

Why Dispensationalism?

by

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Dispensationalism understands the Bible in terms of the unfolding revelation of God which results in different stewardships of responsibility on the part of man. Ryrie suggests a “distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose” (*Dispensationalism*, p. 28). A dispensational approach to Scripture emphasizes the Glory of God as the overarching theme of Scripture from creation to the mediatorial Kingdom to the eternal state where all things will be in absolute harmony and sync with God. Dispensationalism concerns itself with the doctrine of the church, eschatology, the historical-grammatical meaning of the OT/NT, the fundamental distinction between Israel and the Church, and the future salvation of national Israel including its restoration in the future mediatorial Kingdom.

1. Dispensationalism answers the need for Biblical distinctions.

What makes biblical Christianity different from OT Mosaism? This question cannot be answered without fundamental distinctions. The indivisible Mosaic Law with three aspects governed the theocratic kingdom at Sinai (Ex 19:6). Moral and ethical principles in the Law continue in the church age. For example, elements from the Mosaic Law which are rooted in the unchanging character of God, the created order, repeated or adjusted in the NT, and provide no fundamental dispensational conflict bind the conscience and behavior of God’s people today. In this sense the Mosaic Law is an eternal witness to the unchanging truth of God, yet the Church is not under the Mosaic Law per se. There are nearly 1300 commands and admonitions in the NT. A dispensational approach to Scripture preserves the continuity and discontinuity between Law and Grace, Israel and the Church, the Universal Kingdom and the Mediatorial Kingdom.

2. Dispensationalism harmonizes Scripture, accurately interpreting the Word of Truth.

Note the distinctions in the commissions given to the disciples in Matthew 10:1-23 and then later in Matthew 28:18-20. In the former they are only to go to the lost sheep of Israel, preach the Kingdom of Heaven (God) is at hand, and were to take no provisions. In the latter they were to go into the entire world, preach the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Luke 24:46-48), and to take ample provisions (Luke 22:35-36).

3. Dispensationalism explains the varied ministry of the Holy Spirit in the OT and NT.

The Theocratic anointing of OT Judges and Kings is not repeated in the NT church. The Baptism of the Spirit in the NT is unique to the NT church (1 Cor 12:13).

4. Dispensationalism contrasts the role of national Israel with that of the NT Church.

Membership in Israel was ethnic and political (Deut 23:1-3). Membership in the NT local church is by regeneration, subsequent immersion, and an orderly Christian walk (Acts 2; 1 Cor 5; 2 Thess 3) with no ethnic, physical, or political requirements. The NT Church was given a great

commission to evangelize the nations (Matt 28:19-20; Acts 1:8). No such commission was ever given to national Israel.

5. Dispensationalism provides the best unifying center to all of God's activity in History.

God's unifying principle to all His activity is His own self-glory. This encompasses creation, judgment, the mediatorial Kingdom, and the eternal state where God enters into a rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship with His image-bearers and dwells with them forever. This goal occurs within history culminating in the mediatorial Kingdom, is optimistic, and sanctifies human life as having genuine worth. God administers His world with increasing plateaus of progressive revelation and increased human responsibility leading to the ultimate goal of the Kingdom of God and the eternal state. This relationship began with the creation of man (Gen 1:26-28) when God communed with Adam and Eve in the Garden (Gen 3:8). Man enjoyed God's creation, fulfilled God's mandate to rule the earth as viceroys and thus glorify God. God permitted sin and provided the means of redemption and reconciliation so that He could have fellowship with man and be glorified in it all (Gen 3:15). In the consummation at the Messianic Kingdom/Eternal Kingdom God will be in perfect harmony with His creation as He rules in loving sovereignty. Each facet of the universe will glorify God in its fullest capacity. "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them" (Rev 21:3).

6. Dispensationalism presents the best defense against heresy because of its consistent, literal-normal use of hermeneutics.

Covenant systems regularly resort to allegorization, *sensus plenior*, or figurative interpretation of prophetic literature to uphold the generic church, i.e., the one people of God in the outworking of the one covenant of grace (Gen 3:15). Where a consistent, literal-normal hermeneutic is employed heresy is prevented. No true dispensationalist can be a liberal in theology. Spiritualizing or explaining away the original meaning of Scripture is the foundation for liberal, neo-orthodox thinking. The false implications of Covenant Theology are that the Church must go through the Tribulation (i.e., "The one people of God"), that there is no necessary future for Israel nationally, the Church in some sense is still under the Mosaic Law, and that the mission of the Church includes elements of Reconstructionism.

