

**Knowing God;  
Understanding God's works through History (3)**  
(Addressing dispensationalism)

**Introduction**

Last Lord's Day we set forth the basic tenets of covenant theology and how it is the biblical way in which to best read and interpret the history of redemption recorded in God's Word. Today we desire to address the leading dissenters from this view, who advocate that dispensationalism is the key to unlocking and understanding the Scriptures.

Let us read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup>For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. <sup>22</sup>For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. <sup>23</sup>But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. <sup>24</sup>Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. <sup>25</sup>For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. <sup>26</sup>The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. <sup>27</sup>For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. <sup>28</sup>Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all. (1 Cor. 15:20-28)

The Holy Spirit has set before us through the hand of the apostle a description of the kingdom of God through the course of this church age even unto the consummation of history. Here the Apostle Paul speaks of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and of His current reign over the kingdom of God. Since His resurrection and enthronement as the King over the kingdom of God, the Lord Jesus has been fighting and overcoming the enemies of God through history as He has been bringing His people, yes, even all things, into subjection to His Father on whose behalf He reigns. The last enemy that Christ will conquer is death itself, which will take place at the future resurrection of the dead. Upon the completion of His reign, the Lord Jesus will then present this kingdom in all its fullness to His Father. Please note that in this passage there is no mention or suggestion of a future rapture of the church, which initiates a 7 year tribulation on earth, which then culminates in Christ's visible second coming, which is then followed by a 1,000 year long Jewish millennium, which is then when the final judgment of unsaved people takes place followed by the creation of the new heavens and new earth. In other words, there is no way to interpret this passage as it stands according to the view of history and of the future taught by dispensationalism. There is, however, direct mention of the elements of covenant theology, including the roles of Adam and Christ as the federal head of their people. The simple and straightforward assertions of the apostle are consistent with covenant theology that we considered last week.

This is the third and final Lord's Day that we are devoting to the subject, understanding God's works through history. We have shown that although our God has given us a complete, wholly sufficient and inerrant Bible, He has given His people a greater understanding of the Bible through church history. Through history God has revealed His Word more clearly and fully to His people. He has done this by raising up godly men, who were mighty in the Scriptures, who confronted errant, even heretical teaching that had troubled the churches. Through their exposure and correction of error, these godly men clarified and declared the truth of God's Word regarding His ways. We have cited a number of cardinal doctrines that we

hold dear that are taught in the Scriptures, but doctrines that were not clearly understood and articulated until the Lord used events in history to bring them before us.

Last Lord's Day we asserted that the development of covenant theology in 17<sup>th</sup> century England (and New England) brought the clearest and most complete expression of what God has revealed to His people through His Word. What, again, is covenant theology? This is the belief that the Holy Scriptures teach that a relationship between God and His creatures can only be obtained and enjoyed by God's willingness to condescend to enter and maintain a relationship with Him. He must intervene in history to reveal Himself to people and to enter into formal (covenantal) relationship with them. He first did so with Adam, who was the federal head (representative) of the human race. God established a relationship with Adam and through him with mankind that came forth from him. The covenant upon which that relationship was based has been called the covenant of works, for God's promise of an eternal, blessed relationship with Him was conditioned on the obedience (works) of mankind (in Adam) to keep His law perfectly. The penalty of man's transgression of God's law was death, both physical and spiritual, which was eternal in duration. When Adam fell, he lost to mankind the blessed role and relationship that he had enjoyed before God. Adam had served God as prophet, priest, and king over God's creation. But through sin he lost the kingdom, which he was to manage and protect, surrendering that kingdom and all humanity into a kingdom ruled by the devil.

But upon Adam's breaking of the covenant of works with God and having the sentence of God pronounced upon him and all that came after him, God intervened. God gave forth the promise of a new covenant, which was a covenant of grace (Gen. 3:15). God promised that He would one day send a Savior/King who would defeat the devil and recover and restore His people (His elect) to an everlasting covenant relationship with Himself in His everlasting kingdom. This relationship with God in Christ would be a covenant of grace, which was based entirely on God's promise and God's work on man's behalf apart from man's merit or works. The Savior would not only make full atonement for the sin of His people, whereby He achieved the forgiveness of their sins, but He would keep the covenant of works that Adam had failed to keep in order to obtain righteousness before God for His people. In this covenant of grace God grants this gift of righteousness to His people through faith alone by His grace alone, whereby He secures and assures His eternal blessed favor upon them in this life and the life to come (Rom. 5:17). This concept of covenant theology is the key to best understand the unfolding of the entire Word of God. It is the theological framework by which we may read and understand the Scriptures. And all of the various covenants mentioned in the Scriptures that God has made through history with mankind may be understood from this vantage point of covenant theology with its covenant of works and covenant of grace.

