

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

### **1. Introduction**

To a large extent dispensationalism is misunderstood by those who oppose it. This may be the result of the application of a faulty hermeneutic in Bible interpretation. Since our hermeneutic drives our interpretation we need to make sure that it lines up with Scripture. If not, the results can be hazardous. The following aims at displaying the hermeneutical features of the dispensational system. As a system, dispensationalism consists of a solid method of interpretation; therefore adopting its principles of interpretation is valuable.

We will look at the meaning of "hermeneutics." It is essential to understand what we are talking about when we use this term. Subsequently we will look at the key tenets of dispensational hermeneutics. This will be done by contrasting and critiquing some of the views contrary to the one applied in dispensationalism

## 2. Dispensationalism Defined

Firstly, we need to look at the meaning of the word that gives indication to the existence of dispensations in the Bible. Before we do this we have to note that the English word “dispensation” is actually derived from the Latin word “dispensation.”<sup>1</sup> The New Testament usage differs since it was written in Greek. This is seen in the usage of the words “oikonomeo,” “oikonomos,” or “oikonomia.” This word is said to appear twenty times in the New Testament. The word “oikonomeo” appears in Luke 16:2. The second, “Oikonomos” appears in Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7 and 1 Pet. 4:10. Lastly, “Oikonomia” appears in Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25 and 1 Tim. 1:4.<sup>2</sup> Ryrie makes the observation that although this might be true, we cannot say that the appearance of the word in these passages is what necessarily gave rise to the dispensational scheme. He goes on by offering the following in defining the term: “As far as the use of the word in Scripture is concerned, a dispensation may be defined as a stewardship, administration, oversight, or management of others’ property. As we have seen, this involves responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the steward.”<sup>3</sup>

Ryrie makes it clear that the term should not be confused with “age” which can be the case sometimes. They are not to be viewed as synonymous even though in the historical outworking they may “coincide.”<sup>4</sup> To prevent confusion in this regard it is very helpful to remind oneself of the definition above. A dispensation speaks to the “arrangement” that is involved at a specific time in history. An age speaks to the temporal aspect of things. However, Ryrie suggests that if a definition does take time into account it should not be reason for great alarm. He proceeds by offering this concise definition for dispensationalism: “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Hermeneutics Defined

Before we look at the basic hermeneutical approach of dispensational theology we need to have a clear understanding of the term “hermeneutics.” Couch offers that at the heart of the hermeneutical approach is the need for literal interpretation or what is called the “literal method.” According to him the most accurate way to approach a passage in Scripture is by a literal reading, except if the passage offers clear signs or “clues” that indicate to the reader that the passage at hand should be read figuratively or as an illustration.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 33.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publication, 2000), 165.

He offers the following definition for the term:

“...It is the science (principles) and art (task) by which the meaning of the biblical text is determined.’ Hermeneutics is scientific in its method for unlocking the meaning of language, particularly of the Scriptures. At the heart of that method is literal interpretation or normal meaning. Hermeneutics is also an art in that the interpreter must acquire experience and skill. It is not an art, however, in the sense that it is subjective. Biblical truth is not found in the personal taste of a specific pastor or teacher. As much as is humanly possible, all bias and prejudice must be put aside when interpreting the Word of God. In understanding the nature and function of New Testament ecclesiology, one must begin with orderly and consistent interpretation of key passages.”<sup>7</sup>

What we can say from the preceding definition is that hermeneutics should always strive to find the literal meaning of the text unless the context dictates otherwise. Furthermore we should derive meaning from Scripture that is not connected to our own fancy or interests. We must be totally objective when approaching a passage of Scripture. Unknowingly we might have a personal agenda in the specific interpretation of a passage. In this case it is also imperative that we compare our findings with that of other godly individuals who have made the study of the Word a priority in their lives. In other words, uniqueness does not guarantee accuracy. If we arrive at a conclusion that is different from all the rest we must have the humility to re-inspect. From this point onward we are going to delve into the hermeneutical principles that are employed by Dispensationalism as a system.

#### **4. Literalism**

As was mentioned in the preceding, the key to effective hermeneutics is largely linked to the adoption of a literal style of interpretation. This is an approach of hermeneutics that have been championed by dispensationalists. The natural reading of the text is what is in mind.

