

Comparing Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology

An Overview of Covenant Theology:

- Covenant theology centers on one overall covenant known as the *covenant of grace*. Some have called it the *covenant of redemption*. This is defined by many as an eternal covenant among the members of the Godhead including the following elements: (1) the Father chose a people to be His own; (2) The Son was designated, with his agreement, to pay the penalty of their sin; and (3) the Holy Spirit was designated, with His agreement, to apply the work of the Son to this chosen people.
- This covenant of grace is being worked out in history on earth through subordinate covenants, beginning with the covenant of works and culminating in the new covenant, which fulfills and completes God's work of grace to man on earth. These covenants include the Adamic covenant, Noahic covenant, Abrahamic covenant, Mosaic covenant, Davidic covenant, and new covenant.
- Covenant theology does not see each covenant as separate and distinct. Instead, each covenant builds on the previous ones, including aspects of the previous ones, including aspects of the previous covenants and culminating in the new covenant.

God's People in Covenant Theology:

- God has one people, represented by the saints in the OT and the saints of the NT era. There are those in Covenant Theology that believe in what is called Sovereign Grace. That is, God chooses who will be saved and those who will be lost.

God's Plan for His People in Covenant Theology:

- God has one people—the church—for whom He has one plan, in all ages since Adam: to call out this people into one body, in both the Old and New Testament ages.

An Overview of Dispensational Theology:

- Dispensational theology looks on the world and history of mankind as a household over which God is superintending the outworking of His will. This outworking of His purpose can be seen by noting the various periods or stages of different economies whereby God deals with His work and mankind in particular. These various stages or economies are called dispensations. Their number include seven: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and kingdom.

God's People in Dispensational Theology:

- God has two peoples—*Israel* and the *church*. Israel is an earthly people, and the church is a heavenly people.

God's Plan for His People Dispensational Theology:

- God has two separate peoples—Israel and the church—and also has two separate plans for these two distinct peoples. He plans an earthly kingdom for Israel. This kingdom has been postponed until Christ's coming in power since Israel rejected it at Christ's first coming. During the church age God is calling out a heavenly people. Dispensationalists disagree over whether the two peoples will remain distinct in the eternal state.

God's Plan of Salvation in Covenant Theology:

- God has one plan of salvation for all his people since the time of Adam. The plan is one of grace, being an outworking of the eternal covenant of grace, and comes through faith in Jesus Christ.

Eternal Destiny for God's People in Covenant Theology:

- God has but one place for His people, since He has but one people, one plan for His people, and one plan of salvation. His people will be in His presence for eternity.

The Birth of the Church in Covenant Theology:

- The church existed prior to the NT era, including all the redeemed since Adam. Pentecost was not the beginning of the church but rather the empowering of the NT manifestation of God's people.

The Purpose of Christ's First Coming in Covenant Theology:

- Christ came to die for our sins and to establish the New Israel, the NT manifestation of the church. This continuation of God's plan placed the church under a new manifestation of the same covenant of grace. The kingdom that Jesus offered was the present, spiritual, and invisible kingdom.
- Some covenantalists (especially postmillennialists) also see a physical aspect to the kingdom.

The Fulfillment of the New Covenant in Covenant Theology:

- The promises of the new covenant mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31ff (verses 31-34, *"Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a*

God's Plan of Salvation in Dispensational Theology:

- God has only one plan of salvation, though this has often been misunderstood because of inexactness in some dispensational writings. Some have wrongly taught or understood that OT believers were saved by works and sacrifices. However, most have believed that salvation has always been by grace through faith, but that the content of faith may vary until the full revelation of God in Christ.

Eternal Destiny for God's People in Dispensational Theology:

- There is disagreement among dispensationalists regarding the future states of Israel and the church. Many believe that the church will sit with Christ on His throne in the New Jerusalem in Heaven during the Millennium as He rules over the nations, while Israel will be the head of the nations of the earth.

The Birth of the Church in Dispensational Theology:

- The church was born on the Day of Pentecost and did not exist in history until that time. The church, the body of Christ, is not found in the Old Testament, and these saints are not part of the body of Christ.

