

# Covenant Theology Series #3

## Dispensationalism

### Introduction

There are two fundamental approaches to understanding the flow and structure of both redemptive history and God's commentary on it in biblical revelation. One approach is to emphasize the *discontinuity* between the stages and component parts associated with these two strands of biblical theology, and the other is to emphasize the *continuity* between these stages and parts. Covenant theology, when considered as biblical theology, emphasizes the continuity and sees this as the essential feature of both redemptive history and biblical revelation, an appreciation of which is crucial for understanding them properly. An extremely influential movement, especially in American Christianity, known as dispensationalism, is the principal *system* of biblical theology competing with covenant theology for dominance in forming a framework for redemptive history and biblical revelation. Although not all non-covenantal theologians — and everyone is a theologian — self-consciously subscribe to dispensationalism, anyone who approaches biblical theology by understanding it to any degree as fundamentally discontinuous is to that degree dispensational in his approach to these matters. For that reason, an overview and evaluation of dispensationalism is both proper and necessary at this point in our study.

### Historical Background

Dispensational theology as a formal system originated in England around 1830, among an ecclesiastically Separatist group known as the Plymouth Brethren. Its beginnings have questionable aspects, not least the suggestion of an association with occult experiences.<sup>1</sup> It spread to America through the immigration of several members, most notably, J. N. B. Darby and C. I. Scofield. The latter produced, in about 1917, a reference Bible which contained interpretive notes on the same page as the text of Scripture. As it was disseminated among the Christian population of America, the interpretive system contained in the notes became associated without distinction with the content of Scripture, thus becoming a powerful inter-denominational influence on the understanding of the Bible among American Christians. Dispensationalism was officially declared a heresy by the American Presbyterian Church in the early twentieth century because of its teaching that there were different ways of salvation set forth in the Old and New Testaments. The New Scofield Reference Bible was produced in part to address this problem, with the notes revised to remove this assertion. Later, as modernism and the rise of liberal theology, with its denigration of the historicity, authority, and inerrancy of Scripture, began to be ascendant in many of the mainline Christian denominations, rank and file Christians, who were receiving less and less biblical teaching from their liberal-influenced pastors and churches, became readers of the Scofield Bibles, dependent upon them for their understanding of the theology of Scripture, and were thus more and more influenced by the biblical theology of its system, and especially of its system of eschatology. As we will see, a salient factor in this

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this, see Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot* (Simpsonville, South Carolina: Millennium III Publishers, 1994).

process was the contrast between the typically allegorical approach to Scripture, and especially its historical narratives, as “myth” — which actually amounted to unbelief — and the literalistic approach of dispensationalists. As a result, the largest percentage of evangelical Christians not only approach Scripture from a dispensational perspective, especially with respect to eschatology, but many also regard anyone who challenges the system to be a theological liberal. In fact, despite the fact that this system was unknown to the Church and any Bible commentators for the first eighteen and one-half centuries since the completion of the canon of Scripture, many evangelical Christians have never been exposed to any other eschatological system, not to mention any other way of interpreting and handling Scripture. They simply have never heard anything else.

### **Overview of Dispensationalism**

The essence of dispensationalism can be summarized in terms of three distinctive features, which together are responsible for generating the contents of the system:

1. A distinctive *hermeneutic* — This refers to its approach to the interpretation and application of Scripture, which can be described as *literalistic*. This is to be distinguished from the desirable approach of interpreting Scripture *literally*, which most dispensationalists assert is what they are doing. However, to interpret the Bible literally means to interpret it *as literature*, which involves taking into account the distinctive features of its literary genres (or “types”), often including figurative and symbolic expressions as a common convention.<sup>2</sup> Dispensational literalism has been defined by dispensationalists themselves as the principle that a given statement of Scripture should be assumed to be a literal statement unless it cannot possibly be understood in this way, although an examination of their interpretations indicates that they are far from consistent in the application of this principle.
2. A distinctive *ecclesiology* — This refers to their understanding of the Church, particularly in terms of its relationship to the nation of Israel. Traditional dispensationalists assert that there are two distinct and separate redemptive communities in Scripture, Israel and the Church, with separate and distinct revelation and promises, and separate and distinct destinies. In other words, there is no *continuity* between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalism sees the Bible’s program as mainly about Israel, and the Church as a “mystery parenthesis” in God’s program. This assertion either leads to or proceeds from a profound “chopping up” of the Bible in terms of its contents and promises, which some dispensationalists proudly claim as their conformity to what II Timothy 2:15 (KJV) describes as “rightly dividing the Word of truth,” which is a faulty and misleading translation of the verse.
3. A distinctive *redemptive historiography* — This refers to the way in which dispensationalists portray history, specifically redemptive history as it is revealed in the Bible. “Historiography” is defined as “the writing of history, especially...based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The salient feature of the way

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<sup>2</sup> For more on this, see R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), 48-53.

dispensationalists “synthesize” the details of Scripture is in terms of rigidly separate epochs or “dispensations” (hence the term), in which God deals with mankind in radically different ways and in terms of radically distinct requirements which constitute tests of a sort. According to this system, in each dispensation man fails the test, resulting in God’s judgment, the eradication of the former dispensational economy, and establishment of an entirely new economy. The word “dispensation” is a translation of the Greek word οικονομία (transliterated *oikonomia*), from which we get the English word “economy.” In other words, dispensationalists frame the story of redemptive history as a series of radically distinct epochs, with radically different “economies” (the systems of rules which govern God’s relations with mankind), which are thus fundamentally *discontinuous*.

