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DISTINCTIVES OF DISPENSATIONAL PREACHING

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INTRODUCTION¹

My interest in dispensationalism started as a young boy. My dad gave me my first study Bible—a Scofield Reference Bible with my name on it. As I read through the Bible and the notes I learned that God had a program for this world and that history is headed for a climax: the second coming of Jesus Christ to earth to establish his kingdom. My desire to understand the prophetic word grew as I went to Cedarville College (now Cedarville University) from 1976 to 1980 and Dallas Theological Seminary from 1980-1984. Both schools taught dispensational premillennialism. At Cedarville I took my dad’s class on the book of Revelation. At Dallas Theological Seminary, I took Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost’s classes on Biblical Covenants and Daniel and Revelation. I read *Things to Come* by Dr. Pentecost. As a pastor I preached a series of messages on Daniel and Revelation. I also preached a series which I called God’s Forecast for the Future. Since coming to Baptist Bible Seminary I have had the privilege of teaching several preaching classes. In Advanced Expository Preaching I challenge my students to preach the neglected OT prophetic books and the book of Revelation.

In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul told Timothy “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” The word ὀρθοτομοῦντα translated “rightly dividing” means to cut a straight line, to cut a straight road.² This verse emphasizes the importance of studying the word in order to interpret and teach it accurately.

Dispensational preachers are able to rightly divide the word of truth when they recognize the important divisions of scripture. Dr. C. I. Scofield in his book *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* gives 10 outline studies of the important divisions of scripture: (1) the Jew, the Gentile and the Church of God, (2) the seven dispensations, (3) the two advents of Christ, (4) the two

¹ Please do not copy or distribute this paper as it is a work in progress and is intended for publication in *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, a biannual journal of Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania.

² BDAG, 722 states that “rightly dividing the word of truth” means to “guide the word of truth along a straight path (like a road that goes straight to its goal) without being turned aside by wordy debates or impious talk. The phrase implies to “teach the word aright, expound it soundly, and preach fearlessly.”

resurrections, (5) the five judgments, (6) law and grace, (7) the believer's two natures, (8) the believer's standing and state, (9) salvation and rewards, and (10) believers and professors.³

In his book *Dispensationalism* Charles Ryrie states that the *sine qua non*⁴ of traditional dispensationalism is: (1) literal interpretation, (2) the distinction of Israel and the Church, and (3) the glory of God as the goal of history. Is Ryrie's *sine qua non* enough to define dispensationalism?

In his book *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century*, Dale DeWitt lists seven essentials of dispensationalism: (1) literal interpretation of Scripture, (2) salvation by grace without Israel or Israel's Law, (3) genuine progress in revelation, (4) the plan of God, the Covenants and the Dispensations, (5) Israel, the Church and the Kingdom, (6) the Church as a Pauline revelation, and (7) the Pretribulation Rapture of the Church.⁵

What are the distinctives of dispensationalism? Here is my list: (1) literal interpretation of the Bible, (2) progressive revelation (3) the distinction of Israel and the Church, (4) the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth as the goal of God's program for the ages, (5) the dispensations in God's program for the ages, (6) the unconditional biblical covenants for Israel (Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New), and (7) premillennial eschatology which includes the pretribulation rapture of the Church.

LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

The hermeneutics of dispensationalism has been defined as literal, plain, normal and historical-grammatical interpretation. Johnson argues that literal interpretation "entails those meanings which the author intended to communicate in the expressions of the text (grammar) in the original setting (historical)."⁶

The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy made a statement regarding literal interpretation at Summit II on Hermeneutics. Article VII reads: We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application. This affirmation is directed at those who believe that there is a deeper meaning to Scripture than what is expressed in the written text by the authors.

³ C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell), 2.

⁴ The words *sine qua non* is a Latin phrase which means "without which none" and refers to essentials. According to Ryrie, dispensationalism could not exist as a theological system without these three essentials.

⁵ DeWitt is professor of Bible and Theology at Grace Bible College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His book gives a detailed exegetical and theological argument for dispensationalism. Traditional dispensationalists may question whether the Church is a Pauline revelation. Paul stated in Ephesians 3:5-6 that the mystery was not made known to the sons of men in other ages, but has been revealed by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets. Paul obviously was one of the apostles who received the revelation of the mystery but he was not the only recipient of it, though he did more than any of the other apostles in explaining it in his epistles, especially Ephesians. The mystery is that Jews and Gentiles are co-heirs and of the same body—the Body of Christ or the Church (Eph.3:6).

⁶ Elliott Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 65.

What a passage means is fixed by the author and is not subject to change by its readers. Meaning is determined by the author but discovered by the readers. There is one correct interpretation but there can be many applications of the text.

Covenant theologians (Waltke, Poythress) also claim to believe in literal interpretation of the Scriptures. So what is distinctive about dispensationalism? Dispensationalists claim to practice consistent literal interpretation of all scripture including Old Testament prophetic literature. For example, dispensationalists interpret Ezekiel 40-44 as a prediction of a literal temple that will be in Jerusalem during the millennial kingdom. Covenant theologians on the other hand spiritualize Ezekiel 40-44 and say that the temple is a picture of the church reading the NT truth about the church as a temple from Ephesians 2:19-22 back into Ezekiel's prophecy.

Dispensational preachers are committed to expository preaching of the word of God. They explain the author's intended meaning of the text of scripture. They are known for verse by verse exposition through books of the Bible (Swindoll, MacArthur, Jeremiah, Wiersbe).

Here is my definition of expository preaching: Expository preaching is the persuasive communication of the author's intended meaning of a Bible text in its context based on historical grammatical exegesis with the goal of helping people to understand and apply the truths of God's word to their lives.

Before preaching verse by verse through a book of the Bible I like to give an overview message in which I explain the author, recipients, date and place of writing, message, purpose and main outline of the book of the Bible. I want my audience to understand the historical context of the book of the Bible and the argument of the author.

Literal interpretation is historical grammatical interpretation. For each individual sermon I explain the historical context of the passage before reading the scripture in the introduction of my sermon. When I preach narrative literature, I explain the historical setting which includes the date and place of the event. I explain the meaning of the verses of Scripture as I preach and teach verse by verse through a book of the Bible.

Grammatical interpretation involves explaining the meaning of the Scripture in its context. In the study I like to read the Bible text in the original language (Hebrew and Greek), look up words in lexicons and Bible dictionaries, write a grammatical diagram and an exegetical outline. When I preach I like to explain the meaning of important words, and use an expositional outline which follows the argument of the author.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

Over 1600 years forty human authors (prophets and apostles) under the direction of the Holy Spirit wrote the inspired, inerrant scriptures (2 Tim.3:16-17; 2 Pet.1:20-21; John 17:17). God did not give his special revelation all at once. God gave new revelation at the beginning of some dispensations. For instance God made a promise to Abram of land, seed and blessing (Gen.12) at the beginning of the dispensation of promise (Gen.12). God gave the ten commandments to

Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19-20).. The giving of the law was the beginning of the dispensation of law.

