

Dispensationalism: An Abbreviated Critique – By Grover Gunn Part 2



Continued from [Dispensationalism: An Abbreviated Critique – By Grover Gunn Part 1](#)

Rightly Dividing the Word

I can distinctly remember the time during my college days when a Christian whom God used in my life gave me a short introduction to dispensationalism. He quoted 2 Timothy 2:15 from the King James Version and pointed out the importance of “rightly dividing the word of truth.” He then went over with me the seven dispensations of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. I now doubt that 2 Timothy is directly referring to dividing Biblical history into different economies. The American Standard Version translates this verse “handling aright the word of truth,” which I believe better conveys the verse’s intent. Nevertheless, regardless of how one interprets that verse, Christians have recognized from earliest times that God has worked through different economies in different ages. Dividing Biblical history into different dispensational periods is not distinctive of dispensationalism. To say that all Christians who do not today offer animal sacrifices and who do not today abstain from pork are at least incipient dispensationalists is extremely simplistic. The particular number and choice of historical division points presented by Scofield do not define dispensationalism either. The true distinctives are found on a more subtle level.

I believe that one can begin to discern some of the real distinctives of dispensationalism by examining Scofield’s definition of a dispensation: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”¹⁴⁴ It is certainly true that in every divine economy, God gave further revelation of Himself and His will, and man was responsible for responding to that revelation in obedience. It is also true that man apart from God’s saving grace will always fail the test of obedience because of man’s depraved nature. Yet, while there is truth in Scofield’s definition and scheme, there is also oversight and error. Perhaps more significant is the oversight: there is no mention of the progressive revelation of and preparation for the Messianic Seed-Redeemer in each dispensation. For the reformed theologian, Christ and His saving work is the most significant element in each dispensation and is the theme that unifies the progressive and organic development of the Biblical drama. Yet

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie says:

"The covenant theologian in his zeal to make Christ all in all is guilty of superimposing Him arbitrarily on the Old Testament. He does the same with the doctrine of the church and with the concept of salvation through faith in Christ."¹⁴⁵

I also mentioned an error in Scofield's definition. I believe one is there at least implicitly. Dispensationalists and reformed theologians tend to disagree as to the relationship that revelation given to past dispensations has to the present dispensation. Dispensationalists tend to teach that such past revelation is not binding today except to the extent that it is reaffirmed in the revelation given specifically for this present dispensation. In contrast, reformed theology teaches that past revelation continues to be binding today except to the extent that it was time bound or situation specific in its original application or to the extent that it has been modified by more recent Biblical revelations. Like Christ, the reformed theologian emphasizes the continuing relevance of God's former revelations,¹⁴⁶ whereas the dispensationalist puts the emphasis on the nonbinding nature of past revelation that is not specifically reaffirmed for today. This difference in emphasis seems to be implied in Scofield's statement that each dispensation is related to "some specific revelation," as if each dispensation is limited to the revelation specifically directed to that dispensation.

In order to really appreciate the distinctives of dispensationalism's "rightly dividing the word," one needs to think through the dispensational explanation of Biblical history. A good place to start is the dispensational teaching on the Abrahamic covenant and the dispensation of promise. Here God provided a salvation administered on a by faith basis and administered without moral conditions. All went well for the people of God until Mount Sinai when, according to Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, a rash and tragic mistake occurred. There the people of God rashly abandoned their unconditional by faith covenant position and instead tragically accepted the conditional and legalistic Mosaic covenant, which they should have refused to accept.¹⁴⁷ By faith salvation based upon an imputed righteousness was abandoned at Mount Sinai and was not resumed until after Mount Calvary, according to Dr. Chafer. If one considers the period from the Abrahamic covenant to the end time church rapture, the Mosaic covenant was a legalistic parenthesis in a by faith administration of grace that began in the dispensation of promise and resumed in the dispensation of grace. If one considers the period from the Mosaic covenant to the end of the millennium, then the church age is a parenthesis of grace in a meritorious administration of law. It is only fair to mention that many recent dispensationalists have in various degrees modified this excessively rigid dichotomy between law and grace in their explanations of redemptive history and have begun to drift toward the teachings on law and grace more traditionally held by reformed theologians.

The next major development in a dispensational view of the Bible is the Gospels and the early chapters of Acts. According to dispensationalism, Christ was offering the Jewish nation a Judaistic political kingdom. Since

the Jews rejected Christ's offer, Christ postponed the Jewish kingdom and instead inaugurated the parenthetical and previously unrevealed church age. Because of this analysis of the ministry of Christ, dispensationalists see the Gospels as a complex combination of truth relating directly to three different dispensations: law, grace and kingdom. For example, the Sermon on the Mount is legal and Jewish kingdom truth that is not directly meant for the church age. Scofield labeled the Lord's prayer petition "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors"¹⁴⁸ as "legal ground."¹⁴⁹ The parables of Matthew 13, which obviously refer to the church age, are interpreted as an initial explanation of some of the unexpected mysteries of the coming age due to the postponement of the Jewish millennium and the unrevealed introduction of the church age. Matthew 16:18 is where Christ first openly revealed the coming parenthetical church age, and Matthew 18:17 is where Christ gave church truth on discipline. The Olivet discourse¹⁵⁰ is again Jewish truth that is interpreted as a detailed prophecy of the seven year Jewish tribulation period after the church rapture. The upper room discourse¹⁵¹ that occurred a few days later is church truth. The apostles in Acts 1:6 again represent the Jewish remnant, but in Acts 2 they again represent the church and are involved with church truth as they preach on Pentecost. In Acts 3:12-26, the apostles reoffer the Judaistic kingdom to the Jewish nation for the last time until the yet future tribulation period. If the Jews had accepted this re-offer, the rapture would have occurred then, and the Jewish kingdom would have come after a very short church age.

