

# The <sup>Distinct</sup> People <sup>S</sup> of God

A THEOLOGICAL STUDY OF DISPENSATIONALISM

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Fall, 2000

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## Introduction and Methodology

As a systematic theology, dispensationalism has a quiet, yet pervasive influence on evangelical Christianity in America. The list of American seminaries that are dispensationalist institutions is impressive, including Dallas Theological Seminary, Moody Bible Institute, and the Multnomah School of the Bible, to name a few. Likewise, popular Christian television programs such as those found on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN) feature a surprising number of Bible teachers and preachers who proceed from a dispensationalist viewpoint. Modern airwaves and bookstores are “flooded with dispensational preaching, books, . . . and even study Bibles” (e.g., the Scofield Reference Bible and the Ryrie Study Bible).<sup>1</sup> It stands to reason that, whether they know it or not, American believers will encounter and come under the influence of the tenets of dispensationalism many times.

Christians need to have at least a cursory awareness of what competing theological systems teach in order to make an informed, Biblically enlightened decision about which ones conform most closely to Christian orthodoxy. This study, therefore, will be concerned with discovering the basic tenets of dispensationalism and examining them in the light of Scripture. Some teachings of the Church Fathers will also be compared to dispensationalism, showing the degree to which it reflects the historic teachings of Christianity. Before concluding this study, the impact of dispensationalism in contemporary church life will be considered as well.

## What Is Dispensationalism?

Dispensationalism can be broadly characterized as a system of theology which describes the unfolding of God’s plan for the world in a series of successive “dispensations” or “stewardship arrangements.”<sup>2</sup> The word “dispensation” is derived from the New Testament’s (NT) usage of

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Sarver, “Modern Dispensationalism: A Biblical Analysis,” Reformed Sermons, <[http://www.sermon.org/Topical/Dispensationalism/DP\\_1.htm](http://www.sermon.org/Topical/Dispensationalism/DP_1.htm)>.

<sup>2</sup> Ryrie, Charles C., “Dispensationalism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker House Books, 1984), 321-322.

the Greek words οἰκονομέω and οἰκονόμος, which are usually translated “to be a steward,” “steward,” or “stewardship” (see Luke 12:42; 16:1-2; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2).<sup>3</sup> They can also be translated “dispensation” or “administration,” as in Eph. 1:10.<sup>4</sup> Each dispensation generally has three distinct features:

1. From God's standpoint, each dispensation is an “economy” in which He reveals himself and relates to mankind in a specific manner.<sup>5</sup>
2. Mankind bears a corresponding responsibility to be obedient to the revelation received within a given dispensation.<sup>6</sup>
3. Mankind invariably disobeys, causing each dispensation to eventuate in climactic human failure and divine judgment.<sup>7</sup>

Put succinctly, a dispensation is “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”<sup>8</sup> Dispensationalists divide redemptive history (from past beginning to future end) into a varying number of dispensations, usually between three and seven.<sup>9</sup> While this general scheme of redemptive history is certainly characteristic of dispensationalism, it does not adequately capture the essence of dispensational theology. In fact, most systems of Christian theology admit to one degree or another that God’s redemptive plan has progressively unfolded over time in successive stages, covenants, or economies.<sup>10</sup>

This has prompted dispensationalists such as Charles Ryrie to declare that the “primary problem in the whole matter of dispensationalism [is] that of definition.”<sup>11</sup> As stated above, many nondispensationalists share (in some measure) the dispensationalist’s partitioned view of redemptive history; others, in their eagerness to discredit dispensationalism, have been all too content to construct a convenient straw man or a distorted caricature of what dispensationalists

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<sup>3</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Ryrie, “Dispensationalism,” 322.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>7</sup> Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 35.

<sup>8</sup> C. I. Scofield, Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 5n.4.

<sup>9</sup> Ryrie, “Dispensationalism,” 322.

