

# COVENANT THEOLOGY & DISPENSATIONALISM

**Covenant Theology** and **Dispensational Theology** are two prominent approaches for interpreting the Bible, each offering distinct perspectives on the relationship between God, Israel, the Church and His future promises.

## I. DEFINITIONS

1. **Covenant Theology:** A theological system that organizes theological history through a paradigm of three implied covenants:
  - 1) Covenant of Redemption, 2) Covenant of Works, 3) Covenant of Grace. The Covenant of Redemption refers to the eternal covenant among the members of the Godhead to redeem fallen humanity through the sacrifice of God the Son on the cross. The Covenant of Works is the implied covenant made by God with Adam (as humanities federal head or representative) in the Garden to give life in exchange for obedience to God's commands and death for their violation. The Covenant of Grace is God's covenant with man to give salvation to whomever trusts in God for redemption.
  - This perspective emphasizes the unity of God's redemptive plan throughout history, asserting that there is one people of God, encompassing both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church. In this view, the Church is seen as the continuation or fulfillment of Israel, with God's promises to Israel realized in the Church.
2. **Dispensationalism:** Dispensationalism has three primary characteristics: 1) the call for a consistent literal hermeneutic, particularly regarding biblical prophecy, 2) the distinction of Israel from the church, 3) the separation of human history into several distinct epochs, "economies," or dispensations in which God relates to mankind in distinct ways.
  - With regard to soteriological history (history of salvation), dispensationalism teaches that salvation has always been by faith alone, by grace alone, yet the content of the Gospel has been progressively revealed through biblical history. Dispensationalism has a variety of forms and has gone through various developments.

## II. PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The differences between the two schools cover a wide range of theological topics. However, the primary strands of concern are the following:

### 1) **Hermeneutics\* (Rules of Interpretation)**

- a) Redemptive-Historical Hermeneutic or a Literal Historical-Grammatical Hermeneutic?
- b) How are hermeneutical principles to be applied? Should we read the Scriptures allegorically, literally, typologically? When are we to use these differing methods?

### 2) **Ecclesiology (Church)**

- a) Has the church spiritually fulfilled promises to Israel?
- b) Are Jews and Gentiles who have faith in Christ to be considered two peoples or one? Is there a radical bifurcation among the peoples of God?
- c) Is the church age (i.e., dispensation) to be seen as an intercalation or parenthesis in God's redemptive plan?

### 3) **Eschatology (End Times)**

- a) Premillennialism vs. postmillennialism vs. amillennialism debates.
- b) How does ethnic Israel have a place in God's future plan at the Eschaton?
- c) How have or how will the geographical/political prophecies regarding national Israel be fulfilled?

### 4) **Homiletics (Preaching) and Philosophy of Church Ministry**

- a) What should be the goal and intention of the sermon-development process?
- b) How should the principle of salvation be applied practically in the life and ministry of the church?
- c) Who are the members of the church? Can believers and non-believers be members of the church?

Note of Caution: Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism are **not** monolithic systems. In other words, there exists variations. There are a variety of ways that each of the questions above are answered from both sides and oftentimes fundamental disagreement is found within both schools of thought. Moreover, there is overlap between the two systems and therefore, it is not always proper to equate the two systems as point-for-point opposites (e.g., Calvinism vs. Arminianism). For example, covenant theologians do acknowledge God working out His redemptive plan in history through dispensations. Also, Dispensationalists do not a level of continuity between eras. Therefore, rather than proceeding to compare our position with any particular school of thought, it is prudent to limit ourselves to a positive statement of what **we as a church** believe and don't believe.

### III. WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

*The following is not a comprehensive or detailed explanatory treatment but only a summarization of the basic tenets of our doctrinal position:*

1. **Hermeneutics:** We believe that proper exegesis and interpretation of Scripture is best fulfilled by employing a **literal historical-grammatical hermeneutic**. This means that we consider the historical and cultural context of the passage as well as the syntactical and lexical details to extract an understanding of the text. Therefore, rather than trying to find Christ in every individual biblical passage, a consistent hermeneutic will yield the proper indicatives (what God has done for us in Christ) as well as the appropriate imperatives (the application of the truths). We must avoid bringing to the text our expectations or preconceived framework.
3. **National Israel:** We believe that national Israel consisting of believing Jewish Christians will have a part in the Eschaton: This includes the prophecies regarding geo- political promises to the nation of Israel found in the Bible. We do not believe that all the promises given to national Israel have been spiritually fulfilled in the church but that there remains an actual, literal, and historical fulfillment in the future (e.g., Rom. 11:25-27).
4. **We believe in a proper perspective between law and grace:** While affirming significant distinctions between law and gospel, we also maintain that Old and New Testament saints alike have been saved by grace through faith alone, and not by the works of the law (Rom. 4:3, 6, 16; Gal. 2:16). Christ's life and death fulfilled the binding stipulations of the Mosaic Law, but the New Testament clearly teaches that there is a law that remains in place for Christian believers to follow in keeping with Christ's Lordship over their lives (Gal. 6:2; 1Cor. 7:19; 9:21).
5. **We do NOT believe that the church age is an intercalation or parenthesis in God's redemptive plan:** We see unity between the covenants and dispensations and prefer not to view them with sharp distinctions. We reject the idea of two Kingdoms (kingdom of heaven vs. kingdom of God). We believe that God has revealed to us His divine plan progressively through the covenants and various economies in history. As a result, the dispensation of the church is a part (rather than something entirely disconnected) of God's redemptive history, related to the past history of Israel and the future history to be fulfilled at the End Times.
6. **We do NOT believe that there is a radical bifurcation resulting in two peoples of God** (Gentile Christians and Jews) but that Jew and Gentile are "one in Christ": See Romans 3:29-30; 10:12-13, 17-18; Ephesians 1-3.

7. **We believe that born-again believers, baptized in Christ, are members of the church.** We do NOT believe that children of believers are automatically apart of the “covenant community of Christ.”

#### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

- 1) **Is this a fundamental matter that affects our salvation?** No, absolutely not. Though we will not be reductionistic and say that these matters are insignificant as they are quite important, they do NOT affect saving faith.
- 2) **So, would the leaders describe themselves as Dispensational or Covenantal in their theological stance?** We are not Covenantal. We would rather not identify ourselves entirely with one camp, for the risk of being misunderstood as to subscribing to the *whole* of either theological system. There are other strands of both Dispensational and Covenantal thought that we are uncomfortable with or do not find are warranted by Scripture. Moreover, we do not believe that adhering strictly to only one of the positions is necessary for the application of church ministry.
- 3) **Do I have to decide whether I am Dispensational or Covenantal?** No. In fact, we prefer that you defer deciding on any stance. We believe that ongoing and careful study of God’s Word will crystallize doctrinal truths and do not encourage you to prematurely label yourself one way or the other. Study the Scriptures and allow the Bible to form your theological convictions.
- 4) **What if I have more questions?** Approach and consult the leadership. If you are confused or would desire clarification on any of these or other matters, we encourage you to approach and inquire directly of the pastors directly rather than drawing out indirect assumptions.