

Dispensationalism and the Hermeneutics of Application  
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Expository preaching is the bread and butter of a biblical pulpit ministry. However, too often, these church pulpits devolve into merely lectures. What is lost is a passion of preaching, calling for a response. And the basis of a valid response is *application* of truth, seen in its relevance. And dispensationalism lays a unique foundation for such *application*, as relevance is seen in the progress of revelation.

In Gaebelien's foreward to both of Ryrie's volumes on Dispensationalism, he distinguishes himself from Ryrie.<sup>1</sup> The distinction concerns hermeneutics. Gaebelien views Dispensationalism as a method of interpretation, "helpful in grasping the progress in revelation." What is there to grasp? In Ryrie's second volume, he identifies this *help* as answers to the need for Biblical distinctions. He then quotes L. S. Chafer to illustrate the need: "Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice" or "Any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of week rather than the seventh."<sup>2</sup> While the distinction involves a progress in the truth of revelation, it also involves a progress in *response*. If *application* is the *response* which makes use of relevant truth, then hermeneutics concerns the progress in that *response* – thus the title of this article.

Dispensationalism's view of Scriptural revelation only became apparent after the New Testament canon was closed. Only from that perspective was it possible to see the progress. That progress included both what was revealed, but also to whom it was said. At the time of Paul, that included only the Hebrew canon, as "all Scripture was inspired by God and is profitable . . ." (2Tim. 3:16, 17). It was profitable to be read and applied. But the question is, how? And does that differ from application of the New Testament? Thus, this essay will attempt to answer two questions: How is O. T. revelation to be applied in the new dispensation? How is N.T. revelation to be applied in the dispensation to which it is addressed?

*Application as a Steward*

For three years, Jesus taught his disciples about who he was and what Scripture said about him? When he taught about law he applied it to himself (Matt. 5:17) and to his disciples (Matt. 5:17-48). As all were born descendants of Israel, they were under law. In addition, in the dispensation of the law, promises remained which hadn't been fully realized. However, promises addressed to Israel, he never applied to the disciples directly. Rather Jesus first applied them to himself. As an example, in Luke 4:16-21, Jesus applied Isaiah 61:1, 2a to himself – "today this Scripture is fulfilled in Me." In time Peter confessed that Jesus was "God's Messiah" (Lk. 9:20).

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) and *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995.)

<sup>2</sup> L. S. Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas; Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), 9.

When the disciples attempted to apply these promises to include themselves, they concluded that “the kingdom of God was going to appear right away,” as they neared Jerusalem (Lk. 19:11). They had been debating among themselves who would be greatest in the kingdom (Lk. 9:46-48, Mk. 10:35-44).

In order to correct the misunderstanding, Jesus told them the parable of the nobleman (Lk. 19:12-27). This nobleman was recognized as “a man of noble status,” but not a king. Rather he had to travel “to a distant land to receive for himself a kingdom” (*basileian*) and to return to rule. While he would be away, he entrusted (*edōken*) a *mina* to each of his servants. The *mina* was a possession of the nobleman and was to be used by the steward to engage in business until the nobleman would return. Upon the nobleman’s return, each steward would give an account of his stewardship. Then based on their stewardship, the King would give them a share in his kingdom.

The analogy of parable is clear. Jesus was the nobleman as God’s Messiah who was about to depart to receive a kingdom. The disciples as servants would be entrusted with a *mina* to use in his absence. They were not *employees* hired for what they could contribute and contracted to receive a salary. Rather, they were *stewards* entrusted with the Gospel (2Tim. 2:2) to be used on behalf of Messiah. The Gospel involves God’s promises based on the finished work of Christ, which when received (John 1:12) brings salvation. The parable does not specify how to engage in business with the *mina*. The only distinction that is made focused on the servant that was unfaithful. So stewardship features the fact of faithfulness using what was entrusted. Factors beyond the steward’s control contribute to the amount of the return the steward gains (1Cor. 12:4-7).

So when Paul considered his ministry, along with Apollos, he described them as “servants of Christ and stewards of the Gospel” (1Cor. 4:1; 1Tim. 1:11, 12). The *mina* was the Gospel entrusted to them and *applied* in their stewardship; for justification, for sanctification, and ultimately for glorification.