The Bible records historical events and their interpretation. The main events in world history are: creation, the fall, the global flood, the tower of Babel, the giving of the law, the first coming of Christ, the death and resurrection of Christ, the Church, and the coming of Christ to establish his kingdom. These historical events are interpreted and explained throughout the written Scriptures. The four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) tell the story of Jesus and his death on the cross and his bodily resurrection. The epistles explain the significance of the death of Christ for our sins (redemption, reconciliation, propitiation).

The sixty six books of the divine library have a chronological sequence and should be read in their historical context. The Old Testament (39 books) begins with creation and tells the story of Israel. The New Testament (27 books) tells the story of Jesus Christ, the Church and Christ's coming and kingdom.

The content of the gospel message preached by the apostle Paul was different from the message that Jonah preached in Nineveh. Jonah preached "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." And the city of Nineveh repented. Paul preached the message of Christ and him crucified when he went to Corinth (cf. 1 Cor.2:2; 15:1-11).

In the progress of revelation does the meaning of the Scriptures change or expand due to the perspective of added revelation? Elliott Johnson (a traditional dispensationalist) writes, "The bottom line is this: to adopt literal interpretation as a *sine qua non* is to affirm that the context of the theological system provides no valid warrant to expand or alter the meaning understood in the immediate context."⁷

Darrell Bock (a progressive dispensationalist) argues for a complementary hermeneutic, "According to this approach, the New Testament does introduce change and advance. It does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise."⁸

It is true that New Testament revelation gives new additions but the new truth does not change the interpretation of the Old Testament in its context. New Testament authors have given new revelation in their books and they have interpreted Old Testament promises in light of the coming of Christ and his death on the cross. Traditional dispensationalists do not read the later apostolic interpretations back into the original Old Testament texts. Traditional dispensationalists would argue that the Old Testament needs to be read not with the informing theology of the New Testament but with the informing theology of OT books that were written prior starting with the book of Genesis.

⁷ Elliott Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 76.

⁸ Darrell Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 90.

Bock denies that the complementary hermeneutic allegorizes or spiritualizes the text or is similar to *sensus plenior* or multiple meaning.⁹ Bock claims that complementary hermeneutics “affirms one stable meaning in texts, dual authorship, progress of revelation, and the dynamic character of history and promise.”¹⁰ But his approach to hermeneutics follows some of the same patterns used by covenant theologians. For instance, Bock argues from Acts 2 that Christ is seated on the Davidic throne in heaven (a view held by covenant theologians).

Traditional dispensationalists differ with progressive dispensationalists and covenant theologians on progressive revelation. Ryrie writes, “New revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation meant something different. It may add to it or even supersede it, but it does not contradict it. A word or concept cannot mean one thing in the Old Testament and take on opposite meaning in the New Testament. If this were so the Bible would be filled with contradictions and God would have to be conceived of as deceiving the Old Testament prophets when He revealed to them a nationalistic kingdom, since He would have known all the time that He would completely reverse the concept in later revelation. The true concept of progressive revelation is like a building---and certainly the superstructure does not replace the foundation.”¹¹

DISTINCTION BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

Dispensational preachers distinguish between Israel and the Church. God has two separate peoples: Israel and the Church. In the past God worked through Israel as a “kingdom of priests.” God is now working through the Church which is made up of saved Jews and saved Gentiles. Covenant theologians preach that there is one people of God made up of saints of all ages. They believe that the Church began with the call of Abram in the Old Testament and includes all believers of all ages.

Israel

The word “Israel” refers to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Paul states that Israel was given the covenants (Abrahamic, Davidic, New), the law, and the promises (Rom.9:4). Jesus was a Jew, who was born of the virgin Mary, who was a physical descendant of David and Abraham (Luke 3). Paul was a Jew (Rom.9:3). But Paul recognized that “not all Israel are of Israel” (Rom.9:6). What did Paul mean? Israel can be divided into two groups: unbelieving Jews (“children of the flesh”) and believing Jews who are called “the children of the promise” (Rom.9:8).

God has a future plan for Israel which is distinct from that of the Church and the Gentile nations. The tribulation period begins when the Antichrist (the Roman prince) makes a covenant with Israel for seven years (Dan.9:27). Israel will rebuild a temple and reinstitute a sacrificial system. The proof of this is that the Roman prince will put a stop to sacrifices in the middle of the 70th

⁹ Ibid., 91.

¹⁰ Ibid., 94.

¹¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 84.

week of Daniel (the tribulation period). Revelation 11:1-2 refers to this future tribulation temple that will be trampled by Gentiles in the last half of the tribulation period. Currently Israel does not have a temple on the temple mount in Jerusalem. In the tribulation period 144,000 Jewish witnesses will be sealed by God (Rev.7). These will be the righteous remnant of Israel (the children of the promise) who will preach the gospel of the kingdom to the world. Israel will be persecuted by the Antichrist during the second half of the tribulation period (Dan.7:21; Rev.12:13-17). Israel will see Messiah Jesus at his second coming to earth (Zech.12:10; Rom.11:26-27). The righteous remnant of Israel (Jewish survivors of the tribulation period who trust in Jesus as Messiah) will enter the kingdom and rebuild the millennial temple in Jerusalem (Ezekiel 40-43). The righteous remnant of Israel will inherit the land promised by God to Israel in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen.15).

The Church

The Church is made up of Christians who are saved Jews and saved Gentiles from Pentecost until the Rapture. There is no biblical evidence that the Church existed in the Old Testament. Jesus predicted that he would build his Church (Matthew 16:18).¹² Jesus predicted that the apostles would be baptized by the Spirit a few days after his ascension (Acts 1:5). The Church began on the day of Pentecost as the Spirit filled the apostles (Acts 2:1-4). Peter preached the gospel and three thousand believed and were baptized in water and added to the group (Acts 2:41). The early Christians committed themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to breaking of bread and to prayers (Acts 2:42). They met in the temple to listen to the apostles' teaching. They shared their possessions with the poor. They opened their homes and ate meals together. As a result of their praise and public witness the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:47). Peter recognized that the baptism of the Spirit occurred at Pentecost when the same Spirit came upon the Gentiles (including Cornelius) when he preached the gospel to them (Acts 11:15-16).

Paul teaches about the universal Church in Ephesians. The Church did not exist until Christ ascended and became the Head of the Body (Eph.1:20-23). Christ broke down the barrier of the law by his death on the cross and created in himself "one new man" (Eph.2:15). The "one new man" is the Church. The Church is a mystery (a truth not revealed in the Old Testament but revealed in the New Testament). Paul revealed this mystery of saved Jews and saved Gentiles being co-heirs and of the same body (Eph.3:6).¹³

Paul uses the word "church" nine times in Ephesians and in each instance he refers to the universal church. (1) Jesus has been given as head over all things to the Church (Eph.1:22). (2) The manifold wisdom of God is made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places (Eph.3:10), (3) Glory should be given to God in the Church by Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever (Eph.3:21), (4) Christ is the head (authority) over the church (Eph.5:23), (5) the Church is to be subject to Christ (Eph.5:24), (6) Christ loved the Church by

¹² Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." This is the first mention of the word "Church" in the New Testament. The verb "will build" is future. From the perspective of Jesus the Church was not in existence at that time but was still future.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, "The Mystery in Ephesians 3" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:489 (1966): 24-31.

dying on the cross for the Church (Eph.5:25), (7) Christ sanctifies and cleanses his Church by the washing of the water by the word so he can present the Church to himself as a glorious Church (Eph.5:27), (8) The Lord nourishes and cherishes the Church as a man does his own body (Eph.5:29), and (9) the relationship of a husband and a wife is to reflect the relationship of Christ and his Church (Eph.5:32).

