

Newsletter May 2019

Last month in our April 2019 newsletter, we undertook a critical analysis of the systematic method of interpretation of the Scriptures known as Covenantalism. This month we shall similarly set about with an analysis of a second systematic interpretative method known as Dispensationalism. Around the year 1830 AD, John Nelson Darby, an influential Anglican-Irish Bible teacher among the original Plymouth Brethren and the founder of a subgroup known as the Exclusive Brethren, formulated an innovative system of Bible interpretation in opposition to the well-established Covenantalism of his day. His systematic theology became known as Dispensationalism.

In a biblical sense, a dispensation can be defined as “the ordering of events under the divine authority of God within a specific period of time.” The word “dispensation” is found four times in the New Testament (cf. 1Co. 9:17; Ep.1:10; 3:12; Col. 1:25). In each instance, it is translated from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which is defined as “an administration,” “an economy,” or “a stewardship.” An economy is a systematic way of doing things, and an administration defines the way things are run and controlled within a certain discipline. Dispensation, as is found in 1Co. 9:17, means a well disciplined stewardship. Therefore, within each dispensation of time, God has revealed a specific aspect of his will and through it spells out man’s required obedience to that revelation.

A biblical dispensation is viewed as being effective for a limited period, or age, after which it was replaced with another. We note that some covenants that God made with mankind were conditional upon man’s adherence to the terms of the covenant, while others were not. Those unconditional covenants can be referred to as Promissory Covenants. Even in the case of conditional covenants, there were often certain elements of the covenant that were based upon God’s specific promise so that God’s purposes are never thwarted by the failures of mankind. Dispensationalism allows for those promises, including those made to Israel as a specific people and nation. Dispensationalists generally agree on seven dispensations or ages that are as follows:

- **Age of Innocence** Ge.1:28 — Adam and Eve living in a sinless Eden where man had no knowledge of evil.
- **Age of Conscience** Ge.3:7 – The time after Adam’s fall – each man ruled by his own conscience in the centuries before the Noachian flood.
- **Age of Human Government** Ge.8:15 – Mankind placed under subordinate human rule to establish order and protect human life – in the aftermath of the Noachian flood.
- **Age of Promise** Ge.12:1 – The calling out of Abraham to form a unique nation out of his chosen descendants based upon the express promise of God.
- **Age of Law** Ex.19:1 – The forming of Israel into a national theocracy under the direct law of God through the giving of the Ten Commandments, social regulations, and ceremonial laws.
- **Age of Grace** Ac.2:1 – The age in which God’s free grace is paramount; wherein any who accept by faith the atoning work of Christ for his sin can be reconciled to God and declared righteous before Him – commonly identified as the Church age.
- **Kingdom Age** Re.20:4 – a future Kingdom Age on Earth with Jesus Christ reigning on the throne of David as was predicted in De.30:3; Sa.7:16.

One can see that no dispensation: is stated corresponding to the Covenantalist’s “Covenant of Redemption,” inasmuch as such an assumed covenant would not have included man as an active party in the agreement. Moreover, the need for such a divine covenant would imply the possibility of disunity within the Godhead, which could lean toward the error of tri-theism (i.e. three separate Gods). For this same reason, as we noted last month, not all covenantalists accept this unrecorded concept of a covenant within the Godhead.

It is evident that God in complete unity through predestination chose his own before the foundation of the earth, rendering such a formal covenant within the Godhead mere speculation.

Dispensationalists have strictly divided Scripture into different segments of time (as listed above) based upon how God interacted with man during that period. As each dispensation ended, the revelation of previous dispensations are not seen as being cast away, but accumulate as a body of revealed truth within the conscience of man. For instance, although the Christian is no longer under Law (cf. Ga.5:18), the moral imperative revealed in the prior dispensation of Law remains intact, but it is administered differently within a new dispensation. In each dispensation, man's consistent failure to fully comply with the requirements of God's revelation is certain because of his fallen nature. Therefore, man's obedience within a particular dispensation is not seen as a precondition to salvation, which is based solely upon God's grace through faith in the atoning death of Christ in every age beginning with Adam. (For more information regarding this definition, see page 3 of *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, C.I. Scofield, D.D., Oxford University Press, Inc. 1967).

Unlike Covenantalists, Dispensationalists insist upon an exacting and consistent literal interpretation of all Scripture text. Although they believe that Scripture clearly interprets Scripture, they do not believe in a supposed "analogy of faith" into which Scripture must be forced to fit. For instance, "Israel," when it is found in Scripture always identifies the Jewish nation of Israel – specifically the direct descendants of Jacob; "Israel" is not a mere metaphor for the Church in embryo, as Covenantalists suppose. Likewise, it is considered to be illogical to believe that all of the curses found in the Old Testament continue to apply to Israel, while none of God's blessings still apply to that nation and people.