### **Evaluation**

We will be addressing what we believe to be the errors of the dispensational approach to biblical theology throughout our study through a positive presentation of the biblical evidence and reasons for structuring our understanding of the Bible and of redemptive history, and our relationship to God, in terms of covenant theology. However, it is appropriate at the start of that presentation to give an overall evaluation and critique of the dispensational approach.

In the first place, it must be acknowledged that the assertions that what is clearly meant to be understood as historical narrative is instead “myth,” that it is not literally true, and that it should accordingly be understood and applied allegorically, are fundamentally wrong and should be rejected. However, it must be understood that this is true precisely because of proper literary analysis. This is because such a procedure violates the nature of Scripture as it presents itself to us: a collection of literary works encompassing multiple genres, some of which cannot be faithfully interpreted in terms of the authors’ intents without understanding them literally. But this is precisely the point at which dispensationalists also violate Scripture, since they insist on interpreting as literal statements verses and passages which are, in terms of the genre of literature in which they occur, possibly not literal. In fact, many such passages are interpreted by the inerrant and infallible New Testament Scriptures in non-literal ways. Examples include:

- Ezekiel 34:23, 24 (compare verse 15) and 37:24, 25 predict that *David* shall be shepherd and rule over the people of God in a future kingdom, but this is universally understood to be fulfilled in terms of the *Son* of David, Jesus, as He claims this role in John 10:11, 16 and 12:34, and in terms of the principle illustrated by Peter in Acts 2:22-36 as he interprets and applies Psalm 16:8-11.
- The celestial phenomena in Joel 2:30, 31 are also interpreted by Peter in Acts 2:16-21 in non-literal ways, yet the same terminology as employed in Matthew 24:29 is invariably insisted by dispensationalists to be referring to literal celestial phenomena.
- Jesus frequently spoke in non-literal categories to his disciples and others and was misunderstood because He was speaking in Scriptural categories. Examples are Matthew 16:5-12; Mark 5:39; Mark 9:11-13; John 11:11-13. Notable among these in light of the former point is the Mark 9 passage, in which Jesus, alluding to the prophecy of Malachi

4:5, calls John the Baptist “Elijah” without clarification, as Malachi himself did. The identification is made clear in Matthew 11:11-15 and 17:9-13.

- The promises to give to Abraham and his descendants (literally “seed”) the land of Canaan in, for instance, Genesis 12:2, 7; 15:1-5, are said to be fulfilled in a non-literal way, namely in the Church, in Galatians 3:26-29 and Romans 4:13. Notice in the latter passage that the promise of the land to Abraham is said to be “the world,” an assertion that is nowhere to be found in the promises to Abraham recorded in Genesis. The fulfillment is thus non-literal, in accord with the general flow of biblical theology.
- See the next point for overlapping examples of this point.

In the second place, it is clear from multiple Scriptures that Israel and the Church are one and the same entity, and that the *nation* of Israel is simply the covenant community prior to its establishment as an *officially* multi-national, multi-ethnic community under the New Covenant. In other words, Israel is the Church of the Old Testament and the Church is Israel in the New Testament. Just of few of the Scriptural proofs of this include:

- Romans 11 teaches that Gentiles (“non-natural branches”) are specifically grafted into a community (olive tree) which formerly consisted only of Jews (the “natural branches”), some of which were “broken off” (OT “cut off” or “circumcised,” excommunicated) because of unbelief. There is only one olive tree, not two. This can hardly refer to anything other than the covenant community, which is *continuous* from Old Testament to New Testament. It has always been covenant, not religion *per se*, nor ethnicity, that defined the identity of Israel.
- Ephesians 2:11-22 confirms this when it explicitly declares that Gentiles have been made members of “the commonwealth of Israel” (or have received “citizenship in Israel”). This passage also confirms that, as a result of the work of Christ, there is no longer a distinction between “Jew and Gentile,” since Gentiles have been brought *en masse* into the covenant community (Israel/Church).
- The word for “church” (meaning “called out assembly”), the same Greek word used in the New Testament for the Church, is, in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), used constantly to refer to Israel. It translates the word קהל (transliterated *qahal*), usually translated “assembly.” Thus Israel is called “church” multitudinous times in the Old Testament.
- The Church is called “Israel” in Galatians 6:16.
- Israel, from its beginnings as a nation, contained persons who were Gentiles or non-Israelites (e.g., Exodus 12:38; I Chronicles 11:10-47).
- The fulfillments of Old Testament covenant promises are explicitly applied to Gentiles in the New Testament (e.g., Hosea 1:9-11/Romans 9:24-26; Genesis 12:2, 7; 15:1-5/Galatians 3:26-29).
- The Old Testament declares that Gentiles shall be declared to have been “born in Zion” (Psalm 87:4-6).
- The same terms that are applied exclusively to Israel in Exodus 19:3-6 are applied to the New Testament Church in I Peter 2:9, 10.
- In Revelation 7, the 144,000 who are sealed “from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (John *hears*) are identified with the “great multitude that no one could number, from every

nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages,....” (John *sees*; compare Revelation 5:5, 6). In light of Genesis 15:5 and Galatians 3:26-29, this should hardly be surprising.

- And many, many others.

