

## **Dispensationalism What and Why Not**

“Lutherans are unbelievers.” That is the first thought that crossed my mind when I learned they did not believe in the “rapture” or the “millennial kingdom” (the 1000 year reign of Christ on earth). Were not these teaching central to the Biblical witness and clear for everyone to see?

At that moment two different theologies had collided and engaged in battle; Israel and Jesus, grappling on the shore of the Jabbok. The two theologies were “Dispensationalism” on one hand, and “Lutheranism” (“orthodoxy”, if you will) on the other. I did not yet know the names of the opponents, but I right away had a sense of the ferocity of the battle. At stake were two totally different ways of understanding the end times, the church, salvation and the purpose of history, even the very heart and character of God.

So we arrive at the topic at hand: What is Dispensationalism and why is it wrong? There is perhaps no better example of confusing Law and Gospel in modern theology than the teaching of Dispensationalism. The depth of this confusion is tragically matched by the breadth of its exposure. Dispensationalism is so popular and widespread that it has become a major (if not the central) article in American Evangelical doctrine, teaching, preaching and popular piety<sup>1</sup>. Dispensationalism is not an isolated false teaching, it is an over-arching theological system; it is an eschatology (doctrine of the end times), an ecclesiology (doctrine of the church), soteriology (doctrine of salvation), a hermeneutic (approach to the Scriptures) and so forth. Like a cancer, dispensational theology spreads into every part, making the whole body of theology critically ill. What follows is a dose of dispensational radiation treatment.

Part of the trouble with dispensational theology is that it is more often “caught” than “taught” or thought out, less like a teaching and more like a head cold. Most dispensationalists arrive at their belief, not by careful study of the Scriptures, but by dogmatic osmosis. Often these “Dispensationalists by Default” wake up with a crick and wonder, “How did I get this pain in the neck?” We begin, then, by defining the central tenants of Dispensationalism, the articles on which the system stands or falls, and they are the following:

- 1) The distinction between Israel and the Church.
- 2) The use of a “consistent, literal hermeneutic.”
- 3) The purpose of God in the world is His own glory and *not* man's salvation.

These are the “three pillars” of dispensationalism, the *sine qua non* which we hope to make *non*<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Distinction Between Israel and the Church**

“A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct... This is probably the most basic theological test whether or not a man is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. A man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will.”<sup>3</sup> So Charles Ryrie outlines the importance of the distinction of Israel and the Church. This distinction is the first made by Scofield in his *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, “The Jew, the Gentile, and the Church of God.”<sup>4</sup> The church “began at Pentecost and is completely distinct from Israel.”<sup>5</sup> This is the article that comes first and distinguishes dispensationalism from every other doctrine,<sup>6</sup> it is the “essence of dispensationalism”<sup>7</sup>

The distinction goes like this: Israel is God's earthly people with earthly promises and an earthly future (the millennium). The Church is God's heavenly people with a heavenly future, and never the twain shall meet. This distinction of God's purpose drops like a guillotine on the Scriptures, separating the Old Testament promises of the kingdom from the Church. To the

Dispensationalist, the kingdom that Jesus preached was a physical, earthly kingdom (the Davidic Kingdom) which He came to establish for the Jews by throwing off the Roman oppressors. After this kingdom is rejected by the Jews, Jesus switches to “Plan B”, the establishment of the church. This church age is a “great parenthesis” between the offering and the giving of the promised kingdom, “a sort of interim consolation prize, until the interrupted fulfillment of Lk 1:32 can be taken up again in the 'political, spiritual, Israelitish' world dominion to be exercised by Christ from Jerusalem for a thousand years!”<sup>8</sup>

Does the New Testament divide Israel and the church? “Remarkably, the whole New Testament declines to drive the dispensationalist wedge between Israel and the church; on the contrary, it frankly defines the church as the continuation of Israel.”<sup>9</sup> Stephenson is not exaggerating when he marshals the “whole New Testament” against dispensationalism. These Scriptures are answering very directly the question, “What is the relationship between Israel and the church?” The answer is clear: Jesus, on the cross, destroyed any distinction between Israel and the church. Consider the following texts:

For you are *all* sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free; for all are one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.* (Galatians 3:26-29)

This text lacks no clarity; nor does Ephesians 2:11-19:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh- who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands- that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God...

