

“Covenant Theology in a Dispensational Culture”

Lecture 1: Introduction

By Kevin Morris, taught at Ortega Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Fl. 2-23-20

1. How (and Why) You Interpret the Bible Matters!

2nd Timothy 2:15

When we come to the Bible, we must think about our concept of the Bible in terms of how we receive, gather and store the information communicated to us.

- Systems of Theology-
 - As we read the Bible, it is common that we begin to catalogue the truths we encounter into a system or summary that we carry throughout the rest of our time reading.
 - Because God is true (and His word), that which we read will be consistent and unified, so that we can learn and come to logical conclusions of what we’ve learned.
 - This is the essence of confessions or statements of faith.
 - Today there are mainly two systems of theology within the church that are used and professed:
 - In both of these systems, a summary and consistency of doctrinal conclusions are made based on the principal that God is true, in His person and His word.
 - These systems are what we call Dispensational Theology and Covenant Theology

- Covenant Theology is formally speaking a reformed system of theology.
- Why Study Systems?
 - While many of you are familiar with the fact that we as Presbyterians embrace covenant theology, many of you are likely 1st or 2nd generation Presbyterians, including myself.
 - So, you may not be familiar with the battle of these two systems as proper views of the Bible.
 - Dispensationalism as a system has permeated most mainline denominations of the south (Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, etc..).
 - This means that it is the staple spiritual food of America

2. What is the Dispensational Culture? Summarizing the System

Ephesians 4:11-16 (esp. v.15)

The goal of the future lectures in this series is to compare/contrast dispensationalism with covenant theology. For now, the main focus is to rightly identify the system: What makes dispensationalism dispensational?

- Varieties of Dispensationalism
 - Today it seems that dispensationalism has been modified so much that there are as many varieties to it as there are denominations that embrace it.
 - Classic, progressive, hyper, “new” covenant theology, Calvinistic dispensational, Arminian dispensational, etc.

- There is also a pop culture variety of dispensationalism popularized by televangelists, prosperity gospel proponents, and academic societies (DTS).

- Often it is difficult to find the essence of the view without leaving room for variations of it (ex. NCT).

- The Content of Dispensationalism- What is it?

- Very plainly, it is to say that God has different dispensations or economies of government throughout the course of human history. Normally, these are agreed to be seven:

- Innocence (Gen 1:28-3:6)
- Conscience (Gen 4:1-8:14)
- Government (Gen 8:15-11:9)
- Promise (Gen 11:10-Ex 18:27)
- Mosaic Law (Ex. 19:1-Acts 1:26)
- Grace (Acts 2:1-Rev 19:21)
- Millennium (Rev 20:4-6)

1. The Israel/Church distinction-foundational to dispensationalism is to see the church as a parenthesis to God's overall plan. The church is a side story or *intermission* to the main story of Israel.
2. The literal interpretation of Scripture- Because the Old Testament promises to Israel were literal, the fulfillment of those promises (land, etc.) must be literal in nature and literal to the Jewish race. Therefore, time and space must allow for these promises to be fulfilled. This is the purpose of the literal millennium.

3. The centrality of the glory of God- the charge laid against covenant theology is that the church consumes Israel and takes all the promises initially given to Israel. This puts the church and the salvation of man as the focal point of the Bible. Dispensationalists argue that this is a man centered view, and God's glory must be the center.
4. My additional 4th- the necessity of their end times view incorporated into the whole system: rapture, tribulation, new earthly temple, millennium. All of the tenants of dispensationalism depend on the order of events in the end times. If any of these are overturned or proven to be wrong, it results in the collapse of the whole system.

3. How Did This Progress from A View to The View?

Acts 17:10-11

What took place to make this the interpretation of Bible truth? Because this is a relatively new theology, it matters especially for us that we see the historical impact today.

- A Very Brief Historical Survey
 - John Nelson Darby began teaching the basic tenants of this view in the 19th century.
 - This circulation increased with the publishing of the Scofield reference Bible at the beginning of the 19th century
 - This circulation included conferences and exposure with other evangelists such as Dwight L. Moody.
 - Eventually dispensationalism became the expressed system of what was known at the time as the Fundamentalists

- The recent progression:
 - Hal Lindsey, John Hagee, Left Behind books/movies, televangelists, David Jeremiah, Moody Bible Institute, Dallas Theological Seminary
- The Danger of Majority Rule and Theology in a Vacuum
 - Fast forward to my life and the Christian context I lived in
 - I never once heard the word “dispensational” but the theological system I was taught in church was certainly that
 - The biggest problem with this is the absence of ever being taught a different view- or even the presence of different views
 - Some of this is pastoral (teach the flock sound doctrine, not perceived errors) while some is simply the traditions of men
 - Although at that time and at this time, dispensationalism is the dominant view of American Christianity, my experience is that it is not so much taught as it is assumed.
 - Most proponents of it do not mention that it is a system that is a relatively new innovation.
 - This does not mean it is wrong, but it should at least be described as a corrective for the bulk of the church’s history

4. What is My Agenda as a Teacher?

Philippians 1:9-11

Why should we want to think about Dispensationalism if we hold to the rival view, Covenant theology- often slighted as “Replacement Theology”

- Promote a Sincere Love of Neighbor and of Understanding Their View
 - Truth matters, so we should pursue the truth unwaveringly.
 - We must never slander by misunderstanding other positions.
 - Such as Calvinism and Arminianism
 - We should want to understand God and ourselves rightly
 - Biases exist, but they must be of conviction, not presumption
 - Opposing dialogue can and should be healthy
 - My own experience in a dispensational school and the gift of gracious dialogue.
- **Briefly covering what we'll go over in the coming weeks.**
- **Recommended reading for next week**