Dispensationalists view the rest of the book of Acts as church truth. The only problem with this is the frequent references to the kingdom both in Acts and in the epistles written during that period. Dispensationalists explain that the kingdom there referred to is not the theocratic Messianic kingdom of Old Testament prophecy but instead is either God's non-theocratic sovereign rule of providence or is "the kingdom in mystery form" of Matthew 13, which dispensationalists interpret as a name applicable to the non-kingdom church age. This explanation does not satisfy the ultra-dispensationalists who view Acts and the epistles of that period as Jewish truth and not as truth for the later Gentile Pauline Body and Bride of Christ church.

In the epistles, even the "orthodox" dispensationalists find some scattered traces of Jewish truth. For example, 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 speaks of the flaming return of Christ in judgment upon the persecutors of God's people. In dispensational thinking, there is no flaming judgment associated with the church return of Christ, which is a secret rapture. Flaming judgment is associated only with the Jewish second advent. So the recipients of 2 Thessalonians 1 were there being taught Jewish truth even though Paul used his message as an encouragement to church age Christians. The Christians at Thessalonica must have there been acting as representatives of Jewish tribulation saints.

Notice also Titus 2:13. There Paul combined the church return of Christ (the blessed hope) with the Jewish return of Christ (the glorious appearing) in one statement as if they were one event! To be a good dispensationalist, one must read Scripture with one's presupposed dichotomies ever in mind so that one can catch such distinctions. Dividing Scripture categorically and

relegating the message to the proper age and people are key to good dispensational interpretation.

Finally there is the book of Revelation where the early chapters (1-3) are church truth and the rest of the book is Jewish truth concerning the Jewish tribulation and millennium until the mention of the Bride of Christ, which is the church, at the end.

Dividing Biblical history into a progression of dispensations is not unique to dispensationalists. All theologians do that. What is characteristic of the consistent dispensationalist is that he suffers from an acute case of "hardening of the categories." Having in practice rejected the typological and organic union of the two testaments that is found in Christ and His saving work, the consistent dispensationalist has instead adopted a two program, two people view of Biblical history in which the church age is a logically unnecessary parenthesis in the divine program and, from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets, a divine afterthought and adjustment. My own opinion, to use a pun, is that consistently interpreting Scripture through the rigid grid of dispensational assumptions has the potential for turning Biblical bread into theological shredded wheat. Fortunately, many dispensationalists today are mild dispensationalists who are not all that rigid when it comes to dispensational interpretation and theology and who have had little actual exposure to the classical and definitive dispensational works by men such as Darby, Chafer and Scofield where these dispensational dichotomies are rigidly pressed.

Christian Zionism

Dispensationalism as a system tends to promote among Christians Zionism, the conviction that physical Jews today have a Biblical right to possess the land of Palestine. The point of discussion in this chapter is not Zionism as a political issue but Zionism as a Biblically based theological issue. The typical committed dispensationalist does tend to have a passionate commitment to theological Zionism. I remember that when I was a dispensationalist, my tendency was to be somewhat overawed by the epic Zionist event of 1948: the modern establishment of the Jewish state of Israel. I once viewed that event as one of the most dramatic prophetic happenings in history and as one of the clearest signs of the soon return of Christ. The really consistent dispensationalist does not regard 1948 as a direct fulfillment of prophecy, since no Jewish prophecy can directly refer to the parenthetical church age in dispensational theology. Instead, 1948 is regarded as a dramatic preparation for the Jewish fulfillment of prophecy that will begin to occur after the rapture of the church. For the dispensationalist, the fact that the end time stage is supposedly being set in this generation is a very strong indication that the end time drama is very imminent today. I doubt many dispensational writers have gone as far as Hal Lindsey who suggested that the end could come within about 40 years (i.e. a generation) from 1948 based on the fig tree parable of Matthew 24:32-34.¹⁵²

Dispensational Zionism is largely founded on the dispensational interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant. A crucial element in this interpretation is the determination of who are the "seed of Abraham." Using

their "literal" hermeneutic, dispensationalists interpret this term as used in the Abrahamic covenant as referring to the physical Jews. A difficulty with this interpretation is that in Galatians 3, verses 7 and 29, the Christian, regardless of his race, is said to be the seed of Abraham and the heir of the promises made to Abraham. Another difficulty is that these promises made to Abraham are the land promise. In Galatians 3:16, Paul says, "Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made," and then quotes the phrase "and to thy Seed" from the book of Genesis. Every time in the book of Genesis the phrase "to your seed" is used in the context of a divine promise to give something to somebody, the reference is to the land promise.¹⁵³ From this it would seem that the true seed of Abraham who are to inherit land are those who have Abraham's faith. This was the case in principle even in the Old Testament economy where according to God's administrative commands, physical Jews who openly demonstrated high handed contempt for God's covenants and laws were to be excommunicated from Israel, and believing Gentiles were to be grafted in as proselytes. Even in Genesis 17, others beside Abraham's physical seed were included in the covenant, and in Genesis 21, a physical seed was excluded from the covenant community for moral reasons.¹⁵⁴

The dispensationalist, however, argues that the Christian believer as a seed of Abraham is related to only one statement in the Abrahamic covenant, the statement that in Abraham all the nations would be blessed.¹⁵⁵ There are two problems with this argument. First, as we have already shown, Paul in Galatians 3:16 and 29 relates the language of the land promise to the Christian.

So the dispensationalist has no basis for limiting the Christian application of the Abrahamic covenant to the universal statement that all the nations will be blessed in Abraham. Second, the dispensational parenthesis theory, if held with strict consistency, would not allow a direct application even of the universal element in the Abrahamic covenant to church age Christians. The parenthesis theory would seem to require a direct application of the universal element in the Jewish Abrahamic covenant to millennial Gentile nations and relate this to the church age only indirectly. This is the way many dispensationalists deal with other Old Testament passages that obviously refer to the church age, passages such as Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy and Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the Spirit. There are many prophecies that expand on the universal statement of the Abrahamic covenant.

