

DISCERNING THE TRUTH OF GOD'S NATURE IN AN EXAMINATION OF COVENANT
THEOLOGY AND DISPENSATIONALISM

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Introduction

To properly understand the viewpoints and validity of both covenant theology and dispensationalism, one must understand or acknowledge at least to some degree the One who is the author of all biblical covenants, God. God, in His very nature, is eternal. As such, He sees not only the events and activities that are temporal but also the events and activities that are from the past and still yet to come. Unlike humans who understand things or events sequentially, God, since he is timeless, knows all things at once.¹

God also knows all the possible combination of ways that events can come to pass. Knowing the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10), He sees the occurrence of events before they actually come to pass in their temporal setting. God, being eternal, possesses a nature that is unchanging. So, any truth, acknowledgement, or agreement affirmed by Him would not be of a temporal or changing nature but of an eternal nature. Since He is eternal, His faithfulness or adherence to His covenants must be eternal as well. This paper, in an effort to clarify and discuss the viewpoints of covenant theology and dispensationalism, will take into account the unchanging nature of God and His unique relationship with His covenant people, the nation of Israel. In this discussion, the following points will be explored: 1) Background of Covenant Theology; 2) Problems and Inconsistencies of Covenant Theology;

¹Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1999), 285, 287.

3) Background of Dispensationalism; 4) Hermeneutical Interpretations of Dispensationalism; 5)

Conclusion.

Background on Covenant Theology

The origins of covenant theology as a system date back to sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe.² Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669), a German teacher, systemized covenant theology. However, early evidence for it can be found in reformers' works from the 1500's.³

Covenant theology interprets Scripture through the understanding of two or three major covenants that it teaches can be found in the Bible. The first covenant that it teaches is the covenant of works that Adam was under before the fall of man. Covenant theologians stress that as long as Adam obeyed God he could enjoy eternal life. When Adam sinned, though, he died spiritually and brought death upon the human race as well.⁴

After Adam's fall came the covenant of grace which promised the eventual redemption of mankind's sins through the atoning sacrifice by Jesus Christ. Covenant theologians, who operate under the covenant of grace-redemption, believe that the prevailing purpose of God is the redemption of man from sin. This view influences their overall interpretation of Scripture, accordingly. The system of covenant theology emphasizes the covenant of grace as having been established with Adam or Abraham and continuing until Jesus' return.

²Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 82.

³Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 216.

⁴Benware, 82.

Since they view history through a covenant-grace mentality covenant theologians do not acknowledge the binding nature of God's covenants with the nation of Israel. Thus, covenant theologians do not acknowledge a distinction between Israel and the church. Instead, blurring the two, they view the church as God's saved people in all ages inclusive of Abraham and even Adam.⁵ This theology emphasizes that all people who have accepted this grace covenant are part of the church, the true Israel.

Problems and Inconsistencies of Covenant Theology

In their endorsement of the philosophy that the church is the true Israel, covenant theologians spiritualize the meaning of Scripture. They essentially hold the view that the church has effectively acquired all the benefits of the covenants that God made with the nation of Israel.⁶ To covenant theologians, Israel has been replaced by the church. To interpret Scripture in this manner, however, is to employ bad hermeneutics. Scripture that detail events taking place immediately after the ascension of Christ, suggest that first century believers acknowledged a distinction between Israel and the church. The Book of Acts contains references after the establishment of the church in which Israel as a nation was addressed separately from the Gentiles (Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28). Also, Paul, in a prayer, addressed the nation of Israel as a people separate and distinct from the church (Rom. 10:1). In 1 Cor. 10:32, he wrote, "Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" (NASB). Paul also ascribed the covenants and promises to the Israelites in Rom. 9:3-4.⁷

⁵Ryrie, 150.

⁶Benware, 83-84.

⁷Ryrie, 148.

To suggest that the church has replaced Israel is to also deny the church's unique identity within this present age.⁸ The church began at the day of Pentecost and its unique mission is to glorify God and to make disciples of all the nations (Matt. 28:19). To say that the church has simply replaced Israel is to not understand its unique position as the Spirit filled body of Christ on earth. It is also the Bride of Christ, blood bought and redeemed on Calvary's cross.

In addition, to say that the church has replaced Israel as the heir to God's covenants with national Israel is to call into question Yahweh's faithfulness to adhere to the everlasting agreements that He has established with His people (Gen. 13:15; Gen. 15:18; Gen. 17:7-8; Gen. 28:13; Gen. 35:12; 1 Chron. 16:17-18; 2 Chron. 20:7; Dan. 7:18; Jer. 7:7; Jer. 25:5; Jer. 31:35-37; Jer. 33:20-22). To suggest that God is not faithful to the literal covenants and promises He made with Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, is to also open up the possibility that He is not faithful to the new covenant He has established through the sacrifice Jesus made for sins. After all, Jesus said "this is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). Put simply, if God, who established set covenants with the Israelites long ago, can break His own agreements, how can we be sure He will not break the covenant that He established with the Gentile believers in Christ? In addition, how can we be assured of our salvation if His already established covenants cannot be trusted?

Covenant theologians also by necessity must possess a different eschatological view point from pre-millennialists or dispensationalists. The passages regarding Israel from the book of Revelation regarding Israel are understood by covenant theologians to refer to the church. If Israel, in the book of Revelation, is actually the church of believers in Christ, then one must conclude that the church will be subject to the wrath of God poured out during the Great Tribulation. So, covenant theologians' end times viewpoint is that Christians will not be raptured before the time of tribulation during the seven year period to come.

