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May 2009

## Covenants and Dispensations

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## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part I

by Thomas Ice

The Bible speaks of covenants (Gen. 6:18; Ex. 6:4–5; Jer. 31:31–33, etc.) and dispensations (Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25, etc.). Since the Reformation, the two major systems of conservative Protestant theology have developed around covenants and dispensations. It will be interesting to launch an investigation into these two important biblical items. I want to examine the biblical use of covenants and dispensations and also look at the systems of theology known as covenant theology and dispensationalism.

### WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

Covenant theology is not a system of theology developed directly from the biblical covenants, as one might first suspect. Instead it is a system of theology based upon speculation about abstract covenants in an attempt to organize Scripture into a system of theology. Charles Ryrie observes: “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.”<sup>1</sup> The following is a statement of covenant theology by a proponent:

It represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by two covenants: (1) the covenant of works, and (2) the covenant of grace. The *parties* to the former covenant were God and Adam. The promise of the covenant was life. The proviso was perfect obedience by Adam. And the penalty of failure was death. To save man from the penalty of his disobedience, a second covenant, made from all eternity, came into operation, namely, the covenant of grace. . .

The covenant of grace is treated under two aspects. The first is a Godward aspect, under which it is sometimes called the covenant of redemption. The *parties*, under this aspect, are God and Christ; the *proviso* is the Son’s perfect obedience even to his suffering the penalty of man’s disobedience, namely, death; and the *promise* is the salvation of all believers, *parties* are God and the believer; the *promise* eternal life; and the *proviso* faith in Jesus Christ as the only “work” required of the believer (John 6:29).<sup>2</sup>

“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,” says Ryrie.<sup>3</sup> Covenant theology is a system of theological reasoning that believes God runs history via a covenant of works, grace and perhaps one of redemption. This is their big organizing principle for all the Bible and history. Covenant theologian, Mark Karlberg tells us, “Biblical history is structured in terms of a series of distinct covenants.”<sup>4</sup>

### LACKING SPECIFIC BIBLICAL SUPPORT

Covenant theology has many wonderful aspects to it, like its emphasis upon the grace of God. However, covenant theology is not the product of an inductive study of the Bible. Even though a great deal has been written on the subject of covenant theology by its advocates (usually within the realm of Reformed Theology), I have never found anyone who develops their view of this subject directly from an inductive

study of Scripture. I have never found anyone who points to specific Bible passages and says, "This teaches the covenant of works or the covenant of grace." Instead, the case for covenant theology is normally developed from abstract assumptions made by theologians about how God has conceived His plan for salvation to be worked out in history. One covenant theologian says, "that only (historic) Reformed theology provides the system of doctrine necessary for an exposition of the divine covenants which is faithful to the teaching of Scripture."<sup>5</sup> Notice he doesn't say that the Bible teaches covenant theology, but rather that it "provides the system of doctrine" that one needs to approach Scripture with in order to properly understand its teaching on this subject. This is a tacit admission that covenant theology is not really taught in the Bible. The subject of covenants in the Bible is well established, but not the system we know as covenant theology.

Some covenant theologians attempt to justify their theology by demonstrating that covenant is a recurrent and important theme throughout Scripture. This is certainly the case! "The Bible is very much a covenant document, as even a cursory reading of Scripture demonstrates," declares covenant theologian Ken Gentry. "That the covenant idea is a dominant biblical theme is held by a host of Bible scholars."<sup>6</sup> Dispensationalists whole-heartedly agree that covenant is a prominent theme in Scripture, but the real issue is whether the Bible teaches the system known as covenant theology. I agree with Renald Showers who notes, "Covenant Theology attempts to develop the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of covenants."<sup>7</sup>

#### **THE BIBLICAL ROLE OF COVENANT**

Dispensationalists like myself readily agree with covenant theologians about the important role that covenants play in the relationship between God and man in Scripture. Karlberg is absolutely right when he says, "The relationship between God and humanity is, in a word, covenantal. God does not deal with his creation apart from covenant."<sup>8</sup> I think Karlberg has hit the nail on the head when notes that the role of covenant in God's plan for history is that they mediate the relational interaction between God and mankind. I believe that it is the dispensations (which I will be dealing with in the future) that reveals God's plan for history. Yet, Karlberg has correctly said of covenant theology: "Biblical history is structured in terms of a series of distinct covenants."<sup>9</sup> In the Bible covenants deal with relationship, while dispensations relate to history. Thus, covenant theology imposes a contrived framework upon the teachings of Scripture relating to God's plan for history, as revealed through progressive revelation and the dispensations.

An example of how covenant theology can lead to a distortion of what the Bible actually teaches is found in the way that they normally deal with issues relating to national Israel. Since covenant, specifically the covenant of grace provides the organizing structure for their view of history, everything must be seen in terms of such a paradigm. Since their goal for history is personal salvation within the current age and since this age is the climax of history, then there can be no future for national Israel. The details of Old Testament prophecy, nowhere contradicted in the New Testament, speak of a future time of blessing for national Israel when she returns to the Lord in obedience. Yet these Old Testament prophetic details are interpreted as merely allegorical illustrations or types of personal salvation for the New Testament believer. Covenant theology's presupposition of theological order requires a certain kind of interpretive approach (due to its theological reductionism) and isolates theological order from historical development. When the Old Testament passages are read

historically, instead of through the soteriological lens of covenant theology, then they clearly speak of a future time of national Israel's blessing as head over all the nations.

The biblical role of covenant is not to provide a framework for biblical history, instead, it is to define relationships between God and mankind that He is working out through a diverse plan for history as expressed through the various dispensations. Covenant theology distorts both the covenants and God's revealed plan for history.

#### WHAT IS A BIBLICAL COVENANT?

Most covenant theologians do a good job of defining a biblical covenant. Gentry tells us the following about covenant: "The Hebrew *berith* occurs 285 times in the Old Testament, while the Greek word *diatheka* appears thirty times in the New Testament."<sup>10</sup> "Essentially, 'covenant' is a bond or relationship between two parties," declares Karlberg. "In the covenants between God and humanity, the Lord God sovereignly imposes the terms of these arrangements in accordance with his own will and good pleasure."<sup>11</sup>

What is the nature of the biblical covenants? First, covenants are contracts between individuals for the purpose of governing that relationship. God has bound Himself to His people and swore to keep His promises so that He can demonstrate in history that He is faithful. Second, relationships in the Bible, especially between God and man are legal or judicial. Since there is a legal aspect they are mediated through covenants. Covenants usually involve intent, promises, and sanctions.

There are three major kinds of covenants in the Bible:

- The ROYAL GRANT Treaty (unconditional)—a promissory covenant that arose out of a king's desire to reward a loyal servant.

##### EXAMPLES:

The Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1–3; 15; 17:1–21)  
The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:4–17)

- The SUZERAIN-VASSAL Treaty (conditional)—bound an inferior vassal to a superior suzerain and was binding only on the one who swore.

##### EXAMPLES:

Chedorlaomer (Genesis 14)  
Jabesh-Gilead serving Nahash (1 Samuel 11:1)  
The Adamic Covenant (Genesis 2:15–25; Hosea 6:7)  
The Noahic Covenant (Genesis 8:20—9:17)  
The Mosaic Covenant (Book of Deuteronomy)

- The PARITY Treaty—bound two equal parties in a relationship and provided conditions as stipulated by the participants.

##### EXAMPLES:

Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21:25–32)  
Jacob and Laban (Genesis 31:44–50)  
David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18:1–4; cf. 2 Samuel 9:1–13)  
Christ and Church Age believers, i.e., "friends" (John 15)

There are at least eight covenants in the Bible as follows:

- The EDENIC Covenant (Genesis 1:28-30; 2:15-17)
- The ADAMIC Covenant (Genesis 3:14-19)
- The NOAHIC Covenant (Genesis 8:20—9:17)
- The ABRAHAMIC Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3, etc.)
- The MOSAIC Covenant (Exodus 20—23; Deuteronomy)
- The DAVIDIC Covenant (2 Samuel 7:4-17)
- The LAND OF ISRAEL Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:1-10)
- The NEW Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-37, etc.)

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> George N. M. Collins, "Covenant Theology" in Everett F. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 183.

<sup>4</sup> Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), pp. 107-08.

<sup>7</sup> Renald E. Showers, *There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Gentry, *Dominion*, p. 107.

<sup>11</sup> Karlberg, *Covenant Theology*, p. 11.

## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part II

by Thomas Ice

Another way of breaking down differences in biblical covenants is to arrange them according to whether they are conditional or unconditional covenants. Conditional covenants are agreements between at least two entities in which there are stipulations that must be kept by both parties. Failure to keep conditions of the covenant leads to the implementation of stated sanctions or nullification of the agreement. The Suzerain-Vassal Treaty format is an example of a conditional covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was given in this format and is a clear instance of a conditional covenant as can be seen through the many stipulations that Israel was to keep. At this point, however, I want to focus on unconditional covenants in the Bible.