##### *A Normal Reading*

A normal reading of the Bible is inseparable from the grammatical-historical hermeneutic. One might be prompted to ask whether this kind of literalism can at all be applied to the study of Scripture. Shepherd for one believes that the dispensational claim of literalism is not consistent since non-literal interpretations can override the literal.<sup>8</sup> He identifies “inerrancy” as taking precedence over literalism. However, inerrancy is a principle that is shared by covenantal and dispensational interpreters alike (at least within the evangelical realm). Crenshaw also responds negatively to the dispensational call to literalism. He responds to Ryrie’s explanation of the proper hermeneutic. He makes two comments regarding Ryrie’s literal approach. Firstly, he says that the literal method “is no check on imagination” since the sky is seen as the

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<sup>7</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 165.

<sup>8</sup> Shepherd, William H. Sum 1989. Revelation and the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. *Anglican Theological Review*. 71 (3):281-299.

limit when it comes to the extent of the application of the literal method.<sup>9</sup> He refers to a certain dispensational author who says that God has a body since the Bible speaks of God's hands and arms. Another dispensational teacher from Dallas Theological Seminary is referred to by him as having stated that Ezekiel 38 and 39 speak of the fact that horses and swords (not tanks or plains) will come from Russia to attack Israel in the future. Secondly, he asks what the objectivity is that Ryrie refers to. To him "it seems to be philosophical rationalism imposed on Scripture from the reader's mind."<sup>10</sup> He proceeds by saying that the literal hermeneutic that Ryrie refers to never was properly defined by Ryrie referring to conversations he had previously had with him. He says: "We always spoke of a literal hermeneutic, but we never precisely defined this nor did we exegete Scripture to derive it."<sup>11</sup> To me this seems uncanny since Ryrie is very upfront with his interpretation of the literal hermeneutic that he professes to practice. He does accept the fact that there is figurative language in the Bible which Crenshaw seems to deny in his first observation. Ryrie says the following: "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."<sup>12</sup> I believe that the accusation of Ryrie's view being ill defined is also unfounded. In his explanation of the concept of literalism he mentions that even though non-dispensationalists agree that this method (grammatico-historical) should take priority they do not consistently apply it in studying the entire Bible. This is how Ryrie sees the non-dispensationalist in this regard: "He (the dispensationalist) further claims that the nondispensationalist is a literalist in much of his interpretation of the Scriptures but charges him with allegorizing or spiritualizing when it comes to the interpretation of prophecy. The dispensationalist claims to be consistent in his use of this principle, and he accuses the nondispensationalist of being inconsistent in his use of it."<sup>13</sup>

Couch says that when this approach is taken in Bible interpretation every word "is given the normal meaning it would have in its *normal* usage."<sup>14</sup> He refers to the distinction Ram makes between literalism and "letterism." The two are seen in the following way: "To interpret Scripture literally is not to be committed to a 'wooden literalism,' nor to a neglect of the nuances that defy any 'mechanical' understanding of language. Rather, it is to commit oneself to a starting point and that starting point

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<sup>9</sup> Curtis I. Crenshaw, *Dispensationalism: Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool Publications, 1994), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 93.

<sup>14</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 33.

is to understand a document the best one can in the context of the normal, usual, customary, tradition range of designation, which includes 'facit' understanding."<sup>15</sup> The object is not to distort the message for the sake of letterism. However, one should be able to reach a satisfactory level of comprehension by virtue of reading through the passage in a normal way.

#### *Advantages of Literalism*

There are various advantages for the adoption of the literal method in addition to those previously discussed. Some have been given by Ram in the following way:

1. "It grounds interpretation in fact...It is, therefore, loyal to the best in scholarship in our western culture; and in closest sympathy with the scientific methodology of sciences."<sup>16</sup>
2. "It exercises a control over interpretation that experimentation does for the scientific method...All that do not measure up to the canons of the literal-cultural method are to be rejected or placed under suspect."<sup>17</sup>
3. "It has had the greatest success in opening up the Word of God...This method is the honored method of the highest scholastic tradition in conservative Protestantism."<sup>18</sup>

