

Del Rey Bible Institute

Fides Quaerens Intellectum

SCRIPTURE & HERMENEUTICS

APPENDIX 4



COVENANT THEOLOGY

Covenant theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Some covenant theologians specify three covenants: works, redemption, and grace. Covenant theology teaches that God initially made a covenant of works with Adam, promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed, and death entered the human race. God, however, moved to resolve man's dilemma by entering into a covenant of grace through which the problem of sin and death would be overcome. Christ is the ultimate mediator of God's covenant of grace.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

JOHANN BULLINGER

Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) followed Ulrich Zwingli as leader of the Reformation in Zurich. Like the other Reformers, Bullinger held to the authority of the Scriptures and preached biblical doctrine that was also published. He wrote extensively, his works numbering 150 volumes. He was an influential leader in the Reformed church, second only to Calvin in authority.

Bullinger was the sole author of the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, which Confession gave a clear statement of the Reformed faith.¹ He also played a part in the development of covenant theology, teaching federal representation in salvation in the *Compendium of the Christian Religion*.

JOHANNES WOLLEBIUS²

Johannes Wollebius (1586–1629), who taught New Testament studies in Basel, Switzerland, published a *Compendium of Christian Theology* in 1626 in which he espoused Reformed theology. Wollebius taught that God made a covenant of works with Adam in which God ruled over man before the Fall. Wollebius defined the covenant of works as it has usually been defined: “the promise of eternal life for obedience and the threat of death for disobedience.” Wollebius understood the two trees in the garden as sacraments of the covenant of works.

Wollebius also taught a covenant of grace, made through God's mercy after the Fall. The covenant of grace, which extends across all ages after the Fall, is mediated by Christ. Wollebius referred to two administrations, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament covered three ages: Adam to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, and Moses to Christ. The new

¹ 1. See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols., 4th ed. (Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 3:831–909.

² 2. See the discussion by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 306–14.

administration is the period after Christ's coming. Wollebius emphasized five distinctions between the two administrations of the Old and New Testaments. The sacraments of the covenant of works are circumcision and the Passover ceremony in the Old Testament and baptism and the Lord's Supper in the New Testament.

WILLIAM AMES³

William Ames (1576–1633) was a learned, highly regarded Puritan theologian in England and Holland. He vigorously opposed Arminianism, involving himself in the Synod of Dort. Ames, like Wollebius, taught a covenant of works established before the Fall. Ames, however, held that the covenant of works, which was universal in scope, continued after the Fall. Its fulfillment was dependent upon man's obedience to God. Some theologians would place the continuation of the covenant idea under the covenant of law rather than suggesting it belongs to the covenant of works.

Ames taught a covenant of grace made after the Fall, but he preferred to call it a testament because it was related to the death of Christ. Ames saw God as the lone participant in the covenant of grace. He taught a universal sufficiency in the covenant but an application that is limited to those for whom God intended it. Ames also understood the covenant of grace to extend across all ages after the Fall. Ames taught that the covenant of grace spanned two administrations, the Old Testament and the New Testament; the Old Testament covered two ages—before Moses and after Moses; the New Testament also covers two ages—from Christ to the end of the world, and the end itself. The end will achieve the purpose of the covenant: God's glory and man's salvation. The sign of the covenant of grace is baptism, hence, infants should be baptized.

JOHANNES COCCEIUS

Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669), who taught at Bremen, Franeker, and Leiden, was a leader in the development of covenant theology. It came to a clear expression through his writings. Cocceius emphasized a biblical, exegetical theology, in which he recognized the need for a theology derived from the Scriptures themselves, just as the Reformers had practiced it.

Cocceius taught that God entered into a covenant of works with Adam.⁴ This covenant enabled Adam to enjoy communion and friendship with God. Cocceius taught that Adam represented the entire human race in the covenant of works. If Adam obeyed God, he would come to a knowledge and sense of his own good; if he disobeyed, he would rush headlong into evil, or death. The tree of life was the "sacrament of the heavenly city and of eternal life" according to Cocceius. Because Christ is life, the tree of life signified the Son of God. Through his sin, Adam became guilty, fell from God's fellowship, from hope of eternal life, from spiritual grace, from uprightness, from authority over creatures, and from physical life.

³ 3. Ibid.

⁴ 4. See the extended discussion of Cocceius's teaching on the covenant of works in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, revised and edited by Ernst Bizer (Reprint. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), pp. 281–319.

Cocceius taught a universalistic basis for the covenant of grace.⁵ God resolved to show His inexpressible mercy and “to employ an ineffable kindness and longsuffering towards the entire human race.” But this had to be through a mediator who alone could atone for sin. Christ’s death was “a guarantee which was already effective from the start, even before the Son, in view of this merit of his in the future, had fulfilled his vow by completing the work of redemption. Although the Son had not yet plucked out the guilt of sin, it was no longer reckoned unto them.” This became a point of controversy for Cocceius. Cocceius also distinguished a “twofold time,” the first was in the Old Testament “in expectation of Christ,” whereas in the New Testament it was “in faith in Christ revealed.” But Cocceius emphasized that in both Old Testament and New Testament eras, people were always saved by grace.

HERMANN WITSIUS

Hermann Witsius (1636–1708) gave further clarification to covenant theology. He defined the covenant of works as “the agreement between God and Adam created in God’s image to be the head and prince of the whole human race, by which God was promising him eternal life and felicity, should he obey all the precepts most perfectly, adding the threat of death, should he sin even in the least detail; while Adam was accepting this condition.”⁶ The definition incorporates much of covenant theology: Adam as the representative head of the human race, and the covenant of works with the promise of eternal life upon obedience and the threat of death for disobedience.