An unconditional covenant is made when only one party is obligated to keep the stipulations of the agreement as in a Royal Grant. This point is important for Bible prophecy because at stake is whether or not God is obligated to fulfill His promise specifically to the original parties of the covenant. For example, I believe that God must fulfill to Israel as a national entity those promises made to them through unconditional covenants like the Abrahamic, Davidic, and Land of Israel covenants. If this is true, then they must be fulfilled literally and that means many aspects are still future. Arnold Fruchtenbaum explains:

An unconditional covenant can be defined as a sovereign act of God whereby God unconditionally obligates Himself to bring to pass definite promises, blessings, and conditions for the covenanted people. It is a unilateral covenant. This type of covenant is characterized by the formula I will which declares God's determination to do exactly as He promised. The blessings are secured by the grace of God.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

Genesis 12:3 records God's promise to bless those who bless Abraham and his descendants (i.e., Israel). The Abrahamic covenant is directed to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and their descendants and focuses on God's promise to give the land of Israel to the Jews. It is repeated to them at least twenty times in Genesis alone (12:1-3, 7-9; 13:14-18; 15:1-18; 17:1-27; 22:15-19; 26:2-6, 24-25; 27:28-29, 38-40; 28:1-4, 10-22; 31:3, 11-13; 32:22-32; 35:9-15; 48:3-4, 10-20; 49:1-28; 50:23-25).

Confirmation of the covenant is given in Genesis 15 when God sealed the treaty through a unique procedure whereby He put Abram into a deep sleep and bound Himself to keep the covenant regardless of Abraham's response. Since God is the only one who swore to keep the covenant, then it is clearly an unconditional covenant dependant solely upon God. Thus, we can be absolutely confident that He will bring to pass every stipulation of the agreement.

That the Abrahamic Covenant is a Royal Grant and an unconditional covenant may be seen from an examination of the expressions found in Genesis 26:5 compared with parallel expressions in the ancient near east. Genesis 26:5, a text regarding Abraham's response to his covenant with Yahweh says: "because Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws." The term "law" is from the Hebrew *torah* which means "to direct, teach, or instruct." The verbs of Genesis 26:5 are "obeyed" (similar terminology found at Amarna in covenant contexts),

referring to Abraham's obedience to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:1-2), and "kept," where Abraham kept the instruction of Yahweh, paralleling an Assyrian grant where Ashurbanipal rewarded his servant Bulta with a grant because he "kept the charge of my kingship." These verbs indicate a personal relationship rather than a legal code of ethics. Thus, obedience to *torah* comes from the relationship of covenant.

Robert Dean elucidates the idea that the covenant the Lord initiated with Abraham came not out of compulsion to some legislation but as a response to God:

A close examination of the context reveals no covenant stipulations which could be viewed as pure legislative or ethical codes. What the context does reveal is that God has praised His servant Abraham because he has been faithful to do whatever the Lord instructed him to do. He did it not out of compulsion to legislation, but in a faith response to the instruction of God.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, the Abrahamic covenant is an unconditional pact in which God's sovereign election of Abraham and his descendants are revealed and God's decrees for them are declared. Dr. Eugene Merrill tells us:

As most scholars now recognize, the covenant and its circumstances were in the form of a royal (land) grant, a legal arrangement well attested in the ancient Near East. . . . the Abrahamic Covenant, . . . must be viewed as an unconditional grant made by Yahweh to His servant Abram, a grant that was to serve a specific and irrevocable function.<sup>3</sup>

#### COVENANTAL STIPULATIONS

There are three major provisions of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-3). They are summarized as (1) *land* to Abram and Israel, (2) a *seed*, and (3) a worldwide *blessing*. A more complete breakdown of the covenant can be seen in its fourteen provisions gleaned from the major passages containing the treaty and its reconfirmations. Fruchtenbaum lists them as follows:

- a. A great nation was to come out of Abraham, namely, the nation of Israel (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 17:1-2, 7; 22:17b).
- b. He was promised a land specifically, the Land of Canaan (12:1, 7; 13:14-15, 17; 15:17-21; 17:18).
- c. Abraham himself was to be greatly blessed (12:2b; 15:6; 22:15-17a).
- d. Abraham's name would be great (12:2c).
- e. Abraham will be a blessing to others (12:2d).
- f. Those who bless will be blessed (12:3a).
- g. Those who curse will be cursed (12:3b).
- h. In Abraham all will ultimately be blessed, a promise of Gentile blessing (12:3c; 22:18).
- i. Abraham would receive a son through his wife Sarah (15:1-4; 17:16-21).
- j. His descendants would undergo the Egyptian bondage (15:13-14).
- k. Other nations as well as Israel would come forth from Abraham (17:3-4, 6; the Arab states are some of these nations).
- l. His name would be changed from Abram to Abraham (17:5).
- m. Sarai's name was to be changed to Sarah (17:15).

n. There was to be a token of the covenant—circumcision (17:9-14) and so according to the Abrahamic covenant, circumcision was a sign of Jewishness.<sup>4</sup>

The above breakdown of the Abrahamic covenant exhibits a wide variety of promises that will prove to give direction to an interesting history for Israel and the world. Fruchtenbaum notes that fulfillment of these fourteen promises are distributed among the following three parties:

- a. ABRAHAM—The following promises were made to Abraham: a, b, c, d, e, f, i, k, l, m.
- b. ISRAEL, THE SEED—The following promises were made to Israel: a, b, e, f, g, j, n.
- c. GENTILES—The following promises include Gentiles: f, g, h, k.<sup>5</sup>

John Walvoord summarizes the importance of the Abrahamic covenant as foundational to the study of God's plan for history:

The Abrahamic covenant contributes to the eschatology of Israel by detailing the broad program of God as it affects Abraham's seed. . . . It is not too much to say that the exegesis of the Abrahamic covenant and its resulting interpretation is the foundation for the study of prophecy as a whole, not only as relating to Israel, but also for the Gentiles and the church. It is here that the true basis for premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures are found.<sup>6</sup>

The Abrahamic covenant is important when studying biblical covenants, for it expresses many unconditional decrees that will be expanded upon in subsequent revelation and surely fulfilled in history. Expansion of a biblical theme in the later revelation of Scripture has been called "progressive revelation." Much of the Abrahamic covenant is implemented through God's later dealings with national Israel.

#### COVENANTAL RELATIONSHIPS

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to stop and contemplate the relationship of an unconditional covenant, such as the Abrahamic covenant, to that of a conditional covenant, such as the Mosaic covenant. Unconditional covenants provide humanity with God's sovereign decree, telling us where He is taking history. On the other hand, conditional covenants provide us with the means He will use to get us there. God has said in the Abrahamic covenant that he will do certain things for the seed of Abraham, and the Mosaic covenant provides conditional stipulations that must be met before a decree from the Abrahamic covenant can take place. God decreed that Israel would receive certain blessings within the land of Israel, but that they would only enjoy them if they were obedient. When the Israelites disobeyed, they would be cursed. That cursing would eventually lead to obedience and finally result in the ultimate blessing promised in the Abrahamic covenant. "The primary purpose of the Sinaitic covenant," explains George Harton, "was to instruct the newly redeemed nation how they were to live for YHWH."<sup>7</sup> Harton then concludes:

The covenant program revealed in the Pentateuch rests squarely on the twin pillars of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants. This covenant program contains unconditional elements which reveal some things that God has



bound himself to do for the nation Israel. It also contains some conditional elements which define the conditions upon which any individual Israelite may receive the benefits of the covenant. The Jews in Christ's day felt that the unconditional covenant guaranteed their participation in the promised kingdom. They had forgotten that an unconditional covenant may have conditional blessings. The Sinaitic covenant is essentially an amplification of these promises and covenant on which they rested.<sup>8</sup>

Just such a covenantal relationship is displayed in Deuteronomy providing a masterful interplay between the certainty of Israel's destiny, while at the same time insisting that they will get to their blessing by traveling God's road. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, Calif.: Ariel Ministries Press, 1989, 1992), p. 570.

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Dean, Jr., "Theonomy, the Mosaic Law, and the Nations," (unpublished paper), p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of the Pentateuch," in Roy B. Zuck, editor, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, pp. 574-75.

<sup>5</sup> Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, p. 575.

<sup>6</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp. 44-45.

<sup>7</sup> George M. Harton, "Fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28—30 in History and in Eschatology," Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, August 1981, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Harton, "Fulfillment," pp. 17-18.

**COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS**  
Part III  
by Thomas Ice

It is common in the interchange between many who do not see a future for national Israel and those who do to emphasize different passages that appear to the advocate to support their views. I believe that both the sovereign, unconditional decrees of God, as expressed in unconditional covenants such as the Abrahamic and the many conditional responsibilities required of Israel in a conditional covenant such as the Mosaic are both true. It is certainly true that God has decreed certain sovereign outcomes in the Abrahamic Covenant. It is also certainly true that there are many stipulations or conditions that Israel must perform before these sovereign outcomes will occur in history. How are they harmonized?

**ISRAEL: A CASE STUDY**

The nation of Israel provides us with an excellent case study of the interplay between the sovereign decrees of an unconditional covenant (the Abrahamic) and the conditional stipulations of a conditional covenant (the Mosaic). Within the domain of the Abrahamic Covenant God has promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants a land, a seed and to make them a worldwide blessing (12:1–3, 7–9; 13:14–18; 15:1–18; 17:1–27; 22:15–19; 26:2–6, 24–25; 27:28–29, 38–40; 28:1–4, 10–22; 31:3, 11–13; 32:22–32; 35:9–15; 48:3–4, 10–20; 49:1–28; 50:23–25). If we look at the land aspect of this unconditional promise we see that there are conditions or stipulations interjected by the later conditional Mosaic Covenant that impact, not whether the land belongs to Israel, but whether the Jewish people would be allowed by God to dwell in the land and enjoy its benefits.