Notice, first of all, that the “oneness” of Israel and the church is not just mentioned in passing. The “Therefore” of 2:11 is connected to the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, Ephesians 2:8. St. Paul therefore builds the unity of the people of God on the blood and flesh of Jesus, for in His death He “has broken down the middle wall of separation”.

Dispensationalism rebuilds this wall.

God is certainly doing something with the national people of Israel in the New Testament, mostly rejecting them because of unbelief. There is no room in the kingdom of God for the claim, “We have Abraham as our father.” The ax is laid to the root of that nationalistic misunderstanding of God's promise by the preaching of John the Baptist, “I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.” (St Luke 3:8) This, again, is the thrust of the Galatians passage mentioned above, “If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 3:29) Jesus says the same thing when He denies the unbelieving Jews the claim, “Abraham is our father.” (St John 8:39) Faith, not blood, makes children of Abraham.<sup>10</sup>

The same is true for members of Israel. “They are not all Israel who are Israel.” (Romans 9:6) This takes us to the *sedes doctrine* of the issue at hand. Who is the true Israel? St Paul

answers, “those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.” (Romans 9:8) To be Israel is to believe the promise. What about Israel in the flesh? Does this mean nothing? St Paul asks this very question, “I say then, has God cast away His people? Certainly not!” Dispensationalists love this question, using it to prove that God still has a plan for national Israel, but St Paul has more to say; he is going to tell us *how* God has not cast away His people. Paul continues, “For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew.” (Romans 11:1-2) Paul uses himself as an example of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel. In this we see a very different picture of God's keeping His promise than the Dispensationalist gives. God is faithful to Israel in the flesh by having the Gospel preached to them and granting them repentance. God is faithful to His promises by giving His people faith and making them part of the church. God is faithful to His covenant by giving Jesus over to death for the forgiveness of the sins of Jew and Gentile alike. His faithfulness has nothing to do with rebuilt temples and earthly rule, but everything to do with Jesus and His cross.

With this idea in place St. Paul introduces the image of the olive tree (Romans 11:17-24). The natural branches (Israel of the flesh) were cut off due to unbelief (11:20), and the wild branches (the Gentiles) were grafted in by faith. There is no clearer picture of the continuity of the church. There are not two olive trees, but one, and that tree is Jesus. Thus the unity of the Old and New Testament people of God find their unity in Jesus and no one or nothing else. In Christ Israel and the Church are one flesh, united in the forgiveness of their sins. They can be separated only by tearing apart Christ.

This “monstrous conception” of the distinction between Israel and the church causes the “monstrous juggling of the Scripture”<sup>11</sup>, it is the “πρωτον ψευδος” and the “fount of error”<sup>12</sup> out of which flows a brood of vermin and false teaching. We will consider only a few.

First, the *secret rapture of the church*. Dispensationalists teach the “pretribulation rapture of the church”. This means that the church will be taken out of this earth before (pre) the seven year “Great Tribulation” which culminates with the battle of Armageddon and the end of this dispensation. In Dispensationalism the rapture is an auxiliary doctrine which serves the distinction between Israel and the church by removing the church so God can finish His dealing with Israel, much like a mother telling her child, “Clear your toys off the table, it's time for dinner.” The fantastic and fanciful ideas concerning the sudden disappearance of all born-again Christians continues to spawn “Christian” science fiction like the *Left Behind* books and movies.<sup>13</sup> But these machinations are completely disconnected from the Biblical text. “Rather than science-fiction mumbo-jumbo, the Bible teaches that the Rapture is not a unique event, but part of the resurrection of the dead... The “rapture” is the mechanism by which Jesus gives the resurrection body to those who are alive at the time of His return. The rapture is the 'mystery' of the resurrection of the living.”<sup>14</sup>

Second, the distinction between Israel and the Church creates a romantic view of the false religion and idolatry of modern Judaism. On a whim a few years ago I went to the local, 'non-denominational', dispensational mega-church and did a survey of the folks walking around, asking this question, “If you could only be Jewish or Roman Catholic, which would you be?” The overwhelming majority said, “Jewish”. This survey is perhaps ill-conceived; it is certainly telling. One response stands out. I asked a group standing together my question. The woman responded first, saying, “Oh, Catholic.”

“What?” the others around her responded. “I'd rather be Jewish.” This was the consensus of the group.

“Why?” she asked. “At least the Catholics believe in Jesus.” I thought this was a good point.