Witsius also explained the results of the covenant and the solution provided by God.

(1) The precepts of the covenant ... bind one and all in whatever state to perfect performance of duty; (2) the life eternal promised by the covenant cannot be obtained on any other condition than that of perfect obedience achieved in every detail; (3) no disobedience escapes God’s lash and always the punishment of sin is death. These axioms however do not exclude the sponsor who meets the pledge in man’s place by paying the penalty and fulfilling the condition.⁷

Thus, while man was under the sentence of death, God was also providing a solution.

The new covenant of grace displayed the unsearchable riches of God’s wisdom “much more clearly than if everything had fallen out happily for man in accordance with the former covenant.”⁸ Witsius described this as a covenant ratified between God and Christ, with the promise being made to Christ Himself (Gal. 3:17).

WESTMINSTER CONFESSIO

⁵ 5. *Ibid.*, pp. 371–447. See Cocceius’s teaching on the covenant of grace.

⁶ 6. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁷ 7. *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁸ 8. *Ibid.*, p. 371.

One of the earliest statements of covenant theology can be found in the Westminster Confession of 1647. This statement reads as follows:⁹

1. The distance between God and His creation is so great, that, although reasoning creatures owe Him obedience as their creator, they nonetheless could never realize any blessedness or reward from Him without His willingly condescending to them. And so it pleased God to provide for man by means of covenants.

2. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works. In it life was promised to Adam and through him to his descendants, on the condition of perfect, personal obedience.

3. By his fall, man made himself incapable of life under that covenant, and so the Lord made a second, the covenant of grace. In it He freely offers sinners life and salvation through Jesus Christ. In order to be saved He requires faith in Jesus and promises to give His Holy Spirit to everyone who is ordained to life so that they may be willing and able to believe.

4. This covenant of grace is frequently identified in Scripture as a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ, the testator, and to the everlasting inheritance and everything included in that legacy.

5. This covenant was administered differently in the time of the law and in the time of the gospel. Under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances given to the Jewish people, all foreshadowing Christ. For that time the covenant administered under the law through the operation of the Spirit was sufficient and effective in instructing the elect and building up their faith in the promised Messiah, by Whom they had full remission of their sins and eternal salvation. This administration is called the Old Testament.

6. Under the gospel Christ Himself, the substance of God's grace, was revealed. The ordinances of this New Testament are the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. Although these are fewer in number and are administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet they are available to all nations, Jews and Gentiles, and in them the spiritual power of the covenant of grace is more fully developed. There are not then two essentially different covenants of grace, but one and the same covenant under different dispensations.

DOCTRINAL AFFIRMATIONS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

COVENANT OF WORKS

Definition. This covenant is variously called the covenant of life because it reflects the reward for obedience; it is also termed the covenant of works because works are the condition connected with the promise. The covenant of works may be defined as follows: God entered into a covenant with Adam as the federal head (representative) of the human race in which God promised to bless Adam with eternal life if he would obey; if he disobeyed God, Adam would be judged with death.¹⁰

Scriptural basis. Although there is no specific mention of a covenant in the early chapters of Genesis, the existence of a covenant is implicit. A covenant involves an agreement between two parties, in this case, between God and Adam in Genesis 2:16–17, where God laid down the terms

⁹ 9. Douglas Kelly et al., eds., *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A New Edition*, 2d. ed. (Greenwood, S.C.: Attic, 1981), pp. 13–14.

¹⁰ 10. See the definitions by Heidegger and Witsius in Heinrich Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 283.

of the covenant.¹¹ The covenant principle is also suggested in Leviticus 18:5; Ezekiel 20:11, 13, 20; Luke 10:28; Romans 7:10; 10:5; and Galatians 3:12 because these passages suggest the law was intended to give life.¹²

Features. (1) The promise. The promise of the covenant of works was that if Adam obeyed the command of God he would not die; this is suggested from the negative statement of Genesis 2:17, “in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die.” In other words, if Adam did not eat of the fruit, he would live. This promise to Adam is consistent with other passages that emphasize the covenant, or law, that man was placed under by God. The promise for obedience was not the mere continuation of mortal life because that was already his possession. “The life thus promised included the happy, holy, and immortal existence of the soul and body,”¹³ namely eternal life. This was “life raised to its highest development of perennial bliss and glory.”¹⁴

(2) Condition. The condition God placed on Adam was perfect obedience. This is the condition for acceptance mentioned elsewhere in the Bible (cf. Gal. 3:10; James 2:10). Adam was instructed not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17); that was the condition. The test was whether man would obey God or follow his own judgment.¹⁵

(3) Penalty. Punishment for disobedience to the covenant of works is stated in the term “die” (Gen. 2:17).¹⁶ The term should be understood as comprehensive, including all penal evil. Death stands as the opposite of all that Adam was promised in life; Adam stood to forfeit physical, spiritual, and eternal life. “The life promised ... includes all that is involved in the happy, holy, and immortal existence of the soul and body; and therefore death must include not only all the miseries of this life and the dissolution of the body, but also all that is meant by spiritual and eternal death.”¹⁷

(4) Present status of the covenant of works. This can be answered in a twofold manner. In one sense the covenant of works is not abrogated. God still demands perfect obedience of men, just as He did of Adam (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12); furthermore, the curse of death is evidence that the covenant is not abrogated. However, the covenant can be viewed as abrogated in the sense that its obligations are met in Christ.¹⁸ So me covenant theologians are very emphatic that the covenant of works is no longer in force.¹⁹

¹¹ 11. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), p. 213.

