



## Eschatology – A Study of the End Times

### Lesson 1: Dispensationalism versus Covenant Theology

#### Introduction

How is a believer to understand the storyline of the Bible? Throughout the history of the church, there have been systems of theology that have offered their understanding of God’s purposes and storyline as revealed in Scripture. Some of the main systems of theology include Dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, and Progressive Covenantalism. Each of these systems have argued for their understanding of what God is accomplishing in the world.

While these systems have their differences, it must be noted the commonality that these systems have. They agree on many things such as: 1) the Trinity, 2) the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, 3) the person and work of Christ, and 4) how a sinner is saved. However, there are disagreements that these systems have as well. These disagreements include issues such as: 1) the kingdom of God, 2) the covenants revealed in the Bible, 3) the law, 4) who the people of God are, and 5) the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. In order to understand the storyline of the Bible, one must understand these key issues and what the Bible says about them.

From Genesis to Revelation, the storyline of the Bible is important. However, different systems of theology will emphasize differences in this storyline. In the sections below, we will give a broad overview of the two main systems of theology—Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. We will look first at Covenant Theology.

#### Covenant Theology and Its Distinctives

Covenant Theology traces back to the Reformation where Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), sometimes called “the father of covenant theology,” played a key part in the development of Covenant Theology.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest statements of Covenant Theology can be found in the Westminster Confession of 1647.<sup>2</sup>

Covenant Theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works (also called the Adamic Covenant) and the covenant of grace. Covenant Theology teaches that God made a covenant of works with Adam in Eden by which He promised eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed, and death entered the human race. However, God did something to resolve this problem by entering into a covenant of grace through which sin and death would be

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014), 537.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 540.

overcome. The covenant of grace is a covenant made by God with the elect in which He offers salvation to the elect sinner in Christ. Covenant Theology teaches that Christ is the ultimate mediator of God's covenant of grace. There are some covenant theologians who hold to three covenants: works, grace, and redemption. Covenant theologians who hold to a covenant of redemption believe a covenant was made between God the Father and God the Son in eternity past in which they covenanted together for the redemption of the human race by which the Father appoints the Son to be the mediator and whose life would be given for the salvation of the world.<sup>3</sup>

A core distinctive of Covenant Theology is how the Bible is interpreted. Covenant theologians emphasize using the New Testament to reinterpret the Old Testament. They often stress the New Testament as their starting point for understanding the Old Testament, especially Old Testament prophetic passages about Israel. This is what leads to a 'non-literal' understanding of the Old Testament texts.<sup>4</sup> They will emphasize *types* and *shadows* in the Old Testament and use the New Testament to reinterpret what they see only as types and shadows.

Those who hold to Covenant Theology often spiritualize (or allegorize) Scripture, especially regarding Israel and the church. "Israel" is made to mean "the church" in much of their interpretation. However, as Paul Enns states, "A lexical and concordance study of the word *Israel* will demonstrate that Israel is never used in an allegorical sense; it always means the physical posterity of Jacob."<sup>5</sup> Because of this interpretation, those who hold to Covenant Theology do not see national Israel as a key player in the future of God's redemptive plan.

As a result of spiritualizing the Bible, another core distinctive of Covenant Theology is what is known as replacement theology. Replacement theology teaches that the church has replaced Israel in God's program and that the church is the new Israel.<sup>6</sup> They teach that since Israel has rejected Jesus as their Messiah, God has replaced Israel with the church and, therefore, Israel no longer has a future in God's program. They teach that the promises that God made to Israel have been fulfilled in the church.<sup>7</sup>

Covenant Theology also focuses primarily on individual salvation and spiritual issues. The three covenants of Covenant Theology are mainly concerned with human redemption of God's elect. The covenant of works is about eternal life being based on works or merit. The covenant of grace is about salvation by grace alone for the elect. The covenant of redemption involves a covenant in the past between the Trinity to save the elect. However, Dispensationalism focuses not only on individual salvation but also more broadly on God's creation and kingdom purposes.<sup>8</sup> So, what are some of the main distinctives of Dispensationalism?

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 542.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths, Revised and Updated* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2017), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Enns, 545.

<sup>6</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, gen. eds. *Biblical Doctrines: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 747.

<sup>7</sup> Enns, 543.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Vlach, *Dispensational Hermeneutics: Interpretation Principles that Guide Dispensationalism's Understanding of the Bible's Storyline* (Monee, IL: Theological Studies Press, 2023), 11-12.

## Dispensationalism and Its Distinctives

While reformed theology focuses primarily on bibliology and soteriology, Dispensationalism is primarily concerned with the doctrines of ecclesiology (church) and eschatology (end times). Dispensationalism is a relatively new theology beginning in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Although the origin of a systematized dispensational theology is linked with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), the foundations and initial developments are traced back to early church leaders such as Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165), Irenaeus (A.D. 130-200), Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-220), and Augustine (A.D. 354-430).<sup>9</sup> There are other more modern developments of Dispensationalism that have come from men such as Pierre Poiret (1646-1719), John Edwards (1637-1716), Isaac Watts (1674-1748), and C. I. Scofield (1843-1921).

