This is made clear in the wonderful words that are said of Abram: “And he believed in the Lord, and he accounted it to him for righteousness,” to which Paul appeals to show that Abraham was justified by faith and not by the works of the law.¹³

An older writer, A. A. Hodge, presents this as his first (of seven) scriptural proof for the covenant of grace: “As shown at the opening of this chapter such a Covenant is virtually implied in the existence of an eternal Plan of salvation mutually formed by and to be executed by three Persons.”¹⁴ His further proofs include John 17; Isaiah 53:10–11; John 10:18; Luke 22:29.

The point of this is not to conclude that these covenants are unscriptural but simply to show that they are deductions, not inductions, from Scripture. The existence of the covenants is not found by an inductive examination of passages; it is a conclusion deduced from certain scriptural evidence. Now, if it is permissible for the covenant theologian to base his entire system on a deduction rather than on a clear statement of Scripture, why can he not permit the dispensationalist to deduce the existence of various dispensations, especially when certain of the dispensations are specifically named in Scripture? The dispensationalist has more inductive evidence for the existence of the specific dispensations than does the covenant theologian for his covenants of works and grace; and the dispensationalist has as much, if not more, right to deduce his dispensational scheme as does the covenant theologian his covenant scheme.

What the covenant theologian does to make up for the lack of specific scriptural support for the covenants of works and grace is to project the general idea of covenant in the Bible and the specific covenants (like the covenant with Abraham) into these covenants of works and grace.¹⁵ No one disputes the fact that covenant is a very basic idea in Scripture and that a number of specific covenants are revealed in Scripture. But there remains still the reality that nowhere does Scripture speak of a covenant of works or a covenant of grace as it does speak of a covenant with Abraham or a covenant with David or a new covenant.

Seeking to support a revelation of the covenant of grace from Genesis 3:15, J. Barton Payne says, “Genesis 3:15 is, in fact, not even called a *b’rith* [covenant]; but it is necessarily assumed to be so, both because of the presence of all the important features and because of the development of all subsequent redemptive *b’riths* from it.” In the preceding sentence he states that those covenant features supposedly present in Genesis 3:15 are there only “in a most rudimentary form.”¹⁶ Allis calls the revelation of this important covenant in Genesis 3:15 cryptic. This is all very strange and hard to swallow, especially when the biblical covenants with Abraham, Israel, David, and others are so clearly and specifically revealed. Abraham had no doubt that a covenant was being made when God Himself passed between the pieces of the sacrifice (Gen. 15:17–21). And yet we are asked to believe in the existence of a

covenant of grace that was scarcely revealed, although it is the fountain-head out of which even the Abrahamic covenant came!

In another discussion of the covenant of grace, Herbert Carson cites Scripture references for (1) the covenant with Abraham, (2) the covenant on Sinai, (3) further covenants like the Davidic, and (4) the New Testament culmination. But there is *not one* reference from Scripture in the several sections that deal directly with the establishment of the covenant of grace or its characteristics. There are references concerning the blessings of salvation but none to support the covenant of grace.¹⁷ What is missing is rather significant and revealing.

Covenant theologians sometimes refer to dispensations as stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace. Cocceius distinguished three: one before the Mosaic Law, one under the law, and one after the law. Louis Berkhof preferred only two: the Old Testament and the New Testament dispensations.¹⁸ The Westminster Confession distinguishes the administration of the covenant of grace under the law and under the New Testament, concluding nevertheless that “there are not therefore two Covenants of Grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various Dispensations” (chapter VII, section VI). Contemporary covenant theologians, while citing their own interest in progressive revelation and biblical theology (begun in Reformed theology in 1948 by Geerhardus Vos), still hold to a “single covenant of grace” that is “substantially the same” in all of its administrations and that proclaims a “single way of salvation.”¹⁹

THE HERMENEUTICS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

Much has already been said in chapter 5 on the hermeneutical basis of dispensationalism and covenant theology. There is no need to repeat it here. Only two points concern us at this juncture.

The first is this: as a result of the covenant of grace idea, covenant theology has been forced to place as its most basic principle of interpretation the principle of interpreting the Old Testament by the New. So Berkhof writes, “The main guide to the interpretation of the Old Testament is certainly to be found in the New.”²⁰ Ladd, too, wrote that “the present writer is ready to agree with the amillennialist that there is

only one place to find a hermeneutic: in the New Testament.”²¹

Of course, there is everything right about letting the New Testament guide us in our understanding of the Old Testament, but there is everything wrong about imposing the New Testament on the Old. And that is exactly what the covenant theologian does under the guise of a basic hermeneutical principle that tries to make Christ all in all but that in reality is guilty of superimposing Him arbitrarily on the Old Testament. He does the same with the doctrine of the church and with the concept of salvation through faith in Christ.