¹² 12. *Ibid.*, p. 214, 216.

¹³ 13. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Reprint. London: Clarke, 1960), 2:118.

¹⁴ 14. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 216.

¹⁵ 15. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁶ 16. See Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:120.

¹⁷ 17. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ 18. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 218.

¹⁹ 19. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 1:312–14.

COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

Covenant theologians view the covenants differently. Some refer only to the covenants of works and grace, whereas others refer to the covenants of works, redemption, and grace. The covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace should not, however, be understood as distinct covenants, but “two modes or phases of the one evangelical covenant of mercy.”²⁰

Definition. The covenant of redemption was made between God the Father and God the Son in eternity past in which they “covenanted together for the redemption of the human race, the Father appointing the Son to be the mediator; the Second Adam, whose life would be given for the salvation of the world, and the Son accepting the commission, promising that he would do the work which the Father had given him to do and fulfill all righteousness by obeying the law of God.”²¹

Scriptural basis. There are numerous Scripture passages that emphasize the eternal nature of the plan of salvation (Eph. 1:3–14; 3:11; 2 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 1:9; James 2:5; 1 Pet. 1:2). Moreover, Christ referred to His coming as a commissioning (John 5:30, 43; 6:38–40; 17:4–12). Christ is also regarded as the representative of the human race, the head of a covenant (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:22).²²

In the eternal plan of God it was decreed that the Father would plan the redemption through election and predestination; the Son would provide redemption through His atoning death; the Holy Spirit would effect the plan through regenerating and sealing the believers (Eph. 1:3–14).

Features. The features of the covenant of redemption relate to the work assigned to the Son. To achieve the redemption of man, Christ had to take on humanity in a genuine incarnation (Rom. 8:3). As man’s representative, Christ became the guarantee of a better covenant—one that could genuinely effect salvation (Heb. 7:22). Christ subjected Himself to the dictates of the law, perfectly fulfilling the requirements of the law so that He could redeem a humanity under bondage to the law (Gal. 4:4–5). Final release of bondage from enslavement to the law came through the atoning death of Christ (Gal. 3:13).

COVENANT OF GRACE

Definition. The covenant of grace is a covenant made by God with the elect in which He offers salvation to the elect sinner in Christ. (There are differing views among Reformed theologians regarding the covenanted party: some suggest it is “the sinner”; others suggest it is the “elect sinner in Christ.”)²³

²⁰ 20. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols., 2d ed. (Reprint. Nashville: Nelson, 1980), 2:360.

²¹ 21. M. E. Osterhaven, “Covenant Theology,” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 280.

²² 22. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 266.

²³ 23. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Scriptural basis. The scriptural basis for the covenant of grace is the frequently repeated phrase, “I will be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen. 17:7; cf. Jer. 31:33; 32:38–40; Ezek. 34:23–31; 36:25–28; 37:26–27; 2 Cor. 6:16–18; Heb. 8:10).

Features.²⁴ (1) It is a gracious covenant. God provides His Son as a guarantee for our salvation; through His grace God enables man to meet the demands of the covenant responsibilities by the gift of the Holy Spirit. (2) It is a Trinitarian covenant. The origin of the covenant is in the elective love of the Father, the redemption by the Son, and the application of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3–14). (3) It is eternal and an unbreakable covenant. This covenant is unchangeable; God will forever be faithful to the covenant He has promised and provided. (4) It is a particular covenant. It is not a universal covenant because it does not extend to everyone; only the elect are the objects of the covenant. (5) It is the same in all dispensations. The summary phrase, “I will be God to you,” is a unifying phrase in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 19:5; 20:1; Deut. 29:13; 2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). This is further seen in that people are saved by the same gospel in all ages (Gal. 1:8–9).

CONCEPTS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

Comparisons	Covenant of Works	Covenant of Redemption	Covenant of Grace
Persons	With Adam	With Father and Son	With mankind
Promise	Physical/eternal life confirmed	Salvation provided for mankind	Eternal life
Condition	Obedience	— — —	Faith
Warning	Physical death	— — —	Eternal death
Time	Eden before Fall	Eternity past	Eden after Fall

SUMMARY EVALUATION OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

There are four emphases in covenant theology that merit particular evaluation.

(1) The overriding emphasis of grace in covenant theology is a valid and important truth. Salvation by grace is to be cherished and guarded; it is that doctrine for which the Reformers

²⁴ 24. *Ibid.*, pp. 278–82.

fought. It is true in every age, Old Testament and New Testament, that believers are always saved by grace.

(2) The concept of the covenant of works may be correct because the basic tenets of the covenant are indicated in Scripture: God promised Adam life on the condition of obedience; He promised death for disobedience. There is no clear statement, however, that this interchange between God and Adam was actually a covenant.

(3) The covenant of redemption, that the triune God planned man's redemption and its application in eternity past, is an inference drawn, although the covenant is not specifically mentioned in Scripture.

