

Ecclesiology

Topic 6 – Dispensationalism

Randy Thompson
Valley Bible Church
www.valleybible.net

Biblical Distinctives

As we read through and understand the chronology of the Bible, we see that God did not provide all information about Himself at a single time, but progressively added more revelation concerning Himself and His plan. This concept is called “progressive revelation”. This does not mean that God has changed, nor that the early installments or stages in the revelation were inaccurate. It simply recognizes that truth was revealed in many stages (Heb 1:1-2), that Scripture underwent an organic growth from incomplete to complete, from promise to fulfillment, from shadow to substance.

¹God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ²in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. Heb 1:1-2

¹⁵And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel.” Gen 3:15

¹⁷For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. John 1:17

Every disciple studying Scripture comes across the need for certain basic distinctions as they look at God’s progressive revelation. For example, the Judaism presented in the OT prophesied and alluded to the coming of Christ, but is distinct from that NT message.

In order to understand God’s revelation, theologians have developed schemes for understanding these distinctions. There are two primary schemes: Covenantalism (or Covenant Theology) and Dispensationalism (or Dispensational Theology). Each of these systems seeks to explain the distinctions while understanding the whole.

It would take us many weeks to understand and compare and contrast each of these systems in detail. So we will look to simply explain each one and show why VBC understands Dispensationalism to be the correct way to understand the distinctions.

Covenants

First, we need to understand that that Covenant Theology is a scheme to understand the Bible and not necessarily related to the Biblical covenants.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties which binds them to certain commitments from one to another or to each other. Theologically, in relations between God and man, it denotes God’s gracious commitment to bless man.

Covenants are characteristically unalterable and permanently binding. They may be conditional or unconditional. Conditional covenants are binding if certain reciprocal commitments are maintained. Unconditional covenants are binding regardless of the action of another party.

Covenants could be between people or between God and man. The parity covenant was made between equals, such as Abraham and Abimelech (Gen 21:22-32), Isaac and Abimelech (Gen 26:26-33), and Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:44-45).

The suzerainty covenant was made between a superior and an inferior, such as a king to a vassal. This is the form of the covenants which God made with man. When God made a covenant with man He did so with the language that man would understand as entering into a contract. A pattern can be observed with OT covenants paralleling what was often done in treaties in the Ancient Near East. There are stipulations or commandments, an oath taken by an act of swearing, and blessings and cursing. With Biblical covenants we often find a sign of the covenant. This is an outward expression of the commitment that has been made between God and man.

There are several covenants between God and man recorded Scripture. (See the study in the VBC Adult Education section of the website on the covenants for more detailed information.)

The Adamic Covenant (or the Covenant of Works)

Some theologians believe that a conditional covenant was established by God with Adam and his descendants in Genesis 2:16-17. Essentially, if you eat, you die and conversely if you don't eat, you live.

The Noahic Covenant

God established an unconditional covenant with Noah (Gen 6:18) in which He promised to never again destroy all flesh with a flood (Gen 9:8-17). The sign of the covenant was the rainbow.

The Abrahamic Covenant

God established an unconditional covenant with Abraham, his physical descendants, and the world. The sign of the Abrahamic covenant was circumcision which was a physical demonstration of God's commitment to His people, Abraham's physical descendants. God made three major kinds of promises in the Abrahamic Covenant:

1. Personal promises to Abraham
 - a. To bless Abraham and make him a blessing to others (Gen 12:2).
 - b. To make his name great (Gen 12:2).
 - c. To give him many descendants (Gen 13:16; 15:4-5; 17:6).
 - d. To make him a father of many nations (Gen 17:4-5).
 - e. To give him the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession (Gen 13:14-17; 15:7; 17:8).
 - f. To bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him (Gen 12:3).
2. National promises to Abraham
 - a. To make Abraham's physical descendants a great nation (Gen 12:2).
 - b. To give the land of Canaan from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River to Abraham's physical descendants forever (Gen 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8).
 - c. To give the Abrahamic covenant to Abraham's descendants as an everlasting covenant (Gen 17:7, 19).
3. Universal promise to the world: All the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's physical lineage (Gen 12:3; 22:18; 28:14).

The Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19-24)

God established a conditional covenant with the people of Israel where Israel had specific responsibilities to fulfill in order to obtain God's promised blessings (Ex 19:5). The sign of the Mosaic Covenant was the Sabbath (Ex 31:12-16). The Sabbath served as a reminder to Israel that they, as God's people, were separate from the nations of the world. It also served to teach them to trust God since work was prohibited on the Sabbath (Ex 31:15). Recognizing that the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic Covenant helps explain why the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy (Ex 20:8) is the only one of the Ten Commandments not repeated in the NT. The Promises of the Mosaic Covenant are:

1. Israel would be God's special treasure, enjoying a unique national relationship (Ex 19:5).
2. Israel would be a kingdom of priests, taking the role of the mediator in bringing the nations of the world to God (Ex 19:6).
3. Israel would be a holy nation, devoted to God and separated from sin and defilement by obeying the Law (Ex 19:6).

The rest of the Law of Moses is built upon these covenantal promises. While Israel could have been a testimony to the world of the blessing of God, they experienced those blessings partially due to their partial obedience. Yet none of the Abrahamic promises were removed since those promises were unconditional.

The Palestinian Covenant

This covenant was established in Moab and further developed the Abrahamic Covenant. The following elements of the Abrahamic Covenant expanded in the Palestinian Covenant:

1. The Promise of Land – The unconditional ownership of the land was reaffirmed, but the possession of the land was based on Israel's obedience to God (Deut 30:1-5). While their permanent future possession of the land was certain, the promise would be enjoyed by each specific generation only as they obeyed the commandments of God.
2. The Promise of Descendants was repeated from the Abrahamic Covenant (Deut 30:5).
3. The Promise of Blessing – The Abrahamic Covenant set the promise that Abraham and his line would be blessed and would be a blessing to all the families of the earth. In Deut 30:6 we see the evidence of this blessing in the words which will echo the New Covenant concept of the circumcision of the heart. God will fulfill His commitment to bless His people in spite of their disobedience and this blessing will be ultimately established in the New Covenant, which is another development from the Abrahamic Covenant.

The Davidic Covenant

The Davidic Covenant is recorded in 2 Samuel 7:8-19. Although the word "covenant" does not appear in the text of 2 Samuel, it is clear from other passages that God was making a covenant with David (cf. 2 Sam 23:5; 2 Chron 7:18; 21:7; Psa 89:3-4, 28-29, 34-37; Jer 33:19-26). The Davidic Covenant is a further development of the Abrahamic Covenant in that it expands on the promises of physical descendants to Abraham. Some of these promises which God gave unconditionally to David were to be fulfilled in David's lifetime, including his great name (7:9), and rest from his enemies (7:11). But the most significant promises of this covenant (2 Sam 7:16) were designed to be realized by David's seed, including:

1. The promise that David's "house" or lineage would endure forever (7:11, 16; cf. Psa 89:3-4, 29, 36). The people of Israel will never be eliminated.
2. David's kingdom will be established forever (7:13, 16). This kingdom has not continually functioned but it will be established forever into eternity through the Messiah.
3. David's throne will be established forever (7:13, 16; cf. 2 Sam 3:10; 1 Kings 1:37, 47). This is in reference to the ruling authority of David and will be fulfilled by the Messiah.

The New Covenant

The New Covenant is revealed initially in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and is the final covenantal expansion of the Abrahamic Covenant. While the Palestinian Covenant expanded the promise of land from ownership to possession, and the Davidic covenant expanded the promise of descendants from being numerous and a great nation to being an everlasting kingdom, the New Covenant expanded the promise of blessing from a statement of general blessing to a specific disclosure of the type of blessedness – a knowledge of God based on the forgiveness of sin.

