

The Essentials of Dispensational Theology

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Our Commitment, What We Mean, and Why It Is Important

by Dr. Dale S. DeWitt

In an age when people want it simple, they might even try to cut down a full body of doctrine to one easy-to-get idea. Some people want to hang everything on one text, one idea, one interpretation. Reducing does simplify; but the price is high: one gives up careful definition, richness of tone, and attention to detail. There are other hidden costs: the chosen point of reduction becomes overweighted; one idea becomes a fetish; thought stops because the bottom line has been reached; details become curiosities; new thoughts or new vocabulary threatens; and slight variations become monsters. I have actually heard it said in one thoughtless moment that the whole dispensational thought hangs on Daniel's seventy weeks!

A better way is to avoid this easy-does-it swamp altogether. Instead, one

would see a richer description; the full set of ideas would show; detail would be sought, a large supportive agenda may even flourish. This study moves in the latter direction. In it I reaffirm my own and our college's commitment to the basics. I try to make our meaning clean, suggest some consequences, and refocus the essentials. This way of doing doctrine seeks inductive (all data of all related material) biblical support for each idea by itself; it thereby avoids the freeze that strict one-idea logic imposes.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Dispensational theology seeks the Bible's literal meaning. Its Protestant forebearers did the same; but they hedged on prophecy. When they saw "Israel" or "Jerusalem" or "kingdom" in future prophecies, they read "church."

In this reading, no future for biblical Israel was possible, since the church had now taken its place. This shift diverted the promised blessings to us and denied them to Israel, to whom they were promised. Jewish opposition and collusion with the Romans thickened early Christian anti-Semitism, and sealed the church's inability to grasp Israel's future. Israel was condemned forever for killing God's Son. On the other hand, by reading prophecy literally (with due allowance for figures), we can see the prophet's vision of the new world: David's throne restored (Isa. 16:5); Israel converted and regathered (Ezek. 36:33-36); the whole earth blessed (Isa. 62). By reading New Testament texts literally the difference between Israel and the church become clean, since Paul's picture of the church simply does not answer to the prophets' view of future Israel.

LAW AND GRACE

The bottom line of Paul's "no" to the Mosaic Law was that it could not save; it was only a way to Christ's salvation. When Jewish Christian zealots tried to impose it on the Galatians, as a way to complete their salvation (5:4), Paul became livid in opposition: the law does not begin or complete salvation; it does not sanctify either (3:1-5; 5:16-26). It was rather planned by God as one limited, preparatory era in the history of redemption—a dispensation of law to be followed by the dispensation of grace. But even so, it was kept, with even Paul's allowance, by Judean Jewish Christians under the leadership of Peter and James (Acts 21:20-23). This difference is a major one between their ministries (Gal. 2:1-10). Thus a principled basis exists for keeping the law of Moses out of the Gentile dispensation of grace.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Our theology of choice differs from its parent covenant theology (the reformed tradition) in how it sees progress in revelation. In Calvinism's basic document, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin struggled with how to think of growth in the biblical revelation of salvation. In the end (bk. 2, chs. 9-11) he decided that the apparent growth was *only* apparent: God only gradually clarified what He had been

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We embrace the common dispensationalist view that the church will be raised to perfected union with Christ before the Tribulation. None of the seven essential ideas we are discussing has been more battered than this one during the last three decades. The problem is not with the Rapture as an event; that is clear now to all from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17. The problem is establishing its timing—before the Tribulation. Two approaches have been sought. 1) The pre-Tribulation timing of the event is required by the nature of the church. The Tribulation is the "time of Jacob's trouble," not of the church's trouble. Therefore, as the church and Israel are separate, and the mystery of the church includes the mystery of its resurrection (1 Cor. 15:50-51), the church by its very mystery nature must be removed before God again takes up His dealings with Israel. This construction has run into very heavy fire from a logical viewpoint: if the church was born through a transition period, it might also conclude its life through another one. 2) Other dispensationalists now feel more comfortable with another approach: we are promised escape from the wrath of God. The whole Tribulation is an expression of God's wrath. The Rapture is the way God will deliver the church from His coming wrath (1 Thes. 1:10; 5:9). Either way, we are committed to the Rapture before the Tribulation.