What is meant by *dispensation*? A dispensation may be defined as “a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”<sup>10</sup> Often times Dispensationalism is associated with “seven dispensations”<sup>11</sup> which Darby taught, but that is not really at the heart of Dispensationalism. A dispensationalist is simply one who recognizes that God deals differently with people in different ages or economies. Lewis Sperry Chafer used to say that if one does not bring a lamb to the altar in worshipping God, then he is a dispensationalist.<sup>12</sup> Another example would be someone who worships on Sunday instead of Saturday because he recognizes the Sabbath in Exodus 20:8-11 was given for Israel, not the church.

In 1965, Charles Ryrie offered three defining marks that he considered to be the essentials to Dispensationalism: 1) a distinction between Israel and the church; 2) a literal interpretation of all Scripture, including prophecy; and 3) the underlying purpose of God in the world is the glory of God.<sup>13</sup> Ryrie’s defining marks were well received and often became a starting point for defining Dispensationalism. While the glory of God is a defining mark of Dispensationalism, it would be unfair to say that Covenant theologians do not take the glory of God seriously as well.

Considering Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, there are three main distinctives that set Dispensationalism apart from Covenant Theology. The first one is the distinctiveness of Israel and the church. Dispensationalism teaches that the church began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and is not to be identified with Israel. All dispensationalists reject replacement theology.

The second distinctive of Dispensationalism is that dispensationalists believe that there is a future in God’s plan for Israel. Paul says in Romans 11:1, “I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.” Dispensationalism teaches that God has a distinct program for Israel and a distinct program for the church. The commands that God gives to one are not the commands given to the other; and the promises made to one are not the promises given

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<sup>9</sup> Enns, 553.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 557.

<sup>11</sup> Those seven are: 1) Paradise to the Flood; 2) Noah; 3) Abraham; 4) Israel; 5) Gentiles; 6) The Spirit; and 7) The Millennium.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 560.

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 43-47.

to the other. For example, Israel is commanded to keep the Sabbath (Exodus 20:8-11), but the church does not meet on Saturday, we meet on Sunday, the Lord's Day (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2).

A third distinctive of Dispensationalism is the approach to hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the science and art of Bible interpretation. It is a science in that there are objective rules and principles for understanding the Bible that transcend time and place. It is also an art because applying objective rules and principles is a skill.<sup>14</sup> Dispensational hermeneutics seek to interpret the Bible in a literal manner while non-dispensationalists do not. One of the main differences between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists is how each group views the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments. Dispensationalism seeks to keep the Old Testament as the reference point when interpreting the Old Testament. Non-dispensationalists, however, seek to emphasize the New Testament as their starting point for understanding the Old Testament. Dispensationalism seeks to give the authorial intent of the Old Testament writers in accord with historical-grammatical hermeneutics.

As Bible interpretation relates to eschatology and prophetic Scripture, Dispensationalism recognizes that the Bible uses both literal and figurative language. However, dispensationalists insist on a literal interpretation of prophetic passages even though those passages may use figurative language. What is meant by "literal?" *Biblical Doctrines* states, "Scripture should be understood in its literal, natural, and normal sense. While the Bible does contain figures of speech and symbols, they are intended to convey literal truth. In general, however, the Bible speaks in literal terms and must be allowed to speak for itself."<sup>15</sup> The meaning of literal interpretation does not negate figurative language. For example, Jesus says in John 10:7, "Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep." It is understood that Jesus is using figurative language (John 10:6) as He is not a literal door. In interpreting prophetic passages, Dispensationalism does not deny the use of figurative language, but it always seeks to find the literal truth conveyed by that figurative language.

## Conclusion

While there are many areas of doctrine that covenant theologians and dispensationalists agree on, Dispensationalism seems to be the most biblical approach for many reasons. First, Dispensationalism seeks to be consistent with a literal interpretation of the Bible. This means the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel are taken seriously. Second, the Bible is clear that God has a future for Israel that is distinct from the church. God gave unconditional covenants to the nation of Israel (Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenant) that must be fulfilled with Israel. Dispensationalism emphasizes the complete and literal fulfillment of both the spiritual and physical promises of the biblical covenants. Finally, while Covenant Theology often focuses primarily on personal salvation, which is important, it limits the storyline of the Bible. Dispensationalism holds that personal salvation is a part of God's broader kingdom purposes in which the reconciliation of all things involves not just personal salvation, but everything in the universe (Col. 1:15-20).<sup>16</sup> Dispensationalism seems to be the best way to explain God's purposes in the storyline of the Bible.

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<sup>14</sup> Vlach, *Dispensational Hermeneutics*, 9 (footnote).

<sup>15</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrines*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 24-24.