

COVENANTS & DISPENSATIONS

Key question

What are the two most pervasive frameworks in Protestantism for harmonizing the Old and New Testaments and where do these frameworks agree and how do they differ?

Key text

John 1:17

“For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”

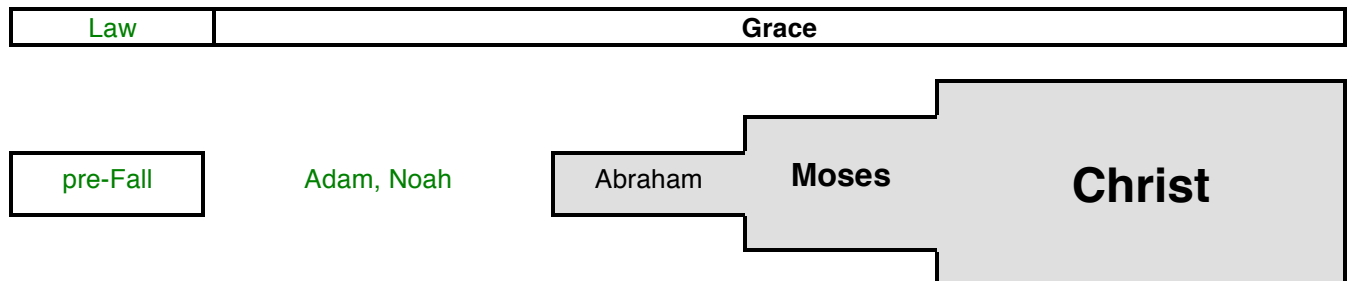
Introduction

1. *“There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.”* Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)
2. Evangelical Christians tend to resolve the tension between the Old and the New Testaments in one of two ways.

A. **The “Covenant” and the “Dispensational” systems represent two different ways of resolving the tension between the theology of the Old Testament and the New.**

1. **The two systems can be illustrated as follows**

The Covenant System sees one covenant of grace that is revealed (unfolded) in stages that represent expansions or enhancements of what has gone before. In this system the New Covenant is simply an upgrade of the Old Covenant. The Old Testament and New Testament are both addressed to and directly applicable to the church of Jesus Christ.



The Dispensational system sees a distinction between God’s dealing with His people Israel and His church (the Body of Christ). The Law as a covenant was temporary and distinct from the New Covenant, which was initiated with the crucifixion, resurrection, and Pentecost. In this system the Old Testament is applied directly to the Jewish people but not the Church of Christ.

pre-Fall	Adam	Noah	Abraham	(Moses)	Christ	2nd coming
Innocence	Conscience	Human Government	Promise	(Law)	Grace	Kingdom

2. Dispensational and Covenantal systems are contrasted in the following chart.

ISSUE	COVENANT POSITION	DISPENSATIONAL POSITION
Pattern Of History	Covenant of Works with Adam: Covenant of Grace with Christ on behalf of elect (some distinguish between Covenant of Redemption with Christ and Covenant of Grace with the elect.)	Divided into dispensations (usually seven); e.g., Innocence (pre-Fall), Conscience (Adam), Human Government (Noah), Promise (Abraham), Law (Moses), Grace (Christ’s First Coming), Kingdom (Christ’s Second Coming.)
View Of History	Optimistic: God is extending His kingdom.	Pessimistic: the Last Days are marked by increasingly worse wickedness in the world and by apostasy in the church.
God's Purpose In History	There is a unified redemptive purpose.	There are two distinct purposes, one earthly (Israel), one heavenly (church).
View Of The Biblical Covenants	They are different administrations of the Covenant of Grace.	They mark off periods of time during which God’s specific demands of man differ.
Relationship Of Old Testament to New Testament	Acceptance of Old Testament teaching required unless specifically abrogated by New Testament.	Old Testament prescriptions are not binding unless reaffirmed in New Testament.
Relationship Between Israel And The Church	The church is spiritual Israel, in continuity with true Israel of Old Testament.	The church is the spiritual people of God, distinct from Israel, the physical people of God.
Old Testament Prophecy	Refers to God’s people, the church.	Refers to ethnic Israel.
Church Age	God's redemptive purpose continued to unfold.	There is a parenthesis between past and future manifestations of the kingdom.
Role Of The Holy Spirit	The Holy Spirit indwells God’s people throughout history.	The Holy Spirit indwells God’s people only from Pentecost to the Rapture.
Baptism	Unifies covenant generally used to support infant baptism.	Israel/church distinction often (but not always) used to support believers' baptism.