7. Dispensationalism best protects the spirituality of the NT Church.

This was the primary historical impetus for the rise of dispensationalism. The Church is not a political body or a mechanism for social justice. It is an institution created by God to declare the whole truth of God as revealed in His Word and to compel its members to profess and obey His Word. Certainly, the Church should remind its members of their civic duties to government, their neighbors, employees and employers. The Church should identify and condemn public vice and promote civic virtue (Gal 6:10). Church members are not barred from serving in government, the military, or other civic offices, since they are also citizens of the state. The Church is not bound to be silent in the civil arena. Nevertheless, spiritual matters are the proper purview of the Church. As members of the Church we have spiritual and theological responsibilities; as members of the State we have civic responsibilities which are informed by our spiritual values.

Dispensationalists keep these arenas in separate categories. Unlike OT Israel we render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's (Matt 22:21; Mk 12:17). The Church is not a new administration of the one people of God. It is a people of God distinct in identity from national Israel with unique origins, purposes, and destinies (Rom 11; Eph 2).

Dispensationalism helps to protect both the constituency of the Church and its mission in the world. Evangelist J. Nelson Darby in 1826 broke with the corrupt Anglican Church of England when his superior ordered all of Darby's converts to make oaths of allegiance to the British Crown as a prerequisite for membership in the state church. This was a betrayal of the church's spiritual mission and constituency. James Hall Brookes, the father of American dispensationalism and Presbyterian pastor of a "border church" during the Civil War, resisted the loyalty oaths or "Test Oath" demanding allegiance to the Union as a prerequisite for preaching and teaching. This historical atmosphere provided the incubation for the growth of American dispensationalism in the decades ahead.

8. Dispensationalism provides the best antidote to the social gospel.

A dispensational view of the Kingdom of God prevents those social, political elements of the mediatorial Kingdom from becoming part of the mission of the Church. God always rules over His Universal Kingdom. Nevertheless, His *Universal Kingdom* is not the same as the *Mediatorial Kingdom*. Nor is the Church the mediatorial Kingdom. The confusion of these entities confounds the mission of the Church and opens the door to the social gospel.

In Modernism the Church does not exist to secure converts per se with the gospel, but to materially facilitate the Kingdom of God and redeem all of creation. The Church's role in Modernism was to promote utopia through philanthropy, charity, public education, social justice, economic development, ecological preservation, end of oppression, and civil equality as the essence of salvation. Resistance to Walter Rauschenbusch's golden age of utopian liberalism came from dispensational fundamentalism which distinguished the universal, eternal Kingdom from the mediatorial Kingdom and then distinguished both concepts of the Kingdom from the NT Church.

Later on, the new-evangelicalism endeavored to broaden the dispensational mission of the NT Church. Carl Henry called for middle-ground between the "kingdom now" error of liberalism and the "kingdom then" mantra of dispensational fundamentalism. Henry accused the dispensational fundamentalists of making Christianity uncompassionate, irrelevant, and hollow (*Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, pp. 53, 57). He did so by suggesting that the mediatorial Kingdom is both "here" and "not here" in order to justify social action by the Church and make the Church relevant again. George E. Ladd made the case for Henry in his 1959 work *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (answered brilliantly by Alva McClain's lifetime work *The Greatness of the Kingdom*). Ladd's "already, not yet" motif of the mediatorial Kingdom supplied the theological basis for expanding the Church's mission beyond the explicit instructions given to it by Christ and the NT apostles (cf. a thorough treatment of this subject in Mark Snoberger's, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms," *DBSJ* 19 [2014]: 53–71; Benjamin G. Edwards' "Being Jesus, *Missio Dei*, and Kingdom Work: An Analysis, Critique, and Proposal

for Modern Approaches to Holistic Ministry,” *DBSJ* 19 [2014]: 73–94). The result of diluting the mission of the church by including all sorts of non-spiritual matters is to “compromise the purity of Christ’s church with an endless pursuit of cultural relevancy and social acceptance” (*Ibid.*, p. 71).

