

COUNCIL ON DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS

THE MYTH OF “REFORMED DISPENSATIONALISM”

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In a sense, the fact that this paper needs to be written is regrettable. “Regrettable” (hopefully) not in that it fails to make a valuable contribution to the field of Dispensational hermeneutics, but “regrettable” because of the days and times in which we live, where entirely novel theological movements develop not from councils, panels, or roundtables, and are sourced not in peer-reviewed academic research papers or journal articles, but instead, are birthed through podcasts and social media. This is precisely what has happened in the past few years, as a group of men associated with The Master’s Seminary have announced, by way of theological (and technological) fiat, that they have come up with a new theological system which they have labeled “Reformed Dispensationalism.”¹

The thesis of this paper is that “Reformed Dispensationalism” is a shadowy hermeneutical construct, a contradiction in terms, and (consistent with the theme of the 2024 Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics) a myth. This paper will address the idea of “Reformed Dispensationalism” from a historical-theological standpoint. In other words, it will present a study of doctrine and the history of doctrine – both from a Reformed/covenantal viewpoint and from a Dispensational viewpoint. In doing so, this paper will seek to demonstrate, ultimately, that the purported merger of Reformed/covenantal theology and Dispensational theology which is now being attempted by those identifying themselves as “Reformed Dispensationalists” is untenable, unworkable, and unwise.²

The paper will begin by laying some basic groundwork, starting with a review of some of the core tenets and presuppositions of both Reformed theology and Dispensational theology. Next, an historical analysis of the past interactions between Reformed theologians and Dispensational theologians will be undertaken. Here, by allowing representatives from these distinct camps to speak for themselves, it will be demonstrated just how wide the gulf is between these two theological positions, and how divergent the two systems of theology truly are. And finally, this paper interacts with some of the recent statements that have been made by those who are advocating for “Reformed Dispensationalism,” with commentary on how out-of-step this newly-birthed system is with the historical-theological reality of the past century-and-a-half.

CORE TENETS OF REFORMED THEOLOGY

The first half of the “Reformed Dispensationalism” moniker is the term “Reformed,” i.e., Reformed theology, which is a broad term encompassing various different theological convictions and traditions. For instance, there are Reformed paedobaptists and Reformed credobaptists. There are those in the Reformed camp who adhere to the Westminster Confession of Faith, while others subscribe to the London Baptist Confession of 1689. There are Reformed

¹ The “birth” of “Reformed Dispensationalism” came about in two stages, namely, in successive episodes of the *No Lasting City* podcast, the first of which was released in April 2021, and the second of which was released in July 2023. The description of the April 2021 episode reads: “Witness the birth of Reformed Dispensationalism.”

² The arguments advanced in this paper were first made in separate presentations given at Shepherds Theological Seminary (January 30, 2024) and at the 2024 Annual IFCA Convention (June 26, 2024). The presentation in both venues was titled “A Bridge Too Far: A Critique of ‘Reformed Dispensationalism.’”

Presbyterians and there are Reformed Baptists. In other words, there is great diversity of conviction and practice under the umbrella of Reformed theology.

One unifying concept which links those who subscribe to Reformed theology, however, is that of *covenant*. Michael Horton notes: “While some friends of and critics of Reformed theology have reduced Calvinism to ‘five points,’ or further still, to predestination, the actual confessions, catechisms, and standard doctrinal works of the Reformed tradition all testify to a far richer, deeper, and all-embracing faith *in the God of the covenant*. *Reformed theology is synonymous with covenant theology*.”³ Even more direct is I. John Hesselink, who states: “Reformed theology is simply covenant theology.”⁴ In other words, central to the Reformed faith are the teachings and the precepts of covenant theology.

And what is covenant theology? The answer to that question is too massive to answer comprehensively here, but a summary answer is this: covenant theology is about the supposed existence of three theological “covenants” through which God’s central purpose and program – of salvation and redemption of the elect – is accomplished. The three theological “covenants” which undergird the whole system of covenant theology are the means by which Reformed theologians attempt to describe how God’s plan of salvation came about and how it is being carried out today.⁵ These three “covenants” are the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace – each of which ties in with the Reformed conception of individual salvation being deemed to be of primary importance and, indeed, the principal theme of Scripture.⁶

First to mention is the Covenant of Works. Charles Hodge described this “covenant” in these terms: “God having created man after his own image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness,

³ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 11 (emphasis added).

⁴ I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1983), 57. There are some notable exceptions and outliers to this statement, in that not all Reformed theologians have embraced the system of covenant theology as a whole. John Murray of Princeton Theological Seminary is a well-known example of a Reformed theologian who did not entirely embrace all aspects of covenant theology (in his case, the covenant of works).