Geisler writes, “Other than the early post-Pentecost church in Jerusalem, there never has been and never will be a truly catholic (universal) church on earth. Neither the Roman nor the Greek branch of Christendom is truly catholic, the only truly catholic church today is the spiritual body of Christ, which is all true believers in whatever local church or denomination. Never does the Bible use the word *church* to denote one visible ecclesiastical union that is the sole organization representing Christ on earth; the repeated use of the word *churches* reveals that only in a general, collective sense can we speak of the many self-governing, independent churches that are based on New Testament teaching as the ‘church’ on earth.”¹⁴

God has a future plan for the Church which is distinct from Israel. The Church will be raptured by the Lord Jesus Christ before the tribulation period (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58; John 14:1-6; Revelation 3:10). Christians will be judged by the Lord Jesus Christ at the Bema and receive crowns for faithful service done for the Lord on earth. The wedding of the Lamb will happen in heaven before the second coming of Christ to earth (Rev.19). The Church will return with Jesus Christ to the earth and Christians will reign and rule with Christ over cities in the millennial kingdom. The Church will live in the city of New Jerusalem which will descend and be on the new earth in the eternal state (Rev.21-22).

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH AS THE GOAL OF GOD’S PROGRAM FOR THE AGES

Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Where is history heading? It is heading to a climax: the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth.¹⁵

John Walvoord noted different aspects of the kingdom of God: “In defining the doctrine of the kingdom, it is important to observe that the Scriptures themselves give a detailed description of various spheres of kingdom, including the universal kingdom where God rules over all creation, the kingdom of God revealing God’s rule over moral creatures (such as holy angels and elect human beings), the kingdom of David, the present mystery form of the kingdom and the millennial kingdom. Each of these spheres is distinct as described in the Scriptures. Ignoring scriptural distinctions leads to erroneous conclusions in the doctrine of the kingdom and confuses our understanding of God’s promises.”¹⁶

¹⁴ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology* vol. 4 (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2005), 55.

¹⁵ For a detailed study of the kingdom of God read Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968).

¹⁶ John Walvoord, “Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, eds. Wesley Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 75-92.

The kingdom of God is a theme that is found throughout the Bible. It includes God's sovereign rule over all creation as well as the theocratic kingdom of God on earth. God's theocratic kingdom began when he created Adam and Eve and delegated authority to rule over the animal kingdom (Gen.1:26-28). They were to rule over the earth under the authority of God. As a result of their sin, Satan became the ruler of this world. From Adam to Moses, God reigned over this fallen world. Even Satan reported to God to give an account of his activities (Job 1-2). God established a theocratic kingdom on earth when he entered into a covenant relationship with Israel (Exodus 24:1-8). Israel became a kingdom of priests to God (Exodus 19:4-6). God mediated his rule over Israel through Moses, then Joshua and the judges. The nation of Israel demanded a king and God gave them their request (1 Sam.8:9-22). Saul disobeyed God's commands and forfeited his crown. God then chose David to be king and made a covenant with him in which he promised a house, throne and kingdom (2 Sam.7:12-16). The nation of Israel was divided into two kingdoms after the death of Solomon: Israel (10 northern tribes) and Judah. The Assyrians took Israel into captivity in 722 B.C. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and took Judah into captivity in 586 B.C. God's theocracy on earth was terminated. The times of the Gentiles began (Luke 21:24). During this time Israel has not had a king seated on the throne of David. The New Testament begins John the Baptist preaching the message to Israel: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Mt.3:2). When John the Baptist was imprisoned Jesus came preaching the same message (Mt.4:17). Later Jesus sent his twelve apostles out to Israel to preach the same message (Mt.10:7). The nation of Israel did not repent of their sins. Instead the Jewish rulers committed the sin of the blasphemy of the Spirit as they claimed that Jesus did his miracles in the power of Satan rather than of God. As a result of their rejection, Jesus began to teach the people in parables. In Matthew 13 he taught the parables of the kingdom.

As a result of the nation of Israel's rejection of Messiah Jesus, the Davidic kingdom was postponed. Ryrie writes, "Therefore, when a dispensationalist says that the kingdom is postponed, he is speaking of the Davidic kingdom, but he also affirms the continuing presence of the universal kingdom and the spiritual rule of God in individual hearts today."¹⁷

Toussaint follows Alva McClain in advocating an "intercalation" view of the kingdom. The present age between the two advents of Christ is a parenthesis prior to the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. Unlike some traditional dispensationalists (Ryrie, Walvoord) who believe in a mystery form of the kingdom during the present age, Toussaint believes that all references to the kingdom in the New Testament refer to the earthly millennial kingdom. Toussaint writes, "If there is no present form of the messianic kingdom, then the present age is something of a parenthesis. From Genesis 12 through the gospels and deep in Acts, God's primary purpose dealt with Israel. In the gospels and Acts, the Lord Jesus is offered to Israel as Messiah. The coming of the kingdom was contingent upon their response. Because of Israel's negative response, God is now working with the church, distinct from Israel (Rom.9-11; Eph.2:11-22; 3:1-12). The church, therefore, is a mystery, never prophesied in the Old Testament (Eph.3:4-6). It is neither a 'new Israel' nor a new form of the kingdom."¹⁸

¹⁷ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 172.

¹⁸ Stanley Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 249.

In the future Israel will believe that Jesus is the Messiah at his second coming to earth (Zech.12:10-14; Matthew 23:39; Romans 11:25-27). Daniel predicted that the Son of Man would be given dominion, glory and a kingdom which would never pass away (Daniel 7:13-14). John saw heaven worship the Lamb when he took the scroll of his inheritance: the title deed to the universe (Rev.5). Then the Lord will restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). The eternal kingdom will first involve a millennial reign of Christ on this present earth and then it will extend into the eternal state in a new heavens and new earth (Rev.20-22).