The mission of Christ was ultimately to seek and to save that which was lost—Redemption (Jn 3:16-17; 6:53-58; 10:10; 17:2). Thus, the mission of the NT Church is narrow and does not equate with all things that only God himself can do (Acts 1:8; cf. Isa 46:9-11; James 4:13-16; Col 1:17). When Jesus comes to set up His mediatorial Kingdom on earth and rule on the throne of David from Jerusalem, He will do so with a rod of iron (Rev 2:27; 19:5). Christ’s mediatorial Kingdom rule is not the paradigm for church ministry. In the synoptics when Christ offered the Kingdom (as defined by the OT prophets) to national Israel, He demonstrated through all His miracles the physical, social, political, ecclesiastical, and spiritual aspects of the KOG. Those miracles were never intended to be a model for church ministry. They were miraculous signs of power pointing to the sovereign authority of the King (Matt 12:28; Jn 10:37-38). Only God could do them. On the other hand, the NT Church is to focus on the explicit commands given to it such as worship, evangelism, discipleship, and fellowship. This is not secondary work for the Church; it is its central work for the Church and God’s central work today.

9. Dispensationalism maintains a future for national Israel.

Has the NT Church replaced Israel?

Well over a century ago Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, had become skeptical about Christianity on account of the influence of French atheist Voltaire. Frederick commented to his chaplain, “If your Bible is really true, it ought to be capable of easy proof. If your Bible came from God, you should be able to demonstrate that fact simply in a word.” His chaplain answered, “Your Majesty, it is possible for me to answer your request literally. I can give you the proof you ask for in one word”. Frederick asked, “What is this unique word that carries such proof?” “Israel,” said the chaplain. Frederick was silent.

Has the church superseded Israel, replaced her, and now is the fulfillment of the specific promises once made to national Israel and presently possessed by a different people to the exclusion of national Israel? Bruce K. Waltke declares with a broad brush the “hard fact that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant” (“Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, p. 274). Waltke is wrong for several reasons.

A. Supersessionism is a violation of sound hermeneutics.

New revelation does not change the authorial-intended meaning of previous revelation. The NT writers often use the OT illustratively, analogically, applicationally, implicationally, and recognize *stated typology*. New revelation, however, is not contrary revelation (Acts 1:6-7). Words bring but one signification to any single propositional context. This law of the univocal use of language must first be assumed in order to be disproved. Gordon Fee’s axiom applies here, “A text can never mean what it never meant”. Later revelation often clarifies and expands

on earlier revelation, but it does not change the original meaning of the OT. This would banish the author from his own words. Otherwise, uncertainty would plague the meaning and understanding of the entire Bible.

In Genesis 15:2-5 God promises that Abram's biological seed would be eternally plentiful. New revelation cannot obfuscate the original promise made by God. When God invited Abram to measure the length and breadth of the land promised to him and his biological offspring (Gen 13:17), new revelation cannot nullify that inviolable promise made by Yahweh.

B. Supersessionism is a violation of a NT type.

God's unconditional promises and covenants with Israel must be fulfilled with that group and not given to an entirely different group. Jeremiah 31:35-37 states that Israel will have a continuing existence. The NT confirms this continuing existence for the nation of Israel (Matt 19:28; 23:39; Luke 21:24; Acts 1:6; Rom 9:4, 11:26; Rev 7:4-8). The Church is not the anti-type for Israel because the type (Israel) still exists and will receive the specific promises given to her. Israel's rejection by God is only temporary (Matt 23:39; Luke 21:24; Rom 11:11, 26).

The title "Israel" is used 73 times in the NT with reference to ethnic Jews or national, ethnic Israel even after the establishment of the NT Church (Rom 9:6; 11:6; Gal 6:16; Acts 3:12; 4:10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28). Throughout the book of Acts the distinction is maintained between both existing groups ("Israel" 20 times; *ekklesia* 19 times). For a thorough treatment of this subject see Michael J. Vlach, "Has the Church Replaced Israel in God's Plan?" *The Conservative Theological Journal* 4:11 (2002): 6-32.

C. Supersessionism is a violation of the clear teaching by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:11-22 and Romans 11.

Ephesians 2:11-22

Ephesians 2:11-22 demonstrates that Gentiles who were "far" from God have now been brought to God because of Christ. Believing Gentiles are now part of a new entity with believing Jews in the church age called the "new man". The new man is not Israel nor does it replace Israel. It is a new creation, a new corporate entity, a new structure, a new body. In this new body, the Church, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female regarding the soteriological status of its members.

Though all people are born depraved, Gentiles did not have the OT revelation or other spiritual privileges as did national Israel. Yes, they were far from God and like Jews had to be brought to God in Christ in order to enjoy the same standing together (v. 11).