⁵ Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference!: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theologies* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990), 7: “Covenant theology can be defined very simply as a system of theology which attempts to develop the Bible’s philosophy of history on the basis of two or three covenants. It represents the whole of Scripture and history as being covered by two or three covenants.” Showers’ observation highlights the fact that covenant theologians are not monolithic in their embrace of all three theological “covenants.”

⁶ “Covenant Theology is a soteriology/redemption system that mostly focuses on the salvation of elect individuals in Christ.” Michael J. Vlach, *The New Creation Model: A Paradigm for Discovering God’s Restoration Purposes from Creation to New Creation* (Theological Studies Press, 2023), 347. Even covenant theologians such as O.T. Allis conceded that “the unifying theme of redemptive history is soteriological, grounded in the covenant of grace.” Douglas Brown, “The Glory of God and Dispensationalism: Revisiting the *Sine Qua Nons* of Dispensationalism,” in *Dispensationalism Revisited: A Twenty-First Century Restatement* (eds. Kevin T. Bauder & R. Bruce Compton) (Plymouth, MN: Central Seminary Press, 2023), 17.

entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience, forbidding him to eat the tree of knowledge of good and evil upon the pain of death. According to this statement, (1) God entered into a covenant with Adam. (2) The promise annexed to that covenant was life. (3) The condition was perfect obedience. (4) Its penalty was death.”⁷ According to Geerhardus Vos, “the covenant of works [is] an old Reformed doctrine.”⁸ Vos continues: “It is in the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works that God’s glory, the original rectitude of humanity in creation, and the imputation of Christ’s active as well as passive obedience can be maintained.”⁹

Second, is the Covenant of Grace, which is explained this way in the Westminster Confession of Faith: “Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.”¹⁰ Louis Berkhof defines the “covenant of grace” as “that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience.”¹¹ According to Parker and Lucas, the “covenant of grace” is the linchpin of covenant theology. They write: “[t]he defining characteristic of covenant theology as a system that emphasizes continuity is based on the understanding of the overarching covenant of grace, which stands as the framework for the whole progress of revelation following the fall.”¹²

Third, is the Covenant of Redemption, which Berkhof defines as follows: “The covenant of redemption may be defined as the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him.”¹³ Paul Enns elaborates on this “covenant,” saying: “In the eternal plan of God it was decreed that the Father would plan the redemption through election and predestination; the Son

⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 2:117.

⁸ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. ed., *Redemptive History & Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 237.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁰ Westminster Confession of Faith 7:3.

¹¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2021 repr.), 277. Turretin declared that “[t]his covenant of grace is a gratuitous pact entered into in Christ between God offended and man offending. In it God promises remission of sins and salvation to man gratuitously on account of Christ; man, however, relying on the same grace promises faith and obedience.” Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.) (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 2:175.

¹² Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas, “Introduction to Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (eds. Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2022), 8.

¹³ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 271.

would provide redemption through His atoning death; the Holy Spirit would effect the plan through regenerating and sealing the believers (Eph. 1:3-14).”¹⁴

As to how these three “covenants” operate together, the idea is that “[m]ankind fails to keep the covenant of works (creation), but God provides salvation in the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace applies the works of Christ into the life of those chosen by God.”¹⁵ Or, “Jesus is the faithful Israelite who entered into an eternal covenant with the Father in the covenant of redemption, and fulfilled the requirements of God in the covenant of works so that we could inherit the promises according to the covenant of grace.”¹⁶ Nathan D. Holsteen aptly summarizes the covenantal system in these terms:

“The covenant hermeneutic is a way of reading Scripture that insists the only way to read Scripture is through a covenantal frame – and that covenantal frame teaches that there is one covenant of grace, so there can only be one people of God, and that one people of God is all the elect through the ages. The consequence is simply this: any promises made to Israel in the Old Testament can legitimately, by means of this hermeneutic, be fulfilled to the saints of the New Testament. If the promises don’t seem to line up very well because they look like ‘sensuous, earthly forms,’ then we must look at those promises again; we must find a spiritual reading that allows the fulfillment of those promises to be seen in ways that fit the spiritual blessings poured out on the New Testament Church. This is precisely because of the principle of unity. The covenant hermeneutic is indeed a hermeneutic of unity: there is one predestination, there is one covenant, there is one salvation, and therefore there is one people of God.”¹⁷

Similar to Holsteen (a Dispensationalist) Michael Horton (a Reformed/covenantal theologian) agrees that: “Whenever Reformed theologians attempt to explore and explain the riches of Scripture, they are always thinking *covenantally* about every topic they take up.”¹⁸

Horton’s observation, as an adherent to Reformed/covenant theology, is especially interesting, considering that the “covenants” of covenant theology are mentioned nowhere on the pages of Scripture. As Berkhof himself admitted (in referring to the covenant of works), “it is perfectly

¹⁴ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 508. Notably, Enns describes this “covenant” in Trinitarian terms. Certain covenant theologians, however, describe the “covenant of redemption” in binarian terms, i.e., with only God the Father and God the Son being direct parties to the divine *pactum*. It leads one to question how this so-called “covenant” exists – with God the Spirit not being a party to it – without running afoul of the Trinitarian doctrine of inseparable operations.

