

The Practical Impact of One's Theological Framework: Dispensational Theology Versus Covenant Theology

Don't they both come to the same conclusions or same results? NO

1. A Key Difference Which Defines the Overriding Narrative of the Bible and Purpose of History

a. Covenant Theology – Overriding Focus is the Salvation of God (“The Gospel”)

In the tri-covenantal scheme (the supposed covenants of “redemption,” “works,” and “grace”) form the extra-biblical (presuppositional) context upon which all covenantal interpretation of the Bible is based. The process is effectuated in the following manner. First the covenantalist subsumes all redemptive history under an imaginary covenant called the “covenant of grace,” and having done so, he uses that as a pretext to minimize any distinctions in the work of God within redemptive history—after all, that history (he claims) falls under the singular “covenant of grace”—therefore (he assumes) the work of God in redemptive history is uniform. In the mind of the covenantalist, this erases, or at least minimalizes, any distinction between “Israel,” to whom the kingdom promises were made, and “the Church.” (Sam A Smith, *The Problem With Covenant Theology*, p. 2)

Based on this tri-covenantal construct, Covenant Theology associates all redemptive history (from the fall of man forward) under one “covenant”—the “covenant of grace.” The result is a view of redemptive history in which all believers share equally in all of the divine promises, since they are all redeemed under the same covenant, and therefore (according to covenantal reasoning) comprise the same metaphysical identity (whether one calls it “Israel” or the “Church”). Thus, according to Covenantalism the kingdom promises made to Abraham and to his descendants can be directly applied to the Church, but not “literally,” of course. (Smith, p. 8)

b. Dispensationalism – Overriding Focus is the Glory of God

2. A Different Understanding of the Identity of the Church

a. Covenantalism – Replaces Israel in some way

In the mind of the covenantalist, this erases, or at least minimalizes, any distinction between “Israel,” to whom the kingdom promises were made, and “the Church.” The minimalization of the Church's distinct identity, separate from Israel, is then used to justify the notion that the Church is merely a New Testament form of Israel—a “new” Israel—or possibly a substitute, or replacement for Israel, since the Jewish nation rejected their Messiah (actually both positions have been argued); in the process, the distinctions between the Old Testament economy and the New Testament economy are also characteristically dissolved. Of course the Church is not an ethnic and geopolitical entity and therefore cannot inherit Israel's promises in any literal sense, so the covenantalist (based upon all of the assumptions made so far) justifies the necessity of employing a non-literal method of interpretation to explain how he imagines the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to the Church. (Smith, p. 2-3)

When it comes to Israel, covenantalism perceives Jesus as the true Israel and that Old Testament promises to national Israel in the Old Testament are shadows that find fulfillment in Him. And when all believers, including Gentiles, become united with Christ, they join “Israel” as well. This means the concept of “Israel” expands to include Gentiles. Thus, the church in Jesus is the new/true Israel and the culmination of God's plans for His people. There is no need for a restoration of national Israel since Jesus is “true Israel” and the church in Jesus is now Israel. Also, while acknowledging a “not yet” aspect to Jesus' reign, covenantalists tend to heavily emphasize first coming fulfillment of Old Testament promises and covenants. For most covenantalists Jesus' Davidic/Millennial reign and the reign of the saints is occurring from heaven now. So we are currently in Jesus' messianic kingdom. Also, covenant promises from the Old Testament are mostly being fulfilled now. Thus, there is no need of a future earthly reign of Jesus since this age is the era of fulfillment and reigning. (Michael Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths: Revised and Updated*)

b. Dispensationalism – Separate from Israel, with the promises to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David to be fulfilled literally and completely.

As a means of recovering the biblical truth of premillennialism, another view called “Dispensationalism” arose. Dispensationalism addresses the core error of Covenant Theology and amillennialism—the substitution of the Church for Israel—and views the Church not as a replacement for Israel, but as a distinct work of God for the purpose of gathering in a great host of Gentiles and provoking Israel to accept their Messiah so the promises of the kingdom can be literally fulfilled to them (Rom. 10-11). (Smith, p. 9)

3. A Different Approach to Israel

a. How you view Israel and our relationship to them

It is a side point, but perhaps worth mention that Covenant Theology and its theological antecedent—amillennialism—have always had an anti-Semitic flavor, since they see Jews and the Jewish nation as having rejected Christ and having been supplanted by the Church. History is filled with examples of “Christian” anti-Semitism, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that it might be directly traceable to amillennialism's concept of replacement. (Smith, p.8-9)

b. How you factor our relationship with the USA into our voting.

