

# Dispensationalism or “Biblical Covenantalism”

## – What’s in a Name?

By Paul Martin Henebury

If someone wants to know what my general outlook on the Bible is I will tell them it is Traditional or Classic Dispensational. I then feel compelled to qualify this confession by making it clear that I do not follow the Tim LaHaye’s and Hal Lindsey’s of this world. Where our theological paths cross I might find myself in agreement with them a fair bit of the time. I would not agree with their Arminianism for one thing. I’m not sure about this, but LaHaye may be closer to Limborch and Finney than to Arminius himself. In any case, I do not think it is wrong to be an Arminian of the stamp of Arminius himself (or Episcopius), and I am sure that many Calvinists who can hardly bring themselves to say the word without their lip curling have never read Arminius for themselves (or a contemporary like Thomas Oden).

But differing on such matters does not make me a Reluctant Dispensationalist. Perhaps the majority of Dispensationalists are and have been Calvinistic in their soteriology. I myself believe salvation to be a sovereign work of God for the elect even if I wouldn’t formulate it in the usual Calvinist way.

I am not a Reluctant Dispensationalist either because I differ with my teachers, Mal Couch, Thomas Ice, Arnold Fruchtenbaum, Steve Ger, Tom McCall, and Robert Lightner. I learned a great deal from these men and esteem them all. But truly I wish we could all go back to the time of Erich Sauer and Alva McClain and follow their lead. They had little to say about “dispensations” in their overall schemes.

I must also insert here that I find little use for Progressive Dispensationalism. I do think their treatment of the New Covenant is quite helpful, but their “complementary hermeneutics” looks to me like they are trying to have their cake and eat it. Often it seems that they have come to their views independently of the text in its context.

My reason for being reluctant is the name! Yes, I know, what’s in a name? Dan Phillips this past week has, in personal correspondence, tried to reason with me about this. “Dispensationalism” is the name we’ve got and we’re stuck with it. I greatly appreciate his advice, and I believe he is probably right. So while I shall have to continue to say I am a Dispensationalist, I would like to try to explain why I have such an issue with the name, and why I shall continue to put in a word for “Biblical Covenantalism,” regardless of its obvious lack of shop-window appeal. I’ll try to do it by way of contrast. DT = Dispensationalism and BC = Biblical Covenantalism:

**1. DT: is led by its very name to define itself by an aspect of its approach which is really tangential to its overall genius. This false definition then circumscribes the outlook and understanding of its adherents and places blinkers (blindness) on their theological vision.**

**Dispensations are just not that important: the biblical covenants are. Dispensationalism is limited because of what dispensations can do.**

**BC: defines itself by the covenants found within the pages of Scripture. Because these covenants, correctly understood, comprehend God's declared purposes for the creation (not just Israel, His chosen people), they expand one's theological vision. Biblical Covenantalism is expansive because of what the covenants of Scripture can do.**

**2. DT: although I don't expect everyone to see this, Dispensationalism derives its hermeneutics from "without" by asserting the normal or literal sense via grammatical-historical hermeneutics. There is little attempt to derive this hermeneutics from the Bible itself.**

**BC: seeks to derive its hermeneutics (which correspond to traditional grammatical-historical hermeneutics) from "within" – from the Bible itself, in deference to the Biblical Worldview. This acknowledges the comprehensive relation of revelation and knowledge.**

**3. DT: often struggles with the New Covenant and its application. Some believe the New Covenant is only for Israel; some that the Church somehow "participates" in the New Covenant without being a party to it. A few believe Christ made the New Covenant with the Church, but usually they limit it to the salvation of the soul.**

**BC: because it pays special attention to the covenants and their inter-relationships, comprehends the Christocentric orientation of the other covenants around the New Covenant. Christ and the New Covenant are identified, allowing one to see how all beneficiaries of God's grace have a covenantal relation to Him. Thus, the terms of the other covenants are released to be fulfilled once the parties to those covenants (whether national Israel or the Gentiles or both) have passed under the New Covenant in Christ.**

**4. DT: is not redemptively focused; meaning it does not concentrate on the teleological goals of God in Christ for the future of the whole created realm.**

**BC: is redemptively focused in the sense given above.**

**5. DT: tends therefore, not to be as Christological as Covenant Theology.**

**BC: is just as Christological as Covenant Theology, though not artificially reading Christ into foreign contexts. Stressing, as it does, the truth that *this creation* is made through and for Christ; is redeemed in Christ, and will be ruled over and restored by Christ.**

**6. DT: tends to restrict its remit to the areas of ecclesiology and eschatology (e.g. Vlach), in consequence confining its thinking and hence productivity to those areas. It cannot be developed into a worldview system under these confines. This confinement is only exacerbated by the way Dispensationalism defines itself.**

**BC: is far more expansive; focusing on every area of Systematic Theology and worldview through its reflection on the outcome and repercussions of the biblical covenants and the centrality of Christ.**