¹⁵ T. Maurice Pugh, “Dispensationalism and Views of Redemption History,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2015), 228-229.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Nathan D. Holsteen, “The Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, 108-109.

¹⁸ Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology*, 14.

true that no such promise is explicitly recorded.”¹⁹ Rather, as theological covenants, they are deductively derived through reasoning and implications from Scripture – not from the inductive examination of passages of Scripture.

Notwithstanding the lack of direct biblical support for the theological covenants upon which its system rests, covenant (Reformed) theology reads the Scripture through the lens of these supposed covenants. J.I. Packer states: “What is covenant theology? The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what nowadays is called a *hermeneutic*—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds.”²⁰ In other words, covenant theology is not merely covenant *theology*. It is a *hermeneutic*. It is a grid through which its adherents view and interpret the Scriptures. And it is a hermeneutic which, as Holsteen notes, “is synonymous with Reformed theology”²¹—the same Reformed theology that the proponents of “Reformed Dispensationalism” now seek to merge with Dispensationalism.

CORE TENETS OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

The other half of the idea of “Reformed Dispensationalism,” of course, is the term “Dispensationalism.”

And what is Dispensationalism? In one sense, Dispensationalism is a theological system. As Bigalke and Couch note: “Dispensationalism is that *biblical system of theology* which views the Word of God as unfolding distinguishable economies in the outworking of the divine purposes for the nation of Israel in a distinct and separate manner from His purpose for the church.”²²

Despite its name, central to Dispensational theology is *not* how many administrations, or economies, or “dispensations” of history one sees on the pages of Scripture. According to Rolland McCune: “a particular number of dispensations is also not an essential feature.”²³ Similar is Roy L. Aldrich: “[t]he dispensational position is not entirely dependent on the meaning of the word [dispensation] or its various uses in the New Testament. Even if no such

¹⁹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 213. Berkhof also concedes, speaking of the same covenant, that “it is perfectly true that Scripture contains no explicit promise of eternal life to Adam.” *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁰ J.I. Packer, “Introduction: On Covenant Theology,” In Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (repr., Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1 (emphasis added).

²¹ Holsteen, “The Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism,” *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, 107.

²² Ron J. Bigalke Jr. and Mal Couch, “The Relationship Between Covenants and Dispensations,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Analysis of the Movement and Defense of Traditional Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2005), 19 (emphasis added).

²³ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity* (vol. 1) (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 113. Charles F. Baker has similarly pointed out that “Dispensationalists are no more agreed on the number and the divisions of the dispensations than they are on the doctrines of election or the second coming of Christ.” Charles F. Barker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Grace Publications, 1994), 4.

word were found in the Bible, some term would have to be chosen to describe the concept of dispensational truth.”²⁴

But while the number of dispensations one holds to is not considered an essential aspect of Dispensational theology, somewhat ironically (considering that covenant theology is its primary competing system), *covenants are essential to dispensationalism*. Holding to the existence of certain covenants – namely, the biblical covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New, etc.) – is an essential component of Dispensationalism. William Barrick observes: “Many students of the Bible tend to associate biblical covenants with covenant theology rather than with dispensational theology. However, dispensationalists must emphasize the significance of the biblical covenants because Scripture itself speaks very precisely about those covenants.”²⁵ He continues: “Without the biblical covenants we cannot develop a biblical dispensationalism.”²⁶ Andy Woods even goes so far as to say that “dispensationalists, with our emphasis on the *Biblical* covenants, are the real covenant theologians.”²⁷

Not only are the biblical covenants essential to Dispensational theology, so too are what Charles Ryrie infamously called the *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism – which are recognized by many²⁸ as three key pillars of Dispensational theology.

The first pillar of Dispensational theology is the recognition of the distinction between Israel and the Church. According to Ryrie: “This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.”²⁹ A core tenet of Dispensational theology, then, is the recognition of the distinction between Israel and the church.

The second pillar is Dispensational theology is the consistent use of a single hermeneutic – namely, the literal-grammatical-historical method. In Ryrie’s words: “Consistently literal, or plain, interpretation indicates a dispensational approach to the interpretation of Scripture.”³⁰ Walvoord was of like mind, saying: “The literal method of interpretation is . . . vitally related to

²⁴ Roy L. Aldrich, “A New Look at Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 120 (1964): 42.