The second point is this: as a result of this forced category of interpretation, covenant theology produces artificial exegesis. That is the verdict even of nondispensationalists against covenant theology. Listen to church historian George Fisher:

Cocceius carried the method of typical interpretation through the writings and the ceremonial institutions of the Old Testament. The exegesis in its particulars was often fanciful. Although he failed to apprehend the progressive character of Biblical revelation in this respect, that he made a system of grace pervade the Old Testament as it pervades the New, he yet made a fruitful beginning of Biblical theology.²²

James Orr, a Scottish theologian, assessed the results of the hermeneutics of covenant theology this way:

It failed to seize the true idea of development, and by an artificial system of typology, and allegorizing interpretation, sought to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old. But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the Covenant as an exhaustive category, and attempting to force into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds of simple and natural notions. It is impossible, e.g., to justify by Scriptural proof the detailed elaboration of the idea of a covenant of works in Eden, with its parties, conditions, promises, threatenings, sacraments, etc. Thus also the Reformed theology—the more that it had assumed this stiff and artificial shape—failed to satisfy the advancing intellect of the age.²³

This is a severe criticism from one who has no ax to grind for dispensationalism but who is looking at covenant theology from a historian’s perspective. Notice that Orr charges covenant theology with (1) forced interpretation, (2) artificiality, especially in typology, (3) no biblical proof for the covenant of works, and (4) failure to satisfy its

time. These are the results of the hermeneutics of covenant theology.

TWO WAYS OF SALVATION

We have pointed out that dispensationalists are charged with teaching two or more ways of salvation. One would think that this charge could never be leveled against covenant theology since its covenant of grace supposedly governs the way of salvation from Genesis 3:15 to the end of the Bible. Indeed, this pouring of the grace of God into a strait-jacket is, according to the dispensationalist, the weakness of the covenant position.

But what does the covenant theologian do with the matter of salvation under the law? Berkhof declares that “grace offers escape from the law only as a condition of salvation—as it is in the covenant of works—from the curse of the law.” In another place he says, “From the law ... both as a means of obtaining eternal life and as a condemning power believers are set free in Christ.”²⁴ Allis declares positively, “The law is a declaration of the will of God for man’s salvation.”²⁵ Even Payne, a covenant premillennialist, for all his effort to keep from indicating that salvation during the period of the law was by any means other than God’s forgiveness in anticipation of the work of Christ, apparently slips at one point: “From the Mosaic period and onward, nonpresumptuous sins (Lev. 5:3) were specifically forgiven via the ritual law (v. 10; cf. Ps. 19:13); and other intentional violations were included as well (cf. Lev. 5:1, 4).”²⁶

These are very odd statements to find in the writings of covenant theologians if, as they say, “salvation has always been one and the same; having the same promise, the same Saviour, the same condition, the same salvation.”²⁷ Indeed, the law was a declaration of the will of God for man’s salvation, and if sins could be forgiven via the ritual law, then covenant theology must be teaching two ways of salvation—one by law and one by grace! Covenant theology seems to teach the very “heresy” it accuses dispensationalism of teaching!

SUMMARY

We have discovered some interesting facts about covenant theology:

1 Its origin was relatively recent. It was not the doctrinal system of the ancient church. It did not originate with the Reformers, and actually its present form is a modification of the original covenant idea proposed by Cocceius and the Westminster Confession.

2 The theological covenants on which covenant theology is based are not specifically revealed in Scripture. Other covenants (such as the Abrahamic and Davidic) are specifically revealed, and in great detail, but the all-embracing covenants of covenant theology are not in the Bible. The whole covenant system is based on a deduction and not on the results of an inductive study of Scripture.

3 The hermeneutical straitjacket that covenant theology forces on the Scriptures results in reading the New Testament back into the Old and in an artificial typological interpretation. We discovered that this was also the verdict of some who were not dispensationalists.

4 For all its efforts to maintain a unity in the means of salvation, even covenant theology occasionally speaks about salvation by the Mosaic Law. Facetiously, one might ask if this means that covenant theology teaches two ways of salvation.

The point is simply this: The things charged against dispensationalism can be charged with equal justice against covenant theology. How important these charges are is another question, and in stating them nothing is implied about their importance. But if it is relevant to bring these accusations against dispensationalism, it is equally relevant to bring similar charges against covenant theology. If these matters are not relevant to covenant theology, then covenant writers would do well to stop trying to make so much of them in their attacks on dispensationalism.

NOTES

1. George N. M. Collins (minister in Edinburgh, Scotland), "Covenant Theology," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 144.
2. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 277.
3. *Ibid.*, 271.
4. James E. Bear, *Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace* (Richmond: Union Seminary

Review, 1938), 4.