In the third place, the way that the New Testament quotes and uses the Old Testament demonstrates that the *fundamental economy* is the same, to wit:

- When the New Testament writers talk about salvation and how God deals with His people, they quote the Old Testament and adduce principles drawn from it (e.g., Romans 4:1-12; Hebrews 3:1-4;11).
- When Jesus appeared, those who observed the child spoke of the significance of His appearance in connection with the fulfillment of Old Testament covenant promises and in terms of His participation in that One Covenant (Luke 1:46-56; 67-79).
- See the connections established in the next study tracing the unity of the Covenant of Grace, and in the rest of this study as a whole.

In summary, it is accurate to say that dispensationalism is a system that was formulated prematurely out of a cursory reading of Scripture. This system, once outlined, was calcified in the minds of its developers and devotees, who proceeded to squeeze the non-conforming Scriptural elements and passages into its mold, with the result that the system, especially with respect to its eschatology, became intolerably and unintelligibly complex, because of the need to invent ways to reconcile it with the Bible. The principle of Occam’s Razor,<sup>3</sup> though not infallible, certainly testifies powerfully to the erroneous nature of dispensationalism.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “Occam’s Razor” refers to a principle of logic formulated by the philosopher William of Occam, which states that the simpler a proposal is among competing explanations or formulations of a given phenomenon or idea, the more likely it is to be correct.

# Covenant Theology Series #4

## One Economy

### Introduction

Covenant Theology, approached in terms of biblical (in distinction from systematic) theology, emphasizes the *continuity* of God's salvation of a people from sin and His accompanying revelation that explains, clarifies, and interprets it. Thus covenant theology can be summarized in the following phrase: *one book, one people, one economy*. We will begin by considering each part of this phrase in reverse order, in summary and overview fashion. First, then, we consider that, fundamentally speaking, God has *one economy* in terms of His activity to save man, and this economy is The Covenant of Grace. By "economy" is meant a system of rules or principles in terms of which a group of people (e.g., a society, nation, or culture) functions and relates to its individual parts. In terms of theology, the most important of these principles concern the rules/principles which govern God's relationship to man.

### Essential Framework

The understanding of Covenant Theology to which our church subscribes, as summarized in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, asserts that there are two fundamental covenants that God has made with men. The first is called in our standards the Covenant of Works (sometimes referred to as the Covenant of Creation), and was established with Adam as the head and representative of all mankind. Because Adam sinned under this covenant and brought the sanction of death to himself and all of his posterity (all mankind), God determined to make another covenant, called the Covenant of Grace (sometimes called the Covenant of Redemption), to provide for the salvation of a chosen people from the curse of the Fall and to enable them to fulfill their original purpose under the original covenant and be reconciled to Him. The major covenants of the Bible are seen under this framework not to be separate entities, but rather stages of development within the overall single Covenant of Grace. We will discuss each of these covenants in detail, but for the purposes of the present study we will list and categorize them briefly, as follows:

#### Universal Covenants

1. Adamic Covenant—Genesis 3:15
2. Noahic Covenant—Genesis 8:20-9:17

#### National Covenants

1. Abrahamic Covenant—Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-14
2. Mosaic (Sinaitic) Covenant—Exodus 19-24
3. Davidic Covenant—II Samuel 7; Psalm 89:1-4, 18-37

#### The Covenant of Fulfillment

### *Unity of the Covenants in the Covenant of Grace*

We will have more to say, in terms of systematic theology, about the unity of the *economy* of the Covenant of Grace. For the purposes of this study, it is sufficient for now to establish this unity through a survey of key Scriptures and the ways in which they speak of and deal with these covenants. A consideration of the following establishes two important and complementary features of the major scriptural covenants: first, that they are distinct from one another in that they represent distinct and important changes and progress in God’s covenant program; and second, that they are essentially parts of one unified Covenant, the *fundamental* economy and features of which do not change and are seen as expressions of one Covenant.

1. Ephesians 2:12—Salvation to mankind, including Gentiles, is mediated through the “covenants [plural] of promise.”
2. Exodus 2:24; 6:2-9—God pays attention to Israel and raises up Moses *because of Abraham*; a connection is established between the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants.
3. Exodus 34:16-28—The promises of the Abrahamic Covenant (and its stipulations) are *reaffirmed* and *amplified*.
4. Leviticus 26:9, 42-45—There are suggestions here of the Adamic, Noahic, and Abrahamic Covenants, but “covenant” is *singular*; the singular covenant is the same with both Abraham *et al* and Israel (cf. I Chronicles 16:14-18).
5. Deuteronomy 4:13, 14, 31 (esp. v. 31)—The Mosaic Covenant is explicitly tied to the Abrahamic promises (Genesis 15:7; 18:17-19); cf. II Kings 13:23. [But consider Dt. 5:2, 3(?)]
6. Deuteronomy 7:9-12 (esp. v. 12)—The covenant promise to the fathers is ratified and received through contemporary faithfulness (see also 8:18).
7. Deuteronomy 29:9-15—This passage establishes: first, the unity between Abrahamic promises and the Mosaic Covenant; and second, the *future expansion* and even *current broadness* of covenant membership.
8. Deuteronomy 29:18-29—The Covenant does not equal salvation; there is responsibility and the possibility of negative sanctions, even damnation, under the Covenant (cf. Joshua 23:15, 16).
9. II Samuel 7:1-29/Psalm 89:1-4, 20-37/Genesis 17:6, 16; 35:11/Deuteronomy 17:14-20—The concepts of a *king* and a *kingdom* and central to the Covenant.
10. II Chronicles 6:10, 11, 14-17—These passages establish a link between the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants.
11. Psalm 25:10, 14—There is *one Covenant!*
12. Isaiah 55:1-5—This passage indicates the centrality of the Davidic Covenant to the overall Covenant of Grace.
13. Jeremiah 31:31-34—The common elements in the description of the New Covenant here shows the unity of the overall Covenant, but development and distinction, particularly between the “Old Covenant (from Abraham through the Old Testament)” and the New Covenant in Christ.