The Purpose of Christ's First Coming in Dispensational Theology:

- Christ came to establish the messianic kingdom. Some dispensationalists believe that this was to be an earthly kingdom in fulfillment of the OT promises to Israel under a New Covenant. If the Jews had accepted Jesus' offer, this earthly kingdom would have been established immediately. Other dispensationalists believe that Christ did establish the kingdom in some form, in which the church participates, but the earthly kingdom awaits the second coming of Christ to the earth. Christ always intended the cross before the crown.

The Fulfillment of the New Covenant in Dispensational Theology:

- Dispensationalists differ over whether only Israel is to participate in the new covenant, at a later time, or whether both the church and Israel

new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.") are fulfilled in the NT.

How The Millennium is Viewed in Covenant Theology:

- Historically, covenant theology has been either amillennial, believing the kingdom to be present and spiritual, or postmillennial, believing the kingdom is being established on earth with Christ's coming as the culmination. In recent years some covenant theologians have been premillennial, believing that there will be a future manifestation of God's kingdom on earth (Historic Premillennialism). However, God's dealings with Israel will be in connection with the church. Postmillennialists believe that the church is bringing the kingdom now, with Israel ultimately to be made a part of the church.

How The Second Coming is Viewed in Covenant Theology:

- Christ's coming will be to bring final judgment and the eternal state. Those who are premillennial assert that a millennial period will precede the judgment and eternal state. Postmillennialists believe that the kingdom is being established by the work of God's people on the earth until the time when Christ will bring it to completion at His coming before the crown. Most dispensationalists hold to a heavenly kingdom for the Church.

participate jointly. Some dispensationalists believe there is one new covenant with two applications: one for Israel and one for the church. Others believe that there are two new covenants: one for Israel and another for the church

How The Millennium is Viewed in Dispensational Theology:

- All dispensationalists are premillennialists, though not necessarily pretribulationists. Premillennialists of this type believe that God will again turn to the nation of Israel, apart from His work with the church, and that there will be a 1,000-year period of Christ's reign on David's throne in accordance with and in fulfillment of the prophecies of the OT.

How The Second Coming is Viewed in Dispensational Theology:

- Most dispensationalists believe the Rapture will occur first, then a tribulation period followed by the Second Coming of Christ with the saints and a 1,000-year reign of Christ, after which there will be a judgment and the eternal state. Some believe in different times of the resurrection(s) during the Tribulation.

*This chart represents traditional views and is based on the study of Richard P. Belcher, *A Comparison of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Columbia, SC: Richbarry Press, 1986). Some changes have been made to help in the understanding of positions.

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

MAN'S RESPONSIBILITY

CALVINISM (John Calvin 1509-1564)

(T-U-L-I-P) acronym

1. Total depravity – Man is totally bad and can not come to God, only God can come to man.
2. Unconditional election – God chooses whom will be saved and then keeps him saved.
3. Limited atonement – Christ died only for the believer who is chosen by God.
4. Irresistible grace – God chooses whom will be saved thru grace that can not be resisted.
5. Perseverance of the saints – Once saved always saved. Saints will persevere.

Presbyterian, Congregationists Reformed

BIBLICAL TRUTH (Pauline Gospel 33-66 AD)

1. All are sinners by birth and choice and all are able to come to God.
2. Saved and eternally secure through the faith of Christ
3. Whosoever will, may come, and become a New Creature by the will of God.
4. Grace may be accepted or rejected. Once saved, grace covers all.
5. Once saved always saved you are no longer your own.

New Testament Church

Full-overcoming Saints

ARMINIANISM (Jacob Arminius 1560-1609)

1. All are depraved but all are able to respond to the Holy Spirit.
2. Saved and kept secure only by faith of the believer.
3. Whosoever will may receive but later reject.
4. Grace may be accepted or rejected.
5. May fall from justifying grace and be lost forever.

Methodists

GOD'S WORKS

VARIANTS

MAN'S WORKS

ERNAL SECURITY (Fundamentalists)

Baptist, Lutherans, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Grace Brethren

GALATIANISM (Evangelicals – Holiness, Works)

Assemblies of God, Church of God, Church of the Nazarene, Open Bible Standard Church

FREEDOM

EXTREMISMS

BONDAGE

ANTINOMIANISM (Individuals and Cults) ERADICATION (Individuals)

ASCETICISM (Individuals and Cults) LEGALISM (Roman Catholicism, Judaism)