- A. The Parties of the New Covenant – It is clear that God gave the New Covenant to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" or the people of Israel (Jer 31:31). The people of Israel were the literal physical descendants of Abraham.
- B. The Promises of the New Covenant
 1. God promised regeneration (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26).
 2. God promised the forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34; Ezek 36:25).
 3. God pledged the indwelling Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:27).
 4. God promised the knowledge of God (Jer 31:34).
 5. God promised His people would obey Him (Ezek 36:27; 37:23-24; Jer 32:39-40).
 6. God promised certain national promises (cf. Ezek 34-37).
- C. The Nature of the New Covenant
 1. The New Covenant was unconditional with no conditions attached. Disobedience did not nullify it and in fact God indicated that it was given because of Israel's inability to obey (Ezek 26:21-22) and that God would bring about their obedience.
 2. The New Covenant was everlasting (Ezek 37:26). It could never be abolished or annulled by Israel or anyone else.
 3. This covenant is given in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant (Jer 31:32) which God had established with Israel. This contrast between the New Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant is repeated in the NT (2 Cor 3; Heb 8:7-13).
- D. The Sign of the New Covenant – There is no specific passage that defines the sign of the New Covenant, however there is a strong indication that God intended the Lord's Supper to be the outward recognition of God's commitment to His people under this covenant. In Luke 22:20 Jesus explained that "this cup is the New Covenant in My Blood" and 1 Corinthians 11:25 repeats this statement in the context of the Lord's Supper. The cup of the communion service represents the New Covenant which God promised to Israel in Jeremiah 31.
- E. The Church and the New Covenant – While Jeremiah 31 clearly states the New Covenant was given to Israel, we must examine the relationship of the New Covenant to the church. It is also clear that the church participates in the New Covenant
 1. The church practiced the Lord's Supper which was based on the New Covenant (1 Cor 11:23-30; 10:21).
 2. The church enjoyed the blessings of the New Covenant, including:
 - a. Regeneration (1 Tim 3:5).
 - b. Forgiveness of sin (Eph 1:7; 4:32; Col 1:14).
 - c. The indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19).
 - d. A new heart (Rom 7:22; 2 Cor 3:3; 2 Pet 1:4).
 3. The apostles functioned as ministers of a New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6).

- F. While it is clear that the church is participating in the New Covenant, the New Covenant is not being fulfilled completely in the church today. The promises of the New Covenant await their complete fulfillment in the literal nation of Israel for these reasons:
1. The very people God made His unconditional commitment to have yet to receive as a people the promises which God made. He cannot leave His promises unfulfilled.
 2. The people of Israel were given more than only spiritual promises. They were also given promises of blessing to the nation as a whole which are impossible for individuals in the church to fulfill. For example, wild beasts will be eliminated from their land (Ezek 34:25-28), the nation would receive no more threats and insults from other nations (Ezek 34:25-28), and there will be a great abundance of food (Ezek 34:28-29). How can these be fulfilled in the church?
 3. God's promise to Israel was reaffirmed in the NT. God will restore the nation of Israel (Rom 11:25-29) for His gifts and calling of Israel to enter the New Covenant are irrevocable.

Covenant Theology

Covenant Theology is a system of interpreting the Scriptures on the basis of two covenants: the covenant of works (covering Gen 1-3) and the covenant of grace (covering Gen 4 to Rev 22). According to this theological view, the covenant of works is a covenant that God made with Adam promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience.

Adam failed at the Fall and sin entered the human race (Rom 5:12). God then entered into a covenant of grace with the elect (this word is chosen specifically) through which the problem of sin could be dealt with and He offers salvation to the elect sinner.