¹⁵⁶ Under the heading "The Gentiles in the Millennium," Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost states: "The universal aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, which promised universal blessing, will be realized in that age."¹⁵⁷

The dispensationalist also argues that the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional in the sense that it is to be fulfilled regardless of the moral condition of the Jewish people. In the dispensational interpretation of the covenants, the "unconditional" Abrahamic covenant is strongly contrasted with the "conditional" Mosaic covenant. Reformed interpreters, in contrast, regard the Mosaic covenant as a national expansion of the Abrahamic covenant. We will not go into a detailed refutation of the dispensational doctrine of unconditional and conditional covenants¹⁵⁸ other than to point out that this

teaching reflects a shallow understanding of the Scriptural relationships between law and grace and between human responsibility and divine sovereignty. Dispensationalists teach that the unconditional Abrahamic covenant was expanded into three other unconditional Jewish covenants: the Palestinian covenant, the Davidic covenant and the new covenant. The expanded covenant dealing with the land promise portion of the Abrahamic covenant is the Palestinian covenant, which dispensationalists identify with Deuteronomy 30:1

10. It does seem strange that anyone would teach that a section of Deuteronomy contains a separate covenant that is not a part of the Mosaic covenant and that differs from the Mosaic covenant in its basic nature. The Palestinian covenant is supposed to be unconditional in the dispensational sense of the word. Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1-3 and 10, however, contains statements that sound like moral conditions. I suspect that what happened was that the dispensational interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise necessitated this artificial interpretation of Deuteronomy 30. Dispensationalists argue that the Abrahamic covenant is Jewish, unconditional and unfulfilled. They prove the covenant to be unfulfilled by examining the chronological and geographic boundaries of the covenant promise. The Abrahamic covenant is a forever promise,¹⁵⁹ and the Jews possessed Palestine for only a limited time in the Old Testament. In regard to the geographic boundaries of the covenant, the promised land was to include the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River.¹⁶⁰ Dispensationalists argue that the Jews never at any time possessed all the land within these boundaries. In 1 Kings 4:21, we learn that Solomon ruled over all the land from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River, but the dispensationalists argue that the "border of Egypt" is not the "river of Egypt" and that Solomon merely ruled over much of this territory by collecting tribute, not by actually possessing it. So, if the dispensationalists are right, the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant is Jewish, unconditional and unfulfilled, and therefore there must be a yet future Jewish possession of the land of Palestine.

Exactly when and how is the Abrahamic covenant's land promise to be fulfilled? In searching out the details of this question, one encounters some interesting divergencies in dispensational answers. In the earlier dispensational writers like Chafer, the Abrahamic covenant had a truly eternal Jewish fulfillment. In that system, the resurrected Old Testament saints together with the resurrected millennial saints were to inherit eternally a Judaistic new earth after the Judaistic millennium while the church saints were to inherit a Christian new heavens for eternity. In this older dispensational system, there was an eternal dichotomy of destinies between Israel, the earthly seed of Abraham, and the church, the heavenly seed of Abraham.

More recent dispensationalists, such as Walvoord, Pentecost and Ryrie, disagree with these details of Chafer's view. They teach that the eternal Jewish nature of the land promise is to be completely fulfilled in the 1000 year Judaistic millennial period. After all, if the land promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in eternity on the new earth, then there is no real

mandate for a Jewish millennium in the Abrahamic covenant. They also teach that the promised land is to be inhabited during the millennium only by unresurrected living Jews and Gentiles and not, as in Chafer's system, by the resurrected Old Testament saints as well. During the millennium, the resurrected Old Testament saints together with the resurrected church saints are to be in the new Jerusalem, which will be a millennial satellite city hovering over Palestine. At the end of the millennium, the new Jerusalem will descend to earth, and the saints of all ages will inhabit together the new earth. The Old Testament saints will never be members of the Body and Bride of Christ but they will at least share a common eternal destiny with the church. In this system, the strictly Jewish inheritance of the land promise is limited to the millennial years and to unresurrected millennial saints. The land promise specifically promised the forever land inheritance to Abraham as well as to his seed, but Abraham together with the other Old Testament saints will be in the heavenly city during the time of the land inheritance. I wonder if the dispensational speculation about possible travel between the satellite city and planet earth during the millennium did not result from their wrestling with this particular weak link in their system.

Here we have the dispensational understanding of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise. Was Scripture truly allowed to interpret Scripture? Was there a sensitivity to progressive revelation? Is there any evidence that the dispensational interpreters recognize their fallibility and have a willingness to adjust if necessary their understanding of the Abrahamic covenant if it does not harmonize well with further infallible revelation on the subject? Or do we see evidence of a willingness to artificially bend further revelation in order to vindicate a particular understanding of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise?

My own understanding of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise is different from the dispensationalist's. I believe the Jewish inhabitation of Palestine in the Old Testament was a temporary typological symbol and pledge of the ultimate eternal inheritance of the saints. I also believe that the land promise applies to the Christian today in the spiritual rest and heavenly position that is his in Christ Jesus. The following is an eight point explanation of my understanding of the fulfillment of the land promise.

First, there are Old Testament passages which indicate that the land promise had a real fulfillment in the Old Testament.¹⁶¹ This data must be incorporated into one's total understanding of the land promise. I would suggest that the land promise found a fulfillment as a type in the Old Testament and also anticipated a future fulfillment in terms of its antitype.

