A Biblical Critique of the Two-fold Theory of Dispensationalism

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1. The Need for a Critique of Dispensationalism

Some might question the necessity for a Biblical evaluation of Dispensationalism, because a vast amount has already been written about this subject, or because of the seeming futility of continuing to challenge a system that is so widely accepted by believers today. However, I feel this critique is fully justified in the light of so much evidence that demonstrates that Dispensationalism rests on a questionable use of Scripture. In his book entitled, Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism, Gerstner (1991:150) emphasizes the seriousness of the theological error of Dispensationalism:

> What is indisputably, absolutely, and uncompromisingly essential to the Christian religion is its doctrine of salvation…. If Dispensationalism has actually departed from the only way of salvation which the Christian religion teaches, then we must say it has departed from Christianity. No matter how many other important truths it proclaims, it cannot be called Christian if it empties Christianity of its essential message.

Another factor, which has given urgency to a biblical

evaluation of Dispensationalism, is the fact that during the course of the last four decades, many denominations and ecumenical groups have taken a position against Jewish evangelism as a result of the prevalent confusion amongst church leaders and Bible scholars regarding the Biblical relationship between Israel and the Church. This is evident from the following news items:

In September 2002, the ecumenical Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations issued a statement condemning "missionary efforts at converting Jews." Joseph Tyson, chairman of the group, said that attempts to convert Jews to Christianity are "theologically invalid" (Jews no longer objects of evangelism 2001).

In April 1998, representatives of 50 churches and Christian organizations in Israel said they would refrain from conducting missionary campaigns aimed at Jews. The statement was endorsed by a wide range of churches, including Baptist, Lutheran, Anglican, and Roman Catholic (Jews no longer objects of evangelism 2001).

2. The Historical Development Dispensationalism: An American Perspective

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), after beginning in the field of law, became interested in the gospel. By 1825 he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England. He later joined the "Plymouth Brethren," a group of believers who had also recently separated from the established church. In 1827 he developed and popularised the view that God had two different purposes for His people: an earthly purpose for Israel and a heavenly purpose for the church.

The question arises: why did this teaching appear at this

time? Zens (1978:3) explains:

It appears that there are two basic undercurrents that made the season ripe for a blossoming of prophetic and millennial interest. The first is the influence of the Jesuit thinking concerning Christ's second coming, and the second is the general outlook that certain recent political events had great implications for the fulfilment of prophecy.

During the period 1862-1877, as a result of several visits by Darby to America and Canada, Dispensationalism spread rapidly in these countries. If Dispensationalism had been confined to the Plymouth Brethren assemblies, its influence would have been negligible. However, it "came to have its proponents in virtually all Protestant denominations," and thus "it became a major factor in American evangelism" (Zens 1978:9).

Another factor in the spread of Dispensationalism in America was the printed page. In 1909 the Scofield Reference Bible appeared under the auspices of the Oxford University Press. This work "has probably done more to extend premillennialism in the last half century than any other volume" (Zens 1978:10).

Dispensationalism was also popularised as a result of the Bible School Movement. Zens (1978:11-12) elaborates:

These institutions were founded primarily because the main-line denominational schools had departed from the evangelical position. A host of Fundamental Bible schools sprang up all over America, the doctrinal foundation was "predominantly" Dispensational and premillennial "from the start." The Scofield Bible was, practically speaking, the accepted "doctrinal touchstone" of these schools.

Zens (2005a) summarises the position of Dispensationalism in America after it had spread for a hundred years (1827-1927):

Within a century from when John Nelson Darby started the idea

of God's two separate purposes in history (1827), it had arisen to a place of common acceptance among the Bible-believing movement in America, which then centered in Fundamentalism.

3. The Essential Characteristics of Dispensationalism

Dispensationlism revolves around the use of the Biblical concept dispensation. The term dispensation is derived from the Greek word oikonomia, which is used in the New Testament to describe the management of a household. Jones (2005) elaborates:

Dispensational theology centers upon the concept of God's dealings with mankind being divided into (usually) seven distinct economies or "dispensations," in which man is tested as to his obedience to the will of God as revealed under each dispensation. (The Greek word oikonomia, which is translated in the scriptures as "dispensation," actually refers to a dwelling or house and means management of a household/stewardship in Luke 16:2-4).

Ryrie (1995:29) defines Dispensationalism in terms of various economies in the outworking of God's overall purpose:

To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.