“But you see, when Jesus comes back the Jews will recognize Him as the Messiah. They'll believe and be saved.”

“Oh, that's right,” she conceded, “put me down as Jewish.”

This incident, while neither scientific nor scholarly, does demonstrate a number of dangerous side-effects of the Israel/Church distinction. There is a romantic notion of Judaism; a preference of the shofar over the church bells. American Evangelicals who despise or neglect the Lord's Supper are zealous to celebrate the passover! Here Elijah's empty seat gives a powerful testimony to their empty sacraments and hollow ecclesiology. Even more, the visible coming of Jesus is seen as a means of grace. "They will see Him and believe." Jesus' words to us, "Blessed are you who have not seen, and yet believe" are turned on their head; salvation becomes a matter of sight, not faith. Thus "this separation between the Kingdom and the Church, which is as unscriptural as it is dangerous, leads to one of the most serious errors of dispensationalism, the tendency to minimize the importance of the present Gospel age in the interest of the Kingdom age that is to come."<sup>15</sup>

The preoccupation on the coming Jesus fosters neglect for the death of Christ. Dispensationalist see all history marching toward a "grand crescendo"<sup>16</sup>, and on this all dispensational eyes are fixed. *Then* Jesus will show His real colors. "Yes, Jesus was meek and mild when He came the first time, but just you wait and see... He'll be tough next time." There is a subtle shame, as if the cross were a failure. The theology of glory is much more attractive than the theology of the cross, and dispensationalism is a theology of glory. The cross is there, but not central, not chief, and as such, Dispensationalism disparages the gospel.

A third troublesome result of the Israel/Church distinction is *Christian Zionism*, the radical political support of the nation Israel based on the fact that God has yet to keep His promise to Abraham by giving the nation all the land from Egypt to the Euphrates River.<sup>17</sup> "Do you know," I once asked a Rabbi who was working with a Southern Baptists group to finance the relocation of Russian Jews to Israel, "that these Baptists are raising money to hasten the return of Jesus, at which time the Jews will undergo a mass conversion to Christianity followed by tremendous persecution and wholesale slaughter?" That was the end of our conversation that morning. But "mission, not misplaced revival of the medieval crusades, is where the rubber of truly Christian eschatology hits the road."<sup>18</sup>

But let this distinction between Israel and the church be left behind so that we may consider the second pillar of Dispensationalism,

### **A Consistent, Literal Hermeneutic**

Dispensationalist claim that they and they alone use a "consistent, literal hermeneutic." The "distinction between Israel and the Church is born out of a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation. Therefore, the second aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism is the matter of plain hermeneutics."<sup>19</sup> Amillennialists, on the other hand, "Spiritualize things, and really goof things up."<sup>20</sup> But the two disparate hermeneutics of dispensationalism and a-dispensationalism cannot be dismissed with a casual reference to the word "literal", for even dispensationalists acknowledge a difference between the *sensus litterae* (the sense of the letter, the plain sense) and the *sensus literalis* (the literal sense). Both sides claim the use of the historical-grammatical method, and yet there is no denying the gulf between their exegetical conclusions. Certainly two hermeneutical spirits are at work.

The dispensationalist divided these spirits as "literal" and "spiritual". The spiritualizing school, it is claimed, in a desperate attempt to make the church fit the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, spiritualizes the promises, abstracting them from their very Jewish and earthly intended sense. The literal school, on the other hand, boldly believes what the text really says. A mock word-association will make the differences clear.

Say the first thing that comes to your mind...

"Temple" Non-dispensationalist, "Jesus' body (John 2), the church." Dispensationalist, "Building in Jerusalem where there are animal sacrifices."

"New Covenant" Non-dispensationalist, "Cross, Lord's Supper." Dispensationalist, "Treaty that Jesus will make with Israel when He returns to set up His earthly kingdom."

“Anti-Christ” Non-dispensationalist, “The pope. Also other false teachers that deny the Gospel.” Dispensationalist, “The world dictator who will sacrifice a pig in the rebuilt temple, Nicolae Carpathia.”

“Sacrifice” Non-dispensationalist, “Jesus' death on the cross.” Dispensationalist, “Reinstituted animal sacrifices during the millennial kingdom at the temple in Jerusalem.” (Yes, dispensationalists believe the temple sacrifices will be reintroduced.)