5. Cornelius Van Til (“Covenant Theology,” in *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955], 1:306), a covenant theologian, affirms this: “The idea of covenant theology has only in modern times been broadly conceived.”
6. John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: Tyndale, 1954), 3.
7. W. Adams Brown, “Covenant Theology,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1935), 4:220–22.
8. John Henry Kurtz, *Text Book of Church History* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1888), 2:213.
9. James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 302–3.
10. See Peter Y. De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 87–191.
11. L. S. Chafer (*Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947], 1:42) said of the covenant of redemption, “This covenant rests upon but slight revelation. It is rather sustained largely by the fact that it seems both reasonable and inevitable.” John F. Walvoord (“The New Covenant,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994], 198) wrote, “The diversity of explanation [concerning the new covenant] is resolved, in this author’s view, by making a distinction between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace. The covenant of redemption involves the promise that Christ would redeem many by his death on the cross, and the covenant of grace provides that God will extend grace on the basis of this sacrifice to those who trust in Christ as their Savior.”
12. Oswald T. Allis, “The Covenant of Works,” in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), 97.
13. Ibid.
14. A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1928), 371.
15. As Murray does in *The Covenant of Grace*.
16. J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 92.
17. Herbert M. Carson, “The Covenant of Grace,” in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, 117–23.
18. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 292–93.
19. Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 40.
20. Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 160.
21. George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 138. Ladd, of course, was not an amillennialist.
22. George Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1896), 349.

23. Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*, 303–4.
24. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 291, 614.
25. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presb. & Ref, 1945), 39.
26. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, 414.
27. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 2:368.

ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

There are at least two reasons why a chapter on ultradispensationalism should be included in this book. First, it is necessary to distinguish the mainstream of dispensationalism from ultradispensationalism. Second, the charge that ultradispensationalism is only dispensationalism carried to its logical conclusion must be answered.

Dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism are related in some ways, but there are some basic differences between the two schools of thought. The primary one is the difference over when the church, the body of Christ, began historically. Dispensationalists say that the church began at Pentecost, while ultradispensationalists believe that it began with Paul sometime later. Both groups, however, recognize the clear distinction between Israel and the church, and both interpret the Bible literally. Nevertheless, this difference over the beginning of the church carries with it a number of other divergencies of teaching between the two groups. It affects the important matter of the ordinances, the relevance of the epistles, and the interpretation of the Gospels.

The prefix *ultra* is not a very accurate one when used as a theological label. It only means more extreme than the viewpoint held by the one who calls the other ultra! People who hold views all the way from mild Arminianism to thoroughgoing Calvinism have been called ultra-Calvinists. Some who are antidispensational label as ultradispensational what has been set forth as dispensationalism in this book. Anyone who divides biblical history into various dispensational periods is sometimes called ultradispensational.¹ That is either a confusion due to misapprehension or an attempt to ridicule by the misuse of the “ultra” label. It is usually a successful tactic in these days, for we tend to shy away from anything that is excessive and not in the mainstream of thought on life.

As mentioned, others insist that ultradispensationalism is only dispensationalism carried to its logical extremes. For instance, O. T. Allis declares, “Bullinger carried this method to such an extreme, a logical extreme we believe, that his teachings have been roundly denounced by what we may call the Scofield party; and Bullingerism has been stigmatized as ‘ultra’ Dispensationalism.”² Daniel Fuller follows the same line, as does John Gerstner.³

THE ORIGIN OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

Ultradispensationalism had its origin in the ministry and writings of Ethelbert W. Bullinger (1837–1913). He received his education at King’s College, London, and was an ordained Anglican clergyman. He was the author of seventy-seven works, including the *Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the Greek New Testament* and the *Companion Bible*. He was a scholar of repute, editor for nineteen years of a monthly magazine called *Things to Come*, and an accomplished musician.

His theology was a mixture. He held the heretical doctrine of the extinction of the soul between death and resurrection.⁴ He was silent on the final state of the lost, and many of his followers were and are annihilationists. In his sevenfold dispensational scheme Bullinger had two dispensations between Pentecost and the end of the church age. He placed the Gospels and the book of Acts under the Law and commenced the dispensation of the Church with the ministry of Paul after Acts 28:28. The prison epistles, therefore—Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians—set forth the fullness of the revelation of the mystery of this church age. He also denied that water baptism and the Lord’s Supper are for this age.

His dispensational teaching has been the fount of all the ultradispensational teachings from his day to the present. However, many ultradispensationalists do not teach soul sleep and annihilation. But almost all hold to the doctrine that the church did not begin at Pentecost but did begin with Paul (although I came across one group that believes the body of Christ began at Pentecost even though the group does not practice water baptism or the Lord’s Supper).

THE TYPES OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

The Extreme Type

In England, the extreme dispensationalism of Bullinger was promulgated by his successor, Charles H. Welch of London. He divided the book of Acts into three sections: (1) restoration, the period when the kingdom was reoffered to Israel in Acts 1–9; (2) reconciliation, the period of Jew and Gentile; and (3) rejection of the nation Israel, which was not actually fulfilled until Acts 28, when Israel was set aside. Such division is typical of this school of dispensationalism.

In America, the extreme type was promoted by A. E. Knoch and Vladimir M. Gelesnoff. Knoch is best known for his *Concordant Version of the Sacred Scriptures*, published in Los Angeles in 1926 and completely revised in 1930. Knoch was even more extreme than Bullinger, seeing four dispensations from Christ to Paul's prison ministry. His followers included a number of extremists who boldly advocated annihilation and universal reconciliation. Less radical and more true to the original position of Bullinger was Otis Q. Sellers of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He largely followed Welch in his view of Acts.