This understanding of the Scriptures divides the Word of God itself into two broad categories, that we may refer to as the old covenant (the covenant of works, which is based on keeping God's law) and the new covenant (the covenant of grace, which is based on Christ keeping God's law on our behalf and for having died for our sins). And historically these two broad categories have always been recognized for their significant distinctions and achievements. We divide the Bible itself into the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word, testament, is another word for covenant. The Bible contains God's revelation His old covenant (OT), in which is the promise of the new covenant throughout, and then we have His revelation of the new covenant (NT), which is the realization and fulfillment of God's promise of the new covenant.

These two testaments record for us the full and complete plan and purpose of God in history. Within this unfolding history of redemption God reveals to us the presence of our sin in our attempts to keep His law (as a covenant of works), whereby we come to understand our need of salvation by His grace that He freely bestows upon us solely through our faith in His Son. Thus the entire story of redemption finds its emphasis in the promise of God and His fulfillment of that promise in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the center of all that is. Jesus Christ Himself is the fulness and finality of God's purpose in history. All that came before were but "a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:17). And so, we see the Old Testament as preparing the world and the way that brings us to Jesus Christ, and then we see in the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment and culmination of God's dealings in His world. And when Jesus Christ returns at the end of this age, He will execute His judgment upon the world, separating His people who have been saved by His grace from all others who are damned due to their sins. Then His people will enter the full enjoyment of His kingdom, that they will inherit which God had prepared for them from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34).

This understanding of the Scriptures is not a complicated matter. It is rather simple and straightforward. It speaks of what went on before the coming of Christ and what has taken place after the coming of Christ. The Old Testament (covenant) promised the future inauguration of the kingdom of God with God's Son as its perfect and rightful King. The New Testament (covenant) declares the arrival and establishment of that kingdom through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The New Testament sets forth the true nature of His kingdom, and the nature of the true citizens of that kingdom (both Jewish and Gentile believers). And the New Testament records the full realization of that kingdom to the entire world at the end of this age, when the Lord Jesus will have conquered all people and forces that had been opposed to the kingdom that His Father had given to Him. And here we are, now living as citizens of His everlasting kingdom with Jesus Christ as our King. And we are awaiting the full revelation of His kingdom at His future second coming.

Now one would think that this rather simple and straightforward understanding of the nature and content of the biblical message would continue to be proclaimed in Protestant churches. The most accepted and widely used confessions of faith upheld and declared covenant theology. And it was the common understanding of most Protestants from the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century through the next 2½ centuries. But a new and quite different understanding of the biblical message arose in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and became dominant in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its pervasiveness in evangelicalism has continued to this day. Rather than covenant theology being the most popular and proclaimed message, rather, dispensationalism arose to become the governing principle with which evangelicals have understood the message of the Scriptures. It continues today to be the most commonly accepted and promoted message proclaimed by evangelicals (Bible believers). And although we tend to bring this matter up often, for it needs to be addressed, I would like us to consider it today and show why it is both an errant and a very poor way in which to interpret the Holy Scriptures. Rather than explaining accurately and clearly the message of the Holy Scriptures, dispensationalism obscures and obfuscates the truth that God has revealed to His people.

## **I. Dispensationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

### **1. Origins of dispensationalism**

Dispensationalism had its beginnings in the Plymouth Brethren movement in Ireland and England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Brethren was a group of Christians who were anticlerical, resisting and resenting the dead formal clergy of the Church of Ireland and England. They formed independent churches which did not recognize the role or need of educated or ordained clergymen, but were strictly congregational in their polity and practice. Though they did not have formal ministers serving in their congregations, gifted members rose over time to provide leadership through their teaching, preaching, and writing. It was in this movement that **J. N. Darby** (1800-1882) arose in prominence. He introduced and popularized dispensational doctrine among the Brethren and later to other evangelical churches in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was the mentor to **Cyrus Ingerson Scofield** (1843-1921). Scofield was an American Congregational and/or Presbyterian clergyman, writer, Bible conference speaker, and the producer of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, who was the great promoter of dispensationalism in this study Bible, which was first published in 1909 and then in 1917.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a tumultuous time for evangelical Christians. Until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the mainline denominations dominated the Protestant church scene. But they all had become corrupted with Darwinian philosophy and German higher criticism. The Bible became scorned as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God. The miraculous was denied. The virgin birth, bodily resurrection of Christ and His present role as Lord was denied. Those who believed the Bible left these denominations as forming new "Bible-believing" churches, missionary societies, Bible colleges and seminaries which soon began to flourish. There was a great absence of sound, historical Christian literature for these fledgling evangelical churches and ministries. But then C. I. Scofield published his *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 and reissued in 1919. It was the only study Bible produced at that time, and it was viewed as filling the great need and void to set forth what "Bible-believing" Christians believed the Bible taught. Scofield's dispensationalism promoted in his study Bible supplanted covenant theology as the dominant way in which