14. Jeremiah 33:14-26—The Davidic and Mosaic Covenants are shown here to be both *linked* and *fulfilled in Christ*.
15. Ezekiel 16:59-63—The New Covenant is prophesied as a stage in “The Covenant,” producing final and efficacious atonement through Christ.
16. Ezekiel 37:24-28/Acts 2:22-36; 15:13-18—The Davidic and the New Covenants are here united. God’s covenant promises to David are represented as fulfilled in Christ.
17. Hosea 6:7—The One Covenant goes back all the way to the Garden. It is the same covenant that both Adam and Israel disobeyed and broke.
18. Matthew 26:28/Exodus 24:1-8/Daniel 9:27—The New Covenant “blood of the Covenant” is the fulfillment of the Old Testament “blood of the Covenant.” Compare Hebrews 9:19-24!!
19. Luke 1:67-79—This prophecy establishes the unity of the Davidic, Mosaic, and Abrahamic Covenants, which of which are alluded to and are referred to in the singular as “the covenant.” They are also shown to be fulfilled in Christ and thus united to the New Covenant.
20. Acts 3:25—The unity of the Mosaic and Abrahamic Covenants is shown, as well as the widespread expansion of covenant membership to Gentiles under the New Covenant.

### **Conclusion**

All of this should serve to establish without doubt that the history of redemption, conceived as covenant, should be regarded as a fundamental unity. A helpful analogy for understanding this fact and its significance is the figure of a growing and developing organism. For instance, Old and New Testaments, whether considered as Scriptures or as eras, should not be understood as two separate organisms or entities (such as a porpoise vs. a man), but as different stages in the development/maturity of a single organism (such as infant vs. toddler vs. adolescent vs. adult). This has numerous, vast, and significant implications for our understanding of both theology and the Christian life, as we shall see.



# Covenant Theology Series #5

## One People

### Introduction

With this lesson we continue our summary analysis of covenant theology viewed in biblical-theological terms with a consideration of Our defining phrase's second element: *one people*. The import of this term is simply the assertion that there is only one community who are designated the "people of God." In other words, there is only one redemptive community, with whom God relates in terms of a redemptive covenant and through whom He imparts salvation, entailing one single, united destiny. As we saw briefly in study #3, this is contrasted with the dispensational approach, which understands there to be two distinct redemptive communities in Scripture, which it designates "Israel" (defined as the ethnic and/or national descendants of Abraham), and "the Church" (a multi-ethnic community established only in the New Covenant era), with separate and distinct identities, promises, obligations, and destinies.

### The Dispensational Understanding

Whether or not one self-consciously subscribes to dispensational theology, the basic elements of its approach to the topic of the people of God are present in the thinking of many as they approach the Bible, especially in the way that they relate revelation about Israel to themselves as Christians. Often this is not comprehended in detail, but the dispensational tendencies are seen, for instance, in a confusion regarding how to relate what God says to and records about the nation of Israel to the experience of modern Christians. This results in a reductionistic approach to the Old Testament which limits its application and significance to examples of moral or immoral behavior and the consequences of such. The *theological* content of the Word of God to Israel is divorced from application to Christians in any explicit way. Even if this is not a self-conscious decision on the part of Bible readers, it often is the case because of a lack of understanding of precisely how the *people* of Israel are related to Christians in the era of the New Covenant (i.e., the New Testament), including contemporary Christians, considered both as individuals and as a corporate entity.

Classic dispensational theology answers these questions with the assertion that Israel was from the beginning God's chosen people *as an ethnic entity*, defined literally as the physical and biological descendants (literally the "seed") of Abraham. In this understanding, all of the promises to Israel are based upon this natural generation from Abraham. The promises of Land and Seed (Descendants) repeated to Israel are applicable only to Israel in this literal sense. Some dispensationalists will acknowledge that non-ethnic people can be added to the community through proselyte admission, but this is always the exception rather than the rule (though the theological basis for *any* such exception, given the insistence of literalistic interpretation of the promises, is seldom, if ever, explained). Traditional dispensationalists rightly understand that the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God was always to come through Christ, but wrongly believe that it was originally meant to be applied exclusively to Israel as a nation. According to dispensationalism, when, at Christ's first coming, the leaders of the nation of Israel rejected

Jesus as Messiah and King, they refused the offer of the Kingdom, and God began an alternate program, founding the Church, which is a “mystery” never anticipated, mentioned, or prophesied in the Old Testament (which is concerned solely with Israel). The Church represents a “parenthesis” in God’s program, which is still primarily concerned with Israel, and the Old Testament promises to Israel will be fulfilled solely to Israel. The Church is given separate promises and a separate destiny, apart from God’s dealings with Israel as a nation. Once the number of elect Gentiles have been saved, God will “rapture” the Church out of the world, at which time “the prophetic time clock” begins to tick again and God resumes His program for Israel, which is fulfilled in the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of a Jewish, millennial Kingdom with Christ ruling from Jerusalem for a literal thousand years. Thus the Second Coming is seen as *pre*-millennial, that is, *prior to* the “Millennium” (the Kingdom of God in Christ). Believing Jews may be part of the Church now, but all Jews (nationally and ethnically conceived), whether believers in Christ or not, are still considered part of a community to whom God’s original promises are still addressed and will eventually be fulfilled.