For example Deuteronomy 4 provides some conditions for the nation remaining in the Land when it says the following:

When you become the father of children and children's children and have remained long in the land, and act corruptly, and make an idol in the form of anything, and do that which is evil in the sight of the LORD your God so as to provoke Him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that you shall surely perish quickly from the land where you are going over the Jordan to possess it. You shall not live long on it, but shall be utterly destroyed. And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the LORD shall drive you (Deut. 4:25–27).

We see a similar scenario in Leviticus 26:

Yet if in spite of this, you do not obey Me, but act with hostility against Me, then I will act with wrathful hostility against you; and I, even I, will punish you seven times for your sins . . . (Lev. 26:27–28).  
I will lay waste your cities as well, and will make your sanctuaries desolate; and I will not smell your soothing aromas. And I will make the land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled over it. You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste (Lev. 26:31–33).

Some critics who do not believe in a future for Israel like to quote from passages like Deuteronomy 4 and Leviticus 26 and conclude that God is finished with the nation of Israel because of their disobedience. These critics err in only reading and taking into account part of the Bible and do not read and harmonize the whole of Scripture on these matters.

Even within the contexts of Deuteronomy 4 and Leviticus 26 there is a promise of ultimate restoration of the nation to her land when she believes:

But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and listen to His voice. For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them. (Deut. 4:29–31).

Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD. (Lev. 26:44–45).

So we see that God makes a sovereign decree about Israel, as expressed through an unconditional covenant. Then the Lord states the stipulations by which the sovereign decree will be fulfilled, as expressed through a conditional covenant. What this means is that one day Israel will dwell in the Land in the future, but that it will be done only when she meets certain conditions for dwelling in the land. Since both covenants (Abrahamic and Mosaic; unconditional and conditional) are absolutely true then this means that Israel will one day dwell in the land and will do so by having met the stipulations for dwelling in the land. This means that Israel will one day come to believe in the Messiahship of Jesus, which will result in her dwelling in the land until the end of history.

We see in the prophets sovereign declarations that reflect the thrust of an unconditional covenant as in Amos 9.

“Also I will restore the captivity of My people Israel, and they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them, they will also plant vineyards and drink their wine, and make gardens and eat their fruit. I will also plant them on their land, and they will not again be rooted out from their land which I have given them,” says the LORD your God. (Amos 9:14–15).

There are also passages in the prophets that indicate Israel will enter into her blessing when she believes as we find in Ezekiel 36.

“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of

flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances. And you will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God" (Ezek. 36:24–28).

Many critics ignore the whole counsel of the word of God on these matters. True, thus far in history Israel has been characterized as having a heart of stone, but, the Bible teaches that one day God will remove that heart of stone and give Israel a new heart and she will believe. Thus, God will provide the means for accomplishing His overall plan for His elect nation. In the past Israel was not able to dwell in the Land and enjoy its blessings because of disobedience. In the future Israel will be able to dwell in the Land and enjoy its blessings because of obedience. So whatever stipulations that conditional covenants require will be met in history in order to see that the promises made to the forefathers in the original unconditional covenant is worked out in history.

Other passages speak of a future time in which Israel will come into a right relationship nationally with the Lord. "And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, . . ." (Zech. 12:10). Notice that God's sovereign grace is poured out upon the Jewish remnant in this passage that results in their repentance. It is certain to happen in the future. The passage goes on and says, "'In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity. And it will come about in that day,' declares the LORD of hosts, 'that I will cut off the names of the idols from the land, and they will no longer be remembered; and I will also remove the prophets and the unclean spirit from the land'" (Zech. 13:1–2). Many other similar passages speak of a future day when Israel will become obedient because of a work of God's grace on their hearts (see also Isa. 61:8–9; Jer. 31:31–40; 50:4–5; Ezek. 11:19–20; 34:25–26).

### CONCLUSION

When we take into account the whole counsel of the Word of God on a matter it becomes clear that both unconditional and conditional covenants do not cancel out the promises of one another as some critics contend, instead they work in concert with each other when viewed within the context of the flow of history and the progress of revelation. We see that an unconditional covenant expresses a sovereign decree of what the end of a matter will be. God then comes in and complicates a matter by saying that something can only occur if certain conditions are followed as stated in a conditional covenant. This means that God will work in history to bring to pass the means (stipulations in a conditional covenant) so that the outcomes in His plan will also be fulfilled (unconditional covenant). Anyone trying to use the conditional stipulations of a conditional covenant to negate the clear outcomes of an unconditional covenant have not correctly harmonized the role and interaction of both kinds of covenants. God keeps His Word. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

### ENDNOTES

**COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS**  
Part IV  
by Thomas Ice

Now that we have seen the interplay between an unconditional and conditional covenant, I will conduct a survey of the various biblical covenants in order to obtain an overview of them. These are not the theological covenants of Covenant Theology, but instead are the significant covenants that are taught in the Bible itself. These covenants are either taught directly in the Bible or deduced from Scripture as containing the properties of a covenant even if that designation is not used in the biblical text. There are at least eight biblical covenants that should be considered.

**THE EDENIC COVENANT**

The Edenic Covenant (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15-17) provides the pre-Fall basis that God employs to establish His rule and relationship to mankind. This is a conditional covenant that was made between God and all mankind. Even though not called a covenant in the Genesis text the components of a covenant can be observed in the text. Since Adam and mankind is cursed due to human failure to keep these stipulations this supports the notion that such would not continue to be the case if these things were not administered through an agreement or covenant. The Edenic Covenant, in conjunction with the Cultural Mandate (Gen. 1:26-28), provides the basis for areas of individual human responsibility, social, political and economic duties, as well as accountability before God for all humanity down through subsequent history. This covenant provides the judicial basis for God's rule over mankind. It provides, for example, the legal jurisdiction for God's judgment through the Flood (Gen. 6—8). After the fall into sin, other covenants will augment this foundational relationship.

**THE ADAMIC COVENANT**

The Adamic Covenant (Gen. 3:14-19) is initiated between God and mankind because of Adam's sin. This is a conditional covenant that was made between God and all mankind. Even though it is not mentioned in Genesis this covenant is referenced in Hosea where it says, "But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against Me" (Hosea 6:7). This covenant contains the cursed status of man and creation that he must endure throughout history. The curse will be primarily removed during the millennial reign of Christ (Rom. 8:19-23) and finally death will be eliminated during the eternal state (1 Cor. 15:53-57; Rev. 21:4; 22:3).

**THE NOAHIC COVENANT**

The Noahic Covenant (Gen. 8:20—9:17) restates God's authority over man and his duties as found in the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 9:1), and then it adds further responsibilities. This is a conditional covenant that was made between God and all mankind. These new items include the following: 1) Animosity between mankind and the animal kingdom (9:2). 2) Man should now eat animal flesh for food (9:3). 3) While eating flesh, the blood shall not be consumed, but drained (9:4). 4) Human life is so valuable that God requires the death of the one who murders another—capital punishment (9:5-6). 5) "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 9:1,7). The Noahic Covenant is made between God and all subsequent humanity, including the entire animal kingdom (9:8-10). In this covenant God promises to never destroy the world again through a flood (9:11). The sign that God will keep His promise is the

rainbow set within a cloud (9:12-17). A rainbow is likely chosen because it is presented elsewhere as an item that surrounds the very throne room of God (Ezek. 1:28; Rev. 4:3) representing His person and presence. The Noahic Covenant is mentioned again specifically in Isaiah 54:9-10.

#### **THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT**

The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3, 7-9; 13:14-18; 15:1-18; 17:1-27; 22:15-19; 26:2-6, 24-25; 27:28-29, 38-40; 28:1-4, 10-22; 31:3, 11-13; 32:22-32; 35:9-15; 48:3-4, 10-20; 49:1-28; 50:23-25) is the mother of all redemptive covenants. This is an unconditional covenant that was made between the Lord God of Israel and Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants. Every blessing that redeemed believers receive, both within Israel and the church, flows from this covenant. While the covenant is first introduced in Genesis 12:1-3, it is actually cut or made in Genesis 15:1-21, reaffirmed in Genesis 17:1-21, and then renewed with Isaac in Genesis 26:2-5 and Jacob in Genesis 28:10-17. It is an unconditional covenant in which God unconditionally obligates Himself to bring to pass definite promises, blessings, and conditions for the covenanted people. The three major provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant are that of 1) land to Abram and Israel, 2) a seed (including Christ), 3) a worldwide blessing. In all statements of the Abrahamic Covenant there are over a dozen provisions. Some apply to Abraham; some to Israel, the seed; while some pertain to Gentiles.

#### **THE MOSAIC COVENANT**

The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 20—23; Deuteronomy) was given exclusively and only to the nation of Israel (Psa. 147:19-20) and was fulfilled through the ministry of Jesus Christ during His first advent (Matt. 5:17). The Mosaic Covenant is a conditional covenant made between the Lord and the twelve tribes of Israel. This Covenant was designed to teach Israel how they were to please God and live as His chosen nation. The measuring stick was to be the Law aspect of the Covenant. The Law was designed to govern every aspect of Israel's life: the spiritual, moral, social, religious and civil aspects. The commandments were a "ministry of condemnation" and "of death" (2 Cor. 3:7-9). The Church Age believer is not in any way, shape, or form under the obligations of the Mosaic Law, but under the Law of Christ and the Spirit (Rom. 3:21-27; 6:14-15; Gal. 2:16; 3:10, 16-18, 24-26; 4:21-31; Heb. 10:11-17). The Mosaic Covenant did not change the provision of the Abrahamic Covenant but was an added thing for a limited time only—till Christ should come (Gal. 3:17-19).