#### *Grammatico-historical*

The emphasis placed on a normal reading of the text is given structure by the "grammatico-historical" principle of biblical interpretation. Terry defines this form of interpretation as a method of exegesis that is designed to discover the meaning of a text that is dictated by the principles of grammar and the facts of history.<sup>19</sup> The reason for this is that the meaning of each word is determined by grammatical and historical considerations.<sup>20</sup> In order to get behind the true meaning of a particular text the one who makes use of this method must give attention to the following phases as outlined by Thomas:

##### 1. Historical Background

In order to understand the full meaning of a text, investigation of the historical background of a passage is indispensable. Thomas says that in this phase one needs to give special attention to the matters related to the writer, his readers, the city they find themselves in, the church in this city, and any other data that is relevant to the understanding of the passage.<sup>21</sup> He goes on to offer four sources in which this

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<sup>15</sup> Mal Couch, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard Ram, *Protestant Biblical interpretation* (Boston: W.A. Wilde Company, 1950), 77.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Milton Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), 173.

<sup>20</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 91.

<sup>21</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis* (n.g. 1987), 25.

information may be found. First, works that are dedicated to New Testament Introduction. They are said to contain valuable information related to the individual books. Second, one can find such information in Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias. Third, many commentaries have extensive introductions that are devoted to these questions. They are very helpful in gathering this kind of information. Fourth, books devoted exclusively to New Testament history are also helpful.

## 2. The Hebrew and Greek Texts

This involves the investigation of the text in its original language either Hebrew or Greek. Intense study of these languages would help the interpreter to approach a passage as it was written in its original form. This should involve the translating of a passage as well as studying the various lexical and syntactical aspects.

## 3. English Translations

One should also set out to investigate how different translations of the Bible translate a specific passage. Thomas says that a bare minimum would be the King James Version, the American Standard Version, and the New American Standard Bible. He says that the more English translations one can read, the better ones understanding of a text will eventually become.<sup>22</sup> Today, we are in the privileged position of having several translations of the Bible that are the products of sound translation philosophy and practice. The aim would be to employ the ones which are grammatically “literally” translated instead of ones that make use of a method called “dynamic equivalence.”<sup>23</sup>

## 4. Hebrew and Greek Commentaries

This step of observation involves the studying of Hebrew and Greek Commentaries. The works of others are consulted so that the interpreter’s own knowledge can be supplemented.<sup>24</sup> The commentaries highlight certain features of the original language that may not be apparent to the interpreter.

## 5. English Commentaries

The last step is to consult English commentaries. According to Thomas these will provide a “bird’s-eye view” of the book.<sup>25</sup>

The above mentioned steps are seen as introductory to interpretation. The worth of knowledge of the original languages cannot be wagered. Without a proper understanding of these languages the interpretation of a text would be faulty. It is also at these levels that much bigger battles are fought for the sake of Christ. In the

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<sup>22</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, 27.

<sup>23</sup> For further study regarding this consult Leland Ryken’s, “The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation.”

<sup>24</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Introduction to Exegesis*, 29.

important activity of interpretation, dispensationalism as a system has been on the right track having implemented the grammatico-historical approach. Of course the temptation might be to implement a method of literalism that is “wooden” as was previously discussed. With some of the developments that have taken place in dispensationalism it will become clear that “Scofieldism” does not necessarily dictate interpretation as some critics of dispensationalism would like to profess. Poythress who is a covenantalist agrees that dispensationalism has developed since the early years. Apart from some of the revisions to the notes in the Scofield Bible he believes that more importantly there is development in the area of secondary applications or “fulfillments” of some Old Testament prophecy.<sup>26</sup> He says the following:

“In addition there is an important development of a more informal kind. I see increasing willingness among some leading dispensationalists to speak at least of secondary applications or even fulfillments of some Old Testament prophecy in the church. Many would say that New Testament believers participate in fulfillment by virtue of their union with Christ, the true seed of Abraham. Remember that Scofield altogether rejected this type of move in his general statement about the ‘absolute literalness’ of Old Testament prophecy. But that left Scofield with an extremely uncomfortable tension between his hermeneutical principle and some of his practice, which allowed a spiritual, churchly dimension to the promise to Abraham, to the Joel prophecy, and to Matthew’s kingdom ethics. Moreover, the insistence on literalness alone in prophecy grated against Scofield’s willingness to see allegorical elements in Old Testament history.”<sup>27</sup>

I agree that some of the revisions that have been made are beneficial for the system of dispensationalism. The fact that there is a willingness to see that there could be New Testament applications for Old Testament prophecies should not however steer us in a direction where we interpret the church as replacing Israel in any way or form.