### **Scriptural Understanding of the People of God**

The notion of a people of God begins with the *protoevangelium*, or ‘first gospel,’ recorded in Genesis 3:15. There a “seed” of the woman is prophesied who will crush the head of the serpent, and it is said that the serpent will bruise “*his*” heel. This is, in light of the rest of Scripture, clearly a prophecy which has first and primary reference to Christ, who is injured (crucified) at the instigation of Satan and his “seed” (Pontius Pilate, the Gentile Roman officials, and the apostate Jewish leadership—John 8:39-47; 13:2, 26, 27; 18:3; Acts 2:22, 23; 4:23-28). Paul elaborates on the theme of the “seed” as he asserts the primary significance of Jesus as the singular “Seed” who is the object of the promises to Abraham (Galatians 3:15, 16). But in both of these instances it is clear that the term “seed” is also applied to a corporate body of individuals who are united to and represented by Christ as a covenant head, and to whom the same promises and prophecies apply. This is explicitly asserted when, in an obvious allusion to Genesis 3:15, Paul promises the Roman Christians that “the God of peace will soon crush Satan under [their] feet” (Romans 16:20). Paul applies the same principle in the passage from Galatians 3 cited above when, after establishing that Christ was the “Seed” to whom the Abrahamic promises were directed (vv. 15, 16), he unambiguously states that those who have been united to (“baptized into”) and “have put on Christ,” so that they are now “in Christ,” are “Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to promise” (vv. 26-29). The term “seed” then, with respect to both biblical prophecy and covenant promises, has reference both *primarily* to a singular individual (Christ), who is a covenant and federal head (representative), and *derivatively* to a corporate body who are united to their head.

This dual reference has its roots, as does most of biblical theology, in associations established in the first chapters of Genesis. The biblical significance of the term “seed” is developed as an outflow of God’s original creation, specifically in Genesis 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25, 27, 28; 3:15; 5:1-3. From these verses, it can be seen that the most biblically significant thing about the offspring or “seed” of a living thing is that it partakes of the “likeness” or “image” of its parent; beings reproduce “after their kinds.” This biblical understanding gave rise to one of the most common Hebrew idioms: the ascribing of characteristics to a person or thing by referring to them as

“children” or “sons” or “daughters” of that thing (e.g., Isaiah 57:4; Ephesians 2:2, 3). This is the understanding underlying Jesus’s words to the Jewish leadership in John 8:18, 19, 27-29, 31-47. In these verses Jesus acknowledges that they are *physical* descendants of Abraham, but proclaims that if they were *really* sons of Abraham, they would do the things Abraham did and have the faith of Abraham. They claim to have God as their Father, but Jesus says that if they *really* had God as their Father, they would love Him as the Father does. He states that they are children of the devil and take on his characteristics. The author of the gospel in which this discussion is recorded sums up the same principle with respect to God’s true children in I John 3:1-3, 8-10, where he makes it clear that the true children of God take on His likeness and characteristics, including righteousness and love.

All of this is the foundation of the understanding that, when the covenant promises are made to “the seed,” whether conceived as the seed of Eve, who is named such because she will become the mother of all the living, *spiritually* (Genesis 3:20), or of Abraham through Sarah, or of Mary (the antitype: Christ), they are made to Christ and to all who by faith partake of the nature of Christ and are being conformed to His likeness and image: the Church (Ephesians 4:20-24; Colossians 3:1-10, esp. v. 10). It is this Church who is symbolically portrayed in Revelation 12. The Church, as we will see, is the mother of Christ and all who are in Him, the Church typologically represented by all those women in redemptive history who through the miraculous power of God bore children though not naturally able to do so. The true children of God are born through the miraculous power of God’s Spirit, not by natural means. This is why Jesus proclaimed that Nicodemus, presumably a spiritual leader in Israel, should have understood these things (John 3:3-10). It is also the basis of the theology behind Romans 5:12-21, a passage in which Paul portrays both damnation (“condemnation”) and salvation as coming to all, to every existing person, through association and solidarity with at least one of two representative covenant heads: Adam and Christ.

We are now in a position to survey the additional scriptural evidence for the identity and nature of the people of God, as follows:

- 1. The biblical term that refers to the covenant community (both in its Hebrew and Greek translations) is used to refer both to the nation of Israel and to the “Church.”** Dispensationalists often assert that the “Church” is absent from the Old Testament and never mentioned, even in prophecy, making it a “mystery” not anticipated in biblical revelation until it is revealed in the New Testament. This is manifestly erroneous from a simple analysis of the term for “church.” The Old Testament word, the term most commonly used to refer to the community of Israel, is *קהל* (*qahal*), which literally means “called out assembly.” This term is translated in the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX), by the term *ἐκκλησία* (*ecclesia*), which is the word translated “church” in our English New Testaments. So the word “Church” is applied to Israel in the Old Testament, a fact obscured by the different ways that translators rendered the same word from the different languages employed in the writing of the Testaments. Accordingly, the Church is called “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16.
- 2. Terms applied exclusively to Israel in Exodus 19:3-6 are applied to the Church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, in I Peter 2:9, 10.**