Social Implications	Emphasizes “cultural mandate.”	The only way to save the world is to save individuals; therefore evangelism takes precedence over "social action."
Eschatology	Usually amillennial; occasionally postmillennial or premillennial.	Premillennial, usually pretribulational.
Millennium	Symbolic, often identified with present age.	Literal, earthly 1000-yr reign after Second Coming.

B. The “Dispensational” systems examined.

1. Rational for the Dispensational system.

- a. **Definition:** “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.” Scofield Reference Bible “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.” Charles Ryrie
- b. All dispensationalists agree on three distinctives of dispensationalism.
 1. A distinction between the church and Israel.
 2. A literal or “normal” hermeneutic for Scripture.
 3. The purpose of God for all dispensations being the glory of God.

NOTE: Dispensationalism is not so much a systematic theology as a commitment to a consistently literal method of interpretation of the OT as it relates to Israel.

- c. Common features of the dispensational tradition.
 1. The authority of Scripture defined in terms of verbal **inerrancy**. Dispensationalists tend to have a very conservative view of inerrancy.
 2. **Dispensations** marking the differing ways God and humans relate to each other over time. Dispensationalists tend to see God’s working with Israel as distinct from His working with the church.
 3. Uniqueness of the church defined by the **Baptism with the Holy Spirit** beginning at Pentecost. Dispensationalists tend to equate the church with the present age (not including Old Testament Israel).
 4. Practical significance of the “**universal church**” which transcends denominations and local congregations. Dispensationalists tend to be nondenominational.
 5. The importance of **Biblical prophecy** is stressed. Dispensationalists tend to give a lot of attention to the prophetic visions in Scripture of end time events.
 6. An emphasis on a **literal 1000 year reign of Christ** on earth after His second coming is common. Dispensationalists are usually premillennialists.
 7. The **imminent return of Christ** for His church is taught. Dispensationalists believe that Christ could return at any moment.
 8. A **national future for Israel** as a people is stressed. Dispensationalists tend to support a mild form of Zionism (the right of the Jewish people to the land of Palestine).
- d. Texts used to support dispensationalism.
 1. In **Eph.3:2** (Col.1:25-26) the term οικονομία OIKONOMIA is used to refer to two dispensations: the present age and the age to come.

2. Other texts suggest a distinction between a period of law and grace. **Jn.1:17** “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” (Heb.7:12; Rom.7:4-7; II Cor.3:7-11). See notes on Law & Grace under Salvation.
 3. A third dispensation is suggested in **Gal.3:15-19** where the promise to Abraham (Gen.12:1-3) is described as preceding the Law of Moses and fulfilled in Christ.
 4. **Acts 11:15** suggests that the coming of the Spirit was “the beginning” (of a new era).
- e. Forms of dispensationalism.

1. **Classical dispensationalism** – Lewis Sperry Chafer, the Scofield Reference Bible
 - a. Each dispensation is seen as a **test** of faith and obedience for those living at that time in redemptive history. The earthly people of past dispensations failed to realize God’s earthly purpose. Instead the saved will be included in God’s heavenly purpose when that purpose is fulfilled.
 - b. A grammatical historical method of interpretation is advocated by classical dispensationalists. By “historical” they do not mean “historical critical” but rather the reading the text in the context of its relationship to the theological and especially dispensational context. They also put a lot of emphasis on typology in reading the Old Testament.
 - c. God has **two purposes**. The heavenly people would go to heaven and the earthly people would go to the new earth for ever. (the following charts are modified from *Progressive Dispensationalism* by Darrell L. Bock, BridgePoint, 1993)

	Heavenly purpose and people (Church)	Heavenly purpose and people fulfilled in heaven forever. (Resurrected Church and O.T. saints)	
Earthly purpose and people (Israel/Gentiles)		Earthly purpose and people resumed. (Israel/Gentiles)	Earthly purpose and people fulfilled on the New Earth forever. (Israel/Gentiles)
Past dispensation	Present dispensation	Future dispensation	Eternity

- d. The church was seen primarily in terms of a private, individual, spiritual, relationship between God and Christians. The social, political aspects of the church were not emphasized. The church age was seen as a heavenly, spiritual, **parenthesis** in classical dispensationalism.