“Israel” Non-dispensationalist, “The church.” Dispensationalist, “The physical descendants of Jacob.”

“Kingdom” Non-dispensationalist, “The church ruled by Jesus who sits at the right hand of God the Father.” Dispensationalist, “National kingdom ruled from a physical throne in a geographical Jerusalem.”

What emerges here is not so much a distinction between literal and spiritual (Jesus and His church are “literal”, they really exist), but a distinction between a “Christocentric” hermeneutic and an “Israeliocentric” hermeneutic. The dispensationalist finds the bulk of prophetic fulfillment in the physical kingdom of Israel in the millennial kingdom.<sup>21</sup> The a-dispensationalist (Lutheran) finds it in Jesus and His death on the cross.

Against this “Israeliocentric” interpretation we offer three arguments. First, the Scriptures teach us their overarching theme, namely, Jesus and His death for our sins. Jesus says to the Pharisees, “Search the scriptures; for in them you think you have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me.” (St John 5:39) The testimony and witness of the Scriptures is about Jesus, through and through, from “Moses and all the Prophets.” (St Luke 24:27, see also 24:25-26, 44-47) This witness is not just about the person of Jesus, but about His work, His suffering, death and resurrection. (See St Luke 1:69-71; St John 1:45; 5:46; Acts 13:32-33; 26:22,23; Romans 1:2; 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:3) The central theme of the Scriptures is the death of Jesus (Genesis 3:15). Jesus is speaking literally when He says, “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and *all things that are written by the prophets* (παντα τα γεγραμμενα δια των προφητων) concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished.” (St Luke 18:31) It is in Jerusalem, in our Lord's passion, death and resurrection that the prophetic word finds its τελος, its completion. The center of the Scriptures and the climax of all history is not the earthly millennium, but the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

This being understood, it is no surprise that we find all Old Testament prophecies being fulfilled in Jesus and His church. This is our second anti-Israeliocentric argument, the Scriptures show us how the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled, fulfilled in Christ and His church. Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:14-36) is a wonderful example. In verses 17-21 St Peter quotes the “Last days” prophecy of Joel (2:28-32) as being fulfilled in the events of that day (Verse 16: “this [i.e. These strange things that you are seeing] is what was spoken by the prophet Joel...”). Peter then goes on to discuss the prophecy that Jesus would sit on the throne of David. “[David], therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ...” (2:30-31) The prophecy that the Christ would sit on the throne of David is not a prophecy in waiting; it was fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus and His ascension to the right hand of God.<sup>22</sup>

Another example is the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34, “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...” Dispensationalist, with their Israeliocentric hermeneutic, must read the recipients of this new covenant to be “national Israel” and “physical descendants of Judah”, and conclude that “although certain features of this covenant have been fulfilled for believers in this present Church Age, the covenant remains to be realized for Israel.”<sup>23</sup> But Jesus is speaking literally (not spiritually) when He says, “This is My blood of the new covenant.” (St Matthew 26:28 and parallels in St Mark and 1 Corinthians) The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews is clear when he discusses this text (Hebrews 8:1-13; 10:15-18). The New Covenant is here in the

ministry of Jesus, “He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.” (8:6) This “better covenant” that Jesus establishes is the “new covenant” that Jeremiah promised (see 8:7-9). That dispensationalists are unable to see the fulfillment of Jeremiah's promise even though the New Testament explicitly teaches it shows the utter blindness of their hermeneutic. The veil over the Old Testament is taken off only in Christ. (2 Corinthians 3:14-16)

This brings us to our third anti-Israeliocentric point. The dispensational hermeneutic insists that a literal reading of the kingdom promises in the Scriptures will teach a physical, earthly, Jewish Messianic “restoration of the national kingdom.”<sup>24</sup> This was the false hope of the Jews during Jesus' ministry. (See St Luke 17:20; St John 6:15) “The misunderstanding of the coming kingdom which our Lord took pains to preclude, and which He rebuked in the form of Peter's carnal misapprehension (Mt 16:23), is in fact its essence [for the dispensationalist]!”<sup>25</sup> The importance of the national character of the kingdom of God for the dispensational understanding of the Scripture cannot be overstated. “If [the kingdom] is the Church, then dispensationalism is unwarranted. If the present form of the kingdom is not the Church and if the future form is the Davidic kingdom on earth, then dispensational premillennialism is the only answer.”<sup>26</sup>

