

Reading: COTC 11

## Which Structures Scripture—Covenants or Dispensations?

Sources: *The Christ of the Covenants* by O. Palmer Robertson (1980).

*Dispensationalism: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* by Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III (1985). The authors are graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary and former dispensationalists.

*Dispensationalism Today* by Charles C. Ryrie (1965). The author is a leading dispensationalist from Dallas Theological Seminary. Quotes from Ryrie below are referenced by page number (**emphasis** has been added).

### A. What Is Dispensationalism?

Both Dispensationalism and Covenant (or Reformed) Theology are systems developed by godly men to explain how God interacts with men and how He has organized the Scriptures. Although a more recent development historically, today dispensationalism is the prevalent theological system in the United States. Dispensationalists are conservative, evangelical, God-fearing Christians who love the Scriptures, and with whom we have much in common.

#### 1. Definitions

- “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture.” (p. 22).
- “The central idea in the word *dispensation* (Gk. *oikonomia*) is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household.” (p. 25).
- “A concise definition of a dispensation is this: **A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.** If one were describing a dispensation he would include other things, such as the ideas of a distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment.... The viewpoint in distinguishing the dispensations is God’s not man’s. **The dispensations are economies instituted and brought to their purposeful conclusion by God....** To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God.” (pp. 29-31).

#### 2. Dispensations

- Dispensation of Innocency (Gen. 1:28-3:6)
- Dispensation of Conscience (Gen. 4:1-8:14); note gap of Gen. 3:7-24!
- Dispensation of Human Government (Gen. 8:15-11:9)
- Dispensation of Promise (Gen. 11:10-Ex. 18:27)
- Dispensation of Law (Ex. 19:1-Acts 1:26)
- Dispensation of Grace (Church) (Acts 2:1-Rev. 19:21)
- Dispensation of Millennium (Rev. 20:1-10?)

### 3. Covenants (in Dispensationalism)

Robertson points out a dual structuring of history in dispensationalism: both covenants and dispensations are used to describe the purpose of God through the ages, although they frequently conflict with one another. Note there is an 'extra' Palestinian covenant (based on Dt. 30:3).

- Edenic Covenant
- Adamic Covenant
- Noahic Covenant
- Abrahamic Covenant
- Mosaic Covenant
- Palestinian Covenant
- Davidic Covenant
- New Covenant

### 4. Unity and Diversity

**“Covenant theology, because of the rigidity of its unifying principle of the covenant of grace can never show within its system proper progress of revelation. ... Only dispensationalism can cause historical events and successions to be seen in their own light and not be reflected in the artificial light of an overall covenant.”** (pp. 19-20).

“Covenant theologians have been guilty of reading back (and sometimes forcing back) the teaching of the New Testament into the Old especially in order to try and substantiate **their doctrine of salvation in the Old Testament**. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, have been guilty of making such hard and fast distinctions between the ages involved in the various dispensations that they, for instance, have said very little about grace in the Old Testament. However, though both groups are blameworthy, **the covenant theologian’s faulty interpretation is a result of a basically inherent defect in his system**, while the dispensationalist’s lack is not in the system but the expounding of it.” (p. 34).

“Dispensationalism alone has a broad enough unifying principle to do justice to the unity of the progress of revelation on the one hand and the distinctiveness of the various stages in that progress on the other. **Covenant theology can only emphasize the unity**, and in so doing overemphasizes it until it becomes the sole governing category of interpretation.... Any seeming disunity in the dispensational scheme is superficial. **Dispensationalism recognizes both the unity of His purpose and the diversity in the unfolding of it**. Covenant theology emphasizes the unity only to the point of forcing unwarranted, inconsistent, and contradictory interpretation of the Scripture.” (pp. 35-36).

### 5. Key Characteristics

“What is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism? The answer is threefold. 1) **A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct....** 2) This distinction between Israel and the Church is born out of **a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation....** It is interpretation that does not spiritualize

or allegorize as non-dispensational interpretation does.... 3) The third aspect ... concerns **the underlying purpose of God in the world**. The covenant theologian in practice makes this purpose salvation, and the dispensationalist says the purpose is broader than that, namely, the glory of God.... Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center.” (pp. 44-46).

## B. Goal of History

“Dispensationalists find **the goal of history in the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth**, while the covenant theologian regards it as the eternal state.” (p. 17).

“In covenant theology the covenant of grace is God’s plan of salvation, and therefore the unifying principle of **covenant theology is soteriological**. In dispensationalism, the [unifying] principle is theological or perhaps better **eschatological** ... culminating in history with the millennial glory.” (p. 18).