the Bible was read and interpreted. The influence of dispensationalism grew through the 20<sup>th</sup> century shaping the belief system of a generation of evangelicals, including **Lewis Sperry Chafer** who founded Dallas Theological Seminary whose legacy was assumed by **John Walvoord** and **Charles Ryrie**. Most conservative evangelical pastors and teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had their views of law and grace, Israel and the church, the rapture and the second coming, the belief in a future Jewish 1,000 year millennium, shaped directly or indirectly by the teaching held by these men. Their teaching is still predominant and is taught to the people in the pews, not only by pastors and teachers influenced by them, but through their books and study Bibles that have always sold quite well. Almost all radio and television preachers and teachers espouse dispensational as the only right way to interpret the Bible. I would guess that perhaps 95% of all Bible believers in the U.S. today, believe the teachings of dispensationalism. That is all that they have ever heard taught them. The only popular radio preachers that I can think of who continue to espouse covenant theology are R. C. Sproul and (I think) Alistair Begg. Interestingly, however, since the 1980's there has been some dispensationalists who have modified some of their more aberrant positions of earlier classical dispensationalists, who are referred to as progressive dispensationalists.<sup>1</sup> They still are dispensationalists, but they have moderated some of the former teaching. But thankfully, in the past several decades there has been a resurgence of teaching of covenant theology, perhaps largely due to the republishing of books of the Puritans of the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Let us now consider in some detail the teaching of dispensationalism.

## 2. The major tenets of dispensationalism

What beliefs distinguish dispensational theology? They are many, but the main beliefs may be as follows.

### (1) God's dealings in history are to be understood according to seven distinguishable dispensations.

If there is a single verse of Scripture that dispensationalists have called upon to legitimize their interpretation of the Scriptures, it is **2 Timothy 2:15**. Paul wrote to Timothy, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, *rightly dividing the word of truth*." Paul was exhorting Timothy to properly interpret and apply the Holy Scriptures to his pastoral ministry. Dispensationalists, however, claim that the last words of this verse speak to rightly *dividing* up the Bible into distinguishable dispensations--in order to understand the Bible rightly, one must be "rightly dividing the word of truth." Just before the turn of the century C. I. Scofield wrote a pamphlet entitled, "Rightly Diving the Word of Truth." He said of this verse:

The Word of Truth, then, has right divisions, and it must be evident that, as one cannot be "a workman that needeth not be ashamed" without observing them, so *any study* of that Word which ignores those divisions must be in large measure profitless and confusing.<sup>2</sup>

What we see, therefore, is that instead of dispensationalists viewing the concept of covenant as central to understanding and applying the Scriptures rightly, their primary biblical hermeneutic, or principle of interpretation, is to interpret the Scriptures according to the various dispensations that unfold in the biblical record.

More specifically, *what is their definition of a dispensation?* Scofield defined a dispensation as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."<sup>3</sup> In other words, it is believed that the Bible records a number of successive points in history when

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur would be the chief promoter of this theology.

<sup>2</sup> C. I. Scofield, **Rightly Diving the Word of Truth** (Loizeaux Brothers), p. 3. The first edition was published in January of 1896.

<sup>3</sup> Richard P. Belcher, **Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology** (Crowne Publications, 1986), p. 8.

God revealed some new and additional teaching regarding Himself and His will, and then He began in that dispensation to test mankind according to that revelation. Each dispensation is distinct from one another, but each dispensation contains certain aspects or elements common to them all. Within each dispensation there is a five step pattern. There is

- (1) a distinctive idea of God's revelation at the outset,
- (2) a specific test of obedience in relation to that divine revelation,
- (3) a failure of man under the economy to the divine revelation,
- (4) a judgment of God for the failure,
- (5) which is then followed by the beginning of a new dispensation

And so, a dispensation is understood as a period of specific trial and testing, and mankind shows its sinfulness by its failure in every test which brings an end to that dispensation at which time God began to deal with mankind differently with a different test in the age that follows.

***How many dispensations are believed to be set forth in the Bible?*** It is believed that ***there are seven dispensations in the Biblical record.*** These include the following:

- [1] The age of Innocence
- [2] The age of Conscience
- [3] The age of Promise
- [4] The age of Human Government
- [5] The age of Law
- [6] The age of Grace
- [7] The age of the Kingdom

## **(2) How is each dispensation to be understood?**

***First, the age of Innocence*** was God's test of Adam and Eve while in the Garden of Eden before the fall. God had created man in a state of innocence, placing him in a perfect environment. The test was that of obedience to His command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Of course Adam and Eve failed the test when they sinned, bringing God's judgment upon them by His pronouncement of His curse and His excluding them from the Garden. This dispensation is recorded in Genesis 1:28-3:24. With Adam and Eve's fall into sin and God's pronouncement of judgment, the age of innocence came to an end.