²⁵ William D. Barrick, “Biblical Covenants and Their Fulfillment,” in *Dispensationalism Revisited: A Twenty-First Century Restatement*, 103.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Andy Woods, *Ever Reforming: Dispensational Theology and the Completion of the Protestant Reformation* (Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2018), 132.

²⁸ The debate surrounding the ongoing adequacy of Ryrie’s *sine qua non*, and whether they need further refinement or clarification, is an active one, but is outside the scope of this paper.

²⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (rev. ed.) (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 39.

³⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1965), 46. Ryrie finished the thought by stating: “And it is this very consistency – the strength of dispensational interpretation – that irks the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.” *Ibid.*

Biblical dispensationalism.”³¹ Ryrie puts an even finer point on the idea by stating: “If literal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle and if it is consistently applied it will cause one to be a dispensationalist. As basic as one believes literal interpretation to be, to that extent he will of necessity become a dispensationalist.”³²

And while it is true, as Bigalke and Couch have noted, that: “Dispensationalism is [a] *biblical system of theology*,”³³ that is, the *outcome* that is produced when consistently applying literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutics, and while it is true that there is such thing as a Dispensational *approach* to hermeneutics,³⁴ it is also the case that Dispensationalism is itself a hermeneutic. Dispensationalism “is an interpretive lens.”³⁵ It is “a hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures.”³⁶ Dispensationalism “is not first an articulation of theology, an outline of doctrinal belief, or a description of historical dogma, but first and foremost a *system* of biblical interpretation.”³⁷ As is true of any hermeneutic, this means Dispensationalism “is a *specific approach* to the interpretation of texts.”³⁸

The third pillar of dispensational theology is the recognition that the ultimate purpose of history is the glory of God through the demonstration that He alone is the sovereign God. According to Renald Showers: “Covenant Theology advocates that the ultimate purpose of history is the glory of God *through the redemption of the elect*.”³⁹ While Dispensationalism recognizes that “the redemption of elect human beings is a very important part of God’s purpose for history, it is only one part of that purpose. . . . the ultimate goal of history has to be large enough to incorporate all of God’s programs, not just one of them.”⁴⁰

³¹ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom: A Basic Text in Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1983), 124.

³² Charles C. Ryrie, “The Necessity of Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (1957): 250.

³³ Bigalke Jr. and Couch, “The Relationship Between Covenants and Dispensations,” 19 (emphasis added).

³⁴ See Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensational Hermeneutics: Interpretation Principles that Guide Dispensationalism’s Understanding of the Bible’s Storyline* (Theological Studies Press: 2023), 8 (noting that there are “interpretation principles foundational to Dispensationalism.”).

³⁵ Glenn R. Kreider, “What is Dispensationalism?,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption*, 18.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41. That dispensationalism is a “hermeneutic” is affirmed not only by traditional dispensationalists, but also by progressive dispensationalists, such as Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, who refer to progressive dispensationalism as employing a “complementary hermeneutic.” Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, 100-103.

³⁷ T. Maurice Pugh, “Dispensationalism and Views of Redemption History,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, 232 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Nathan D. Holsteen, “The Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, 103.

³⁹ Showers, *There Really Is a Difference!*, 20 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

While it would take volumes to detail further the many different points of departure between Reformed/covenant theology and Dispensational theology, having now briefly summarized both systems, a few of these differences are worth emphasizing here.

First, is the elevated focus on personal salvation (soteriology) in Reformed/covenant theology, which differs from Dispensationalism, whose chief concern is hermeneutical. As Kreider notes: “Dispensationalism’s innovation is not soteriological but hermeneutical.”⁴¹ And, as has been established above, Reformed/covenantalism and Dispensationalism are two differing hermeneutics. Here’s how Nathan Holsteen fleshes out this point:

“Both dispensationalism and covenant theology share the same conviction about God’s speaking in Scripture. They also share the same conviction about the need to find God’s intended meaning in Scripture . . . So the two traditions are certainly very close to one another with respect to their positions on the broader map of Christian hermeneutics. But – and this will surprise no one – there are yet differences that create a measurable conceptual distance between *the two hermeneutics*.”⁴²

Holsteen observations here are insightful. Not only do they highlight the fact that there is a “measurable conceptual distance” between Dispensationalism and Reformed/covenant *theology*, but that in fact, the two theological systems represent “two hermeneutics.”⁴³

⁴¹ Even a non-dispensationalist like O.T. Allis was able to recognize that this consistent use of a literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic is a hallmark of dispensationalism: “Literal interpretation has always been a marked feature of Premillennialism; in Dispensationalism it has been carried to an extreme. We have seen that this literalism found its most thoroughgoing expression in the claim that Israel must mean Israel, that it cannot mean the Church, that the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel concern the earthly Israel, and that the Church was a mystery, unknown to the prophets and first made known to the apostle Paul.” Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing), 1947), 244. So, too, did George Eldon Ladd. He wrote: “Here is the basic watershed between a dispensational and a nondispensational theology. Dispensationalism forms its eschatology by a literal interpretation of the Old Testament and then fits the New Testament into it. A nondispensational eschatology forms its theology from the explicit teaching of the New Testament. George E. Ladd, “Historic Premillennialism,” in *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views*, ed. Robert G. Clouse (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 27.