*Robertson*: The goal of dispensationalism focuses on establishment of earthly millennial kingdom, while goal of covenant theology focuses on the consummation and the eternal state – redemption.

*Robertson*: “Rather surprisingly, dispensationalism has no dispensation of the eternal state. Ryrie explains this omission by noting that dispensational economies are related to the affairs of this world. Since this world will come to an end with the millennium, there is no need for another dispensation. **Rather than have history climax in eternity, Ryrie indicates that God’s entire program culminates not in eternity but in the millennial kingdom....** Dispensationalism has built its entire approach to biblical interpretation on a metaphysical dichotomy between the material and the spiritual realms. While the church age centers on a supposedly heavenly, spiritual realm, the millennium culminates the purposes of God in the material realm.” (p. 225).

## C. Literal Hermeneutic

“The dispensationalist claims to employ principles of literal, plain or normal, interpretation consistently. **Covenant theologians are well known for their stand on allegorical interpretation** especially as it relates to the prophetic Word, and they are equally well known for their amillennialism which is only the natural outcome of allegorizing.” (p. 20).

“**Literal interpretation means interpretation which gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage**, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. This is sometimes called the principle of grammatical-historical interpretation ... normal interpretation, ... [or] plain interpretation.... **Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation.** After all, the very existence of any meaning for a figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved.... ‘The *literalist* (so called) is not one who denies that *figurative* language, that *symbols*, are used in prophecy, nor does he deny that great *spiritual* truths are set forth therein; his position is, simply, that the prophecies are to be *normally* interpreted (i.e., according to the received laws of language) as any other utterances are interpreted—that which is manifestly figurative being so regarded.’” (pp. 86-87).

## Examples of the “Apostles’ Hermeneutic” in Matthew 2 (Crenshaw):

Literal: Mt. 2:5-6 – Micah 5:1-2

Type: Mt. 2:15 – Hosea 11:1

Analogy: Mt. 2:17-18 – Jer. 31:15

According to Sense: Mt. 2:23 – no direct OT reference

*Gunn*: “Whenever a New Testament fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy is not literal enough for the dispensationalist, the dispensationalist simply argues that the fulfillment really was not a fulfillment. Such fulfillments are classified as illustrations, foreshadowings, kingdom breakthroughs, prefigurements, types, and so on.” (p. 265).

**Case Study:** Joel 2:28-32 – Acts 2:16-21

## D. Israel vs. Church

### 1. Not the Same

“If the distinctive character of the Church as a living organism indwelt by Christ in which Jews and Gentiles are on an equal basis is described as a mystery unknown in Old Testament times, then **the Church must not have been constituted in those Old Testament days.**” (p. 135).

“Use of the words *Israel* and *Church* shows clearly that in the New Testament national Israel continues with her own promises and **the Church is never equated with a so-called “new Israel”** but is carefully and continually distinguished as a separate work of God in this age.... **The covenant [theologian] is completely blinded by the premise that the one death of Christ must mean one people of God saved in the same way and called out for the same purpose.**” (pp. 140, 143).

“It is quite obvious that Christians are called the spiritual seed of Abraham, but **the New Testament nowhere says that they are the heirs of the national promises made to the physical descendants....** Faithful, believing Jews in Old Testament times were spiritual Israel and both the physical and spiritual seed of Abraham. But faith, not race, is the determinative reason for being able to be called the spiritual seed of Abraham. Only when a believer belongs to the race of Israel can he in any sense be called a spiritual Israelite.” (p. 149).

Note: see Palmer Robertson’s book *The Israel of God* for an exhaustive treatment of this subject, clearly demonstrating that the NT church is the continuation of OT Israel and the heirs of all the OT promises.

### 2. Duality of Purpose

#### a) Ryrie

Quoting Chafer: ‘The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing **two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.**’ (p. 45).

“The earthly purpose of Israel ... will be fulfilled by Jews during the millennium as they live on the earth in *unresurrected* bodies. The earthly future for Israel does not concern Israelites who die before the millennium is set up. The destiny of those who die is different. Believing Israelites of the Mosaic age who died in faith have a heavenly destiny. Unbelieving ones will be confined in the lake of fire. Jews today who believe in Christ are members of the Church, His Body, and their destiny is the same as Gentile believers. But to those Jews who will be living on the earth in earthly bodies when the millennium begins and to those who will be born with earthly bodies during the period will be fulfilled the earthly promises which have remained unfulfilled during these years. Even during the days of the millennial kingdom there will be those who believe and those who reject the Savior-King, and their eternal destiny will be determined by their heart relationship to Him. But until they die or until the millennium ends, their destiny will be to fulfill those earthly promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. ... **The eternal place of Old Testament believers in the heavenly Jerusalem is certain, and in that heavenly state they are distinguished from the Church! Distinction is maintained even though the destiny is the same.**” (pp. 146-147).