#### **THE DAVIDIC COVENANT**

The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4-17) is the foundation upon which the future millennial kingdom of Christ is to be founded. This is an unconditional covenant and was made between the Lord and David. It promises to David the following: 1) posterity in the Davidic house; 2) a throne symbolic of royal authority; 3) a kingdom, or rule on earth; and 4) certainty of fulfillment for the promises to David "shall be established forever."

Solomon, whose birth God predicted (2 Sam. 7:12), was not promised a perpetual seed, but only assured that 1) he would build "an house for my name (2 Sam. 7:13); 2) his kingdom would be established (2 Sam. 7:12); 3) his throne, i.e. royal authority, would endure forever; and 4) if Solomon sinned, he would be chastised but not deposed. The continuance of Solomon's throne, but not Solomon's seed, shows the

accuracy of the prediction. Most of these items will be fulfilled during the millennial reign of Christ.

#### **THE LAND OF ISRAEL COVENANT**

The Land of Israel Covenant (Deut. 30:1-10) provides an expansion upon the land promise found in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3). This is an unconditional covenant and was made between the Lord and the nation of Israel. In Deuteronomy, after two chapters predicting disobedience and judgment, and deportation from the Land, the Lord foretells of ultimate repentance and blessing upon national Israel. The Lord binds Himself to this ultimate destiny for Israel by establishing a covenant that promises the Land to Israel forever. This covenant unfolds as follows: 1) dispersion for disobedience (Deut. 30:1 see also Deut. 28:63-68; 29:22-28). 2) The future repentance of Israel while in dispersion (Deut. 30:2 see also Deut. 28:63-68). 3) The Messiah will gather the remaining exiles and transport them to the Land (Deut. 30:3-6 see also Dan. 12:1; Zech. 2:6; Amos 9:14; Matt. 24:31). 4) The land will be permanently restored to Israel (Deut. 30:5 see also Isa. 11:11-12; Jer. 23:3-8; Ezek. 37:21-25). 5) The whole nation of Israel will be converted to their Messiah (Deut. 30:6 see also Hos. 2:14-16; Zech. 12:10-14; Rom. 11:26-27). 6) Judgment of those that oppose Israel (Deut. 30:7 see also Isa. 14:1-2; Joel 3:1-8; Matt. 25:31-46). 7) Israel will experience national blessing and prosperity (Deut. 30:9 see also Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 14:9-21).

#### **THE NEW COVENANT**

The New Covenant (Deut. 29:4; 30:6; Isa. 59:20-21; 61:8-9; Jer. 31:31-40; 32:37-40; 50:4-5; Ezek. 11:19-20; 16:60-63; 34:25-26; 36:24-32; 37:21-28; Zech. 9:11; 12:10-14; Heb. 8:1-13; 10:15-18) provides for the yet future spiritual regeneration of Israel in preparation for the millennial kingdom. This is an unconditional covenant and is made between the Lord and the nation of Israel. The New Covenant, as stated in the Old Testament passages I have noted previously is predictive of Israel's new spiritual condition that begins at the end of the tribulation and continues into and throughout the Millennial Kingdom. The New Covenant is applied to the church (Matt. 26:27-28; Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6), because it provides the forgiveness of sins and a spiritual dynamic that is not just reserved for the nation of Israel.

#### **CONCLUSION**

It is through these covenantal relationships that God establishes His relationships with mankind and His elect nation—Israel. It is through the pre-Fall covenants that God relates to Adam and mankind morally, legally, economically, socially, politically, and provides man with his vocational calling through the cultural mandate. The same is true for Israel as God selects a people from among the peoples in order to establish His counter kingdom and culture in this world. God has chosen to govern His relationship with His special people through a series of covenants that bind Him to them forever. History is still unfolding in our own day and God has yet to complete His plan for Israel and humanity in general. One thing we know for sure is that God has bound Himself through His covenants and He will keep His word to Israel and all of mankind. Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity is the primary agent through Whom God works to fulfill the promises of His covenants to all mankind, Israel and the church. Days yet in the future will reveal the final fulfillment of all outstanding promises that God put forth in His covenants thousands of years ago. More than anything in the world we can trust God to keep His promises. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**



## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part V

by Thomas Ice

Since I have identified the biblical covenants and classified them as conditional or unconditional, I want to now look at each one and see if they are still in force today and if they are, how they relate to the church age believer. These covenants provide a framework by which we can know how God wants us to behave in every area of life.

#### THE EDENIC COVENANT

The Edenic Covenant (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15-17) provides the pre-Fall basis that God employs to establish His rule and relationship to mankind in this conditional covenant. The prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit was a one-time test given only to Adam (Gen. 2:15-17) and thus is not a ban that we can transgress today (see also Rom. 5:13-14). However, the Cultural Mandate (Gen. 1:26-28) was not just for Adam. It provides the basis for areas of individual human responsibility, social, political and economic duties, as well as accountability before God for all humanity down through subsequent history. It is through this covenant that God defines man's role for cultural activity in history. It is mankind's job description in shorthand.

#### DIVINE INSTITUTIONS

The divine institutions are conventions that function within the biblical covenants that relate to mankind's social life. I first learned about the biblical teaching relating to divine institutions from a pastor named Charles Clough<sup>1</sup> about 35 years ago. He says, "Divine institutions are real absolute structures built into man's social existence."<sup>2</sup> "The term 'divine institution' has been used for centuries by Christians, particularly in Reformed circles, to describe the fixed, basic social forms," according to Clough.<sup>3</sup> Divine institutions were created by God (thus divine), but apply to all mankind from the time of Adam and Eve. Man's basic social structures did not just evolve over time but were part of God's creation.

The first divine institution is responsible dominion (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15-17; Ps. 8:3-8), which is the area that an individual is responsible to God. Man was created to be God's vice regent over planet earth in order to manage it under God's authority. The fall resulted in a perversion of man's responsibility but it was never taken away.<sup>4</sup> This means that each individual human being is responsible before God for creative labor, which is designed to glorify God. God designed it so that through the individual choices one may demonstrate in history a record of obedience or rebellion against their Creator. After the Fall, Clough notes: "Instead of peaceable, godly dominion over all the earth under God and His Word, man fights and claws his way to a counterfeit dominion built of his own works (cf. Jas 4:1-4)."<sup>5</sup> Individual choice is seen as the area in which one either trusts Christ as his Savior or rejects Him. No one else can do it on behalf of an individual.

The second divine institution is marriage (Gen. 2:18-24). This institution is deduced from the original marriage of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. It is within this realm that sexual relations are to be experienced and together the husband and wife are to fulfill the cultural mandate to rule over the creation. We see that the woman is called a "helper" who was brought by God to Adam who needed a helper corresponding to himself in order to help him in his calling to rule over nature. "Unlike animals, mankind's so-called sexual differentiation is not merely for procreation; it is also for

dominion.”<sup>6</sup> “Later the extreme importance of the structure of marriage appears in the NT when Paul reveals that it typifies the union between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22–33).”<sup>7</sup> Clough makes the following helpful comment:

Mankind cannot express God’s image except as both “male and female” together (Gen. 1:27). This is because God has certain characteristics that are “feminine” in nature (e.g., Matt. 23:37). Moreover, the woman’s role as “helper” in Genesis 2:18 is not meant to be a demeaning, secondary one. The term used for “helper” elsewhere is used of God Himself (Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7). . . .

Undeniably, however, the Bible places emphasis upon the man as the one who receives his calling from God which then shapes his choice of wife. . . . Together in a division of labor man and wife separate from their own family, in contrast to an extended family, does a young man have to face full leadership responsibility directly under God.<sup>8</sup>

The third divine institution is built upon the first two and is that of family. “In the Bible it is the family, not the individual, that is the basic unit of society (property, for example, is titled under Mosaic Law to families).”<sup>9</sup> “Family exists for training of the next generation (cf. Exod. 20:12; Deut. 6:4–9; Eph. 6:1–4).”<sup>10</sup> Family is the institution that is responsible for continuing each family legacy by being responsible for education and wealth. Even if a family chooses to use surrogate teachers, the family is responsible for seeing that a child is properly educated. Clough tells us:

Family and marriage cannot be separated from dominion. Where dominion is perverted and the environment ruined, starvation and poverty follow. Where marriage is dishonored and where families are broken, society collapses. No amount of laws, programs, or “redefinitions” of marriage and family can save the day. God designed the divine institutions to provide dominion and prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

The Fall did not change any of the divine institutions, instead it corrupted man who misuses them. Clough explains:

When faced with the corruption in each of these social structures, fallen man responds in several ways. One way is to reinterpret the struggles with sin in terms of economics (Marx’s “class war”) or of race (white and black racists) or of psychology (Freud and others). Another cope-out is to abandon the institutions themselves as outdated, arbitrary social “conventions” that need “re-engineering”. All such responses, however, are costly failures to the societies that try them. In the end, they reflect the pagan mindset that denies the responsibility of the fall and the abnormality of evil.<sup>12</sup>

#### **POST FALL DIVINE INSTITUTIONS**

At least two more divine institutions were established after the Fall of man into sin. Both were instituted after the Flood and were designed to restrain evil in a fallen world. The first three divine institutions are the positive or productive ones of society, while the last two are negative, designed to restrain evil in a fallen world.