In a similar fashion, Abraham and the patriarchs were stewards of the promises (Gen. 12:1-3; 12:7 etc.). And their stewardship concerned promises which they *applied* in their lives and the lives of their family. Subsequently, Israel became stewards of the law which was added to the yet unfulfilled promises. Moses called Israel to *apply* the law as a nation of priests and as a holy people (Ex. 19:5,6). Thus Jesus applied the law in its true intent and full scope to both himself and his Jewish disciples (Matt. 5:17-48). In their stewardship, the standard held out was perfection, as God the Father himself is perfect (5:48). When sincerely *applied*, that would expose imperfections in Israel as the remainder of the historical accounts made clear.

### *Application as Stewards of Grace and Truth*

The Gospel of John in the prologue (1:14-18), spoke of the stewardship in the present dispensation. Jesus was introduced in Person as full of grace and truth (1:14). Grace is favor given that is undeserved and truth is the manifestation of what really is. That combination in undiminished fullness was displayed as He ministered to His

generation. In that ministry, the disciples saw the glory of the Father (1:14). John the Baptist witnessed to His divine Person (1:15). The apostle with all who trusted him received grace from Christ's fullness; grace after grace as it had been given (1:16). That is explained because law was given through Moses, and grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17). This speaks of the progress in revelation that has come in this dispensation.

This same perspective on salvation history was evident in Paul when he said, we are "not under *law* but under *grace*" (Rom. 6:15). This means a change in stewardship in the progress of revelation. No longer is Israel under law because Christ has fulfilled the law (Gal. 3:19-24; Rom. 10:4). In the completion of the old, he entrusted the *mina* or the Gospel to his servants for the new age. The church is now entrusted with *grace* as a characterization of the Gospel. It is the free provision of the truth made available in the finished work of Christ. John described the new revelation as; *grace* and *truth*. It is a message of *truth* applied in *grace*. This truth that came in Jesus Christ may be truth found in Scripture (2Tim. 3:16) or it may be truth developed from the Gospel as found in the canon of the New Testament.

This combination of grace and truth embodied in believers uniquely suits the disclosure of the presence of Christ on earth in the church. In a fallen world, truth can only be fully addressed when combined with grace. Grace is only duly appreciated as necessary, when truth is applied in all its fullness. And this is the stewardship of the church.

*Application* of the truth is at the heart of that stewardship. Since the truth developed from the Gospel in the New Testament is addressed directly to the church, this application is straightforward. On the other hand, truth progressively revealed in the Old Testament is addressed to Israel, this application is more involved. So we will pose three examples of O. T. texts to illustrate dispensational application.

In the first two examples, the *truth* of two promises is applied in the *grace* in Christ. In the Gospels, the Lord applied promises to himself rather than to the disciples. Now Paul, in Gal. 3:6-29, illustrates how two different promises can be applied to believers, whether Jew or Gentile. The promises belong to Israel (Rom. 9:4) because they are addressed to Israel in Genesis, but are applied through and in the Israelite, Jesus Christ.

The first is a series of promises addressed historically to Abraham (Gen. 12:2, 3). One is a promise to bless Abraham and a second is a promise to bless Gentiles through Abraham: "Now the Scriptures saw in advance that God would justify the Gentiles by faith and told the Gospel ahead of time to Abraham saying, 'All nations will be blessed through you'" (Gal. 3:8). The application involves three things to note. First, Paul noted that Abraham believed God and was blessed as his faith was credited to him as righteousness (3:6).

Second, the promise extends to all nations “through you” (Gen. 12:3). The ambiguity of “through you” at least means through Abraham, but those blessed directly through Abraham were limited. Isaac was blessed through Abraham’s faith (Gen. 22:1-19), and those who read about Abraham’s case and follow his faith are blessed as Abraham’s son (Gal. 3:7). Third, it is clear that all nations were not influenced directly through Abraham. That awaited Abraham’s descendant, Jesus Christ who would ultimately provide redemption (Gal. 3:13) which is the basis through which blessings are available. While Christ is the basis for blessing all nations, ultimately Israel will also be the messenger through whom all nations will hear (Rev. 7:3 and 14:4, 6).

The second example transitions from the promise of blessing to the promise of inheritance (Gal. 3:14, 18). This promise was spoken to Abraham and to his seed (3:16a). Neither Abraham nor any descendant received the inheritance, at least in full, until Christ came (3:16b). The promise of inheritance was applied to Christ at his ascension. Jesus, himself, clarified what would happen when he would receive “the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:5). Then Peter explained what had happened at Jesus’ ascension when he received the Father’s promise and poured out the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2:33). So this promise of inheritance was fulfilled in Jesus Christ and although Gentiles received no promise of inheritance, yet *in Christ*, Gentiles became seed of Abraham, “heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29). In Ephesians, Paul summarized the application of inheritance to believers in the church: “when you heard the message of *truth*; the *gospel* of your salvation, when you believed in Him (*grace*), you were also sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, He is the down payment of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:13, 14).