⁸Ibid., 150.

Or another covenant theology view point is that the Great Tribulation took place in AD 70 when Jerusalem and the second temple were destroyed.

Background on Dispensationalism

Despite the claims of some who have suggested that John Nelson Darby originated the belief of dispensationalism,⁹ historical references from the second century confirm that it was a concept that was held by Justin Martyr (110-165) and Irenaeus (130-200).¹⁰ In addition, Peter Jurieu, in 1687, authored a book in which he presented his view of a pre-tribulational pre-millennial rapture of believers in Christ.¹¹ This historical precedent for a belief of an existence of the dispensation of times within the Bible lends credibility to the system and dispels the belief that it is a recent idea. In addition, Eph. 1:10 and 3:9 provide biblical confirmation of the idea of dispensationalism.

The word “dispensation” is defined as an economy or stewardship of the outworking of the purpose of God.¹² Charles Ryrie holds the belief that there are seven distinct dispensations: 1) the dispensation of innocency (before the fall); 2) the dispensation of conscience (after the fall); 3) the dispensation of civil government (after the flood); 4) the dispensation of promise or patriarchal rule (the time of Abraham); 5) the dispensation of the Mosaic law (the time from Moses to Jesus Christ); 6) the dispensation of Grace (the church age); 7) the dispensation of the millennium (after the second coming of Christ).¹³

⁹ Hank Hanegraaff, *The Apocalypse Code* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2007), 40-41.

¹⁰Ryrie, 71-72.

¹¹Benware, 247.

¹²Benware, 86-87, Ryrie, 27-29.

¹³Ibid., 59-65.

One of the major characteristics of dispensationalism is the belief that there are two distinct yet different plans for the physical nation of Israel and for the church of Jesus Christ. As such, the body of Christ is currently active and working to accomplish God's work in the present church age. However, the people of Israel are not discarded or forgotten by God, but are part of a separate plan which will culminate in the time of the Great Tribulation and the millennial age to come. John Walvoord sums up the dispensationalist view: "The prophecies given to Israel are viewed as literal and unconditional. God has promised Israel a glorious future and this will be fulfilled after the Second Advent."¹⁴

Hermeneutical Interpretations of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalists interpret the Bible employing a literal method called historical-grammatical interpretation.¹⁵ This method utilizes a plain or normal interpretation of speech in which the literal meaning of words is believed to be the most accurate.¹⁶ Author and eschatology professor Dwight L. Pentecost states: "the interpreter will proceed on the presupposition that the word is literal unless there is a good reason for deciding otherwise."¹⁷ This method provides the most consistent way of understanding prophetic Scripture.

Interpreting prophetic Scripture in a literal fashion would appear to make the most sense, too. After all, there isn't really an outright statement in Scripture to indicate that the church has replaced the physical nation of Israel as the true Israel. There are some passages that often get misinterpreted in regard to the view of covenant theology, though. Gal. 3:6-9 states that believers are "sons of Abraham". There can be no doubt that the Gentile believers have benefited by the blessings of Abraham. They are

¹⁴John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay: Dunham Publishing Company, 1959), 136.

¹⁵Ibid., 91.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Dunham Publishing, 1964), 40.

actually a spiritual seed of Abraham and they are heirs of the promise given “to all the families of the earth” (Gen. 12:3).¹⁸ But this doesn’t negate the fact that there are physical seeds of Abraham who descended from him, too. Clearly, there are covenants that have been made by God that apply to Abraham’s physical descendants who came down through Isaac and Jacob. These covenants still apply today.¹⁹

Another passage that gets misinterpreted is where Paul writes, “For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (Rom. 9:6). This Scripture is simply distinguishing that within the nation of Israel there are those who are true believers and those who are not. The passage is not implying that Christian believers also make up the nation of Israel, because it distinguishes within the nation of Israel who are the elect.²⁰

Often, the nature of God’s covenants with Abraham is misunderstood in the way of conditionality. The Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:6-18; 17:2-7) was actually not dependent on Abraham performing any act. There were no mandates that God gave Abraham to fulfill in order to receive the Lord’s blessings. There was only the promise to bless Abraham and his descendants that God communicated to Abraham. Abraham’s (and ultimately Israel’s) role was to simply receive the blessings and benefits of the covenant which were of an everlasting nature.²¹ These covenants stand alone between God and Abraham and his physical descendants, Israel. They did not depend on Abraham or Israel’s faithfulness, but on the everlasting faithfulness of God.

¹⁸Benware, 51.

¹⁹Ibid., 50.

²⁰Ibid., 51.

²¹Ibid., 42.

Conclusion

God is faithful. Even when a believer has lost his way and done things he should not do and has been unfaithful to Him, God is still faithful. Even when a believer has not done the things he should do and been unfaithful to Him, God is still faithful. The nation of Israel may have been blinded and lost their way and been unfaithful to God for a time especially in rejecting Messiah, but He is still faithful. The nation of Israel may not be doing the things they should be doing now, but God is still faithful to both his people and His everlasting covenants established with them a long time ago. Ultimately, all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:26).

Being God, He knew a long time ago every sin I would commit a long time before I committed it, but Jesus still died for me anyway. Also, being God, He knew every act of unfaithfulness that Israel would commit long before He entered into any covenant of faith with them. But He still made His covenant with them and stayed faithful. Ps. 89:28-34 speaks of God's loyalty and His unwillingness to alter His covenants with Israel. It is plainly clear from Scripture that God's nature is such that He is eternally faithful.