

# DISPENSATIONALISM, KEY TO BIBLE PROPHECY: FALSE OR TRUE

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## INTRODUCTION

Vern Poythress once commented, “Theological systems, whether dispensationalist, covenantal, Calvinist, Arminian, or even modernist, have a profound influence on the way we approach a given text [of Scripture].”<sup>1</sup> Nowhere is the imposition of these theological systems more apparent than in the interpretation of biblical prophecies, especially those relating to God’s plans for the earth and humanity. In the essay that follows, it will be demonstrated that the key to a proper understanding of biblical eschatology lies in a dispensational theological system. In support of this contention, an examination of the predominant non-dispensational approach to interpretation of these biblical prophecies will first be performed.

## COVENANT ESCHATOLOGY

Dan Mitchell proposes the fundamental differences between dispensational and non-dispensational eschatological systems lie in hermeneutical methods.<sup>2</sup> To wit, at the heart of nearly all non-dispensational eschatological systems is the view that Christ represents the “all in all,” the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, and interpretation of biblical prophecy is performed in relation to the present ministry of Christ in His church, or to a Christian’s

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<sup>1</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub., 1994), 58, quoted in George E. Meisinger, "Prophetic Hermeneutics," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (2004): 45-46.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Mitchell, 2012. "Dispensationalism and the Interpretation of Bible Prophecy," *THEO630 - Problems and Issues in Eschatology*, Liberty University. embedded video, [http://bb7.liberty.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab\\_tab\\_group\\_id= 2\\_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D\\_1986636\\_1%26url%3D](http://bb7.liberty.edu/webapps/portal/frameset.jsp?tab_tab_group_id= 2_1&url=%2Fwebapps%2Fblackboard%2Fexecute%2Flauncher%3Ftype%3DCourse%26id%3D_1986636_1%26url%3D) (accessed July 9, 2013).

experience of salvation. To achieve this end, the Old Testament is interpreted by means of the New Testament through a forced Christocentric theology – a deductive process allowing Scriptures to be spiritualized or allegorized to comport with a redemptive focus to the detriment of God's other purposes.<sup>3</sup>

Wayne House explains, “[F]or most of history, covenant theologians see only one ‘community’ of God throughout history, namely, the elect. Therefore, the faithful among Israel in the Old Testament and believers in the New Testament church are in the same community”<sup>4</sup> – they are collectively “the Church.” Thus, by spiritualizing prophecies regarding Israel (“the Church”), any and all promises made to “the Church” (i.e., Israel) are actually intended for all those included in the Church today. There is, in effect, no future for national Israel under covenant theology, and the unity of Scriptures lies in the redemption of “the Church” through Christ.

## DISPENSATIONAL ESCHATOLOGY

Dispensationalism characterizes the distinctive ways by which God manages or arranges his relationship with humanity in specific periods throughout human history, past and future. Charles Ryrie offers a clear summary when he writes,

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

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<sup>3</sup> Dwight Pentecost notes this Allegorical Method is “the method of interpreting a literary text that regards the literal sense as the vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual and more profound sense.” He suggests this method perverts rather than interprets Scriptures by removing Scriptures as the basic authority in interpretation, placing authority in the mind of the interpreter. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come : A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1964), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> H. Wayne House, "The Future of National Israel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 166, no. 664 (2009): 466.

economies are the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.<sup>5</sup>

George Meisinger rightly notes that dispensationalism starts with the book of Genesis, and “asks what God meant by his progressively given revelation at each historical stage and what Abraham and his descendants understood by that revelation”<sup>6</sup> – a Judeo-centricity.<sup>7</sup>

Craig Blaising notes that “dispensationalism interpretes [Old Testament] prophecies in a more ‘literal’ manner.”<sup>8</sup> This literal manner of interpretation is sometimes called *grammatical-historical* interpretation. Ryrie observes this interpretive approach recognizes the normal usage of words in language and their plain sense in historical context.<sup>9</sup> Simply put, dispensationalism embraces the literal, normal, or plain interpretation of biblical prophecies.

So what is the effect of applying this literal hermeneutic to biblical prophecies? Plainly put, dispensationalism reveals that the Abrahamic Covenant, and its expansions (Davidic and New), is with Israel and will be realized in a future kingdom age upon the earth when the Jews are in their own promised land. The Church participates in the blessings of the Covenant because of its relationship with Christ. The Church is not Israel, and Israel is not the Church. Moreover, Ryrie suggests dispensationalism reveals the unifying principle within Scripture is the Glory of God 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

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<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, Paperback ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Meisinger, "Prophetic Hermeneutics," 47.

<sup>7</sup> Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel : Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, Nac Studies in Bible & Theology (Nashville, Tenn.: B & H Academic, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pbk. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: BridgePoint, 1993), 18. In reality, both sides interpret some passages literally and other passages allegorically. The question is how do you decide which ones to interpret which way?

<sup>9</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, Rev. and expand ed. (Moody Press, 1995), 80.

nature.”<sup>10</sup> As a theological system, dispensationalism, with its literal hermeneutic, brings genuine unity to Scripture and averts the relativism engendered by allegorical methods.

## CONCLUSION

Certainly no theological system is without flaws, and dispensationalism is no exception. By embracing dispensationalism, some have been accused of promoting self-fulfilling prophecy with respect to Christian Zionism (the return of the Jews to the land). Others have suggested dispensationalism bifurcates God’s purposes for humanity given the distinctive programs for Israel and the Church. And yet non-dispensational systems, by means of their allegorical hermeneutic, jeopardize much more of the truth of Scripture simply by removing Scripture as the final arbiter for proper interpretation. Thus, dispensationalism seems to represent the key theological system for proper interpretation of biblical prophecy, as well as the whole of Scripture.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 213.

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