Grenz et al. (1999:39-40) define Dispensationalism as a system of theology with essential characteristics:

God works with humans in distinct ways (dispensations) through history; that God has a distinct plan for Israel over against the church; that the Bible, especially predictive prophecy, needs to be interpreted literally; that the church will be secretly raptured from earth seven years prior to Christ's second coming; that Christ will rule with Israel during a literal thousand-year earthly reign.

Most traditional Dispensationalists recognise seven specific dispensations, divisions of time or ages throughout history, in which man responds to a specific revelation of the will of God. According to Smith (2005), the seven traditionally recognisable dispensations are:

l) Innocence – Adam

2) Conscience – after man sinned, the flood

3) Government – after the flood, man allowed to eat meat, death penalty instituted

4) Promise – Abraham up to Moses and the giving of the law

5) Law – Moses to the cross

6) Grace – the cross to the Millennium Kingdom

7) Millennial Kingdom – a 1000-year reign of Christ on earth centred in Jerusalem

It appears that there is a strong continuity of thought among Dispensationalists. It is not difficult to ascertain the guiding presuppositions of this system. Dr Charles Ryrie in Zens (2005a) has pointedly faced the question, *"What is the sine qua non of dispensationalism?"* His answer has three parts.

1) “A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct … a man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions.”

2) Dispensationalists employ *“a consistently literal principle of interpretation.”* This principle “is at the heart of dispensational eschatology.”

3) Dispensationalists assert that God’s purposes center in His glory, rather than in the “single purpose of salvation.”

4. The two-fold theory of Dispensationalism: the distinction between Israel and the church

The two-fold theory of Dispensationalism is derived from their hermeneutical approach that emphasises a literal fulfilment of Old Testament promises to the nation of Israel. Although the issue of “literal interpretation” is heavily debated today, many Dispensationalists still claim that *“a consistent literal interpretation”* applied to all areas of the Bible, including the Old Testament promises to Israel, is a distinguishing mark of Dispensationalism (Vlach 2005).

In terms of the *“consistently literal principles of interpretation,”* Dispensationalists argue that since the prophecies of Christ’s birth, death and resurrection were literally fulfilled, what they consider to be promises to the Jews will also be literally fulfilled. Their reasoning is based on the presupposition that Israel and the church have separate destinies.

Dispensationalists, therefore, believe that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament (especially regarding physical blessings, such as land), apply only to Israel unless God has

stated otherwise. They believe that these promises were not intended as prophecies about what God would do spiritually for the church, but will literally be fulfilled by Israel itself (largely in the millennium). For example, the promise of the land is interpreted to mean that God will one day fully restore Israel to Palestine. Dispensationalists thus believe in a distinct future for national Israel—a future that includes the restoration of the nation with a distinct identity and function (Vlach 2005). This is confirmed by Feinberg (1988:83) when he says, "Only Dispensationalism clearly sees a distinctive future for ethnic Israel as a nation."

According to Dispensationalists, Jesus made an offer of a literal Kingdom to Israel. Since Israel rejected it, it was postponed. Gane (1997) explains the Dispensationalist's concept of parenthesis as follows:

… when Jesus was on earth He offered the earthly kingdom to the Jews. Because they rejected it, the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies in regard to their rulership of Palestine and predominance over the nations could not be immediately put into effect. Of necessity there came a gap of centuries during which the Christian Church has played a separate and distinctive role designed by God. But this role is not a spiritual fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies regarding Israel. The period of Christian Church history is a parenthesis, not foreseen by the Old Testament prophets and not designed to fulfill their forecasts. This period of the Church will come to an end when the Christian saints are secretly raptured seven years before the glorious appearing of Christ in the clouds of heaven.

Since Dispensational theology grows out of *"a consistently literal principle of interpretation,"* applying this hermeneutical principle leads Dispensationalism "to distinguish God's program for Israel from his program for the church. Thus the church did not begin in the OT but on the day

of Pentecost, and the church is not presently fulfilling promises made to Israel in the OT that have not yet been fulfilled" (Ryrie 1984:322).

Vlach (2005) summarises the position of the Dispensationalism as follows:

The church does not replace or continue Israel, and is never referred to as Israel. According to dispensationalists, the church did not exist in the Old Testament and did not begin until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Old Testament promises to Israel, then, cannot be entirely fulfilled with the church.

