

Dispensational Distinctions in Redeemed Humanity as a Correspondence to God's Tri-Unity?

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes the idea that the consistent three-fold distinction between the nations, Israel, and the church observed by traditional dispensationalists represents a correspondence to God's triune being. Dispensationalists have been criticized for affirming a consistent distinction within the people of God (specifically, the Israel-church distinction). Many outstanding dispensationalists have effectively responded to this criticism on exegetical and hermeneutical grounds. This paper engages this point of debate by suggesting a particular theological rationale for the wider three-fold distinction (including the Gentiles), the aforementioned correspondence to the Trinity. If it can be demonstrated that corporate, redeemed humanity bears the marks of being triune, then a plausible theological rationale for the traditional dispensational position on the relationship between the nations, Israel, and the church becomes evident: God, through history, is shaping corporate humanity in a manner that will ultimately reflect His own triune being.

THE DISPENSATIONAL THREE-FOLD DISTINCTION IN CORPORATE HUMANITY

Much attention in dispensational studies has been placed on the relationship between Israel and the church. Both supporters of dispensationalism, and its critics, have recognized the central importance of this relationship to dispensational theology. Specifically, traditional dispensational theology has maintained that there exists in the purposes of God a consistent distinction between Israel and the church which precludes one group from ever assuming the purposes and identity of the other. The church is not a "new Israel," and Israel was not the church in the Old Testament. Each group represents a distinct divine purpose, and these purposes are not to be confused with each other. Indeed, so important is this distinction between Israel and the church to traditional dispensationalism that Charles Ryrie identified it as the first element of his *sine quo non*.¹

Israel is an elect nation, with a distinct calling, and particular covenants intended to be fulfilled by that nation. This means that a distinction must also be observed between Israel and the rest of the nations – the Gentiles. If Israel enjoys a position before God not enjoyed by any other nation, then a real distinction must exist between the Jewish nation, and the vast array of Gentile nations to which Israel stands in contrast. As Chafer observed, the Gentiles stand in

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 46-48.

contradistinction to the nation of Israel right to the very end.² And since the church of Jesus Christ is not a nation of the earth, but a body of called out individuals *from* every nation, a real distinction must also exist between the church and the nations. For the premillennialist, this should be particularly evident when considering the millennium. In the millennial age, many from the nations will be saved, yet not to a position in the church, which would have been completed, raptured and glorified prior to the tribulation period, and judged and married to Christ prior to the millennium.³ Thus the redeemed from among the nations in the millennium must represent a work of God distinct from His work in the church. This calls to mind Chafer's recognition of "Two Gentile purposes" – a calling out of Gentiles in the present dispensation to form the church, and the wider salvation of Gentiles in the millennium.⁴ All of this implies a broader three-fold distinction involving three distinct groupings in corporate humanity: the Gentile nations, the one elect nation Israel, and the body of Christ – the *ecclesia*, a group of individuals called out from every nation.

A brief survey of seminal dispensational writers, as well as traditional dispensational voices of today, reveal a recognition of distinctions within God's people, and a three-fold distinction in corporate humanity between the nations, Israel, and the church. John Nelson Darby spoke of "three great spheres in which Christ's glory is displayed – the church, the Jews, and the Gentiles."⁵ Darby's approach here is a fascinating one, as he not only identified a three-fold distinction, but even went on to offer a doxological rationale for the distinction. There was a three-fold glorification of Christ – "three spheres in which Christ's glory is displayed." The church was not of this world, but was a heavenly people – united to the ascended Christ – who displayed the sovereign, redeeming grace of God.⁶ The church was set in heavenly places in Christ "that in the ages to come God might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus."⁷

Israel and the nations for Darby represented "different degrees" of Christ's earthly government.⁸ Through Israel, God's immediate government in the earth is established, while the Gentiles are "brought to recognize His power and sovereignty displayed in His dealings with them."⁹ When Jerusalem is established in peace in the kingdom age, the nations will own the Lord in Zion.¹⁰ Darby also highlighted the role of the Gentiles as rulers in the earth in light of Israel's failure to properly represent their God.¹¹

² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), 6.

³ Adrian E. Isaacs, "Eschatological Humanity as Triune: Considering a Foundational Dispensational Distinction in Light of the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Interdisciplinary Journal on Biblical Authority* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2020): 180-201

⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (Middletown: First Rate Publishers, 2016), XIV.