**3. “Israel,” with respect to its relationship to God, is always represented in Scripture as being composed of more members than the ethnic descendants of Abraham.**

This is clear from the following scriptural examples:

- This is explicitly taught in Romans 9-11, where Paul answers the concern about the promises to Israel by identifying true Israel as the elect, and making the point that many of the actual physical descendants of Abraham were not reckoned as a part of Israel. Jesus affirms that it is God who produces true Israelites by miraculous activity and that He is able to do it from literally anything (even rocks!) apart from biological progeny (Matthew 3:9). He explicitly expounds this truth in His dialogue with the Jews recorded in John 8:33-58, in the context of their prideful claim that they are descendants of Abraham and therefore special, by affirming that they are biological descendants of Abraham while denying that they are true descendants of Abraham because of their unbelief and their actions, calling them rather “children of [their] father, the Devil.”
- The community of Israel redeemed from slavery in Egypt and which leaves there and enters into covenant with God at Sinai is explicitly said to be composed of more than ethnic Israelites, a “mixed multitude” (Exodus 12:38).
- Psalm 87 predicts that Gentiles born as members of foreign nations will be said to have been “born in Zion” and registered among the peoples as having been born there. Zion is a frequent symbol for Jerusalem and the Temple, and thus for Israel as the covenant people of God. It is a symbol of the Church in Hebrews 12:22-24, which constitutes another blending of Israel and the Church.
- The tribes of Israel are identified with a vast, multi-ethnic throng in Revelation 7, representing a fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 15:5. This is seen in the fact that what John initially *hears* is to be identified with what he then *sees* (cf. Revelation 5:1-10).
- As previously mentioned, the children of Abraham and heirs of the covenant promises are explicitly asserted to be determined by their *union with Christ*, whether Jew or Gentile (Galatians 3:26-29).

**4. Scripture explicitly teaches that Gentiles are added to the same, already existing covenant community of Israel.** This is especially evident in the following passages:

- In Romans 11:11-24, Paul expounds on how believing Gentiles are “grafted into” the same community from which the “natural branches,” ethnic Israelites, have been removed because of unbelief. This community cannot be anything other than the covenant community of Israel, given the context and issue under consideration in Paul’s remarks, namely why Israel has not received the fulfillment of certain promises. Paul’s answer is that those of faith in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, are united to Him, are part of Israel, and receive what was promised.
- Paul explicitly reiterates all this in Galatians 3:5-9.
- In Ephesians 2:11-3:13, Paul asserts that there is no longer a *theological* distinction between ethnic Jew and ethnic Gentile, because God has joined the two into one body by making Gentiles part of Israel, giving them “citizenship” in it and making

them heirs of the covenant promises, through faith in Christ, which is the only way Jews can receive them as well. Notice how this is predicted by Jesus in John 10:16.

**5. Scripture clearly demonstrates that God has always had only one plan for the salvation of human beings, and that this plan has always included Gentiles.**

Consider the following:

- From the beginning, the promises to Abraham always included the Gentiles (compare Genesis 12:1-3 and Galatians 3:8).
- Romans 9-11 discusses how God's one plan included Israel's rejection of Christ so that the Gentiles would come in. The Church was not an alternate community formed by an alternate, "mystery" plan, but God's plan from the beginning, according to this passage.

**6. Covenant promises given to Israel are explicitly said in the New Testament to be fulfilled in the Church.** Examples include:

- Being the People of God—Hosea 1:6-11; 2:14-23 → Galatians 3:29; Romans 9:22-26; John 10:16
- Blessing through Abraham—Genesis 12:3 → Galatians 3:8
- Rule over the nations—Genesis 15:7, 18-21; Psalm 2:7-12 → Romans 4:13; Galatians 3:16; Matthew 5:5; Revelation 2:26, 27; 3:21
- Amos 9:11, 12; Isaiah 43:1-7; Daniel 9:19 → Acts 15:13-19

**Significance of This Understanding**

This truth has significant implications for Christians as they live out their faith, to wit:

1. We have a *covenant identity* and a heritage, the history and nature of which is set forth in the whole Bible, including the Old Testament.
2. Our understanding of our relationship to God must involve an understanding of the totality of Scripture, and our expectations and hope include all of the promises to Abraham and to Israel, as they are amplified and clarified in the New Testament.
3. It is crucial to understand that the reason we are included among the people of God has to do with God (i.e., His election of us as individuals), not anything in us, including our physical ethnicity. Pride concerning anything intrinsic to us is unchristian.
4. The people of God is the community of people in covenant relationship to God. This is what defines their (our) identity.
5. The division of the people of God into two separate redemptive communities is one of the linchpins in the dispensational system of eschatology, which is essentially pessimistic with respect to the prospects of the widespread growth and influence of the Kingdom of God prior to the Second Coming of Christ. This has often become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Emphasis in the ministry of the Church, as it has been influenced by this perspective, has been overly on simply "getting people into the Kingdom," with a neglect of the primary emphasis of the Great Commission, which is the production of mature

disciples of Christ who have been trained to obey Him in all of life. It is obedience to this directive which truly builds the Kingdom of God—ironically, it is only through mature Christian disciples that truly effective evangelism occurs—and changes the world, and this is what is involved in the fullness of the plan of God (I Corinthians 15:20-28; cf. Matthew 28:18-20). This perspective, not some prophetic inevitability, is a major reason for the decline of Christian influence in the West. There is a need to return to a vision of the Kingdom of God which sees Christian thinking dominating every institution and every dimension of society, resulting in God's blessing. But Christians cannot do this if they only know the bare essentials of how to be forgiven of their sins. The Church must return to the ministry of teaching the whole counsel of God with the intention of equipping Christians to "bring every thought captive to Christ" (II Corinthians 10:3-5) and be salt and light with the effect that the world is Christianized in its thinking and practice, albeit with the realization that every individual will not be a true believer (Matthew 13:24-43).