Second, the ultimate fulfillment of the land promise is an eternal fulfillment.¹⁶² The Hebrew word translated forever is at times contextually limited and does not always refer to a literal eternity,¹⁶³ but God's covenants do have a truly eternal, forever reference. When the forever nature of God's covenant is compared to the life span of the sun, one can be certain that the divinely inspired writer had more in mind than a mere one thousand years.¹⁶⁴

Third, the ultimate fulfillment of the land promise involves the whole world

and not just Palestine. Notice what Paul said in Romans 4:13:

“For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world (Greek: kosmos) was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.” We have already shown the terminology about a promise given by God to Abraham and his seed can only refer to the land promise. Paul identified the land promise given to Abraham and his seed not merely with Canaan but with the whole world.

Fourth, the ultimate inheritors of the land promise will be the elect of all the ages. As we have already seen, there are New Testament passages which relate the language of the land promise to Christians as the spiritual seed of Abraham.¹⁶⁵ In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ identified the heirs of the land promise as the spiritually meek,¹⁶⁶ which is an appropriate description of God’s people in general. In the book of Hebrews, the land promise is associated with citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem.¹⁶⁷ The saints of all ages are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem,¹⁶⁸ which is further evidence that the saints of all ages will inherit the land promise.

Fifth, this association of the land promise with citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem means that during the inter-advent age, the land promise finds fulfillment in “an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven.”¹⁶⁹ From the moment of conversion, the Christian is a comer unto Mount Zion and a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem,¹⁷⁰ has spiritual rest in Christ Jesus,¹⁷¹ and is seated with Christ in the heavenlies.¹⁷² We, today, in Christ Jesus have a foretaste of the heavenly rest that was pictured by Joshua’s conquest of the promised land.¹⁷³

Sixth, the land promise today is related to the covenant blessing of the fifth commandment. Under the old covenant, those who honored their father and mother were promised, in general, that it would go well with them in the land which God gave them.¹⁷⁴ Now that the covenant people are from every nation, tribe and tongue, this promise of covenant blessing has been dispensationally adjusted by Paul to read: “that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest live long on the earth.”¹⁷⁵ Paul has removed the Palestinian specific geographic limitation in this covenant promise that related covenant blessing in terms of the land promise.

Seventh, the Christian today is in a position analogous to Israel under Joshua when they conquered the promised land. The difference is that our weapons are not physical¹⁷⁶ and our task is to conquer the whole world. We know that the Abrahamic land promise ultimately refers to the whole world.¹⁷⁷ Adam was originally given dominion over the whole world.¹⁷⁸ This inheritance was lost in the fall and Satan became the prince of this world,¹⁷⁹ but God promised that a Seed Redeemer would ultimately defeat Satan¹⁸⁰ and that this new Adam would regain world dominion.¹⁸¹ This Seed Redeemer would be a Seed of Abraham through whom Abraham would be a blessing to all nations.¹⁸² This Seed Redeemer would be a son of David who would have the nations for His inheritance and the ends of the earth for His possession.¹⁸³ This Seed Redeemer would be a Son of Man who would be given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him.¹⁸⁴ Through

His resurrection-ascension, Christ has received all authority in heaven and on earth.¹⁸⁵ Christ from His heavenly throne is today fulfilling Psalm 2¹⁸⁶ and Psalm 8¹⁸⁷. The northern boundary of the land promise given to Abraham was the Euphrates River,¹⁸⁸ but the dominion of the Messiah is extended "from the River to the ends of the earth."¹⁸⁹ Even as God gave Palestine to Israel under Joshua and told them to conquer it, so God has given the nations to new covenant Israel under Jesus and has told us to disciple them.

And eighth, when Christ returns, the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to the new earth,¹⁹⁰ which then becomes the eternal locus of the land promise fulfillment. In Hebrews 4:8-9, we learn that the rest under Joshua after the conquest of the promised land was a type of the heavenly Sabbath rest of the eternal inheritance. The ultimate fulfillment of the land promise will be the eternal inheritance of the new earth by the saints of all ages. Only in this eternal context can Abraham and all his true seed inherit the land forever.

Before closing this chapter on the Abrahamic land promise, I want to comment on the Old Testament prophecies about dispersed Jews' returning to the land. Dispensationalists tend to refer these prophecies to an end time regathering of the Jews to Palestine. It seems much more logical that these prophecies primarily referred to the Babylonian exile and the return of the Jewish captives under Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah. In opposition to this, the dispensationalist can point out that these prophesied regatherings were a second return to the land and a regathering from a world-wide dispersion,¹⁹¹ not from a localized Babylonian exile. This objection ignores the Biblical fact that the exiled Jews were scattered all over the civilized world of that day.¹⁹² And return from Babylonian exile was the second return to the land since the first was the exodus under Moses.

Admittedly, there are elements in the restoration prophecies that go beyond what was experienced under the old covenant. This is because the fulfillment of prophecies of blessing can be limited¹⁹³ or postponed¹⁹⁴ or cancelled¹⁹⁵ due to covenant disobedience and because these prophecies have continuing and progressively greater fulfillments in the church age and in eternity. A prophecy can be given in terms of the old covenant economy and fulfilled in terms of the new covenant economy and eternity. The restoration prophecies refer progressively to the gathering of an Old Testament remnant from Babylonian exile to a reestablished Jerusalem, to the Messianic gathering of Jews from all nations into the Heavenly Jerusalem on Pentecost, to the great commission gathering of the Gentiles into the Israel of God,¹⁹⁶ and ultimately to the final gathering of the elect to their eternal inheritance in the ultimate Canaan, the new earth of Revelation 21.¹⁹⁷ The nature of the gathering progresses as the kingdom progresses from one of localized typological shadows to one of universal spiritual antitypes to one of eternal realities.

"Thy Kingdom Come"

The Presbyterian Church in America Book of Church Order begins with the statement, "Jesus Christ . . . sits upon the throne of David." Most people raised with the teachings of the reformed faith would take this fundamental

truth for granted. Who, after all, would question this essential teaching? Well, a well informed dispensationalist would not only question this but would take strong exception to it. The Davidic throne is another Biblical subject concerning which dispensationalists and reformed theology have radically different teachings.