The Moderate Type

The most widely known and influential ultradispensationalists in America are those associated with the Worldwide Grace Testimony (now known as Grace Mission), Grace Gospel Fellowship, and Berean Bible Society. Cornelius R. Stam, J. C. O'Hair, and Charles F. Baker are perhaps the best-known names connected with these groups. *Berean Searchlight* and *Truth* are representative magazines, and Grace Bible College in Grand Rapids, Michigan (formerly Milwaukee Bible Institute), teaches their point of view. A number of books, pamphlets, and articles have come from the pens of men in the movement.

As to doctrine, this group is agreed that the church, the body of Christ, began with Paul and did not begin on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2; however, they are not of one mind as to when the church did actually begin. O'Hair placed its beginning at Acts 13, whereas Stam thought it began as early as Acts 9. In other words, they are sure when the church did not begin but not sure when it did begin! Because they begin the church before Acts 28 (in contrast to the extremist school),

they do observe the Lord's Supper but do not believe that water baptism is for this church age.

Comparison of the Two Types

Points of agreement:

1. The great commission of Matthew and Mark is Jewish and not for the church.
2. The ministry of the Twelve was a continuation of Christ's ministry.
3. The church did not begin at Pentecost.
4. Water baptism is not for this church age.
5. There is a difference between Paul's early and later ministries.
6. Israel, not the church, is the bride of Christ.

Points of difference:

1. When did the church begin?
Extreme: Acts 28 **Moderate:** before Acts 28
2. How long is the transition period in the book of Acts?
Extreme: until Acts 28 **Moderate:** until Acts 9 or 13
3. What is the proper place of the Lord's Supper?
Extreme: no place **Moderate:** proper to observe in the church
4. What Scripture is written to the church primarily?
Extreme: prison epistles only **Moderate:** other Pauline epistles also

THE DEFINITION OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

When one boils down the points of agreement and differences between the extreme and moderate schools of ultradispensationalism, he finds one outstanding difference remaining between ultradispensationalism and dispensationalism. It concerns the beginning of the church, the body of Christ. Virtually all ultradispensationalists, of whatever school, agree that it did not begin at Pentecost. All dispensationalists agree that it did. Therefore, ultradispensationalism may be defined, or certainly characterized rather definitively, as the school of interpretation that places more than one dispensation between Pentecost and the end of the

church age.

THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH IN ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

Ultradispensationalists are certain that the church did not begin at Pentecost. The extreme group, which follows Bullinger, thinks that it began with the revelation of the mystery of the body of Christ to Paul during his first confinement in Rome; that is, it began near or after the close of the record of the book of Acts. As a result, the ordinances are not valid for this age since they are not mentioned in the epistles written from that Roman imprisonment. The moderate group holds that the church began sometime before Paul wrote his first epistle, but exactly when is debated among those who hold this position.

O'Hair evidently believed that the church began with the pronouncement recorded in Acts 13:46—"We are turning to the Gentiles"—since after this event "there is no record that Paul or Peter, or any other messenger of the Lord, had divine authority to offer the prophesied kingdom to Israel, if that nation would repent."⁵ Stam holds that the church began before Acts 13, for to a degree the mystery was revealed to Paul at his conversion. "His conversion marked the *beginning* of the new dispensation."⁶ In other words, the church began in Acts 9. This is based on the fact that early in the book of Acts God was dealing with Jews and Peter was the chief spokesman. The church, they say, could not have begun until God was dealing with Gentiles and primarily through Paul. To be very accurate, one should say that the ultradispensationalist believes that the "body church" did not begin until after Paul came on the scene. The Jewish church did begin at Pentecost, but that is different from the church, the body of Christ.

The interpretation of the book of Acts, the relation of the Gospels, the ordinances, the offer of the kingdom are all corollary subjects of the ultradispensationalists' doctrine of the beginning of the church. But, whereas they are germane to the full development of ultradispensationalism, they are not relevant to the purpose of this chapter and reluctantly must be omitted.

ERRORS OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

Normative dispensationalists believe that there are some basic errors in the ultradispensational system, and, therefore, they reject the system as diverse from their own and reject any implication that the two are similar.

Erroneous Concept of a Dispensation

In this book a dispensation has been defined as a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. In relation to ultradispensationalism the definition raises this most pertinent question: Is something distinguishably different being done since Paul came on the scene that was not being done from Pentecost to the time of Paul? (It matters little whether "Paul's coming on the scene" means Acts 9; 13; or 28.) Were these features and characteristics and doctrine of the body church before Paul?

What the ultradispensationalist fails to recognize is that the distinguishableness of a dispensation is related to what God is doing, not necessarily to what He reveals at the time, and least of all to what man understands of His purposes. It is certainly true that within the scope of any dispensation there is progressive revelation, and in the present one it is obvious that not all of what God was going to do was revealed on the Day of Pentecost. These are economies of God, not of man, and we determine the limits of a dispensation not by what any one person within that dispensation understood but by what we may understand now from the complete revelation of the Word. Actually, we are in a better position to understand than the writers of the New Testament themselves.