In Covenant Theology, there is a strong sense of uniformity throughout the Bible; a strong sense of continuity between the OT and NT. In the Covenant Theology hermeneutic, there is less acceptance of progressive revelation, and more of a thought of amplifying or explaining with greater clarity or precession what has been there from the beginning.

Some call this a hermeneutic of uniformity. There is a tendency to look back into the OT and view the things we know from the NT as always having been true and revealed in the OT. Examples of this are the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the peoples of God (Israel and the church).

Covenant Theology has an aspect of its teaching that is termed "Replacement Theology". In this doctrine, the church has replaced Israel in God's program and the promises that God made to ethnic/national Israel have been and will be fulfilled in the church. This essentially means that literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics have been replaced with allegoricalization in eschatological passages.

This is "interesting" in many ways, but particularly when we look at the Abrahamic covenant and see that all the aspects that have already been fulfilled, have been fulfilled literally to the national Israel.

Several of the NT verses that Covenant theologians use to support their view are found in Galatians.

Galatians 3:6-9 and 3:26-29 can be understood from a non-Covenantal view as either gentiles or Jews who believe are the true spiritual descendants of Abraham.

⁶Even so Abraham BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

⁷**Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.** ⁸The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, "ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU." ⁹So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer. Gal 3:6-9

²⁶For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁷For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹**And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.**
Gal 3:26-29

Galatians 6:15-16 can be understood from a non-Covenantal view as the "Israel of God" refers to Jewish believers in Jesus Christ, to those who are spiritual as well as physical descendants of Abraham.

¹⁵For neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. ¹⁶**And those who will walk by this rule, peace and mercy be upon them, and upon the Israel of God.** Gal 6:15-16

As an aside... Replacement Theology has been responsible for much anti-Semitism and atrocities against the Jewish people.

Dispensational Theology

A different interpretive scheme for studying the Bible is Dispensationalism. Some of this information came from the VBC website on Bible Interpretation; Enns' "Moody Handbook of Theology"; McCune's "A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity"; "Christ's Prophetic Plan" edited by MacArthur and Mayhue; and Ryrie's "Dispensationalism".

This method of understanding Scripture acknowledges that God had progressively unfolded His revelation to mankind. Truth was revealed in stages. These progressive stages of Biblical history are sometimes described as "dispensations". This is an English word translated from the Greek found in 1 Cor 9:7; Eph 1:10; and Eph 3:9 which is translated manage, stewardship, or administration in various passages by the NASB. It means stewardship or management of a household or a religious "economy" or period of administration.

As an example... If you walk down the street in any town and stop at several houses, you will find that each house is run a little differently. In the first home, they may have a rule that each one must clean up his own room every morning. In the next house, the father may insist that no one is to look at his evening paper until he has had a chance to read it. He may also have a rule that his son is to keep the grass mowed. To reward his son for keeping it mowed, he may take him swimming. In one house, there may be a teen-age daughter whose parents require her to be home by nine o'clock in the evening. But next door there may be another teen-age girl whose parents will allow her to stay out until twelve o'clock if she wants to. As we go up and down the street we notice that there are different rules for each household--rules to live by. The rules they keep (or break) will not make them members of the family, because each one is already a member. But broken rules can cause much trouble in the household.

In the same way, God has utilized various "house rules" in dealing with those who belong to Him throughout history. These "house-rules" are called dispensations.

Imagine how much confusion there would be and how difficult it would be if you went up and down the block and wrote down the rules of every house-hold and then you tried to keep all the rules? Many of the rules would conflict. It could be an impossible task to keep all the rules. This is the point: there are different groups of people mentioned in the Bible to whom God gave differing sets of rules by which to live. If we are going to understand the Scriptures, it will help if we think of the various periods of time as households with specific rules for the family members of each household.

Each dispensation is composed, then, of a unique set of "house-rules" or principles. We can recognize a change in God's dispensational arrangement of history when the following converge at a point in history.