⁵ John Nelson Darby, "Elements of Prophecy in Connection with the Church, the Jews, and the Gentiles," in *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*, vol. 11, ed. William Kelly (Winschoten: H.L. Heijkoop, 1971), 45

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹¹ Darby, 52.

C. I. Scofield, in his work *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, began his treatise on Biblical distinctions with a chapter entitled “The Jew, The Gentile, and the Church of God.” At Niagara in 1888, Scofield spoke of this three-fold distinction as “the inspired division of the human family,” and that “you will find that each has a distinct place in the counsels and purposes of God.”¹² He went on to point out that “These distinctions run through all Scripture.” According to Arno Gaebelein, it was from James Hall Brookes that Scofield learned of prophetic particulars concerning the nations, Israel, and the church.¹³

And Scofield’s student, Lewis Sperry Chafer, gave us a thorough treatment of the three-fold distinction between the nations, Israel, and the church in his writings, particularly his *Systematic Theology*. Chafer recognized a three-fold distinction in humanity that he understood was consistent. That is, each group – the nations, Israel, and the church, continues what it is from the origin of each respective group, to the eschaton.¹⁴ Chafer also emphasized that each group’s distinct *identity* is never lost or confused. With the exception of the gathering of individual Jews and Gentiles to form the church in the present dispensation, these three groups never lose their unique identities, nor are they ever merged into something other than what they are.¹⁵

Regarding the calling of both Jews and Gentiles in the present dispensation to form the church, Chafer perceptively regarded this group as a *third* corporate grouping alongside the previous two. Commenting on Ephesians 2, Chafer wrote:

In the midst of these distinctions between Jew and Gentile which were set up by God, owned by God, and accentuated by human prejudice and hatred, a new divine purpose was introduced; made possible on the ground of the death and resurrection of Christ and the advent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. That divine purpose is no less than the forming of a new body...drawn from both Jews and Gentiles...¹⁶

The church, as Chafer recognized, is composed of individuals drawn out from the previous two groups – Israel and the nations – so as to constitute a third division in corporate humanity.

Later dispensationalists have also affirmed real distinctions within God’s people, including the three-fold distinction. Chafer’s successor at Dallas Theological Seminary, John Walvoord, produced three works that have been combined into one volume entitled *The Nations, Israel and the Church in Prophecy*. As the title suggests, this volume relates Biblical prophecy to each of the three groups, highlighting that which pertains to the Gentiles, that which pertains to the Jews, and that which pertains to Christians. According to Walvoord, it was erroneous to

¹² C. I. Scofield, “Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” in *Conference Hill Studies: Report on the Believers’ Meeting for Bible Study: Held at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, July 18–25, 1888*, ed. S. Robinson (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2011): 109–116.

¹³ Arno C. Gaebelein, *The History of the Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Our Hope Publications, 1943), 22.

¹⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 37-40.

¹⁵ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4, 311.

¹⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter: Doctrinally Considered* (USA: Resurrected Books, 2015), 109.

assume that eternity would mean the loss of national identity.¹⁷ Thus, he argued that in the new creation to come, Gentiles will be Gentiles, and Israelites will be Israelites.¹⁸ The New Jerusalem will feature the children of Israel, the Gentiles, and the church, represented by the twelve apostles. This plurality within corporate humanity represented for Walvoord a *unity in diversity* with respect to God's program - ¹⁹ unity in one common salvation, but distinction in character and dispensational background.²⁰

In his work *Things to Come*, J. Dwight Pentecost related the doctrine of the tribulation uniquely to each of the three groups with sections entitled "The Relation of the Church to the Tribulation," "Israel in the Tribulation," and "The Gentiles in the Tribulation" - demonstrating a recognition of this key distinction. Charles Ryrie noted that while God's purposes for the church and Israel are given the most attention in the Bible, other groups - including the nations - have purposes as well.²¹ Concerning the nations, Ryrie noted that God's plan for this group continues into the heavenly Jerusalem, and that these nations are distinct from the church.²² Paul Benware highlighted that the *one new man* of Ephesians 2 is distinct from both the Gentiles and Israel, and is entirely new relative to the prior two groups.²³ Meanwhile, Dr. Mark Hitchcock has stated that Biblical prophecy discloses God's plan for the Gentile nations, the Jewish people, and the church.²⁴ Robert Thomas understood Revelation 21:12-14, which of course speaks of the names of the twelve tribes of Israel in the New Jerusalem, as well as the twelve names of the apostles, to indicate that Israel will have a distinct role from the church in the New Jerusalem and in eternity.²⁵ And finally, in the recent work *Discovering Dispensationalism*, editors Cory Marsh and James Fazio point out that for dispensationalists, there has never been only one people of God, but rather multiple peoples of God.²⁶ The authors naturally recognize a clear, consistent distinction between Israel and the church - neither of which can assume the identity of the other,²⁷ and also recognize the ongoing identities of Gentile nations, even in the eschaton.²⁸