### **The Principle of Single Meaning**

According to dispensational hermeneutics the principle of single-meaning is an important feature of proper hermeneutical practice. Thomas refers to the time-honored principle of interpretation as held by Milton S. Terry that there is only one interpretation for a biblical passage. Terry is quoted saying:

“The hermeneutical principles which we have now set forth necessarily exclude the doctrine that the prophecies of Scripture contain an occult or double sense...We may readily admit that the Scriptures are capable of manifold practical *applications*; otherwise they would not be so useful for doctrine, correction, and instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16). But the moment we admit the principle that portions of Scripture contain an occult or

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<sup>26</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1987), 33.

<sup>27</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism*, 35.

double sense we introduce an element of uncertainty in the sacred volume, and unsettle all scientific interpretation.”<sup>28</sup>

In this sense Thomas draws our attention to the importance of seeking a single meaning in the interpretation of a specific text. Even though his interpretations do not always seem accurate in eschatology Thomas commends Terry for his solid principles of hermeneutics. Terry is also seen by Thomas as being an interpreter of Scripture who makes use of the grammatical-historical approach. In explaining the reason for his belief in this approach Thomas goes on to explain via an example from the book of Genesis. He refers the reader to the events that were taking place in the Garden of Eden when God placed man in it and gave him instructions (Genesis 1:27-30). Adam is said to have known exactly what it was that God had expected from him. Yet, later we find how this is attacked by the Devil when he tempts Eve. She eventually succumbs to the temptation and soon both Adam and Eve stand guilty before God for their disobedience. This is seen as the first time when human beings were uncertain about that which God wanted them to do.<sup>29</sup>

Not all dispensationalists agree with this principle however. Thomas says that the position of “Progressive Dispensationalism” is that one should refrain from limiting a passage of Scripture to a single meaning. One should allow for later complimentary additions in meaning. Speaking of the view that Saucy holds Thomas reveals his disagreement. He makes the statement that to “theorize that the apostles assigned additional meanings to OT texts, as Saucy does, cannot qualify as grammatical-historical interpretation because in numbers of cases the meanings they added to the OT were beyond the reach of human recipients of those OT Scriptures.”<sup>30</sup> For the purpose of introducing the hermeneutical principles of dispensationalism to the reader, this topic will be left in the open. It does not scar the system in any way. One can still arrive at a dispensational conclusion whether one adopts or rejects this principle. This brings us to one of the most important distinctions between dispensational and covenantal interpretation namely, their view of the church and of Israel.

### **Israel and the Church**

In approaching this topic it would be necessary to define what we mean by the term “Israel” and “church.” The confusion is often the result of these not being clearly defined.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2002), 154.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas says regarding the significance of this event that “the first human experience on the ‘sea of uncertainty’ resulted when Eve and then Adam bought into the serpent’s suggestion that Gods’ statement was not limited to a single meaning. Such was the beginning of hermeneutical difficulties in understanding God’s Word.” Robert L. Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics*, 156.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, Robert L. Spr 1995. The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism. *Master’s Seminary Journal*. 6 (1):90.



### *Definition of Israel*

Fruchtenbaum offers the following definition for the term "Israel." He says that "the term Israel is viewed theologically as referring to all descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, also known as the Jews, the Jewish people, Israelites, Hebrews, etc. The term is not limited to the present political and national state in the Middle East, which is merely a part of the whole; nor is it limited to the present political and national state in the Middle East, which is merely a part of the whole; nor is it limited to those who adhere to the religion of Judaism only."<sup>31</sup>