In order to demonstrate the continuity of agreement among the proponents of Dispensationalism, Zens (2005a) provides a chronological list of quotations concerning the dual purposes theory is given below:

J. N. Darby: "The Church is in relationship with the Father, and the Jews with Jehovah. The Jewish nation is never to enter the Church. The Church is a kind of heavenly economy, during the rejection of the earthly people" (The Hopes of the Church of God, pp. 11, 106, 156).

L. S. Chafer: "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages, God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved" (Dispensationalism, p. 448).

Charles Ryrie: "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct. The Church is a distinct body in this age having

promises and a destiny different from Israel's" (The Basis of the Premillennial Faith, p. l 2).

John Walwoord: "Of prime importance to the premillennial

interpretation of Scripture is the distinction provided in the New Testament between God's purpose for the Church and His purpose for the nation Israel" (The Millennial Kingdom, p. vii).

The dividing of redemptive history into several economies has been done throughout church history. However, the idea that God has "separate" purposes for Israel and the church is indeed novel, since it cannot to be found in the works of writers in the post-apostolic period. Yet this is the teaching on which Dispensationalism stands or falls. It is the presupposition that guides their Biblical interpretation. If this presupposition proves to be false, then their whole theological system collapses.

5. A Biblical evaluation of the two-separate-purposes theory of Dispensationalism using key passages from the New Testament

In this section, the essential principles of Dispensationalism will be challenged in the light of clear statements from selected Scriptures, especially those principles relating to the two-fold theory: the distinction between Israel and the Church. Since this evaluation is by no means comprehensive, certain crucial representative passages will be selected in an attempt to expose the faulty foundations of Dispensationalism.

5.1 The kingdom of God has come and is given to a people who will produce its fruit (Matthew 21:43)

Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit (Matthew 21:43, NIV).

Ryrie asserts that this passage "conclusively" demonstrates

that Israel is to be restored. The word "nation," he says, "in its strict interpretation refers to the nation of Israel when she shall turn to the Lord and be saved before entering the millennial kingdom" (Zens 2005a). However, Smith (1989:254) shows that in terms of the context, verse 43 describes a situation in which a privilege is taken from one group and given to another:

The death and resurrection of Jesus lurk in the background of the parable (vv. 33-41) and the prophecy (v. 42), but the foreground is occupied by the drama of privilege taken from one group and given to another: The kingdom of God (v. 31) will be taken away from you and given to others, to new tenants, described as a nation (ethnos), and that nation is defined by a single phrase, producing the fruits of it.

Zens (2005b) elaborates on this view, when he describes the actual participants in the dramatic illustration:

"Yet the context, especially in verse 41 at the conclusion of the parable, suggests that the householder (God) punishes the wicked husbandman (Israel), and gives out the vineyard (the kingdom) to others (Gentiles). This indeed occurred when the Jews killed their heir (v. 38). Thus after rejecting their Messiah who came first in lowliness, the gospel of their exalted Messiah goes to them first, and this also they reject."

Paul summarises the fulfilment of verse 43 where the Scripture says, "Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: '*We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles*'" (Acts 13:46, NIV).

The parable clearly a portrays the rejection of Jesus Christ by the Jews, only for Him to become the cornerstone of the Church by the act of God raising Him from the dead. Because of unbelief and disobedience, the Jews are rejected and their

privileges of the kingdom of God given to a people (the Gentiles) who will produce its fruit (v. 43) (see also 1 Peter 2:4-10) (Atkinson 1963:798).

The parable also pictures the rejection of Jesus Christ (by the Jews) as the true temple of God. Jesus Himself declared, "One greater than the temple is here" (Matthew 12:6). Since Christ is the true temple, one need not look elsewhere for the prophetic fulfillment of various Old Testament scriptures, such as Isaiah 66:21 and Zechariah 14:16-19, in the building of a new temple on the rock in Jerusalem at some future date. The New Testament Church (The kingdom of God) is also described in terms of a temple built with of living stones (including Jews and Gentiles). Strimple (1999:99) explains: "No other temple can be erected, in which all the saints of God, Jew and Gentile, are being built as living stones (Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5)."

5.2 The hope of the Jews has already been accomplished in Christ's resurrection; they are called upon to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 13:32-34).

We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers, he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David" (Acts 13:32-34, NIV).