We can summarize then by saying that real, consistent distinctions within the people of God, including the three-fold distinction between the nations, Israel, and the church, is generally

¹⁷ John F. Walvoord, "The Nations in Prophecy," in *The Nations, Israel and the Church in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), 169.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom: A Basic Text in Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 326

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ryrie, 47.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2006), 117.

²⁴ Mark Hitchcock, *The End: A Complete Overview of Bible Prophecy and the End of Days* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2012), 10.

²⁵ Robert L. Thomas, "The Traditional Dispensational View," in *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: 4 Views*, ed. Chad O. Brand (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2015), 135.

²⁶ Cory M. Marsh & James L. Fazio, eds, *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2023), 368.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 366

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 368.

well attested in the writings of traditional dispensationalists. The three-fold distinction recognizes that while corporate humanity is shaped into a three-fold plurality in history, the distinction is maintained eternally. That is to say, the dispensational and historical arranging of humanity into this three-fold plurality of Gentile, Jew, and Christian is reflected in a redeemed, eschatological humanity that maintains this three-fold distinction. As Walvoord stressed, the identities are not lost in the New Jerusalem. That being said, the idea that there could be real, consistent identity distinctions in the people of God, particularly in the eschaton, has been criticized by non-dispensationalists.

CRITICISM OF DISPENSATIONAL DISTINCTIONS IN THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Generally, the criticism of dispensational distinctions in the people of God has centered on the Israel-church relationship, though the wider three-fold distinction has been recognized. For example, commenting on Scofield's *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Michael Williams stated that the three-fold distinction between the Jews, Gentiles, and the church is the most important division in Scripture in dispensational theology.²⁹ The 1943 report of the PCUS Ad Interim Committee regarding the compatibility of dispensationalism to the Westminster Confession recognized the dispensational distinction in the human race between the Jews, Gentiles, and the church, but objected to this – particularly the idea that there could be two different eternal destinies for Israel and the church.³⁰ They countered the dispensational view by arguing for the human race as a *unit* – the entirety of which is fallen and must exercise saving faith, with one eternal destiny set before them – heaven.³¹ So for the Ad Interim Committee, the concern was to see the human race as a unit, rather than a plurality of groups. Emphasizing the covenant of grace of covenant theology, the Committee's concern here was largely soteriological, not dispensational.³² Committed to the unifying nature of this covenant of grace, the Committee regarded dispensational distinctions within the people of God as erroneous.³³

Vern Poythress, in his critique of dispensationalism, argued quite clearly that there can be only one people of God because there is only one Christ. Again, soteriology appears to have been the driving force behind this concern.³⁴ He argued that since there is one humanity united under the headship of Adam – a humanity that is universally affected by Adam's sin, so there is one new redeemed humanity under Christ's headship.³⁵ Again, these arguments by Poythress are

²⁹ Michael Williams, *This World is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 26.

³⁰ "Copy of the Original Report of the 1943 PCUS Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms as to Whether the Type of Bible Interpretation Known as 'Dispensationalism' is in Harmony with the Confession of Faith," in *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936 to 1944*, R. Todd Mangum (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 235

³¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

³² Isaacs, "Eschatological Humanity as Triune."

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 43

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

made directly in opposition to the dispensational position of a plurality in the people of God. John Gerstner, in his work *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*, raised a similar soteriological objection, questioning how two distinct peoples of God – Israel and the church – could possess the same salvation.³⁶

The title of Keith Mathison’s work, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* speaks directly to the non-dispensationalist’s concern, namely, that dispensationalism divides the people of God. Mathison is quite clear, stating that people of God from all ages are one body – the church,³⁷ which – in supersessionist fashion – he regards as the “true Israel.”³⁸ His argument is that the foundational dispensational doctrine of a distinction in the people of God – namely, Israel and the church – is unbiblical, and that Christians must reject it, affirming instead the oneness of the people of God – the church, the “true Israel.”³⁹