⁴² Nathan Holsteen, “The Hermeneutic of Dispensationalism,” in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition*, 107 (emphasis added).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 109. Holsteen also notes, that while “[t]he dispensational hermeneutic is a commitment to literalism,” it “is distinct from the literalism of the covenant hermeneutic,” with “the hermeneutic of dispensationalism [being] a (more) consistent literalism.” *Ibid.*, 112. He continues, “What sets them apart is their respective *systemic approach* to literalism. The covenant hermeneutic jettisons literalism wherever the unity of predestination, the unity of the covenant, the unity of salvation, or the unity of the people of God is perceived to be threatened. The dispensational hermeneutic, on the other hand, does not jettison a literal hermeneutic for any *systemic* principle; it affirms the literal hermeneutic while admitting that the literal hermeneutic allows for a variety of perspectives on the use of imagery and figure in any given passage.” *Ibid.*, 120, n. 23 (emphasis in original). Vern S. Poythress elaborates: “Both sides claim to interpret literally, and yet they derive different theological systems. This suggests that the difference is not literalism v. non-literalism, but different understandings of what constitutes literal hermeneutics.” Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism* (2d ed.) (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 78).

Second, are the differing emphases between the two systems on the biblical covenants (Dispensationalism) versus the theological “covenants” (Reformed/covenant) theology. These theological systems – and competing systems of hermeneutics – do not complement one another. Rather, they collide with each other. “Dispensational theology conflicts with the covenant theology of some historic Protestant creeds—most explicitly the covenant theology of the Westminster Confession.”⁴⁴

Third, are the divergent views of Israel and the church in these two systems. As Mark A. Snoeberger notes: “dispensationalism prefers to see the church as a parenthesis in God’s kingdom program, and not, to use [Michael] Horton’s words, the Mosaic era as ‘a parenthesis in redemptive history.’”⁴⁵

To summarize, and to borrow from Renald Showers’ famous line, there really is a difference between Dispensational and Reformed theology, and there really is a difference between Dispensational and covenant theology. But that has not stopped those who are promoting the idea of “Reformed Dispensationalism” from arguing that there still can be a merger, or blending of sorts, between the two systems.

THE HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN REFORMED AND DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

To get closer to the heart of the matter – i.e., whether Reformed/covenant theology and Dispensational theology can join forces under the banner of “Reformed Dispensationalism,” it is necessary to engage in a brief study of certain points of historical intersection between the two systems.

What this study will show is that while there are certain points of historical intersection between Dispensational theology and Reformed theology, what the historical record reveals is less overlap, and more clashing. Areas of common ground between the two systems will be evaluated first.

It must be conceded and agreed, for instance, that all Dispensationalists are Reformational. “Dispensational theology adopts the literal hermeneutic of the Reformation tradition.⁴⁶ Like any Protestant believer today, a Dispensationalist recognizes that his feet are planted in

⁴⁴ Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During the Twentieth Century: Theological Development and Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002), 83. DeWitt also notes, though, that Dispensationalism “applies this hermeneutic more thoroughly than has that tradition.” *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Mark A. Snoeberger, “A Traditional Dispensational Response,” in *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 242 n. 5.

⁴⁶ DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America*, 54.

Reformational soil. As Thomas Ice notes: “The reforms of the Protestant Reformation led the way to the eventual development of dispensationalism.”⁴⁷

Indeed, the Protestant Reformers held to hermeneutical presuppositions which, in many ways, would line up with those held today by Dispensationalists. Martin Luther, for instance, declared that the Scriptures “are to be retained in their simplest meaning ever possible, and to be understood in their grammatical and literal sense unless the context plainly forbids.”⁴⁸ Ulrich Zwingli said that pulling a passage from its context “is like breaking off a flower from its roots.”⁴⁹ William Tyndale said that “Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense.”⁵⁰ These men were not “Dispensationalists” (the label had not been embraced yet), but one can draw a straight line from the original Reformers’ hermeneutical commitments and methods to that of modern-day Dispensationalists. For instance, James Fazio notes:

“The Protestant Reformation called us back to the Word of God, and shows us what that looks like, especially though not exclusively, in matters pertaining to soteriology. Dispensational thinkers have sought to exegete and apply God’s Word broadly throughout every area of theology and practice. Forged from the fires of the Reformation’s heightened attention to the Bible and its details, a more refined and systematic dispensational understanding has developed and continues to be shaped.”⁵¹