According to their two-fold theory, Dispensationalists assert that Israel's real fulfilment lies in the future, when the alleged unfulfilled promises are confirmed in the millennium after the rapture of the Church. However, Zens (2005b) uses Acts 13:32 to show the futility of their argument:

But verse 32 points out that the "hope of Israel" has already been accomplished in the Resurrection. Further, the

Resurrection is said to be a fulfillment of the "sure mercies of David." It is on the basis of this recently accomplished promise that the Jews are to repent and believe the gospel. God's dealings with Israel have not been "postponed." He has at this time fulfilled the promise "to the fathers for us their children.

The context of Acts 13:32-34 is Paul's address at Antioch is as follows: After giving a summary of the life of Christ (Acts 13:23-31), with an emphasis on His resurrection, Paul uses the Old Testament texts to prove that Jesus is indeed the Messiah (Acts 13:32-37). Paul thus argues that Christ's resurrection proves Him to be the Messiah foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures. He then calls upon his audience (mainly Jews) to hear the message, to repent and believe the gospel (Acts 13:38-41).

Keddie (1993:156-157) argues that in terms of the context of Acts 13:32-34, the very rejection of Israel's promised Saviour was transformed by God into the actual fulfilment of various prophecies, and Jesus' accomplishment of salvation for His people:

Jesus is Israel's promised Saviour (Psalms 2:7; Isaiah 55:3; Psalm 16:10; Acts13:32-37). But what had happened? Firstly, the people rejected the only one they ought to have recognized and received! (13:27; John 1:11). Secondly, in doing so, they actually fulfilled the very prophecies read in their hearing every Sabbath day! (13:27). They killed Jesus on 'the tree' (13:29; Deuteronomy 21:23). God 'raised him from the dead' and so transformed their very rejection of him into the occasion of Jesus' accomplishment of salvation for his people. This is the 'good news' which God had promised the fathers of Israel and has now fulfilled 'for us' – namely, 'raising up Jesus,' not only from the dead, but as the Son, who is exalted a Prince and Saviour (13:32-33; 5:31).

It is only in utter disregard for a clear text like Acts

13:32 that Ironside, in Zens (2005b), blindly asserts: “The moment Messiah died on the cross, the prophetic clock stopped. There has not been a tick upon that clock for nineteen centuries. It will not begin again until the entire present age has come to an end” (The Great Parenthesis, p. 23).

5.3 The gospel is universal; both Jews and Gentiles are called upon to respond to the proclamation of the gospel (Romans 10:12-14).

For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10:12-14, NIV).

According to Dispensationalists, God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the Jews with earthly objectives and the other related to the Church with heavenly objectives. In this view, there is no continuity or connection with what went before or comes after; all of Israel’s future, including her future turning to the Lord, must be separate from the Church.

However, in contrast to the Dispensationalist’s view of the Church as being separate from Israel, Paul uses the word everyone in Romans 10:13 to indicate that the way of salvation is open to all, Jew and Gentile alike. This universality of the gospel is emphasized by a quotation from Joel 2:32, which leads one to the inevitable conclusion that, if they do not “call on the name of the Lord” (v.13), the Jews are themselves responsible for their fate (Thomson and Davidson 1963:958).

Edwards (1992:255) elaborates as follows on Paul’s use of the word “Everyone” in Romans 10:13 and its implications for the universality of the Gospel:

By prefacing the quotation with Everyone emphasizes that

salvation is available to Jews and Gentiles without distinction. He continues in verse 12, For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. Paul made this same assertion in 3:23 with reference to sins: "There is no difference, for all have sinned." But neither is there any difference with reference to grace (cf. 11:32)! Jesus is the same Lord to both Jews and Gentiles. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v. 13, see Joel 2:32). This gospel is not the possession of a privileged few – not even the chosen people. The Gospel is salvation without limits, a universal promise for everyone who believes.

Paul's argument in Romans 10:11-15 clearly indicates that, "The gospel is universal and its application demands a universal proclamation" (Spirit Filled Life Bible 1991:1704), including Jews and Gentiles. They are without excuse in their unbelief. Wiersbe (1991:124) summarises the meaning of Romans 10:14-17 as follows:

The missionary heart of Paul comes out in verses 14-17. Salvation is by faith, and that faith comes "by hearing … the word of God" (v. 17). But unbelieving sinners (including Israel) cannot hear unless we tell them. God needs people with beautiful feet (Isaiah 52:7) to carry the gospel to the lost.

