

WEEK 2 | THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Before delving into the details of what the future holds, we must first spend some time developing the proper framework for interpreting prophecies in Scripture; we must view these passages through the right lens. Thus, we will begin by answering some big questions about eschatology and then move towards piecing together all the details.

THE STORYLINE OF SCRIPTURE

The Bible is not just a religious text; it is an historical book, a story of human affairs in the world. As one theologian said, the Bible is theology revealed in history. Like every story, the Bible has a metanarrative, an overarching storyline that organizes and makes sense of all the particulars. Like any good story, Scripture (all of human history, for that matter) begins with an idyllic setting; this initial idyllic state is disrupted by a crisis that must be solved; the remainder of the story details the resolution of that crisis until a point of restoration is reached. The metanarrative of Scripture is often described as follows:

CREATION → FALL → REDEMPTION → NEW CREATION/RESTORATION

Human history as recorded in Scripture sets this pattern that all good stories follow. God, after all, is the best Storyteller. While there is not much controversy over the four stages of this story, there is a great deal of disagreement over how to trace the unfolding of this story. Over time, two broad systems of interpretation have arisen that provide frameworks for understanding how God's redemptive story unfolds: Covenantal Theology and Dispensational Theology.

What system one holds to when interpreting Scripture carries significant consequences. As Benjamin Merkle says, "Theological systems are constructed in an attempt to understand the overall message of the Bible. Ideally, they result from a faithful interpretation of the Bible. Once formed, however, they also influence how we interpret the Bible."¹ In other words, which system you use will, inevitably, guide you to certain theological conclusions. Before we can begin to investigate the particulars of the "last things," we must first assess both systems and determine which one is most faithful to Scripture.

The distinctions between these systems arise in how they answer four key hermeneutical questions:

- 1) What is the basic hermeneutic?

¹ Benjamin Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 5.

- 2) What is the relationship between the covenants?
- 3) What is the relationship between Israel and the church?
- 4) What is the kingdom of God?

By addressing these questions, we can begin to see the implications of each system and assess which one best makes sense of the Biblical data and provides the proper framework for interpreting the storyline of Scripture.

COVENANT THEOLOGY

THE SYSTEM

Covenant theology is a system that interprets the storyline of Scripture on the basis of three theological covenants:²

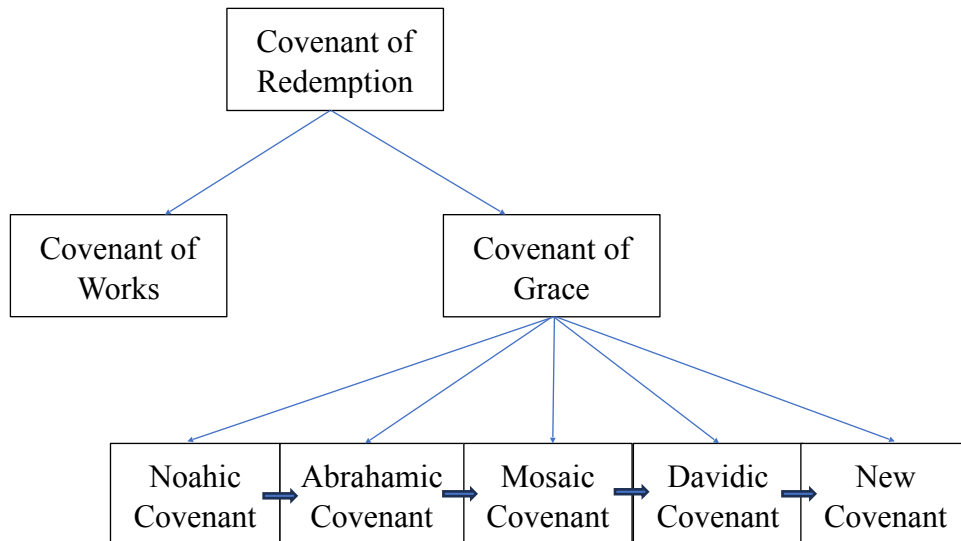
- 1) *The Covenant of Redemption*: pact between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit made in eternity past in which the Father elects a people to be redeemed in the Son and by the Spirit.
 - a. Derived from Biblical texts speaking of unconditional election and predestination.
 - b. Rev 13:8 . . . everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.
 - c. Eph 1:4 . . . even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world. . .
- 2) *The Covenant of Works*: a pre-fall pact between God and Adam as federal head of humanity. Adam, created without a sin nature, is assumed capable of perfect righteousness and obedience. For his obedience, he is implicitly promised the right to eat from the tree of life; for disobedience, he is promised death. “Humankind was created to pass through the probationary period and attain the right to eat from the Tree of Life. Thus, the telos of human existence was not fully present at creation, but was held out as a future reward.”³ Adam failed to uphold the covenant and plunged the human race into sin.
 - a. Hosea 6:7 “But like Adam they transgressed the covenant. . .”
 - b. Representational roles of Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21
- 3) *The Covenant of Grace*: a post-fall pact between God and Adam in which God promised to redeem His creation and bound Himself to redeem a people as described in Genesis 3:15. “This covenant is related to the previous covenants in that it is based on God’s commitment to redeem a people for himself (covenant of redemption) and will ultimately

² By “theological,” we mean covenants that are extrapolated from the Biblical data, though they are not explicitly described or taught in Scripture.

³ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 106.

be fulfilled by the faithful law-keeping of the second Adam (covenant of works).”⁴ Traditionally, this covenant is not limited to the elect but also includes the children of the elect, both believing and unbelieving (hence paedobaptism).

As you can see in the figure below, the Biblical covenants (covenants explicitly presented in Scripture) are all simply different expressions of the one, overarching covenant of grace.



Biblical Covenants in relation to Covenant of Grace:

- *Adamic* (Covenant of Works): covenant of commencement
- *Noahic*: covenant of preservation
- *Abrahamic*: covenant of promise
- *Mosaic*: covenant of law
- *Davidic*: covenant of kingdom
- *New*: covenant of consummation

THE IMPLICATIONS

We can see the implications of this theological system when we begin to try and answer our four key hermeneutical questions. Most obviously, we see the relationship between the Biblical covenants. Each successive covenant is simply another stage in the progressive revelation of the one Covenant of Grace. Rather than recognizing the distinctions between the covenants, Covenant Theologians see a great deal of continuity between them (since, after all, they are all expressions of the one overarching covenant).

⁴ Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology* (), 113.

Thus, Covenant Theology sees an organic relationship between Israel and the Church. Because there is one overarching Covenant of Grace, there is only one true covenant people—the church. Covenant Theologians would argue that the church was present even in the Old Testament, and that the New Covenant promises made to the church are direct fulfillments of the Abrahamic promises made to Israel. This, again, is because of the relationship between the covenants themselves. Thus, “The New Testament church grows out of the Old Testament church. . . the New Testament church, made up of both Jews and gentiles, represents the true Israel of God.”⁵

Because they see the church as the natural fruition of Israel, and because they see the promises made to the church as direct fulfillments of the covenant promises made to Israel, Covenant Theology must employ a spiritual hermeneutic when interpreting Old Testament prophetic passages—especially those pertaining to the physical and national promises made to Israel. Because they see the Biblical covenants as successive outworkings of the one Covenant of Grace, priority is given to newer revelation; in other words, the New Testament is given priority over the Old Testament, and the Old Testament must be interpreted in light of the New Testament.

Thus, “Whereas dispensationalists employ a consistently literal hermeneutic when interpreting the Bible, covenant theologians emphasize a Christocentric interpretation that often involves an expanded meaning (*sensus plenior*) beyond what was originally given in the Old Testament.”⁶ Old Testament prophecies made to Israel are seen as fulfilled in Christ and the church.

This same hermeneutic is applied to the theme of the kingdom of God. While the prophetic promises made to Israel in the Old Testament describe the restoration of the theocratic kingdom under the rule of the Davidic king in Jerusalem, covenant theologians see these prophecies as being fulfilled in a spiritual reign through the spiritual reign of Christ in the church, a reign that will find its culmination in the eternal state.

THE PROBLEMS

Several problems are inherent in the system as described above:

- 1) A Reliance on Theological Covenants

⁵ Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity*, 159-160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

Covenant Theology as a system is dependent on the three theological covenants that are nowhere explicitly taught in Scripture. This is especially true of the covenant of works. While there certainly is continuity between the Biblical covenants, to regard them as progressive expressions of a single covenant simply goes beyond what Scripture presents. Significantly, this one covenant of grace becomes the theological lens through which the storyline of Scripture is viewed and forces the covenant theological into unnatural hermeneutical conclusions.

2) An Inconsistent Hermeneutic

In an effort to fit Old Testament prophecies into the covenantal system, the plain meaning of the text must often be abandoned in favor of a spiritual interpretation not natural to the text itself. This is problematic for several reasons:

First, using a spiritual hermeneutic removes the protective guardrails of a literal hermeneutic and opens up the possibility of a number of different interpretations; it moves the authority away from the text and places it in the interpreter.

Second, a spiritual hermeneutic seems to violate the very nature of revelation. It assumes that the Old Testament *could not be properly understood* on its own terms apart from the New Testament. While it is true that the New Testament brings greater clarity and specificity to much of what is promised in the Old Testament, this does not mean the Old Testament was incomprehensible.

Third, while covenant theologians would argue that their hermeneutic only expands upon the meaning of Old Testament prophecies, in truth it changes the meaning altogether. This violation of the principle of single-meaning calls into question whether the text really means anything at all.