Not only did Dispensationalism, as a recognized theological system, come out of Reformational soil (historically speaking), in its immediate origins, dispensationalism developed in Reformed circles. According to George Marsden: “Dispensationalism was essentially Reformed in its nineteenth-century origins and had in later nineteenth-century America spread most among revival-oriented Calvinists.”⁵² And Norman Kraus points out that “the basic theological affinities of dispensationalism are Calvinistic. The large majority of the men involved in the Bible and prophetic conference movements subscribed to Calvinistic creeds.”⁵³

⁴⁷ Thomas Ice, “Dispensationalism and the Reformation,” in *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (eds. Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio) (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2017), 19.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation: A Practical Guide to Discovering Biblical Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 1991), 45.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

⁵⁰ William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (London: Penguin Books, 2000 repr.), 303-04.

⁵¹ Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio, *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2017), 7.

⁵² George M. Marsden, “Introduction: Reformed and American,” in David F. Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 3.

⁵³ Norman C. Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1958), 60.

However, while it is undoubtedly true that Dispensational theology has Reformational origins, this is merely part of the history of the development of doctrine. It does not mean, as those today who are promoting the idea of “Reformed Dispensationalism” maintain, that the two systems of Reformed/covenantal and Dispensational theology can somehow be merged.

THE HISTORICAL DIVIDE BETWEEN REFORMED AND DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

While there have been certain historical points of intersection between Reformed and Dispensational theology, for many decades now, theologians representing both camps have been quick to highlight just how divergent the two systems of Bible interpretation and theology actually are. Sticking with those in the Reformed/covenant theology camp, there would be shock (if not chagrin) to know that a new movement called “Reformed Dispensationalism” was brewing.

For instance, Robert McKenzie, a Ruling Elder in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, highlights the fact that “the fundamental point of doctrine that separates Covenant Theology from Dispensationalism is one of hermeneutics.”⁵⁴ And Benjamin Merkle notes:

“Whereas dispensationalists employ a consistently literal hermeneutic when interpreting the Bible, covenant theologians emphasize a Christocentric interpretation that often involves an expanded meaning (*sensus plenior*) beyond what was originally given in the Old Testament. Because the Old Testament is only part of the canon of the Christian Scriptures, it must be interpreted in light of the New Testament. To ignore the way the New Testament writers understand Old Testament prophecies is to employ a non-Christian hermeneutic.”⁵⁵

Another Reformed voice expressing his discomfort with Dispensationalism is Lyle Bierma, who notes that an “aspect of dispensationalism that concerns Reformed Christians is its insistence that God always has and will have separate purposes for Israel and the church. According to this view, the history of redemption is about two distinct peoples and two divine plans. From a Reformed perspective, however, this represents a serious misreading of Scripture. The Bible is the story of one plan of God as it unfolds in one covenant of grace that he enters into with his one people.”⁵⁶

This Reformed discomfort with dispensationalism is not a recent phenomenon. Louis Berkhof once called dispensational premillennialism “a new philosophy of the history of redemption, in

⁵⁴ Robert M. McKenzie, *Identifying the Seed: An Examination and Evaluation of the Differences between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Robert M. McKenzie, 2018), 1.

⁵⁵ Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 143.

⁵⁶ Lyle D. Bierma, “Dispensationalism and the Reformed,” *Calvin Seminary Forum*, Volume 6, No. 3 (Fall 1999): 8.

which Israel plays a leading role and the Church is but an interlude.”⁵⁷ Berkhof also said: “The theory is based on a literal interpretation of the prophetic delineations of the future of Israel and of the Kingdom of God which is entirely untenable.”⁵⁸ Daniel Fuller was no more friendly to Dispensationalism, saying: “The problem of Dispensationalism is its hermeneutical point of departure.”⁵⁹

Each of these Reformed theologians, then, has been quick to point out the stark differences between Reformed theology and dispensational theology. According to William C. Watson, “the most vocal anti-dispensationalists of late are theologians of the Reformed tradition.”⁶⁰ No one, though, was more caustic in his Reformed-oriented criticism of Dispensational theology, than was John Gerstner, who in 1991 published *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, which was a biting critique of Dispensational theology. In that work, Gerstner went so far as to refer to Dispensationalism as “dubious or false evangelicalism.”⁶¹

What the facts of church history and theological scholarship reveal, then, is that there is a wide chasm which separates Reformed theology and Dispensationalism – a chasm which scholars on both sides have historically recognized. And, as Vern Poythress points out: “In the dispute between dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, both sides cannot be right.”⁶² That is, until recent days, in which there has been an attempt to bring forth a new theological system known by its proponents as “Reformed Dispensationalism.”