The Davidic kingdom in Scripture is founded on the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7:12-16. This covenant promise obviously involved Solomon, David's immediate seed and heir to the throne, since it spoke of the seed's building God's temple and of the possibility of the seed's sinning. The promise, however, also involved a greater antitypical fulfillment since it spoke of an eternal kingdom. The prophets later associated the eternal Davidic kingdom with the Messiah, who was to inherit the throne of David and to rule eternally over the kingdom in righteousness and justice. This Messianic kingdom was to become a universal kingdom over all the kingdoms of the world.

Reformed interpretation associates the Messianic establishment of the Davidic kingdom with the first advent of Christ and especially with His ascension into heaven. Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed during their earthly ministries that the kingdom was at that time actually near at hand, not merely potentially near. Jesus told his disciples to seek the kingdom because "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."¹⁹⁸ Jesus gave specific instructions on how to enter the kingdom¹⁹⁹ and stated that "every man presseth into it."²⁰⁰ The presence of the kingdom was especially manifested in the casting out of demons.²⁰¹ Jesus explained the nature of the kingdom in parables,²⁰² and, referring to His own presence, told the Pharisees that the kingdom was in their midst.²⁰³

Jesus especially brought in the Messianic kingdom through His resurrection and ascension to His throne at the right hand of God. It was at this point that Jesus received His full regal authority as Messiah.²⁰⁴ Peter related the resurrection of Christ to the Davidic covenant promise concerning a throne and stated that at His ascension Jesus was made the Christ.²⁰⁵ The titles Christ and Messiah both mean the anointed one, which is the Old Testament title for God's chosen king over Israel.²⁰⁶ At His ascension, Jesus was said to have fulfilled Messianic psalms that refer to the Messianic rule.²⁰⁷

The fact that the Messianic kingdom was initially established at the first advent is further verified in the book of Acts. For example, at Samaria, "Philip preached the things concerning the kingdom of God."²⁰⁸ Paul and Barnabus encouraged newly formed churches with the message: "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."²⁰⁹ The unbelieving Jews at Thessalonica charged that Paul and Silas were acting "contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus."²¹⁰ Throughout his Roman imprisonment, Paul "preached the kingdom of God."²¹¹

With all this New Testament evidence that Christ established the Messianic rule at His first advent, why do dispensationalists insist that the Messianic rule has not yet begun? The basic reason is dispensational literalism. Dispensationalists argue that the Davidic throne must be an earthly throne situated on literal Mount Zion in literal Palestine. They argue that Christ

postponed His rule on the literal throne of David until after the parenthetical and previously unrevealed church age and that Christ's present rule from the throne at the right hand of the Father is not the rule the Old Testament prophets were prophesying.

After all this to do about the **literal** throne, it is interesting to study the definition of the Davidic throne given by dispensationalist scholar Dr. John F. Walvoord:

"By the term 'throne' it is clear that no reference is made to a material throne, but rather to the dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king. The right to rule always belonged to David's seed."²¹² This definition is anything but literal. In order to understand the significance of this definition, one needs to keep in mind the dispensational theory that the Davidic covenant was unconditional in the sense of being void of all human responsibility. If the Davidic covenant was unconditional in that sense and if the Davidic covenant eternally established the Davidic throne, then how do dispensationalists deal with the Babylonian exile? Was not the throne actually cast to the ground by God at that time?²¹³ Now we can see the reason for Dr. Walvoord's definition of the throne. If the throne only refers to "the right to rule," then the seed of David retained the throne even while in Babylonian exile.²¹⁴ This brings us to an interesting question: Does Christ not now possess "the dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king" and "the right to rule"? If one accepts Dr. Walvoord's definition of the Davidic throne, then how can one possibly also hold that Christ does not now possess it? It seems that when dispensationalists want to argue that Christ is not now on the throne of David, they stress a very literal definition, but when they wish to argue that the Davidic throne was not lost during the Babylonian exile, they stress a very figurative definition of the throne.

In arguing that Christ does not now possess the throne of David, dispensationalists have traditionally insisted that the true throne of David must be an earthly throne. They have insisted that a heavenly throne²¹⁵ and a heavenly Mount Zion²¹⁶ are not sufficient for the fulfillment of prophecy. Some more recent dispensationalists, however, now teach that Christ will be reigning during the millennium not from an earthly throne but from the **heavenly** Jerusalem. I quote: "It is from this heavenly city that David's greater Son exerts His Messianic rule, . . ."²¹⁷ This is really a remarkable about face.

Dispensationalists also argue that the Messianic throne of David must be a political and territorial reign. They argue that this was the popular Jewish understanding of the subject at the time of Jesus' earthly ministry and that the New Testament nowhere redefines the concept. I disagree with this last statement. I believe that the quotations concerning the kingdom that we have already examined are more than adequate evidence that Jesus did not accept this political view of the kingdom.²¹⁸ Admittedly the disciples were infected with this popular Jewish view in various degrees up to their receiving the illuminating outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost.