1. A continuance of certain ordinances which were previously valid (certain rules continue unchanged).
2. An annulment of other regulations which were previously in force (e.g. circumcision, which is strongly commanded in Ex 4:24-25, is not part of the rules for living in this dispensation, Gal 5:2-6).
3. An introduction of new principles which were not valid before (e.g. the building of a new spiritual temple, the church, composed of both Jews and Gentiles, Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 1:18,24, something previously unheard of, Eph 3:3-6)

It is crucial, then, to determine where a command or promise falls in God's progressive unveiling of truth. All Scripture is for me (all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable), but not all Scripture is to me (many of the commands and promises are not addressed to me, but rather to people living under other dispensational arrangements).

So, dispensationalism is that framework for interpreting the Bible that recognizes that God has dealt with people differently through the ages or dispensations.

Dispensationalism has been describe by Ryrie as having three primary distinctives.

1. Dispensationalism maintains a consistently literal interpretation of Scripture.

Other systems of understanding the Bible may interpret the Bible literally on occasion, or even most of the time. But dispensationalism is the system that most consistently interprets the Bible literally.

Literal (or plain or normal) hermeneutics takes the plain literal sense while understanding the historical, immediate, and wider contexts; uses of figures of speech; and the type of literature. This is also called the plain, literal, grammatical, historical method of interpretation. Literal hermeneutics adheres to the golden rule of interpretation, "if the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense".

A more precise view of the difference between dispensational and covenantal interpretation is that dispensationalism believes that the OT should be interpreted on its own and not through the lens of the NT. In other words, dispensationalists do not use the NT to cancel authorial intent of OT passages as determined by literal interpretation.

The primary impact of dispensational (consistently literal) interpretation of Scripture is on eschatology (prophecy) and ecclesiology (the church).

2. Dispensationalism maintains a clear distinction between ethnic/national Israel and the church. This is really just an application of the first distinctive. Covenant Theology blends the church and Israel together.

A dispensational approach allows us to understand that at one time, God was dealing with Israel, He is now dealing with the church, and one day He will deal with Israel again. Eschatologically, this drives the interpreter to see Christ's second coming as premillennial to set up His 1000 year earthly reign where God will fulfill His promises to national Israel.

3. Dispensationalism tends to focus on the glory of God as God's ultimate purpose in the world. Covenant Theology is centered primarily on the idea of salvation. God's saving of people throughout the Bible is what they base their understanding on. For the dispensationalist, salvation is important, but more important is God's Glory.

A more precise way to say this might be to understand dispensationalists as taking a broader view of God's work in history, emphasizing not just the spiritual, but the physical fulfillment of God's promises.

Now, each dispensation has differences in the rules that God's people are to live by. But these different rules are not different ways to be saved from sin. In every dispensation, man has always been saved by grace through faith.

⁵And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." ⁶Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. Gen 15:5-6

²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.

³For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Rom 4:2-3

⁵So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? ⁶Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Gal 3:5-6

²³and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. James 2:23

Here are a couple of examples of passages that are often used out of context when viewed non-dispensationally:

⁷Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. ⁸**This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.**

⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go." Joshua 1:7-9

¹⁰"For thus says the Lord, 'When seventy years have been completed for Babylon, I will visit you and fulfill My good word to you, to bring you back to this place. ¹¹**For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.** ¹²Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.' Jer 29:10-14

The number of dispensations is a minor point in dispensationalism. Different theologians identify different dispensations. Remember, the three points that make someone dispensational do not include the number of dispensations. Ryrie identifies seven stewardships:

1. Dispensation of innocence – creation to the fall
2. Dispensation of conscience – the fall to Noah
3. Dispensation of human government – Noah to Abraham
4. Dispensation of covenant/promise – Abraham to the Law of Moses
5. Dispensation of the law – the Law of Moses to the founding of the church at Pentecost
6. Dispensation of grace – Founding of the church at Pentecost to the Second Coming
7. Dispensation of the Millennium – the Millennium onward into the eternal state