THE RECENT BIRTH OF “REFORMED DISPENSATIONALISM”

As noted at the outset, this paper has been made necessary by the *de novo* declaration of the existence of a new theological movement known as “Reformed Dispensationalism,” on the *No Lasting City* podcast, in an episode recorded in April 2021, and in a second episode recorded in July 2023.

With the foregoing background in view, what follows is a discussion of what those advocating for “Reformed Dispensationalism” have said in their own words (not in academic writing but instead in a podcast format),⁶³ which will be followed by a discussion of the incompatibility of

⁵⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 787.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 71.

⁶⁰ William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015), 60.

⁶¹ John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (3d ed.) (BattleGround, WA: Christian Resources, 2009), xvii.

⁶² Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, 7.

⁶³ Each of the following quotes from those championing the idea of “Reformed Dispensationalism” comes from transcripts of the April 2021 and July 2023 *No Lasting City* podcasts.

“Reformed Dispensationalism” with Reformed and Dispensational hermeneutics, and Reformed and Dispensational history.

First, those who are advocating the concept of “Reformed Dispensationalism” have been clear in expressing their views of the theological “covenants” of Reformed theology, and how holding to one or more of these “covenants” can be consistent with Dispensationalism. For instance, one of its proponents, Peter Sammons, notes: “. . . you can be a dispensationalist and affirm one, two, three, or any of the covenants of covenant theology . . . So I don’t think that dispensationalists have to be afraid of using those terms.”⁶⁴ Michael Riccardi, another representative of “Reformed Dispensationalism,” states: “. . . the truths that are seeking to be denominated by the terms ‘covenant of redemption,’ ‘covenant of works,’ ‘covenant of grace.’ I think those are truths that don’t strike at any essential tenet of dispensationalism.”⁶⁵

What Sammons and Riccardi both fail to recognize, however, is that the “covenants” of covenant theology strike right at the heart of Dispensationalism. Those “covenants” were birthed out of an entirely different – indeed, a competing – system of theology, and an entirely different hermeneutic – namely, a covenantal hermeneutic. That covenantal hermeneutic obliterates the Dispensational distinctions between the church and Israel. And that covenantal hermeneutic sees the Scripture through an entirely different lens than the Dispensationalist – namely, with a focus on the primacy of an individual’s personal salvation through Christ.

The adherents to “Reformed Dispensationalism” have not only indicated a comfort with the “covenants” of covenant theology. They have also made an appeal to church history – namely, to church history in the Reformed tradition – to show that there were some Reformed theologians (such as John Owen and Wilhelmus à Brakel) who had certain futuristic views pertaining to Israel. For instance, Sammons says:

“So the criticism comes, if you embrace the covenant of redemption, covenant of works, and so on, you are admitting certain hermeneutical moves that if you were to practice them consistently, would get you to say that Israel is the church, the church is Israel, and it would undo this land promise and the kingdom promise. And my point is, well, evidently not for Owen, and evidently not for Brakel . . . Owen didn't choose between the two. And Brakel didn't choose between the two. I don't think I'm choosing between the two.”

In other words, one of the planks of the “Reformed Dispensationalist” platform is that since there were certain Reformed/covenant theologians who acknowledged the Scripture’s teachings concerning a future for Israel, then there is also the possibility of a more full-scale merger of the two systems of Reformed/covenant theology and Dispensational theology.

But this ultimately is saying too much while proving too little. The fact that S. Lewis Johnson held to all five points of Calvinism did not make him “Reformed,” in the classical sense. Further,

⁶⁴ At the time he expressed his views on the *No Lasting City* podcast, Dr. Sammons was a member of the Theology faculty at The Master’s Seminary. Dr. Sammons is no longer listed on that institution’s website.

⁶⁵ Dr. Riccardi was and is serving as an Assistant Professor of Theology at The Master’s Seminary.

the fact that John Murray rejected the “covenant of works” did not make him “Dispensational,” in any sense. Neither does the fact that certain men in the stream of Reformed theology recognized a future for Israel make them Dispensationalists. And neither does this way of thinking allow for the merger of the Reformed/covenantal approach to the Bible – soteriological, and through the lens of the three theological covenants – with the Dispensational interpretation of Scripture.

Those who are advocating the concept of Reformed Dispensationalism have demonstrated an awareness that what they are promoting is not a “development” within Dispensationalism, but instead a “change” to Dispensationalism.⁶⁶ For instance, Sammons, in stating his case for “Reformed Dispensationalism,” opined: “I think it is a matter of harmony, even sometimes more than hermeneutics.” And then: “I just want to create space to see that, you know, there is indeed a lot of overlap.”