These are the essentials of dispensational theology, and of the Grace Fellowship's particular commitment. It is important to recognize, however, that this menu itself is only a fraction of our confession as Christians. To these heads of doctrine must be added the whole body of Christian belief about God, creation, history, man, providence, Christ, salvation, the church (in its actual operations), and the end times—a big agenda indeed.



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1:6-8; 3:17-26; 5:29-32). The ultimate mission was to be to the whole world (Mt. 28:16-20), but through a repentant Israel (Acts 3:19) under the kingship of Christ (Acts 3:20-23, 25). Peter's focus was on Israel, the kingdom, a renewed Jewish law, and use of traditional Jewish ritual (baptism, sacrifice, feasts, circumcision). This ministry contrasts with Paul's mission to the Gentiles: grace reaches the Gentile without Israel, the church is formed of believing Jews and Gentiles in equal union, and the church is released from the law and the old Jewish rituals (baptism, circumcision, feasts, sacrifice; cf. Col. 2:9-19; Eph. 2:11-22). Thus we remain committed to the dispensational distinction between Israel and its kingdom on one side, and the church and its world mission with Israel or the law on the other.

THE CHURCH A PAULINE REVELATION

It is clear from the discussion above that we believe the church is a Pauline revelation. This common dispensationalist tenet is made consistent with the book of Acts by linking the beginning of the church to Paul and the Gentile mission. Among our theological leaders of past and present, there have been certain variations on this theme. Some prefer to include Peter's sheet vision within the orbit of the developing Pauline revelation; some prefer to keep it separate. Some think the church (as the Body of Christ) began only with the actual missionary journeys of Paul (Acts 13); some think the origin of the church coordinates precisely with Paul's conversion (Acts 9). Some think the gospel of Christ's saving death and resurrection was included in Paul's special revelation; some think the church only is the subject of his special calling. Some think the twelve continued as a separate kingdom church; some that the Jewish kingdom believers merged into the Body of Christ when it began. The common argument of our Fellowship from the beginning has been that the church of this dispensation *began with Paul, but before he wrote his first epistle*. Beyond this common agreement, a sometimes uneasy but genuine freedom on details has prevailed, despite temptation at times to make one of these areas absolute by viewing variations as a crisis of principle.

doing since Adam's fall. This enabled Calvin to think that the whole New Testament salvation was at work from Adam on, only it was not clear until later that this was so. Thus, when God promised Abraham land and seed, it may sound quite materialistic; but according to Calvin the New Testament assures us that eternal life was really meant. Dispensational theology rejects this construction. It believes the salvation of the Old Testament was incomplete because Christ had not yet died and risen (Heb. 7-10). Thus, by mixing a literal reading of the promises to Abraham or David with a firm view of progressive revelation, dispensational theology lets the Old Testament stand on its own two feet, and reads the New Testament as full of the *really* new, bristling with contrast to the Old, but with enough continuity to retain connection.

THE DISPENSATIONS

It is easy to see how such growth was planned into a series of dispensations. Here, too, we learn from Paul as the biblical historian of salvation. He divides law and grace (Rom. 6:14, Eph. 3:1-5); to these he adds two more eras, one before law, and one after grace: promise and kingdom (Gal. 3:15-16; 2 Tim. 4:1). Each of the four—promise, law, grace, kingdom—has its own special character. Our dispensational heritage sees seven such dispensations; some have seen eight, some twelve. Paul only mentions four, since neither innocence, conscience, or human government—the other traditional three—are mentioned by him as an era. However this may be, our view is that a series of dispensations, each with a new body of truth, is the basic structure of salvation history.

CHURCH AND KINGDOM/ISRAEL

We believe the change in dispensations from law to grace accompanied the revelation of the mystery of the church to Paul (Eph. 3:1-12). The kingdom of Jesus' and His twelve apostles' ministry to Israel is the same kingdom foretold by the prophets. In Christ's person, teaching, and work, this messianic kingdom was manifested to Israel for the first time (Mt. 4:17; Lu. 17:20-21; Mt. 10:6; 15:24-27). After His resurrection, the apostles continued the kingdom mission to Israel (Acts