Ultradispensationalists fail to recognize the difference between the progress of doctrine as it was during the time of revelation and the representation of it in the writing of the Scripture. On this point Thomas D. Bernard has well observed,

There would be a difference between the actual course of some important enterprise—say of a military campaign, for instance—and the abbreviated narrative, the selected documents, and the well-considered arrangement, by which its conductor might make the plan and execution of it clear to others. In such a case the man who read would have a more perfect understanding of the mind of the actor and the author than the man who saw; he would have

the whole course of things mapped out for him on the true principles of order.⁷

The distinguishable feature of this economy is the formation of the church, which is Christ's body. This is the work of God; therefore, the question that decides the beginning of this dispensation is, When did God begin to do this? not, When did man understand it? Only by consulting the completed revelation can we understand that God began to do this work on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 11:15–16; 1 Cor. 12:13; Col. 1:18). Therefore, whether Peter and the others understood it then does not determine the beginning of the dispensation. Since the distinguishable feature of the present dispensation is the formation of the church and since the church began at Pentecost, there has been only one economy from Pentecost to the present. The ultradispensationalist can only offer the distinguishing feature of a Jewish church as over against a Gentile church, which is the body of Christ, but such a distinction has no validity because there are Jews in today's Gentile church (even if it did not begin until after Pentecost) and because the baptism of the Spirit occurred in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Thus, the same economy has been operative since the Day of Pentecost.

Erroneous Exegesis of Key Passages

Passages concerning the church. Whatever church is mentioned before Paul is said by the ultradispensationalist to be the Jewish church and not the body church. This forces an artificial and unnatural interpretation of some very basic passages. Paul stated that before his conversion he persecuted the church of God (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). The natural understanding of these three references to the church is that it was the same church to which he and the converts won through his preaching were joined.

Furthermore, the first mention of the word *church* (Acts 5:11) in the book of Acts is described in terms of people being “added to the Lord” (v. 14 KJV). This cannot be a Jewish church since it is described in terms of its members being added to the Lord Jesus. As Harry Ironside said in commenting on this verse, “This was before Paul’s conversion. Observe it does not simply say that they were added to the company of believers, nor even to the assembly alone, but they were added to the Lord. This is only by a baptism of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ Similarly, the converts in Antioch

were said to have been “added unto the Lord” (Acts 11:24 KJV). It is significant to note that Stam has no comment on this phrase. He bases his argument that this church in Acts 5 was a Jewish one and not the body church on the fact that they were gathered in Solomon’s porch!⁹ Such forced exegesis of these passages using and explaining the word *church* before Paul came on the scene is erroneous exegesis.

Ephesians 3:1–12. Ultradispensationalists are fond of using this passage to attempt to prove that to Paul exclusively was revealed the mystery of the church, the body of Christ. If this is provable, then the mystery church, the body, could not have begun until Paul came on the scene. The most pointed critique of their use of this passage has been written (though unfortunately buried in a footnote) by dispensationalist Erich Sauer:

In Eph. 3:3, Paul does not assert that he was the first to whom the mystery of the church had been made known. He says only that the secret counsel that there is no difference in the church between Jew and Gentile, and the equal rights of the believing Gentiles and believing Jews had not been made known in the time (not before him personally but in general) before his generation, as it had now been revealed to “the holy apostles and prophets through the Spirit.” The plural “apostles and prophets” is to be noted as implying that the revelation was not to Paul alone, and it was made to them “through the Spirit,” not first by the agency of Paul (ver. 5). The “as it has *now* been revealed” may indeed suggest that this mystery had been hinted at in the Old Testament, but under veiled forms or types, and only now was properly revealed.

What Paul does declare is that he had received this mystery by “revelation” (ver. 3). But he says no word as to the sequence of these Divine revelations or the question of priority of reception. The emphasis of ver. 3 does not lie on “me” but on “revelation.” He does not use here the emphatic Greek *emoi*, but the unemphatic *mot*, and he places it (in the original text), not at the head of the sentence, but appends it as unaccented. On the contrary, to stress the word “revelation” he places it early in the sentence: “according to revelation was made known to me the mystery.” Here (as in Gal. 1:12) he does not wish to declare any priority of time for himself or that the revelation was given to him exclusively, but only that he stood alone in the matter independently of man. Not till Eph. 3:8, does he use the emphatic *emoi* and place it at the head of the sentence. But there he is not dealing with the first *reception* of the mystery but with his *proclamation* of it among the nations. This, of course, was then in fact the special task of Paul. He was the chief herald of the gospel to the peoples of the world.

If one says: “I received this information from Mr. Jones himself,” this does not assert that

Mr. Jones had not formerly mentioned the matter to others. Trans.¹⁰

Other Passages Concerning the Revelation of the Mystery

The extreme type of ultradispensationalism is easily refuted by several passages in which Paul says that he had been preaching the mystery long before the Roman confinement. In Romans 16:25–27 he makes the plain statement that throughout the years his preaching had been in accordance with the revelation of the mystery. (Bullinger said that these verses were added to the epistle after he reached Rome several years later.) First Corinthians 12 is a detailed revelation of the mystery of the relationships of the body of Christ. The epistle was written before the Roman imprisonment. The mystery of the body church was clearly revealed, known, and proclaimed before Acts 28.