When we come to the dispensational interpretation of the book of Acts, we

find that suddenly the word *kingdom* cannot refer to the Messianic rule but must refer to the general rule of divine providence or to the "kingdom in mystery form." The reason for this shift in definition is obvious: the Davidic kingdom cannot be related to the church age in dispensational interpretation. Here I ask the dispensationalist his own question: Where was the word kingdom redefined? Why does it have to refer to the Davidic kingdom in the Gospels but cannot in Acts and in the epistles? To use a criticism which Dr. Charles C. Ryrie used against an amillennialist, the reason that the dispensationalist does not see the Messianic kingdom when the word is used in the book of Acts is because "he feels, of course, that he has found justifiable reasons for spiritualizing the concept of the kingdom."²¹⁹

Actually the word *kingdom* in both Hebrew and Greek refers primarily to the abstract authority to rule, not to a concrete realm, which is a secondary connotation of the word. This proper understanding of the word helps explain many passages. For example, in Matthew 6:33, Christ said: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things (food, shelter and clothing) shall be added unto you." What is a Christian to seek in order to obey this command? A theocratic kingdom in a future Jewish age? Or God's rule and authority in all of life? Also, notice the second petition in the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come."²²⁰ With this proper understanding of the word kingdom, this second petition is almost synonymous with the third petition: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Christ at his first advent established and began to exercise this authority to rule and to reign, which is the primary meaning of kingdom. It will not be until the time of the new heavens and the new earth that Christ's kingdom will be fully and perfectly realized in the secondary and concrete elements of a realm and subjects. In the present, Christ has His kingdom authority and He is obtaining His realm and His subjects as the nations are disciplined.²²¹

When one accepts the reformed understanding of the Davidic kingdom, it really is meaningful to the Christian today. It relates to the here and now, not to a future Jewish age. The dispensational view of the kingdom neglects the full significance of the present reign of Christ and can lead to a pietistic, other-worldly sort of Christianity that is culturally impotent.

Old Testament Salvation

The area of theology where dispensationalists have been criticized most severely over the years and where recent dispensational theologians have made the greatest adjustments in the dispensational system is the doctrine of Old Testament salvation. By studying in detail the teaching on this subject by earlier dispensationalists such as C.I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer and the teaching on this subject by current dispensationalists such as Charles Caldwell Ryrie and John F. Walvoord, one can come to understand both the basic essence of dispensationalism and its recent evolution. Because of this definite theological evolution, I like to refer to earlier dispensationalists such as Dr. Chafer as classical dispensationalists and to current dispensationalists such as Dr. Ryrie as neo-dispensationalists.

The most basic weakness in the dispensational teaching on Old Testament

salvation is related to the concept of union with Christ. On this subject, dispensationalist Dr. John F. Walvoord has made the following revealing statement:

"In this present age, . . . a peculiar work is revealed which did not exist in the Old Testament and apparently will not be realized after the present age. This is the work of God the Holy Spirit which places a believer in Christ and relates him to all fellow believers in the figure of a human body."²²² Dispensationalists recognize that if Old Testament saints are in Christ as Paul used that term, then Old Testament saints are in the church universal,²²³ and that destroys the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the church. A salvifically unified people of God through the ages is a concept that is antithetical to the foundational presuppositions of dispensationalism.

The dispensational teaching on Old Testament salvation that has been most criticized is their teaching on the relationship of Old Testament salvation to grace, faith and works. This is an area where dispensationalism has evolved in recent years. It will be necessary to treat separately the classical dispensational teaching and the neo-dispensational teaching on this subject.

The classical teaching on Old Testament salvation is extensively explained in the fourth volume of Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer's Systematic Theology, which is my primary source for my understanding on this subject. The first element in Dr. Chafer's explanation of Old Testament salvation is physical birth into Old Testament Israel. The Old Testament salvation of God's earthly people (Israel) was founded on physical birth in contrast to the New Testament salvation of God's heavenly people (the church) which is founded on spiritual birth or regeneration. Dr. Chafer saw no spiritual regeneration in Old Testament salvation. This physical birth as a Jew put one into the nation Israel, which as a nation was heir to the gracious and unconditional Abrahamic covenant. The individual Jew, however, was as an individual subject to the meritorious and conditional Mosaic covenant. As an individual, he had to keep the Mosaic law in the power of the flesh with no divine enablement. He obtained forgiveness for his transgressions of the Mosaic law through offering animal sacrifices. By fulfilling these legal and ceremonial conditions, the Old Testament Jew remained a true member of God's earthly covenant people, which as a nation was heir to the unconditional national covenant blessing based on the Abrahamic covenant.

Basic to this system is the teaching that Israel as a nation was under the unconditional Abrahamic covenant while the individual Jews within the nation were under the conditional Mosaic covenant. The national inheritance of the earthly people will be inherited in the dispensational millennium and in eternity. During the dispensational millennium, the earthly people will inherit the earth and the heavenly people will reside in heaven. During eternity, Israel will inherit a Judaistic new earth and the Christians will inherit the non-Judaistic new heavens.

In 1944, the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly found the theology of Dr. Chafer, who was then an ordained minister in the PCUS, to be "out of accord

with the system of doctrine set forth in the Confession of Faith" because he taught "divergent plans of salvation for various groups in various ages." Dr. Chafer denied this charge in an article "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding." Dr. Chafer explained that he taught only one plan of salvation for all ages because he taught that salvation was always grounded upon God's grace which was made available through the death of Christ. In his writings, Dr. Chafer argued that his concept of Old Testament salvation was a by-grace system of salvation because 1) it was founded on physical birth into Judaism, which was by grace; 2) it involved forgiveness of sins through animal sacrifices, which was by grace; and 3) "Since human faithfulness in whatever degree could never be the exact compensation or exchange for the values of eternal life or for unending blessings in the kingdom, there is a very large measure of divine grace to be seen in the salvation of the elect earthly people."²²⁴ In his article on inventing heretics, Dr. Chafer asserted that people who "receive their doctrine from the Sacred Text rather than from man-made creeds" would agree with him that salvation involves "different human requirements in various ages" and that salvation can be by grace even when received "upon any varied human terms."²²⁵ While here arguing that he taught a unified salvation through the ages in that it was always grounded upon grace, Dr. Chafer also seemed to be acknowledging that he held to very divergent human requirements for salvation in various ages.