More recently, covenant theologians Chad Brand and Tom Pratt Jr. have argued that the dispensational distinction between Israel and the church is “artificial” and “unbiblical.”⁴⁰ A major part of their argument is that, since God is *one*, there must only be *one* people of God – a people taken from all the nations.⁴¹ This appeal to “oneness” as a basis for the oneness of God’s people is similar to the move Gerstner made, except that while Gerstner appealed to the one salvation, Brand and Pratt appeal to the one God. For Brand and Pratt, the *oneness* of God is the very basis for a single people of God throughout the Bible.⁴² The authors, in making this argument, include a footnote where they indicate that their emphasis on the oneness of God is based on Israel’s *Shema* – “Hear O, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” – and that they do not intend to discuss the nature of the Trinity, which they understand to be distinctiveness-in-unity.”⁴³

As covenant theologians, Brand and Pratt Jr. obviously wrote from a perspective that understands both Israel and the church to represent differing aspects of the unfolding of redemption under one covenant of grace. While rejecting supersessionist or “replacement” language when speaking of Israel and the church, and affirming an eschatological salvation for Israel,⁴⁴ the authors nonetheless reject the view that Israel will have a distinct role from the church in the eschaton, a point argued by Robert Thomas.⁴⁵ The “one new man” language and

³⁶ John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000), 235, quoted in Adrian E. Isaacs, “The Nations, Israel, and the Church in the Eschatology of Lewis Sperry Chafer” (Th.D thesis, University of Toronto, 2023), 97.

³⁷ Keith Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1995). 38

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰ Chad O. Brand & Tom Pratt Jr., “The Progressive Covenantal View,” in Brand, ed., 236-237.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 237n.

⁴⁴ Chad O. Brand, ed. *Perspectives*, 15. The precise position that Brand and Pratt represent is known as *progressive covenantalism* (see the aforementioned work edited by Chad O. Brand, *Perspectives on Israel and the Church: 4 Views*).

⁴⁵ Brand & Pratt Jr., “Response by Chad O. Brand and Tom Pratt Jr., in Brand, ed., 153.

teaching of Paul eliminates such an eternal distinction, and suggests but *one* people of God.⁴⁶ Thus, the *one new man* is not a third group alongside Israel and the nations as Benware argued, but rather is redeemed humanity *in toto* – the church - from the cross and Pentecost⁴⁷ through to the eschaton.

No dispensationalist would contradict Biblical monotheism. Likewise, no dispensationalist would deny that there is *one* salvation. But to argue, on the basis of these two things as some non-dispensationalists have done, that there must be only *one* people of God seems to neglect the Biblical principle of unity-in-diversity, something that exists within the very being of God Himself.⁴⁸

THE THREE-FOLD DISTINCTION AS A CORRESPONDENCE TO GOD’S TRI-UNITY

The Triune God

It is well established and recognized that the distinctions observed in the people of God by dispensationalists are rooted in a particular hermeneutical approach, namely consistent literalism, or historical-grammatical interpretation. This hermeneutical approach was, of course, Ryrie’s second element in the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. Ryrie’s argument was that the first element of the *sine qua non* – the distinction between Israel and the church – was born out of a consistent use of the historical-grammatical method.⁴⁹ As this principle is widely recognized among dispensationalists, I will not say anything more with respect to the hermeneutical factors underpinning dispensational distinctions within corporate humanity. The primary concern of this paper pertains to a possible theological rationale for the three-fold distinction between the nations, Israel, and the church; specifically, that the three-fold arrangement between these three groups serves a correspondence or close resemblance to God’s tri-unity.

In introducing the doctrine of the Trinity into this discussion, we are not so much concerned with the more particular aspects of theological debate regarding the Trinity, such as differences between Western and Eastern approaches (except for a passing reference to the filioque), or the contemporary discussions regarding the classical model of the Trinity and the relational model.⁵⁰ Our concern is more basic – simply, the reality of unity-in-distinction in the Godhead, and the manner in which the church has generally understood the Trinitarian relations. In doing so, I hope to provide a reasonable answer to those who claim that the fact that God is one, and that there is one salvation precludes there being multiple peoples of God.

Traditional Trinitarian doctrine affirms that God is *one*, but that three hypostases, or “Persons” constitute the one God. The divine essence, or *ousia*, is not something akin to a fourth reality alongside the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.⁵¹ Nor is it divided into parts among the

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Brand, ed., 15.