	Heavenly purpose (Ahistorical, Individual, Spiritual)	Heavenly purpose (Realized forever)	
Earthly purpose (Historical, Political, Social)		Earthly purpose resumed.	Earthly purpose realized forever
Past dispensation	(Present dispensation)	Future dispensation	Eternity

- e. The Abrahamic covenant under classical dispensationalism is the foundational covenant which provides a context for the other Biblical covenants. The covenant made with Abraham in Gen.12 has both a spiritual and physical aspect.

Heavenly spiritual aspect	<i>Abrahamic covenant</i>	Earthly physical aspect
Tutor for Gospel	<i>Mosaic covenant</i>	Conditions for life
Symbolic of church	<i>Palestinian covenant</i>	Promise of land
Present reign of Christ	<i>Davidic covenant</i>	Political reign of Christ
The church (Jew and Gentile together)	<i>New covenant</i>	Jewish revival at end of age

f. Scofield’s view of the Kingdom of God and of Heaven in classical dispensationalism can be illustrated in the following chart.

The Kingdom of God (in Heaven)				Kingdom of God in heaven
Davidic Kingdom	The Kingdom of Heaven (on Earth)			
	“at hand”	Mystery form (Christendom)	Prophetic (Millennial)	
Past Dispensation	<i>Jesus Christ</i>	Present Dispensation	Future Dispensation	Kingdom of God on the New Earth

2. **Revised dispensationalism** – Charles Ryrie, the New Scofield Reference Bible
 - a. Revised dispensationalism spoke of Israel and the church rather than a earthly and heavenly dualism.
 - b. Revised dispensationalism tends to move away from typological interpretation of the Old Testament.
 - c. All the redeemed go to Haven (or as some believe, to the New Earth).

Heavenly fulfillment view

	Purpose for the Church	Purpose for Church fulfilled	Purpose for Church/Israel fulfilled in Heaven forever
Purpose for Israel		Purpose for Israel resumed and fulfilled	
Past dispensation	(Present dispensation)	Future dispensation	

New Earth fulfillment view

	Purpose for the Church	Purpose for Church fulfilled	
Purpose for Israel		Purpose for Israel	Purpose for Church/Israel fulfilled

		resumed	in Heaven forever
Past dispensation	(Present dispensation)	Future dispensation	New Earth

- d. Revised dispensationalism moved away from the distinction between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven.

The view of Charles Ryrie

Universal Kingdom of God			
Davidic Kingdom	Spiritual Kingdom (Church) Mystery form of the Kingdom (Christendom)	Davidic / Messianic Kingdom	Eternity in Heaven
Past Dispensation	Present Dispensation	Future Dispensation	

The view of John Walvoord

Universal Kingdom of God			
Spiritual Kingdom of God			
Davidic Kingdom	Mystery form of the Kingdom (Church)	Millennial Kingdom	Eternity in Heaven
Past Dispensation	Present Dispensation	Future Dispensation	

The view of J. Dwight Pentecost

Eternal Kingdom of God			
Past Theocratic Kingdom	Present Theocratic Kingdom	Future Theocratic Kingdom	Eternity on the New Earth
Successive Rulers	Civil Government, Home, Employers, the Church	Davidic / Messianic Kingdom	
Past Dispensation	Present Dispensation	Future Dispensation	

3. Progressive dispensationalism – **Darrell Bock**

- a. Dispensationalist face a challenge in that their commitment to a “face value” literal or normal reading of prophetic Scriptures does not seem to square with

the way the N.T. authors treat the O.T. In other words, to be consistent and take the N.T. authors at face value one must depart from a literal reading of some O.T. texts. Progressive dispensationalism respects this problem and tries to address it.

