

COVENANT THEOLOGY AND DISPENSATIONALISM

Ways to Describe and Use “Covenant” (a multi-faceted idea)

Relationship between God and his people

Divine administration of the kingdom of God

Covenantal elements (oath, ceremony, sacraments, shedding of blood, blessings and curses, etc.)

Organizing principle for Biblical interpretation (covenant as hermeneutic)

Quotes

“What is covenant theology? The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic — that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds.”

— J.I. Packer, from the preface of Herman Witsius’s
The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man

“Covenant theology structures all of Biblical revelation . . . Covenant is the most coherent explanation for Biblical revelation and the nature and authority of the canon.”

— Scott Clark, *Theses on Covenant Theology* at rscottclark.org

Illustrations

Atmosphere/environment

Gravity

Story/drama

Games: Jigsaw puzzle/Battleship

Lens

Map

Everyone has an organizing principle with which they approach the Scriptures (assumptions, preconceptions, etc.)

Self-interpretation

Rationalistic

Covenant Theology

New Covenant Theology

Lutheranism

Roman Catholicism

Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism

Preliminary Remarks: What we're not saying

We're not saying that to be a dispensationalist is to be a non-Christian.

We're not saying that dispensationalists ignore the covenants.

We're not saying that all dispensationalists believe exactly the same thing.

We're not saying that dispensationalism is confined to a single denomination or group.

Popularity

Proponents

Dallas Theological Seminary

Independent Bible Churches

Chuck Swindoll

John MacArthur

Christian Television

"Left Behind"

Dispensationalism Defined

Dispensationalism is an interpretive approach to the Bible that sees redemptive history as consecutive periods of time (dispensations), in which God tests man's obedience to His revealed will. In each dispensation, man ultimately disobeys, and God forgives. God then brings in a new dispensation, repeating the cycle throughout history until the kingdom of God is consummated.

Characteristics of Dispensationalism

Literalistic Interpretation

(including a literal Millennial reign of Jesus from the throne in Jerusalem)

Discontinuity between Israel and the Church

(two peoples of God with two different plans)

God's glory (rather than salvation of sinners) as the chief focus of revelation

Versions of Dispensationalism

Classical (J.N. Darby, C.I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer)

Modern (Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, DTS)

Progressive (Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising)

The Seven Dispensations (Classical)

History of Dispensationalism

John Nelson Darby and the Brethren Movement (1827)

Dispensationalism comes to the U.S.

Darby influences Scofield, who influences Chafer and others

Scofield Reference Bible (1909)

Filling the vacuum created by liberal theology

Bible conference movement (1870s to early 1900s)

Lewis Sperry Chafer and Dallas Theological Seminary (1924)

Current Popularity

Independent churches appeal to American rugged individualism.

Dispensational eschatology more sensationalistic and dramatic.

Churches not bound by creeds; more freedom to try gimmicks, join movements, etc.