# Covenant Theology Series #6

## One Book

### Introduction

With this lesson we continue our summary analysis of covenant theology, viewed in biblical-theological terms, with a consideration of our defining phrase's third element: *one book*. This part of the phrase is closely related to the other two parts, one people and one economy. It asserts that God's scriptural revelation in the Bible, the 66 various books of the Old and New Testaments, is itself fundamentally a *unity* in terms of both its essential message and its application. In other words, *all* of it is meant to be applied to *all* of God's people of *all* times, though various books, being written at various times throughout redemptive history, which are addressed, when they first appear, to audiences with discrete needs and in discrete historical situations. This is not to say that there are not elements of discontinuity displayed between the various parts of the Bible. These elements of discontinuity mirror the discontinuity, as a function of progressive development, in the history of God's redemption of His people. But this discontinuity is always subservient to the fundamental continuity and unity of the Scriptures. Before consideration of this principle in contrast to the various ways that the books and parts of the Bible are sometimes improperly separated, a word concerning the nature of this unity is in order.

### The Progressive Nature of Scripture

It is impossible rightly to understand or apply the Bible without an understanding of its *progressive* nature. God's salvation of a people, which was considered in depth in the previous lesson, was also progressive. In fact, the Bible is, from one perspective, a revelation of the *story* of God's work in history (i.e., "His story") to redeem a people for Himself, a story which has been referred to as "redemptive history." We could say that our defining phrase could easily include another element: *one story*. This is perhaps the reason that the Bible contains more historical narrative than anything else; it is this *narrative*, or story, which forms the superstructure of God's revelation. That revelation parallels the story as both develop together, the *revelation* explaining and commenting on the work of *redemption* which it accompanies. There are many stories in the Bible, but they are all part of one grand *Story* which develops and grows toward maturity, just as a living organism does. Both the work and God's interpretation and revelation of it develop and mature, so that the application of the revelation changes and develops as the history and community of people who are redeemed develop, God giving more and more revelation as appropriate to explain and elucidate the nature and implications of developments in the plan and work of redemption as they occur. Just as the people whom God redeems are essentially one people throughout redemptive history, so the revelation addressed to that people is essentially one, though both the detail revealed and the people's understanding of it grow as the story and plan develop, giving them the context and experience to understand and process more and more as their experience grows.

### Errors of Discontinuity in the Understanding and Application of Scripture

Various groups and persons have at times introduced invalid *disjunctions*, or separations, between the books or parts of Scripture, thereby obscuring its unity and thus distorting its message. Some of these are:

1. **A disjunction between *Testaments***—This is the typical separation applied by **dispensationalists** as they handle the Bible. The Old Testament is often viewed as only tangentially applicable to present-day Christians, and then mostly in terms of moral example, but insufficiently in terms of *theology*. Many, if not most, would say that the Old Testament is addressed fundamentally to Israel, not the Church, though some principles carry over because of the commonality of mankind and the fact that there is only one God with whom all have to do. Certainly most, if not all, of the promises of the Old Testament are seen as for Israel and not the Church. The principle often stated for application of the Old Testament, particularly of the Law of God, expressed in Old Testament commands, is that only that which is repeated in the New Testament is applicable to New Testament believers, and whatever is not repeated is assumed to be abolished, except perhaps for ethnic and national Israel.
2. **A disjunction between *theologies***—There are two groups which commonly divide the Bible *theologically*. **Liberal/modernist theologians**, because they deny the supernatural inspiration and authorship by God of the entire Bible which lies behind the work of the authors of its various books and parts, assert that various authors expound different, even contradictory theologies or ways of understanding God and His world, essentially setting forth disparate, *entirely human*, beliefs. Of course, such an understanding is completely contrary to an orthodox, historic Christian doctrine of Scripture. Coming from an entirely different perspective, **orthodox Lutherans** claim that the key to properly understanding and applying the Bible lies in what they refer to as the “Law-Gospel Distinction.” This theological principle asserts that Law and Gospel are fundamentally incompatible, and that the failure to separate these two concepts distorts the message of Scripture.
3. **A disjunction between parts**—The final two disjunctions are errors into which all kinds of genuine Christians fall. One is a tendency to emphasize or dwell upon some *parts* of Scripture to the neglect of others. For instance, many have read stories in Genesis but are completely unfamiliar with the stories of Israel after the return from exile in Ezra-Nehemiah. Some read only the New Testament, not for the reasons under #1 above, but simply because the world of the Old Testament is so unfamiliar. Many never read the prophets. Some seem only to read the book of Revelation, while others ignore it completely out of frustration with their inability to understand it.
4. **A disjunction between genres**—Most Christians have their favorite types of Scripture and exclusively access those, not realizing that all the parts and “genres” (types of literature) of the Bible mutually define and reinforce the message of each other in ways that are crucial to a deep and mature understanding of each. Thus some people only read the stories of Scripture and have never read the Psalms extensively. Perhaps most have never read all of the Law of Moses in the Pentateuch, and although most Christians are fond of the book of Proverbs (because it seems so practical), they would be hard pressed to define “wisdom literature” and typically avoid the other Wisdom books (Job and Ecclesiastes). The solution to both this and the previous error is to see Scripture as *a*



*unified exposition of the dynamics of the Covenant relationship between God and His people.* We will return to this point later in this lesson.

