

**The Double-Edged Sword of Dispensationalism:
Destructive as Methodology, Constructive as Outcome**
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INTRODUCTION

As Charles Ryrie catalogued the three aspects of dispensationalism's *sine qua non*, he prefaced the three distinctives by emphasizing a critical methodological difference between dispensational thinkers and covenant (theology) thinkers: "the covenant theologian finds biblical distinctions a necessary part of his theology even though the covenant of grace is the ruling category...the dispensations supply the need for distinctions in the orderly progress of revelation throughout Scripture."¹ Ryrie cites the need for distinctions as the occasion for developing theological systems, and the basis of those distinctions as the covenant of grace for covenant theology and the progress of Scripture for dispensational theology.

The implication is evident: Ryrie asserts that covenant theology is primarily a *theological predetermination* because the theological covenant undergirding covenant theology is the ruling category, while dispensational theology is an exegetically based *theological outcome*, because it is derived by observing the progress of Scripture. Ryrie further observes that "Only dispensationalism does justice to the proper concept of the progress of revelation."² Ryrie further recognizes dispensationalism as an outcome when he affirms that, "If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle, and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist."³ The primary emphasis of Ryrie's opening chapter (entitled "*Dispensationalism: Help or Heresy?*") is that dispensationalism is a help because it is a *product* of the Bible interpreted in a normative way.

If Ryrie is correct in his assertion that dispensationalism is helpful because of its scriptural derivation and as an outcome of exegetical work, then his firm yet gracious critique of covenant theology as a theological rather than exegetical precommitment is likewise warranted. Ryrie's evaluation occasions examining the impact and value of the

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Moody Press, 1995), 16-17.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 20.

dispensational theological system when reckoned as an outcome of hermeneutics applied (as Ryrie advocates) or by contrast, as a theological precommitment.

As Ryrie critiques theological precommitments by critiquing a popular example (covenant theology), it is fair to scrutinize dispensational thought, seeking to understand whether it is precommitment or product. If a precommitment, then dispensationalism deserves every bit of the criticism Ryrie (and others) direct toward covenant theology. It is curious then to discover the diversity of opinions on which of the two characterizations is true – among both critics and adherents of dispensational thought.

PRECOMMITMENT OR PRODUCT: SOME OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVES ON DISPENSATIONAL THOUGHT

Perhaps the most commonly accessed definition of dispensationalism asserts that the system is in fact a unique hermeneutic that is distinct from yet based on a literal translation of the Bible. Wikipedia's entry on the system reads, "Dispensationalism is a particular hermeneutic or analytical system for interpreting the Bible based on a literal translation, and which stands in contrast to the earlier Calvinist system of covenant theology used in fundamentalist biblical interpretation."⁴

Varner Johns exemplifies the most staunch critics of dispensationalism in his assertion that CI Scofield "imposed upon the Bible a system of error as subtle and Satanic as any that has ever been invented by the master deceiver."⁵ Robert Harbach goes a bit further in describing exactly how the dispensational system is in error, noting that

the line Dispensationalism makes through Scripture is disjointed, slip-knotted, sheep-shanked, strained and broken with many gaps intervening along its shabby, ludicrous length...they become **guilty of approaching the Bible according to modernistic methods. For both Dispensationalism and Modernism have a subjective theory of Bible structure...reads the Gospel According to Matthew applying its subjective hypothesis**, and decides that the Sermon on the Mount is not intended for the Church today, but for a future age, after the Church has gone...Dispensationalism is a questionable hermeneutical method...[emphasis mine].⁶

⁴ Wikipedia, "Dispensationalism" viewed at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism>.

⁵ Varner Johns, "Sevenfold Errors of Dispensationalism" *Ministry Magazine*, November, 1942 <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1942/11/sevenfold-errors-of-dispensationalism>.

⁶ Robert Harbach, "Dispensationalism: An Ancient Error" PRCA website, originally January 1, 1967 in *The Standard Bearer*, <http://www.prca.org/resources/publications/articles/item/3741-dispensationalism-an-ancient-error>.

Harbach considers dispensationalism to be a hermeneutic method, and a highly problematic one for sure. If Harbach is right, then dispensationalism represents a precommitment that demands a particular interpretive method in order to justify its conclusions. In fact, this is reminiscent of Ryrie’s critique of covenant theology (though Ryrie is certainly much more gracious than Harbach attempts to be).