- b. Progressive dispensationalism recognizes certain strengths of covenant theology, which it incorporates into its system. For example, Israel and the church are seen as parts of a single “people of God.”
- c. Traditional dispensationalists typically see the ‘church age’ as an interruption or parenthetical period in God's dealing with Israel. The church is seen as unrelated to Israel and the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Believers of this dispensation are segregated from believers of other dispensations in purpose and destiny. Consequently, they see the new covenant as entirely future, concerning Israel during the Millennium. This segregation of saints is best seen in the concept of the ‘Church’ being exclusively the Bride of Christ to the exclusion of other saints. Progressive dispensationalists however believe the ‘church age’ is the fulfillment of certain promises in the Old Testament, regarding the new covenant, and salvation of Gentiles. Tim Warner www.lasttrumpet.com
- d. Rather than being unrelated to God’s program for Israel, the Church is an integral part of that program, and is currently participating in the new covenant promises in this dispensation. Progressive dispensationalists believe the New Covenant was inaugurated by Jesus Himself, by shedding His blood, [[Luke 22:20](#), [Heb.8:6](#), [Heb.9:15](#)]. Jeremiah prophesied the New Covenant would be made with Israel [[Jer.31:31-34](#)]. A look at the Gospels shows the ‘good news’ was originally presented to Israel exclusively. In fact, when Jesus sent His disciples out to preach the gospel the first time He explicitly told them not to preach to Gentiles [[Matt.10:5,6](#)]. Later we find Paul’s acknowledgment of this fact with the words, “*to the Jew first, and also to the Greek*” [[Rom.1:16, 2:9,10](#)]. The crucial difference can be summed up as whether the Church is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, and whether saints of various dispensations should be seen as segregated. Tim Warner www.lasttrumpet.com
- e. That Paul did not hold to Traditional Dispensationalism or a ‘parenthetical Church age’ is clearly indicated in his defense before Agrippa. He saw his mission to the Gentiles as the fulfillment of Israel's hope! “***And now I stand and am judged for the hope of the promise made by God to our fathers. To this promise our twelve tribes, earnestly serving God night and day, hope to attain. For this hope’s sake, King Agrippa, I am accused by the Jews.***” [[Acts 26:6,7](#)]. Paul then recounted his conversion on the road to Damascus, and Jesus’ sending him to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. “*Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, ... “having obtained help from God, to this day I stand, witnessing both to small and great, saying no other things than those which the prophets and Moses said would come—“that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the first to rise from the dead, and would proclaim light to the Jewish people and to the Gentiles.”* [[Acts 26:19-23](#)] Tim Warner www.lasttrumpet.com

2. Problems with the traditional Dispensational system.

- a. It claims to be consistently literal in its interpretation of Scripture but it is forced to **depart from literalism** at times to make its system work. It also must admit that the NT authors did not always use a literal method in interpreting the OT.
 - Matt.2:15 quotes from Hosea 11:1 to prove from Scripture that Jesus must come from Egypt. But this was hardly the meaning of the OT text.
 - Acts 8:30-35 quotes Isa.53 in referring to the suffering of Jesus but the context of the OT text (Isa.49:3, 45:3) has the nation Israel in mind.
 - In Rom.9:25-26 Paul quotes from Hosea 1:9-10, 2:23 and applies these prophecies (that refer to Israel's repentance) to the church.
- b. The lines between Law and Grace are not always as clearly drawn as the system would suggest. This is especially true in the **Gospels**.
- c. The **eschatology** of dispensationalism (in its attempt to be literal and yet consistent) seems at times forced to **obscure** a simple reading of the N.T.
- d. In its commitment to literalism it tends to pay too little respect to the true **nature of language** (especially poetic and symbolic use of language).
- e. It tends to ignore the passages that seem to link the Church with Israel (see below).

C. The "Covenant" system examined.

1. Rational for the Covenant system

- a. Covenant theology has its prototype in patristic theology as systematized by Augustine of Hippo.
- b. It represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by two covenants:
 1. The covenant of works - between Adam and God resulting in failure.
 2. The covenant of grace - between Christ and God resulting in redemption. The covenant of redemption is typically described as a covenant between the Father and the Son rather than as a covenant between all three members of the Godhead. This is because the Bible presents the Son as the Redeemer, not the Holy Spirit, and it presents the Father as the one who permits, commands and accepts the Son's sacrifice. The Holy Spirit is critically important to the salvation process, but the condition of redemption was to be fulfilled by the Son in obligation to the Father, and the Father was to reward the Son's obedience. This is the essence of the covenant of redemption: a condition laid on the Redeemer, and a reward promised to the Redeemer upon fulfillment of the condition.
- c. The Old and New Testaments deal with the covenant of grace as expressed in different ways. This is supported in the way the NT writers appeal to the OT writings and the way Paul links the New Covenant to the Abrahamic covenant.
- d. Covenant Theology teaches that Jesus is the true remnant of Israel, and that Gentiles are now counted as part of Israel because of their union with Christ. The church, in turn, is the visible people of God and is the visible organization which contains the remnant of True Israel (i.e. believers).