The only trouble that Dispensationalists have on this point is the Bible. Jesus and all of the Scriptures teach us how to understand the nature of the kingdom, that it is not a national, political kingdom. Jesus confessed before Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (St John 18:36) Before the Pharisees Jesus teaches, “The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you.” (St Luke 17:20-21) “The time is fulfilled,” this is how Jesus began preaching, “and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.” (St Mark 1:14-15) To look for the kingdom of God is to make the same mistake the Pharisees did when Jesus came (St Luke 17:20). Jesus' kingdom is not political. It is not earthly. This does not mean that it is “spiritual” or “allegorical” or unfitting for the King of kings. “You call this the kingdom of God?” a dispensationalist asks as they sweep their arm around the church. “Some kingdom.” Dispensationalism despises the church, and so was our Lord despised and mocked. “You call yourself the king of the Jews?” (St John 19:3, etc.) Jesus is the crucified King, crowned with thorns, and His is a crucified kingdom, a kingdom under the cross. “The kingdom of God suffers violence.” (St Matthew 11:12) The Church is the kingdom that Jesus wants, and to call her unworthy is to insult that which is dearest to our Bridegroom's heart.

The hermeneutics of dispensationalism falter because they misplace the very heart of the Scriptures, replacing Jesus and His cross with the hope of the earthly kingdom. Their formal principle is inconsistent and not particularly “literal”<sup>27</sup>, but their material principle is deadly. This we will consider further with the third pillar of dispensationalism,

### **The Purpose of History is the Glory of God and not the Salvation of Man**

“A third aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism ... concerns the underlying purpose of God in the world. The covenant theologian in practice makes this purpose salvation, and the dispensationalist says the purpose is broader than that, namely the glory of God.”<sup>28</sup> We are here introduced to another category: covenant theologian. What is a covenant theologian? While a more precise definition is desirable, we can begin with this: a covenant theologian is anyone who disagrees with dispensationalism, particularly concerning this point.<sup>29</sup> Covenant theologians posit the unity of Scripture and history in God's work of redemption. “To the dispensationalist the soteriological or saving program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself.”<sup>30</sup>

The danger here is the separation of God's glory and man's salvation. “Salvation, for all it's wonder, is but one facet of the diamond of the glory of God.”<sup>31</sup> The cross is one means, and probably not the best means, of glorifying God. The millennial kingdom will accomplish that

much better, for it is the “mighty crescendo”<sup>32</sup> of history as “the entire program culminates not in eternity but in history, in the millennial kingdom of the Lord Christ. The millennial culmination is the climax of history and the great goal of God's program for the ages.”<sup>33</sup> This kingdom “is to be established by power, and not persuasion.”<sup>34</sup> The Gospel is good for this age, but there is a better age coming.

This is the age of individual conversions, the snatching of a brand here and there from the burning. That is to be an age of mass conversions, nations born in a day. The dispensationalist exalts the cross as the only hope of hell-deserving sinners- with one exception. It is a very important exception. It is for the dispensation of grace, for the Church age, and for this age only, that he exalts the cross. ... The 'Gospel of the grace of God' is, according to the *Scofield Bible* (on Matt. 4, 17), the Gospel for the Church age; and the Church age is a parenthesis of indeterminate length between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks of Dan. 9. It is an interlude in the history of God's people Israel. It is a time when the great prophetic clock is silent. It does not figure in prophetic history. It is 'time out' in sacred chronology. Yet this parentheses is the Church age, the age of the Cross, the the preaching of the Gospel of the grace of God. How could a 'Bible Christian' minimize more seriously the value and centrality of the Cross in Biblical Revelation?<sup>35</sup>

“Justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith is relegated to the status of a mere parenthesis in the saving works of God!”<sup>36</sup> And after this age is over, we will go back to the glorious? Dispensation of the law! “In the millennial kingdom, the final and most glorious dispensation, the legal system, the law of merit, rules!- Did Jesus Christ at one time, and will He again, preach the Law as the vehicle of God's blessings?”<sup>37</sup>