Arguments like these have forced many ultradispensationalists into the school of the moderates. However, certain other considerations make clear that Paul was not the first or only one to speak of the mystery. The Lord said, “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd” (John 10:16). Furthermore, in the Upper Room, just before His crucifixion, He revealed the two basic mysteries of this church age. He told His disciples (Paul was not one of them), “In that day you shall know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (14:20). The “you in Me” relationship is that of being in the body of Christ, of which Jesus is the Head. The “I in you” relationship is that of His indwelling presence (Col. 1:27).

The body church relationship was thus revealed by the Lord before His death, and it would be operative “in that day” (i.e., at the day when the Holy Spirit would come to be “in” them, John 14:17). When did this happen? It occurred on the Day of Pentecost. On the Day of Pentecost, then, they were placed in Him, and the body church began. That they may not have understood it we do not question, but the dispensation began when God began to do His distinguishably different work, not when, or if ever, man understood it.

Baptism “in” the Spirit

Before His ascension the Lord promised the disciples that they would

be baptized *en pneumati* (“in the Spirit,” Acts 1:5). In 1 Corinthians 12:13 Paul explains that being placed in the body of Christ is accomplished by being baptized *en pneumati*. Since the promise of Acts 1:5 was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost (see 11:15–16), and if this is the baptism explained in 1 Corinthians 12:13 as effecting entrance into the body of Christ, that is an irrefutable argument for the body church’s beginning on the Day of Pentecost. The ultradispensationalist realizes the strength of this argument, and he is forced to argue for two baptisms. Acts 1:5, he says, is a baptism “with” the Spirit for miraculous power, and “this baptism with the Holy Spirit was not, of course, the baptism of Jews and Gentiles into one body.”¹¹ The baptism of 1 Corinthians 12:13 is “by” the Spirit, and this is the one that forms the body church.

Such a distinction is quite admissible as far as possible meanings of the Greek preposition *en* are concerned. The preposition does, at different times, mean “with,” “in,” and “by.” That is not contested. What is contested is the artificiality of making it mean one thing in Acts and another in 1 Corinthians *when it is used in exactly the same phrase with the word “Spirit.”*

For the sake of argument, let the ultradispensationalist face the possibility that in both instances it does mean the same and refers to the same baptism. Then his entire effort to make a separate dispensation of the early chapters of Acts of an alleged Jewish church crashes to the ground. It makes little difference how the *en* is translated. Translating it “in,” “with,” or “by” still refers to Spirit baptism, which began on the Day of Pentecost. The only normal and consistent way to understand these references to baptism *en pneumati* leads to the inescapable conclusion that the body of Christ began at Pentecost and that there was no separate dispensation of a Jewish church from Pentecost to the time of Paul. Even the ultradispensationalist acknowledges this: If *en* is the same in all occurrences “then it is obvious that Spirit baptism first took place at Pentecost.”¹² However, he insists that it cannot be translated the same way in all instances, thus proving two baptisms.

Normative dispensationalists usually translate the *en* as “with” in all passages except 1 Corinthians 12:13, where they translate it “by.” That makes Christ the agent of baptism in all but the 1 Corinthians passage, where the Spirit is the agent. But Acts 2:33 says that Christ is the

ultimate agent of the Pentecostal Spirit baptism of the Spirit because He was the one who sent the Spirit. Furthermore, to support two baptisms on the basis that the Pentecost baptism is into the Spirit, whereas the Corinthians baptism is into the body of Christ is tenuous. Both are true and both began at Pentecost, which is similar to the Spirit's ministry in sealing believers—He is both the Agent who seals and the sphere in which they are sealed. Similarly, the Spirit and Christ can both be the agents, and the spheres can be both the Spirit and the body of Christ. And the complete package began at Pentecost.

CONCLUSION

These errors—in the basic concept of a dispensation, in exegesis of key passages, in understanding when the mystery was revealed, in the baptizing ministry of the Spirit—are the reasons dispensationalists reject ultradispensationalism. The argument has been based not on the history or practice of the ultradispensational movement but strictly on biblical evidence, for this is the evidence on which any school of thought ought to be judged. And on this basis ultradispensationalism is rejected.

It should be clear, too, that on the basis of the evidence presented, dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism have very basic differences. While it is true that antidispensationalists can level similar charges against both groups, that does not make the teaching of both groups the same. After all, one can level quite similar charges against liberals and Barthians, but that hardly makes liberalism and neoorthodoxy similar doctrinal systems. The same is true of dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism.

NOTES

1. T. A. Hegre, *The Cross and Sanctification* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1960), 3.
2. Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presb. & Ref., 1945), 15.
3. Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 201–3; John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 204.
4. Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *The Rich Man and Lazarus or "The Intermediate State"* (London: Eyrie

& Spottiswood, 1902).