Dispensationalists have been accused of teaching a pessimistic view of world history. But dispensationalism sees an optimistic view to world history. World history is headed to a climax: the establishment of God's kingdom on earth through Jesus Christ. Ephesians 1:22 indicates that all things have been placed under Jesus Christ after his bodily resurrection from the dead and ascension to the right hand of God. Hebrews 1:8 says that we do not see all things put under him. But history is headed to a climax: the dispensation of the fullness of times when all things will be placed under Christ (Eph.1:11). Paul explains that after the second coming of Christ "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. For He has put all things under His feet. But when He says all things are put under Him it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted (Paul is referring to God the Father). Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

THE DISPENSATIONS IN GOD'S PROGRAM OF THE AGES

Dispensationalists believe that God is sovereign and that He has a plan for the ages. World history can be divided into dispensations. Ryrie gives this summary: "Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In his household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to his own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time."¹⁹

The word "dispensation" comes from the Greek word *oikonomia* which comes from two Greek words: *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (law). The word is used of the office of stewardship (Lk.16:24). In Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9 it is used to refer to an administration in world history.

What is a dispensation? Ryrie states that "a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."²⁰

Scofield gives this definition: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."²¹ Toussaint writes, "It perhaps would be better to refer to a responsibility placed on individuals in a dispensation rather

¹⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford, 1959), 5.

than a test. Nevertheless the various dispensations do render man accountable and in that sense a test may be considered as a valid element of any dispensation.”²²

Lewis Sperry Chafer gives this definition of a dispensation: “A dispensation is a specific, divine economy, a commitment from God to man of a responsibility to discharge that which God has appointed him.”²³

Here is my definition: A dispensation is God’s distinctive method of governing people during a time period of human history in which God gives new revelation which includes a test of obedience which man fails that leads then to God’s judgment.

How many dispensations are there in the Bible? Progressive dispensations present four dispensations: Patriarchal: Creation to Sinai, Mosaic: Sinai to Messiah’s Ascension, Ecclesial: Messiah’s Ascension to Messiah’s Return (second coming of Christ to earth) and (4) Zionistic: Millennial and Eternal kingdoms.²⁴ Traditional dispensationalists believe in seven dispensations in world history: (1) Innocence, (2) Conscience, (3) Human government, (4) Promise, (5) Law, (6) Grace and (7) Kingdom. A person does not have to believe in seven dispensations to be a dispensationalist.

Innocence (Gen.1:1-3:6)

Time: The dispensation of innocence began with Creation and ended with the Fall of man.

Stewardship Responsibilities: God gave to Adam and Eve the following responsibilities: (1) Procreation: be fruitful and multiply (Gen.1:28), (2) Geographical distribution: fill the earth (Gen.1:28), (3) Stewardship of the earth: Subdue it (Gen.1:28), (4) Rulership over the animal kingdom: Man was given authority over the animals. Man was to have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth (Gen.1:28), (5) Diet: God told Adam and Eve that they could eat fruits and vegetables (Gen.1:29), (6) Work: God told Adam to tend and keep the garden (Gen.2:15). (7) God told Adam and Eve to not eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen.2:17). This was a test of man’s innocence. Obedience would show love for God. Disobedience would lead to death.

Man’s Disobedience: The serpent deceived the woman and the woman ate of the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen.3:1-6). Adam deliberately disobeyed God’s command and ate the forbidden fruit (Gen.3:6). Man’s disobedience led to the following consequences: (1) Guilt. The eyes of Adam and Eve were opened after they sinned and now they saw the world as sinners (Gen.3:7a). (2) Shame: They made coverings for themselves out of fig leaves (Gen.3:7b). (3) Fear: They hid from God among the trees (Gen.3:8). Sin led to a broken

²² Stanley Toussaint, “A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald Campbell (Chicago: Mood Press, 1982), 83-84.

²³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947), 7:122.

²⁴ Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up to Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993).

relationship with God. (4) Blame: They refused to accept responsibility for their sinful actions (Gen.3:11-13). Instead Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent.

God's Judgment: God cursed the serpent by making it crawl on its belly (Gen.3:14). Because of Eve's sin women would experience labor pains in child birth and marital conflicts would result from women wanting to rule their husbands (Gen.3:16). God cursed the ground with the result that work would become difficult for man. Death entered the human race because of Adam's sin (Gen.3:19; Rom.5:12).

God's Salvation: God did not leave Adam and Eve in their sin. God went looking for Adam and Eve and confronted them about their disobedience. Then God promised that the seed of the woman would defeat the serpent (Gen.3:15).²⁵ Adam believed this promise and named his wife Eve (mother of all living). God then in grace expelled Adam and Eve from the garden in Eden and prevented their return by having a cherubim with a flaming sword prevent anyone to come and eat of the tree of life in their fallen condition.

Conscience (Genesis 3:7-8:14)

The dispensation of conscience began with the Fall of man and continued to the global flood. The stewardship under which man lived after the Fall was different from that before the Fall. In Romans 5:13-14 Paul makes a distinction between a pre-law age and the age of the law. "For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come." Romans 2:15 indicates that people without a written revelation from God had a moral sense of right and wrong (a conscience) to guide them in their decision making. This conscience either accused or excused them.

Man's Disobedience: Cain murdered his brother and protested his punishment (Gen.4:1-15). Cain and his descendants built a godless civilization (Gen.4:16-24). The sons of God took wives from the daughters of men (Gen.6:1-4). "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen.6:8).

God's Judgment: As a result of their violence and immorality God decided to judge the world with a global flood (Gen.6-8).

God's Salvation: But God had grace on Noah (Gen.6:8). God commanded Noah to build an ark to save his family. Noah obeyed God and built the ark. God delivered his family and two of every kind of animal which boarded the ark from the destructive global flood which killed sinful men, animals and birds (Gen.6-8). Hebrews 11:7 says "By faith Noah being divinely warned of

²⁵ This is *the protoevangelium*- the first mention of the gospel in the Bible. The promise does not reveal the name of the seed of the woman. Isaiah would later indicate that the Messiah would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14). This promise was fulfilled at the cross when the seed of the woman (Jesus who was born of the virgin Mary) crushed the serpent even as the serpent bit his heel (the crucifixion of the Messiah). Christ disarmed principalities and powers and made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it at the cross (Col.2:15). Through death Jesus destroyed the devil, who had the power of death (Heb.2:14).

things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.”

Human Government (Genesis 8:15-11:9)

Time: Flood to Tower of Babel. The dispensation of human government began with the giving of the Noahic covenant to Noah and his family and ended with the judgment of the people at the Tower of Babel.

Stewardship Responsibilities: God made an unconditional covenant with Noah in which He promised to never judge the world again with a global flood (Gen.8:21; 9:11b). God promised seasons and temperature changes while the world exists (Gen.8:22). He blessed Noah and his sons and told them to have children and fill the earth (Gen.9:1, 7). God permitted man to eat meat, but not blood (Gen.9:2-4). God established capital punishment for murder (Gen.9:5-6). The sign of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow (Gen.9:12-17).

Man’s Disobedience: But human government became corrupt. The people built the tower of Babel (Gen.11:1-4) in disobedience to God’s command to fill the earth (Gen.9:1).

God’s Judgment: As a result God judged the people and confused their languages and scattered the people (Gen.11:9). The table of nations indicates where the different people groups settled after the Tower of Babel (Gen.10).