All of the blessings God made to Israel are seen to specifically apply to Israel, not to the Church. Of particular importance is the unconditional covenant that God made with Israel concerning a future Kingdom Age on earth. In the Covenantal interpretation, the Church Age ends the series of covenants such that no Kingdom Age on earth is addressed. That singular omission constitutes a major difference between the dispensational and the covenantal positions regarding the doctrine of the Church. Dispensationalists reject the "replacement theology" of Covenantalism and firmly believe in a future redemption of Israel as a people and as a nation. Although alluded to at times, the Church as well as the Gospel was a "mystery" that was hidden away in the Old Testament, only to be revealed in the light of the New Testament (cf. Ep. 3:2-6; Col.1:26,27).

Covenantalists and Dispensationalists differ greatly regarding the existence of a future millennial age on earth with Jesus Christ personally ruling on the throne of David in the city of Jerusalem. The relevant text found in the Revelation, in which a thousand-year reign is mentioned six times, reads as follows:

“And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season. And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and *I saw* the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received *his* mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This *is* the first resurrection. Blessed and holy *is* he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years. And when the thousand years are expired, Satan shall be loosed out of his prison,” (Re. 20:1-7 Emphasis added).

The Greek word *chilioi* found in this text is very specific and unquestionably means “one thousand.” Likewise, the Greek word *etos* clearly means “year.” Those who believe that Christ Himself will physically return in the future to personally establish his thousand-year Kingdom of Heaven on earth are known as Pre-millennialists. The “catching up” (Greek, *harpazo*) of the remnant Church to be with Christ in the air, (i.e. the Rapture) is expected to occur prior to the establishment of Christ's Kingdom on earth. This position is the viewpoint taken by Dispensationalists and the one taken throughout this work as well.

Unlike the historian, the Dispensationalist considers all of the major events found within the Revelation as yet to be fulfilled in a future age – with the exception of the vision of the glorified Christ in Chapter 1 and the primary immediate intent of the messages given to the seven first-century churches found within the first three chapters. This interpretation requires maintaining an exacting literal prophetic sense of the text, and it is the view that was held by early Christians such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and many others. This is also the view universally recognized by Christians in the great majority of present-day evangelical churches. All but this futurist view requires distortion of the text to make it conform to a historian view, as we discussed last month.

Nearly all Dispensationalists dogmatically accept another doctrine known as Pre-tribulationism, which is the belief that the church will be raptured prior to a period of extremely intense tribulation that will occur during the reign of the Antichrist in the last days. This doctrine has become a major pillar of Dispensationalism. It is solely based upon Darby's assertion that the twenty-four elders that John saw in Revelation Chapter 4 represent the presence of the entire Church in Heaven, which was safely transported (i.e. "raptured") long before the Antichrist comes to power upon the earth in Revelation Chapter 6. Consequently, Darby postulated that the Rapture must have occurred just prior to the beginning of Revelation Chapter 4.

Inasmuch as this assumed event is not recorded in Scripture, it is commonly referred to as a "secret Rapture." The interdependence of this "secret rapture" with the assumed identity of the twenty-four elders as the Church in Chapter 4 is highly problematic, as we noted in our commentary on the Revelation. If this "secret rapture" had not occurred, there is no solid reason to believe that the twenty-four elders are connected to the Church; and if the elders do not represent the entire church in Heaven, there is no basis to assume that a "secret rapture" had previously taken place at all. This circular reasoning is why it was so imperative for us to make an attempt to determine the precise identity of the twenty-four elders as they were encountered in our earlier commentary.

Our failure to independently prove the identity of the twenty-four elders as being Church leaders led to this author proposing a Post-tribulation-Pre-wrath timing for the Rapture, in which the Rapture of the Church will take place 3 ½ years into the reign of the Antichrist (cf. Re.7:9,10) just before God begins to unleash his full wrath upon the earth (cf. Re. Chap. 8 & ff.). Nevertheless, Darby's dispensational system, including the teaching of Pre-tribulationism, was eagerly adopted in the eighteen-hundreds by beleaguered American fundamentalists as they struggled hard against the highly destructive modernist movement that had infiltrated mainline covenantal churches worldwide (cf. *CRC* Book III, pages 331, 369).

As to the general doctrine of Millennialism, it can be traced back to the earliest beginnings of the church, but since Dispensationalism as a system of Bible interpretation is relatively new, dating back only to the early nineteenth century, many distrust its observations as being opposed to the reformed view of Scripture developed during the Reformation Era. Covenantalists argue that Dispensationalists have fabricated an external set of rigid benchmarks based upon conjecture and then forcibly applied them to Scripture, whereas Covenantalism is based upon recorded biblical covenants. As we must note, however, the beginning of many of those dispensations coincide with the establishment of a biblical Covenant or include them within the dispensation, thus often rendering this basic difference between the two approaches somewhat academic for those same periods.