The third illustration concerns the law expressed in the Mosaic Scriptures. I propose that the truth expressed in the Hebrew Scripture is applied in Christ’s grace to believers in the church. Some truths expressed in the law have been replaced because of Christ’s finished work (sacrifices, Sabbath, etc.). Other truths are compatible with His finished work, as nine of the ten commandments. Nine of the ten are restated in the New Testament, but they aren’t applied simply because they are repeated. Rather they need to be applied because they are included in the Scriptures.

In the Lord’s exposition of the law (Matt. 5:17-48) he teaches the true intent of the law expressed in Exodus 20:1-17 or Deut. 5:6-21. Historically, he spoke to the disciples as Jews *under the law*, as Judaism had, and applied them to himself as also under the law (Matt. 5:17). But in the Gospel account, Matthew addressed the disciples in the church. Jesus’ concluding words to His disciples were to teach “them to observe everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20). These truths will now be applied “*under grace*.”

What did it mean to be “under the law?” There appear to be three related, but distinct factors:

- to be subject to the precepts of the law,
- to be liable to the consequences of sin in violation of the law, and
- to be liable to the penalty of the violation.

The precept most often addressed today concerns the divorce-remarriage precept (Matt. 5:31, 32). Judaism emphasized that a certificate of divorce *must* be provided “for something improper” (Deut. 24:1-4). Jesus didn’t question that a certificate of divorce was a valid provision of God, but simply clarified that it was *permitted*. What is the difference? Divorce was not part of the original design for marriage (Gen. 2:24), but along with the permission of evil (Gen. 3:1-5), God permitted divorce for the hardness of the human heart. While the penalty of divorce was specified under the law, divorce was allowed in a fallen and guilty race so that remarriage could provide care for the woman in the ancient society.

As Jesus taught the true intended meaning of the law, he stated two results of divorce (Matt. 5:31, 32): first, “everyone who divorces his wife, except for immorality, *makes her commit adultery*” and second, “whoever marries a divorced woman *commits adultery*.”

The strength of these inevitable results of divorce raises a question: should these results be viewed as the consequences of divorce or the penalty of divorce? A consequence would lead to a less definite result: like “it would likely push her into adultery.” But the result as stated pronounces a penalty. All of this is true to the legal applied penalty of violation of the law of marriage. While divorce was permitted, the permission didn’t address the guilt of the penalty – adultery. A penalty was true of all sin “under the law.”

Now that Jesus Christ came in grace and truth, the truth of Jesus’ exposition remains unchanged. But now “under grace,” the penalty can be forgiven. Therefore the divorcee who has genuinely repented is forgiven of the guilt of adultery. While as a forgiven sinner, he/she ought to attempt to restore the original marriage, yet she or he as divorced is also free to remarry. In grace, the guilt is forgiven, but grace does not remove the consequences of divorce. That’s why restoration of the original marriage is taught (1Cor.7:11). But divorce and remarriage have always been permitted because of the hardness of the human heart.

Living in the dispensation of grace and truth provides the church with a biblical context to minister to couples who are divorced and remarried. While commonly a pastor will not perform a remarriage ceremony, once a divorced and remarried couple begins to attend church, they are welcomed without any question. Little or no attention is directed to help them deal with the guilt associated with what Jesus said about being divorced. This sin is recognized, but the guilt is merely ignored. But living in the dispensation of grace, as believers we can approach the throne of grace and find forgiveness of this sin as with any other sin.

But does this understanding of grace promote sin (Rom. 6:15)? While it doesn’t prevent believers from divorce, anymore than the law did, it does promote life in Jesus Christ, who came in grace and truth (John 1:14-18). Sinners promote sin, not finding forgiveness in the grace of God. Distinctions among those who are divorced must be made by those in the church. The distinction is between those who are genuinely

repentant (Luke 3:7-14) and those who carry a bitterness and resentment toward their divorced mate. They are not forgiven and have found nothing in Christ's grace. While this approach in the church carries with it the risk of being misunderstood, yet it promises life that is based in Christ, not based in human works, based on law. This is the application of a steward of grace and of truth.