

**Xenos Christian Fellowship  
Christian Ministry Light Unit 2  
Using Your Bible**

**Week 2 – Interpreting Prophecy; Covenant vs. Dispensational Theology**

Introduction

Importance of Prophecy

**Eschatology:**

**Why is this important?**

- \_\_\_\_\_ of the Bible is devoted to this subject.
- Paul apparently taught \_\_\_\_\_ about end-times.

**(1 Thessalonians 5:1)** “Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well...”

- Anticipating the end-times, particularly Christ's return, should influence believers' \_\_\_\_\_.

**(1 Peter 4:7-11)** “The end of all things is near. Therefore *be clear minded and self-controlled* so that you can *pray*. Above all, *love each other deeply*, because love covers over a multitude of sins. *Offer hospitality* to one another without grumbling. Each one should *use whatever gift he has received to serve others*, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one *speaking the very words of God*. If anyone *serves, he should do it with the strength God provides*, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

- It builds our faith and gives us hope.
- It provides us with \_\_\_\_\_.
- Many will be misled and confused before and during the end-times – let's not be among them!

**(Matthew 24:4, 23-25)** 4 Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you... 23 At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here

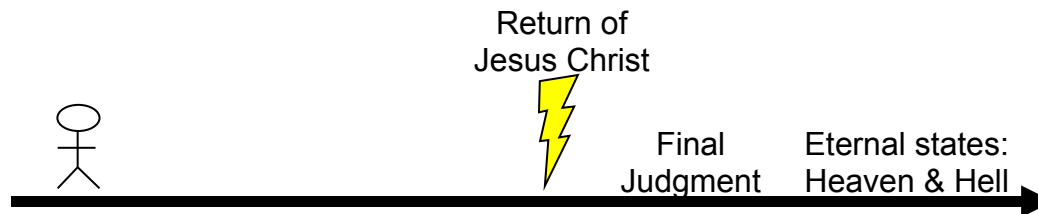
is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it. 24 For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect--if that were possible. 25 See, I have told you ahead of time."

### What God Has Revealed Concerning the future?



All orthodox Christians agree on these essentials:

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### The Messianic Kingdom

**Messianic Kingdom:** A future period of human history in which God intervenes in history, vanquishes his enemies, and reigns over the world through the Messiah and his people Israel.

**Psalm 2:1-12**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

**Zechariah 14:1-11**



**Matthew Henry’s comments on Zechariah 14:**

v. 2 “but the rest of the people won’t be cut off from the city”

“Many of the Jews shall receive the gospel, and so shall prevent their being cut off from the city of God, his church upon earth...”

v. 4 “and the Mount of Olives will be split in its middle from east to west”

“The Gentiles (will be) made one with the Jews by the breaking down of this middle wall of partition (Eph. 2:14). A great mountain of the ceremonial law was in the way of the Jews' conversion, yet before Christ and his gospel it was made plain . . . The mountain being divided, one-half towards the north and the other half towards the south, there shall be a very great valley (means) a broad way of communication between Jerusalem and the Gentile world, by which the Gentiles shall have free admission into the gospel ...”

v. 5 “you will flee by the valley of my mountains”

“The valley of the mountains is the gospel-church, to which are added of the Jews daily such as should be saved ...”<sup>1</sup>

Should Old Testament prophecies about the messianic kingdom be interpreted literally or figuratively?

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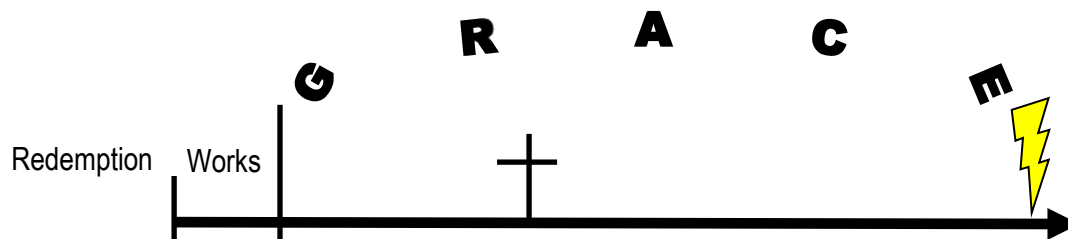
<sup>1</sup> Matthew Henry, *One Volume Commentary on the Whole Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1961) p. 1191.