The fourth divine institution is civil government whereby God transferred to man through the Noahic Covenant the responsibility to exercise kingdom authority in order to help restrain evil after the Flood (Gen. 9:5–6). Before the Flood man could not execute judgment upon evil as seen in the way in which God commanded man to deal with Cain’s murder of Abel (Gen. 4:9–15). This divine institution is based upon capital punishment (Gen. 9:5–6) and if for the purpose of restraining evil (Rom. 13:3–4). Lesser judicial authority is implied in the God-given command for civil institutions to exact a life for life. Even though capital punishment has grown distasteful to apostate Western culture, it is still the basis for God’s establishment of civil government.<sup>13</sup>

The fifth divine institution is tribal diversity, which was also established after the Flood in order to promote social stability in a fallen world (see Gen. 9:25–27 and compare with Gen. 10—11 and Deut. 32:8). Notice this is not racial diversity but tribal diversity. This divine institution does not involve race but tribes or families. “Throughout the postdiluvian period,” explains Clough, “God preserved man’s social stability and health by playing off one group or tribe against another to maximize true progress and retard the influence of evil (cf. Acts 17:26–27).”<sup>14</sup>

Tribal diversity was implemented through the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). Why did God want to separate mankind? Many believe that mankind should come together in unity. Genesis 11:6 explains why God confused human language as follows: “And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.’” Thus, the only reason why humanity wants to unite itself is in order to more effectively rebel against God, as seen in the Tower of Babel incident. This is why currently history is moving toward globalism as we move further from God and is why the goal of Antichrist in the tribulation is to forge together a one-world government set against the plan and purposes of God. The tribulation will end with God’s direct intervention and judgment, as at the Flood. In the mean time, God slows down man’s collective rebellion through civil government and tribal diversity.

The purpose for tribal diversity can be illustrated by differences between large boat hulls. Until about 100 years ago, all large sea going vessels had a single large hull. If a large enough hole developed in the hull then often the ship would sink as it filled up with water. Then ship builders started building multiple compartments in large ships with the belief that if there developed a hole in one compartment then the other compartments could keep the ship afloat. So it is with mankind! If one tribe became corrupt then God did not need to judge the whole world. He could use other peoples to judge that tribe without needing worldwide judgment. This is one way God manages the nations between the Flood and His second coming. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For anyone interested in listening to the mp3 audio series by Charles Clough on “The Biblical Framework” can download it at [www.cclough.com](http://www.cclough.com).

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Clough, *Laying The Foundation*, revised (Lubbock: Lubbock Bible Church, 1977), p. 36. An updated version of this can be found on [www.cclough.com](http://www.cclough.com).

<sup>3</sup> Clough, *Laying*, p. 36, f.n. 36.

<sup>4</sup> Charles A. Clough, *A Biblical Framework for Worship and Obedience in an Age of Global Deception*, Part II, p. 39. From the following internet address: <http://www.cclough.com/notes.php>

<sup>5</sup> Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup> Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 40.

<sup>7</sup> Clough, *Laying*, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 41.

<sup>10</sup> Clough, *Laying*, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> See Clough, *Laying*, p. 83 and *A Biblical Framework*, pp. 97–98.

<sup>14</sup> Clough, *Laying*, p. 84.

**COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS**  
Part VI  
by Thomas Ice

We have seen that the structure of the divine institutions function within the framework of the biblical covenants and dispensations to provide a social structure through which God provides governance to all mankind. I will continue to overview the biblical covenants and look at each one to see if they are still in force today and if they are, how they relate to the church age believer.

**THE ADAMIC COVENANT**

The Adamic Covenant, which is deduced from Genesis 3:14–19 (see also Hosea 6:7), was a conditional covenant between Adam and God. The basis for Adam’s responsibility was spelled out in Genesis 2:7–9, 15–17 where the Lord told Adam, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16b–17). We all know that Adam disobeyed God (Gen. 3:6) and cast the entire human race into a sinful and cursed condition (Gen. 3:8–18; 5:3). While this test was a one-time event, nevertheless, the effects of the Fall have continued down throughout history into our own day. The New Testament teaches that, “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23) and that Adam’s rebellion brought sin and the curse upon all mankind (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22). It is through this covenant that the sinful condition of mankind entered into the world and passed upon all mankind making necessary the work of Christ if individuals are to receive restoration of their relationship with God.

**THE NOAHIC COVENANT**

Since the Noahic Covenant (Gen. 8:20—9:17) is made between God and all mankind after the Flood, it is still in force today and provides the jurisdiction that makes all mankind responsible to God for their actions in concert with the Edenic Covenant. The sign of the covenant, the rainbow, is a universal sign that has appeared since the Flood and continues to this day, which reinforces God’s claim that the all mankind since the Flood are under its force. An important feature of this covenant is the establishment of civil government and capital punishment as the key feature (Gen. 9:5–7). Since God promised not to destroy the earth again by water (Gen. 9:15), it will be destroyed next time by fire (2 Pet. 3:10–12), the Lord installed civil government, and the sanction of capital punishment, as a way of restraining evil in the interim, because “the intent of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (Gen. 8:21).

Capital punishment is not just something that evolved over the years within human society and is now falling out of favor, instead it was clearly installed by God to restrain evil. That capital punishment continues throughout our current church age as a tool of civil government is clearly endorsed in the New Testament (Rom. 13:1–7; Tit. 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:12–14). Clearly capital punishment can be and has been abused since its installation, but God, who knows all things, past or future, instituted it anyway knowing that it would enable the greatest injustice of all time—the crucifixion of His Son.

Human civil government will continue in its present form until the second coming of Christ. At the second advent Christ will personally judge all unbelievers and then set up His righteous dictatorship in which He will reign and rule on earth for 1,000 years. Christ, the God-Man will administer His rule through a hierarchy of human rulers who

will function as vice-regents. For example, David will rule over Israel (Jer. 30:9; Ezk. 34:23–24; 37:24–25; Hosea 3:5).

#### **THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT**

The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3, 7–9; 13:14–18; 15:1–18; 17:1–27; 22:15–19; 26:2–6, 24–25; 27:28–29, 38–40; 28:1–4, 10–22; 31:3, 11–13; 32:22–32; 35:9–15; 48:3–4, 10–20; 49:1–28; 50:23–25) is an important covenant established by God with Abram through which He works to rebuild what mankind lost in the Fall. Therefore, it could be called a redemptive covenant. We saw that this covenant contains promises made specifically to Abraham, Israel, the seed (including Christ), and some promises are for Gentiles. This is why virtually all aspects of this covenant continue into the present church age and will also carry on into the millennium.

Church age believers are called the spiritual seed of Abraham (Rom. 9:7–8, 24; 15:27; Gal. 3:9, 16, 29) since our salvation is the fulfillment of some of the promises made to Abraham and his descendants, as fulfilled through Christ in Whom we have believed. Further, the promises made in the Abrahamic covenant to Israel have not been abandoned by God (Rom. 11:1–2, 29) and will be fulfilled to the Jewish nation during the millennium. Thus, many of the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant continue into our day including the land promises for the Jews and God's promise to bless those who bless Israel (Gen. 12:1–3).

#### **THE MOSAIC COVENANT**

The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 20–23; Deuteronomy) was given exclusively and only to the nation of Israel (Ex. 34:27; 20:2; Deut. 4:1, 6–8, 13, 20, 34, 37, 44; 7:6–8; 10:12–15; 26:16–19; 1 Kings 8:9; Psa. 147:19–20) and was fulfilled through the ministry of Jesus Christ during His first advent (Matt. 5:17; Eph. 2:13–16). This covenant was given to separate Israel from the rest of the nations and as a constitution to instruct them how to live holy lives unto the Lord. When Christ came He fulfilled the Law and thus, broke down the barrier between Jew and Gentile, in Christ (Eph. 2:13–16). The Law was designed to govern every aspect of Israel's life: the spiritual, moral, social, religious and civil aspects. The commandments were a "ministry of condemnation" and "of death" (2 Cor. 3:7–9). The New Testament teaches that the Mosaic Law has been done away with by Christ (Rom. 6:14–15; 7:1–6; 1 Cor. 9:20–21; 2 Cor. 3:7–11; Gal. 4:1–7; 5:18; Eph. 2:13–16; Heb. 8:6–7, 13; 10:9). The Church Age believer is not in any way, shape, or form under the obligations of the Mosaic Law, but under the unconditional the Law of Christ and the Spirit (Rom. 3:21–27; 6:14–15; Gal. 2:16; 3:10, 16–18, 24–26; 4:21–31; Heb. 10:11–17).

Practicing Jews since the time of their national rejection of Christ continue to live under the Mosaic Law as best they can since they obviously do not believe that Jesus has fulfilled the Law. However, continued Jewish observance of the Law is not sanctioned by God because Jesus is in reality the Messiah and one day the nation will accept His Messiahship. Nevertheless, this explains why a portion of Israel attempts to observe the Mosaic Law the best they can in our own day. Also, the prophecies woven throughout the Mosaic Law that have not yet been fulfilled are still valid for today and will be fulfilled either in the tribulation or the millennium.

#### **THE DAVIDIC COVENANT**

The Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4–17) is the foundation upon which the future millennial reign of Christ is grounded. It promises to David the following: 1) posterity

in the Davidic house; 2) a throne symbolic of royal authority; 3) a kingdom, or rule on earth; and 4) certainty of fulfillment for the promises to David “shall be established forever.” Even though most of these items will be fulfilled during the millennial reign of Christ, they do not have direct relevance to our current church age.