“There is nothing wrong with God’s having a purpose for Israel and a purpose for the Church and letting these two purposes stand together within His overall plan. **After all, God had a purpose for angels which is different from His purpose for man.**” (p. 155).

DSB Note: God has different purposes for men and dogs too. But does He have different purposes for dachshunds and Dobermans? Using the analogy between angels and men and then applying that conclusion only to men (Jews and non-Jews) is like comparing apples and oranges – all you have at the end of the day is fruit salad!

b) Robertson

“Dispensationalism would assert vigorously that such a conclusion derives from consistent literalism in biblical interpretation. But it would appear that a much more fundamental principle is at work. Actually, the dispensational distinction between the two purposes of God in history arises from a metaphysical rather than a hermeneutical presupposition.... **Basic to this distinction is a metaphysical or philosophical dichotomy between the material and the spiritual realm....** Covenant theology does not see redemption as related to a more ‘spiritual’ realm than the realm in which the promises of Abraham operated. Because covenant theology sees redemption from the perspective of creation, no dichotomy exists ultimately between redemption in the spiritual realm and redemption in the physical realm.... From the very beginning, Christ’s goal is the restoration of the total man in his total creational environment. Nothing less than bodily resurrection in the context of a new heavens and a new earth where the entire curse of the fall has been removed can satisfy the biblical concept of redemption. Dispensationalism, however, emphasizes God’s activity of setting apart a people for Himself physically as it relates to Israel and spiritual as it relates to the New Testament people of God. This distinction is indeed one of metaphysics. **A form**

**of Platonism actually permeates the hermeneutical roots of dispensationalism.”** (pp. 213-214).

“Dispensationalism partitions the purposes of God, making one purpose relate to the physical, earthly realm, and another purpose relate to the heavenly, spiritual realm. The whole of the Christian faith cries out against such a distinction. **Man cannot be partitioned in such a manner because he was not created in such a dualistic fashion. Man was created as a physical/spiritual complex.**” (pp. 214-215).

The dispensational system of biblical interpretation builds on a dichotomy of the purposes of God. God is presented as having one purpose that is earthly and physical and another that is heavenly and spiritual.... **This dichotomy is metaphysical rather than Biblical in origin.**” Implication: the gospel implications of carrying forward the righteousness of God into every realm of life have not been understood. (p. 226).

### 3. Kingdom

“There is a spiritual aspect to God’s kingdom rule. It is not a separate kingdom from His universal reign, but it is a sphere within that in which He rules the hearts and lives of those who trust Him. Believers in this age have been brought into the kingdom of His dear Son (Col. 1:13), and believers in every age are part of this spiritual kingdom. But the spiritual feature of this present age is not revealed in terms of a kingdom but in the Church, the Body of Christ.... **It was the Davidic kingdom which Jesus offered and not the general rule of God over the earth or His spiritual reign in individual lives.** If it were the spiritual kingdom Christ was offering, then ‘such an announcement would have had no special significance whatever to Israel, for such a rule of God has *always* been recognized among the people of God.’ **The kingdom the Lord preached was something different from either the general rule of God in His overall sovereignty or the rule of God in the individual heart.** Therefore, when a dispensationalist says that the kingdom is postponed, he is speaking of the Davidic kingdom, but he also affirms the continuing presence of the universal kingdom and the spiritual rule of God in individual hearts today.” (pp. 172-173).

*Crenshaw & Gunn:* Davidic Throne – **the present age and the present reign of Christ have no direct relationship to the Davidic covenant or to Messianic prophecy** – they neglect the full significance of the present reign of Christ which can lead to a pietistic, other-worldly sort of Christianity that is culturally impotent.

*Robertson:* “No quarrel may be entered against the suggestion that a distinct epoch runs from the time of the Jewish rejection of Christ to the time of His second coming. But there is a vast distinction between understanding Christ as postponing His kingdom due to the Jewish rejection of His offer to them, and Christ as establishing His kingdom even in His suffering at the hands of the Jews. Jesus never merely offered to the Jews the possibility that He should become king among them. Instead, He declared that He was as a matter of fact king among the Jews. **It was not that Israel rejected an offer on the part of Jesus that He become their king. It was that the Jews rejected their King!** In His rejection, Jesus manifested the true nature of His kingdom. His power would not be exercised through political or military

pressures. In this sense His kingdom was not of this world.... This is precisely the dimension of the kingship of Christ which dispensationalists have failed to comprehend. **Their insistence upon a Jewish millennial kingdom in which Christ subdues the nations by the exercise of political and military authority hinders them from perceiving the presence of God’s kingdom today.**” (pp. 224-225).

