

Dispensationalism 101

Contrasting Dispensationalism & Covenant Theology

By Bob Nyberg

Bottom Line: The basic difference between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology has to do with how a person interprets the Bible. The foundation for both systems relates to the issue of hermeneutics – that is how the Bible is interpreted.

If you were to sweep away all the peripheral matters, you would find that there are three key issues that separate these two systems of theology.

Issue #1: Should the Bible be understood in its plain, normal sense of meaning taking into account the historical context in which it was written? Or does the interpreter of scripture have the right to allegorize anything that he does not understand or does not fit into his theological box?

The Dispensationalist says that we should take scripture at face value. We should understand it in its plain, normal sense of meaning. We should interpret the Bible according to the rules of grammar and take into consideration the historical context in which it was written.

In contrast, the Covenant Theologian feels the liberty to allegorize those portions of scripture that he finds difficult to understand or which do not fit neatly in his theological system of interpretation.

For example, in Revelation chapter 20 the apostle John says six times that the millennial kingdom will be 1000 years. The dispensationalist says that there is no reason to allegorize the term 1000 years. However the Covenant Theologian says that 1000 years simply means that it will be a really long time. He does not hold to a literal millennial kingdom therefore he allegorizes the term 1000 years.

Another example are prophetic passages written by the Old Testament prophets. The prophets in the Old Testament depicted a glorious millennial kingdom here on earth.

Even Covenant Theologians admit this fact. For instance, Floyd Hamilton (a covenant amillennialist) wrote: “Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures. That was the kind of Messianic kingdom that the Jews of the time of Christ were looking for, on the basis of a literal kingdom interpretation of the Old Testament promises.”

However, a literal millennial kingdom here on earth does not fit into his system of theology therefore he rejects the premillennial-dispensational interpretation of those prophetic passages of scripture found in the Old Testament.

Why allegorize portions of scripture that plainly teach a literal millennial kingdom? There were hundreds of prophecies about Jesus' first coming that were all fulfilled literally. Why should we expect that prophecies about His second coming would be allegorical?

If you allow allegorical interpretation, how far do you carry it? Many of the early church fathers took allegorical interpretation to an extreme.

Clement of Alexandria, wrote:

- The two fish Jesus used to feed the five thousand represent Greek philosophy.
- The Mosaic Law prohibitions against eating swine, hawks, eagles and ravens (Lev. 11:7, 13-19) represent respectively unclean lust for food, injustice, robbery and greed.

Origen wrote:

- Noah represents Christ, Noah's Ark represents the Church.
- The two donkeys used in Christ's triumphal entry represent the Old and the New Testaments.
- Rebekah's drawing water at the well for Abraham's servant means we must daily come to the Scriptures to meet Christ.

Those are interesting interpretations of scripture, but how do you get that understanding from the text of the Bible? And who is to say if these men were right or wrong in their interpretations? If one does not use the plain, normal method of interpretation, then all objectivity is lost. What check would there be on the variety of interpretations which man's imagination could produce if there were not an objective standard which is what the plain, normal principle of interpretation provides? To try to see meaning other than the normal one would result in as many interpretations as there are people interpreting.

Dispensationalism is based upon the golden rule of interpretation: "When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise."

In contrast, Covenant Theology uses the allegorical approach to passages of scripture that they find difficult to fit into their theological box.

If a person holds to the plain, normal principle of interpretation then they are probably a dispensationalist.

Issue #2: Are Israel and the Church the same or are they different?

The dispensationalist says that if you read the Bible in its plain, normal sense then you have to come to the conclusion that Israel and the Church are different.

In contrast, a Covenant Theologian, since he allows allegorical interpretation, says the Church and Israel are the same. He says the church began either with Adam and Eve or with Abraham. I find it interesting that they can't even decide among themselves when the church began. The Covenant Theologian says that the Church is "the New Israel." They maintain that when you read the name "Israel" in the New Testament this term is really referring to the Church. OK, then let's see how that works.

In Romans 10:1 Paul wrote, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for *Israel* is that they may be saved." Okay the Covenant Theologian tells us that Israel = the Church. So according to them that verse should really read: "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for *the Church* is that they may be saved."

Wait a minute! I thought that the Church was the body of Christ which means that members of the Church are already saved! To make the assumption that Israel and the Church are the same results in all kinds of absurdities!

So if a person applies the principle of plain, normal interpretation to scripture, then they will see a difference between Israel and the Church. If that is true, then they are probably a dispensationalist.

Issue #3: Is God only interested in the salvation of mankind or does God have a larger program in mind? For instance, does God also have a plan for the angels?

The dispensationalist says that if you read the Bible in its plain, normal sense then you have to come to the conclusion that God's plan is not simply limited to the salvation of mankind as important as that is.

The Covenant Theologian's whole system is based on 2 or 3 "theological covenants" which are not even found in the Bible! They cannot even agree as to how many "theological covenants" there are! Why? Because you cannot find them in the Bible! Those so-called "theological covenants" only relate to the salvation of mankind.

In contrast, the dispensationalist says that God's plan is much broader than that.

James Orr, who was a covenant theologian, said of his own system that "Covenant Theology puts God into a soteriological straightjacket!" In other words, he was saying that the concept of these 2 or 3 "theological covenants" being limited to just the salvation of mankind is way too restrictive!

If a person holds to the plain, normal interpretation of scripture then they will conclude that there will be a literal millennial kingdom on earth; that Israel and the Church are separate; and that God's program is not just limited to the salvation of mankind.

Those are the three basic questions that separate Covenant Theology from Dispensational Theology. Hermeneutics, or the principles of interpretation, is the key issue that distinguishes these two systems of theology. The Dispensationalist tries to be consistent in applying a plain, normal interpretation to all portions of scripture. In contrast, the Covenant Theologian uses a dual system of hermeneutics. He applies the plain, normal system of interpretation to historical passages of scripture. But he applies allegorical interpretation to passages of scripture that do not fit into his theological system.

Maybe I am just being too simplistic, but I feel much more comfortable taking God's Word at face value rather than trying to make it fit into a system of theology.