Adam Graham furthers the discussion elucidating what he believes to be wrong with dispensationalism:

It is clear that literal interpretation of scripture, as a rule, is a valuable principle, but only when it is tempered with a consistent understanding of context and the progressive nature of revelation. **It is also clear that dispensationalism does not and cannot fully adhere to this principle consistently.** We should therefore not be afraid to both espouse the merits of literal interpretation of scripture and deny the exclusivist claims that many in the dispensational camp often make.⁷

Graham recognizes the merit of “literal interpretation,” but suggests that dispensationalism simply doesn’t follow that method. The “exclusivist claims” of many dispensationalists, according to Graham, are rooted in theological loyalties rather than sound exegetical process.

John Gerstner helps put the hermeneutic issue in focus, as he specifies that,

We all agree that most literature, including the Bible, is usually meant to be understood according to the literal construction of the words which are used...At the point where we differ, there is a tendency for the dispensationalists to be literalistic where the non-dispensationalist tends to interpret the Bible figuratively. But to say on the basis of that limited divergence of interpretation that the two schools represent fundamentally different approaches is not warranted. Many on both sides think that this minor “hermeneutical” difference is a more foundational difference than the theological. We profoundly disagree for we believe that **the dispensational literal hermeneutic is driven by an *a priori* commitment to dispensational theological distinctives** [emphasis mine].⁸

Gerstner conceives dispensationalism to be a theological precommitment that drives a version of a literal hermeneutic – what Gerstner calls “the *dispensational* literal hermeneutic.”

⁷ Adam Graham “What is Wrong With Dispensationalism” No King But Christ, June 21, 2018 <https://www.nokingbutchrist.org/what-is-wrong-with-dispensationalism/>.

⁸ John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 92-93.

PRECOMMITMENT OR PRODUCT:
SOME INSIDE PERSPECTIVES ON DISPENSATIONAL THOUGHT

Outside perspectives are not the only ones that seem to indicate that dispensationalism might be a precommitment based on hermeneutic applications, though it is noteworthy that none (of which are cited here) would *directly suggest* that the system of thought is a theological precommitment. Self-affirmed dispensationalist David Guzik illustrates the difficulty as he describes dispensationalism as “a way of looking at the Bible that understands God’s unfolding plan—that He has worked in somewhat different ways with and through different peoples...I’m a dispensationalist...”⁹. It is unclear whether “a way of looking at the Bible” refers to the outcome of exegesis or the methodology.

Tommy Ice addresses the challenge a bit in his article *Dispensational Hermeneutics*, in part by distinguishing between macroliteralism and microliteralism. Ice explains that “The system of literal interpretation is the grammatical-historical, or textual, approach to hermeneutics. Use of literalism in this sense could be called macroliteralism.”¹⁰ He adds that,

Within macroliteralism, the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system yields the interpretative conclusion, for example, that Israel always and only refers to national Israel. The church will not be substituted for Israel if the grammatical-historical system of interpretation is consistently used because there are no indicators in the text that such is the case. Therefore, one must bring an idea from outside the text by saying that the passage really means something that it does not actually say. This kind of replacement approach is a mild form of spiritualized, or allegorical, interpretation.¹¹

Ice concludes that those who replace Israel with the church so do in violation of macroliteralism.¹² At the same time, within macroliteralism, the attention to individual passages and whether or not they might include figures of speech and how those should be handled in each instance, Ice refers to as microliteralism.¹³ Ice makes it clear that dispensational thought is an outcome that is rooted in macroliteralism (a broad and consistent commitment to LGH¹⁴), even though there may be some differences and

⁹ David Guzik, “Pitfalls of Dispensationalism” Calvary Chapel, May 14, 2015 <https://calvarychapel.com/posts/pitfalls-of-dispensationalism/>.

¹⁰ Thomas Ice, “Dispensational Hermeneutics” *Scholars Crossing*, Liberty University, May, 2009, 3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Literal Grammatical Historical.

disagreements at the microliteral level. Ice thus absolves of theological precommitment exegetes who arrive at dispensational conclusions broadly and yet have some differences in various details not contrary to macroliteralism, as he perceives such exegetes to be working within the framework of LGH. On the other hand, while Ice resolutely recognizes that LGH is an essential of dispensationalism,¹⁵ he curiously and in passing refers to the literal hermeneutic as “a development of dispensationalism”¹⁶ – a reference that seems to imply that the system of dispensationalism, at least in some sense, precedes the hermeneutic. Perhaps he was meaning that hermeneutic ideas at the *microliteral* level have been advanced by dispensational thought, but either way, Ice’s comments underscore the difficulty of the relationship of dispensational thought to hermeneutic methodology. Ryrie’s sine qua non positions dispensationalism as utterly dependent on the consistent application of LGH, yet other dispensational thinkers seem to imply at least an occasional interdependence between dispensational thought and LGH.