What are we to make of this dispensational divorce of God's glory and the Gospel? The angelic choirs begin their Christmas hymn, “Glory to God in the highest, and...” But then the Dispensationalists stand up and say, “That's quite enough! You can stop there. Just sing about God's glory.” But God's glory and the salvation of man cannot be separated, for the glory of God is hidden in the cross of Jesus Christ. On the night before His crucifixion Jesus said, “Now the Son of man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately.” (St John 13:31-32) His cross is His glory. So the heavenly choir sings, “You are worthy... For You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood.” (Revelation 5:9) Christ crucified is a “stumbling block” and “foolishness”, “but to those who are called... Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:23-24) The wisdom and power and glory of God are seen in the humiliation and suffering and death of the cross. “True theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

“Chiliasm promises to remove the offense of the cross, and this promise breeds dissatisfaction with the present lowly estate of the church. Chiliasm promises to win the world for Christ in the millennium with better instrumentalities than the simple preaching of the Gospel, and this promise breeds impatience.”<sup>39</sup>

But concerning the teaching about Christ and His cross, our confessions say, “when it [the Gospel, justification] is properly understood, it illumines and magnifies the honor of Christ and brings to pious consciences the abundant consolation that they need.”<sup>40</sup> Glory to Christ and comfort to sinners, the Gospel brings both in their fullness.

The Gospel constitutes the glory of the church. Lowly and harassed as she is, she is resplendent with a glory that cannot be exceeded in this life. Oh, the excellent glory of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins! “The glorious Gospel of the blessed God” (1 Tim. 1, 11); “the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ” (2 Cor. 4, 4); “the ministration of righteousness doth exceed in glory” (2 Cor. 3, 9); as long as the world endures, the glory of Jesus shineth *in the Gospel*: the Gospel “gives the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4, 6). The Gospel is God's last word to us. Into the Gospel God has poured all the riches of His saving grace and saving power. The Gospel is the most precious gift to the Church Militant, a treasure unsurpassed, unsurpassable. “It remaineth” (2 Cor. 3,

11); it will not be replaced.<sup>41</sup>  
May God grant that this pure Gospel of Christ crucified for sins be preached and taught without error to the edifying of His holy people unto eternal life.

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- 1 That Dispensationalism is woven into the piety of American Christianity makes it even more troublesome. There is a trend away from dispensationalism in Academic Evangelical circles, but the culture of Evangelicalism still drinks deeply from the well of science-fiction prophecy buffs. Dispensationalism is becoming less a matter of books and more a matter of bumper-stickers. This is not to suggest a bumper-sticker counter attack (“In case of Rapture, can I have your car?”). It is enough to acknowledge that this discussion goes to the very heart of what many Evangelicals believe and teach.
- 2 For the purpose of simplicity we have left the historical development of Dispensationalism out of this paper, but perhaps a passing summary is worth mentioning. Dispensationalists go to great lengths to show the antiquity of their teaching, including a “catalog of testimonies” with quotations from the Apocrypha to Justin and Origin and Augustine. It is difficult to see this early church proof-texting as anything more than obligatory. The words of Irenaeus sound strange indeed in the mouth of Charles Ryrie. In spite of this effort they all, in the end, must admit that it was not clearly taught until done so by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) of the Plymouth Brethren. It was popularized C. I. Scofield (1843-1921) in his *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), and championed by L. S. Chafer (1871-1952). Dallas Theological Seminary and Moody Bible Institute continue to champion the dispensational cause. Dispensationalism is not wrong because it is new, it is wrong because it militates against the Scriptures and the Gospel. Being new doesn't help. For more see: Arnold D. Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965). Also, for a classic treatment, see Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism, Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960).
- 3 Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pp. 44,45. We will rely heavily on this book, billed as the “first book-length contemporary apologetic to be written by a recognized scholar.” (p. 7)
- 4 C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1896) pp. 5-12.
- 5 “Article 9: The Church” *The Doctrinal Statement of Dallas Theological Seminary*, quoted from [www.dispensationalism.com/statment.html](http://www.dispensationalism.com/statment.html) on 12 November 2004.
- 6 It is to be noted that the separation of Israel and the Church is the question being mulled over by so-called “Progressive Dispensationalists.” “The changes in dispensationalism have been largely in the direction of a greater continuity within God's program of historical salvation. Instead of a strict parenthesis that has no relation with the messianic kingdom prophecies of the Old Testament, many dispensationalists now acknowledge the present age of the church as the first-stage partial fulfillment of these prophecies. Israel and the church are no longer viewed as representing two different purposes and plans of God, as some earlier dispensationalists taught; they are now seen as sharing in the same messianic kingdom of salvation history. These changes have obviously brought more congruence between dispensationalism and non-dispensationalism at many points.” Robert Saucy, *The Case For Progressive Dispensationalism, the Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), p. 9. See also, Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993).
- 7 Ryrie, 47.
- 8 Kurt Marquart, *The Church*, vol. IX, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, (Fort Wayne: The Luther Academy, 1995), 179.
- 9 John Stephenson, *Eschatology*, vol. XIII, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics*, (Fort Wayne: The Luther Academy, 1993), 86.
- 10 Dispensationalists label this Biblical teaching “replacement theology” and heap upon it all sorts of wickedness, even blaming it for the holocaust. (See, for example, Hal Lidnsey, *The Road to Holocaust*).
- 11 Theodore Engelder, “Notes on Chiliasm”, *Concordia Theological Monthly* (6 [1935]:161-173, 241-254, 321-335, 401-418, 481-496), p. 327. Stephenson rightly says of Engelder's articles, “they have forfeited none of their timeliness through the passage of more than half a century.” (p. 84, n. 43, Note, also, that Stephenson offers the pagination for only the first two of Engelder's five articles.)
- 12 Stephenson, p. 85.
- 13 For a theological critique of the *Left Behind* phenomenon, see the CTCR document “A Lutheran Response to the Left Behind Series” ([www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/LeftBehind.pdf](http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/LeftBehind.pdf)). Also Brent McGuire, “Will You Be Left Behind? *The Lutheran Witness* (March 2001). For a rollicking critique of the Left Behind movie and its artistic failure, see Ron Dreher, “Do Fake Boobs Go To Heaven?” ([www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment020601b.shtml](http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/comment020601b.shtml) on 10/10/04)
- 14 Bryan Wolfmueller, *The End Times, He Will Come Again with Glory to Judge the Quick and the Dead* (Unpublished Bible Study) “Appendix A, What About the Rapture?” reads in its entirety:

“Discovered’ by Rev. John Darby in 1827, the teaching of the Rapture is at the center of Dispensationalism. It is the mechanism God uses to get the church out of the way so that He can go back to dealing with Israel (see Appendix D, p. 13). It is sometimes called the “Secret Rapture” or “Secret Coming” of Jesus, where He comes halfway to the earth, calls all true believers to Him, and then returns to heaven to wait for the conclusion of the seven year “Great Tribulation\*”. The wildly popular Left Behind series begins with the “secret rapture” of the church, when people suddenly disappear, leaving behind their families and their false teeth.

Rather than this science-fiction mumbo-jumbo, the Bible teaches that the Rapture is not a unique event, but part of the resurrection of the dead. When discussing the resurrection of the dead, the question arises, what about the

resurrection of the living? How will we receive the resurrected body? Will the Lord kill our bodies in order to raise them up? Or will we miss the resurrection all together?

In two texts of Scripture St Paul answers these questions: 1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-54 and 1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18. In these texts we see that the “rapture” is the mechanism by which Jesus gives the resurrection body to those who are alive at the time of His return. The rapture is the “mystery” of the resurrection of the living.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:50-52:

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed- in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

- There must be a change. The living cannot inherit the eternal kingdom. We must receive the gift of the resurrection: the incorruptible body, but how?
- Not all will die (sleep) before the resurrection, but all will be changed.
- The resurrection of the dead and the “rapture”, the resurrection of the living.

1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.

- We see again the resurrection of the dead and the “catching up” of the living. The “rapture” is a smaller part of the resurrection by which those who are alive inherit incorruption.

The rapture is no “secret”, it is part of the very public and visible return of our Lord when He comes with shouts and trumpets to raise the dead and give eternal life and heaven to all those who believe in His name, and send to hell those who do not. We who remain until the end will not be taken away in judgment, but will be 'left behind' to inherit the new heaven and new earth [ST MATTHEW 24:36-42].

Therefore comfort one another with these words. [1 THESSALONIANS 4:18]

15 Theodore Englder, “Dispensationalism Disparaging the Gospel”, *Concordia Theological Monthly* (8 [1937]:649-666), 652.

16 Ryrie, p. 105.

17 The argument goes like this:

1. God gave unconditional promises to Abraham concerning the Promised Land, all the way to the Euphrates River (Genesis 15:18).
2. Israel never possessed the land to the promised borders.
3. God still has a promise to keep with national Israel.