Fruchtenbaum goes on to prove the existence of the nation of Israel by showing how they were elected by God for a specific purpose. He draws our attention to the fact that there are different kinds of election. In the case of the children of Israel we see that God may have elected one man in the beginning, namely Abraham, His election was also a corporate election of the entire nation that came about after Abraham died. He says: "In dealing with the concept of election, a distinction must be made between individual election and national election. The former is soteriological and results in the salvation of that individual. This type of election extends to both Jewish and Gentile individuals; and any person who has ever believed, either Jew or Gentile, was the object of God's individual election."<sup>32</sup> He goes on by explaining the difference between individual election and corporate or "national" election. As is the case with Israel, the concern of Israelology is corporate/national election because only Israel is called a nation who is elect. National election does not guarantee the salvation of every individual within the nation since only individual election can do that. Nor does national election guarantee the physical salvation of every member of the nation."<sup>33</sup> Lastly, he emphasizes what is truly meant by national election. National election guarantees "that God's purpose(s) for choosing the nation will be accomplished and that the elect nation will always survive as a distinct entity. It guarantees the physical salvation of the nation and, in the case of Israel, even a national salvation. It is the national election of Israel that is the basis of Israel's status as the Chosen People."<sup>34</sup>

### *The Abrahamic Covenant*

Bass agrees with Fruchtenbaum in his interpretation of God's national election of Israel. It is seen as a distinguishing feature of dispensationalism. It is understood by dispensationalists:

"...that the whole of God's redemptive relation to man is centered in His covenantal relation to Israel. The implications of this division of God's redemptive relations are apparent: Israel, as a nation, is related to God by one principle (the unconditional covenant), while the church, as the body of Christ, is related to Him by an entirely

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<sup>31</sup> Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 113.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, *Issues in Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 113-114.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

different principle. The covenant (with Abraham) is the key to the interpretation of all God's purposes in history."<sup>35</sup>

The importance of the Abrahamic Covenant is also seen by Walvoord. He says that:

"It is recognized by all serious students of the Bible that the Covenant with Abraham is one of the most important and determinative revelations of Scripture. It furnishes the key to the entire Old Testament and reaches for its fulfillment into the New. In the controversy between premillennialism and amillennialism the interpretation of this covenant more or less settles the entire argument. The analysis of its provision and the character of their fulfillment set the mold for the entire body of Scriptural truth."<sup>36</sup>

#### *Definition of the Church*

Above we have already alluded to a characteristic of the church. As we know God works differently with the church than which He does with Israel. We will now attempt a formal definition for the church. Grudem defines the church as "the community of all true believers for all time."<sup>37</sup> He goes on to explain what he means:

"This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved. Paul says, 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Eph. 5:25). Here the term 'the church' is used to apply to all those whom Christ died to redeem, all those who are saved by the death of Christ. But that must include all true believers for all time, both believers in the New Testament age and believers in the Old Testament age as well. So great is God's plan for the church that he has exalted Christ to a position of highest authority for the sake of the church: 'He has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1:22-23).<sup>38</sup>

According to dispensational understanding this definition is not sufficient. Since God is working in a special way with the house of Israel He is also working in a special way with the Church. The church cannot be generalized to the degree that there is almost no distinction between Israel and the Church. Grudem however acknowledges that there is the view as was promoted by Chafer in his Systematic Theology. He says the following regarding Chafer's view of the church:

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<sup>35</sup> Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 25.

<sup>36</sup> Walvoord, John F. Oct.-Dec. 1951. The Abrahamic Covenant and Pre-Millennialism. *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 108(4): 414.

<sup>37</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 853.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

“Chafer argues that God has two distinct plans for the two different groups of people that he has redeemed: God’s purposes and promises for *Israel* are for *earthly blessings*, and they will yet be fulfilled on this earth at some time in the future. On the other hand, God’s purposes and promises for the *church* are for *heavenly blessings*, and those promises will be fulfilled in heaven. This distinction between the two different groups that God saves will especially be seen in the millennium, according to Chafer, for at that time Israel will reign on earth as God’s people and enjoy the fulfillment of Old Testament promises, but the church will already have been taken up into heaven at the time of Christ’s secret return for his saints. On this view, the church did not begin until Pentecost (Acts 2). And it is not right to think of Old Testament believers together with New Testament believers as constituting one church.”<sup>39</sup>

I agree with Chafer in defining the church in a much narrower sense than Grudem. Grudem even makes it clear that his view differs substantially from dispensationalists and progressive dispensationalists alike.<sup>40</sup> However, the events at Pentecost must be viewed as the dawn of the church age as was promised by Christ himself. Culver has two propositions regarding the conception of the church. He says that (1) the Church is a body of believers in Christ created by the Holy Spirit, who imparts his own eternal life to each believer-member and who is Himself, in a distinct and special way, the bond of vital unity between the members themselves and of all with Christ, and (2) the formation of the church by the special work of the Holy Spirit was the culmination of a process of revelation and of history, all of which lie in the record and history of the New Testament.<sup>41</sup> He goes on to demonstrate where the actual fulfillment (of the church) actually took place:

“The fulfillment, when it came, was, then climatic – and let us now return to the proposition with which the recent paragraph began: The formation of the church by the special work of the Holy Spirit was the culmination of a process of revelation and of history, all of which lie in the record and history of the New Testament. Pentecost was as decisive and epochal and essentially unrepeatable an event as the birth of Jesus, His resurrection or his Ascension. ‘When the day of Pentecost arrived (‘fully come’ KJV), they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting’ (Acts 2:1-2).”<sup>42</sup>

In light of the preceding discussion, the distinction between Israel and the church can be seen as one of the main tenets of dispensational theology which will now be the focus of thought.

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<sup>39</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 860.

<sup>40</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 861.

<sup>41</sup> R.D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), 873-874.

<sup>42</sup> R.D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, 873-874.

### *Distinctness of Israel and the Church*

Saucy manages to present the distinction between Israel and the church in a helpful manner. He says that rather than spiritual realities (the reality of redemption) it is the lack of national characteristics that distinguishes the church from Israel.<sup>43</sup> Saucy proceeds by showing the difference between the two entities: "...Israel was not only the people of God but was also formed and chosen as a nation among nations. Although she did not exist as a nation for extensive periods of history and was displaced from the land, the concept of Israel never essentially changed. Ultimately, according to the prophets, she would be returned to the land and restored as a nation."<sup>44</sup> The fact that the church does not replace Israel will be looked at in the next topic. Saucy is in fact saying that the two are so distinct that God will ensure the fulfillment of His promises to both. Israel is not done away with because of her disobedience. In fact, God will restore her again one day when they realize where they have gone wrong. Saucy proceeds by contrasting Israel with the church. He says "contrariwise, the church is a spiritual entity that, despite its very real collective existence in time as the 'assembly' (i.e., the church), does not exist as a nation. At the Jerusalem council that confronted the issue of salvation among the gentiles, the apostle James declared the God was 'taking from the Gentiles a people for himself' (Ac 15:14)."<sup>45</sup> It is clear then that the church is not a nation such as Israel. This does however not detract from the fact that they are a distinct entity. Saucy interprets James as conveying the message that "this entity was totally 'independent of all national preconditions.' It is clear from the New Testament that this people, the church, is a community composed of both Jews and Gentiles in which neither race nor nationality nor ethnic identity has any bearing of any kind on status or function."<sup>46</sup>

On different occasion Saucy is found to be consistent in his view regarding the difference between Israel and the church. He believes that the New Testament never confuses Israel and the church.<sup>47</sup> He says that "as opposed to the church, which is a religious body composed of individuals from all nations, the term Israel retains its reference to that people which came physically from the loins of Abraham."<sup>48</sup> He proceeds by saying that this is proved by the fact that even after the conception of the church the children of Israel are still addressed as a national entity. Saucy asserts that "when on the day of Pentecost Peter addresses his audience as 'ye men of Israel' (Ac 2:22), he is obviously referring to those of the physical nation and not the church.

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<sup>43</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 210.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 70.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Similar uses of the term *Israel* are found throughout Acts, demonstrating the fact that the church had not taken this term for itself (Ac 3:12; 4:10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28)."<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, he takes us a few years forward bringing to our attention the apostle Paul's reference to the nation of Israel as an entity. This can be seen in Paul's prayer for Israel (Rom. 10:1; 11:1) and the references he makes to Israel throughout his discussing of the program of God (Rom. 9-11). In this discussion he expresses his concern for his "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:3). This statement is given more credence for the reason that Paul intensifies it in Romans 11:25. What he says would be meaningless if he did not see a distinction between Israel and the church: "Lest you be wise in your own sight, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in."<sup>50</sup>

### **A Future for Ethnic Israel**

In light of the preceding discussion one must agree that God is not done with Israel as a nation. As serious scholars of the Bible we must acknowledge that God has a special plan for both Israel and the church respectively. Dispensationalists are known for their avoidance of views that say Israel will cease as a nation in God's grand plan for the ages. Seeing Israel as a nation that have ceased is known as "replacement theology" or "supersessionism." Being "supersessionist" means to see the New Testament church as the replacement or fulfillment of the nation Israel as God's people.<sup>51</sup>