In a recent statement affirming its commitment to dispensational thought, the IFCA asserts that “Dispensational theology emerges from a consistent literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic.”¹⁷ This statement reflects that dispensationalism is the theological egg that comes from the hermeneutic chicken. At the same time, the statement adds that, “IFCA International has been committed since its inception to a Dispensational understanding of Scripture.”¹⁸ One might wonder the value of referring to a dispensational understanding of Scripture while affirming that dispensationalism emerges from viewing the Scriptures through a particular hermeneutic lens. While it is clear that the IFCA is comprehensively committed to LGH in its most normative form,¹⁹ the description of the view of Scripture as dispensational blurs the relationship of cause to effect.

Michael Vlach describes (in a Reformed-theology venue) dispensationalism as “a distinctive hermeneutic.”²⁰ Vlach expands on that assertion, noting that dispensationalism is “primarily about a hermeneutic for Bible interpretation, especially involving Old Testament prophecies concerning ethnic/national Israel.”²¹ Again one might ask whether dispensationalism is the outcome of a hermeneutic or whether it is

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

¹⁷ IFCA, “Resolution on Dispensational Theology and Hermeneutics” Adopted July 1, 2020, <https://www.ifca.org/blog/Advancing%20the%20Cause/2020-resolution-on-dispensational-hermeneutics>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The IFCA affirms in the Resolution that “we commit ourselves to the search for the authorial intent, both divine and human, behind every biblical text, through the careful use of the interpretation principles found in the literal- grammatical-historical approach to hermeneutics.”

²⁰ Michael Vlach, “Dispensational Theology” The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/dispensational-theology/>.

²¹ Ibid.

about a hermeneutic. At the very least equating the system (dispensationalism) with the hermeneutic (LGH) by describing dispensationalism *as* a distinctive hermeneutic is problematic.

Andy Woods rightly explains that “dispensationalism has more to do with commitment to a particular hermeneutic than it does to adherence to a theological model.”²² Woods is clear that “the Dispensational theological system arises out of a hermeneutic rather than from a theology imposed upon Scripture.”²³ His thesis in the article is “to explain the hermeneutics of dispensationalism,”²⁴ yet the title itself (“Dispensational Hermeneutics”) can be understood in two ways – and both are ways that dispensational thinkers have utilized. Woods certainly meant it – as did Ice in his identically titled article – to describe, as his thesis states, the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. Woods is otherwise careful not to blur the lines between cause and effect.

GREAT IMPLICATIONS OF A SUBTLE DISTINCTION

At this point it is important note the vital distinction between (1) a hermeneutic which results in a theological system and (2) a theological system which prescribes a hermeneutic. The latter is found in most worldviews, and is easily identifiable in other Christian denominations and theological systems (e.g., the allegorical/theological hermeneutic of covenantalism, the canonical/dogmatic hermeneutic of Catholicism, etc.). Yet dispensational thought is grounded and rooted in the former: a hermeneutic which results in the theological system. The moment the theological system prescribes a hermeneutic, the theological system can no longer be considered a product of exegesis. Dispensationalism as a theological methodology is self-defeating at best and destructive at worst. Yet if it is an outcome, then it is constructive and useful, as Ryrie characterized it.

If dispensationalism *is* the hermeneutic, then dispensationalism is the lens through which dispensationalists seek to read Scripture, and if so, that is precisely the error Ryrie rebukes in his criticism of covenantalist thought. Especially in light of the conflating of the two (the theological system and the hermeneutic methodology) by those outside of dispensational thought, it would seem advisable to avoid any appearance of conflation and to consistently acknowledge and maintain the cause and effect boundaries and the distinctness of the hermeneutical cause and the theological effect. If one recognizes the Biblical model and consistent prescription of the LGH as integral to **Biblical epistemology**,₂ and interprets all of Scripture through that lens, the

²² Andy Woods, “Dispensational Hermeneutics” SpiritAndTruth.org, 2005, <https://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/documents/articles/25/25.pdf?x=x>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

outcome will be (at least the basic) traditional dispensational concepts. Critics of dispensationalism unashamedly affirm this (e.g., Berkhof, Gerstner), but believe the theological conclusions to be untenable and thus advocate a different hermeneutic approach.