4. A Different Approach to Prophecy

a. Both have a literal approach to PAST prophecy.

b. Covenant Theology allegorizes (spiritualizes) future prophecy, which effectively displaces, diffuses, or discards large parts of the Bible.

While the suppositional “covenant of grace” gives a pretext to the covenantal interpreter for denying a literal interpretation to premillennial prophecies, it doesn’t provide any guidance as to how those prophecies ought to be re-interpreted; as such, the covenantal suppositions provide only part of what’s needed to arrive at amillennialism (or postmillennialism). The covenantalist has to make up the interpretive content as he goes, and he does this through the process of “spiritualization” (allegorization)—but hopefully if enough interpreters agree on what the prophecies “mean,” perhaps no one will notice that there is absolutely no objective basis for these interpretations at all—the reason being that there are no hard and fast rules for allegorical interpretation—it’s an inherently subjective process. When one allegorizes, he is saying that the text doesn’t mean what it says; therefore, where does the interpreter get the “spiritualized meaning” from? Naturally if it doesn’t come from the text, there’s only one other place it can come from—from the interpreter’s own mind (conditioned with his own theological preconclusions). (Smith, p. 3)

c. *Dispensationalism approaches past and future prophecy identically = literal fulfillment.*

It is important to remember that Dispensationalism is based upon a biblical theology, rather than a presuppositional theology—that is, it is based upon observations that come **from** Scripture, not a theological framework imposed **upon** Scripture; Dispensationalism simply recognizes and gives due consideration to the existing biblical landscape. In other words, unlike covenantalists, dispensationalists don’t claim to know more than the original authors of the Bible. On the other hand if Covenant Theology is true, most of the biblical writers couldn’t have understood their own statements, since they did not yet have the “light” of covenantal theology to guide them. (Can we really imagine some dear departed covenantal scholar in Heaven trying to convince the Apostle John that what he wrote in Revelation doesn’t mean what it says, and can only be properly understood when interpreted through the filter of sixteenth-century covenant theology?) (Smith, p. 4)

d. *Prophecy is meant to be understood and intended to impact our lives (2 Tim 3:16-17)*

2 Tim. 3:16-17 **All Scripture** is given by inspiration of God, and **is profitable** for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Another complaint often heard from covenantalists is that dispensationalists divide the Bible into segments, denying that much of its truth relates to believers today. This is simply not true. What dispensationalists do insist upon, however, is that biblical promises will be fulfilled to the people (or group) to which they were originally directed. In other words, promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to Israel, promises made to the Church will be fulfilled to the Church, and promises made specifically to individuals will be fulfilled to those individuals. Dispensationalists believe that even if a particular work or promise of God is not directed at the Church, all truth is still “truth,” and is useful. (Smith, p. 12)

e. *Results in the loss of clarity, the lack of comprehension, and the wholly subjective nature of allegorical (“spiritualizing”) / application.*

While Dispensationalism is fairly recent—less than three hundred years old—it merely represents a return to the premillennialism of the New Testament, and as such is nothing more than a restatement of what the New Testament writers and the early church believed; it simply beckons a return to a normal/literal understanding of Scripture, interpreted within its own theological context rather than the artificial context of sixteenth century Covenantalism. (Smith, p. 4)

f. *Covenant Theology ignores the clarity that God intended to give through Scripture. Scripture is meant to be understood, believed, and acted upon.*

5. *A Different Approach to the Purpose and Place of Government*

a. *Covenantalism – To transform the world*

b. *Dispensationalism – To hold back sin*

Gen 9:6 Whoever sheds man’s blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

Rom 13:3-4 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴ For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

6. *A Different Approach to the Impact of Passages Relating to the Imminent Coming of the Lord:*

a. *One’s approach is either literal (normal), allegorical (spiritualizing) or unknown (“who knows?”)*

b. *How you view the coming of the Lord, including its timing, affects your actions.*

c. *The view that Christ would return to establish His kingdom on earth was held by the early Church:*