This gave way to the second dispensation, which is ***the age of Conscience***. After having fallen into sin and having been excluded from the Garden, mankind went into the world as sinners. But God continues to deal with mankind according to the conscience he had given to everyone. The test was that men and women were to govern themselves in righteousness according to their conscience. God had been taught about simple sacrifice for his sin and that he was to live righteously before God. But man failed his test. Mankind grew worse and worse. We read in Genesis 6:5-8:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. <sup>6</sup>And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. <sup>7</sup>So the LORD said, "I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth, both man and beast, creeping thing and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them."

This dispensation ended with God's judgment upon the earth with the world-wide flood, by which God washed the earth of sinful humanity. The one exception, of course, was Noah. "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (Gen. 6:8).

The *third* dispensation was *the age of Human Government* which began with Noah and his family coming forth from the ark. After the flood we read a record of the nations that came forth and repopulated the earth. It is claimed that the test for this dispensation was a new test of obedience to obey human government through which man was to govern the world. But mankind failed his test and God brought His judgment of mankind at the tower of Babel. There God confounded the languages and scattered the peoples across the world. It is taught that this dispensation is recorded in Genesis 8:15-11:32.

The *fourth* dispensation is *the age of Promise*. This began with God's call of Abraham and continues through the book of Genesis and the exodus of Israel from Egypt, ending at Mount Sinai. God had selected one man from whom would come forth the nation of Israel and eventually the promised Messiah. God promised His blessing upon Abraham and his descendants, in other words, Israel, therefore it is called the age of Promise. It is claimed that the test that God imposed upon this people was whether or not they would choose to continue in a relationship with God according to His promise of grace. They failed their test by choosing rather to relate with God according to His law given to them at Mount Sinai, which they chose to accept as the basis of their relationship with God.

"The test was when God at Mt. Sinai offered this people a law-relationship with Him rather than the grace-relationship they then knew. They rashly and foolishly accepted it, thus failing the test, ending the period of promise."<sup>4</sup>

According to dispensationalists, Israel should not have accepted the law of God from Moses, insisting that they remain under the grace of God given to them through God's promise to Abraham.

Then began the *fifth* dispensation, which was *the age of the Law*. At Mount Sinai God gave Israel the Ten Commandments by which they were to order their corporate and individual life. The test of this dispensation was whether or not Israel would faithfully keep God's Law. Of course the Bible records that Israel repeatedly failed to do so. The final test, therefore, was whether or not Israel would accept the promised Messiah who was sent to them and who offered them the earthly kingdom (millennium). They failed terribly in that they crucified their promised Messiah-King. This dispensation of Law continued from Exodus 19:1 until Acts 1:26, just before the Day of Pentecost.

The *sixth* dispensation is *the age of Grace*, that began with Pentecost and continues until what they believe to be the rapture of the church. With the rejection of Christ by Israel, the test is given to the Gentile world to accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Here is their understanding of this age of grace:

When Israel, God's chosen people, rejected the kingdom and crucified their king, God now turned to the Gentiles to deal with them through the grace of His Son's death for the formation of a body of people for Himself. This body of people was the Church. This is a parenthetical period until God turns once again to deal with His chosen people, Israel. The point of testing in this period is the acceptance of Jesus Christ. The period will, however, end in failure with the apostasy of the professing church and resultant apocalyptic judgments.

The age of grace is said to end with the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is not clear what they claim regarding a so-called 7 year tribulation after the church is said to be raptured out of the world. Biblically, they claim this dispensation covers the Scriptures from Acts 2:1 until Revelation 19:21.

The *seventh* and final dispensation is said to be *the age of the Kingdom*. It is said with the failure of the church to evangelize the world in this age of grace, that God will turn to work once again among His chosen people, the Jews. After the rapture of the church, the Jews will once again have preeminence in

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 11. This is a crazy notion in that dispensationalists believe that Israel should have refused to receive from God the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai.

God's purposes through the final seven year tribulation and into the kingdom age after the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is said that the 1,000 year kingdom age will be a world which is dominated by the Jewish people who serve Jesus Christ who has established the promised Davidic Kingdom of the OT. But this age also ends in failure when the people of the world moved by satan rebel against King Jesus who is enthroned in Jerusalem.