## Covenant and Dispensational Theology

### Covenant Theology<sup>2</sup>

Covenant Theology is typical of Reformed theologians. This includes the Reformed and Christian Reformed, the Presbyterian, the Anglican (or Episcopal), and to some extent, the Lutheran. Classical Roman Catholicism also recognizes the same approximate divisions of scriptural history, while differing on the question of man's responsibility in the covenant of grace. Taken together then, the Covenantal view must be considered by far the predominant view.

"Covenants" are contracts between two parties. Covenant Theology normally speaks of three main covenants in salvation history. While both Covenantalists and Dispensationalists acknowledge the important role of covenants in salvation history, covenant theology tends to emphasize the UNITY of God's working with mankind.



#### 1. The Covenant of Redemption (before creation):

- The Son promises the Father to render perfect obedience (unto death) for our sins.
- The Father promises to the Son:
  - all the Son's needs will be met;
  - the Holy Spirit will be given to the church;
  - salvation in all of its phases will be given to all believers;
  - the Son will be exalted and glorified.

#### 2. The Covenant of Works (from creation until the fall):

- Man's conditions: Adam must obey God's commands.
- God's response: God rewards obedience with eternal life, and punishes disobedience with death.

<sup>2</sup> For a good summary of Covenant Theology, see Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953). Covenant of redemption: p. 151 ff. Covenant of works: p. 130 ff. Covenant of grace: p. 157 ff.

### 3. The Covenant of Grace (from the fall until the second advent):

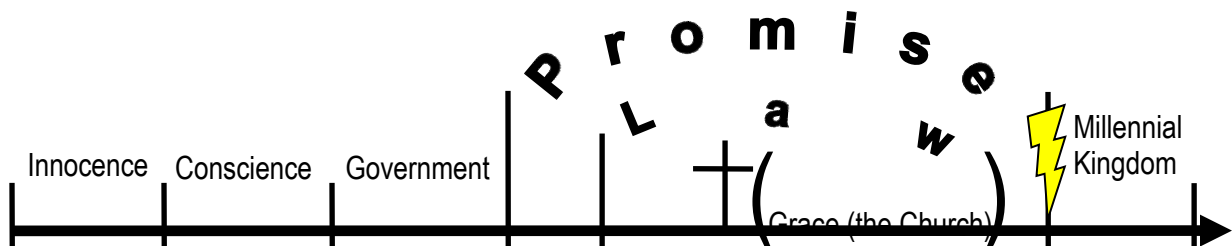
- Man's conditions: saving faith in God's promise, issuing in obedience to God's commands.
- God's response: salvation in all of its phases to the believer through the substitutionary work of his Son.

#### Comments:

### Dispensational Theology<sup>3</sup>

The Dispensational view is of more recent origin, arising from the evangelical awakening in America and England. Through the work of Jesse Penn-Lewis, Charles Spurgeon, T. Austin Sparks, J. N. Darby (who is given credit for formally bringing the view to light), Dwight Moody, C. I. Scofield (who included it in the Scofield Bible), Watchman Nee, Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Walvoord, and Hal Lindsey, this view has become widespread and popular today. It is the view of most Pentecostals, Brethren, many Baptists, and most independent Bible churches.

"Dispensations" (Greek: *oikonomia*) refer to economies, or different ways in which God works with man in salvation history (see Eph. 1:10; 3:2; 1 Tim. 1:4). In the classic Dispensational scheme, each dispensation begins with an offer by God and ends with failure by man and a period of divine judgment. Dispensational theology tends to emphasize the DIVERSITY of ways in which God works with mankind.



### 1. Innocence, or Untested Holiness (Genesis 1-3):

- Offer: God offers man eternal life for obedience.
- Judgment: Man rebels, and is expelled from the Garden of Eden.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of Dispensational Theology, see the study notes in the *Scofield Reference Bible*.