Promise/Patriarchal Rule (Genesis 12:1-Exodus 18:27)

The dispensation of promise began with the call and promise made to Abram and ended with the giving of the law to Israel at Mt. Sinai. God promised Abram a land, seed and blessing and made an unconditional covenant of grant with him (Gen.12, 15).

Man’s Test: Abram’s faith in the promise was tested while he lived in the promised land. Famine in the land led Abram to go to Egypt for food. Abram’s servants and Lot’s servants fought over the good grazing land. The Canaanites were living in the promised land at that time. The land did not belong to Abram. The only land that Abram possessed was the cave at Machpelah which he purchased to bury his wife Sarah. Abram was old and had to wait 25 years for God to bless him with the promised Son Isaac.

Man’s Disobedience: Abram disobeyed God on several occasions. Abram lied about Sarah being his wife when he went down to Egypt and the promise was endangered when the pharaoh of Egypt took Sarah into his harem. Abram took Hagar as his concubine and had a son named Ishmael. Isaac too failed as he lied about his wife Rebekah being his sister and put her in danger with Abimelech (Gen.26). Jacob deceived his father Isaac into receiving the blessing. He struggled with deceit most of his life. The family went down to Egypt and settled there. As a result they became slaves of pharaoh.

God’s Judgment: God judged his people as they were enslaved for 430 years in Egypt.

God's Salvation: Abram believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (Gen.15:6). Dispensationalists do not believe in two ways of salvation. We believe that Old Testament saints were saved by grace through faith alone. Paul wrote, "Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Rom.4:16).

Law (Exodus 19:1-Acts 1:26)

Time: The dispensation of the law began with God giving the ten commandments to Moses on Mt. Sinai and continued until the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

Man's Test: God gave Israel the ten commandments and other laws to govern their lives. The law was a suzerain-vassal treaty.²⁶ The law promised blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. The laws are sometimes categorized as moral, civil and ceremonial but the law was a unit.

Man's Disobedience: Israel led by its leaders broke the law of God. King David was guilty of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband Uriah (2 Sam.11). Idolatry led to God's judgment on the nation.

God's Judgment: The nation of Israel experienced drought, famine, and invasion and oppression by Gentile nations as a result of their disobedience. Read the book of Judges and see how God used the Canaanites, Midianites and Philistines to oppress Israel. As a result of the nation's persistent idolatry God judged Israel with deportations from the promised land. The Assyrians came in 722 B.C. and took the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity. In 605, 597 and 586 B.C. the Babylonians invaded Judah and took the Jews into captivity. The Jews experienced captivity in Babylon for 70 years.

God's Salvation: Paul points out in Romans that the law could never save. Paul wrote, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). Paul wrote, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16). Even in the dispensation of the law the Jews were saved not by offering sacrifices but by faith in God and his promises. Paul wrote of David who describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works (Rom.4:5-8).

In the fullness of time God sent his son (Jesus) born of a woman and born under the law to redeem those who were under the law (Gal.4:4). Jesus said that he did not come to destroy the law and prophets but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). He gave an exposition of the meaning of the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Jesus obeyed the law completely. Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of the world. The Mosaic law including the sacrificial system found its fulfillment with the death of Jesus on the cross. Romans 10:4 says "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

²⁶ See William Barrick, "The Mosaic Covenant" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10.2 (Fall 1999), 213-232.

Grace (Acts 2:1-Revelation 3:22)

Time: Pentecost until the Rapture. The Church was born on the day of Pentecost. The early church grew as the gospel was preached throughout the Roman empire. The New Testament was written for the Church during the age of grace.

Paul describes this dispensation in Ephesians 3:9 as the “dispensation of the mystery which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ.” One of the purposes of this dispensation is “to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph.3:10-11).

The Church’s Responsibility: The risen Christ gave the Great Commission to his disciples. He told them to go and make disciples of all ethnic groups. They were to accomplish this mission preaching the gospel, baptizing new converts and teaching the converts to obey the commands of Christ (Mt.28:16-20). Jesus told his disciples that it was necessary for Christ to suffer and rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness was to be preached in his name to all nations (Luke 24:46-48). Paul stated that the gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins, was buried, was raised to life and was seen (1 Cor.15:1-11). Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Eph.2:8-9). Traditional dispensationalists believe that salvation has always been by grace through faith in all dispensations but the content of the gospel that was believed was different.

God’s Judgment: During the age of grace the wrath of God is upon those who reject the Creator God (Rom.1) and reject Jesus (John 3:36). Christians who disobey Christ experience judgment (sickness and premature death- 1 Cor.11:30; James 5:13-20; 1 John 5:16).

Tribulation period (Revelation 4-19)

Ryrie states that the tribulation with its many judgments is from the dispensational viewpoint the end of the economy of grace.²⁷ Other dispensationalists view the tribulation period as a separate dispensation since the church is removed and God is working with the nation of Israel again.²⁸

The tribulation period is a period of seven years when God will judge the world for its rejection of the gospel of grace and prepare Israel for the coming of Messiah Jesus. The tribulation period is the 70th week of Daniel’s prophecy recorded in Daniel 9:24-27. During the tribulation period God will use 144,000 Jewish witnesses (12,000 from the 12 tribes of Israel) and 2 special Jewish witnesses to preach the gospel of the kingdom. God will save not only Jews but also Gentiles

²⁷ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 51.

²⁸ Mal Couch, “The Relationship Between the Dispensations and Covenants” *Conservative Theological Journal* (December 1998), 411-412. Couch also writes, “The Tribulation seems to be a test for mankind. With all the terror, men do not repent of the works of their hands (Rev.10:20). They rejoice over the death of the two witnesses (11:10), seem willing to worship the Beast (13:12), blaspheme God because of their pains and sores (16:11), drink willingly the wine of the passion of the Harlot’s immorality (18:3) and seem to be well due the final great stroke of wrath that fall upon them from Jesus Himself (14:14-20)” (Ibid., 427).

during the tribulation period as a result of their witness. The church is not mentioned in Revelation 4-19. The church will be in heaven during this time.

The tribulation period will begin when the Antichrist signs a covenant with Israel for seven years (Dan.9:27). People will say peace and safety (1 Thess.5:1-3). The apostate church will be organized (Rev.17). A ten nation western power will emerge (Dan.2:41; 7:7; Rev.17:13). The first six seal judgments will occur in the first half of the tribulation period: (1) Antichrist will come proclaiming peace, (2) war will break out, (3) famine, (4) disease will lead to the deaths of a quarter of the world's population, (5) tribulation saints will be martyred, and (6) earthquake and falling meteors will impact the earth (Rev.6). Two Jewish witnesses will minister, be martyred and then raised to life and ascend to heaven (Rev.11:3-14).

In the middle of the tribulation period Satan will be cast out of heaven to earth (Rev.12:7-13). The trumpet judgments will occur (Rev.8-9). The apostate church will be destroyed by the Antichrist (Rev.17:13). The armies of Egypt and Syria will invade Israel but they will be defeated by the Antichrist and his armies (Dan.11:36-12:1). Antichrist will become the ruler of the world (Rev.13:1-10). He will stop the sacrifices in the temple²⁹ in Jerusalem (Dan.9:27; Lk.21:20). Antichrist will then go into the temple and declare himself to be God (2 Thess.2:4; Matt.24:15). The False Prophet will make an image of Antichrist and demand that the world worship Him by receiving the mark or number of the beast (Rev.13:11-18).

