

## DISPENSATIONALISM AND COVENANT THEOLOGY

The present study arises out of an overture that was presented to the 147th General Synod by the Southern Presbytery of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod. The original overture called upon the synod to "emphasize that the system of scripture interpretation known as dispensationalism whether that of Darby, Scofield, Chafer, or current Dallas Seminary, is antithetical to the system of doctrine as contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechism." The overture called particular attention to the Dispensationalist's "erroneous view of the parenthesis nature of the church and his dichotomous view of the destiny of the church and Israel [as] a serious error being both divisive and harmful to the preservation and propagation of Reformed Presbyterian Churches," and urged that "While the doors of the church are open for membership to all genuine believers, none holding a dispensational view of Christ's body be permitted to hold any office of ruling or teaching."

The Committee on Bills and Overtures of the 147th Synod replied to this overture by calling attention to the fact that elders and deacons as well as ministers and licentiates are required to give affirmative answers to the question whether they sincerely receive and adopt the doctrinal standards of this church as containing the system of doctrine taught in the scriptures. The committee cited in particular Chapter VII, "Of God's Covenant with Man," Paragraphs 5 and 6, and Chapter 25, "Of the Church," as stressing "the unity of the covenant of grace and the unity of the church universal consisting of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one under Christ, the Head thereof." The committee regarded it as expedient for Sessions to be assured that those who teach in Sunday School and other teaching ministries not teach contrary to this doctrine.

The Committee's reply was placed before the body as a motion and seconded. Various amendments were offered but failed to pass. The matter was committed to a special committee to be appointed by the moderator for a thorough study and report to the 148th Synod.

### DISPENSATIONALISM DEFINED

One of the problems in framing an appropriate motion on the matter at synod has been finding a proper definition of Dispensationalism to consider in the light of the Confession of Faith and Covenant Theology. We have therefore selected a fairly recent publication entitled Dispensationalism Today, by Charles C. Ryrie, Dean of the Graduate School of Dallas Theological Seminary, as a basis for understanding the nature of Dispensationalism as currently understood by those who espouse this system.

In describing the nature of dispensations, Ryrie states, "Dispensations are different administrations of God in directing the affairs of the world." Ryrie would prefer to define a dispensation in terms of an economy rather than an age. He says that a dispensation is "a stewardship arrangement and not a period of time, but the arrangement will exist during a period of time." The central idea of the word is said to have to do with "the managing or administration of the affairs of a household." "Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time."

Ryrie quotes the Oxford English Dictionary as defining a dispensation theologically as "a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a



particular nation or period of time; also the age or period during which the system has prevailed." From God's point of view, Ryrie says, a dispensation is "an economy"; from man's point of view it is a "responsibility"; it is also a "stage in progressive revelation."

Ryrie acknowledges that some features of one dispensation may continue through other dispensations and sees the relationship between dispensations more as a spiral rather than as disconnected cycles. He summarizes his definition of a dispensation as follows:

"The principal characteristic of a dispensation is the economic arrangement and responsibility which God reveals in each dispensation. Such responsibility is a test in itself. Most men fail the test and then judgment follows. The dispensational scheme has two perspectives - a cross-sectional aspect (which is sometimes misconstrued as cycles but which is in reality a spiral) and a longitudinal aspect (which emphasizes the unfolding progress of revelation and continuing principles throughout the ages of the dispensations.)"

We would not question the dispensationalist's own definition of his own system of interpreting scripture. We would wonder whether it can be consistently shown that in each dispensation or age usually cited there was an actual test followed by a judgment. We see no judgment, for example, following what would be called the Dispensation of Promise from Abraham to Moses. We are happy to note the stress that is placed today by the dispensationalist on the fact that certain principles do continue throughout various dispensations and that the dispensations themselves are more a spiral than a cycle. This brings them into closer harmony with the covenant theologian's emphasis upon the unity of God's dealings with His people throughout various ages.

The stress upon progressive revelation, Ryrie considers a distinctive feature of dispensationalists, but most reformed theologians holding the covenant position would also agree that God has revealed truth progressively throughout the scripture.