The following chart illustrates how the New Testament church is linked to the new Israel:

	Old Israel	New Israel
Holy nation	Ex.19:5,6	1 Peter 2:9; Matt.21:43
Kingdom of priests	Ex.19:5,6	1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev.1:6;Rev.4:4;5:10
A peculiar treasure	Ex.19:5,6	1 Peter 2:9
God's people	Hosea 1:9,10; Rom.9:6- 8	1 Peter 2:9
A holy people	Deut.7:6	1 Peter 1:15,16
A people of inheritance	Deut.4:20	Eph.1:18
God's tabernacle among Israel & the church	Lev.26:11	John 1:14
God walked among them	Lev.26:12	2 Cor.6:16-18
	Twelve sons of Jacob	Twelve apostles
	Twelve tribes	Twelve tribes scattered abroad — James 1:1
Christ married to His people	Isa.54:5; Jer.3:14; Hosea 2:19; Jer.6:2; 31:32	James 4:4; Eph.5:23-33; 2 Cor.11:2

e. Texts used to support the Covenant system.

1. The early church viewed itself as the renewed Israel. Rom.9:6; 11:1,2; 1 Pet.2:9-10
2. The church is presented as the new Israel in fulfillment of the promises made to the nation. Lk.22:30, Acts 1:15-26.
3. Rom.9-11 deals with the ongoing existence of Israel into which the Gentiles have been grafted.
4. **Gal.6:16** “And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them and upon **the Israel of God.**” This phrase is interpreted by those who argue for the covenant system, to refer to the whole church thus establishing it as the new Israel. Others see it as referring to Jewish Christians.
5. **Rom.2:28-29** “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from ‘God.’”
6. **Rom.9:6** “But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;”
7. **Eph.2:31-32** “¹¹ Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," {which is} performed in the flesh by human hands--¹² {remember} that you were at that time

- separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.”
8. **Phil.3:3** “for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” (The body of Christ is the true Israel)
 9. **Heb.11:16** “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.” (the promised land is spiritual)
 10. **Heb.8:8-10** quotes from Jer.31 and applies the blessings of the new covenant to the Church, suggesting that it is the spiritual Israel.

2. Problems with the Covenant system.

- a. The **conditional nature of the Law of Moses** (a covenant following the pattern of the sovereign-vassal treaty of the ancient near east) is ignored. The Abrahamic and New Covenants stand in sharp contrast to the Mosaic Covenant in that they follow the pattern of an unconditional royal grant.
- b. Paul’s argument in **Galatians** (and elsewhere) for a sharp contrast between Law (written in stone) and Grace suggests that the Mosaic Law was in view and was replaced with the New Covenant of grace through faith in Christ.
- c. When giving **moral instruction to the early church** (as in I Corinthians) Paul does not appeal to the Mosaic Law as one would expect if indeed it were still in force.
- d. The way in which Paul handles the **Sabbath** issue suggests that the Law of Moses was not in effect at the time Paul was living. The same might be said of the tithe issue.
- e. A **division between the moral** (binding for today) **and ceremonial/civil** (abrogated for today) aspect of the Mosaic Law is hard to justify from Scripture. The commandment concerning Sabbath observance is a test case where Paul in Rom.14 clearly frees Christians from its proscriptions.
- f. In its commitment to philosophical coherence it pays too little attention to the **historical development** of redemption.
- g. Paul seems to suggest that Christ created a new system not just a reformed Israel. **Eph.2:15** “that in Himself He might make the two into one new man.”
- h. “In Covenant Theology there is the tendency to impute to passages a meaning which should not be gained merely from their historical and grammatical associations. This phase of interpretation is called the “theological” interpretation.” *Daniel P. Fuller*

The Point

Many of the differences in interpretation within the evangelical church are explained in terms of the two systems that are most commonly used as a framework.

Response

Head

I am to understand that:

There are two basic frameworks used by evangelicals to explain the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Heart

I am to believe that:

God's grace is a powerful and central theme in His self-revelation no matter which system or interpretation one uses.

Hands

I am to behave by:

Studying and understanding both systems so that I can understand Christian spokesmen who are coming from differing points of view.

Pastoral advice

How should one resolve these conflicts?

1. I favor a "neo dispensational" approach to the OT / NT tension. I am influenced by Paul's strong distinction between Law and grace especially in Galatians.
2. I sense that the distinction that Paul makes between Law and Grace is the strongest argument for a "neo dispensational" approach.
3. This should not be an issue that divides us with respect to fellowship and it need not if those on both sides are reasonable, humble, and charitable in their views.
4. Some of the most significant areas of life affected by these two systems are - baptism, Sabbath observance, tithing, the relationship of the Law of Moses to the Christian life, the style of worship, and the role of the clergy.