### **3. The major errors of dispensationalism**

We would assert that there are many serious and foundational problems with dispensationalism, that it is a very poor tool by which to interpret the Scriptures. Many errors result and much ignorance of the truth of the Scriptures is lost to those who espouse dispensationalism. It is important to understand that these errors do not touch essential matters of the gospel that would cause us to separate formally from these brethren.<sup>5</sup> They are very important matters, but they are not essential matters on which the salvation of ones who believe or disbelieve dispensationalism is in jeopardy. The fact is that most all Christians in today's world began their Christian walk within the setting and under the hearing of dispensational teaching. And although these faults with the system adversely influence the content and weaken the impact of the gospel message, the heart and substance of the gospel is not affected so as to make their teaching "another gospel."<sup>6</sup>

The errors of dispensationalism are so many and they are so pernicious in so many ways that it is a significant challenge to put into words a summary of these in one sermon. We could easily speak for the next ten Sundays about these matters and not feel that we were thorough in our treatment. I personally came out of dispensationalism almost 40 years ago, after having been indoctrinated in the system for about 10 years. Through the years I have become increasingly mindful of how much damage the system has done to the understanding of the truth of God's Word and how difficult a task it is to wean sincere and committed Christians from what they have been taught and have believed firmly to be the truth of the Scriptures. For our purposes at this time we are only able to speak in rather broad terms and categories. If you are interested, I have good books available that address these and many more matters thoroughly.

We may attempt to address the major categories of errors of dispensationalism in the following ways. We will identify (1) errors of understanding of principles of biblical interpretation, (2) errors of understanding of the identification and role of "Israel", (3) errors of understanding of the "Church", (4) errors of understanding of the promised kingdom of David, (5) errors of understanding regarding the end times, and (6) errors of understanding regarding the future judgment of mankind.

#### **(1) Errors of principles of interpretation**

Dispensationalism arose in history because its originators had adopted certain ways of interpreting the Bible that were a departure from historic Protestantism. They claim that they alone practice the right method of interpreting the Scriptures, which is according to the grammatical-historical method. They accuse those who are not dispensational as not interpreting the Bible "literally", but that non-dispensationalists spiritualize and allegorize that which should be accepted literally.

First of all, this is an incorrect accusation, for we would argue that we also interpret the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, using the grammatical-historical method. But whereas they claim to interpret the Old Testament literally, we would charge them that in doing so they fail to take the New Testament literally. For we advocate that God meant everything He said in the Old Testament, but that in the New Testament God tells us what He had meant in the Old Testament. "God means what He says (OT) and says what He

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, although we do not view these matters as a test of fellowship, very often dispensationalists view their teaching as essential beliefs and will readily separate from us because of the. I suspect the main reason many evangelicals would not consider attending our church is that they know, perhaps through our radio broadcasts, that we do not espouse the end times as dispensationalists teach.

<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there are some who are dispensationalist in their theology who are quite errant respecting the gospel. There are those, like John Hagee, who claim that the Jews can have salvation apart from faith in Christ, because they are God's chosen people. Billy Graham also taught this in his later years. Also, the NT message of the gospel and the kingdom is greatly affected by dispensational teaching.

means” (NT) (John Wilmot). The key to rightly understanding the Old Testament is to read it in the light of the person and work of Christ as the Holy Spirit illuminates the truth to the student of Scripture. Speaking of Jews who had failed to believe on Jesus as their promised Messiah, Paul wrote these words:

<sup>14</sup>But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. <sup>15</sup>But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. <sup>16</sup>Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Cor. 3:14-16)

The Jews interpreted their Scriptures (our OT) literally, but in doing so they failed to recognize the true identity of Jesus as the Christ, the spiritual nature of the promised kingdom of God, and of the need to be born again and exercise repentance and faith in the Son of God for salvation, even entrance into the promised kingdom.

Dispensationalists tend to literalize the Old Testament and interpret the New Testament in the light of their OT understanding. They have this reversed. In God’s scriptural revelation the New Testament interprets the Old Testament. Here are the words of **John Wilmot** writing of the hermeneutics of a dispensationalist:

Mr. B. W. Newton, maintaining a rigidly literalistic outlook, writes that “the prophecies of the New Testament cannot be interpreted in opposition to those of the Old Testament,” that “they are professedly supplemental to those already given in the Old Testament”, and “it is important to receive the instruction of the prophets if we wish to apprehend the additional lessons of the apostles”. The rule would be sound if the Testaments were reversed, that is to say, the prophecies of the Old Testament must not be interpreted in opposition to the New Testament. The supplementary lessons of the apostles are expository and meaningful; and it is important to receive the lessons of the apostles if we wish to understand the instruction of the prophets. Our Lord and His apostles were exponents of Moses and the prophets. By such guidance we find that a spiritual meaning is given and a Gospel and evangelical fulfillment intended. On the other hand, the judgment of the able writer quoted leads him to postpone fulfillment to “the millennial period”, and so to “millennial interference”, “millennial blessing”, “human life in the millennium”, “the millennial heavens and millennial earth”, and choice words of psalmist and prophet are said to be those of the Israel Nation when the Lord shall come. The fact is, no such millennial qualifications are mentioned in the Old Testament and human judgment, therefore, forces the text to fit the theory. The one millennial occurrence in the New Testament (and in the whole Bible) makes mention of none of the earthly characteristics so arbitrarily placed within that thousand years (Rev. 20).<sup>7</sup>

The dispensational system fails to adhere to a biblical principle that God first reveals what is true in the natural, physical and temporary order of things in order to later reveal the supernatural, spiritual and eternal order. The divine order is first the natural and then it is followed by what is spiritual. Consider Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 15:46 respecting the relationship between Adam and Jesus Christ:

However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. <sup>47</sup>The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. <sup>48</sup>As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. <sup>49</sup>And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.