The advantages that Ryrie sees in the dispensational scheme are three: (1) Supplying the need for biblical distinctions. An outline of the Bible is afforded by means of this arrangement of its subject matter. Such distinctions, as Ryrie points out, are recognized by covenant theologians, and the word "dispensation" is used by some of them in marking out various ages of biblical history. Both Hodge and Berkhof make such age distinctions. They see them all, of course, as related to "the unifying and underlying covenant of grace," as Ryrie acknowledges.

(2) The second advantage Ryrie points out is providing a philosophy of history. He states that the goal of history to the dispensationalist is the millenium while to the covenant theologian the goal is the new heaven and the new earth. He sees the unifying principle of covenant theology as soteriology whereas the unifying principle of the dispensationalist he says is eschatology and theology. His stress upon the progress of revelation in the dispensational scheme he sees as over against what he calls the "rigidity" of the covenant theologian who, he says, tries to read back the New Testament into the Old Testament.

(3) Ryrie's third advantage in Dispensationalism is a consistent hermeneutics. He accuses the covenant theologian, especially the amillenialist, of allegorizing while the dispensationalist takes a literal and plain interpretation. This he applies especially to the kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament.



The basic question of what makes a person a dispensationalist, Ryrie answers as follows: (1) Not the fact that he sees different economies in the Bible since the covenant theologian also sees these. (2) Not the number of dispensations. Hodge sees five and Scofield sees seven. Others have seen more or less. (3) Not premillennialism. There are covenant theologians who are premillennialists. All premillennialists are not dispensationalists, but all dispensationalists are premillennial.

What then does constitute a man a Dispensationalist? Ryrie includes three things: (A) Dispensationalism keeps Israel and the Church distinct. God is pursuing two distinct purposes dealing with two distinct peoples throughout eternity. One people are related to earth with earthly objectives. The other are related to heaven and are a heavenly people with heavenly objectives. (B) Literal interpretation of scripture as distinguished from spiritual or allegorized interpretation. (C) The underlying purpose of God in the world. Covenant theology makes it salvation, Ryrie says, while dispensationalism says it is the glory of God. He says the covenant theologian errs in combining all the many facets of divine purpose in the one objective of fulfilling the covenant of grace.

As we analyze these distinctions, we find only the first (1) as a major distinction between dispensationalism and covenant theology.\* The emphasis upon literal interpretation (2) is shared by many covenant theologians, especially those who are covenant premillennialists. No one would insist, however, that literal interpretation fails to understand as spiritual and allegorical, matters that are clearly intended to be so interpreted. The ultimate goal of God (3) in fulfilling the covenant of grace is the "praise of the glory of God's grace," and covenant theologians stress this ultimate goal as fully as dispensationalists would stress it, though it must be admitted that covenant theology does place great stress upon the soteriological work of God in redeeming a people for His name from all nations and all ages.

Ryrie acknowledges as he concludes his discussion of these differences that "the essence of dispensationalism. . . is the distinction between Israel and the Church." He feels that this grows out of the dispensationalist's use of plain interpretation and fits with the basic purpose of God of glorifying Himself through all His purposes with man.

As we seek to define dispensationalism further, we see another distinction that needs to be stressed: The dispensationalist defines a dispensation as an economy

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\*Even this matter is evidently not as serious as is frequently alleged in that Ryrie does agree that differences in the future status of saved Jews and Christians concern only the situation during the millennium. At this time, he holds, the godly of Israel who are living at the beginning of the millennium will be living in unresurrected bodies and godly Israelites of other ages as well as Christians who participated in the rapture will be living in spiritual bodies. He says, "Believing Israelites of the Mosaic age who died in faith have a heavenly destiny." (p. 146). He quotes Pentecost with approval, "The individual Old Testament saint's hope of an eternal city will be realized in the heavenly Jerusalem, where without losing distinction or identity, Israel will join with the resurrected and translated of the church age to share in the glory of His reign forever." (p. 148) It would seem that Ryrie agrees that the church and Israel will share the same eternal blessings.



in God's administration of the world and a corresponding responsibility on man's part tested in a specific way. But in his system God has two different administrations (really redemptions) each having successively differing economies. Both administrations are gracious because they are for fallen men. These two administrations are (1) governmental and national and (2) individual and spiritual.