A vital component of the epistemology modeled and prescribed in the Bible is the model for interpreting communication – the hermeneutic. LGH is modeled in every book of the Bible, and no alternative is announced nor extolled. If one consistently applies that hermeneutic, then they are putting into practice *Biblical* epistemology – they are thinking the way God revealed that He intended for humanity. If one applies those principles consistently, their theological outcome will look (at least) quite a bit like traditional dispensational thought. Thus it is fair to say that there is a distinctive hermeneutic (LGH) that results in the dispensational system. Some refer to this as a “dispensational hermeneutic,” but that is at best confusing. There is a distinctive hermeneutic (LGH) that results in the dispensational system. It is the basis of the dispensational system, but *it is not part of the system*, it is simply part of the *sine qua non* of the system. Ryrie’s *sine qua non* recognizes LGH consistently applied as a necessary prerequisite of dispensational thought, but never describes it as *part of the thought-outcome or theological system*. As LGH is directly contra the theological hermeneutic, if the hermeneutic of dispensationalism is a product of the theological system, then it cannot be LGH. Dispensationalism would be a self-defeating and hypocritical system (particularly in its critiquing other systems for embracing that very theological hermeneutic). The hermeneutic of dispensationalism is not *dispensational*, rather it is simply integral to communication as God created it and revealed it in the Bible, thus undergirding the Biblical worldview.

On the other hand, Kevin DeYoung argues that the “insistence on making the path between exegesis and theology a one way street is untenable and unwise.”²⁵ He suggests that “Theology does not have to distort exegesis. Done well, it can help provide **guardrails for the interpretive process** [emphasis mine], honor the unity of Scripture, and throw a spotlight on the most important and most difficult issues arising from the Word of God.”²⁶ These guardrails provided by theological conclusions would keep us from what errors, I wonder. And who will guard the guardrails? De Young provides an answer to that conundrum, as he muses, “As a Christian I hope that my theology is open to correction, but as a minister I have to start somewhere. We all do. For me that means starting with Reformed theology and my confessional tradition and sticking with that unless I have really good reason not to.”²⁷ DeYoung joins many scholars in

²⁵ Kevin DeYoung “Your Theological System Should Tell You How to Exegete” The Gospel Coalition, February 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-devyoung/your-theological-system-should-tell-you-how-to-exegete>.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

beginning with a system of theology in order to “better” understand the Scriptures. But at what cost. Even if the starting theological system is completely reliable, that preunderstanding shortens or short circuits the exegetical process. Theology comes last, not first, and if it attempts to do both (as DeYoung prescribes) then it comes first.

Finally, Tim Challies illustrates how a theological system as a method (rather than outcome) can be destructive. Challies’s reflection on why he is not dispensational in his theology is noteworthy:

So why am I not dispensational? I’d like to say that I have studied the issue very closely, that I have read stacks of books on eschatology, and that I can thoroughly defend my position against every alternative. But that’s not the case. It’s more that **my reading of the Bible**, my years of listening to sermons, and my study of Christian theology **has not been able to shake or displace the amillennialism of my youth** [emphases mine]. To the contrary, it has only strengthened it. Paul Martin’s recent sermon series through Revelation strengthened it all the more. The very framework of dispensationalism appears to me to fall into a similar category as paedobaptism in that they both, in the words of Tom Hicks, “wrongly allow the Old Testament to have priority over the New Testament.”²⁸

Challies began with an infusion of (amillennial) theology, and presupposing the principle of New Testament primacy, has found no good reason to abandon his original theology. Further, he is strengthened in his theological conclusions. It is worth noting that New Testament primacy could be characterized as *sine qua non* for amillennial thought. If that is so, then Challies justifies his rejection of dispensationalism based on a fundamental necessity of amillennial thought. In other words, the theological precommitment precludes hermeneutic objectivity and is self authenticating. This is destructive, because it does not allow the interlocutor to be objective in study and can obfuscate realities which might otherwise be readily recognizable in the text. If dispensational thought is guilty of theological precommitment, then it is no better off and no less destructive.