## **2. Conscience (Genesis 4-6):**

- Offer: God offers to govern man through his conscience.
- Judgment: Man sears his conscience, and God brings the universal flood.

## **3. Government (Genesis 7-11):**

- Offer: God offers to govern man through civil government (Genesis 9:6).
- Judgment: Man corrupts civil government, and God brings the confusion of tongues and scatters man.

## **4. Promise (Genesis 12 -- Millennial Kingdom):**

- Offer: God promises to bless Abraham and his descendants, and all nations through them.
- Judgment: Jacob's sons apostatize and God brings them into slavery in Egypt.

## **5. Law (Exodus 20 -- Millennial Kingdom):**

- Offer: God promises to grant Israel the promises he made to Abraham conditional to their obedience to his Law.
- Judgment: Israel apostatizes, undergoes exile and dispersion, and is finally purified through the Great Tribulation.

## **6. Grace or the Church Age (Pentecost -- Rapture):**

- Offer: God TEMPORARILY suspends working through Israel as his chosen nation and offers to work through all believers in Jesus.
- Judgment: The church apostatizes and is judged in the Great Tribulation after true believers are rescued through the Rapture.

## **7. Millennial Kingdom (Revelation 20):**

- Offer: God fulfills all of his promises to national Israel after the Second Coming of Jesus.
- Judgment: Satan ignites a rebellion against Jesus, which God terminates and then judges all men at the Great White Throne.

## **Comments:**

## **Is Xenos Covenantal or Dispensational?**

**Key implications of Covenant and Dispensational Theology:**

	<b>COVENANTALISM</b>	<b>DISPENSATIONALISM</b>
<b>SOTERIOLOGY</b>	Emphasizes UNITY in the way God has worked with man during the covenant of grace.	Emphasizes DIFFERENCES in the way God has worked with man during different dispensations.
<b>GOD'S DEALINGS WITH MAN</b>	As a result of this emphasis on unity, Covenantalists correctly emphasize that people have always been saved by grace through faith.	Most dispensationalists, like Covenantalists, argue that people have always been saved by grace through faith.
<b>ECCLESIOLOGY</b>	Covenantalists define the church as all believers during all of history. Therefore, as in Roman Catholicism, they often feel free to use Old Testament material in church structure, which leads to things like infant baptism, religious calendars, ritualism, etc. At different times in history, some Covenantalists have equated their nations and city states with God's people (e.g. New England Puritans).	Because Dispensationalists see the Church Age as a distinct period in salvation history (beginning on Pentecost), they usually call for a more radical break with Old Testament worship and structures.
<b>SANCTIFICATION</b>	Many Covenantalists place more emphasis on the Law in sanctification	Dispensationalists tend to stress grace in this area
<b>PNEUMATOLOGY</b>	Some Covenantalists believe the Holy Spirit indwelt believers in the Old Covenant.	Dispensationalists say the Holy Spirit indwelt believers <i>only after</i> Jesus' death on the cross.
<b>ESCHATOLOGY</b>	They see no future role for the nation of Israel.	In the future, God will again work through the nation of Israel and establish a worldwide theocracy.
<b>HERMENEUTICS</b>	Because they no longer see a role for national Israel, Covenantalists must employ a <i>figurative hermeneutic</i> when reading passages about the messianic kingdom (i.e. they argue that these texts symbolize some present experience of Christians or some future non-historical reality).	Because they believe the nation of Israel will play a role in the end-times, Dispensationalists use a <i>literal hermeneutic</i> when reading Old Testament promises about Israel. They believe the passages are intended primarily for Israel and that God will fulfill these promises in the future.

Summary:

Should Old Testament prophecies about the messianic kingdom be interpreted literally or figuratively?

<b>Covenant Theology</b>				
<b>Dispensational Theology</b>				

The Millennial Kingdom

**Revelation 20:1-10**

**Three views of the Millennial Kingdom**

POST-millennialists: Jesus will return \_\_\_\_\_ the millennium.

PRE-millennialists: Jesus will return \_\_\_\_\_ the millennium.