The Westminster Confession speaks of God's administration of the covenant of grace under different economies - Abrahamic, Mosaic, Christian, etc. The difference is that the Westminster Confession has one administration with the successively differing economies, but the dispensationalist says there are two administrations with successively different economies. This will come out more clearly in the following discussion of the plan of salvation.

### THE PLAN OF SALVATION

With regard to the plan of salvation in the Old Testament and the New, Ryrie insists that the dispensationalist's view is and has always been that salvation in all ages is by grace, through faith. He admits that some dispensational writers have made statements that would seem to indicate otherwise but quotes recognized dispensationalists as presenting salvation by grace in the Old Testament as well as the New.

Among those he quotes are Chafer, "There is therefore but one way to be saved and that is by the power of God made possible through the sacrifice of Christ;" Pettingill, "Salvation has always been, as it is now, purely a gift of God in response to faith. The dispensational tests served to show man his utter helplessness, in order to bring him to faith, that he might be saved by grace through faith, plus nothing."

Ryrie does take issue with covenant theology and with Charles Hodge, however, in his contention that in the Old Testament they had "the same Saviour, the same condition and the same salvation." While basing the work of salvation upon the work of Christ, he insists that the Old Testament believers did not know enough about Christ to believe in Him and disagrees with Hodge that they were saved through faith in the promised Redeemer, or faith in the promise of redemption through the Messiah.

Ryrie insists that the progress of revelation had not gone that far and that it must rather be said that "The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations."

Says Ryrie, "If by two 'ways' of salvation is meant different content of faith, then dispensationalism does teach two ways. . . But if by 'ways' is meant two bases or means, then dispensationalism most emphatically does not teach two ways."

With regard to the sacrifices Ryrie grapples with the problem that the Old Testament "does ascribe efficacy to the sacrifices. . . 'It shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him,'" while at the same time the New Testament emphatically asserts that "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sin."



Ryrie sees a "genuine atonement for sins" assigned to the sacrifices "because they were offered and not because the offerer was either worthy in himself or perceptive of something which the sacrifices pictured." He resolves the difficulty by asserting that "the individual Israelite by birth was related to God through the state. . . .When sin occurred it was both a governmental and spiritual offense because of the nature of a theocracy. . . .All Israelites were related to God theocratically; some were also related spiritually. The bringing of the sacrifices restored the offender to his forfeited position as a Jewish worshiper and restored his theocratic relationship."

This has the effect of setting forth two types of "salvation," one theocratic and governmental, the other individual and spiritual, and tends to introduce confusion as to what is meant by salvation in the dispensational scheme. It is to be questioned whether God's theocratic dealings with Israel should be thought of in terms of "salvation." Certainly the Westminster standards in their stress on the unity of God's redemptive purposes leave no room for a doctrine of two "salvations."

The covenant premillarian is jealous to maintain God's governmental dealings with Israel, but only as a foil for his redemptive dealings with all the people of God. He makes God's program for Israel subordinate to His redemptive program for all His people, while the dispensational premillennialist makes it coordinate.

Some dispensationalists, says Ryrie, hold that the efficacy of the sacrifices "extended to full remission of sins but such remission depended upon the offerer having faith (since there was not inherent virtue in the sacrifices themselves.)"

In the mind of the covenant theologian those sacrifices were efficacious only as the sacraments of the New Testament are efficacious, not as saving ordinances, but as signs and seals of faith in God and His provision of atonement. Baptism is sometimes pictured in the New Testament as though it were actually efficacious to remove sin (Acts 2:38), but this is simply a case of the sign being used to describe the Spirit's work of the inner baptizing.