5. J. C. O'Hair, *Important Facts to Understand Acts* (Chicago: O'Hair, n.d.), 22.
6. Cornelius R. Stam, *Acts Dispensationally Considered* (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1954), 2:17.
7. Thomas Dehany Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 35.
8. H. A. Ironside, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1938), 33.
9. Stam, *Acts Dispensationally Considered*, 1:184.
10. Erich Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 73 n.
11. Stam, *Acts Dispensationally Considered*, 1:30.
12. Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 1971), 502.

A PLEA

This book has been written for two reasons: to correct some misconceptions about dispensationalism that have given rise to false charges against it, and to give a positive presentation of normative dispensational teaching. It is hoped that friends of dispensationalism will find it helpful to their own thinking. Certainly not everyone could be expected to agree with all the details presented. I do not claim to speak for all who call themselves dispensationalists, and I certainly do not endorse the divergencies of progressive/revisionist dispensationalism or ultradispensationalism.

This edition contains new or considerably expanded discussions on hermeneutics, the mystery character of the church, and progressive dispensationalism, as well as references to books and articles published since the original edition. But this book would not be complete without a plea for integrity and considerateness.

Every Christian has a right to his convictions about biblical truth, but as long as we are in earthly bodies none of us can be infallible. No one in any age has all the truth—not the apostolic fathers or the Reformers or dispensationalists or nondispensationalists. Nevertheless, we should hold with conviction the truth as we believe God has given us the understanding of it. False humility may be only a cover-up for unwillingness to take a stand for what one considers to be the truth. On the other hand, a cocksure attitude does not give credence to the limitations and fallibility of the human mind. “Broadmindedness,” “rethinking,” “rapprochement” can be used to cover a multitude of sins! The biblical mandate is well expressed in Paul’s words: “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15).

The dispensationalist, the revisionist, and the nondispensationalist have a right to feel that their understanding of the Bible is the true one, but none has the right to think or act as if he were the sole possessor of

truth. And certainly all have a right to expect to have their views represented fairly and with integrity. Nothing is gained for one's viewpoint by running down the opposition.

Unfortunately, the representation of the dispensational viewpoint has not always been with integrity. For instance, chapter 6 points out how unfairly the dispensationalists' teaching on the matter of salvation is represented. Neither the older nor the newer dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation, and it is not fair to attempt to make them appear so to teach. After all, a man has to be taken at his word or all means of communication break down. It is certainly fair to attempt to prove a position illogical, but it is never fair to misrepresent that position either by misquoting or selectively quoting. Straw men are easy to create, but the huff and puff it takes to demolish them are only huff and puff.

As pointed out in the first chapter, another method of attack is to associate dispensationalists with higher critics, or liberals, or to list the dispensational interpretation of a doctrine along with the neoorthodox or liberal. All of this is the guilt-by-association method and is entirely unworthy of any conservative who uses it.

Regrettably, some progressive dispensationalists appear to have promoted themselves by demeaning the dispensationalists who preceded them, people to whom they owe much and in whose camp they want to stay. Normative dispensationalism is a legitimate, worthy, and conservative viewpoint. Other Christians do not have to agree with it, but they should represent it fairly and treat its contributions with respect. This is simply a matter of Christian integrity and courtesy.

A sense of priority is also important. The temptation for any Christian preacher or writer to get off on a tangent or to ride a hobby horse is a very great one. That is true in doctrine, and it is true in matters of living. The age of specialization has caught up with the ministry so that some have lost their perspective of the whole counsel of God and their sense of priorities in proclaiming it. Knowing and proclaiming this whole counsel of God is our desire, yet we all need priorities in our proclamation of doctrine. Some doctrines in the Bible are more central than others. Paul placed a high priority on the right understanding of the gospel (Gal. 1:8–9). He placed a low priority on the doctrine of the observance of particular days (Col. 2:16–17). Some doctrines should be

given priority over others.

We who are dispensationalists would do well to remember this. "Dispensational truth" is not necessarily the most important thing in the Bible. Even prophecy, though a major theme, should not constitute the whole of one's preaching. The spiritual life, which is without question a high priority doctrine, can be overdone. This does not mean that a person should not be an expert or delve deeply in a certain area of truth, but it would seem to be more appropriate to ask God to give more experts in the whole counsel of God.

Of course, God gives gifts to the church as He wills. But nowhere in the Bible do we read that the gift of teaching is restricted to teaching dispensationalism or prophecy or Christian living. Neither do we read anywhere in the Bible that the gift of helps or the gift of showing mercy is only to be exercised on those who believe strictly as we do. The gifts are to the body, and the body is composed of dispensationalists and nondispensationalists!

We also need to be realistic about the matter of priority in fellowship. Fellowship means sharing in common, and all areas of fellowship are not equal, simply because they do not involve the same sharing. Fellowship on the horizontal plane (that is, with other human beings) is like a series of concentric circles.

The largest circle includes all people with whom we have a certain kind of fellowship. We are to do good to all (Gal. 6:10) and to show respect in our speech to all people, believers and unbelievers, simply because all were created in the image of God (James 3:9).

The next largest circle includes all Christians. We have a certain kind of fellowship with them regardless of their affiliations or beliefs. God has done something miraculous and eternal for every person in that circle of fellowship, and we all share in common that internal divine work.