What may be read and understood as “literal” in the Old Testament may actually be pointing to something beyond itself, to that which is “spiritual.” This is the meaning and use of typology. What is typology?

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<sup>7</sup> John Wilmot, **Inspired Principles of Prophetic Interpretation** (Reiner Publications, 1965), pp. 12f.



“Typology is one of the most important pieces of biblical interpretation in general, as well as the mystery of Christ and covenant theology in particular... **Greg Beale** offers a helpful definition of typology.

The study of analogical correspondence among revealed truths about persons, events, institutions, and other things within the historical framework of God’s special revelation, which, from the perspective view, are of a prophetic nature and are escalated in their meaning.

Most often the Old Testament contains the type, and then the New Testament reveals its antitype, the spiritual reality to which that physical type had pointed. And so, Adam was the type, Jesus Christ is the antitype. The manna was the type; Christ was the antitype, the true bread from heaven. Canaan, the Promised Land, was the type, but heaven and the eternal state is the antitype. Circumcision was the type; Spiritual circumcision or regeneration is the antitype.

There are so many examples of types and their antitypes in Scripture that to catalogue them all would be quite a feat. I have a reprinted book from the 17<sup>th</sup> century written by the Reformed Baptist, **Benjamin Keach** (1640-1714), entitled, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of Scripture*.<sup>8</sup> It is a classic, which is 1007 pages in length. Much of errant dispensational teaching can be assessed as the failure to identify and distinguish between the *literal* types of the Old Testament and their *spiritual* antitypes in the New Testament. One of the major ways in which dispensationalists err is in not terminating the importance and abiding reality of the type once the antitype arrives.

If types are not their antitypes, it naturally follows that when the antitype arrives, the type is discarded. “The substance being come, the shadow flies away” (Hercules Collins—17<sup>th</sup> c). This is the argument of the author to the Hebrews. A return to animal blood is a denial that Jesus’ blood has any meaning. To prefer the shadow over substance, is to say that the substance has not arrived. To prefer animal sacrifices is to say that Jesus has not come in the flesh and is not the Christ.<sup>9</sup>

I wish our dispensational friends understood and applied this principle to their interpretation of the Old Testament. The Old Testament temple was the type that pointed to the New Testament antitype of the physical body of Jesus Christ (John 2:19). To teach that one day there must be a rebuilt physical temple that will be in legitimate service during a future 1,000 year millennium is a denial of the spiritual reality of the Lord Jesus Himself and a denial of His death on His cross. Of course the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament and the myriad of sacrifices through the centuries was the type of which Christ and His atoning sacrifice was the antitype. And so, to claim that because we are to take the Old Testament literally, that there will be a restored Levitical priesthood in a future millennium offering animal sacrifices as a memorial to the death of Christ in a rebuilt temple that God regards as a legitimate means of worshipping Him, is a violation of understanding the nature and meaning of types and their antitypes. It is a literizing of shadows while obscuring the abiding spiritual realities.

Similar idea to the matter of typology, dispensationalists disregard the normal manner in which God has worked through history. He is always moving forward in order to accomplish His purposes. Dispensationalists declare that God will one day return to His real love and purpose, that is to manifest Himself to and through the physical nation of Israel. The major message of the book of Hebrews was that there was no going back for the Jewish Christian, a return to former practices of the Jews religion of the Old Testament. God has come through Jesus Christ and is moving forward in history to the consummation of all time and things. But dispensationalism teaches that God Himself will turn back, and return to His old purposes and ways with the physical Jews and the political nation of Israel. But God does not walk backwards.

## (2) Errors of understanding of the identification and role of “Israel”

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<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of Scripture* (Kregel Publications, 1972), 1007 pp.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Renihan, *The Mystery of Christ; His Covenant and Kingdom* (Founders Press, 2019), p. 34.

Dispensationalists will deny the legitimacy of using the expression, “spiritual Israel.” They define Israel as the physical children of Abraham only, to whom God has bound Himself to bless. They believe that God’s primary plan in history is to bless the Jewish people who are the physical offspring of Abraham to whom God committed Himself. They persist in their belief that God’s favor is shown due to, and according to, one’s race, when throughout the Bible God has manifested His favor according to ones He purposed in grace. God deals with people in His covenant of grace on people He has purposed to show grace, not because of who their physical parents or ancestors were. God has indeed dealt with race as the determining factor respecting His covenant of works, but it is according to grace that He relates with people in the covenant of grace.