The Bible, on the other hand, is careful to show that this promise to Abraham has been fulfilled. Joshua 21:43-45 says, “So the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it. The LORD gave them rest all around, according to all that He had sworn to their fathers. And not a man of all their enemies stood against them; the LORD delivered all their enemies into their hand. Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass.” (NKJV) (See also Joshua 10:40; 11:15,23) 2 Samuel 8:3 talks about King David recovering his territory to the Euphrates River. It's difficult to recover territory if you never had it in the first place.

18 Stephenson, p. 88.

19 Ryrie, p. 45.

20 Skip Heitzig, Sermon preached on Revelation 20. Quoted from memory.

21 How appropriate the Augsburg Confession is when it dismisses all forms of millennialism as “Jewish opinions” (AC XVII.5, Tappert, p. 38).

22 Having read Peter's masterful exposition of the promise given to King David, it is difficult to stomach the Dispensational interpretation. Concerning 2 Samuel 7, John Walvoord writes, “A leading opposing view, however, is advanced by the amillennialists who interpret the prophecy non literally as referring to Christ, not in His reign over Israel or over the world but to Christ as the head of the church. In the amillennial interpretation, the throne of David is equated with the throne of God in heaven, and the reign of Christ is usually related to the present age of Christ's spiritual reign in the hearts of believers.” (John Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* [US: Victor Books, 1990], p. 55-56.)

23 *New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 804. (Note on Jeremiah 31:31)

24 Ryrie, p. 171.

25 Stephenson, p. 85.

26 Ryrie, p. 171.

27 Dispensational claims of “literalism” are easily dismissed. Consider this list of verses, modified to fit a dispensational interpretation:

Matthew 23:36 Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation **but just bear in mind that in a few verses the same phrase “this generation” will mean “that generation”**.

Matthew 24:34 Verily I say unto you, **That** generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled.

Isaiah 9:7 Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be **a 2000 year pause for the church age**, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice **not** from henceforth **but rather later on** even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will **eventually** perform this.

Matthew 3:2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is **in the millennium after a few thousand years**.

Matthew 10:7 And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is **not** at hand, **but will be in 2000 years**.

Matthew 21:43 Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall **not** be taken from you, **after all the promise are not conditional upon your obedience, and will never be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof since you are the descendants of Abraham**.

Mark 13:32 But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, **except the prophecy teachers which will tell you when it will happen** no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.

Luke 1:33 And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be **an end, but it will start up again after a 2000 year or so gap**.

Luke 17:21 Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is **not** within you, **but rather will be established in 2000 years or so**.

Acts 7:38 This is he, that **could not have been** in the church in the wilderness **since the church did not start until Acts chapter 2** with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us:

1 Corinthians 15:50 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood **will** inherit the kingdom of God **during the millennium**.

2 Peter 1:11 For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ **which will be established in 2000 years or so**.

These adaptations were compiled by the Center for the Refutation of Dispensational Falsehoods

([www.ios.com/~doug/bibstud/crdf/crdf.htm](http://www.ios.com/~doug/bibstud/crdf/crdf.htm), posted 2/16/99)

Dispensationalism does indeed have a “violent exegesis.” (Engelder, “Notes...”, p. 166). “The chiliastic [millennialist] interpreter, wandering around in this maze of confusion, cannot be blamed much if he involves himself in self-contradictions.” (Engelder, p. 171-172).

28 Ryrie, p. 46.

29 Anyone disagreeing with the Israel/Church is a “Replacement Theologian.”

Anyone disagreeing with the literal (Israelio-centric) hermeneutic is an “amillennialist.”

Anyone disagreeing with the God's glory over man's salvation is a “covenant theologian.”

30 Ryrie, p. 46.

31 Ryrie, p. 103.

32 Ryrie, p. 105.

33 Ryrie, p. 104.

34 *Scofield Reference Bible* note on Zechariah 6:11

35 Engelder, “Dispensationalism...”, p. 652.

36 Stephenson, p. 85.

37 Engelder, “Notes...”, p. 493

38 Martin Luther “Heidelberg Disputation” *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 53.

39 Engelder, “Notes...”, p. 410.

40 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV.2 (Tappert, p. 107).

41 Engelder, “Notes...”, p. 486.