Some argue that when Christ ascended to heaven that He sat on David’s throne in heaven. However, Jesus said, “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21). This passage makes it clear that Jesus is not on David’s throne but seated at the right-hand of the Father. The New Testament further teaches that during His present session He is making intercession for believers (Heb. 7:25; 1 John 2:1–2), which explains why He is seated at the Father’s right-hand. It is true that the New Testament argues that Jesus became qualified to sit on David’s throne at His first coming (Acts 2:22–36), nevertheless, Jesus remains in heaven (Acts 3:21) until Israel repents (Acts 3:19) and then will come the “times of refreshing” and the “period of restoration of all things,” (Acts 3:19, 21) which we know as the millennial kingdom when Jesus will reign on David’s throne from Jerusalem. There is no biblical evidence for a present spiritual fulfillment or inaugurated form of the Davidic covenant.

#### THE LAND OF ISRAEL COVENANT

The Land of Israel Covenant<sup>1</sup> (Deut. 30:1-10) is an unconditional covenant and was made between the Lord and the nation of Israel. The Lord binds Himself to this ultimate destiny for Israel by establishing a covenant that promises the Land to Israel forever. Even though it is still in force for Israel it will not be fulfilled during our current church age. This covenant will be fulfilled for national Israel during the tribulation when the whole nation of Israel will be converted to their Messiah (Deut. 30:6 see also Hos. 2:14-16; Zech. 12:10-14; Rom. 11:26-27) and will experience national blessing and prosperity (Deut. 30:9 see also Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 14:9-21) during the millennium. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The Land of Israel covenant has often been called the Palestinian covenant. I do not like that term since it is not a biblical term. The Bible has never called the land of Israel Palestine. The Bible refers to Israel as the land of Canaan (for example Gen. 11:31; Ex. 6:4; Lev. 14:34; Num. 13:2; Deut. 32:29; etc.) before Israel came and occupied the land at the Exodus in 1400 B.C. From that time on it is called the land of Israel. However, in A.D. 135 when the Roman emperor Hadrian destroyed Jerusalem he wanted to de-Judaize the land of Israel. Hadrian took the name Palestine that was used to refer to what we know today as the Gaza Strip (where the ancient Philistines once lived) and applied it to the entire land of Israel, west of the Jordan River. Yasser Arafat took the name in 1964 and applied it to the Arabs who were living in Israel. Since that time it has come to be closely alienated with Arab opposition to Israel’s ownership of the land, thus, an inappropriate term for God’s covenant promising the land of Israel to the Jews.

## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part VII

by Thomas Ice

Previously I overviewed most of the biblical covenants and examined each one to see if they are still in force today and if they are, how they relate to the church age believer. I have already surveyed all of the biblical covenants except the final one—the New Covenant, which I will seek to do at this time.

#### THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant (Deut. 29:4; 30:6; Isa. 59:20–21; 61:8–9; Jer. 31:31–40; 32:37–40; 50:4–5; Ezek. 11:19–20; 16:60–63; 34:25–26; 36:24–32; 37:21–28; Zech. 9:11; 12:10–14; Heb. 8:1–13; 10:15–18) provides for the yet future spiritual regeneration of Israel in preparation for the millennial kingdom. This is an unconditional covenant and is made between the Lord and the nation of Israel and has not yet been enacted for the nation of Israel. The New Covenant is predictive of Israel's new spiritual condition that begins at the end of the tribulation and continues into and throughout the Millennial Kingdom. Arnold Fruchtenbaum tells us the following about the New Covenant for Israel:

The announcement of the New Covenant begins with a declaration that it will be a Jewish covenant, for it will be made with both houses of Israel (v. 31). It will be in sharp contradistinction with the older Mosaic Covenant (v. 32). Of the five Jewish covenants, the Mosaic was the only conditional one. Although God had been faithful in keeping His terms of the covenant, Israel had not been so faithful, resulting in the Mosaic Covenant's being broken. For while the Mosaic Covenant showed the standard of righteousness which the Law demanded, it could never impart to the Jew the power to keep it. But that problem will be rectified in the New Covenant (v. 33) through regeneration, which will provide the internal power necessary to meet and to keep the righteous standards of God. The result of the New Covenant will be a total national regeneration of Israel (v. 34). Jewish missions and Jewish evangelism will not be needed in the Messianic Kingdom because every Jew will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest. The sins of Israel will be forgiven and forgotten. While there will be Gentile unbelievers in the Kingdom, there will not be Jewish unbelievers in the Kingdom. To a man, all the Jews will believe. There will be no need to tell a Jew to "know the Lord" because they will all know Him.<sup>1</sup>

#### THE NEW COVENANT AND THE CHURCH

We have seen how the New Covenant will be fulfilled for Israel, but an often ask question is does this covenant relate in any way to the church? A New Covenant is mentioned a number of times in reference to the church in the New Testament (Matt. 26:27–28; Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3:6). It appears to be the basis for the forgiveness of sins and a spiritual dynamic that is not just reserved for the nation of Israel. I believe that there is one New Covenant, which will be fulfilled in the future with Israel but is participated in relation to the doctrine of salvation by the church today. The Bible clearly teaches that God promised a New Covenant to His people Israel (Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:26–38) and that Jesus established the New Covenant through His death on the cross (1 Cor 11:25–26). "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it,



in remembrance of Me" (1 Cor. 11:25). The inclusion of the Gentiles is substantiated by Jesus' statement in Matthew 26 enlarging the scope of the New Covenant when He says, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Luke records a similar statement when Jesus says, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).

Paul contrasted two covenants in 2 Corinthians 3:6–18. The first was the old Mosaic Covenant, while the second is the New Covenant. Under the old there are the tablets of stone, the letter, a ministry of death, and fading glory. Under the new there are tablets of flesh (human hearts), the Spirit, a ministry of life, and surpassing glory. The first has passed away. The second is now reigning. Paul is a minister of this New Covenant, as the passage says, "who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6). So it appears that in some way the New Covenant applies to the current church age, even though none of the specific prophecies relating to Israel appear to have been fulfilled under the New Testament application of the New Covenant to the church age. We see in Scripture that the Church has not replaced literal Israel in its relationship to the New Covenant, and the New Covenant is not being fulfilled totally in the Church today.

#### **HOW THE NEW COVENANT APPLIES TO THE CHURCH**

A key to understanding what Scripture teaches on this matter is to recognize that the Old Testament promise of the New Covenant contained both spiritual and material benefits. The church indeed is enjoying the spiritual benefits (e.g., regeneration and the indwelling Holy Spirit), but the church is not experiencing the material benefits, which remain unfulfilled and will remain unfulfilled until literal national Israel appropriates the New Covenant to experience both its spiritual and physical benefits at the end of the Tribulation and throughout the millennium. Paul says in Romans, "For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things" (Rom. 15:27). Rodney J. Decker has the following explanation of how the New Covenant applies to the church today:

The New Covenant, prophesied in the Old Testament to be made with Israel, was ratified at the Cross and implemented as a replacement of the Mosaic Covenant. It is presently the basis on which anyone relates to God and it governs the life of all believers. The church, though not a formal partner of the New Covenant, participates in the covenant both as a subject of its rule of life and as a recipient of promised Abrahamic Covenant blessings for Gentiles that have come through the Seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

This explanation does not demand that the church "fulfill" the covenant; that remains for national Israel in the future millennium. It does acknowledge that there is more involved in the New Covenant than could have been known simply from the Old Testament. This in no way changes the meaning of those passages, but does allow for God's doing more than He promised (though it will be no less than promised). The term "partial fulfillment" is not necessary. If fulfillment is used to describe the relationship of the covenant partners, then fulfillment in any respect should be viewed as future. "Participation" is a better term to describe the present aspects as it both avoids replacement concepts (the church replacing Israel in fulfilling the covenant) and also explains the partial nature of the obedience evident in the experience of the church. Even though the ministry of the Holy Spirit has

changed dramatically, based on the ratification and implementation of the New Covenant, the full ramifications of that ministry will not be experienced until the covenant enters the fulfillment stage in the future messianic kingdom. . . . The Old Testament does not say that only Israel will participate in the New Covenant. The Old Testament does say that the New Covenant is made with Israel. That is different, however, from saying that the New Covenant is *only* for Israel. The New Testament does not violate Old Testament statements when it includes more than was revealed in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

### CONCLUSION

If one attempts to say that the New Covenant is being fulfilled today, during the current church age, through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, then it would mean that we should not evangelize any more, that every Jew would be saved, and that we would have the Law of God written on our hearts (compare Jer. 31:31–34). This is not the case within the church today. Therefore, it means that we are not currently experiencing the full impact of the New Covenant as described in the Old Testament. Postmillennialists, Amillennialists, Covenant Theologians, and preterists all believe that all aspects of the New Covenant are being fulfilled today. If such were the case then why do we have evangelism and have to teach people the Law? Jeremiah speaking the word of the Lord says, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:33b–34). Believers today simply do not fit this description. Further, the Lord is speaking about what He will do with Israel. Notice to whom the passage is directed: “‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD” (Jer. 31:33a). This is certainly not yet a description of the Jewish nation as it exists today.