The dispensationalist maintains that he believes in one way of personal salvation for all ages. The covenant theologian, however, would insist that there was more content to the faith of the believing Israelite than mere faith in God. There were promises of a Messiah, and the sacrificial system did portray an atonement that showed promise of a way of deliverance from sin. It may be debated as to how much content there was to the faith of each Israelite who believed in a saving manner. We would have to say that he believed to the extent of the revelation that God had given at that time. The dispensationalist would agree with that statement, but the covenant theologian would consider that the individual believer did at least understand that God had made a provision for forgiveness of his sins and that he must have trusted God for that provision to be made effective in his life.

Jesus said, "Abraham saw my day and was glad." This is usually understood to mean that the patriarch foresaw the coming of Christ as he prepared to offer Isaac and God provided Himself a lamb for a burnt offering. It applies also to other predictions to Abraham of the coming of his own "seed" who would bless the world. "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness." He was saved by grace, through faith in a coming Redeemer.



## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Dispensational premillennialism considers that the messianic kingdom foretold by the Old Testament prophets and expected by the Jewish people was at the first advent of Christ offered, rejected, and postponed until the second advent of Christ. The covenant amillennialist considers that these prophecies will not be fulfilled literally, and that the church of Christ is the only kind of fulfillment they receive. Others would say that some would be fulfilled in the new heaven and the new earth. The covenant premillennialist stands somewhat in the middle of these views and sees the church as fulfilling some of these prophecies but also sees a future millennial kingdom when others will be fulfilled. The strong distinction that the dispensationalist makes between Israel and the church naturally leads to his finding the kingdom prophecies fulfilled only in the millennium. Ryrie states "a millennial kingdom fully integrated into the whole theological system is a feature of dispensational premillennialism." "For the nondispensationalist premill the millennial kingdom is more like an addendum to his system," he says. Some nondispensational premills might agree with that; others would disagree.

When the dispensationalist hears Jesus and his disciples preaching "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," he regards this as simply offering to the Jews the promised kingdom of the Old Testament prophecies. When the covenant theologian reads these statements he sees in them a preaching of repentance preparatory to entering into the experience of the new birth, by which one is born into a spiritual kingdom. He finds little to distinguish between "the gospel of the kingdom" and the gospel of the grace of God. He feels that the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 are definitely referring to the present age, and that the Sermon on the Mount is intended by Christ to be a rule of life for the citizens of His kingdom today. He sees in the Christian Church an expression of the kingdom that Christ proclaimed, even though the premillennial covenant theologian would see a fuller expression of that kingdom in the millennial period.

Because the dispensationalist sees the kingdom as offered, rejected and postponed, he has to place the Sermon on the Mount in that category also and consider that it is primarily related to the messianic kingdom that is future. He feels it cannot be literally followed today. Ryrie does say, however, that "Like all Scripture, the sermon is applicable to believers in this age" and quotes Chafer as saying that "lessons and principles may be drawn from it." He says, "Dispensationalists believe that anger, lust, divorce, and murder are sin, and they believe it on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount. Dispensationalists believe that the Lord's Prayer and the Golden Rule are excellent guides." All of these things we are glad to hear while continuing to maintain that Jesus intended the sermon to have a primary reference for the church today.

## THE BODY OF CHRIST

The composition of the church, the body of Christ, would seem to be the crucial question as far as the difference between the dispensationalist and the covenant theologian is concerned. To the dispensationalist the church began at Pentecost. (Ultra-dispensationalists have it beginning with Paul's revelation of the mystery of the church in Ephesians 2 and 3 and place it after the events of the Book of Acts, or place it after the beginning of Paul's missionary journeys in Acts 13, or after the conversion of Paul in Acts 9.) To them it is a completely new body



composed (1) of Jews and Gentiles who since Pentecost have trusted Christ, and (2) have experienced the indwelling of Christ. These are the two distinct features of the church, according to Ryrle. He considers that this body composed of Jew and Gentile was not in existence in Old Testament times, and this experience of being indwelt by Christ was unknown in Old Testament times and reasons that therefore the church did not exist in Old Testament times.