Gentiles were outside the lineage of the Messiah, outside the citizenship of Israel, with no relationship to its covenants such as the Abrahamic, Davidic, and the New Covenant. In contrast, Israel had been promised a land, seed, and blessings (Gen 12:1-3; 15:1-21; Jer 16:15; Zech 8:4-8). A continuing seed was promised to Israel that would ensure the nation's existence and the offspring of David as Messiah to head the nation (Ps 89:3-4, 34-36; Isa 9:6-7; Zech 14:3-

9). The New Covenant was promised in which a redeemed Israel would know God and have the law written on their hearts (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:19-20). The Gentiles, contrarily, were without hope and without God (12).

But now the believing Gentiles' present condition is in Christ. God reconciled the believing Jews and Gentiles to each other and to God not through human ingenuity, but through Christ (13; cf. Isa 57:19). Christ brought peace to both believing Jews and Gentiles and made them one in Christ (14). Christ accomplished this through His cross-work which broke down the middle wall that separated the two parties. The Mosaic Law marked a separation and hostility between Jews and Gentiles. However, the NT believer is not under the Mosaic Law per se (Rom 7:1-6; 10:4; Gal 2:19; 3:24-25). Regenerated Jews and Gentiles in Christ would not have the Mosaic Law as the *modus operandi* on account of Christ's death on the cross (15-16). The Law having been fulfilled in Christ was not destroyed, but rendered inoperative for the believer. Christ has fulfilled the Law and is the end of the Law (Rom 10:4; Gal 3:24). Believers are now under the Law of Christ (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21).

God created one "new man" in order to reconcile both Jews and Gentiles to God. This new man is entirely different from the two former persons (15a). Gentiles do not become proselytes to Israel, nor do Jews become Gentiles. Both become one new humanity—a third corporate entity where Jews and Gentiles now accept one another. They are a new race that is "raceless"—the Church of God (16-22; 1 Cor 10:32).

Romans 11

Roman 11 teaches that though Israel has been persistently stubborn to God's salvation plan of righteousness, God has not rejected Israel! (11:1-2). A permanent rejection is impossible with God (Jer 33). Israel's hardening against God is only partial (11:1-6), and God will not violate His election of Israel (11:2). "Foreknew" refers to God's electing knowledge and love for Israel. Israel's current transgression will one day be reversed when their conversion to Christ takes place (11:11; cf. Zech 14). When national Israel's restoration takes place, even greater blessings for the Gentiles will occur (11:12). Israel's rebirth as a nation will bring blessings to both national Israel and the nations.

In vv. 17-24 the *olive tree* refers to the *spiritual blessing* found in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3). The natural branches are Israel. Branches from the wild olive tree are the Gentiles who have now become believers. The branches broken off (v. 17) refer to the unbelieving members of Israel who are outside the blessing found in the Abrahamic Covenant. The branches "grafted in" are believing Gentiles who receive the spiritual blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant along with believing Jews. Believing Gentiles, however, do not take over Israel's role. The natural branches are still natural and the branches grafted in are still "wild". National Israel is still Israel and Gentiles are still Gentiles. The wild branches do not become natural. Both the believing remnant of national Israel and Gentiles have salvation in Christ, nevertheless they remain distinct (cf. Eph 3:6).

In vv. 25-36 Israel will experience a national salvation. The "mystery" (truth held in God's mind but not revealed in previous revelation, i.e., the OT) is that when the fullness of the Gentiles has

occurred “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26). The OT did not explicitly say that salvation blessings to Gentiles would precede those of national Israel. “All Israel” refers to the nation as a whole (Isa 59:2-21; Jer 31:33-34). God’s inviolable promises to Israel will be fulfilled, because “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29).

In conclusion, Isaiah 40:1 commands us to “Comfort, Oh comfort ye my people, saith the Lord your God”. The comfort of Israel is her Kingdom rest, her golden age. It will be a time when the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9), a time when Messiah will sit on His throne and rule the world through the nation Israel. As members of the church, we who are the Bride will then be the honored wife and queen of the millennial reign. This will be a time when all wrongs will be rectified, and Israel will be in her Kingdom rest, right with her God, and her covenant with Yahweh fulfilled. Who is able to bring about such a golden age for national Israel and a certain future for the church? Only the one true and living God Who says because of Who I am things are going to be exactly as I have planned them to be (Isa 40).

Recommended reading:

Alva J. McClain. *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God*. Winona Lake, Indiana: BMH Books, 1974.

Michael J. Vlach. *The Church as a Replacement of Israel: An Analysis of Supersessionism*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009.

_____. *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*. Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2008.

Content of this message is in part a distillation of material taught by my professors at DBTS: Dr. Rolland McCune, Dr. Sam Dawson, Dr. Mark Snoeberger and guest lecturer Dr. Michael Vlach.