(4) The covenant of grace has an important emphasis in stressing the concept of grace in salvation. Probably the overriding weakness of the idea of this covenant is that it is an oversimplification; whereas it observes an abiding similarity in God's relationship to humanity, it fails to account for emphatic differences in that relationship. The covenant of grace is said to cover the time from Adam to the end of the age, with no distinctions being made between the differing covenants and covenanted people throughout this period. Scriptures related to Israel (e.g., Ezek. 36:25–28) are made to refer to the church. Other such areas of legitimate distinction need to be considered by covenant theologians.¹

¹ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 503-10.

DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

Dispensationalism is a system of interpretation that seeks to establish a unity in the Scriptures through its central focus on the grace of God. Although dispensationalists recognize differing stewardships or dispensations whereby man was put under a trust by the Lord, they teach that response to God's revelation in each dispensation is by faith (salvation is *always* by grace through faith). Dispensationalists arrive at their system of interpretation through two primary principles: (1) maintaining a consistently literal method of interpretation, and (2) maintaining a distinction between Israel and the church.¹

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

ANCIENT DEVELOPMENTS²

Even though dispensationalism in an organized format is relatively recent, nonetheless the foundations and initial developments of dispensationalism are ancient. The following statements from early church leaders reflect an awareness of distinguishing economies (dispensations) in the program of God.

Justin Martyr (A.D. 110–165). Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* recognizes several differing economies in the Old Testament. Justin acknowledges that prior to circumcision and the law, one can please God without being circumcised and without keeping the Sabbath. After God's revelation to Abraham, circumcision was necessary to please Him; after the giving of the law to Moses, it was necessary to keep the Sabbath and observe the sacrificial system.

Justin Martyr held the essence of dispensationalism in his recognition of differing economies in the Old Testament.

Irenaeus (A.D. 130–200). Irenaeus refers in his writings to four principal covenants given to the human race, particularly drawing a distinction between three covenants of the Old Testament and the gospel. This distinction is typical of dispensationalism.

Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150–220). Clement identified four dispensations: Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic.

Augustine (A.D. 354–430). Augustine distinguishes between the “former dispensation” when sacrifices were offered and the present age when it is unsuitable to offer sacrifices. Augustine writes that while God Himself is unchanging, He enjoins one kind of offerings in the former period and a different kind of offering in the latter period. Augustine calls this “the changes of successive epochs.” Augustine recognizes that worshipers approach God in a different manner in different ages.

Ryrie concludes, “It is not suggested nor should it be inferred that these early Church Fathers were dispensationalists in the modern sense of the word. But it is true that some of them

¹ 1. The writer is indebted to Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) for much of the material in this chapter. This work delineates the meaning and hermeneutics of dispensationalism, contrasting it with both covenant theology and ultradispensationalism.

² 2. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–76.

enunciated principles which later developed into dispensationalism, and it may be rightly said that they held to primitive or early dispensational concepts.”³

MODERN DEVELOPMENTS⁴

Pierre Poiret (1646–1719). This French mystic and philosopher wrote a six volume systematic theology entitled *L’O Economie Divine*. In this modified Calvinistic and premillennial work, Poiret presented a seven-fold dispensational scheme as follows:

1. Infancy—to the Deluge
2. Childhood—to Moses
3. Adolescence—to the prophets (about the time of Solomon)
4. Youth—to the coming of Christ
5. Manhood—“some time after that” (early part of Christianity)
6. Old Age—“the time of man’s decay” (latter part of Christianity)
7. Renovation of all things—the Millennium

Poiret thus recognizes differing dispensations culminating in a literal, thousand year period.

John Edwards (1637–1716). This pastor and author published two volumes entitled *A Complete History or Survey of All the Dispensations* in which he endeavors to show God’s providential dealings from creation to the end of the world. He outlines the dispensations as follows:

1. Innocency and Felicity (Adam created upright)
2. Sin and Misery (Adam fallen)
3. Reconciliation (Adam recovered: from Adam’s redemption to the end of the world)
 - A. Patriarchal economy
 - (1) Adamical (antediluvian)
 - (2) Noahical
 - (3) Abrahamic
 - B. Mosaical economy
 - C. Gentile economy (concurrent with A and B)
 - D. Christian (Evangelical) economy
 - (1) Infancy, past (primitive) period
 - (2) Childhood, present period
 - (3) Manhood, future (millennium) period
 - (4) Old age, closing (the loosing of Satan to the conflagration) period

Isaac Watts (1674–1748). This notable hymn writer, also a theologian, was more precise in defining dispensationalism; he recognized the dispensations as conditional ages wherein God had

³ 3. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴ 4. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–76.

certain expectations of men and made conditional promises and prohibitions to them. Watts defines dispensations as follows:

The public dispensations of God towards men are those wise and holy constitutions of his will and government, revealed or some way manifested to them, in the several successive periods or ages of the world, wherein are contained the duties which he expects from men, and the blessings which he promises, or encourages them to expect from him, here and hereafter; together with the sins which he forbids, and the punishments which he threatens to inflict on such sinners, or the dispensations of God may be described more briefly, as the appointed moral rules of God's dealing with mankind, considered as reasonable creatures, and as accountable to him for their behaviour, both in this world and in that which is to come.⁵

Watts's dispensational outline is as follows:

1. The Dispensation of Innocency (the Religion of Adam at first)
2. The Adamical Dispensation of the Covenant of Grace (the Religion of Adam after his Fall)
3. The Noahical Dispensation (the Religion of Noah)
4. The Abrahamical Dispensation (the Religion of Abraham)
5. The Mosaical Dispensation (the Jewish Religion)
6. The Christian Dispensation

It is noteworthy that this outline is similar to the *Scotfield Reference Bible* except for the omission of the Millennium that Watts did not consider a dispensation.