<sup>10</sup> Keith A. Mathison, Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God? (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1995), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ryrie, Dispensationalism, 23.

believe.<sup>12</sup> In either case, that which defines and distinguishes dispensational theology is obscured. To further complicate matters, dispensationalism is still undergoing continued development and refinement within certain theological circles.<sup>13</sup> In order to avoid confusion and evaluate dispensationalism fairly and accurately, it is necessary to discover precisely what constitutes the irreducible core, the *sine qua non* (absolutely essential element) of dispensational theology. Ryrie contends that dispensationalism's *sine qua non* is threefold:

1. A dispensationalist draws a distinction between Israel and the Church. God has separate plans for each people, the former being earthly, the latter being heavenly.<sup>14</sup>
2. The dispensationalist's approach to interpreting Scripture is "consistently literal, or plain."<sup>15</sup> By contrast, spiritualizing or allegorizing Scripture is a distinctly nondispensationalist practice.<sup>16</sup>
3. Dispensational theology elucidates the underlying purpose of God in His creation, which is to bring glory to Himself.<sup>17</sup>

While helpful, Ryrie's list can be trimmed down even more. According to point number three, it is distinctive of dispensationalist theology to teach that God's overriding purpose in Creation is to bring glory to Himself; in truth, however, this view is not unique to dispensationalism. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (which is the classic Reformed confession) proclaims that God works in and through all things for His own glory.<sup>18</sup> As for Ryrie's second point on dispensationalism's literal hermeneutic, it is generally agreed among conservative biblical scholars that the interpretation of Scripture should be as consistently literal as possible. By no means, however, is this universally possible — as Mathison writes, "The Bible itself will not allow it."<sup>19</sup> It must be said (while fully affirming the truth of II Tim. 3:16) that the Bible's human authors often employed poetic, figurative, and even (unwittingly) imprecise language, particularly

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<sup>12</sup> Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 13-14.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 14-15n.3.

<sup>14</sup> Ryrie, 39.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>18</sup> Mathison, 5.

when attempting to describe the ineffable. Take, for instance, the repeated mention of “whirling wheels” which are nested within one another and “full of eyes” in Ezekiel’s description of certain visions he had received (Eze. 1, 10). Clearly, Ezekiel was attempting to find human words to describe his experience with a category of reality that is wholly other — a slavishly literal translation of such passages will produce an utterly nonsensical result. In addition, not all dispensationalists adhere to Ryrie’s “rule.” C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), whose infamous *Scofield Reference Bible* was largely responsible for fueling the acceptance and rapid spread of dispensationalism in the United States, writes that it is “permitted — while holding firmly [their] historical veracity — reverently to spiritualize the historical Scriptures.”<sup>20</sup> Ryrie’s second assertion must therefore be dismissed as well.<sup>21</sup> Only his *first* point concerning the distinction between Israel and the Church is truly unique to dispensationalism.

John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who is regarded as the first to synthesize and systematically enounce dispensationalism as a theological construct, began with the premise of an Israel/Church distinction. A renewed sense of his union with Christ (according to Eph. 2:6) transformed his ecclesiology — since Christ is seated in the heavenly places, and believers are seated with Him, then “the Church of God, as He considers it, was composed only of those who were so united to Christ . . . .”<sup>22</sup> The Church, therefore, is a heavenly body.<sup>23</sup> Israel, on the other hand, is a separate people which has “its own blessing under [Christ] according to His promises of old.”<sup>24</sup> Darby further states that the Jewish remnant (Rom. 9:27-29) “has neither the church’s heavenly blessings nor the church’s hope.”<sup>25</sup> Thus Darby distinguishes between Israel (an earthly people) and the Church (a heavenly people), with each having a unique destiny and inheriting

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>20</sup> C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1907), 45-46.

<sup>21</sup> For another example of a dispensationalist who diverges from the “consistently literal” hermeneutic, see page 33 of J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1964) for his analysis of Ezekiel 40-48. Pentecost asserts that the literal animal sacrifices referenced therein are offered only as “memorials” in the millennial fulfillment of this passage.

<sup>22</sup> John Nelson Darby, *Letters of J. N. D.*, vol. 3 (Kingston-On-Thames: Stow Hill Bible & Tract Depot), 298.

<sup>23</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 15.