During the last half of the tribulation period, the Antichrist will persecute Israel and the tribulation saints (Dan.12:1; Rev.13:7; Mt.24:21). The Jews will flee to the wilderness and they will be protected by God (Rev.12:13-17). Three angels will proclaim special messages (Rev.14:6-13). The seven bowl (vial) judgments will be poured out on the earth (Rev.16). The kings from the east will meet Antichrist's army at Armageddon (Dan.11:44; Rev.16:12; Zeph.3:8; Zech.12:2-3, 14:1-2). The sign of the son of man will appear in heaven (Mt.24:30). The Lord Jesus Christ will return to earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords with the armies of heaven which include the Church (Rev.19:11-16). The Jews will believe in Jesus as their Messiah (Zech.12:10). The Antichrist and the False Prophet will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev.19:20; 2 Thess.1:7-8; 2:8-9). Christ will destroy the Gentile armies with a word at Armageddon (Rev.19:21). Christ will deliver the righteous remnant (Isa.11:11-12; 34:6). Christ will judge the Jewish survivors of the tribulation period (Ezek.20:34-38; Mal.3:2-5). Christ will judge individual Gentile survivors of the tribulation period (Matt.25:31-46; Joel 3:1-12). The Old Testament saints and tribulation martyrs will be resurrected (Job 19:25-27; Dan.12:2, 13; Rev.20:4). Satan will be bound and thrown into an abyss for 1000 years (Rev.20:1-3).

Kingdom (Revelation 20:1-6)

The dispensation of the kingdom is a period of 1000 years which occurs after the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. The Lord Jesus Christ will rule over Israel and the nations with a rod of iron as he sits on the throne of David in Jerusalem (Zech. 9:10-15; 14:16-17). David will be Christ's regent over Jerusalem (Jer.30:9; Ezek.34:24). The twelve apostles will sit on thrones and

²⁹ For a discussion of the temple mount and Israel's future temples read Randall Price, *The Coming Last Days Temple* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1999).

rule over the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28).³⁰ The Church will reign with Christ as Christians rule over cities in the millennial kingdom (Luke 19:11-27).

What is the purpose of this dispensation of the kingdom? Jesus Christ will fulfill the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenants for Israel. Jesus Christ will rule the world in righteousness with a rod of iron (Rev.12:5; 19:15). Why would King Jesus need to reign with a rod of iron if Satan has been imprisoned in the abyss? There will be unbelievers in the kingdom who will rebel against king Jesus. These unbelievers will be the descendants of the believing survivors of the tribulation period in their physical bodies. King Jesus. Zechariah 14:18-19 states that if the family of Egypt will not come up to Jerusalem to worship King Jesus that they will have no rain and will receive the plague which the Lord strikes the nations who do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. This will be the punishment of Egypt and the punishment of all the nations that do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. King Jesus will put all of his enemies (Satan, unbelievers, kings and death) under his authority (1 Corinthians 15:24-25). Jesus will reward Christians and tribulation martyrs with positions of authority in the kingdom as they will rule over cities (Luke 19:17; Rev.20:4). Jesus will redeem creation from the curse of sin (Romans 8:19-22). Paul wrote “that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times, He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him” (Ephesians 1:10).

What are some blessings of the kingdom? There will be peace in the world (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3; Zechariah 9:10), joy and feasting (Zech.8:19; 10:7; Jer.30:19), full knowledge of the Lord (Is.11:9; Habakkuk 2:14), the removal of the curse on creation (Iss.11:6-8), long life spans (Is.65:20), economic prosperity (Micah 4:4; Joel 2:24; Amos 9:13), increase of light (Is.4:5; 24:23; 30:26), and a unified language and worship (Zeph.3:9; Is.45:23; Zech.14:16).

Will people worship and serve the Lord Jesus Christ during a time of world peace? The dispensation of the kingdom shows that a perfect government cannot change the hearts of sinful people. The events at the end of the millennial kingdom demonstrate this truth.

God’s Judgment: After spending 1000 years in the abyss, Satan will be released from his prison (Rev.20:7). Satan will deceive the nations and lead a final rebellion against the saints living in Jerusalem (Rev.20:8). Fire will come out of heaven and destroy the unbelievers (Rev.20:9). Satan will be judged and thrown into the lake of fire (Rev.20:10). All unbelievers will be resurrected (John 5:28-29; Rev.20:12). All unbelievers will be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment to determine degrees of punishment in the lake of fire (Rev.20:11-15). All unbelievers will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev.20:15). The present heavens and earth will be destroyed by fire (2 Pet.3:12).

³⁰ This verse is a strong argument for dispensational premillennialism. The twelve tribes of Israel do not refer to the church.

The New Heavens and New Earth (Revelation 21-22)

God will create a new heavens and a new earth (Rev.21-22) Is this an eighth dispensation? No. It has no test. Tests are over. It involves no sin This is the beginning of eternity. The New Jerusalem will descend from heaven to rest on the new earth (Rev.21:22).

THE UNCONDITIONAL BIBLICAL COVENANTS FOR ISRAEL

Traditional dispensationalists understand the importance of the biblical covenants. God made four unconditional covenants with promises for Israel: (1) the Abrahamic covenant (Gen.15:1-21; 17:1-22; 26:2-5, 24; 28:13-17), (2) the Land covenant (Deut.28-30), (3) the Davidic covenant (2 Sam.7:12-16), and (4) the New Covenant (Jer.31:31-34).³¹ These are grant covenants which focus on promises that God guarantees to the nation of Israel. Covenant theologians emphasize two theological covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. They relate the biblical covenants to the covenants of grace. Dispensationalists emphasize the importance of the unconditional biblical covenants (covenants of grant) for Israel. We believe that the promises of these covenants for Israel are yet to be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. Israel will inherit all of the promised land (Abrahamic and Land covenants).. A Davidic king (Jesus) will reign over Israel and the world from the Davidic throne in Jerusalem in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. And God will forgive the sins of Israel and pour out his Spirit and blessing on the nation when they believe in Jesus as Messiah in fulfillment of the New Covenant.

Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 15)

In the Abrahamic covenant God promised Abraham land, seed and blessing.³² The promise was made to Abram before he left Ur and went to the land of Canaan (Gen.12). The actual covenant was made with Abram later on (Gen.15). The Abrahamic covenant was unconditional as God alone passed in a theophany between the cut up animals while Abram slept. “On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying, ‘To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates’” (Gen.15:18). The sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision (Gen.17).