Impact of Dispensational Theology

There are several impacts of dispensational theology including one's view of end times (eschatology) and the view of Israel and the church. However, maybe the most impactful area is the Christian's view of their obligation to keep the Law of Moses. In this regard, the Believer is free from the Law of Moses (see the VBC position paper titled "The Christian's Obligation to the Law of Moses" for a comprehensive discussion)

When we approach the Word of God, we ought to want to obey it. However, some of the OT laws are challenging to apply. For example, should we have laws of capital punishment for incorrigible children (Deut 21:18-21), for adulterers (Lev 20:10) and for false teachers (Deut 13:1-11)?

¹⁸“If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them, ¹⁹then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his hometown. ²⁰They shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ ²¹Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear *of it* and fear. Deut 21:18-21

¹⁰“If *there is* a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death. Lev 20:10

¹“If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, ²and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, ‘Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,’ ³you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴You shall follow the Lord your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. ⁵But **that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death**, because he has counseled rebellion against the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, to seduce you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk. So you shall purge the evil from among you. Deut 13:1-5 (6-11 says the same about family members)

Is it sinful to tattoo your body (Lev 19:28)?

²⁸You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead nor make any tattoo marks on yourselves: I am the Lord. Leviticus 19:28

Can we wear clothes mixed of linen and wool (Deut 22:11)?

¹¹“You shall not wear a material mixed of wool and linen together. Deut 22:11

Is it wrong for men to trim their beards (Lev 19:27)?

²⁷You shall not round off the side-growth of your heads nor harm the edges of your beard. Lev 19:27

Some OT Laws have been specifically discontinued, for example, circumcision (Acts 15; Gal 5:2-3), the dietary laws (Mark 7:19; Acts 11:8-9; 1 Tim 4:3) and the Sabbath (Rom 14:1-5; Col 2:16). Many have been specifically repeated in the NT, such as idolatry, stealing, murder, etc.

Many Christians deal with the OT very inconsistently. In essence, they pick and choose the parts to follow and the parts to discard with no guiding principle.

Some have responded to this problem and have offered the following principle: If the NT does not specifically change a command, then the OT commands still stand. Therefore, they are free from offering sacrifices or keeping the dietary laws. Yet this leaves many of the laws that are closely connected to function of the nation of Israel in place.

The most common approach is to attempt to divide the OT into moral, civil and ceremonial laws. Unfortunately, this does not eliminate the picking and choosing which OT laws Christians are obligated to follow; it only attempts to categorize them. Of course, before the church age, all of the OT Law was obligatory. Since the “moral laws” are not in red letters, the interpreter is left with the hopeless task of seeking to discern which laws fall into that category. Two OT commands that churches can be particularly motivated to instruct for application are keeping the Sabbath holy and tithing. Should we observe all of the Law, some of the Law, none of the Law or only the parts of the Law that brings people to church more often and causes them to contribute more money?

The unity of the OT Law really leaves us with only two options, to either accept the Law in its entirety, submitting ourselves to it, or to see ourselves as being released from the Law.

Dispensationalism allows the Believer to understand that the house rules of the Mosaic law do not apply to the house rules of the church age.

Israel and Church Distinct

Christians are not under the Mosaic Law because the Law was given to Israel, not to the church. Understanding that God’s ways are different in the church age than He used with Israel is foundational to seeing why the Christian is not bound to the Law of Moses. God’s laws for Israel do not apply to the church, even though there are many requirements that are shared between the people of the church age and the people of Israel.

The NT references Israel distinct apart from the Gentiles in the church age (Acts 3:12; 4:8-10; 5:21-35 and 21:28). Paul refers to Israel as a distinct entity in writing “Give no offense to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God” in 1 Corinthians 10:32 and in praying for their salvation (Rom 10:1).

