

Faith Pulpit

Fundamentalism and the Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism

Introduction

Fundamentalism has never embraced one uniform system of theology. My purpose here is to provide an overview and comparison of Covenant Theology (henceforth, CT) and Dispensational Theology (henceforth, DT) used by many fundamentalists throughout its history. While some fundamentalists today attempt to eschew any (rigid) theological system, in actuality everyone uses some type of grid (a set of suppositions) to interpret Biblical passages. Often the difference between those who embrace established theological systems and those who do not is that the latter do not realize they are using such a grid and have not thought through the Bible in a systematic way. That practice can lead to perilous inconsistencies in interpretation.

In order to accomplish my purpose, I will provide a summary of each theological system—especially how they approach hermeneutics. I will then make some important contrasts. Before delving into the particulars, I will examine both systems' historical importance to fundamentalism.

Historical Significance

Several Christian denominations have historical connections to Fundamentalism. However, the denominational battles against liberalism and resultant separation from those organizations were fought primarily in the Baptist and Presbyterian circles. The boundaries are unclear governing which theological system suited those in each of the two denominations mentioned above. There were Presbyterians, or those with close connections to Presbyterianism, who were integral to promoting DT—James H. Brooks,¹ C. I. Scofield,² and Lewis Sperry Chafer³ to name a few. Many Baptists identify with CT (often adhering to the Second London Baptist Confession of 1677/1688).

I understand separatism, typified by the following examples, as a key identifying characteristic of Fundamentalism.⁴ The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches (1932), a Baptist group who separated from the increasingly liberal Northern Baptist Convention, are generally adherents of DT. On the Presbyterian side several key leaders, staunch conservatives in the fight against liberalism in the 1920s, never embraced the “fundamentalism” label but did practice separatism. John Gresham Machen, formerly of Princeton Seminary and one of the founders of Westminster Theological Seminary (1929) and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936), is an example. Worldwide, there are other Presbyterian associations, often small, that embrace both separatism and CT.⁵ A brief outline of these theological systems follows.

Details of Each System

Fundamentalists have often relied on scholars who, though conservative, do not openly identify with fundamentalism. Therefore, the primary sources I use are not reflective of fundamentalist writers.⁶ Both theological systems originated and developed outside the context of early twentieth-century fundamentalism, though DT less so. Renald Showers compares these systems side by side.⁷

In order to avoid confusion, I want to point out that some of the primary terminology in each system is also used by the other. Dispensational writers see covenants in the Bible,⁸ and covenant theologians use the term “dispensations,”⁹ often in similar ways that DT does.

Covenant Theology. Like all theologies, CT did not just suddenly drop out of the sky in its final form. It developed gradually over a period of time during¹⁰ and after the Reformation (though adherents find support in earlier periods of church history). The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) first encapsulated a form of CT on which many rely to express their understanding, though other key documents are valued as well.

CT understands the Bible to support a series of at least two covenants instituted by God, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. These covenants explain how God interacts with His people and the expectations He has for them. Many Covenant theologians see an additional covenant, developed later historically, called the Covenant of Redemption.¹¹

This third covenant that some CT writers accept is logically the first covenant in the series. The Covenant of Redemption states that God the Father contracted this agreement with God the Son to procure salvation for humanity by the Son’s death on the cross. This happened in eternity past, since God knew Adam would fall into sin. Berkhof cites several passages as the Biblical basis for this eternal decree of God¹² and the fact that it is an actual covenant.¹³ The Son becomes the guarantee or surety that the provisions of the covenant will be met, and He also is the “Head of the Covenant” as the last Adam, the representative of those He redeemed (the elect).¹⁴ The next covenant is the Covenant of Works, which God the Father contracted with Adam. The promise of eternal life is implied to Adam by

the fact that God would punish disobedience with death.¹⁵ Christ's relation to this covenant is through the parallel between Christ and Adam (Rom. 5:12–21).