If one decides to adopt replacement theology, soon one will realize that promises made to Israel, such as the promise of "the Land," will not come to fruition. Yet, there is excellent reason to believe that Israel will in fact inherit the land according to dispensational belief. Barndollar provides that even though Israel has been "in and out" of the land several times in her history, God promises that there will be a second return to the land of Palestine.<sup>52</sup> Even though another scattering is required God will surely bring this about as is spoken of by Isaiah (Is. 11:10-12). He goes on saying that "no place in history can be identified as the fulfillment of this prophecy; therefore we must consider it as still in the future."<sup>53</sup> In light of this, how is replacement theology essentially supported we might ask?

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 71.

<sup>51</sup> Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths* (Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2008), 24.

<sup>52</sup> W.W. Barndollar, *The Validity of Dispensationalism* (Des Plaines, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1964), 65-66.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

### *Non-Literal Interpretation*

One will essentially arrive at this conclusion regarding Israel through the adoption of a non-literal interpretation of the Prophecies concerning Israel. Culver strongly responds to this malpractice taking place in evangelicalism at large. He agrees with Saucy that the New Testament never says that the church is a new Israel. Parallels may however be drawn since all of Scripture is profitable to us for instruction in righteousness.<sup>54</sup> In addition, Culver offers two reasons for rejecting this view. He similarly sees Paul as never saying that the church is Israel. He offers the following as his first reason:

“It is readily granted here that all Christians are saved in the same way Abraham was, by grace through faith, and in that sense are spiritual children of Abraham. Yet, Paul who presses this point throughout Romans and Galatians, never says the church is an ‘Israel.’ ‘The seed of Abraham’ is an expression used in two (or more) distinct ways in the Bible. Paul’s poignant use of it is an example of reference to Abraham’s seed by natural descent: ‘has God rejected his people? By no means...For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1). Paul is proud to have been circumcised on the ‘eighth day,’ to be ‘of the people of Israel...a Hebrew of Hebrews (Phil. 3:5). He plainly accepts the then present integrity of the Jewish nation as ‘his (God’s) people’ still. He echoes multitudes of Old Testament passages where ‘offspring of Abraham’ is equated with ‘children of Jacob’ (Ps. 105:6) – ‘Israel...Jacob, whom I have chosen’ (Isa. 41:8), to ‘your people Israel’ God gave ‘this land...for ever.’ They are ‘the descendants of Abraham your (God’s) friend’ – a special friendship never to cease (2 Chron. 20:7).”<sup>55</sup>

Secondly, Culver believes it is not difficult to prove that purported texts (Gal. 6:16; Rom. 2:20; Rom. 9:6, 25, 26 and Hosea 1:10; 2:23) do not see the church as the replacement of Israel as the “New Israel.” We will briefly look at what he says regarding these texts. We will only look at Culver’s handling of Galatians 6:16 and Romans 9:6.

Galatians 6:16 is seen to be addressed to a church whose members were predominantly Gentile. The verse reads: “And as for all who walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.” In this epistle Paul wants to correct the misunderstanding that a Gentile has to become a proselyte Jew (by circumcision) in order to become a Christian. Paul however states in the previous verse that the presence or lack of circumcision does not avail anything. Paul is believed to have pronounced a blessing on the whole group. He acknowledges the fact that there were some believers in the church who were of Jewish origin, therefore he adds “and upon the Israel of God.” Culver believes that this rendering of the grammar is closely literal and adds no “interpretive flourishes.” The KJV, NKJV, NAB, Luther’s Bible and other strictly literal version conforms to the same rendering. Culver says “in

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<sup>54</sup> R.D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, 852.