Those Jews who exercise true saving faith during the church age are joined with the believing non-Jews into one body, the church, where there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:11-23; Col 3:11). Those non-believing Jews continue to be described as a distinct people for whom God has a special plan (Rom 11).

This shows why the Mosaic Law no longer applies in the church age, for the church is not the people to whom the Law was given. The most fundamental reason the Christians are not obligated to obey the Law of Moses is because the Law was given to the nation of Israel, not to the church. The Law of the OT governed the Jewish people; the NT was written to the church and governs us.

Certain commands are given to the church that were not given to Israel, notably the ordinances of the church: the Lord's Supper and baptism. These were given to the church alone, just as certain commands such as circumcision were not given to the church. That certain rules were given to each entity is further evidence that the church and Israel are not identical.

While much of the OT Law is repeated in the NT, some of it is not. A good example is the Ten Commandments, where nine of the commandments are restated in the NT but the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is not, freedom is given (cf. Rom 14:1-5; Col 2:16).

That there are some clear differences in the obligations for the church and for Israel shows they are not identical.

The role of the OT in the life of the Christian

So, if the Believer is free from adherence to the Mosaic Law, then what value is the OT? All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable (2 Tim 3:16), even if it is not directly applicable.

We can learn much about God's character throughout the OT. We can see much of who God is and what He values in the books of the Law and the rest of the OT. While God is revealed much more clearly in the NT in Christ (Col 2:17; Heb 10:1), the revelation of God in the OT was still accurate and profitable (2 Tim 3:16-17). The OT not only describes God's character in direct statements, it does so in examples of His work. Much of the Word of God is filled with specific ways that God worked through individuals that will not be repeated today, yet these provide instruction and encouragement to us. To say that we have been released from the Law should not be understood as a discouragement from reading it vigorously.

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 shows the value of the OT as an example to us so that we will not fall into the same temptation to crave evil things. Because of God's Law and the rebellion of His people, we should be careful to take heed, lest we fall in a similar manner. What was written in the OT instructs us to persevere with hope (Rom 15:4).

¹For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ³and all ate the same spiritual food; ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. ⁶**Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved.** ⁷Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play." ⁸Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. ⁹Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. ¹⁰Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹**Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.** ¹²Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. 1 Cor 10:1-12

²²Therefore it was also credited to him as righteousness. ²³**Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him,** ²⁴**but for our sake also,** to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵*He* who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification. Rom 4:22-25

⁴For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Rom 15:4

We are also able to learn much from the OT wisdom books, such as Psalms and Proverbs. These are filled with teaching of how to live sensibly in this present age. This is why these books have been so popular among Christians.

For the unbeliever, the Law was a tutor leading to Christ (Gal 3:23-24). For those who were kept in custody under the Law, it served as a guide to Christ. For practicing Jewish people today it can serve this same function of bringing them to the understanding of the substance of Christ, not simply the shadow of what was to come (cf. Col 2:16-17). When faith comes, they are no longer under the Law, which serves as a tutor (Gal 3:25).

How we understand what God desires from us is essential to an obedient love of God. To confuse what God requires of Christians not only affects our application of God's Word to our life, it may well have the negative consequence of leading others into confusion as well. We must take care to impart God's will with accuracy.

While all Scripture is given to us, inspired by God and profitable, not all Scripture is for each person to directly apply. God's commands to Israel must be understood as such and not transferred to the church. Those who seek to do so necessarily do so inconsistently. Christians who mistakenly believe that elements of the Law of Moses are required for believers in Christ today are, in the words of Peter from Acts 15:10, "putting God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear."

Summary

In order to study the Bible accurately a scheme is needed to understand the distinctive periods when God deals differently with different groups of people. Dispensationalism is this scheme which consistently uses literal, grammatical, historical hermeneutics. As a result, there is a distinction between national Israel and the church. A significant impact of dispensationalism is a consistent view of the OT law and the Christian's obligation towards it.