The nature of this conditional covenant relationship includes Adam's title as the head of the human race.¹⁶ He was designated so on a trial basis, in order to determine if he would obey God's will. As such, he acted on behalf of all future descendants, so that through Adam's failure, sin passed on to all humanity. Through God's grace, in this covenant Adam had the promise which "enabled Adam to obtain eternal life for himself and for his descendants in the way of obedience."¹⁷ But Christ did what Adam failed to do—to fulfill this covenant—and His righteousness is imputed to those who place their trust in Him.¹⁸

The third covenant is that of the Covenant of Grace, which governs humanity now. God the Father contracted this covenant, though Covenant theologians have not agreed with whom He made this covenant. Many have concluded God contracted this covenant with the elect in Christ.¹⁹ While this covenant includes salvation, it encompasses more than salvation and is unconditional in the sense that its promises are always fulfilled in the elect.²⁰ It is not conditioned upon faith, because "faith itself is a fruit of the covenant."²¹

However, in this covenant corporately are included others who in some way are a part of it, but not recipients of its blessings. Berkhof said,

They [covenant theologians] were fully aware of the fact that, according to God's special revelation in both the Old and the New Testament, the covenant as a historical phenomenon is perpetuated in successive generations and includes many in whom the covenant life is never realized. And whenever they desired to include this aspect of the covenant in their definition, they would say that it was established *with believers and their seed*.²²

Those last words designate the limitations of this covenant.²³

The covenant promises from God are many,²⁴ some physical blessings as well as spiritual. Some of the latter include justification, adoption, eternal life, as well as the benefits of the Spirit, and finally glorification.²⁵ Humanity's response to God's gracious offer is to affirm their belonging to God's people, as well as trusting in Christ for salvation.²⁶

Other notable emphases of the covenant important to hermeneutics include its uniformity throughout all human history and dispensations (thus only one people of God), though its form of administration has changed over time. Berkhof identifies this principle through promises by God the Father to be God to His people (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 19:5; 2 Sam. 7:14; Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10). The sacraments, different in form from one dispensation to another, have basically the same meaning.²⁷ Another characteristic of the Covenant of Grace is how adherents can consider it both an unconditional and conditional covenant, depending on perspective.²⁸

There are many other important areas to emphasize in both the Covenant of Grace and within CT in general. Despite this, I will finish this section with the general observations that CT stresses a strong continuity between the Old and New Testaments, as well as the one people of God throughout the Scriptures. These characteristics do relate to CT's hermeneutics and will become significant as we turn to DT.

Dispensationalism. John Nelson Darby, a Plymouth Brethren pastor,²⁹ popularized DT as a theological system in the nineteenth century (though advocates see elements or characteristics of the structure in earlier periods). DT was common in many Bible conferences in the United States during the latter part of the century. Further refinement and dissemination came in the twentieth century with the publication of the Scofield Reference Bible,³⁰ and the founding of theological institutions known to be loyal to this perspective.

DT recognizes that God has had different stewardships for various people groups as revealed progressively in the Bible. That helps explain why believers today are no longer required to offer animal sacrifices. Those various stewardships in history they call dispensations. DT does not consider these stewardships as different ways of salvation. Salvation has always been by grace through faith in God's revealed truth.³¹

Charles Ryrie theologically defined a dispensation as a "distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose," finding Biblical support for this usage (Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25).³² DT views God's workings in the world as His dispensing of stewardships according to His will in accordance to the progressive nature of Biblical history.³³

Therefore, the characteristics of individual dispensations include the following:

1. A change in God's governmental relationship with humanity, often with new features, though not always so.
2. A resultant change in humanity's responsibility.
3. A corresponding revelation necessary to effect the change (which is new and is a stage in the progress of revelation through the Bible).³⁴

DT places the emphasis on the different stewardships, which God revealed in various times and to various people. Ryrie notes dispensations *by themselves* do not make DT a theological system since CT recognizes them, nor does arriving at a particular number of dispensations.³⁵ CT even uses the word in much the same way DT does. Though DT has never agreed upon a required number of dispensations, the most common list is the following:³⁶

1. Innocence—from Adam to the Fall.
2. Conscience—from the Fall to the Flood.
3. Civil Government—from the Flood to the Tower of Babel.
4. Promise or Patriarchal Rule—from the call of Abraham to the Egyptian bondage.
5. Mosaic Law—from the giving of the Law to the death of Christ.