On the other hand, dispensational thought matters as a way of synthesizing history *because* it is the outcome of the Bible interpreted in a manner consistent with the hermeneutic principles described and prescribed in the Bible itself. Only insofar as dispensationalism is the outcome of that methodology can it provide a useful perspective of history, because as dispensational thought corresponds with Biblical methodology, it corresponds with truth. At any point at which the system trumps Biblical methodology that system is prone to error. The power of dispensationalism is

²⁸ Tim Challies “Why I Am Not Dispensational” June 23, 2016 <https://www.challies.com/articles/why-i-am-not-dispensational>.

not the system itself, but its distinctiveness as a comprehensive product of the Bible handled consistently according to the basic principles of normative communication (the LGH).

CASE STUDY: METHODOLOGY AND OUTCOME PERTAINING TO THE CHARACTER OF GOD, LAW, AND IMPLICATIONS

The Premise

Basic dispensational thought asserts its derivation as Scriptural and as arrived at through the exegetical process, and consistently applied LGH principles. Because of this fundamental principle of origination, dispensationalism cannot simply be an eschatological addendum to an already established system – it must be the direct product of Biblical study. Thus dispensational thought should be philosophically and theologically comprehensive and have great interdisciplinary importance. It ought to be synonymous with Biblical worldview

This idea is nowhere more evident than in relation to the basic understanding of the character of God and how He works. If dispensationalism is the product of Biblical exegesis according to the LGH, then *any and every theological affirmation* ought to be not just subject to scrutiny by Biblical content, but the Biblical origin of the idea should be demonstrable and readily connected to the most normative understanding of passages being studied.

Testing the Premise

There are three historical views, and perhaps three logical possibilities pertaining to God and His relationship to His legislation: (1) God is under good (authority is under law), (2) God is good (authority is law), and (3) God is over good (authority is over law). Plato took up this discussion (in the *Euthyphro*), arguing that if the gods were under good, then they were merely intermediaries and the idea of good was supreme. Plato also critiqued the second option, suggesting that the gods being good would illustrate good but would offer no actual definition of good. He also challenged the third view, noting that if the gods were over good, then when they disagreed with one another how could anyone ever know what was the good in that case. Plato didn't answer the question for the reader, he simply showed the problems with the three logical options. But there was one aspect Plato did not consider (a singular, authoritative Deity sovereignly declaring what is good). Unfortunately, some theological systems have not considered the issue with even as critical an eye as did Plato, and have come to some destructive conclusions.

The three perceptions of the relationship of God to good naturally lead to three views on the present applicability of the Mosaic Law, for example. The view that God is

under (or bound by) good leads to a **Continuity** view – that all three categories²⁹ of Law are still in effect. God legislates from His character. His character does not change, therefore His legislation cannot change, thus we are still under the entirety of the Law. Theonomy and reconstructionism have taken this approach. The **Semi-Continuity** view is rooted in the idea that God is good (as a definition, being good is being like God), and affirms that the moral aspects of the Law are still in effect. God’s legislation is an expression of His character, and His character remains unchanged, thus the Law must also remain applicable even if some aspects are no longer in force. Reformed/Covenant theology affirms this view and its premises. Both the Continuity and Semi-Continuity views rely on a theological precommitment to a particular view of the relationship of God to good and legislation, and both employ their respective precommitment as a hermeneutic by which to understand not only God’s relationship to the Mosaic Law, but also the relationship of the Mosaic Law to the church. On the other hand, the **Discontinuity** view recognizes that God as sovereign has authority to determine what is and is not good. He has the freedom to change His legislation without changing His character. Consequently, the Mosaic Law need not be applicable based on a universal constant. That God is sovereign and has such authority to determine and communicate good is exegetically derived,³⁰ as is the fact that the Law was within a covenant given to Israel as a nation.³¹ God reveals His ultimate purpose for the Law,³² communicates that the Law has been fulfilled by Christ on the cross,³³ and emphasizes that the church is not under that Law.³⁴

Greg Bahnsen, affirming the Continuity view, appeals to Matthew 5:17 to argue against three categories of Law with different applicability. He refers to the abiding validity of the Law,³⁵ though he does recognize there needs to be changes in how that Law is expressed, because “The accomplishment of redemption changes the way in which we observe the ceremonial law, and the change of culture and times alters the specific ways in which we observe the case laws. The cases are different but the same moral principles remain.”³⁶ Though he tries to avoid it, Bahnsen’s view is subject to the James 2:10 problem – the Law is all or nothing, and one does not have liberty to change how the Law is administered (unless there is clear exegetical warrant to do so).