A-millennialists: There is *NO* literal 1000 year kingdom.

Amillennialism (Covenantal)

Timeline:



Definition:

Role of Israel:

View of the Church:

View of the “millennial kingdom”:

History:

This view has its roots in the early church fathers (Origen and Augustine) and became popular after Constantine "Christianized" the Roman Empire. They were predisposed to view the millennial kingdom as synonymous to the Holy Roman Empire, and their allegorical method of interpretation opened the door for this kind of understanding. Anti-Semitism was also a factor driving this interpretation<sup>4</sup>, although present-day Amillennialists are not anti-Semitic. It was accepted as the official position at the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD, at which time belief in a literal millennium was condemned as superstitious. The Reformers accepted the amillennialist framework without essential change. Today, it is the dominant view in those sections of the Protestant and Catholic Church that take biblical eschatology seriously.

### Post-Millennialism (Covenantal)

Timeline:



Definition:

Role of Israel:

View of the Church:

View of the Millennial Kingdom:

The church will gradually “Christianize” the world and usher in the millennial kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> See David A. Rausch, *A Legacy of Hatred: Why Christians must Not Forget the Holocaust* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984) pp. 18-27.

#### History:

Postmillennialism is not widely held today. This view finds important theological precedent in the early and medieval Roman Catholic church, when they identified themselves with the kingdom of God. It was also popular during the 18th and 19th centuries, corresponding to the ascendancy of optimistic humanism. Subsequent historical events (WW I, WW II, Cold War, Marxism, etc.) have dashed hopes for a period of world peace apart from God's supernatural intervention.

#### Critique of Post- & Amillennialism

1. Post- and amillennialists interpret the Old Testament prophecies of the Jesus first coming *literally*, but they interpret the Old Testament prophecies of his second coming *figuratively*.

**(Micah 5:1-5)** "Now muster yourselves in troops, daughter of troops; they have laid siege against us; with a rod they will smite the judge of Israel on the cheek. 2 " But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity." 3 Therefore, He will give them up until the time when she who is in labor has borne a child. Then the remainder of His brethren will return to the sons of Israel. 4 And He will arise and shepherd His flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD His God. And they will remain, because at that time He will be great to the ends of the earth. 5 And this One will be our peace."

2. Figurative interpretations either put the interpreter in authority over the text or render the text unintelligible.

3. Elements within the prophetic passages themselves often suggest they should be interpreted literally.

4. Both the Old and New Testaments explicitly state that God will fulfill all of his promises to Israel.

Old Testament

**(Jer. 31:35-37\*\*)** "This is what the LORD says, he who appoints the sun to shine by day, who decrees the moon and stars to shine by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar— the LORD Almighty is his name: (36) "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the LORD, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." (37) This is what the LORD says: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done," declares the LORD."

**(Isa. 54:9-17)** "To me this is like the days of Noah, when I swore that the waters of Noah would never again cover the earth. So now I have sworn not to be angry with you, never to rebuke you again. (10) Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has compassion on you. (11) "O afflicted city, lashed by storms and not comforted, I will build you with stones of turquoise, your foundations with sapphires. (12) I will make your battlements of rubies, your gates of sparkling jewels, and all your walls of precious stones. (13) All your sons will be taught by the LORD, and great will be your children's peace. (14) In righteousness you will be established: Tyranny will be far from you; you will have nothing to fear. Terror will be far removed; it will not come near you. (15) If anyone does attack you, it will not be my doing; whoever attacks you will surrender to you. (16) See, it is I who created the blacksmith who fans the coals into flame and forges a weapon fit for its work. And it is I who have created the destroyer to work havoc; (17) no weapon forged against you will prevail, and you will refute every tongue that accuses you. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and this is their vindication from me," declares the LORD.

See also Ezekiel 36:22-38; 37: 1-14; 39: 28-29; Joel 2: 28-3:21.

#### New Testament

**(Matthew 19:27,28)** Peter answered him, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"

(28) Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

**(Rom. 9:3-5)** For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. (4) Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. (5) Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

**(Romans 11:25-29\*)** I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins." As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, *for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.*

See also Matthew 24:20ff.; Luke 21:24; 2 Thess. 2:4ff; Revelation 7:3-8; 11:2.