⁴⁸ Which Brand and Pratt Jr. do recognize.

⁴⁹ Ryrie, 47, 48.

⁵⁰ See Jason S. Sexton, ed. *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Two Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

⁵¹ Philip W. Butin, *The Trinity* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 32.

three.⁵² Rather, God is entirely present in each of the three divine Persons so that the Father, Son, and Spirit all mutually share the one divine essence.⁵³ This means that each of the three divine Persons are essential to deity. God exists *precisely as* the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. There is but one God – a statement in complete conformity to Jewish and Old Testament monotheism (Isaiah 46:9). Yet this one God exists *as* a plurality of Persons. The Father is God (John 6:27, 1 Peter 1:3), the Son is God (John 1:1, John 20:28), and the Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4, 1 Cor. 2:10-11). Real distinction is present within the one eternal, immutable God.

Trinitarian doctrine recognizes the real distinctions within the Godhead to be distinctions of relations. That is, the distinction in God lies in the fact that there are relations of Persons within God's being: The Father is not the Son, and Son is not the Father, and the Son and the Father are not the Spirit. So far as the divine essence is concerned, all three possess everything pertaining to deity. But with respect to the eternal relations within the Godhead, each divine Person retains the identity that is theirs from eternity. These relations between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit "form their sole distinguishing feature."⁵⁴ Whatever we can say about God the Father, we can say about God the Son, except that He is the Father.⁵⁵

The classical doctrine of the Trinity has of course used the words *begotten* and *procession* to understand the relations between divine Persons.⁵⁶ The Father is the unbegotten one, while the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Spirit meanwhile proceeds from the Father and the Son.⁵⁷ The Persons of the Trinity do not stand isolated or unbounded from each other. That would be tritheism. Rather, an indivisible unity exists among the three Persons that is constituted by these unique relations: the Begetter, the Begotten, and the One who proceeds from both. The relations between the divine Persons accounts both for what differentiates, and unites the Trinitarian reality.⁵⁸ This is a unity-in-distinction, and a distinction-in-unity; and the communion that exists between the three divine persons – their *koinonia* – is a blissful communion of love.⁵⁹

Here we do well to recall the words of the Apostle John: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Even apart from and before creation, the one God existed for all eternity as a communion of love: Father, Son, and Spirit existing together in blissful, infinite love. Augustine offered a view of love that involved three things – the lover, that which is loved, and the love itself.⁶⁰ The medieval thinker Richard of St. Victor maintained that for mutual love to be perfect, it had to be shared with a third person.⁶¹ Thus, in God there is an I-thou relationship of reciprocal love (the

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1999), 178.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Isaacs, "Eschatological Humanity as Triune."

⁵⁷ It is recognized that eastern Christians would object to the "filioque" clause: "and the Son."

⁵⁸ O'Collins, 178.

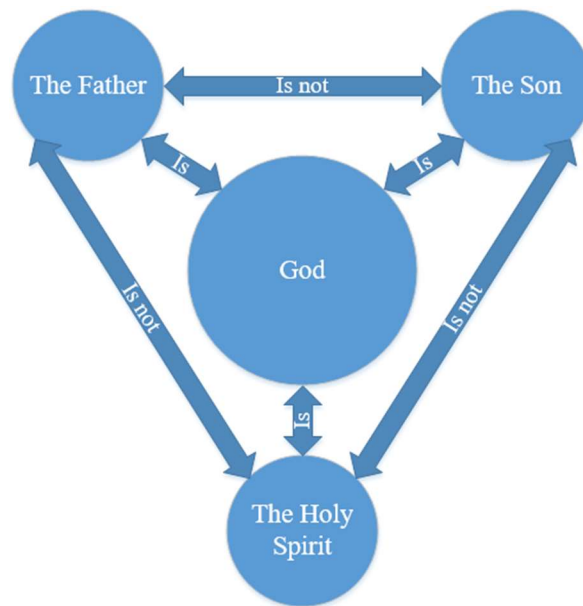
⁵⁹ Ibid., 179.

⁶⁰ Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1991), IX:2.

⁶¹ O'Collins, 137.