Furthermore, in Romans 10:19, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:21 to indicate how Moses had issued a warning that Israel would reject God's message. Life Application study Bible (1997:2039) summarises the message of Romans 10:18-20 as follows:

Many Jews who looked for the Messiah refused to believe in him when he came. God offered his salvation to the Gentiles ("those who are not a nation" and "a nation that has no understanding"); thus many Gentiles who didn't even know about a Messiah found and believed in him.

Finally, in Romans 11, Paul argues that there is an intense unity between the "times of the Gentiles" and both the Israel's past economy and her future "ingrafting." His analogy of the olive tree indicates "that there is but one people of God throughout redemptive history" (Fuller, in Zens 2005b).

Zens (2005b) concludes that the only hope for Israel, as portrayed in Romans 10 and 11, is the same gospel of salvation by faith in Christ proclaimed to both Jews and Gentiles:

… there is no hope for Israel apart from the gospel of grace which is proclaimed by local churches, to whom alone, as the pillar and ground of the truth, Christ has entrusted "the faith" until the end of this present evil age. Thus there may well be an ingathering of Jews after "the times of the Gentiles." But when and if this happens, Israel will be "saved" and joined to the body of Christ by believing the same gospel as Paul preached to his brethren in the flesh.

5.4 God never intended that the Jews should have a separate earthly purpose, but an intensely spiritual (heavenly) purpose (Hebrews 11:10,13,16).

For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God…. All these people … admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth…. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:10,13,16 NIV).

Ever since Darby claimed that Israel had an "earthly religion," Dispensationalists have always maintained that Israel is an earthly people related to the earth and the Church is a heavenly people related to heaven. For example, Pickering claims that "God's main purpose with Abraham was not to take him to heaven," but to give him a land" (Zens 2005b).

However, is this actually true? From the above passage from Hebrews it will be become clear that the people themselves (the Old Testament heroes of Faith) are essentially related to

heaven and not earth. From the very beginning, the Jewish religion was intensely spiritual. "In verse 10, we are told that Abraham's real goal was not a portion here on earth, but a (spiritual) *'city whose builder and maker is God'"* (Zens 2005b). Guthrie (1983:232) agrees that the writer of Hebrews (11:10) emphasizes the spiritual nature of the future city:

There is certainly a striking contrast between the tents in Canaan and the city which has no foundations to which the faith of Abraham looked forward… The writer thinks in spiritual terms of the city which God is building. We may compare this idea with the vision of the new Jerusalem which is described in Revelation 21 and 22, where again the spiritual aspects are without question the most important. Abraham had a wide and noble horizon which could look behind the immediate environment.

In Hebrews 11:13-16, the writer of Hebrews indicates that Old Testament believers, in embracing God's promises, were not led to confess a hope in a great earthly kingdom. On the contrary, they regarded themselves as pilgrims and strangers on the earth (Zens 2005b). Guthrie (1983:234) also points out that in verses 13 and 16 the writer emphasizes the importance of the heavenly things rather than the earthly things:

13. The patriarchs had acknowledged (homologesantes) their true status as strangers and exiles. Abraham used the same description of himself in Genesis 23:4. In 1 Peter 1:1; 2:11 a similar description is applied to Christians. In Hebrews the idea fits in with the earlier allusion to the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness (chapter 3) and the writer's aim is clearly to use this as a pattern. It is all of a piece with the underlying principle of the epistle that it is the heavenly and not the earthly things which are most important 16. The better country is at once identified as a heavenly one. The identification of the two adjectives (kreittonos, epouraniou) is particularly characteristic of this epistle. It places the emphasis on spiritual rather than material

inheritance.

6. Conclusion

The author is convinced that the system of Dispensationalism is faulty. That does not mean that the contributions that Dispensationalists have made should be totally discounted. In fact, it is evident that throughout recent Church History many Dispensationalists have made a profound contribution towards extending the Kingdom of God. However, when making a Biblical evaluation of the system of Dispensationalism, all subjective feelings should be put aside, and one should be as objective as possible. In the light of Scripture, it is evident that Dispensationalism is faulty in the following areas of theology:

6.1 Dispensationalism has wrongly divided the word of truth

· Dispensationalism has a distorted view of God's plan of salvation.