### Pre-Millennialism (Dispensational)

Timeline:



Definition:

Role of Israel:

View of the church:

View of the Millennial Kingdom:

History:

The early post-apostolic church, as evidenced by the writings of early church leaders, was pre-millennial. However, as G. E. Ladd and amillennialists have repeatedly pointed out, their end-times scenario was not well developed. Even if this point is granted, it still cannot be argued that they were amillennial. After going into eclipse after the time of Augustine (along with a literal hermeneutic), this view reappeared in the early 19th century in connection with the Plymouth Brethren and the rise of Dispensationalism. Since then, it has been popularized by authors such as C. I. Scofield, L. S. Chafer, John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, and Hal Lindsey.

Pre-Millennial interpretation of the Messianic Kingdom passages:

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### **Critique of Pre-Millennialism (Dispensational)**

1. There are clear instances in which the New Testament authors say that the Church has received a spiritual (non-literal) fulfillment of promises originally intended for the nation of Israel. (Joel 2:28-32 in Acts 2:16ff.; Jeremiah 31:31-34 in Hebrews 10:16,17)

Dispensationalist response:

2. Premillennialists have difficulty presenting a consistent interpretation of all predictive prophecies.

Dispensationalist response:

3. Amillennialists hold that the millennium cannot be literal, since it involves animal sacrifice (see Ezekiel 40-48), which allegedly contradicts the argument of Hebrews.

Dispensationalist response:

### Key Millennial Kingdom Passages

**(Isaiah 11:3-5)** He will delight in obeying the LORD. He will never judge by appearance, false evidence, or hearsay. <sup>4</sup> He will defend the poor and the exploited. He will rule against the wicked and destroy them with the breath of his mouth. <sup>5</sup> He will be clothed with fairness and truth.

- Righteousness and justice will prevail.

**(Isaiah 11:6-9)** In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together; the leopard and the goat will be at peace. Calves and yearlings will be safe among lions, and a little child will lead them all. <sup>7</sup> The cattle will graze among bears. Cubs and calves will lie down together. And lions will eat grass as the livestock do. <sup>8</sup> Babies will crawl safely among poisonous snakes. Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes and pull it out unharmed. <sup>9</sup> Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.

- There will be a restoration of harmony in creation.

**(Isaiah 11:9)** And as the waters fill the sea, so the earth will be filled with people who know the LORD.

- The world will be filled with people who acknowledge the Lord.

**(Isaiah 60:1-5)** “Arise, Jerusalem! Let your light shine for all the nations to see! For the glory of the LORD is shining upon you. <sup>2</sup> Darkness as black as night will cover all the nations of the earth, but the glory of the LORD will shine over you. <sup>3</sup> All nations will come to your light. Mighty kings will come to see your radiance. <sup>4</sup> “Look and see, for everyone is coming home! Your sons are coming from distant lands; your little daughters will be carried home. <sup>5</sup> Your eyes will shine, and your hearts will thrill with joy, for merchants from around the world will come to you. They will bring you the wealth of many lands.

- God’s people will be renewed and restored in their land.

**(Isaiah 32:17-18)** And this righteousness will bring peace. Quietness and confidence will fill the land forever. <sup>18</sup> My people will live in safety, quietly at home. They will be at rest.

- It will be a time of peace and security.

**(Isaiah 44:3)** And I will pour out my Spirit and my blessings on your children.

- There will be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion



Memory Verses

**Jeremiah 31:31-37\*\*** – God's promise of the New Covenant for Israel (not just for the Church) will be fulfilled.

**Romans 11:28,29\*** – God's promises to national Israel are irrevocable.

Assignment

Complete the *Epistles Inductive Overview Assignment*.

Recommended Reading

Pentecost, J. Dwight. *Things To Come*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958.

Walvoord, John F. *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation*. Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1971.

Clouse, Robert G. (Ed.) *The Meaning of the Millennium*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1977.