As to Covenantalists using the word "church" for the old as well as the new covenant body of believers, that issue is a cause of intense disagreement between Covenantalists and Dispensationalists. From the Greek, we find that the word for "church" and "congregation" or "assembly" is actually derived from the same word. That word is *ekklesia*, but the word "church" actually comes from another Greek word *kuriakos* from which came the transliterated word, "kurk," or "church." Those two Greek words when put together designate "a called out assembly belonging to God." Therefore, Covenantalists argue that the congregation or assembly that was within the nation of Israel must be directly identified with the new covenant assembly or "church." It can be simply stated that Covenantalists see Israel of the old covenant as the "old-covenant church" that flowed through into the new covenant Church — making no distinction between the two as a community of believers.

Conversely, Dispensationalists see the two as distinct and separate bodies of believers to which God administered differently. This is the major conflict between these two major interpretations of Scripture. Let us see if we can somehow reconcile the two positions or, failing that, better define them. We can properly consider the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant as a "type" of the New-Covenant Church to come. The Apostle Peter referred to the new covenant Church as a "holy nation" in his writings, a term which reinforces this concept of

Israel as a type. There is a believing elect remnant in the temporal church today – just as there was a believing elect remnant within the nation of Israel. However, that comparison diverges widely as we continue on: Israel had national boundaries whereas the temporal church has no national boundaries. Israel was of ethnic origin, being strictly composed of Hebrews, whereas the church has no ethnic distinction. Israel had a priestly tribe, the Levites, whereas the visible Church within the temporal church constitutes a “royal priesthood” consisting of all its true believers. (compare the text of Ex.19:6 with 1Pe.2:9).

The treasure hidden in the field, of which Jesus spoke in Matthew 13:44, can be seen to represent the believing remnant of Israel, which were the first to enter into the present provisional Kingdom by making up the nucleus of the New-Covenant Church. However, this precious Jewish remnant was soon hidden away and buried within a vast field of Gentiles as the Church grew numerically. At the time that Jesus offered the Kingdom of Heaven to Israel, it was rejected by Israel as a nation. Nevertheless, the believing remnant that had always been present in that nation did accept Jesus as their King and Messiah. New-Testament Scripture clearly verifies that fact. This early believing remnant is often referred to as the "true Israel," which can be seen as having made a transition from the old covenant “church” or “assembly” into the initial core of the new-covenant Church. This understanding of a partial transition is very important, since it was only that small remnant that made up the new covenant church in the beginning along with few or no non-Jews (i.e. Gentiles).

Therefore, the nation of Israel did not become the New-Covenant church; only the believing remnant made the transition as they received Jesus as their Messiah. Jesus has preserved that believing remnant through his death by taking upon Himself the sins of his people, giving all that He had to purchase that great treasure (cf. Mt.13:44). From this “treasure allegory,” we must conclude that the believing Jew has not been discarded – only those who remain in perpetual unbelief have been forever rejected. In the words of Paul, “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they *are* not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Ro.9:6). Paul continued on by stating, “God hath not cast away his people which he foreknew” (Ro. 11:2).

Even so, there was a precious remnant “according to the election of grace” (cf. Ro.11:2,5). Even in this present day in which we live, there remains a Jewish remnant “according to the election of grace.” We should be greatly encouraged and warmed in our hearts when we encounter a Hebrew Christian, realizing how natural and right it is that a “son of David” should accept the greater Son of David as their King and long awaited Messiah. Such acceptance is natural, perhaps, but certainly not common inasmuch as most Jews continue on in their state of self-imposed blindness. It is for the believing remnant in the past, living now, and in the time yet to come, that Jesus died, not for those that have rejected and will continue to reject Him.

It can be clearly seen, therefore, that Israel as a nation is not the same as the physical institutionalized church of today. The fact that Israel has been restored as a political nation since 1948 does not equate it with any church denomination, nor does it equate that nation with the body of believers in general. Israel today is basically the result of an ethnic Zionist movement, rather than a return of believing Jews to truly worship God in a land of promise. Modern Israel is a democracy rather than a restoration of the theocratic nation of old. That distinction is rather obvious, and most Covenantalists as well as Dispensationalists could generally agree with that distinction.

Nevertheless, we must realize that both the Church and Israel have an all important spiritual as well as a physical component. As the Apostle Paul said regarding Israel’s unbelief, “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect. For they *are* not all Israel, which are of Israel: (Ro. 9:6): Just as all members of today's churches are not truly members of the body of Christ, so it was that not all citizens of Israel were true members of the body of true believers. Therefore, when the Covenantalists speak of Israel being the old covenant church, they can only say that those who trusted God under the old covenant were in a similar position of grace as those who trust him under the new covenant today. That is, those saved under the old covenant, such as Job, Abraham, Moses, Aaron, David and many others were saved by grace through faith just as are believers under the New Covenant of Jesus Christ today. “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Ro. 4:3; cf. Ga.3:6; Ja.2:23).

While most all mainline denominations still hold to Covenantalism, Darby’s Dispensationalism has now become almost universally accepted by today’s evangelical churches as fully settled doctrine, and elements of it are often found existing within the membership of other churches that officially continue to teach Covenantalism from the pulpit. © Arthur J Smith May 2019