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882). This scholar, although an important figure in systematizing dispensationalism, did not originate the system. Darby was a brilliant man—he graduated from Trinity College in Dublin at age eighteen and was admitted to the bar at twenty-two. Upon conversion he left his law practice and was ordained in the Church of England. Through his ministry hundreds of Roman Catholics became Protestants. Darby eventually left the Church of England, seeking a more spiritual group. He settled in Plymouth, England, where he met with believers in a breaking-of-bread service. By 1840 eight hundred people were attending and, although he insisted they were not a denomination, others called them “Plymouth Brethren.”

Darby was an indefatigable writer, amassing forty volumes of six hundred pages each. Moreover, the volumes reflect his awareness of biblical languages, philosophy, and church history. Darby's dispensational system is as follows:

1. Paradisaical state to the Flood
2. Noah
3. Abraham
4. Israel
 - A. Under the law
 - B. Under the priesthood
 - C. Under the kings
5. Gentiles
6. The Spirit

⁵ 5. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

7. The Millennium

Darby advanced the scheme of dispensationalism by noting that each dispensation places man under some condition; man has some responsibility before God. Darby also noted that each dispensation culminates in failure.

C. I. Scofield (1843–921). This biblical scholar, also a lawyer, identifies seven dispensations: “These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God’s method of dealing with mankind, or a portion of mankind, in respect to the two questions: of sin, and of man’s responsibility. Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure in every dispensation.”⁶

Scofield categorizes the dispensations this way.

1. Man Innocent (from creation to expulsion from Eden)
2. Man Under Conscience (from Eden to the Flood)
3. Man in Authority Over the Earth (Noah to Abraham)
4. Man Under Promise (Abraham to Moses)
5. Man Under Law (Moses to Christ)
6. Man Under Grace (death of Christ to the rapture)
7. Man Under the Personal Reign of Christ (millennial reign of Christ)

Scofield’s early influence included two individuals who in turn became teachers of dispensational truth. James H. Brookes (1830–1897), a Presbyterian pastor from St. Louis and a popular conference speaker, and James M. Gray (1851–1935), who became president of Moody Bible Institute, made notable impact in their time.

Later, Scofield’s scheme of dispensationalism was popularized in the *Scofield Reference Bible*, through which many people came to fuller knowledge of the Scriptures. A new edition under the chairmanship of E. Schuyler English was published in 1967 and included updated notes by outstanding dispensational scholars: Frank E. Gaebelein (Stony Brook School), William Culbertson (Moody Bible Institute), Charles L. Feinberg (Talbot Seminary), Allan A. Mac Rae (Faith Seminary), Clarence E. Mason (Philadelphia College of Bible), Alva J. Mc Clain (Grace Seminary), Wilbur M. Smith (Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), and John F. Walvoord (Dallas Seminary).

Others. The writings of Dallas Theological Seminary professors have promulgated dispensationalism in recent years. Charles Ryrie’s *Dispensationalism Today* is undoubtedly the premier defense of dispensationalism. Other writings, such as J. Dwight Pentecost’s *Things to Come* and the eschatological writings of John F. Walvoord (principally *The Millennial Kingdom* and the trilogy *Israel in Prophecy*, *The Church in Prophecy*, and *The Nations in Prophecy*) have ably set forth the dispensational position. Charles L. Feinberg’s *Millennialism: Two Major Views* has equally defended this system. Lewis Sperry Chafer’s august *Systematic Theology* sets forth dispensationalism in a comprehensive manner.

Among the schools that are avowedly dispensational are: Dallas Theological Seminary, Grace Theological Seminary, Talbot Theological Seminary, Western Conservative Baptist

⁶ C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (New York: Loizeaux, 1896), p. 12.

Seminary, Multnomah School of the Bible, Moody Bible Institute, Philadelphia College of the Bible, and many others.

DOCTRINAL AFFIRMATIONS OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

DEFINITION OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Etymology. A dispensation may be defined as “a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”⁷

The English word *dispensation* comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means “stewardship.” This word is used in Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4.

Several distinct examples of dispensations can be seen in Paul’s usage. In Ephesians 1:10 Paul indicates that God planned a “stewardship” or “dispensation” in which all things would ultimately be summed up in Christ. Paul describes this future dispensation as “the fulness of the times,” “the

REPRESENTATIVE DISPENSATIONAL SCHEMES*

	Pierre Poiret 1646–1719	John Edwards 1639–1716	Isaac Watts 1674–1748	J.N. Darby 1800–1882	J.H. Brookes 1830–1897	James M. Gray 1851–1935	C.I. Scofield 1843–1921
Creation to	Innocency	Innocency	Paradisaical	Eden	Edenic	Innocency	
the Deluge (Infancy)	Adam Fallen Antediluvian	Adamical (after the Fall)	State (to the Flood)	Antediluvian	Antediluvian	Conscience	
Deluge to Moses	Noahical	Noahical	Noah	Patriarchal	Patriarchal	Human Government	
(Childhood)	Abrahamic	Abrahamical	Abraham			Promise	
Moses to Prophets (Adolescence)	Mosaical	Mosaical	Israel— under Law	Mosaic	Mosaic	Law	
Prophets to Christ (Youth)			under Priesthood under Kings				

⁷ 7. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 29.