<sup>24</sup> William Kelly, ed., *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (Kingston-On-Thames: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot), vol. 11, *Prophetic No. 4*, by J. N. Darby, 278.

different promises in the outworking of God’s plan. Scofield echoes Darby’s position by bifurcating the fulfillment of God’s promise to make Abraham into a great nation (Gen. 15:18) — Abraham has a natural, earthly posterity in Israel, and a spiritual, heavenly posterity in “all men of faith, whether Jew or Gentile.”<sup>26</sup> This bifurcation is carried so far as to designate Christian Jews (ostensibly part of the Church) and unbelieving Jews as two different kinds of Israelite, the former being “spiritual,” the latter “natural.”<sup>27</sup> Even modern progressive dispensationalists, whom Ryrie accuses of blurring the Israel/Church distinction, maintain the essence of this bifurcation.<sup>28</sup> Progressive dispensationalist Bruce Ware states that “Israel and the Church are in one sense *a united people* of God . . . , while in another sense they remain separate in their identity and so comprise *differing peoples* of God.”<sup>29</sup> So throughout the history of dispensationalism’s development and various permutations, the Israel/Church distinction is the one constant and truly constitutes the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism.

## Were the Church Fathers Dispensationalists?

One of the most frequent criticisms leveled at dispensationalism is that it is a recent theological development with no basis in the historical creeds or doctrinal positions of the Church. Ryrie rightly counters that “newness” is not the final arbiter of whether or not a system of theology stands or falls; the crucial question is, “Is it scriptural?”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, it is only reasonable to assume that “the Holy Spirit has been at work . . . in the church through the ages,” and that the “doctrinal, creedal, and confessional work” which has preceded that of the present day Church is of immense value and relevance to any theological system or study.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>26</sup> Scofield, 25n.1.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1202n.1.

<sup>28</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 40.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 96.

<sup>30</sup> Ryrie, 62.

<sup>31</sup> J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 25.

Presumably, this is why Ryrie himself turns to the Church Fathers in order to debunk the charge that dispensationalism does not reflect the historic orthodoxy of the Church. Ryrie's contention is that an incipient or proto-dispensationalism is apparent in the writings of the Church Fathers.<sup>32</sup> Take for example, the following quotation of Iranaeus (130-200 A.D.):

The Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord. For this reason were four principal covenants given to the human race: one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom (*Against Heresies*, III, XI.8).

Although Iranaeus does not specifically label each of the time periods he enumerates above as dispensations, Ryrie argues that Iranaeus' meaning is remarkably similar to the modern understanding of a dispensation.<sup>33</sup> It has already been demonstrated herein, however, that dividing redemptive history into stages or epochs is not uniquely endemic to dispensationalism. Ryrie's argument for early proto-dispensationalism would be much stronger if statements reflecting the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism could be found in the writings of the Church Fathers. But Justin Martyr (110-165 A.D.) states the exact *opposite* of the Israel/Church distinction:

As, therefore, Christ is the Israel and the Jacob, even so we, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelitic race (*Dialog with Trypho*, CXXXV).

Justin (a Gentile) here tells Trypho (a Jew) that those who have put their faith in Christ constitute the true Israel.<sup>34</sup>

In light of these facts, Ryrie's appeal to the Church Fathers in support of his early proto-dispensationalism has little to commend itself. Not until the time of Darby and Scofield in the 19th century and thereafter does the essential Israel/Church distinction begin to surface in organized

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<sup>32</sup> Ryrie, 63.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 64. In similar fashion, Ryrie also appeals to Clement of Alexandria, Justin Martyr's *Dialog with Trypho*, and St. Augustine (see pp. 63-64). Each of these quotations has only to do with the general dispensational scheme of dividing redemption history, *not* the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism.

<sup>34</sup> Mathison, 13.

form.<sup>35</sup> Still, this alone does not disprove dispensationalism’s essential tenet — before it can be affirmed or dismissed, the Israel/Church distinction must be scrutinized through the lens of Biblical data.