Father and the Son), and also a Co-beloved (the Holy Spirit).⁶² And linking 1 John 4:8 directly with this three-fold aspect of love, Norman Geisler stated that God is love, and love consists of three elements: a lover, a beloved, and a spirit of love, and these three are one.⁶³

Pulling all of this together, classic Trinitarian doctrine affirms that there is one God that exists in three distinct but co-equal Persons, the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit. All three are God, yet each possess a distinct identity so as not to be any of the others. The three are not separate deities that stand apart from each other, but are bound together in an indivisible unity where the Father begets the Son, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. We can summarize this by considering a well-known illustration of the Trinity, known as the Shield of the Trinity.



The Nations, Israel, and the Church

What does all of this have to do with dispensational theology? When the traditional dispensational understanding of the relationship between the nations, Israel, and the church is observed in light of the unity-in-diversity of the Trinity, a remarkable correspondence seems to appear. First, there is the simple fact of a shared humanity despite consistent identity distinctions. There is only one human nature, not multiple. Gentiles, Jews, and Christians all share precisely the same anthropological make up – the human nature inherited from Adam and Eve. This one humanity subsists in the three groups equally. None are less human than another. In this model, the one human nature corresponds to the one divine nature, while the three distinct identity groups correspond to the three Persons of the Trinity. While obviously not making any

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Bloomington: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 294.

connection to the Father, the Son, or the Spirit, the Apostle Paul seems to have affirmed the three-fold nature of corporate humanity when he told the Corinthians not to offend “Jews, or Greeks, or the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32). One natural humanity subsisting in three groups implies a Trinitarian humanity.

There is also the manner in which the three-fold distinction has been historically worked out through the dispensations. The distinction between the nations, Israel, and the church is elective and dispensational rather than physiological. That is to say, Israel and the church do not simply appear as independently created groups, entirely separate from the Gentiles with a separate nature, but rather, share a bond of unity and an identical human nature with the Gentiles, and with each other. The time period from Adam to Abraham consisted of one group of people on the earth, the Gentiles.⁶⁴ When God chose to establish a covenant nation through which He would redeem the world, He did not create a new humanity in the sense of a new physiological reality, but rather called out from the nations one man, Abram (Gen. 12:1-3). Through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God established a second division in the human race, Israel.

The human race, having fallen into sin was in need of saving. Abraham is drawn out from the nations by God, and the elect nation of Israel is established. Through Israel came Jesus Christ, the Savior of humanity. Thus, Israel, who is drawn out from the nations, becomes the very channel of blessing and salvation for the nations. It is as if one was taken from the nations (Abram), to then return blessing to nations, the fountainhead of corporate humanity. A possible correspondence may exist here to the begetting of the Son by the Father, and the reciprocated love that the Son returns to the Father – the inner-Trinitarian love between the Father and the Son.

And of course, it is through the work of the Jewish Messiah that a third group – the church – is established. Again, the church is not an isolated entity, entirely separate from the prior two groups. Rather, through the cross, and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, the church is constituted by individuals drawn from both the nations and Israel. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:14-16:

For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity (NKJV).

In terms of its makeup, the church proceeds from *both* Israel and the nations. The church is common to both groups, and represents a bond of unity between Israel and the nations. It is through the Jewish Messiah, giving life to the world, that a third group – the church – is established as a unity of Jews and Gentiles. Yet, the existence of the church does not eradicate or nullify the continued existence of both Israel and the nations. All three exist together. Here there

⁶⁴ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 40.

appears to be a correspondence between the church that proceeds from the nations and Israel, and the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. Thus, what God has done through history, is fashion humanity into a three-fold plurality that bears some resemblance to His own triune reality.

Finally, there is the arrangement in the millennium and the new creation. Dispensationalists understand Scripture to teach a glorious era on this earth that will be characterized by righteousness and the just rule of Jesus Christ on this earth. During this glorious millennium, the nations will be saved (Mal. 1:11, Isaiah 11:10), not as a part of the church, but as their own distinct group. This was the second of Chafer's "two Gentile purposes." We also know that Israel will experience a national, eschatological salvation. In addition to the various Old Testament passages that speak of Israel's redemption, Paul speaks of Israel's coming redemption in Romans 11. Since Israel and the church are distinct from one another, this eschatological Jewish salvation does not bring them into the church. Rather, they are saved *as Israel*, in fulfillment of God's covenant promises to that nation. And with respect to the New Jerusalem, we are told that the nations will walk in the light of the eternal city, and will bring their glory into it. We also see in the New Jerusalem the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and the twelve Apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:12-14), which may be indicative of an enduring, eschatological distinction between Israel and the church.