Manhood and Christian	Christian	Gentiles	Messianic	Church	Grace
Old Age		Spirit	Holy Ghost		
Renovation of		Millennium	Millennial	Millennial	Kingdom
All Things					
				Fullness of	
				times	
				Eternal	

*Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p.84.

summing up of all things in Christ.” That has not yet happened; it is the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom.

In Ephesians 3:2, 9 Paul refers to the stewardship or dispensation that has previously been a mystery. Paul is referring to the age in which Gentiles are fellow-heirs with Jews (v. 6); that, however, did not occur until Acts 2; hence, Paul distinguishes the church age as a separate dispensation in these verses. But in so doing, he contrasts it with the previous age, which was the Mosaic law. Paul, therefore, distinguishes three distinct dispensations in Ephesians 1 and 3.

Other statements also emphasize different ages or dispensations. John 1:17 declares, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” John points out that the new era of Christ stands in contrast to the period of the Mosaic law. The dispensation under Moses is termed “law,” whereas the age under Jesus Christ is called “grace.”

Romans 6:14 declares, “You are not under law, but under grace.” With the advent of Christ the believer has died and risen together with Him so that sin need not dominate the believer’s life. The believer can enjoy a measure of victory in this dispensation that he could not have under the law.

Galatians 3:19–25 explains the duration of the law: it was “added” and was in force “until” Christ came. The purpose of the law was to shut up all people under sin and to point them to faith in Christ. Like the tutor whose work is over when the child reaches maturity, so the function of the law is over now that Christ has come (Gal. 3:25).

Features. “Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God.”⁸ In this divine household God gives man certain responsibilities as administrator. If man obeys God within that

⁸ 8. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

economy (dispensation), God promises blessing; if man disobeys God, He promises judgment. Thus there are three aspects normally seen in a dispensation: (1) testing; (2) failure; (3) judgment. In each dispensation God has put man under a test, man fails, and there is judgment.

The basic concept of a dispensation is a stewardship. This is particularly seen in Luke 16:1–2. This parable illustrates the distinctives of a dispensation.⁹

There are two parties. One has the authority to delegate duties; the other has the responsibility to carry them out. In this parable, the wealthy man and the steward are the two parties.

There are specific responsibilities. In the parable, the steward fails in his duties, wasting his master's goods.

There is accountability. The steward is called upon to give an account of his faithfulness as a steward.

There is change. The master has a right to remove the steward from his place of privilege and responsibility (Luke 16:2).

A dispensationalist is simply one who recognizes that God deals differently with people in different ages or economies. Lewis Sperry Chafer used to say that if one does not bring a lamb to the altar in worshiping God, then he is a dispensationalist. One who worships on Sunday instead of Saturday is also a dispensationalist, because he recognizes the Sabbath was for Israel, not the church (Exod. 20:8–11).

Number. The number of dispensations is not as important as recognizing that there are dispensations. Different people divide the ages up differently. Many dispensationalists suggest there are the following seven.¹⁰

Innocence. This covers the time before Adam's fall (Gen. 1:28–3:6).

Conscience. Romans 2:15 indicates God dealt with man through his conscience prior to the law. Others refer to this age as "self-determination" or "moral responsibility." This covers the period from Genesis 4:1–8:14.

Government. This involves features of the Noahic Covenant: animals' fear of man, promise of no more floods, and protection of human life through the institution of capital punishment. This period covers Genesis 8:15–11:9.

Promise. This covers the period of the patriarchs, in which God ordained that they should respond by faith to His revelation. This covers the time from Genesis 11:10 to Exodus 18:27.

Mosaic law. The law was given as a constitution to the nation Israel and covers the period from Exodus 19:1 until Acts 1:26. The law was in force until the death of Christ and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

Grace. Although grace is evident in every age, it is uniquely so in the coming of Christ. Through the advent of Christ God made His grace known to all mankind. This covers the period from Acts 2:1 to Revelation 19:21.

Millennium. This covers the period described in Revelation 20:4–6 when Christ will return to earth to reign for a thousand years.

It should be noted that features from one dispensation may be incorporated into subsequent dispensations; thus, elements from the periods *conscience*, *government*, and *promise* continue on in subsequent dispensations.

⁹ 9. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 57–64.

HERMENEUTICS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Literal interpretation. Dispensationalists follow a consistently literal method of interpretation, which extends to eschatological studies. Many conservative non-dispensationalists interpret the Bible literally with the exception of prophecy; dispensationalists apply the literal scheme of interpretation to all the disciplines of theology. Although the term *literal* may raise questions in some quarters, it should be understood as the normal, customary approach to any literature—the way all language is commonly understood. *Literal*, when describing hermeneutical approach, refers to interpretive method, *not* to the kind of language used in the interpreted literature. *Literal interpretation* recognizes both literal and figurative language. Dispensationalists insist on literal *interpretation* for prophetic Scriptures even though they abound with figurative *language*. One reason for this, besides consistency, is the demonstrable literalness of prophecies already fulfilled in Christ’s first coming.¹¹ There is every reason to expect the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Christ’s second coming to be literal as well.

Dispensationalism builds on the fact that God has given unconditional promises to Israel, such promises as the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3). In that one God promised a land and a physical posterity to Abraham, wherein He would bless the descendants of Abraham. Dispensationalists believe these promises will be fulfilled literally in the future with Israel. Nondispensationalists spiritualize the prophecies and relegate them to the church.