Ryrle bases his contention on three passages of scripture. (1) First is the mystery character of the church mentioned in Ephesians 2:15 which calls the church a "new man" composed of Jew and Gentile, and Ephesians 3:3,6 which sets forth Paul as the one to whom the mystery of the church (that "Gentiles would be fellow-heirs and of the same body," with the Jews) was revealed. (2) Secondly, in Ephesians 1:20-23, where the church's existence as a body with Christ as head is based on his resurrection and exaltation, and in Ephesians 4:7-12, the ascended Christ has given gifts to his church for its proper functioning and operation. He envisages the completion of the church at the rapture in I Thessalonians 4:16, considering the "dead in Christ" to include only the ones saved in this present age. (3) Thirdly, the baptizing work of the Spirit was predicted in Acts 1:5, he says, and began to happen in Acts 2 at Pentecost as stated in Acts 11:15,16. This baptizing work placed people in the body of Christ, and this began to occur at Pentecost, says Ryrle.

Ryrle makes a good case for his contention but seems to us to misinterpret perhaps the most crucial text upon which he bases his view; namely, that in Ephesians 2 and 3 which speaks of the "one new man" which is composed of Jew and Gentile as "one body" in Christ. The point that Paul makes here is that Gentiles are now brought into what Jews already had in the Old Testament, and in this sense the present day church is a new thing. It is not absolutely and completely new but is new in a manner similar to the way that the "new commandment" is new. That commandment was in existence in the Old Testament, but was newly revealed and emphasized by Christ as the badge of his disciples. The New Testament church which does consist of Jew and Gentile is new in the sense that it has both in it, but because it is clearly a matter of Gentiles now being admitted into that to which before they were strangers, it is not new.

That to which they were strangers in the former age was the company of the redeemed people of God. In the Old Testament the Gentiles were "without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise." (2:12) All of these blessings the Old Testament people of God did possess. The Gentiles were sometime afar off from these blessings but are now brought nigh by the blood of Christ. The enmity that the ceremonial law set up between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and God has made of two (those who before were in the Lord and those who were outside) one new man. The Gentiles are therefore "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God," which the Old Testament saints were already a part of before Christ came.

Paul was privileged to reveal this mystery of the fact that Gentiles were now to be made "fellow-heirs and of the same body." He revealed what had not been fully known before, although hinted at in certain Old Testament prophecies (Isaiah 49:1-12), and then Paul was specially privileged to preach the message of salvation to Gentiles so as to be a means in God's hands of composing this new body which now had a host of redeemed Gentiles in it as well as redeemed Jews of a former age.



Ryrie accuses the covenant theologian of reading back into the Old Testament what is in the New Testament. He acknowledges, however, that there were people rightly related to God in Old Testament times. This seems to us to destroy the whole case of the dispensationalist. There is warrant for reading into the Old Testament things that are revealed in the New Testament. Man could experience in Old Testament times spiritual experiences that were revealed in more complete and definite terminology in the New Testament. They could become members of a body of which He is the Head even before He died, rose and ascended to be that Head.

People in the Old Testament, even those born into the commonwealth of Israel, were born dead in sin; they were guilty of sin and deserving of the curse of God upon their sin; they were as totally unable to make themselves acceptable to God as people today. Apart from the future provision of redemption in Christ, they could have had no hope, and when by faith they did trust God for his deliverance, they must have experienced the equivalent of the "new birth." The truth, "Ye must be born again," was as true in Old Testament times as it was when Jesus said it to Nicodemus, even though the terminology was unknown till Jesus used it. This calls then for the work of the Holy Spirit in individual hearts in a saving capacity. It calls for the continuing ministry of the Spirit in the individual life to sanctify that life and keep that one walking close to God in faith and obedience. Many of the Old Testament saints, like Enoch, Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah, walked as close to God as the apostles of Christ and knew the working of God's Spirit in their lives as a continuing experience.