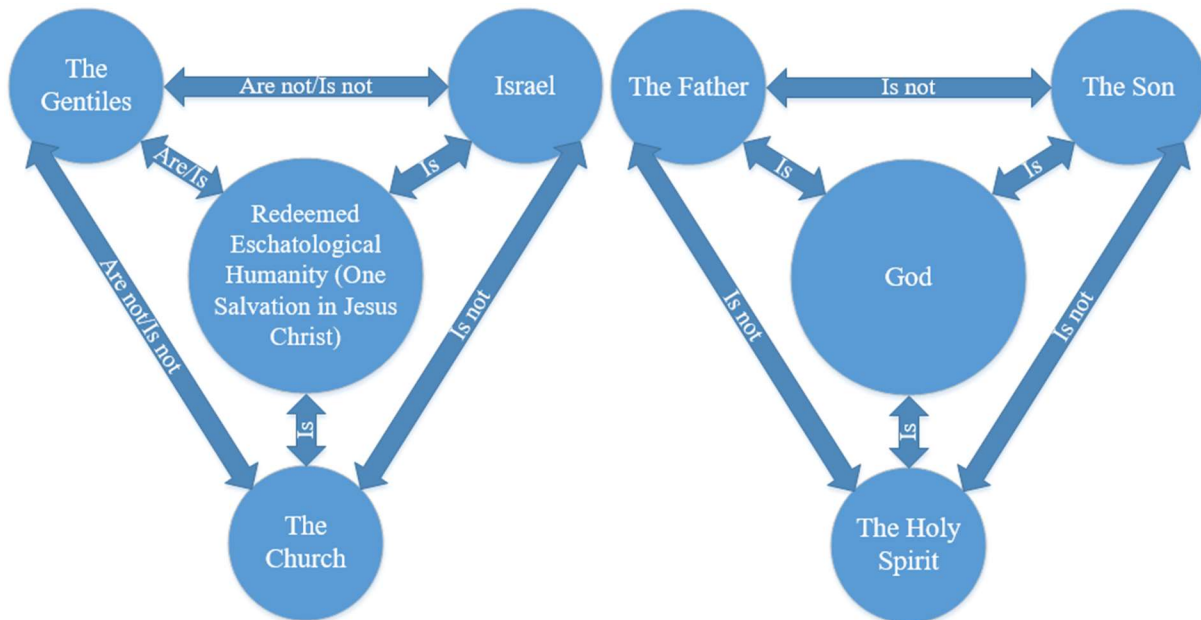
As demonstrated earlier in this paper, traditional dispensationalists have understood the unity-in-diversity that exists in corporate humanity to be maintained even in the eschaton. National identities will not be lost. And making a connection between the diversity-in-unity in God and the diversity-in-unity in redeemed humanity is not at all unprecedented among dispensationalists. Cory Marsh and James Fazio note that the diversity that exists among the Persons of the Trinity will in fact continue to reflect the diversity among human beings who are made in God's image, and who will be united under His Lordship.⁶⁵ They go on to note that distinctions among the different peoples of God remain even in the new creation (Rev. 21:12, 14).

The correspondence being suggested here specifically concerns the nations as a corporate group,⁶⁶ Israel, and the church reflecting the triune reality of God. What God has done in history – shape corporate humanity into a three-fold reality – will be maintained eternally and will forever bear a similarity to the three-fold diversity-in-unity in the Godhead. Within eschatological redeemed humanity, there is *one* salvation. All are saved in the exact same way, whether they be part of the Gentile corporate group, Israel or the church. All are saved by grace through faith, with Jesus Christ accomplishing the redemption common to all. Yet this redeemed humanity subsists in three distinct groups, the nations, Israel, and the church. Each retains its distinct identity. The church is not Israel, and Israel is not the church, and neither of these are the Gentiles. Yet all three are one in Christ, who is in fact their common center. On this point,

⁶⁵ Marsh and Fazio, 368.