But their own statements are too broad and sweeping to suggest that what they are advocating is a mere “development” within Dispensationalism. For instance, consider the strength of this language from Sammons:

“There’s also other principles in covenant theology that we have to affirm in order to be faithful Christians. And that’s part of the thing I think we oftentimes miss in the dispensational circles is that we all affirm that man owes God obedience because we are creatures made in His image. And the way Thomas Watson and William Ames defined it, the covenant of works, is that man owes God obedience personally, perpetually, and perfectly, right? That’s how they define the covenant of works ultimately. So principally, we would affirm all the truths of the covenant of works . . . you must affirm that to be a Christian, that man owes God obedience. There’s no Christian who has ever lived who denies that principle . . . those things are very vital to our Christian faith.”

Of course, it is true that, as Christians, we owe God obedience as the Creator and owner of all things on heaven and on earth. And it certainly is true that we have failed to obey God. Romans 3:23 reminds us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But these truths have nothing to do with a supposed “covenant of works,” which Sammons indicates we need to affirm “in order to be faithful Christians.”⁶⁷

Andy Woods, a traditional Dispensationalist, once said this about progressive Dispensationalism: “Progressive dispensationalists are those attempting to find a middle ground between traditional dispensationalism and covenant theology in their desire to build a bridge to Reformed theology.”⁶⁸ Woods’ concerns over progressive dispensationalism foreshadowed the concerns

⁶⁶ This “development” versus “change” language harkens back to the debates between traditional Dispensationalists and progressive Dispensationalists in the wake of works published by, among others, Craig Blaising, Darrell Bock, and Robert Saucy, over the past 30 years.

⁶⁷ Sammons then went on to proactively critique those Dispensationalists who might not be on board with his model, saying: “There are dispensationalists who are sort of, they cut themselves off from some of the blessings of the biblical truths behind it, like doctrines like theological covenants, the Reformed theology.”

⁶⁸ Andy Woods, *Ever Reforming*, 142.

raised here over “Reformed Dispensationalism.” It is an attempt to build a bridge from Dispensationalism to Reformed/covenant theology. Here again, is Sammons, seeking to build that bridge through what he shared on the *No Lasting City* podcast:

“Reformed Dispensationalism is sort of a way of saying . . . is not our brand of, of doctrine, our understanding of Reformed theology coupled with that understanding of Israel, and hermeneutical commitments. Is that not compatible, at least, you know, obviously acknowledging distinctions, but compatible enough to say we can wear the moniker Reformed as well, and have these distinctives?”

CONCLUSION

Despite the Reformed Dispensationalists’ call for compatibility between Reformed/covenant theology and Dispensationalism, the reality is, these two systems are not so easily joined together. As has been established above, from a historical-theological standpoint, the whole notion of “Reformed Dispensationalism” is, to say the least, problematic.

Those in the Reformed camp have already recognized the impossibility of “Reformed Dispensationalism.” For instance, R. Scott Clark, professor of church history at Westminster Seminary in California, has written:

“One might perhaps speak of reforming Dispensationalism, in the sense of reorganizing it or changing it internally, but if by “Reformed Dispensationalism,” one intends to indicate a synthesis of Dispensational theology with Reformed theology, it is impossible. It is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.”⁶⁹

And J. Ligon Duncan, Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, proved himself somewhat prescient over ten years ago, when he said this at First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi:

“There is no one on either side of the Dispensational/Covenant Theology Debate who would say, “Well, both of these sides are half right, we just sort of need to combine the two of them.” They are diametrically opposed at so many points that it would be hopeless to attempt to come up with sort of a hybrid of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology.”⁷⁰

Duncan and Clark – each writing from their Reformed perspective – have put their finger on the concerns undergirding this paper. A Dispensationalist can appreciate the writings of Reformers from a devotional standpoint, and can have his heart inflamed by the rich devotional writings of

⁶⁹ R. Scott Clark, “Can Dispensationalists be Reformed? (Part One),” October 9, 2023, <https://heidelblog.net/2023/10/can-dispensationalists-be-reformed-part-1/>

⁷⁰ J. Ligon Duncan, “Dispensationalism,” October 4, 2013, <https://fpcjackson.org/resource-library/classes-training-devotionals/dispensationalism/>

the Puritans and other Reformers. A Dispensationalist can even appreciate aspects of Reformed theology to the extent that it stands on the shoulders of the actual Reformation lineage.

But that is a far cry from attempting to merge Reformed theology and Dispensational theology, and in doing so ignoring both downplaying the significant theological and hermeneutical differences between the two systems, and the bearing out of those differences in the historical record. “Reformed Dispensationalism,” to borrow from R. Scott Clark, is “impossible,” an “oxymoron,” and a “contradiction in terms.” Not only that, “Reformed Dispensationalism” is a myth.