A proper exegesis of Matthew 21:43 clarifies God's plan of salvation for all people, namely, that (1) the kingdom of God has already arrived in the Coming of Jesus Christ and that it is given to a people who will produce its fruit; and (2) those who reject Christ, and His plan of salvation – through unbelief and disobedience – are rejected by God.

God's plan of salvation has always been the same: salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. Prior to the coming of Christ, those who trusted in the promise of Christ were saved by faith: "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6, NIV). Through faith in God alone – the One promised them redemption in Christ – Old Testament believers were assured of their salvation (Psalm 32:1-2) (Gillespie 2001).

A fatal flaw of Dispensationalism is that it divides up salvation into more than one "plan of salvation." For example, it separates God's plan for Israel from His plan for the Church. Gillespie (2001) summarises the position of Dispensationalism regarding the nature of salvation as follows:

The ages of dispensationalism are taught as temporary stages of salvation. Each dispensation offers a distinct plan or way of salvation. The nature of salvation in each varies according to that particular dispensation. Each dispensation concludes, and the following one is necessitated, by the failure of Mankind to follow its terms, arrangements, or conditions. This scheme of dispensationalism presents salvation as coming about in a progression. It is as though in each age God makes an improvement on the previous one. It teaches that God is working to get it right or find something that works while Humanity keeps defeating His attempts. God is seen as developing a plan until He finally succeeds (partially) through Jesus Christ.

· Dispensationalism has a distorted view of Israel's destiny.

It is clear from Acts 13:32 that the "hope of Israel" has already been accomplished in the Resurrection. Zens (1978:51) summarises the twisted exegesis of Dispensationalism regarding the nature of Israel's destiny as follows:

…the central tenets of Dispensationalism are highly suspect in the light of the Word of God. This has come about because Dispensationalism has failed to see that Israel's hope has come. Therefore, much is made future that is already fulfilled. In this sense, they yet remain like the Jewish interpreters of the first century who await for something that was manifest in their midst.

According to Dispensationalists, Jesus' offer of a literal

Kingdom to Israel was rejected and was, therefore, postponed. Ewing (1999) explains that, according to Scripture, the opposite is true:

The idea behind the Dispensational view is that Christ came at his first advent to offer Israel an earthly kingdom but they refused, and it was postponed, creating the church as a "parenthesis" in history. Ironically, in John 6:15, we find the Jews trying to make Him king by force, but Jesus refuses! In contrast, Christ said, "My kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36 NIV)." They didn't reject Christ's earthly kingdom offer, He rejected theirs! They rejected His spiritual kingdom.

It is further claimed by Dispensationalists that the covenant promises yet to be fulfilled lie primarily in Israel's possession and rule of the land of Palestine. However, Ewing (1999) indicates that there is little evidence in the New Testament to support this claim:

While it is recognized by all that the land promise is a continuous theme on seemingly every page of the Old Testament, it is rarely noticed that it virtually vanishes in the New. In fact, except for a couple of brief historical references, it is only even mentioned in one book! Furthermore, this single epistle, Hebrews, directly deals with the promise, and spiritualizes it.

6.2 Dispensationalism makes use of false presuppositions

· Dispensationalism wrongly separates Israel and the Church

The Bible clearly teaches that God's plan for Israel and the promises and prophecies spoken to Israel are fulfilled in the Church. For example, Paul uses the word everyone in Romans 10:13 to indicate that the way of salvation is open to all, Jew and Gentile alike. However, Dispensationalists deny this

teaching. Gillespie (2001) identifies this as a fundamental mistake of dispensational teaching:

They deny that these promises are fulfilled in the Church, but rather must be fulfilled in Israel, even if it necessitates rearranging the entire sequence of end time events. This is exactly what dispensational teachers do.

As a result of a literal interpretation of Biblical prophecy, one of the major characteristics of Dispensationalists is their false teaching that Israel (the Jewish nation) is distinct from the Church. They believe that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament (especially regarding physical blessings, such as land), apply only to Israel unless God has stated otherwise. They believe that these promises were not intended as prophecies about what God would do spiritually for the church, but will literally be fulfilled by Israel itself (largely in the millennium). For example, the promise of the land is interpreted to mean that God will one day fully restore Israel to Palestine (Staff 2005).