Covenant theologians hold to different views on the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. Some believe that the Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled when Joshua conquered the land. Others think that the Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled when David and Solomon conquered their enemies. Pieters believes that the Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled today by the church. Hoekema believes that the the Abrahamic covenant will be fulfilled in the future eternal state as the church inherits the world. Amillennialists and covenant theologians think that Israel will not inherit the land promises of the Abrahamic covenant because Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah.

³¹ For a detailed exposition of the unconditional biblical covenants (also called grant covenants) see Elliott Johnson, “Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 121-167.

³² See Keith Essex, “The Abrahamic Covenant” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* (Fall 1999): 191-212.

Traditional dispensationalists believe that God will keep his promise to give Israel the land in the millennial kingdom. Israel has never completely possessed all of the land promised in the Abrahamic covenant. The borders are the river of Egypt to the Euphrates river (Gen.15:18). The borders of the promised land are stated in several Scripture texts: Exodus 23:31; Numbers 13:21; Deuteronomy 11:24; Ezekiel 47:13-48:29).

Land Covenant (Deuteronomy 28-30)

The Land Covenant (sometimes called the Palestinian Covenant) amplifies the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant. The Land covenant made it clear that disobedience would bring discipline and obedience would bring blessing to the people of Israel in the land. God disciplined Israel for being disobedient. God judged them with drought, famine, locusts, plagues, the invasion of Gentile nations. The ultimate judgment was dispersion from the land of Israel (cf. the curses in Dt.28). In 722 B.C. the Assyrians invaded Israel (the northern kingdom) and took them into captivity. In 605, 597 and 586 B.C. the Babylonians invaded the land and took Judah into captivity. The Jews spent 70 years in Babylonian captivity before returning to the land. Deuteronomy 30:1-3 indicates that if Israel remembered the Lord and repented that He would restore them from captivity to their land. The Land covenant will be fulfilled in the future millennial kingdom. Zechariah 12 indicates that the nation of Israel will repent and the Lord will bring the righteous remnant of Jews back to the land.. The righteous remnant of Jews will inherit the promised land in the millennial kingdom.

Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:18-16)

In the Davidic covenant God promised David a house (dynasty), throne (right to rule) and a kingdom (nation to rule).³³ The Davidic covenant is related to the Abrahamic covenant in that it explains the seed promise. The covenant is eternal as indicated by the word “forever” in 2 Samuel 7:13. Psalm 89 indicates that it was a covenant and oath that God made with David and his descendants. In the Davidic covenant some promises were made to David that were fulfilled during David’s lifetime. God promised to make David’s name great (2 Sam.7:9). God promised that David and Israel would experience rest from his enemies (2 Sam.7:11). The Davidic covenant contains some conditional aspects of blessing. The Davidic king who disobeyed would be removed from the throne as a discipline but this does not mean that the Davidic descendants would lose their right to rule.

The throne of David has been vacant since the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple in 586 B.C. During the times of the Gentiles no descendant of David has sat on the Davidic throne. Jesus Christ is the rightful heir to the Davidic throne. Jesus Christ is the physical descendant of David and the Davidic king who has the right to rule Israel (Mt.1; Lk.3). Jesus is the Messiah but he is not currently sitting on the throne of David. He is currently seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven (Eph.1:19-23).

Progressive dispensationalists agree with Covenant theologians who think that the Davidic throne is in heaven today. Bock writes “the reign and rule of our great Messiah, the promised Son of David, has begun, highlighted by the executive and mediatorial outpouring of many divine

³³ See Michael Grisanti, “The Davidic Covenant” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10.2 (Fall 1999), 233-250.

blessings of His grace.” (Three Views, 202). But if Christ’s reign has begun, it is not a reign of peace, since there are still wars and rumors of wars. Jesus is the Davidic king, but he sits on the Father’s throne and not the Davidic throne. The Davidic kingdom is still future and will be established with the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth (Dan.7:13-14; Psalm 2).

There are several problems with the view that Jesus is ruling on David’s throne in heaven today. First, the Davidic throne was located in Jerusalem. Jesus did not reign over Israel from Jerusalem after his death and resurrection. Instead, he ascended into heaven. Second, when Jesus ascended into heaven, he sat down at the right hand of the throne of God in heaven. Jesus distinguished between the Father’s throne and his throne. The risen ascended Jesus said, ‘To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne’ (Rev.3:21). The throne of God in heaven is a separate throne from the Davidic throne on earth. Third, nowhere does it say in the New Testament that Jesus is currently reigning on David’s throne. Jesus is the Davidic king, but he is not seated on the Davidic throne. Fourth, Jesus will not sit on the throne of David until he returns a second time to reign as King over Israel and the world in the millennial kingdom. Jesus predicted that “in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of his glory” that the disciples who followed him would also sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28). Since this event is still future, Jesus could not be seated on David’s throne. Jesus predicted that when the Son of Man comes in his glory that he would sit on his throne in heavenly glory (Matthew 25:31).

New Covenant

Traditional dispensationalists have different views on the New Covenant. Some have held to two new covenants in order to keep Israel distinct from the Church. I believe that there is one new covenant which was made with Israel which was inaugurated with the death of Christ on the cross. The prophet Jeremiah predicted that God would make a new covenant with Israel (Jer.31:32). God promised to transform Israel by giving the Jews a new heart, forgiving their sins and establishing their relationship with the Lord. God would bless the Gentiles through this covenant as well.³⁴

Jesus told his disciples in the upper room that they were to drink of the cup because it “it my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Matt.26:28). Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant. The New Covenant was inaugurated at the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The apostle Paul contrasts his new covenant ministry with the ministry of the old covenant which was associated with Moses (2 Cor.3:7, 13, 15). The writer to the Hebrews contrasts the new covenant with the old covenant of the law and shows the superiority of Jesus Christ.

Paul Benware writes, “The church then is a partaker of the spiritual blessings of the new covenant, enjoying regeneration, the forgiveness of sin, and the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The church is primarily Gentile in its makeup—those who have been graciously grafted in by God until their number is completed. Multitudes of Gentiles experience the wonderful blessings of the new covenant. But the church is not national Israel, the people with

³⁴ Larry Pettegrew, “The New Covenant” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10.2 (Fall 1999), 251-270.

whom God made this covenant. The church does not and cannot fulfill the new covenant. Its fulfillment awaits the arrival of Jesus the Messiah. When He returns at the Second Coming, all the spiritual and material blessings promised Israel will be received.”³⁵

The New Covenant will be fulfilled for Israel when the nation repents at the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. At that time all Israel will be saved.

PREMILLENNIAL ESCHATOLOGY

Pre-Tribulation Rapture of the Church

Traditional dispensationalists believe that the Lord Jesus Christ will return in the air and rapture his Church to heaven before the tribulation period. At the Rapture the Lord Jesus Christ will personally come down from heaven. A shout will be given. An archangel will speak. And a trumpet will blow. The souls of Christians who have died will return with Jesus and be reunited with their bodies and the dead Christians will experience a resurrection. Christians who are alive will receive glorified bodies. Then collectively in a moment of time the Church will be caught up to meet Jesus in the air. Jesus will then take his Church to heaven (John 14:1-6; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58).