## **The *Sine Qua Non* of Dispensationalism in the Light of Scripture**

The dispensationalist’s insistence on the Israel/Church distinction requires that each term has an inherently narrow, technical sense. Based upon the evidence presented above, “Israel” can be defined strictly as an ethnic term, referring to men and women who are physically descended from Jacob (Israel). In an equal sense, it also refers to *unbelieving* ethnic Jews who have *not* come to faith in Jesus Christ. The term “church,” on the other hand, is a technical term for Christians, both Jew and Gentile.<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Israel and the Church are mutually exclusive. Darby himself makes this crystal clear:

There never was a Jewish church. The church, even in its outward profession, stands by faith — it is never composed of natural branches [see Rom. 11]. The Jews were natural branches. . . . A Jewish church is an unscriptural fallacy.<sup>37</sup>

Does the Bible use the terms “Israel” and “church” in the same manner, drawing the same distinctions?

### ***Defining “Israel” and “Church”***

Most often, when Christians hear the Greek word ἐκκλησία, an immediate translation to “church” occurs in their minds. But the word is used somewhat more broadly in the NT. It can have a secular sense, referring to an assembly or gathering of any sort — it is used in this manner to describe the rioting Ephesians in Acts 19: 29, 32, and 41. In Acts 7:38, Stephen uses ἐκκλησία

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>36</sup> Recall the aforementioned statement by Scofield concerning Abraham’s heavenly seed — “men of faith,” both Jew and Gentile, comprise this “spiritual” posterity.

<sup>37</sup> William Kelly, ed., The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby (Kingston-On-Thames: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot), vol. 10, Ecclesiastical No. 4, by J. N. Darby, 71.

in his address to the Sanhedrin; here it is translated “congregation” or “assembly,” and is clearly parallel to phrases having their root in the OT, such as “Sons of Israel” (v. 37) and “our fathers” (v. 38) — thus the nation of Israel, led through the desert by Moses and assembled at Mount Sinai (Deut. 9:10), is referred to by Stephen as ἐκκλησία.<sup>38</sup> From these examples, it can be argued that ἐκκλησία is best translated “assembly” or “gathering.”<sup>39</sup> But what of its references to believers in Christ? Crucial to understanding the religious significance of ἐκκλησία is its appearance in 1 Cor. 1:2, where Paul addresses “the Church of God (ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ) which is in Corinth.” The modifying phrases which follow (“those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus” and “all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”) make it clear that a universal ἐκκλησία has found local expression at Corinth. The genitive τοῦ θεοῦ (of God) differentiates this universal ἐκκλησία from all others, viz. secular ones, and explains “who assembles, or who causes men to assemble . . . . [It] is plain that God assembles His own. *To the ἐκκλησία belong all those who are His*” (italics added).<sup>40</sup> Biblically, when used in reference to the Christian community of faith, the word ἐκκλησία could be understood as “the assembly of God,” the gathering of those people who are uniquely His. This does not exclude the dispensationalist understanding of “church” — certainly, NT Christians fall under the umbrella of “the assembly of God.” But it is clear that the Bible does not employ ἐκκλησία as a strict technical term referring exclusively to Christians. Rather, those who are assembled in Christ’s name and at His behest constitute the ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ.

What of the term “Israel” (Ἰσραήλ)? How is it used in the NT? Ἰσραήλ can simply refer to the geographical region of Palestine where the Jews resided, as in Matt. 2:20; Joseph is instructed to return to ἡ γῆ Ἰσραήλ (the land of Israel) with Jesus and Mary. At times, Ἰσραήλ serves as the designation of the Jewish people, whether referred to historically or

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<sup>38</sup> K. L. Schmidt, “ἐκκλησία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. III, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 504.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 505.

contemporaneously with regard to the writers of the NT. Luke 1:80 is an example of this, where the advent of John the Baptist's ministry is called the "day of his public appearance to Israel" (NASB). In a historic sense, Ἰσραήλ is used by Paul in reference to the patriarch Jacob and those descended from him (Rom. 9:6).<sup>41</sup> Finally, Ἰσραήλ can have a distinctly spiritual or religious connotation which refers to the community of faith. As the angel Gabriel announces the coming birth and ministry of John the Baptist to Zachariah, he states that John "will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God" (Luke 1:16). A few verses later, God is identified as "the God of Israel" (Luke 1:68). In each of these cases, Ἰσραήλ "carries the special sense that the people thus named is the people of God" (see also Matt. 10:6, 15:24; Jn. 1:49, 12:13; Rom. 9-11).<sup>42</sup>