The baptism of the Spirit was revealed in the New Testament, and began to be operative in a fuller degree in the present age of the Spirit, but it would seem that there was little if any difference in the kind of work that He did in the Old Testament from what He now does in the New. There may be a difference in the degree of His working, but not in the kind of work that He did. Those who were thus ministered to by the Spirit in the former age can be easily seen to be a part of the same organic body of Christ of which body He is the head, and which body He has called to Himself and ministered to by the Spirit in all ages. Clearly, when the "dead in Christ" rise at His coming, all the saints of all ages will be included in that resurrection and in that terminology.

#### COVENANT THEOLOGY

The dispensationalist tends to frown upon the theological system known as covenant theology. This system of interpretation sees two basic covenants in scripture, first, the covenant of works entered into by God with Adam on behalf of all posterity and by which mankind was offered life for obedience and threatened with death for disobedience; second, the covenant of grace entered into by God with Christ and those who would believe in Him (God's elect) by which salvation is provided through the Redeemer and by faith in Him.

This system of thought is based largely on Romans 5:12-19 where Adam and Christ are set forth as the two federal heads of two races of people: all mankind and the redeemed. Prior to the fall, man could have experienced life through obedience; following the fall, life could never again be attained by this condition and must be "by grace, through faith." This system of thought therefore emphasizes the unity of God's dealing with His people throughout the ages stressing that there is one company of redeemed people of all ages and nations, and one plan of redemption by which they are redeemed.



All other covenants of scripture are said to be expressions of the covenant of grace. The covenant with Abraham affords many spiritual promises that continue to be available to God's people till the end. The covenant of Sinai is a product of God's grace, although it is essentially a law covenant and does stress the condemnation of the law. It shows the way of salvation to the sinner made aware of his sin by pointing him to the fact that God has provided an atonement.

The new covenant is essentially synonymous with the covenant of grace in that the covenant of grace is newly and fully manifested in the new covenant. In the coming of Christ to mediate that covenant, He actually provided at a time in history the blessings of the covenant of grace which God's elect have been privileged to enjoy through every age. In point of time the old covenant is done away when the New Covenant supersedes it, but because the New Covenant is a new manifestation of the eternal covenant of grace, its blessings were available even to those living under the old covenant.

The dispensationalist objects to covenant theology because he believes the two basic covenants are not clearly revealed in scripture. He objects also because he believes the covenant theologian reads the New Testament back into the Old Testament in an artificial way. He objects also, of course, because his system of interpretation has led him to find two basic groups of people that God is dealing with in inspired record and throughout history, whereas the emphasis of covenant theology is upon one basic group of redeemed people.

That these covenant concepts based on two federal heads, Adam and Christ, are biblical is clear from the Romans 5 passage. The Revised Version of 1881 translates Hosea 6:7, "They like Adam have transgressed the covenant," a proper rendering of the passage and one that suggests the covenant idea in God's dealings with Adam. Hebrews 13:20, 21, that glorious benediction with which the great book of Hebrews comes near to its close, refers to "the blood of the everlasting covenant." This has to be that covenant by which all men of all ages are redeemed who are redeemed. It has to be then the everlasting covenant of the grace of God.

In view of these basic differences between the dispensationalist and the covenant theologian, it is doubtful that one who holds the dispensational position could state that he is in agreement with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith. As this study indicates, the differences are not as great as some covenant theologians would seek to make them, yet it must be recognized that dispensationalism as here defined is a misinterpretation of scripture by these evangelical scholars. It would seem, therefore, that the consistent dispensationalist could not subscribe to Chapter VII, "Of God's Covenant with Man," and Chapter 25, "Of the Church."

The former chapter sets forth a covenant of works and a covenant of grace as essential parts of our system of doctrine. The latter chapter defines the church in these words: "The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all."

This study has necessarily been incomplete for a subject so large. The manifestations of dispensationalism are various, and it is probable that each individual who alleges that he holds dispensational views should be judged on his own merits. We require each elder in the church to stand examination in his adherence to our system of doctrine. Let each man be examined as to his own adherence to the standards of our church. Sunday School teachers and others involved in the teaching ministry of the church should, of course, teach within the framework of the church's doctrinal standards in all matters of biblical truth.