Now clearly God has called and used many of Abraham’s physical offspring in His plans and purposes of history. But God purposed to be in covenant relationship with the spiritual descendants of Abraham. They were the true recipients of His grace, in that they had the same faith that their spiritual father, Abraham, had possessed and had exhibited in His life. Spiritual Israel includes all people of history who have had the same faith as Abraham, not because they have the same blood as Abraham.

The Apostle Paul stated in a number of places this spiritual reality. He argued that God promised Abraham that he would become the *father of many nations* (cf. Rom. 4). These were not only those who were physically born to him, but people everywhere who had the same faith as their father Abraham. Paul reasoned in Romans 9 that though not many Jews had embraced Jesus as their promised Messiah, it was not as though God’s word had failed, for God never intended to save all of Abraham’s physical offspring. God had never desired, intended, or promised that all of Abraham’s physical posterity would be saved. Paul reasoned that Abraham had two sons, but God chose only one of them for Himself (Rom. 9:6f). And even though Isaac’s wife, Rachael, had twin sons, God chose to bestow mercy on only one of them. And so Paul could say of “Israel”, that not all who were physically born Israelites were true Israelites.

<sup>6</sup>But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect. For *they are not all Israel who are of Israel*, <sup>7</sup>nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.”

<sup>8</sup>That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. (Rom. 9:6-8)

Here we clearly see that God’s purposes were to save spiritual Israel. Being a part of physical Israel was not in itself a reason to hope for God’s favor. But dispensationalists tend to apply spiritual promises to the Jewish people because they are the physical descendants of Abraham.

### **(3) Errors respecting the “Church”**

Dispensationalists teach that the Bible holds forth promises for two different people, Israel and the Church. Israel contains the Old Testament people of God, His earthly people. They believe and teach that no Old Testament saints belong to the Church, for the Church is comprised only of those who were saved on or after the Day of Pentecost. They maintain a strong distinction between God’s promises to Israel and His promises to His Church. These two peoples of God will exist in eternity separately with separate destinies and distinguishing blessings. I have often asked our dispensational friends to which group, Israel or the Church, did the redeemed people belong who lived before the call of Abraham, for they were neither Jews nor NT Christians? The Scriptures teach that there is one people of God which is comprised of all people in history who are redeemed through the life and death of Jesus Christ. The true universal church, therefore, did not begin at Pentecost, but includes all people saved through history. There is one people of God redeemed by the Savior.

### **(4) Errors respecting the promised Kingdom of David**

Dispensationalists teach that the promised kingdom of David of the Old Testament is not the same as the kingdom of God of which Jesus taught and is said to have been inaugurated through His death and

resurrection. They teach that that Jesus will one day establish the kingdom of David at His second coming is a literal, earthly kingdom on earth with its capital in Jerusalem. During a future 1,000 year kingdom age Jesus will reign as the Son of David on His throne, but His current reign as King of kings and Lord of lords should not be confused with the Davidic kingdom. These folks have a tendency to see two of everything in Scripture. They believe that God has promised two everlasting *thrones*--the throne of David and the throne of the Lord Jesus. There are two everlasting *kingdoms*: the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of God.

But it is quite clear that the Scriptures speak of one everlasting kingdom, with one eternal king, and that this kingdom that promised to David was and is fulfilled in David's Son, our Lord Jesus. There is only one promised kingdom. That kingdom of God, the kingdom promised to Israel's King David, is the very kingdom in which all disciples of Jesus Christ have been citizens for these past 2,000 years. Peter was declaring to the Jewish people gathered before him in Jerusalem at Pentecost that God had inaugurated His promised kingdom of David through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is "*Jesus Christ is of the Seed of David, raised from the dead*" (2 Tim. 2:8) that entered into His reign as Lord of lords and King of kings. Through His own death He paid for the sins of His people so that they might be forgiven. Through His own resurrection life and "all authority" that the Father gave Him, the Son of David is able to save to the uttermost all who come to Him. And His deliverance is not merely an outward rescue from oppression. He deals with the cause of all suffering. He removes sin from His people. He removes the curse of God that is upon people due to sin. He gives them victory over their own sin that brings upon themselves their misery. He sets them free and gives them joy and peace as they live before Him in righteousness within His kingdom.