²⁹ Some suggest the Law should be divided into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories. Yet in doing so face the dilemma of James 2:10.

³⁰ E.g., Genesis 1, Micah 6:8.

³¹ Exodus 19:3-6.

³² Galatians 3:19-24.

³³ Ephesians 2:15.

³⁴ Romans 6:14-15, Galatians 3:24.

³⁵ Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Ethics, 3rd Edition* (Covenant Media Press, 2021), chapter 2.

³⁶ Greg Bahnsen, “The Faculty Discussion of Theonomy,” Question 9, <http://www.cmfnow.com/articles/pe192.htm>, 1978, at RTS.

David Jones calls the Semi-Continuity view “the prevailing view of the church.”³⁷ This view appeals to Acts 15 to suggest that ceremonial law is not applicable to believers, and he appeals to several other passages³⁸ to assert that civil law is not applicable. Yet, the moral law is applicable today for sanctification.³⁹ Jones and others recognize that the undergirding principle is that *authority is law*. Some aspect of God’s legislation must stay in effect if His character is to remain intact. Jones adds that, “Since the Decalogue is a reflection of God’s moral character, the norms codified in the Ten Commandments are universally applicable and demonstrable both before and after their issuance on Mount Sinai.”⁴⁰ Yet again, the James 2:10 problem is in view – the Law didn’t codify norms, it codified legal mandates, and those mandates were (mostly) *not* evident before the Law was put in place. Samuel Bolton recognizes that placing believers under the Law seems to conflict with freedom in Christ, but he addresses that conflict almost poetically: “The law sends us to the gospel that we may be justified, and the gospel sends us to the law again to enquire what is our duty in being justified.”⁴¹

Because the Semi-Continuity view is not exegetically derived, it runs into significant exegetical problems, not the least of which relates to the Sabbath. Jones attempts a resolution, but has to do some contortions with the text to get there:

For Christians, then, the Sabbath is a sign of redemption and, as such, it depicts the eternal rest they have received from Jesus in salvation...Keeping the Sabbath ought not to be a legalistic burden, characterized by lists of permitted and forbidden activities. Rather the Sabbath ought to be a joyous celebration and a blessing...In a specific sense the fourth commandment calls believers to observe a regular day of worship...not to observe the Sabbath, in either a broad or a specific sense, is to behave in a distinctly un-Christlike manner...in the NT...the early church moved the day of Sabbath observance to the first day of the week.”⁴²

Jones’s assertion that the Sabbath is celebration rather than legal burden doesn’t square with the text. The Sabbath was by its very nature as part of the Law a legal burden. The claim that the Sabbath calls believers to a day of worship seems to miss entirely that the Sabbath mandated rest, not worship specifically. The idea that the church moved the Sabbath borders on absurd, and begs the question of where such a move was prescribed and upon what authority. Theological precommitments lead to continual (and destructive) theological supremacy over exegesis.

³⁷ David Jones, *Introduction to Biblical Ethics* (B&H Academic, 2013), 76.

³⁸ E.g., Romans 13:1-5, 1 Peter 2:13-17.

³⁹ Jones, 139.

⁴⁰ Jones, 139.

⁴¹ Samuel Bolton, *True Bonds of Christian Freedom* (London:UK, Banner of Truth, 1964), 80.

⁴² Jones, 166.

Illustrating how a self proclaimed (leaky) dispensationalist can apply the same methodology (theological precommitments predetermine outcomes), John MacArthur states the precommitment this way: “God’s law is a manifestation of His nature. What God has commanded, moral attitudes and behaviors, is a reflection of His nature.”⁴³ MacArthur recognizes this (pre)commitment has implications and explains them as follows:

So, to come along and say that the law is unimportant is to say that the very nature of God and the will of God as reflected in His law is insignificant and unimportant, which I see as a blow or a strike against the very character of God. That is why, at the end of Romans 3, Paul says, after talking about justification by grace through faith alone, he says, “Do we nullify the law?” And then he says, *me genoito*, “No, no, no, God forbid: but we establish the law.”⁴⁴