Church uniqueness. Dispensationalists emphasize that Israel always denotes the physical posterity of Jacob and is never to be confused with the church. A concordance study of the term *Israel* indicates it is always used to denote Jacob’s physical descendants and is never used in a “spiritualized” sense to refer to the church.¹² Although nondispensationalists frequently refer to the church as “the new Israel,” it is an unwarranted designation.

Dispensationalists teach that God has a distinct program for Israel and a distinct program for the church. The commands given to one are not the commands to the other; the promises to the one are not the promises to the other. God calls on Israel to keep the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8–11), but the church keeps the Lord’s Day (1 Cor. 16:2). Israel is the wife of Yahweh (Hos. 3:1), but the church is the Body of Christ (Col. 1:27).

First Corinthians 10:32 is important in noting that a distinction is maintained between Israel and the church *after* the birth of the church (Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31; Rom. 10:1; 11:1–29). In Romans 11 Paul discusses extensively the future when Israel will be saved, emphasizing a distinctive future hope for Israel as a nation. The chapter sets Israel in contrast with the Gentiles—who are coming to faith until the fullness of the Gentiles, when Israel will be saved.¹³

¹¹ 11. *Ibid.*, pp. 86–98; see also Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 119–27.

¹² 12. The singular passage that is referred to by nondispensationalists is Galatians 6:16 where it is suggested that “Israel of God” may refer to the church. However, the Greek word *kai* (and) is probably used exegetically in this case, that is, peace and mercy come upon the true Israel of God—Israelites who walk by faith, not the Judaizers.

¹³ 13. See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 132–55, for a helpful discussion noting the distinction of the church from Israel.

Biblical unity. Dispensationalists emphasize that the unifying theme of the Bible is the glory of God. In contrast to covenant theology, which emphasizes salvation as the unifying theme, dispensationalists see salvation as man-centered and simply one aspect of God's glory. "Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center."¹⁴ In every age or dispensation God has revealed His glory, which is the unifying theme of Scripture.

DISTINCTIVES OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Grace. Although dispensationalists emphasize that the present church age is an age of grace (John 1:17; Rom. 6:14), that emphasis is not to imply that grace did not exist in previous dispensations. The approach to God in salvation is always through grace, and grace was also manifested in the dispensation of law.¹⁵ God chose Israel but passed over the Gentiles. He promised the people of Israel a land, peace, victory over enemies, and blessing. Despite Israel's repeated failure, God continued to deal with the nation in grace—the period of the judges and the monarch were a display of such grace. Amid Israel's failure God promised the nation a new covenant whereby He would forgive her sins. God provided divine enablement through the display of His grace and the ministry of the Spirit.

While God's grace is uniquely displayed in the present age through the advent of Jesus Christ, grace was also displayed under the law.

Salvation. Dispensationalists have sometimes been accused of teaching different ways of salvation in different dispensations. That is, however, a false charge. Dispensationalists teach 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."¹⁶ God's revelation to man differs in different dispensations, but man's responsibility is to respond to God in faith according to the manner in which God has revealed Himself. Thus when God revealed Himself to Abraham and promised him a great posterity, Abraham believed God, and the Lord imputed righteousness to the patriarch (Gen. 15:6). Abraham would have known little about Christ, but he responded in faith to the revelation of God and was saved. Similarly, under the law God promised life through faith. Whereas the Israelite under the law knew about the importance of the blood sacrifice, his knowledge of a suffering Messiah was still limited—but he was saved by faith (Hab. 2:4). Dispensationalists thus emphasize that in every dispensation salvation is by God's grace through faith according to His revelation.

Church. Dispensationalism is nowhere more distinctive than in its doctrine of the church. Dispensationalists hold that the church is entirely distinct from Israel as an entity. This is argued from several points. (1) The church was a mystery, unknown in the Old Testament (Eph. 3:1–9; Col. 1:26). (2) The church is composed of Jews and Gentiles; the Gentiles being fellow-heirs with Jews without having to become Jewish proselytes—something that was not true in the Old

¹⁴ 14. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁵ 15. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Grace of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1963), pp. 101–9.

¹⁶ 16. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 123.

Testament (Eph. 3:6). This issue was resolved in Acts 15 when the Judaizers attempted to put Gentiles under the law. (3) The church did not begin until Acts 2. It is the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit that unites believers with Christ and one another, making up the church (1 Cor. 12:13). That work was still future in Acts 1:5, but in Acts 11:15 it is clear that it began in Acts 2, establishing the birth of the church. Dispensationalists also believe that the church will conclude its existence upon the earth at the rapture, prior to the Tribulation (1 Thess. 4:16). (4) The church is consistently distinguished from Israel in the New Testament (1 Cor. 10:32).

Prophecy. Dispensationalists attempt to be consistent in literal interpretation; therefore, the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel are taken seriously. Furthermore, those prophecies pertain to Israel, the descendants of Jacob, not the church. The unconditional covenants of the Old Testament were given to Israel: the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3) promised Israel a land, a posterity, and blessing; the Palestinian Covenant (Deut. 30:1–10) promised Israel would return to the land; the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:12–16) promised Israel that Messiah would come from Judah and have a throne and a kingdom, ruling over Israel; the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) promised Israel the spiritual means whereby the nation would enter into blessing and receive forgiveness.