Some of the smaller circles may be our particular church fellowship or a doctrinal fellowship, such as is shared in an educational or mission affiliation. It could also be a small group or a Sunday school class, or a group of Christians serving in a specific ministry.

Cutting across all these circles is the personal factor. We obviously do not share to the same extent the fellowship we have within a given

circle. Our Lord shared certain things with Peter, James, and John that He did not share with the others who were in that circle of the Twelve. As well as personal factors, there may be legitimate sociological factors that cut across the circles, and certainly geographical factors themselves limit fellowship.

The point is simply this: Circles of fellowship are not in themselves wrong; it is our failure or refusal to recognize some of them that is wrong. When someone fails to recognize the larger circles and builds a wall of doctrine or practice around the smaller one, refusing ever to move out of these circles for any reason, he is in error. Equally wrong is the attempt to make believers have the same kind of fellowship with all other believers and not allow them to have the smaller circles of fellowship. It is obvious, too, that one's circles of responsibility relate closely to the circles of fellowship.

Integrity exercised in all our varying relationships will do much toward cultivating proper relationships among conservatives who may differ on the dispensational issue. It may seem strange that a book supporting such a sharply debated matter as dispensationalism should close with an appeal for harmony. It is hoped that this point will be read as carefully as the points of disagreement. It would be wishful thinking to expect every reader of this book to become a convinced dispensationalist, but we sincerely hope that we may clear away some of the fog, settle some of the dust, and yet clearly see wherein we do differ and wherein we agree.

It may help to be reminded of some of the important doctrines to which dispensationalists subscribe wholeheartedly. After all, dispensationalists are conservatives 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 the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the future coming of Christ, and the eternal damnation of the lost. Those who are divided from us in the matter of dispensationalism or premillennialism may remember the areas in which they are united with us. As already noted, some doctrines are more important than others, so it particularly behooves us not to cut off our fellowship from those who share similar views about these important doctrines. There are few

enough these days who believe in the fundamentals of the faith, and to ignore those who have declared themselves on the side of the truth of God is unwise. Something is wrong with our circles of fellowship, sense of priority, or doctrine of unity when conservatives view fellow conservatives as the opposition party and then find their theological friends among those who are teaching and promoting error. There is something wrong, too, with our conception of wisdom and scholarship when we discount the teaching ministry of the Spirit.

There are, then, large areas of agreement between dispensationalists and nondispensationalists. Even within the area of disagreement (that is, the area of dispensational teaching), some points of agreement exist. Whether nondispensationalists want to acknowledge it or not, dispensationalists do believe in the unity of the plan of salvation, the unity of God's redeemed people of all ages, the present aspect of the kingdom of God, the single basis of salvation, and the spiritual seed of Abraham. Our differences with nondispensationalists lie in three areas: (1) we believe in the clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church; (2) we affirm that normal, or plain, interpretation of the Bible should be applied consistently to all its parts; and (3) we avow that the unifying principle of the Bible is the glory of God and that this is worked out in several ways—the program of redemption, the program for Israel, the punishment of the wicked, the plan for the angels, and the glory of God revealed through nature. We see all these programs as means of glorifying God, and we reject the charge that by distinguishing them (particularly God's program for Israel from His purpose for the church) we have bifurcated God's purpose. Actually, the biblical revelation does more than bifurcate God's purpose (which means to divide in two); it divides it into at least five distinct purposes, all of which are united in the single purpose of glorifying God. Why this should be such a stumbling block to nondispensationalists as well as to progressive dispensationalists is a puzzle, especially when it seems to be clear from Scripture that God has multiple purposes.

Our differences with the new progressive dispensationalism include denying that Christ is now reigning in heaven on the throne of David. Revisionists seem to forget that appointment of Christ as the Davidic king does not necessarily mean that His reign as such has begun. Also,

subsuming the church under the larger umbrella of the kingdom (not clearly defined) dilutes the mystery character of the church. We teach the real (not merely symbolic) meaning of the baptism of the Spirit forming the body of Christ in this dispensation, and the importance of the distinct interval between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Daniel 9:24–27. Revisionists emphasize the overall Christological purpose of God rather than the doxological purpose, as does classic dispensationalism.

The basic distinctions of classic, or normative, dispensationalism as explained in this book, though sometimes challenged or changed, remain the bedrock teaching of the dispensational approach to understanding the Bible. And we believe the use of normative dispensational principles to be the best help one can use to interpret the Bible correctly and consistently.

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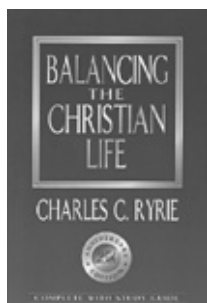
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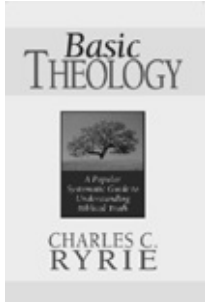
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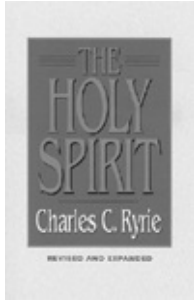
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