<sup>55</sup> R.D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, 853.

such a case 'the Israel of God' is not an alternate name for all the Gentile Christians in Galatia 'who walk by this rule.' They are Christian Jews, "Israelites according to the flesh' who have received their Messiah and are now within the Christian *ekklesia*."<sup>56</sup>

Romans 9:6 is often offered as proof that the church is seen as the New Israel and so replaces the Israel of old. It says: "...For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel." Culver is convinced that this verse only relates to people who are already natural-born Israelites. They are seen as Paul's "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:3-5). Some have however only "descended from Israel" in the sense that they are physical descendants of Abraham like Esau for instance. Others in the pool of "descended from Israel" are however truly Israel in the sense that they "belong to Israel." This refers to the fact that they have come to faith in Jesus Christ and are truly saved.<sup>57</sup> Culver says the following:

"In these verses, as in all of Romans 9:1-13, the only people under discussion in particular or in principle are Jews. Any one, Jew or Gentile, may be a spiritual child of Abraham (Gal. 2:6-9) in direct spiritual line with Old Testament believers from Abel on through all the faith heroes of Hebrews 11. But only a Jew of the natural line of Abraham can be an 'Israelite indeed' (John 1:47) in the sense Paul specifies in Romans 9:1-13 unless he was by natural descent 'of Israel' (v. 6). This passage is irrelevant to the question of Israel-church identity."<sup>58</sup>

In other words, this passage does not address the church at all, much less proposes that the church is by any means the New Israel. It does however speak to the fact that in the end the "true Israel" of God (who has placed their faith in His Son) will be the only natural descendants of Israel who will remain (stand in judgment).

#### The Reformation Hermeneutic

The scope of this paper does not allow for in-depth study, but the Reformation hermeneutic is what is largely seen as the culprit in the false notion that Israel has been replaced by the church. Horner recognizes this in his research of the Reformation and its view of Israel. He states: "...we return to the fundamental character of the Reformed eschatological hermeneutic, here severally represent, which so vehemently disallows a diversity within the unity of Jesus Christ's consummate kingdom. I believe that for reasons more philosophic than logical, more historic than biblical, more systematic than exegetical, there is a tenacious refusal to allow a both-and situation for Israel and the Gentile nations."<sup>59</sup> Horner refers here to the maintaining of a distinction between the nation Israel and the church. He goes on by saying that "there has come about a Gentile fear for the perpetuation of Judaic influence on Christianity,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> R.D. Culver, *Systematic Theology: Biblical and Historical*, 854.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Barry E. Horner, *NAC Studies in Bible and Theology: Future Israel* (Nashville: B&H Academic, n.d.), 201.

as if the church at Antioch should supersede the church at Jerusalem – though Acts 15 indicates how invalid such a proposal is.”<sup>60</sup> Hereby he proves that the concept of the supersession of Israel by the church is unfounded and unbiblical. Horner proceeds by telling about the detrimental effects Augustine’s interpretation of Israel has had on Christianity at large. He says “it is as if history dominates, that is, Augustinianism reigns and holds exegesis in captivity. But history also indicates that in the realm of eschatology, Augustine was terribly wrong and, so are those who follow in his eschatological steps regarding the disenfranchisement of national Israel.”<sup>61</sup> Horner concludes by insisting that this part of understanding the message of the Bible has been driven by a “historic hermeneutic” more than one that is exegetically motivated. He says that “in this particular realm of divine truth, much of Reformed exegesis has been driven more by a historic hermeneutic rather than the principle of *semper reformandum*, ‘always reforming.’ After all, Luther, Calvin, Turretin, Fairbairn, Bavinck, and Vos could not possibly be wrong! Or could they? They are all part of the same eschatological lineage that peers through essentially Augustinian lenses.”<sup>62</sup> The future of interpretation will be bleak if we do not reform again as Horner calls us to. If not, the following is deemed inevitable: “If the patristic root, with its unsavory eschatology, does not result in the ripening of its fruit through the sweetening of sovereign grace, its continuance and bitter influence, after the manner of centuries of church history, will only result in branches that bring forth tart produce during this twenty-first century.”<sup>63</sup>

### Conclusion

We have seen that dispensationalism remains faithful to the “face value” interpretation of the Bible. Without this, accurate interpretation will not be possible. It is important that we keep within the bounds of sound hermeneutic so that we do not make ourselves guilty of supersessionist conclusions. If we keep within the rules of the grammatico-historical approach, this need not be the case. Lastly, I believe that dispensationalism as a system is keeping with “*semper reformandum*” in that it is growing in interpretation.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Barry E. Horner, *NAC Studies in Bible and Theology: Future Israel*, 201-202.



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