If these covenants are understood literally and unconditionally, then Israel has a future that is distinct from the church. On this basis dispensationalists subscribe to a literal millennium for Israel, which Messiah will establish at His Second Advent (Rev. 19:11–19). But before Israel will enter into blessing the nation must repent and recognize Jesus as the Messiah; a major purpose of the Tribulation is to discipline Israel to bring the nation to faith in Messiah (Jer. 30:7; Ezek. 20:37–38; Dan. 9:24). The Tribulation, thus, will have no reference point for the church, which will be raptured prior to the Tribulation (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 5:9; Rev. 3:10). The *purpose* of the Tribulation pertains to Israel, not the church. This is a major reason why dispensationalists hold to a pretribulation rapture.

EXTREME OF DISPENSATIONALISM

The movement of faithful Bible students who push the dispensational approach beyond the point where most other dispensationalists would stop is generally called ultradispensationalism.¹⁷ The distinctive feature of ultradispensationalism is its view concerning the beginning of the church. In contrast to mainstream dispensationalism, which holds that the church began at Pentecost in Acts 2, ultradispensationalism believes the church began later—the moderate group suggesting Acts 9 or 13 and the more extreme group, Acts 28.

The extreme group follows E. W. Bullinger (1837–1913), a scholar of some renown; earlier dispensationalism, in fact, was sometimes called Bullingerism. Others in this group include Charles H. Welch of London, successor to E. W. Bullinger; A. E. Knoch; Vladimir M. Gelesnoff; and Otis Q. Sellers of Grand Rapids. Bullinger taught that the gospels and Acts were under the dispensation of law, with the church actually beginning at Paul's ministry after Acts 28:28. The New Testament books that set forth the revelation concerning this concept of the church are Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. Bullinger identified three periods in the New Testament: (1) the time of the gospels when the gospel was preached to the Jews only and

¹⁷ 17. *Ibid.*, pp. 192–205; and G. R. Lewis, "Ultradispensationalism," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), pp. 1120–21.

authenticated by water baptism; (2) the transitional period in Acts and the corresponding earlier New Testament epistles when the offer still went to the Jews, offering them participation in the “bride church” and authenticated by two baptisms, water and Spirit; (3) the period of Jew and Gentile as one body in Christ and authenticated by Spirit baptism alone. Because the Gentile church is related to Christ through the Spirit, baptism and the Lord’s Supper have no significance for the church. Those rites relate to the flesh, according to Bullinger.

The moderate group, holding that the church began in Acts 9 or Acts 13, is identified by J. C. O’Hair, Cornelius R. Stam, and Charles F. Baker, author of *A Dispensational Theology*. Grace Bible College of Grand Rapids is the ultradispensational school leading to ministries with Grace Gospel Fellowship and Worldwide Grace Testimony.

Stam taught that the church began in Acts 9, with the conversion of Paul. The “Body Church” could only begin with the beginning of Paul’s ministry because Paul was the minister to the Gentiles. Because after that time there was no further offer of the kingdom to Israel, J. C. O’Hair taught that the church began in Acts 13:46 with the statement: “We are turning to the Gentiles.” Because O’Hair’s followers begin the church within the time frame of Acts, they observe the Lord’s Supper but not water baptism.

SUMMARY EVALUATION OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

There are at least nine considerations in evaluating dispensational theology.

(1) A strength of dispensationalism has been its attempt to recognize the differing economies or dispensations in biblical history. This feature has led to maintaining a clear distinction between God’s programs for Israel and for the church.

(2) Hermeneutically, dispensationalism follows a *consistently* literal approach to Scripture. Other systems like covenant theology freely admit to fundamental hermeneutical changes within their interpretations of the Bible.

(3) Dispensationalism has a legitimate biblical basis in the idea of differing economies (Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; etc.). Exegetically, it can be shown that there are at least three differing dispensations: Old Testament, New Testament, and the kingdom. The important thing is not the number of dispensations, but the principle of differing economies or “house rules” within the history of God’s interaction with people. Even a postmillennialist like Charles Hodge and an amillennialist like Louis Berkhof recognized differing dispensations, though neither man accepted classification as a dispensationalist.

(4) Another strength of dispensationalism is its focus on the glory of God rather than the salvation of man as the objective of all things. It centers on God, not man.

(5) “Mainline” dispensationalism avoids the excesses of ultradispensationalism. This subgroup within dispensationalism in its most radical form has limited applicable Scriptures to some of Paul’s epistles. The extremists in its ranks reject both baptism and the Lord’s Supper, whereas the moderates will observe the Lord’s Supper. The primary fallacy of this movement is failure to recognize the birth of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2); instead, the church’s origin is located, depending on which ultradispensational faction is consulted, in Acts 9, 13, or 28.

(6) A misunderstanding concerning the way of salvation has sometimes been fostered by dispensationalism. Some important dispensationalists have wrongly taught that man’s responsibility to be saved has differed from one dispensation to another. Although it is true that the expression or form of man’s trust in God has differed throughout the dispensations, yet in every age salvation has been by God’s grace through man’s faith.

(7) Dispensationalism has sometimes erred in stressing grace as restricted to the church age while ignoring or minimizing grace in other dispensations. God's grace has been displayed in every age.

(8) Dispensationalism has also at times projected a negative attitude toward God's law as though it were opposed to God's grace. God's law is present in one or several forms throughout every dispensation for healthy and necessary divine reasons.

(9) Dispensationalists have sometimes relegated certain passages of Scripture to other dispensations past or future, thus obscuring their usefulness to the church. The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) is one example. Recent dispensationalists, however, have modified this practice and have recognized and taught the legitimate applications of every Scripture to God's people today.²

² Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 513-25.