The Bible is clear that Israel will one day receive the benefits of the New Covenant. What a wonderful day that will be when she enters into a right relationship with the Lord after all of those years. At the same time, the church is a partaker in the spiritual blessings that flow from the New Covenant, not “a taker over” of Israel’s promises, as some are inclined to say. God’s plan is on course and will be fully implemented in the course of His timing. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events*, (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003, [1982]), pp. 410–11.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney J. Decker, “The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Vol. 162, Num. 608; Oct, 1995), pp. 455–56.

## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part 8

by Dr. Thomas Ice

Now that I have surveyed the biblical covenants I want to now move on and deal with the biblical dispensations and the theology known as dispensationalism. Dispensationalism believes that the Bible pictures history as a single plan run by God through successive stages of history known as dispensations. God manages the entirety of human history as a household, moving humanity through sequential stages of His administration, determined by the level of revelation He has provided up to that time in history. Each administrative period is characterized by specific revelation involving stated responsibilities, a test in relation to that revelation, failure to pass the test, and God's gracious provision of a solution despite the disobedience of mankind in every phase. The dispensations have nothing to do with how people are saved from their sin that most important of issues is handled by on the basis of other factors.

### WHAT IS A DISPENSATION?

The leading spokesman for dispensationalism is retired Dallas Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Charles Ryrie. Many know Ryrie through his books and articles, but he is best known for his popular *Ryrie Study Bible*. Ryrie's book *Dispensationalism*<sup>1</sup> and is a primary reference point for gaining an understanding of dispensationalism. Since Dr. Ryrie is the expert on this subject, we will let him speak as we summarize his material.

He notes that *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a theological dispensation as "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."<sup>2</sup>

The English word *dispensation* translates the Greek noun *oikonomía*, often rendered "administration" in modern translations. The verb form *oikonoméō* refers to a manager of a household.<sup>3</sup> "In the New Testament," notes Ryrie, "*dispensation* means to manage or administer the affairs of a household, as, for example, in the Lord's story of the unfaithful steward in Luke 16:1-13."<sup>4</sup>

The Greek word *oikonomía* is a compound of *oikos* meaning "house" and *nomos* meaning "law." Taken together "the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household."<sup>5</sup>

The various forms of the word *dispensation* are used in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oikonoméō* is used in Luke 16:2 where it is translated "to be a steward." The noun *oikónómos* is used ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; I Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; I Pet. 4:10), and in all instances it is translated "steward" except "chamberlain" in Romans 16:23. The noun *oikonomía* is used nine times (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; I Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; I Tim. 1:4). In these instances it is translated variously ("stewardship," "dispensation," "administration," "job," "commission").

### BIBLICAL USE OF DISPENSATION

Further examination of *oikónómos* as it is used in the Gospels finds Christ using the word in two parables in Luke (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8). Ryrie notes that in Luke 16 we find some important characteristics of a stewardship, or dispensational arrangement:

(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 (or manager) plays these roles in the parable of Luke 16 (v. 1).

(2) These 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").<sup>6</sup>

Further defining features can be gleaned from the other occurrences of the *dispensation* word group. All other uses, except 1 Peter 4:10, are found in the writings of Paul. Ryrie cites the following features:

(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 (I Cor. 4:1-2; Titus 1:7).

(2) Faithfulness is required of those to whom a dispensational responsibility is committed (I 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 (I 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.<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that dispensationalists have developed the theological term *dispensation* in a way similar to the biblical use of the term. Therefore, I believe that the system of theology we know today as dispensationalism is consistent with biblical teaching.

## DEFINING DISPENSATIONALISM

Building upon the above biblical observations, we are now able to define dispensationalism. According to Ryrie, “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.” In addition to a definition of a dispensation, Ryrie notes that if “one were describing a dispensation, he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment.”<sup>8</sup> Finally, he tells us concerning a dispensation that:

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. Eric 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.<sup>9</sup>

In his classic work, *Dispensationalism*, Ryrie formulates a more extensive definition of dispensationalism:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these 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.<sup>10</sup>

Another dispensational scholar, Paul Nevin, summarized dispensationalism as follows:

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 an economy, or administration. From the human 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.<sup>11</sup>

### **A BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY**

Dispensationalist Renald Showers notes that a dispensational view of the Bible provides a believer with a biblical philosophy of history, a way of looking at history from God’s divine perspective.<sup>12</sup> This is important for a Christian, because when we understand God’s purpose for each era of history we are able to develop a worldview for living in accordance with God’s will for each dispensation. A believer who has a Divine perspective on the past, present and future is able to know what God expects of him in every area of life in our present day.

In the current church age, the New Testament instructs us in both private and public spheres of life. The dispensationalist, for example, does not live in this age of grace as if he was still under the rule of the Mosaic Law. Instead we understand that we are now under the hundreds of commands that the New Testament calls the Law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Current dispensational obligations are wisely combined with responsibilities from previous ages, which continue in our own day, to provide a New Testament believer with a complete biblical framework for understanding how to please God in every area of our current lives. Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* (Pamphlet published by Dallas Theological Seminary, [1980], 1986), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, a translation and adaptation by William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 562.

<sup>4</sup> Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 25.

<sup>6</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.26.

<sup>7</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 28.

<sup>9</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Paul David Nevin, "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" (Th. D. dissertation, Dallas Seminary, 1965), p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is A Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), pp. 49-52.

## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part 9

by Dr. Thomas Ice

Earlier I provided a definition and description of dispensationalism. Next I want to look at the essentials of dispensationalism in order to provide a basis that will enable one to examine their beliefs to see whether they are indeed dispensational.

#### ESSENTIALS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Who is a dispensationalist? Essentials are needed by which to gauge a theology. Otherwise one can claim to be something when upon examination it turns out that they are not really what they claim. For example, a Mormon today may claim to be an evangelical Christian while at the same time remaining within the Mormon church. Should we just take his word for it or should we be able to examine what he believes in order to compare it to biblical standards that will reveal whether he can legitimately claim to be an evangelical. In the same way we need to be able to examine whether one is truly a dispensationalist.

What are the essentials that characterize a dispensationalist? Ryrie has stated what he calls the three essentials or *sine qua non* (Latin, "that without which") of dispensationalism.

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.<sup>1</sup>

The three essentials are not a definition or description of dispensationalism; instead they are basic theological tests which can be applied to an individual to see whether or not he is a dispensationalist.

#### FIRST ESSENTIAL: LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Ryrie's first essential of dispensationalism is not just literal interpretation, but more fully, a *consistent* literal hermeneutic. "The word *literal* is perhaps not so good as either the word *normal* or *plain*," explains Ryrie, "but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation does."<sup>2</sup> Literal interpretation is foundational to the dispensational approach to Scripture. Earl Radmacher went so far as to say that literal interpretation "is the 'bottom-line' of dispensationalism."<sup>3</sup>

Not all literal interpreters are dispensationalists but all dispensationalists are consistently literal interpreters. Dispensationalists define literal interpretation as the historical-grammatical hermeneutic developed within historic Protestantism. The literal hermeneutic is not mere "literalism" or "wooden literalism" as some suggest, instead, it approaches the text based upon what is actually written in the Scriptural text, without importing an idea from outside the context of a passage as does the spiritual or allegorical approach. Therefore, those implementing a *consistently* literal hermeneutic do not have a special approach when it comes to prophetic literature as do ones who allegorize the text. The literal interpreter employs a consistent hermeneutic from Genesis to Revelation.

## **SECOND ESSENTIAL: DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH**

*"A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct,"* declares Ryrie. He also notes that anyone "who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will."<sup>4</sup> What does it mean to keep Israel and the church distinct? Dispensationalists believe the Bible teaches that God's single program for history includes a distinct plan for Israel and a distinct plan for the church. God's plan for history has two people: Israel and the church. John Walvoord says: "dispensations are rules of life. They are not ways of salvation. There is only one way of salvation and that is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Seminary has described the distinction 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.<sup>6</sup>

If the unfulfilled promises given to Israel in the Old Testament literally refer to the Jews, which they do, then it is clear that many are yet unfulfilled. Therefore, it is clear that God's plan for Israel, who is currently in dispersion (see Deut. 4:27-28; 28:63-68; 30:2-4), is on hold until He completes His current purpose with the church—which is to take out from the Gentiles a people for His name (see Acts 15:14)—and raptures the bride of Christ to heaven. After the rapture, God will then complete His unfinished business with Israel (see Acts 15:16-18) during the seven-year tribulation period. Thus, if one does not distinguish between passages in which God speaks to Israel from those intended for the church, then the results will be an improper merging of the two programs.