The (semi) continuation of the Law is now a necessary consequence of the precommitment, and it impacts how MacArthur views the new nature (and is one of the reasons he rejects the dual nature idea): “...And that new nature is a new, divinely created disposition infused with power from the Holy Spirit so that you can now, for the first time, actually obey the law. And not just obey the law, but love to obey the law.”⁴⁵ In asserting the new nature’s ability (and design) to obey the law, MacArthur seems to recognize that his words are conflicting with Paul’s, so he clarifies to resolve that apparent contradiction. Notice he doesn’t clarify his own words, but Paul’s:

...when Paul says you’re not under the law, he first means you’re not under the law as a means of salvation. You’ve come out from under the law, and you are no longer defining your relationship to God by your ability to keep the law satisfactorily, which was impossible.⁴⁶

Based on MacArthur’s theological precommitment to God’s law as a manifestation of God’s nature (an assumed premise of both Continuity and Semi-Continuity), MacArthur asserts that believers are now enabled, equipped, and designed to keep the law, though not for justification. But it is noteworthy how on the one hand he distinguishes between justification and sanctification (not wanting to affirm justification by works of law), yet in the immediate context joins the two together again:

⁴³ John MacArthur, “Sanctification, Sin, and Obedience”, <https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/GTY164/sanctification-sin-and-obedience>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

...salvation is both a forensic reality – that is, God declares you righteous by imputing His righteousness to you – and it is also a real change so that you now are given the ability to live righteously, which is to live in conformity to the law of God and do so willingly from the heart.⁴⁷

On the one hand it is a forensic reality, on the other it is a “real” change. The unbeliever has “broken the law of God and He's angry about it. Unless something happens to change your condition, you're on your way to eternal hell.”⁴⁸ That something is faith *and* repentance, which MacArthur (problematically) defines as “turning from sin.”⁴⁹ Yet he adds that true repentance inevitably results in a change of behavior.”⁵⁰ MacArthur begins with a theological precommitment that results in several theological-over-exegetical affirmations. When following this methodology it becomes apparent that objective exegesis can no longer be possible, because the theological precommitments are too influential. Often God’s character and His gospel are defined outside of the normative principles of communication because of those precommitments.

The Discontinuity view, on the other hand, is consistent (and even synonymous) with a dispensational understanding of God’s character and His relationship to good and legislation. These two ideas are consistent because they both rely on LGH and objective exegesis to derive their affirmations. Nowhere in Scripture does God reveal any ontological limitations for His declarations of good nor of His legislations, thus any assertions of such limitations would be speculative theological constructs. Discontinuity and dispensational thought attempt to avoid these because they have no exegetical basis. Further, there is no exegetical case to be made for the three-fold division of the Law, and there is no exegetical case to be made for the church to be under the Law of Moses. Instead, we discover when applying normative communication principles that God is holy,⁵¹ that God determines and reveals what is good,⁵² and that He works all things for His glory.⁵³ If He desires to change, fulfill, end, or apply legislation He has sovereign rights as the Creator and as the Legislator to do so.

This particular case study is intended to illustrate how one seemingly innocuous theological precommitment can greatly impact one’s theological outcomes. If one predetermines theology and uses those predeterminations to direct their exegesis, then they must do so at the abandonment of normative communication principles (LGH) and with a departure from the exegetical process. Any theological precommitment great or

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ John MacArthur, “Saved. From What?”, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A242/saved-from-what>.

⁴⁹ John MacArthur, *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Word Publishing, 1993), 74.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁵¹ Isaiah 6:3.

⁵² Genesis 1, Micah 6:8.

⁵³ E.g., Romans 11:36.

small that preempts hermeneutics and exegesis is destructive *if* we are designed to understand truth by hermeneutic principles and through the exegetical process.

Dispensationalism is no exception. As an outcome, (traditional) dispensationalism is an excellent and helpful way to organize and understand Biblical and historical data. Yet if used as a method, dispensationalism becomes credal (just like every other theologically driven system), locking in any theological error for future interlocutors, darkening the path of exegesis. This state of affairs would necessitate constant reformation to once again return our focus to the very words that God provided for our accurate understanding of Himself and His plan insofar as He has revealed these to us. It is significant that He revealed these things employing the principles of normative communication. Consequently dispensational thought matters and is thus constructive when those same principles are acknowledged and consistently applied.