⁶⁶ This is not to deny that further distinctions will exist between particular nations among the Gentiles (cf. Isaiah 19:25)

Darby’s view, which we looked at earlier, is compelling: The three-fold distinction serves as a three-fold glorification of Christ, whereby each group uniquely provides an opportunity for Christ to be glorified in a particular way. In summary, we can illustrate this three-fold arrangement in redeemed corporate humanity, and its apparent correspondence to the Trinity, in the following way:⁶⁷



CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The goal of this paper has been to suggest that the consistent three-fold distinction between the nations, Israel, and the church that traditional dispensationalists understand to be revealed in Scripture, reflects God’s triune distinction-in-unity. There is one God in three eternally distinct Persons, and there is one redeemed eschatological humanity in three distinct groups. As the three Persons of the trinity exists in a loving, eternal union, so the three groups will exist together in the eschaton, forever enjoying each other. Israel with the nations, the nations with the church and the church with Israel. Seen in this light, the three groups together constitute the one redeemed humanity, with the essence of their unity being their common life in Jesus Christ. Here, there is no place for triumphalism. No place for antisemitism, or replacement theology. To truly bear a likeness to the triune God in this manner, each of the three groups are necessary, and must stand in their own distinct identity. If one is removed, the correspondence breaks down.

If this apparent correspondence between redeemed corporate humanity and the Trinity is what God specifically intended, then far from dividing the people of God, it would seem that dispensationalism is the one theological approach that truly captures this remarkable similarity between redeemed corporate humanity and the Trinity. The consistent, historical-grammatical

⁶⁷ The image that follows first appeared in the Fall 2020 issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal on Biblical Authority*, page 198.

interpretive method employed by traditional dispensationalists brings this consistent three-fold distinction to light. The dispensational reading of corporate humanity through Biblical history arrives at the eschaton with a corporate redeemed humanity that is three-in-one, forever displaying a likeness to the one God who is three-in-one. It seems to me then that to argue that *one* God and *one* salvation necessitates *one* people of God misses the mark. God is a plurality of Persons and, thus, we should not be surprised if the one humanity made in God's image is characterized by a plurality of people groups.

It is recognized that our progressive dispensational friends may find this suggested correspondence difficult to accept, not because it is characterized by real distinction in humanity, but because of the everlasting three-fold nature of it. In their book *Progressive Dispensationalism*, Blaising and Bock were careful to point out that in their view, the church is not a separate group in contrast to Jews and Gentiles, but rather, represents redeemed humanity as it exists in the current dispensation prior to the Christ's return.⁶⁸ In another work, Blaising again stresses that in his view, the church is not a distinct people separate from Israel and the Gentiles.⁶⁹ Rather, the church is a spiritual communion of persons of different *ethnes* and nations united in Christ.⁷⁰ While the progressive position still affirms a diversity-in-unity among the redeemed, I would argue that the traditional position offers a far richer theological picture in that the diversity-in-unity is specifically three-fold, beautifully reflecting the three-fold diversity-in-unity of the Godhead, and doing so eternally. This is not simply an arbitrary theological preference, but the natural outcome of a consistent, historical-grammatical interpretation of the Biblical text.

Finally, it is recognized that this suggested correspondence is not without its challenges and question marks. Perhaps chief among these is the fact that it is largely theologically reasoned. If indeed the correspondence is specifically what God has intended, it is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture. However, it is arrived at by observing what Scripture as a whole *does say* about the nations, Israel, and the church and the nature of their relationships to each other. Another issue, which may be more of a question than an outright difficulty, is how each of the three groups experience and relate uniquely to God in the eternal state. If the three-fold distinction is maintained, and each group shares in the same salvation, which must involve union to Christ the Savior, where might an experiential difference lie – if there is one? And finally, how far should the correspondence be pressed? Should we really attempt to trace a correspondence between the inner life of God (i.e. how the three divine Persons relate to each other) and the historical arranging of the three human groups, or should we simply be content to leave the correspondence as one of a three-fold unity-in-diversity that occurs both in God and corporate humanity?

⁶⁸ Craig A. Blaising & Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 49-50.

⁶⁹ Craig Blaising, "A Theology of Israel and the Church," in *Israel the Church and the Middle East: A Biblical Response to the Current Conflict*, eds. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 89.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

Traditional dispensational theology has recognized a three-fold consistent distinction in corporate humanity between the nations, Israel, and the church. It is entirely reasonable then to suggest that a theological rationale would lie behind this arrangement. Said another way, what might the divine motive be in shaping corporate humanity in a three-fold manner? Dispensational theology affirms that the glory of God is the underlying purpose of God in creation.⁷¹ It is quite possible then, that the three-fold arrangement between the nations, Israel, and the church was intended by God to be to His own glory for all eternity by reflecting the wondrous reality of the diversity-in-unity of the triune God.

⁷¹ Ryrie, 48.