In the Old Testament God made certain promises to Abraham when He pledged to make him the father of a special people. Dispensationalists understand these promises, and other unconditional covenant promises (i.e., treaty grants) made by God to Israel as still in tact for Israel, even though the church currently shares in some of Israel's spiritual blessings (Rom. 15:27). Ultimately God will not only restore Israel to a place of blessing (see Rom. 11), but will also literally fulfill the land and kingdom promises made to Israel in the Abrahamic (Gen. 12:1-3), Land of Israel (Deut. 30:1-10), and Davidic (2 Sam. 7:12-16) Covenants. In the present time, God has another plan for the church that is distinct from His plan for Israel (Eph. 2-3). Dispensationalists do not believe that the church is the New Israel or has replaced Israel as the heir to the Old Testament promises. Contrary to some who say that the church has superseded Israel, the New Testament nowhere calls the church Israel. Dispensationalist Arnold Fruchtenbaum says:



The conclusion is that the church is never called a “spiritual Israel” or a “new Israel.” The term Israel is either used of the nation or the people as a whole, or of the believing remnant within. It is never used of the church in general or of Gentile believers in particular. In fact, even after the Cross there remains a threefold distinction. First, there is a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles as in 1 Corinthians 10:32 and Ephesians 2:11-12. Second, there is a distinction between Israel and the church in 1 Corinthians 10:32. Third, there is a distinction between Jewish believers (the Israel of God) and Gentile believers in Romans 9:6 and Galatians 6:16).<sup>7</sup>

Fruchtenbaum gives six reasons why the New Testament keeps Israel and the church distinct. They are:

- (1) the church was born at Pentecost, whereas Israel had existed for many centuries. . . .
- (2) certain events in the ministry of the Messiah were essential to the establishment of the church—the church does not come into being until certain events have taken place. . . .
- (3) the mystery character of the church. . . .
- (4) the church is distinct from Israel is the unique relationship between Jews and the Gentiles, called one new man in Ephesians 2:15 . . .
- (5) the distinction between Israel and the church is found in Galatians 6:16 [i.e., “the Israel of God”] . . .
- (6) In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term *Israel* is used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct.<sup>8</sup>

### THIRD ESSENTIAL: GLORY OF GOD IS THE PURPOSE OF HISTORY

The third essential of dispensationalism also revolves around another important distinction. Showers says, this “indispensable factor is the recognition that the ultimate purpose of history is the glory of God through the demonstration that He alone is the sovereign God.”<sup>9</sup> Ryrie explains:

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.<sup>10</sup>

This essential is the most misunderstood and often thought to be the least essential. When properly understood, I believe that this is a valid essential. Dispensationalists are not saying that nondispensationalists do not believe in God’s glory. We are making the point that the dispensationalist understanding of the plan of God is that He is glorified in history by more areas or facets than those who just see mankind’s salvation as the

only focus (although this is probably the most important aspect of God's plan).  
Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology," ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted" in *Issues In Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936), p. 107, as cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church" in *Issues In Dispensationalism*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church", pp. 116-18.

<sup>9</sup> Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is A Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 213.

## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part 10

by Dr. Thomas Ice

*It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men [dispensationalists] 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.*

—Anti-dispensationalist, George Eldon Ladd

I believe that dispensationalism is a system of theology that has been properly developed from the Bible itself. Dispensationalism is essential to correctly understanding the Bible. No one will be able to rightly divide or handle accurately God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15) without understanding these great truths. Instead of being a hindrance to correct understanding of God's Word, as is regularly claimed by the opponents of dispensationalism, it is a human label for the correct approach and understanding of Scripture. Dr. Charles C. Ryrie hits the mark when he concludes:

If one does interpret the Bible this way, will it mean that he cuts out some of its parts? Not at all. Actually, the Bible comes alive as never before. There is no need to dodge the plain meaning of a passage or to reinterpret or spiritualize it in order to resolve conflicts with other passages. God's commands and standards for me today become even more distinct, and His program with its unfolding splendor falls into a harmonious pattern. The history of dispensationalism is replete with men and women who love the Word of God and promote its study, and who have a burden for spreading the gospel to all the world.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT ARE THE DISPENSATIONS?

Now that I have surveyed the theological system known as dispensationalism, I now want to identify the dispensations that we find in the Bible. Most who are opposed to dispensationalism agree that there are distinguishable economies or dispensations in the outworking of God's single plan for history. Thus, one does not need to be a dispensationalist to hold to the periodization of history. Most Bible teachers down through church history have recognized that there are different phases or eras of history.

Each dispensation includes: 1) revelation of God's will, 2) man's responsibility, 3) consequences. In each succeeding dispensation some features continue into future dispensations while other aspects cease at its conclusion. I believe that there are seven dispensations that can be deduced from God's Word<sup>2</sup> as follows:

- **INNOCENCE** (Gen. 1:28—3:6)—The dispensation of *Innocence* begins with the creation of Adam and Eve and God's commissioning of them. The dispensation of Innocence was a time when mankind, through Adam (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21,22), was created morally good but able to fall into sin. This apparently short-lived age ceased at the Fall into sin as recorded in Genesis 3. God's revelation of His will was "from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen. 2:17). Man's responsibility was to obey God and not partake. The consequences were: "for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

- CONSCIENCE (Gen. 3:7—8:14)— The *Dispensation of Conscience* begins with the fall into sin leading to the Flood of Noah. This dispensation demonstrates that man needs more than his conscience to walk upright before God. During this dispensation God revealed His will through the curse (Gen. 3:14-24). Man's responsibility was to master sin that desired to rule over him (Gen. 4:6-7). The consequences of neglecting his conscience would be the global flood of Noah (Gen. 6:5-7). The title conscience comes from Romans 2:15 and aptly designates the period between the Fall and the Flood.
- HUMAN GOVERNMENT (Gen. 8:15—11:9)— The *Dispensation of Human Government* begins after the flood when Noah and his family leave the ark. Civil Government was not invented by mankind as the need developed, instead, it was instituted by God Himself after the flood as seen in Genesis 8 and 9. God's will is revealed in that evil is to be restrained through the corporate institution of civil government instead of personal vengeance. With the absence of a threat of God's direct intervention through an instrument like the flood, man's responsibility is to mediate and restrain mankind's evil through capital punishment of certain offenses (Gen. 9:6; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). The consequences relate to man's failure to carry out God's will to restrain evil. Because of this God intervened in the tower of Babel incident (Gen. 11:1-9).
- PROMISE (Gen. 11:10—Ex. 18:27)—The *Dispensation of Promise* (so named by Paul in Galatians 3:15-22; 4:23,28) begins with the call of Abram and ends with the foundation of Israel as a nation through the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19). This period is dominated by the call of Abram and the promise made to him and his descendants, both physical and spiritual. The outworking of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and his descendants is tracked through Genesis and Exodus. During the age of Promise God revealed His will through the giving of the Abrahamic Covenant and its outworking in history. Abram's responsibility was to dwell in the land. The consequences were that when Israel disobeyed God He would chastise His people.
- LAW/ISRAEL (Ex. 19—John 14:30)—This dispensation began when Israel is established as a nation at the Exodus and given the Law. Israel was not and never was saved by keeping the Law, instead, it was how they as a redeemed people were to live. It was their rule of life that governed every aspect of life. But it was temporary until the coming and fulfillment by Christ. Israel's responsibility was to obey the Mosaic Law in order to show their loyalty to the Lord. Israel, as a nation, failed to keep the Mosaic Law which resulted in the many judgments spelled out in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26, the ultimate judgment resulting in their captivity while scattered among the nations. Today we are in a transition period during which Israel is partially regathered into her land and still partially scattered among the nations.
- GRACE/CHURCH (Acts 2:1—Rev. 19:21)—The church age began on the Day of Pentecost as noted in Acts 2. The rule of life for the church is grace. All aspects of life are to spring forth from grace for the church age believer and the extent of God's grace is expanded to all peoples through the worldwide offer of the gospel.<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that there was no grace before the events of Acts 2, rather that this is a time in which God magnifies His grace through the global preaching of the gospel to all mankind. Man's responsibility during the current age is to accept the gift of Christ's righteousness which is freely offered to all mankind (Rom. 5:15-18). The Church age ends with the rapture of the church when the last member of the body of Christ comes to faith in Jesus as their Messiah. This dispensation ends in the judgment of the tribulation upon a Christ-rejecting world.
- KINGDOM (Rev. 20:1-15)—During Messiah's 1,000 year reign from Jerusalem upon His return to the earth, all of the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to Israel as a

nation. These promises will have been accomplished by Christ, on behalf of a now converted Israel. The church will also reign and rule with Christ as His bride. Since Israel will be in her glory, the Gentiles will also reap great blessing as well. The responsibility during this age will focus on obedience to Christ the King and His laws, since Jesus will Himself be present during the thousand years as He reigns and rules the world from Jerusalem. Dr. Ryrie notes: "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."<sup>4</sup>

### THE ETERNAL STATE

Since the dispensations deal with God's plan for history, the eternal state is not considered a dispensation, just as eternity past is one either. Thus, present history ends with the destruction of the present heavens and earth (2 Pet. 3:10) and the creation of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1). The transitional event will be the great white throne judgment where all unbelievers throughout history will have to give an account of their rejection of Jesus Christ as their savior and will be judged according to their works (Rev. 20:11-15), which will result in everyone who appears before God being cast into the Lake of Fire for all eternity (Rev. 20:14-15). All the believers throughout the ages will dwell with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in bliss in the New Jerusalem for all eternity (Rev. 21:1-8). As the bride of Christ, we shall spend eternity getting to know the Lamb and the Father (Rev. 22:4). There will be no more testing since that is the purpose of history not eternity. We have a great future as a believer in Christ for all eternity. Maranatha!

**(End of Series)**

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* (Pamphlet published by Dallas Theological Seminary, [1980], 1986), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> For a graphic presentation of the dispensations and dispensationalism I recommend that one examine Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting The End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Some wrongly teach that the seven-year tribulation period is either a separate dispensation or conclusion of the church age. The tribulation is the completion of the Law/Israel dispensation since it is the 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel (Dan. (9:24-27) which is for Israel. Law/Israel is the only dispensation in history that is not completed consecutively or has two stages to it. Since the tribulation is the completion of Israel's dispensation, this provides a strong reason why the church will be ruptured before the tribulation.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), p. 56.