Using the literal method of interpretation of the biblical covenants and prophecy, Dispensationalists have compiled a specific set of core beliefs about God’s kingdom programme, and what the future will hold for ethnic Israel and for the Church. They believe in a distinction between Israel and the Church, and a promised future earthly reign of Christ on the throne of David. (The Davidic Kingdom.) This has led Dispensationalists to some very specific conclusions about the end-times (Dispensationalism 2005).

A major problem with Dispensationalism can, therefore, be seen in their erroneous and unbiblical distinction between Israel and the Church:

Dispensationalism sees Israel as an earthly people with earthly promises, and the church as a heavenly people with heavenly promises. Membership in Israel is by natural birth.

One enters the church by supernatural birth. Dispensationalists view Israel and the church as having distinct eternal destinies. Israel will receive an eternal earthly Kingdom, and the church an eternal heavenly Kingdom (Dispensationalism: A Return to Biblical Theology or Pseudo Christian Cult 2005).

Staff (2005) summarizes this problem of Dispensationalism as follows:

In many ways it is thus accurate to say that dispensationalism believes in "two peoples of God." Although both Jews and Gentiles are saved by Christ through faith, believing Israel will be the recipient of additional "earthly" promises (such as prosperity in the specific land of Palestine, to be fully realized in the millennium).

· Dispensationalism promotes disunity between Israel and the Church

The book of Hebrews clearly indicates a close unity between the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the Church. Hebrews makes it clear that the Old Covenant is fulfilled in the New. For example, Hebrews 11 shows that the Old Testament heroes of Faith are essentially related to heaven and not earth. Hence, from the very beginning, the Jewish religion was intensely spiritual, and thus God's purpose for Israel is fulfilled in the Church. In addition, in Hebrews 3:4-6, 11, the wilderness experience of Israel is used as an analogy for the Church. Zens (2005b) elaborates:

The "rest" is entered by faith. Unbelief will keep a man out of heavenly glory and bring him to damnation, even as unbelief kept a generation of Israelites out of a land flowing with milk and honey.

While the New Testament writers see the focus of Old Testament prophecy as related to things present and accomplished, Dispensationalists state that prophecy centrally relates to

the future glory of national Israel and not the Church age (Zens 2005b). In this way, Dispensationalists promote the disunity between Israel and the Church. This disunity is in sharp contrast to the Biblical position:

In contrast, Christian theology has always maintained the essential continuity of Israel and the church. The elect of all the ages are seen as one people, with one Savior, one destiny. This continuity can be shown by examining a few Old Testament prophesies with their fulfillment. Dispensationalists admit that if the church can be shown to be fulfilling promises made to Israel their system is doomed (Dispensationalism: A Return to Biblical Theology or Pseudo Christian Cult 2005).

· Dispensationalism mistakenly holds to a literal interpretation of all Biblical prophecy

Dispensationalists argue that they hold to a literal interpretation of the Biblical prophecy, while claiming that their theological opponents have a tendency to spiritualise prophetic passages. For example, Charles Ryrie (1995:88) argues that since all prophecies concerning the first coming of Christ were fulfilled literally, it stands to reason that all prophecies concerning the second coming will also be literal. However, the problem with this argument is that it is simply not true. “A review of the prophecies concerning Christ, reveal that only 34 of the 97 (35%) were fulfilled literally” (Crenshaw and Grover 1989:9-13). The rest of the prophecies were analogical or typical fulfilments.

Furthermore, many contemporary authors tell their readers that they interpret the Bible literally. However, Schwertley (1996) shows that this is not always the case:

But if you read their books, scenes with bows, arrows and horses become future battles with tanks, helicopters and airplanes. The mark of the beast becomes a computer chip or

bar code. The locusts from the bottomless pit (Revelation 9) supposedly become attack helicopters, and so on. Are there any premillennial authors or commentators who believe that the beast from the sea with seven heads and ten horns (Revelation 13) is a literal creature?

The truth is that all Bible scholars believe that Scripture should be interpreted literally at times and symbolically at other times, depending on the context of the passage and intent of the author. Gane (1997) explains:

All conservative interpreters of the Bible believe that the Scriptures should be interpreted literally. But a literal interpretation of Scripture involves recognition of the symbolic nature of some passages. Apocalyptic prophecy makes a considerable use of symbolism. Dispensationalists insist on giving a literal interpretation to passages that are clearly intended to be symbolic or allegorical.

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