6. Church Age or Age of Grace—from Acts 2 and the beginning of the Church to the Second Coming of Christ.
7. Kingdom Age—from the Second Coming of Christ to the Eternal State.

God entrusted individuals in each dispensation a stewardship. But every person in each dispensation had to trust in God's gracious provision for salvation as revealed to that point in Biblical history.

DT extracts key hermeneutical principles from the following characteristics. Ryrie's essential elements of DT include:

1. *A consistent distinction between Israel and the church.*³⁷ When reading about the Israelites throughout Scripture, dispensationalists understand that God is dealing directly with the Nation of Israel physically descended from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The church is a New Testament entity birthed in Acts 2 made up of those from all nations of the world. Paul explains the coming of this new entity as a part of God's plan previously unrevealed (Eph. 2:11–3:12).
2. *A consistent literal interpretation of the Scriptures.*³⁸ Other theological systems, including CT, practice a literal hermeneutic. DT requires literalism even regarding the unfulfilled prophecies made to Israel.³⁹ Several of those prophecies proclaim that God has a future restoration for Israel. Thus, the church does not replace Israel in God's program. DT sees the situation this way: God's relationship with Israel was not dependent on Israel's actions but was based on who God is as recorded in the Biblical covenants with Israel⁴⁰—the same basis on which He is related to Christ's church. Both relationships are based on His grace. Neither Israel nor the church deserves God's blessings, nor has either one lived up to God's standards.
3. *A consistent recognition of the ultimate purpose of God is His glory.*⁴¹ Ryrie makes the distinction that while God's purpose in history includes salvation, it is actually broader than that. Salvation brings humanity into a right relationship with God through the Savior, Jesus Christ. Through Christ this provision and plan brings glory to God. However, God advances His glory through His purposes for angels as well as the non-elect.⁴² In addition, God brings glory to Himself when He fulfills His covenant promises to Israel. As Douglas Brown pointed out, "Any theological system that undermines the completion of God's program with Israel diminishes God's glory."⁴³

Contrasts

Both CT and DT are intricately tied to hermeneutics. Both systems view the Bible in a certain way that guides adherents in their understanding of Biblical passages. Some examples follow.

CT understands the church as originating with Abraham, or even earlier, and continuing through God's entire program in the Scriptures. Yet DT sees the church as a New Testament entity beginning in Acts 2. Thus, in DT there are two peoples of God highlighted in the Scriptures, but only one in CT.

A further implication with ascribing characteristics of the nature of Israel's national covenant community to the church are far-reaching. Through this, unregenerate people can be structurally included in the church, according to CT. DT does not observe this circumstance in the New Testament.

While CT recognizes distinctions in the Bible's history in how God administers His purpose, its adherents tend to see much more uniformity between God's plan in the Old and New Testaments. An

example of this is their understanding that infant baptism replaces Old Testament circumcision.⁴⁴ The church now replaces Israel. CT reinterprets Biblical passages and prophecies given to Israel.

The hermeneutical implications to this issue are significant. To DT, if the church replaces Israel, then the promises made to Israel are now inherited by the church. Hence, CT has to change those promises in some way since many of them involve returning to and living in the physical land. That interpretation goes beyond the literal not only as to the recipients but also in regard to the content. Dispensationalists wonder, “If God can permanently remove blessings that He promised someone, what good are His promises to me?” Such a possibility is difficult to comprehend.