Note that this understanding of the word Ἰσραήλ as the people of God is remarkably similar in force to the phrase ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ (the assembly of God). While similar, they should only be equated if there is biblical evidence to support it. If they are indeed parallel expressions, then the essential Israel/Church distinction maintained by dispensationalists is brought into serious question.

### ***Some Key Scriptures***

In Romans 9:6, Paul makes a startling statement: Not all who are descended from Israel are from Israel. Similar statements can be found elsewhere in Romans:

[He] is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God (Rom. 2:28-29).

[Not] all [are] children [of God] because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is a

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<sup>41</sup> William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, and Frederick W. Danker, eds., A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, 2d ed., rev. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 381).

<sup>42</sup> Walter Gutbrod, "Ἰσραήλ," in Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. III, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 384.

word of promise: “At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son” (Rom. 9:7-9).

What precisely is Paul’s meaning here? Paul’s two references to Israel in 9:6 cannot be identical, i.e., Israel cannot refer (as required by dispensationalism’s *sine qua non*) both times to those physically descended from Jacob throughout the ages. Paul’s meaning would then be, “Not all who are physically descended from the patriarch Israel are physically descended from the patriarch Israel,” which makes absolutely no sense. There must be a shift in the intended meaning of “Israel” between Paul’s first and second use of the word. Of the remaining possible meanings (see above discussion of the meaning of Ἰσραήλ), understanding Israel as “the people of God” is the only logical choice. Thus Romans 9:6 could be rendered:

Not all who are descended from the patriarch Israel are necessarily the people of God.

How can this apparent paradox exist? At issue, in Paul’s logic, is what makes one a part of the community of faith which belongs to God. Although there is great advantage to those descended from the Jewish bloodline (Rom. 3:1-2, Rom. 9:4-5), the primary concern is an inward faith-response to God which is the core nature of a true Israelite (see Rom. 4).<sup>43</sup> The words of John the Baptist further illustrate this point:

Therefore bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham for our father,” for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children Abraham (Luke 3:8, cf. Matt. 3:8-9).

Paul later speaks of the nation of Israel in parabolic format, comparing it to a cultivated olive tree (Rom. 11:16-24). Speaking to Gentile Christians, Paul states that some of the existing branches of this tree were broken off “for their unbelief” (Rom. 11:20). Again, Paul’s imagery is reminiscent of John the Baptist’s rebuke of the Jews at the Jordan river:

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<sup>43</sup> F. F. Bruce, Romans, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. The Rev. Canon Leon Morris (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 177.

[The] axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire (Luke 3:9).

As with Rom. 9:6, Paul's tree parable cannot be speaking of Israel in strictly ethnic terms, because believing Gentiles are *included* in this tree while some who are physically descended from Israel are *excluded* from the tree by reason of their rejection of the Gospel.

This constitutes a clear intersection of ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ and Ἰσραήλ — together, both Jews and Gentiles comprise one people of God on the basis of their mutual faith in Jesus Christ. *With the advent of Christ, the identity of Israel is indissolubly mingled with that of ἐκκλησία.* It is not that ἐκκλησία *replaces* Israel, but that the true Israel of the ages (i.e., that people who, by virtue of God's election and their ensuing, inward faith-response are uniquely His) finds its NT expression solely in those who have received the Gospel (whether they are Jews or Gentiles).

Ephesians 2:11-19 supports this conclusion. In this passage, Paul describes the Gentiles' situation by listing 5 conditions which were true of them before the advent of Christ:

1. They were separated from Christ.
2. They were excluded from the commonwealth or citizenship (from Greek πολιτεία) of Israel.<sup>44</sup>
3. They were strangers to the covenants of promise.
4. They were without hope.
5. They were without God in the world.