### **Scriptural Understanding of Special Revelation**

The Bible itself reveals the progressive nature of its revelation and of the application of its commands. The application of certain commands and principles changes as the situation of God's people with respect to the progress of redemption changes. For example,

- In Galatians 3:15-4:10, Paul argues that parts of the Old Testament Law, namely those parts that were symbolic observances uniquely applicable to Old Testament Israel in their redemptive historical context (e.g., food laws, Festivals, circumcision, etc.), functioned in a particular way for them which no longer applies in the same way to believers living after the completion of the work of Christ.
- The main thrust of the book of Hebrews is that the requirement for the observance of Old Covenant (Old Testament) ceremonies and symbols was temporary, because their function was to point to, and instruct in the significance of, the work of Christ and the nature of the fulfillment of covenant promises in the New Covenant. Thus the *development* of redemption in God's plan rendered them of only provisional and limited application, as shadows to reality, advertisements to product (cf. for example, 8:1-13; 10:1-9).

Nevertheless, *all* of this revelation (especially God's Law) is *always* applicable to *all* of God's people of *all* times, as borne out by the following Scriptures:

- In II Timothy 3:14-17, specifically referring to the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul tells Timothy that all Scripture comes from God and is profitable to instruct God's people in the way they should live.
- In Matthew 5:17-20, Jesus indicates that New Testament people, who live in the Kingdom, should be taught to observe and obey the Old Testament Law.
- The very Old Testament laws the applicability of which to believers after the New Covenant is most questioned, are applied in the New Testament to Christians, including Gentiles (e.g., I Corinthians 5:6, 7; 9:7-12; II Corinthians 6:14-7:1), albeit *in different ways*.

Therefore, *all Scripture is a unity which applies to all of God's people of all times, with necessary distinctions which flow from the progress and development of redemptive history.* There is both continuity and discontinuity, but the fundamental emphasis is on the continuity.

### **Significance of This Understanding**

This truth has significant implications for Christians as they live out their faith, to wit:

1. All Christians must understand that all of the Bible applies to them, and seek both to understand and to apply every part of it to their lives.
2. Christians must develop skill in interpreting and applying all of the various parts and genres of Scripture, which have unique and complementary functions in fostering growth and sanctification in them.
3. Christians must grasp the total scope of the history of redemption and of their place in it in order rightly to handle the Bible.
4. Christians must focus on knowing and applying those parts of Scripture with which they are least familiar and toward which they least gravitate, so that they might be fully mature and well-rounded in their relationship to God.

### *Understanding the Covenantal Nature of Scripture*

The chart on the next page represents an overview of the various parts of Scripture and how they relate to the central concept of *covenant*, to which they all relate and which gives to each its essential function and meaning. This can be summarized as follows:

1. The Pentateuch (the *Law*) centers around the initial and most comprehensive revelation of our obligation to God as His covenant people (His stipulations to us as Lord of the Covenant). The narrative parts of this provide the context and rationale for this Law.
2. Old Testament *history* dramatizes (and thus *impresses* upon us) the demands, but especially the results, of covenant faithfulness and unfaithfulness in obedience or disobedience.
3. Old Testament *wisdom* provides example of application of the Law of God in the practical situations of life, illustrating what faithful obedience to its general principles *looks like* as we live out our covenant relationship to God.
4. The Old Testament *prophets* act as covenant lawyers, assessing the covenant faithfulness, or lack thereof, of God's people, and proclaiming the appropriate sanctions (blessings and/or curses) of the Covenant to them with respect to particular situations at particular times in the history of redemption, ultimately pointing to Christ as the one through whom the promises and blessings of the Covenant would come to the faithful, through the re-establishment of the Kingdom of God (God's rule through His image-bearer, man; lost in the Fall but restored through the second Adam, the God-man, Jesus).
5. New Testament *history* records Christ's *establishment* (gospels) and *expansion* (Acts) of the Kingdom, the definition of which is God's covenant rule through His Law, as administered through His people (in whom His image is restored progressively).
6. New Testament *epistles* (letters) provide inspired interpretations of Christ's institution of the Law of the Kingdom (*essentially* the Old Testament Law) in application to specific congregations (churches) and individuals with respect to various situations, needs, and problems.
7. New Testament *prophecy* (the book of Revelation) anticipates and foretells the application of the covenant sanctions of the Kingdom on rebels against that Kingdom, first on those in the Covenant (Jews) and then on all mankind.

Thus all of Scripture, in all of its parts, is unified as a revelation of the nature of God's covenant, as this has been progressively revealed through redemptive history, with the Law, the stipulations of the Covenant of Grace, as its foundation. To repeat the assertion presented earlier in this lesson, the Bible is, from one perspective, *a unified exposition of the dynamics of the Covenant relationship between God and His people*. [See the chart on the following page.]