DT questions CT’s commitment to literal hermeneutics when the Abrahamic Covenant is reinterpreted into a Covenant of Grace. Further, DT questions the legitimacy of finding Covenants of Works⁴⁵ or Grace in the Bible.

Covenant theologians question statements by early Dispensationalists that seem to indicate more than one way of salvation.⁴⁶

They also cite Dispensationalism’s failure to see the Bible as a unified whole.

DT sees more discontinuity between the Testaments. God has a clear plan for Israel which He will fulfill because of His promises, but He also has a plan for the church in the present time. God will eventually fulfill the prophecies made with Israel literally.

Conclusion

Efforts to harmonize these two systems have not been successful. These systems’ hermeneutics approach the Bible from different perspectives. But throughout Fundamentalism’s history, there has been interaction between the two systems and even cooperation in the early days against the fight against liberal theology that reinterpreted God’s Word to attack the foundations of the faith.

While some fundamentalists (and others as well) have eschewed developed theological systems, they do so to their own risk. Numerous churches have been led astray by inconsistent or incoherent interpretations of the Bible that have done great harm to the cause of Christ. There may be no perfectly devised human system of theology. However, trying to formulate an understanding of God’s whole purpose and plan in the Scriptures has kept many fundamentalists focused on the Word and knowledgeably able to contend for the Faith.

Works Cited

1. Brooks (1830–97) pastored Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri.
2. Scofield (1843–1921) authored the famous Scofield Study Bible.
3. Chafer (1871–1952) served as the first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, an institution that has been historically a strong proponent of dispensationalism.
4. See my “What are the Fundamental Doctrines of the Faith?” *FrontLine* (May/June 2019), 29, no. 3, 34; and Kevin Bauder, “How Fundamentalists Became Separatists,” 8–9 in the same issue of *FrontLine*.
5. The Free Presbyterian Church of North America (http://fpcna.org/fpcna_about.asp?localsection=history, accessed 22 May 2019) is an example, along with their training institution, Geneva Reformed Seminary in South Carolina.
6. In order to maintain a narrow focus for this brief study, I will mostly limit myself to just two representative authors that represent each system in its classic sense: Louis Berkhof (Covenant Theology) and Charles Ryrie (Dispensationalism).
7. *There Really Is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990).
8. They recognize the “Biblical” covenants such as the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants. See note 41.
9. For example, see Berkhof’s section on “The Different Dispensations of the Covenant,” in his *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1938), 290–301.
10. Some would say after the Reformation, but I think a foundational document is Heinrich Bullinger’s 1534 *De testament seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno* [A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God], which can be found in English in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead Of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). I believe Zwingli’s writings also contain significant foundational understandings that others built upon. See Peter DeJong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1945), 18, 23–24.
11. The Westminster Confession of Faith contains no mention of the Covenant of Redemption. Some consider the idea behind this covenant as actually a part of the Covenant of Grace; see Berkhof’s discussion, *Systematic Theology*, 265; see also 270–71.
12. Ephesians 1:4ff.; 3:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; James 2:5; and 1 Peter 1:2, in *Systematic Theology*, 266.
13. John 5:30, 43; 6:38–40; 17:4–12; Romans 5:12–21; and 1 Corinthians 15:22, in *Systematic Theology*, 266.
14. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 267–68.
15. *Ibid.*, 213; cf. 216. For further explanation, see endnote 45. The primary passage for this covenant is Genesis 1–3; other supporting passages provided are Romans 7:10; 10:5; Galatians 3:13 (213–14). Hosea 6:7 is also used in support (214–15).
16. *Ibid.*, 216.
17. *Ibid.*, 215.
18. *Ibid.*, 213–15.
19. This discussion is found in Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 272–76.
20. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 275–76.
21. *Ibid.*, 276.
22. *Ibid.*, 276, emphasis his
23. For further discussion on what way the unregenerate are in the Covenant of Grace, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 288–89.
24. These are especially encapsulated in the “I will be a God to you, and to thy seed after thee,” in Genesis 17:7 and other passages; see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 277. Berkhof also cites Jeremiah 31:33; 32:38–40; Ezekiel 34:23–25, 30, 31; 36:25–28; 37:26, 27; 2 Corinthians 6:16–18; and Hebrews 8:10.
25. Cited texts include Job 19:25–27; Psalms 16:11; 73:24–26; Isaiah 43:25; Jeremiah 31:33, 34; Ezekiel 36:27; Daniel 12:2, 3; Galatians 4:5, 6; Titus 3:7; Hebrews 11:7; James. 2:5; in Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 277.
26. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 277.
27. *Ibid.*, 279–80.
28. See discussion, Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 280–81.
29. Darby lived from 1800–82 in Great Britain.
30. Charles Ryrie notes that Scofield followed closely the dispensational scheme outlined by Isaac Watts (1674–1748), rather than Darby, in *Dispensationalism*, rev. and expanded (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995, 2007), 76–79.
31. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 122–140.
32. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 33. In Eph. 1:10, Ryrie notes a future period mentioned; Eph. 3:2 he sees the present period; both of these examples, he states, are used in exactly the way a Dispensationalists understands a dispensation; and in Col. 1:25, he sees a past period implied in the text; *ibid.*, 31–32.
33. This is a rough paraphrase of Ryrie’s text, in, *Dispensationalism*, 34–35. In other words, DT does not presume OT saints knew more than the Bible reveals that they knew at that point in Biblical history.
34. The list nearly corresponds with Ryrie’s text in *Dispensationalism*, 40. Ryrie only considers as “secondary” the well-known characterizations of a dispensation as a test, failure, and judgment. He mentions that a test corresponds to number 2 in the list above, but that a failure may not be a part of a dispensation at all (40–41).
35. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 45. Note his comment on premillennialism too, 46.
36. Adapted from Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 58–65.
37. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 46.
38. *Ibid.*, 47.
39. These verses refer to Israel’s gathering in the land in a lasting way with boundaries that have never yet been realized in a protected, reconciled relationship with God. Sometimes Gentiles are mentioned as well. A few such passage include Hosea 2:18–23; Joel 3:20–21; Amos 9:14–15; Micah 2:12–13; 4:1–8; 7:20; Zeph. 3:11–20; and Zech. 14:1–4. This corresponds with other passages such as Romans 9–11. God’s rejection of Israel is described as temporary (Isa. 54:6–8; Rom. 11:1ff).