The Rapture of the Church is imminent. It could happen at any moment. No sign must occur before the Rapture of the Church. The apostle Paul believed that the Rapture could have happened in his lifetime. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 he says “we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord.” Paul included himself with the use of “we.”

The Rapture is the blessed hope of the Church and not of Israel (Titus 2:12-13). The Rapture is a mystery (a truth not revealed in the Old Testament but revealed in the New Testament—cf. 1 Cor.15:51). 1 Thessalonians 1:10 says that Christians are to wait for Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath. Traditional dispensationalists believe that the coming wrath refers to the wrath of the tribulation period. The wrath of God refers to all of the seven year tribulation period and not just to the end. An evidence of that fact is that unbelievers will cry to God to hide them from the wrath of the Lamb during the first half of the tribulation period (cf. Rev.6:16-17).

Paul argues in 1 Thessalonians 5 that Christians will not be surprised by the Day of the Lord. Unbelievers will not escape the Day of the Lord (1 Thess.5:3). Christians are not appointed to wrath (1 Thess.5:9). The Thessalonian Christians thought that they were in the Day of the Lord because they were experiencing persecution and trials. Paul had to write a second letter to the Thessalonians and tell them that they were not in the Day of the Lord. The Day of the Lord will not come until three events take place: (1) the rebellion (the apostasy which will occur after the Rapture), (2) the revelation of the man of sin (the Antichrist), and (3) the removal of the Restrainer (a reference to the Holy Spirit who restrains evil today through the church). At the Rapture all Christians will be removed from the earth. Unbelievers will be left behind to enter the tribulation period.

³⁵ Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 73.

Revelation 3:10 is a promise that the church will be kept from the time of the tribulation period. . The hour of testing refers to the tribulation period. The purpose of the tribulation period is to test those who dwell on the earth. This is a technical phrase in Revelation to refer to unbelievers (Rev.6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8). There is no mention of the church in Revelation 4-18.

As dispensational preachers, we must not set dates for the Rapture. How should we live in light of the imminent Rapture? We should wait expectantly for Christ to return for his church (1 Thess.1:9-10). We should work hard for the Lord (1 Cor.15:58). We should witness to lost people (Acts 1:6-8). We should live pure lives (1 John 3:2-3). We should put on the armor of light (Rom.13:11-12).

Different Resurrections for Different Groups of People at Different Times in the Future

The bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees that all people will be resurrected. Covenant theologians believe in a general resurrection of all people after the second coming of Christ and a general judgment. Dispensationalists believe that there are separate resurrections for believers and unbelievers.

Dispensationalists believe that Christians who have died will be resurrected at the Rapture of the Church which will happen before the tribulation period (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-58).

Old Testament saints will be resurrected at the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. The angel told Daniel that he would rise to his inheritance at the end of the days (Dan.12:13).

Tribulation martyrs will be resurrected at the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth. Revelation 20:4 says “And I saw thrones and they sat on them and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshipped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.”

All unsaved people will be resurrected after the millennial reign of Christ on earth. Revelation 20:5a says “But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished.” Unbelievers will be resurrected and given bodies before they stand at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev.20).

Different judgments for different groups of people at different times in the future

Dispensationalists do not believe in one general judgment where believers are admitted to heaven and unbelievers are dismissed to hell. Dispensationalists recognize different judgments for different groups of people at different times in the future.

All Christians will be judged by Jesus Christ at the Bema or Judgment Seat of Christ which happens after the Rapture (1 Corinthians 3:9-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). The judgment seat of Christ is an evaluation of the life and service of Christians by Jesus Christ to determine their rewards or loss of rewards based upon their faithfulness in serving Him. It is not designed to

determine their salvation or to punish them for sins committed on earth. Christians will receive crowns for their service and godly character. The incorruptible crown will be given to Christians who live disciplined lives (1 Cor.9:25). The crown of rejoicing will be given to Christians for faithful witnessing (1 Thess.2:19). The crown of life will be given to Christians who love Jesus as they endure trials (James 1:12). The crown of righteousness will be given to those who love Christ's appearing (2 Tim.4:8). The crown of glory will be given to faithful pastors (1 Pet.5:4). All Christians will receive some praise from God (1 Cor.4:5). Some Christians will suffer loss of rewards (1 Cor.3:15). Christians will return with Jesus Christ to reign over cities in the millennial kingdom (Luke 19:17).

Unbelievers who are left behind after the Rapture will experience the judgments of the tribulation period. The seal, trumpet and bowl judgments will be poured out on the earth (Rev.6-15). Revelation 3:10 indicates that the "hour of trial will come upon the whole world to test those who dwell on the earth." Unbelievers will cry out to the mountains to fall on them and hid them from the wrath of the Lamb (Revelation 6:16).

Gentile survivors of the tribulation period will be judged by the Lord Jesus Christ after his second coming to earth and before the millennial kingdom (Matthew 25:31-46). The sheep (Gentiles saved during the tribulation period) will be permitted to enter the millennial kingdom in their physical bodies. The goats (unbelieving Gentiles) will be condemned to hell.

The Beast out of the sea (the Antichrist) and False Prophet will be thrown into the lake of fire at the second coming of Jesus Christ to the earth (Revelation 19:20). One thousand years later the devil will be thrown into the lake of fire after he is loosed and leads a final rebellion against the saints in Jerusalem (Revelation 20:10).

All unbelievers will be judged by the Lord Jesus Christ at the Great White Throne Judgment. Their names will not be in the Book of Life. They will be condemned and thrown into the lake of fire to suffer eternal punishment (Revelation 20:11-15).

A Literal Second Coming of Jesus Christ to earth prior to the millennial kingdom on earth

At his second coming Jesus Christ will come back to earth riding on a white horse to defeat the Antichrist and the armies of the world who oppose him at the battle of Armageddon (Revelation 19). The second coming of Jesus Christ will be visible and glorious. The second coming of Jesus Christ happens before the 1000 year kingdom on this earth (Revelation 20). He will come back with his holy angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God (2 Thess.1:7-8). The Jews will mourn when they see him (Zech.12:10).

The OT prophets predicted the second coming of Messiah to the earth and the events associated with the Glorious Appearing. The prophet Zechariah predicted that the Lord would go and fight against the nations who do battle against Jerusalem and "in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives will be split in two, from east to west, making a very large valley; half of the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south (Zech.14:3-4). When Jesus ascended into heaven from the Mount of Olives, two angels appeared to the disciples and predicted that "This same Jesus who

was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Jesus Christ will return to earth and his feet will touch down on the Mount of Olives.

CONCLUSION

What are the distinctives of dispensational preaching? Here is my list: (1) literal interpretation of the Bible, (2) progressive revelation (3) the distinction of Israel and the Church, (4) the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth as the goal of God’s program for the ages, (5) the dispensations in God’s program for the ages, (6) the unconditional biblical covenants for Israel (Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New), and (7) premillennial eschatology which includes the pretribulation rapture of the Church. Are these the only distinctives? Should there be more or less? What do you think?