#### 4. Parenthesis

Quoting Chafer: “But for **the Church intercalation**—which was **wholly unforeseen and is wholly unrelated to any divine purpose** which precedes it or which follows it—Israel would be expected to pass directly from the crucifixion to her kingdom; for it was not the death of Christ and His resurrection which demanded the **postponement**, but rather an unforeseen age.” (p. 163).

*Crenshaw & Gunn*: “According to dispensationalism, **the church age is a parenthesis in the Jewish kingdom program** prophesied in the Old Testament. According to Reformed Theology, the church is spiritual Israel come to maturity and is the fulfillment of many prophecies concerning Israel in the Old Testament.” (p. 165).

*Robertson*: “The dispensational exclusion of the present reign of Christ from the perspective of the OT promise concerning the Davidic Messiah simply does not conform to the NT analysis of the present age.... **The present age is not a ‘parenthesis’ unforeseen by the prophets of old.**” (p. 227).

#### 5. Salvation

“**The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations.** It is this last point, of course, which distinguishes dispensationalism from covenant theology.” (p. 123).

Quoting the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement: “We believe that according to the ‘eternal purpose’ of God (Eph. 3:11) salvation *in the divine reckoning* is always “by grace, through faith,” and rests upon the shed blood of Christ. We believe that God has always been gracious, regardless of the ruling dispensation, but that man has not at all times been under an administration or stewardship of grace as is true in the present dispensation.... We believe ... that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, **we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God** (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ.” (p. 124).

*Crenshaw & Gunn*: Old Testament Salvation – strong dichotomy between Israel and church means that the OT saints will not be in the Body and Bride of Christ in eternity – they are not “in Christ” and under the covenant headship of Christ. Neo-Dispensationalists clearly teach an OT by-faith salvation, but ‘the content of faith changes in the various dispensations.’ **The faith of OT saints was not in Christ. Dispensationalists cannot allow OT saints to be in Christ, because that would destroy their dichotomy.** Because we know and understand God’s covenant today

better than they did does not mean that the object of their faith was different. **The content of saving faith has not changed; our understanding of that content has progressed through the ages.**

## 6. Zionism

*Crenshaw & Gunn*: Dispensational Zionism – physical Jews today have a Biblical right to possess the land of Palestine. The Abrahamic covenant is Jewish, unconditional, and unfulfilled.

## E. Theological Tendencies (Crenshaw):

- **Premillennial** – strong focus on the millennium and rapture – put hope in the millennium rather than in Christ ruling today.
- **Carnal Christian** (Christ is not king – not yet ruling as Lord) – one can have faith without works; unclear understanding of interrelation of grace, law, and works
- **Pietism** – we must not have anything to do with the physical world, retreat and wait for the rapture.
- **Humanistic** – discards most of the OT law and biblical law as irrelevant and thus looks to humanism for answers. The Bible is not a textbook on counseling, economics, or politics, for example; also no Christian Sabbath.
- **Arminianism** – doctrine of human sovereignty as expressed in free will – the innate ability to obey God’s commands.
- **Subjective Individualism** – the individual receives the emphasis – they don’t see the unity of the covenant, only the distinctions.

## F. Major Errors: (Gunn)

- The belief that OT salvation was not through faith in the coming Christ.
- OT saints are not saved through union with Christ; further, they will not be members of the Body and Bride of Christ in eternity.
- Belief that the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional while the Mosaic covenant was conditional.
- The NT era is a parenthesis in the prophetic program for Israel – no OT prophecy can refer to the church age.
- Abrahamic, Davidic, and Jer. 31 (new) covenants are primarily Jewish and only relate to Christians indirectly.
- Christ’s current reign has no direct relationship to Davidic covenant fulfillment or Messianic kingdom prophecies.
- No organic relationship of continuity between OT Israel and the NT church.

## G. Conclusion

*Robertson*: “Covenants are explicit scriptural indicators of divine initiatives that structure redemptive history. The dispensations instead represent arbitrary impositions on the biblical order. In the end it is not human design but divine initiative that structures Scripture.” (p. 227).