40. For instance, the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1–3; 13:14–17; 15:1–21; 17:1–16ff; and others); the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:4–17; 1 Chron. 17:10–14); and the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; and others—note it is very clear to whom God made these covenants).
41. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 48.
42. *Ibid.* The contrast is that all three covenants of CT concern the redemption of humanity. However, not all dispensationalists emphasize this to the degree that Ryrie did. For an excellent discussion on this on this topic, see Douglas Brown, “The Glory of God and Dispensationalism: Revisiting the Sine Qua Non of Dispensationalism,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 22, No. 1 (2018): 26–46.
43. Brown, “The Glory of God and Dispensationalism,” 46.
44. Note: “The organic unity of God’s people throughout the ages is a distinctive emphasis of covenant theology. This emphasis in turn has profound implications for our understanding of ecclesiology (including questions of church government, baptism, etc.), of the Christian’s use of the Old Testament, and much more” (Walter Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994, 2007], 309). The quotation is by Silva.
45. “They who deny the covenant of works generally base their denial in part on the fact that there is no record of such a promise in the Bible. And it is perfectly true that Scripture contains no explicit promise of eternal life to Adam. But the threatened penalty clearly implies such a promise” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 216).
46. See the older Scofield Reference Bible, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 1115, at John 1:17. However, confusing or misguided language about salvation has been used by CT authors too; see Oswald Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1939), 39; and Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 614.

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