Neo-dispensationalists, apparently having learned from Dr. Chafer's critics, have adjusted the dispensational teaching on the human requirements in Old Testament salvation. They now clearly teach that salvation in all ages is through faith in God's promises. In contrast to reformed theology, the neo-dispensationalists insist that Old Testament salvation was through faith in the Old Testament promises but not through faith in Christ in any sense. Since they teach that Old Testament salvation did not involve the Pauline concept of union with Christ, it only seems appropriate for them to exclude faith in the coming Christ as well. The reformed theology position is that the Old Testament promises and typological institutions found their true fulfillment in Christ and thus faith in these Old Testament promises involved faith in the coming Christ even though the Old Testament saint may have understood this very dimly. For example, Abraham believed that God would give him a Seed and would one day bless all nations through him. Abraham no doubt associated this promise with the previously given Seed Redeemer promise of Genesis 3:15. The New Testament reveals that this promised Seed of Abraham was Jesus of Nazareth.²²⁶ So when Abraham believed this promise, he saw Christ's day, though dimly and as through a mirror darkly, and was glad.²²⁷

There is another significant difference between the position of the earlier and the current dispensationalists. Unlike the classical dispensationalists, the neo-dispensationalists do not teach an eternal dichotomy of destinies between Israel and the church. Neo-dispensationalists teach that during their millennium, living Jews will be on earth while resurrected Old Testament saints and resurrected church saints will together inhabit the new Jerusalem. Some recent dispensationalists such as Dr. John F. Walvoord speculate that the new Jerusalem during the millennium will be a satellite city hovering over Palestine. In eternity, the saints of all the ages will together inhabit the new earth, though the distinction between Israel and the church will

remain. Old Testament and millennial saints will still not be members of the Body and Bride of Christ.

Allow me to close this chapter by discussing the issue of conditional and unconditional covenants. It is a little difficult to analyze this dispensational dichotomy since it is hard to understand. Even they seem to have problems with the idea of a covenant with absolutely no moral stipulations. One dispensational writer states that what is promised in an unconditional covenant is given apart from the response of the recipient (no "if" is attached whatsoever) but that the blessings of an unconditional covenant can be conditioned on the recipient's response without this changing the unconditional character of the covenant!²²⁸ It is also difficult to imagine how a divine covenant could have been strictly conditional without salvation's being legalistic and meritorious under that covenant's administration.

Instead of seeing a strong dichotomy between the unconditional, gracious and national Abrahamic covenant and the conditional, meritorious and individualistic Mosaic covenant, I see the Mosaic covenant as a national expansion of the promises, moral stipulations and ceremonial law found in the Abrahamic covenant. Both covenants were by-grace covenants and both involved moral stipulations with blessings promised for obedience and neither, when properly interpreted, were legalistic or meritorious.

I believe that from the perspective of divine sovereignty and God's secret decrees, all of God's covenants are unconditional; that is to say, all of grace, totally undeserved, completely gratuitous. I also believe that from the perspective of human responsibility and God's revealed will and the historical administration of God's covenants, God's covenants all require a response of genuine faith. Genuine faith progressively bears the fruit of holiness and good works.²²⁹ Every professed Christian has the God given responsibility to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling.²³⁰ Salvation, apart from exceptional cases such as the death of infants, is always through faith in Christ.²³¹ Here is human responsibility and moral stipulation and blessing conditioned on response. This does not, however, require salvation to be meritorious or legalistic. Some try to obtain a through faith salvation that is by grace by trivializing faith into nothing in the context of a "Savior only", carnal Christian salvation. That, in my opinion, is not the answer. I believe the reason salvation can be through faith and yet totally free and by grace is because God graciously gives His chosen people the spiritual ability to meet His own requirement of Gospel obedience. God works in His people's lives to enable them to will and to work according to His good pleasure.²³² Without faith, it is impossible to please God,²³³ and the natural, non-regenerate man is totally unable to please God²³⁴; however, the person whom God unconditionally chooses to bless, He regenerates and sanctifies and enables to believe with a dynamic faith that will lead to holy living. God then rewards this obedient holiness with blessings and rewards. The faith that works is not a meritorious condition for blessing but is the instrument through which God brings blessing upon the saint in accordance with the divine principle, "to be carnally minded is death but to be spiritually minded is life and peace."²³⁵ God's covenant blessings are but

rewards upon the effects of God's own grace. Thus when God unconditionally chose Abraham to receive blessings, God regenerated him and enabled him to believe and to obey so that God could bless him in accordance with holiness. God chose to actively, personally know Abraham in order that Abraham might raise His family in the way of righteousness and thus receive covenant blessings.²³⁶ Thus God rewarded Abraham for his obedience²³⁷ and yet Abraham's salvation was unconditional and all of grace. This is the Calvinistic theology of rewards. This is the only satisfactory explanation I have found as to how God's covenants can condition blessings upon moral stipulations and still be totally unconditional and all of grace.

Summary of Objectional Teaching

Allow me to close by listing what I consider to be the really objectionable teachings associated with dispensationalism. There are other dispensational teachings with which I disagree but I do not view them as foundational and basic. The following are the dispensational teachings that I personally regard as especially objectionable:

1. The belief that Old Testament salvation was not through faith in the coming Christ. The reformed position is not, as it has been misrepresented on occasion, that the Old Testament saints understood as much about Christ and the Gospel as we do today. The reformed position is that the object of saving faith in the Old Testament was the same as the object of saving faith in the New Testament, although admittedly the Old Testament saint had much less knowledge of Christ. He saw dimly through the Messianic prophecies and types. The object of faith has not changed through the dispensations; the degree of knowledge of the object has.
2. The belief that the Old Testament saint had a salvation that did not include union with Christ and that the Old Testament saints in eternity will not be members of the Body and Bride of Christ. Reformed theology does recognize that the New Testament era is an era of greater grace and spiritual fullness to the point that Scripture can contrast the New and Old Testament ages as light compared to darkness. This is not to say that the Old Testament was so lacking in grace that Old Testament salvation did not involve covenant union with Christ and the covenant headship of Christ.
3. The belief that there is a strong dichotomy of nature between the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant in that one is unconditional and the other conditional. Related to this would be the dispensational teaching that the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer are legal ground and thus not directly applicable to the Christian. Reformed theology views the Mosaic covenant as basically a nationally expanded version of the Abrahamic covenant, and its moral law elements are regarded as still valid. Since moral law is merely the expression of God's holiness as it relates to created reality, God's moral law can no more be invalidated than can God's holiness.²³⁸ There can be, and are, adjustments in the realm of case law and ceremonial law since case law is a time-bound, situation-specific application of moral law and ceremonial law is positive law.