As was said before, the early Church was premillennial; that is to say, they believed that Christ would come and personally establish His kingdom on earth. This belief was derived by simply taking Scripture at face value, using the same normal/literal interpretative method for all Scripture—since numerous passages clearly picture the second coming as occurring immediately prior to the commencement of the millennial kingdom (Isa. 35:4-10; Zech. 2:10-11; 14:1-11; Matt. 24:29-25:46, esp. 25:31-34; Rev. 19:11-20:6). It was not until later that the method known as “spiritualization” (the seeking of a “higher,” more “spiritual” or “mystical” meaning of Scripture) became popular. (Smith, p. 5)

d. *A clarity in understanding prophecy is mandatory to have the right view of and right response to prophecy.*

e. 1 John 2:28

1 John 2:28 And now, little children, **abide** in Him, that when He **appears**, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming.

Καὶ νῦν, τέκνια, **μένετε** ἐν αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐὰν **φανερωθῇ**, σχῶμεν παρρησίαν καὶ μὴ αἰσχυνθῶμεν ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ παρουσίᾳ αὐτοῦ.

Present abiding (be abiding ~!) is motivated, in part, by the soon coming of the Lord. Any other view of Scripture (a- or post-) takes away from the purpose and impact of the verse. Why be abiding now, if Jesus is not going to return for an indefinite amount of time – possibly even a million years? The verse seems to suggest that Jesus could come momentarily (“that if he might be revealed”), which is only a view held by pre-millennialists.

f. 1 John 3:1-3

1 John 3:1-3 Behold (x!) what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. ² Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is **revealed**, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. ³ And everyone who has (~) this hope in Him purifies (~) himself, just as He is pure.

Ἴδετε ποταπὴν ἀγάπην δέδωκεν ἡμῖν ὁ πατήρ, ἵνα τέκνα θεοῦ κληθῶμεν, καὶ ἐσμέν. διὰ τοῦτο ὁ κόσμος οὐ γινώσκει ἡμᾶς, ὅτι οὐκ ἔγνω αὐτόν. ² ἀγαπητοὶ νῦν τέκνα θεοῦ ἐσμεν, καὶ οὐπω ἐφανερώθη τί ἐσόμεθα. οἶδαμεν ὅτι ἐὰν **φανερωθῇ**, ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα, ὅτι ὁψόμεθα αὐτόν, καθὼς ἐστίν. ³ καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἔχων τὴν ἐλπίδα ταύτην ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ἀγνίζει ἑαυτόν, καθὼς ἐκεῖνος ἀγνός ἐστίν.

This passage gives no room for events between “now” and “when He is revealed.” There is no list between our present state of being the children of God now, and the revealing of Jesus. When that happens, “WE shall be like Him” indicates the expectation we who are living should have in the any moment return of the Lord.

g. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

1 Cor 15:51-52 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—⁵² 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.

This is similar, as Paul indicates the expectation that Jesus could come at any time. “WE shall not all sleep, but WE shall all be changed.” The present-day believer has this same expectation of the any-moment return of the Lord.

h. 1 Thes 4:13-18

1 Thes 4:13-18 But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. ¹⁴ For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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 will rise first. ¹⁷ Then we who are alive and 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. ¹⁸ Therefore comfort one another with these words.

(cf **1 Thes 1:10** and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, *even* Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.)

This passage again presents the expectation of the early Church believers that Jesus could return in their lifetimes. “WE who are live *and remain*” is a phrase we see twice. The fact that both “those who sleep in Jesus” and those that “believe that Jesus died and rose again” who remain will be caught up together. This is intended to present ongoing comfort to believers (“be comforting” one another with these words).

Paul wanted the Thessalonians to correctly and clearly understand the coming of the Lord for believers (what we call “the rapture”). A right understanding of prophecy as Paul presented was to help them not be led

i. 1 Thes 5:1-11

1 Thes 5:1-11 But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you. ² For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. ³ For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. ⁴ But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. ⁵ You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. ⁶ Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. ⁸ But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. ¹¹ Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.

This passage (just after 1 Thes 4:13-18) calls believers to know prophecy and to respond accordingly.