3) A Failure to Recognize Distinctions

- a. Between the Covenants
- b. Between Israel and the Church

Because of its emphasis on the continuity in Scripture based on the single covenant of grace, covenant theology fails to recognize the distinctions between Israel and the church as well as the various Biblical covenants. While there is some continuity present, there are also significant differences that would caution us against collapsing them together into one people and one covenant.⁷

⁷ More time will be spent on these distinctions in the coming weeks.

DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

THE SYSTEM

Dispensationalism is a theological system that views the storyline of Scripture as the outworking of God’s purpose for His creation through multiple distinguishable dispensations or “economies” (from the Greek *oikonomia*, meaning “economy” or “stewardship”). A dispensation is not a period of time, nor is it a different means of salvation. Rather, a dispensation “refers to a distinctive way in which God manages or arranges the relationship of human beings to Himself.”⁸ Each dispensation, or stewardship, includes unique features and operative principles that are clearly revealed by God. Generally, this involves:

- 1) A change in God’s governmental relationship to man
- 2) A resultant change in man’s responsibility
- 3) A corresponding revelation necessary to affect the change

While dispensations involve a period of time and necessarily encompass the Biblical covenants, they ultimately provide a more holistic view of how the Bible fits together when compared to Covenantalism. There is debate as to how many dispensations are portrayed in Scripture. Some classic dispensationalists see as many as seven, while progressive dispensationalists tend to identify three or four dispensations:

Patriarchal (to Sinai)	Mosaic (to ascension)	Ecclesial (to second coming)	Zionic (millennial and eternal)
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How does this system differ from Covenantalism? The following paragraph from Merkle, quoted at length, helps demonstrate the difference:

Of course, the various dispensations directly relate to the biblical covenants that God ratified throughout history. . . Progressive dispensationalists “understand the dispensations not simply as different arrangements between God and mankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption.” Each successive dispensation reveals a qualitative advancement of different aspects of the final redemption. As such, this view is markedly different from covenantalism, which sees various dispensations (or epochs of

⁸ Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Block, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 11.

history) as different historical expressions of the same overarching covenant of redemption.⁹

Whereas covenantalism places a greater emphasis on continuity because of its commitment to the one covenant of grace, dispensationalism recognizes the discontinuity and distinctions in how God has related to humanity throughout history.

THE IMPLICATIONS

This system, given its emphasis on distinct arrangements between God and man throughout history, answers our four hermeneutical questions very differently than covenantalism.

First, dispensationalism is committed to the consistent application of a literal hermeneutic. While covenantal theologians would claim the same, the difference lies in how each system treats the relationship between the testaments. Dispensationalism, unlike covenantalism, does not give priority to the New Testament and regards the Old Testament as able to be understood on its own terms. “While the New Testament may develop the meaning of the Old Testament texts, the expansion of meaning does not change the original meaning unless the New Testament explicitly states otherwise.” Thus, dispensationalism maintains the literal fulfillment of the Old Testament promises made to Israel in the biblical covenants rather than spiritualize them as being fulfilled to the church.

Second, dispensationalism does not collapse the biblical covenants together but recognizes their distinctions and the roles they play in various dispensations. It recognizes the fundamental nature of the Abrahamic Covenant and the way in which the successive covenants are amplifications of those promises made to Abraham, his offspring, and the nations. While all the Biblical covenants are connected, they are also distinct in the parties involved, the promises made, their conditionality/unconditionality, etc.

Third, in the same way that the distinctions between the Biblical covenants are maintained, dispensationalism also maintains a clear distinction between the church and Israel. Rather than seeing the church as the fruition of Israel and the one people of God, dispensationalists see the two groups as different and playing different roles in the outworking of God’s redemptive plan. The church does not replace Israel, nor is the church the spiritual fulfillment of physical Israel. They are distinct peoples whom God has related to in distinct, though related, ways.

⁹ Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity*, 88.

Fourth and finally, because dispensationalism holds to a literal hermeneutic, it argues for a literal fulfillment of the kingdom promises made to Israel in the Old Testament. Thus, though there is a spiritual aspect of the kingdom at work in the church age, the consummation of the kingdom in all its aspects, including its national and physical elements, awaits the millennium in which the promises of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants will be fulfilled in a literal way.

SUMMARY

The above summary of these two theological systems shows how important it is to consider how you are interpreting Scripture. Though both camps would endeavor to have their system be driven by exegesis, inevitably their system will influence their exegesis of particular passages. As shown above, dispensationalism has the advantage of a consistent approach to exegesis based on its commitment to a literal hermeneutic, letting all of God's word speak on its own terms. In my opinion, this makes it superior in its ability to explain the storyline of Scripture and to integrate all the particulars of that story in a coherent and cohesive way.

ADDITIONAL READING

Merkle, Benjamin L. *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational & Covenantal Theologies*. Bellingham, CA: Lexham Press, 2020.

Parker, Brent R., and Lucas, Richard J. *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies: Four Views on the Continuity of Scripture*. Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 2022.