4. The belief that the New Testament era is a parenthesis in the prophetic program for Israel to the point that no Old Testament prophecy can directly refer to the church age.
5. The conviction that the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant and the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 are primarily Jewish covenants that can relate to the Christian only in a secondary and indirect sense at most.
6. The belief that Christ's present reign at the right hand of the Father has no direct relationship to the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and the Messianic kingdom prophecies.
7. The belief that there is no organic relationship of continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. Reformed interpreters believe that the Christian church, and not the theological heirs of Phariseeism, are the true present heirs of the Old Testament covenants and kingdom promises.

The purpose of this list is not to stereotype all dispensationalists. These are objectionable beliefs from the perspective of reformed theology, and these are beliefs that have been taught by leading dispensational theologians as basic elements in that system. If there are Christians today who think of themselves as dispensationalists and who disagree with some of the above listed beliefs, then I am thankful that they do disagree with at least some of these. What a person actually believes is more important than how he classifies himself theologically.

End Notes

- 144 C.I. Scofield, editor, The Scofield Reference Bible, page 5, note 4.
- 145 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, page 187.
- 146 Matthew 5:17-19
- 147 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:163-164, 215-216, 211-212, 247.
- 148 Matthew 6:12
- 149 C.I. Scofield, editor, The Scofield Reference Bible, page 1089-1090 note 1 on Luke 11:1; see also page 1002, note 1 on Matt. 6:12. Compare Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:221-222.
- 150 Matthew 24
- 151 John 14-16
- 152 Hal Lindsey with C.C. Carlson, The Late Great Planet Earth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), page 54.
- 153 Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3,4; 28:4,13; 35:12; 48:4.
- 154 verses 9-12; cf. Galatians 4:2
- 155 John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 145-146; cf. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pages 149-150.
- 156 cf. Psalm 22:27-30; 68:29-31; 72:8-11,17; Isaiah 2:2-5; 11:9-10; 19:24-25; 42:1-4; 45:14; 49:6-7,22-23; 52:10; 54:1-3; 60:3f.; 65:1; 66:19; Jeremiah 16:19; Amos 9:11-12; Zechariah 2:3-13; 8:20-23; Malachi 1:11.
- 157 J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, page 507; compare Charles Caldwell Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today, page 134.

158 cf. Jeremiah 18:5-12
159 Genesis 13:15; 17:8
160 Genesis 15:18
161 Joshua 21:43-45; 23:14-16; 1 Kings 8:56; Nehemiah 9:7-8.
162 Genesis 13:15; 17:8
163 compare Deuteronomy 15:17
164 Psalm 89:34-37; compare Jeremiah 31:35-36; 33:20-21; Isaiah 54:10
165 Galatians 3; Romans 4:13
166 Matthew 5:5; compare Psalm 37:11
167 Hebrews 11:8-10,16
168 Hebrews 12:22-23; 13:14; Galatians 4:26
169 1 Peter 1:4
170 Hebrews 12:22
171 Matthew 11:28
172 Ephesians 2:6
173 Hebrews 4:8-9
174 Deuteronomy 5:16
175 Ephesians 6:3
176 2 Corinthians 10:4
177 Romans 4:13
178 Genesis 1:26-28
179 John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; cf. Ephesians 2:2
180 Genesis 3:15
181 Psalm 8:6
182 Genesis 12:3
183 Psalm 2:8
184 Daniel 7:14
185 Matthew 28:18
186 Revelation 2:26-27; 12:5
187 Hebrews 2:6-8; 1 Corinthians 15:25-27
188 Genesis 15:18
189 Zechariah 9:10
190 Revelation 21:1-2
191 Isaiah 11:11; 49:12
192 Esther 3:8
193 Joshua 1:4; 7:11-12
194 Numbers 14:30-31
195 Jeremiah 18:9-10
196 Isaiah 49:5-6; Acts 13:47-48; 15:13-18
197 Matthew 13:30
198 Luke 12:32
199 John 3:3,5; Matthew 5:20; 7:21
200 Luke 16:16
201 Matthew 12:28-30
202 Matthew 13:11
203 Luke 17:20-21
204 Matthew 28:18
205 Acts 2:29-36
206 1 Samuel 24:6; 2 Samuel 23:1; Psalm 2:2
207 Acts 2:34; 4:25-26; Revelation 2:26-27; 12:1-5
208 Acts 8:12

209 Acts 14:22
210 Acts 17:6-7
211 Acts 28:23,31
212 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 196.
213 Psalm 89:39,44
214 *Ibid.*, page 201.
215 Revelation 12:5
216 Hebrews 12:22
217 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 546.
218 John 6:15; 18:36
219 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 172.
220 Matthew 6:10
221 Matthew 28:18-20
222 John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit at Work Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), page 21.
223 1 Corinthians 12:13
224 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), page 91.
225 Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 102, number 405 (Jan. – March, 1945).
226 Galatians 3
227 John 8:56; cf. Galatians 3:8
228 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 68.
229 James 2:17; Ephesians 2:10; Hebrews 12:14
230 Philippians 2:12
231 Ephesians 2:8
232 Philippians 2:13
233 Hebrews 11:6 Hebrews 11:6
234 Romans 8:8
235 Romans 8:6
236 Genesis 18:19
237 Genesis 22:15-18; 26:2-5
238 cf. Matthew 5:17-20