All five of these conditions have been changed, Paul writes, by the shed blood of Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:13). The context does not permit picking and choosing which of these conditions have been altered by Jesus' sacrifice — they all “stand or fall together.”<sup>45</sup> The reversal of the second condition, viz., the inclusion of Gentiles in the πολιτεία of Israel, is particularly troublesome for dispensationalists. Progressive dispensationalist Carl Hoch characterizes it in a number of different ways, ranging from a “sharing” of covenants between Israel and Gentiles to the notion that

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<sup>44</sup> Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker, 686.

<sup>45</sup> Mathison, 34.

inclusion in the πολιτεία of Israel denotes “equal footing” between Jews and Gentiles.<sup>46</sup> His concern is to avoid the idea that Gentiles *become* Israel.<sup>47</sup> But this concern is based on the dispensationalist’s erroneous understanding of Israel and Church — they are not mutually exclusive terms, nor is one swallowed up in or replaced by the other. They are complementary, each having to do with the true congregation or assembly of God’s people, irrespective of their nationality.

## Dispensationalism in Contemporary Church Life

On the popular Christian television channel, TBN, Charles Ryrie was recently a guest on a program hosted by a Jewish believer. It was not very far into the program before this Jewish Christian revealed himself to be a staunch proponent of dispensationalism. At one point, he asked Mr. Ryrie to comment on what he perceived to be “anti-Semitic” teachings being propagated by nondispensationalist theologians — presumably, these teachings were viewed as anti-Semitic by the host because they reflected the replacement theology espoused by some nondispensationalists.<sup>48</sup> The hurtfulness and divisiveness of the host’s statement should be immediately apparent. How many dispensationalist theologians think the same way?<sup>49</sup> While this author has no desire to stereotype any dispensationalist theologian, the question is a relevant one — TBN airs programs featuring a large cadre of dispensationalists. Depending on how many echo this Jewish believer’s characterization of nondispensationalist theology, it could represent a serious rift within the Body of Christ.

A secondary question, which is no less relevant, arises: Where did such a sentiment come from? Perhaps this particular person’s Jewishness got the best of him — as a Jewish believer, he no doubt feels a certain degree of solidarity with and concern for the modern state of Israel. But

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<sup>46</sup> Carl B. Hoch, Jr., “The New Man of Ephesians 2,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 106, 113.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>48</sup> Replacement theologians teach that Israel has been completely replaced by the Church, which is now the true Israel of God.

non-Jews who are dispensationalists have parroted similar sentiments almost bordering on Zionism — in fact, one of the author’s professors once proclaimed in a church gathering that Israel is “the spiritual center of the universe.” The dispensationalist’s empathy with Israel is profound.

Unfortunately, this can lead to an antipathy or indifference toward modern Arab cultures, many of which are bent on the destruction of Israel as a political state. A missionary to the Middle East (acquainted with the author) once decried an appalling apathy he perceived on the part of American Christians with regard to evangelizing Arab nations.

Given the untenable nature of dispensationalism’s Israel/Church distinction and its implications, balance must be brought to the Christian’s view of modern-day Israel. It is neither more nor less deserving of the compassion, prayers, and ministry of the Church than any other people group.

## **Conclusion**

Dispensationalism is a complex theological construct; in the space of one research paper, it is impossible to cover all of dispensationalism’s eschatological, ecclesiastical, and prophetic intricacies. Instead, the focus of this study has been to uncover the irreducible core of dispensationalism and compare it with the relevant teachings of Scripture. In the process of doing so, dispensationalism’s essential Israel/Church distinction has been shown to be incompatible with the Bible — in the NT, the terms “Israel” and “Church” can both refer to the people of God, and actually intersect in the writings of Paul (Rom. 9-11, Eph. 2). As stated above, the Israel of the ages is populated by those who have responded in faith to the call and election of God; with the advent of Christ, the assembly of God (Israel) includes men and women of “every tribe, tongue, and nation” (Rev. 14:6), Jew or otherwise, who are genuine disciples of the Lord Jesus.

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<sup>49</sup> Ryrie did not appear to deny that nondispensationalists promote anti-Semitic teachings.

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