#### **(5) Errors respecting the end times**

These are many in number, so many that we cannot address them all here. Dispensationalists teach that the second coming of Christ will take place in two separate events separated by a period of seven years. The rapture of the Church will occur in which Jesus Christ will catch away from the earth believers in Jesus Christ and return with Him to heaven. Then a period of tribulation of seven years will transpire on earth in which an earthly political antichrist will rise to rule over the world. At the end of the seven years Jesus Christ will return to the earth with His saints, visibly and physically in order to establish His 1,000 yearlong kingdom on earth.

For 1,000 years King Jesus will rule over the world which will be characterized by peace and righteousness, for the devil and his forces will have been removed from the earth. Both glorified Christians who had been resurrected and glorified at the rapture and unconverted mortals allowed to continue through the tribulation into the kingdom, and those who are naturally born during the millennium will dwell together in this kingdom.

But at the end of the 1,000 years the people of the earth will be moved by satan who had been released from his spiritual prison, to rebel against King Jesus ruling in Jerusalem. Then the Lord will put an end to their rebellion which will signify the end of history. Then the Great White Throne Judgment will occur in which all the unsaved of all of history will be brought before King Jesus to be judged and damned in their sins. All who come before Him in this judgment will be cast into the lake of fire to be tormented forever.

All of these details are fictional and are not taught in the Scriptures. Rather, the Bible speaks of the second coming of Jesus Christ as taking place on the last day of history. At that time He will judge all the world in a general judgment of mankind, who will be judged according to how they had lived in this world. People will be separated into one of two destinies, heaven and hell. God will then create a new heavens and new earth in which He and His people will dwell forever.

#### **(6) Errors respecting the future judgment of mankind**

One of the most serious and devastating errors perpetrated by dispensationalism is the failure to teach that all people who have ever lived will one day undergo God's judgment of works on the last day. The outcome of this judgment of works will either be eternal life or eternal damnation (Rom. 2:5-11). It is commonly believed that the only judgment that Christians will face will be for the purpose for receiving

rewards of stewardship for having served Christ faithfully in this life as Christians. But the Bible teaches that all humanity must face the final judgment. This should not be a cause of fear or even apprehension for the true Christian, for his life of works, his words, his attitudes and actions of this life will vindicate his claim to be a true believer in Jesus Christ. He will stand in that day clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ with his sins covered by the blood of the Lord Jesus. Jesus Christ Himself will stand forward as is advocate and claim him as His own. And Jesus Christ Himself is the Judge before whom they stand who will exonerate them of the guilt of all sin, for He had died and rose for their justification.

## II. The recovery and proclamation of covenant theology

What are the views of the dispensationalists toward the covenants? They believe that the covenants of Scripture have respect to the Jews and Israel, not the Church. Even the promised new covenant proclaimed in the Old Testament is primarily applied to Israel in the future, rather than to the Church in this present age. As **John Gerstner** once pointed out that whereas covenant theology attempts to unify the Bible, dispensationalism divides the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike traditional interpreters, dispensationalists “divide” these sections sharply into areas that *conflict with* one another rather than *unfold from* one another. Genuine biblical revelation is developmental; one stage unfolds naturally from another as the unfolding of the blossom of a flower. But for dispensationalists, these periods are sharply divided rather than integrated, and they conflict rather than harmonize. Even “divide” is a sharper term than Paul’s original requires, and dispensationalists have made it sharper still, a veritable scissor separation of one part from another.<sup>11</sup>

May the Lord continue to awaken many Christians to the truth and relevance of these matters. And may He enable to to proclaim His truth to today’s world in which He has placed us.

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<sup>10</sup> John Gerstner, **A Primer on Dispensationalism** (P & R Publishing, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

### **More Problems with Dispensational Theology**

Aside from all that we have stated above, here are some additional doctrinal and historical errors promoted by this system of belief.

1. It is common for dispensationalists to view only the New Testament as Christian Scripture. The Old Testament is not believed to be relevant or applicable for Christians, for it was for the Jews under the law of the Mosaic covenant.
2. It strips the Old Testament of meaning and value for Christians in declaring its promises have not been fulfilled by God in Christ in this age, but wait fulfillment in a future Jewish millennium.
3. Often dispensationalists believe that because they are in the age of grace and not the age of the law that they have no obligation to obey the law of God in this life, that they can disregard all legal standards of righteousness for they are under grace.
4. Many dispensationalists believe and teach that repentance is not turning from sin unto righteousness, but simply changing one's mind so as to believe in the right identity of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Therefore, turning from sin is not necessary for salvation, if only one believes rightly, he is saved.
5. It fails to interpret the Old Testament rightly, leaving it to be a closed book for the churches.
6. It illegitimately elevates the physical Jews to status as the true people of God rather than seeing people of faith in that role.
7. It has a faulty view of the second coming of Christ in two stages.
8. It fails to see and value the present messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.
9. It strips Jesus Christ of His present glory as the enthroned and ruling Son of David.
10. It takes present spiritual truths and realities and projects them into a future earthly kingdom.