

## COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

### Part 9

by Dr. Thomas Ice

Earlier I provided a definition and description of dispensationalism. Next I want to look at the essentials of dispensationalism in order to provide a basis that will enable one to examine their beliefs to see whether they are indeed dispensational.

#### ESSENTIALS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Who is a dispensationalist? Essentials are needed by which to gauge a theology. Otherwise one can claim to be something when upon examination it turns out that they are not really what they claim. For example, a Mormon today may claim to be an evangelical Christian while at the same time remaining within the Mormon church. Should we just take his word for it or should we be able to examine what he believes in order to compare it to biblical standards that will reveal whether he can legitimately claim to be an evangelical. In the same way we need to be able to examine whether one is truly a dispensationalist.

What are the essentials that characterize a dispensationalist? Ryrie has stated what he calls the three essentials or *sine qua non* (Latin, "that without which") of dispensationalism.

The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well.<sup>1</sup>

The three essentials are not a definition or description of dispensationalism; instead they are basic theological tests which can be applied to an individual to see whether or not he is a dispensationalist.

#### FIRST ESSENTIAL: LITERAL INTERPRETATION

Ryrie's first essential of dispensationalism is not just literal interpretation, but more fully, a *consistent* literal hermeneutic. "The word *literal* is perhaps not so good as either the word *normal* or *plain*," explains Ryrie, "but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation does."<sup>2</sup> Literal interpretation is foundational to the dispensational approach to Scripture. Earl Radmacher went so far as to say that literal interpretation "is the 'bottom-line' of dispensationalism."<sup>3</sup>

Not all literal interpreters are dispensationalists but all dispensationalists are consistently literal interpreters. Dispensationalists define literal interpretation as the historical-grammatical hermeneutic developed within historic Protestantism. The literal hermeneutic is not mere "literalism" or "wooden literalism" as some suggest, instead, it approaches the text based upon what is actually written in the Scriptural text, without importing an idea from outside the context of a passage as does the spiritual or allegorical approach. Therefore, those implementing a *consistently* literal hermeneutic do not have a special approach when it comes to prophetic literature as do ones who allegorize the text. The literal interpreter employs a consistent hermeneutic from Genesis to Revelation.

## SECOND ESSENTIAL: DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

*"A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct,"* declares Ryrie. He also notes that anyone "who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will."<sup>4</sup> What does it mean to keep Israel and the church distinct? Dispensationalists believe the Bible teaches that God's single program for history includes a distinct plan for Israel and a distinct plan for the church. God's plan for history has two people: Israel and the church. John Walvoord says: "dispensations are rules of life. They are not ways of salvation. There is only one way of salvation and that is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Seminary has described the distinction as follows:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. . . . Over against this, the partial dispensationalist, though dimly observing a few obvious distinctions, bases his interpretation on the supposition that God is doing but one thing, namely, the general separation of the good from the bad, and, in spite of all the confusion this limited theory creates, contends that the earthly people merge into the heavenly people; that the earthly program must be given a spiritual interpretation or disregarded altogether.<sup>6</sup>

If the unfulfilled promises given to Israel in the Old Testament literally refer to the Jews, which they do, then it is clear that many are yet unfulfilled. Therefore, it is clear that God's plan for Israel, who is currently in dispersion (see Deut. 4:27-28; 28:63-68; 30:2-4), is on hold until He completes His current purpose with the church—which is to take out from the Gentiles a people for His name (see Acts 15:14)—and raptures the bride of Christ to heaven. After the rapture, God will then complete His unfinished business with Israel (see Acts 15:16-18) during the seven-year tribulation period. Thus, if one does not distinguish between passages in which God speaks to Israel from those intended for the church, then the results will be an improper merging of the two programs.

In the Old Testament God made certain promises to Abraham when He pledged to make him the father of a special people. Dispensationalists understand these promises, and other unconditional covenant promises (i.e., treaty grants) made by God to Israel as still in tact for Israel, even though the church currently shares in some of Israel's spiritual blessings (Rom. 15:27). Ultimately God will not only restore Israel to a place of blessing (see Rom. 11), but will also literally fulfill the land and kingdom promises made to Israel in the Abrahamic (Gen. 12:1-3), Land of Israel (Deut. 30:1-10), and Davidic (2 Sam. 7:12-16) Covenants. In the present time, God has another plan for the church that is distinct from His plan for Israel (Eph. 2-3). Dispensationalists do not believe that the church is the New Israel or has replaced Israel as the heir to the Old Testament promises. Contrary to some who say that the church has superseded Israel, the New Testament nowhere calls the church Israel. Dispensationalist Arnold Fruchtenbaum says:

The conclusion is that the church is never called a “spiritual Israel” or a “new Israel.” The term Israel is either used of the nation or the people as a whole, or of the believing remnant within. It is never used of the church in general or of Gentile believers in particular. In fact, even after the Cross there remains a threefold distinction. First, there is a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles as in 1 Corinthians 10:32 and Ephesians 2:11-12. Second, there is a distinction between Israel and the church in 1 Corinthians 10:32. Third, there is a distinction between Jewish believers (the Israel of God) and Gentile believers in Romans 9:6 and Galatians 6:16).<sup>7</sup>

Fruchtenbaum gives six reasons why the New Testament keeps Israel and the church distinct. They are:

- (1) the church was born at Pentecost, whereas Israel had existed for many centuries. . . .
- (2) certain events in the ministry of the Messiah were essential to the establishment of the church—the church does not come into being until certain events have taken place. . . .
- (3) the mystery character of the church. . . .
- (4) the church is distinct from Israel is the unique relationship between Jews and the Gentiles, called one new man in Ephesians 2:15 . . .
- (5) the distinction between Israel and the church is found in Galatians 6:16 [i.e., “the Israel of God”] . . .
- (6) In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term *Israel* is used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct.<sup>8</sup>

### **THIRD ESSENTIAL: GLORY OF GOD IS THE PURPOSE OF HISTORY**

The third essential of dispensationalism also revolves around another important distinction. Showers says, this “indispensable factor is the recognition that the ultimate purpose of history is the glory of God through the demonstration that He alone is the sovereign God.”<sup>9</sup> Ryrie explains:

we avow that the unifying principle of the Bible is the glory of God and that this is worked out in several ways—the program of redemption, the program for Israel, the punishment of the wicked, the plan for the angels, and the glory of God revealed through nature. We see all these programs as means of glorifying God, and we reject the charge that by distinguishing them (particularly God’s program for Israel from His purpose for the church) we have bifurcated God’s purpose.<sup>10</sup>

This essential is the most misunderstood and often thought to be the least essential. When properly understood, I believe that this is a valid essential. Dispensationalists are not saying that nondispensationalists do not believe in God's glory. We are making the point that the dispensationalist understanding of the plan of God is that He is glorified in history by more areas or facets than those who just see mankind's salvation as the

only focus (although this is probably the most important aspect of God's plan).  
Maranatha!

**(To Be Continued . . .)**

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology," ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted" in *Issues In Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936), p. 107, as cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church" in *Issues In Dispensationalism*, p. 126.

<sup>8</sup> Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church", pp. 116-18.

<sup>9</sup> Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is A Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 213.