

Dispensationalism: Root Cause of Modern Antinomianism

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The Messianic community today faces some strong theological challenges. While we are trying to develop a coherent orthodoxy relating to the correct beliefs and practices in relationship to the prophesied restoration of Israel—we face external difficulties from popular Christian belief systems which directly relate to how a person reads and interprets Scripture. The two systems that are in direct opposition to the premise that all born again Believers are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel, and they should live as such, are those of replacement theology and dispensationalism. Replacement theology, widely adhered to in Reformed circles, simply advocates that the nation of Israel has been abolished and Israel's promises have been transferred to a new entity known as the Church, which God is exclusively working through. Any promises of a physical restoration of people to the Holy Land, is to be simply allegorized away as a sign of spiritual bounty. Dispensationalism, in contrast, believes that Israel's promises are still valid, but that Israel has been temporarily put aside because of the Jews' widescale rejection of Yeshua, and that right now God is working through the Church. When the Church has been raptured to Heaven it is said, then God will once again deal with the nation of Israel.

The majority of those coming into the Messianic movement from evangelical Christian backgrounds, come from denominations or churches which have taught some form of dispensational theology. These churches certainly believe that God's promises to Israel are valid, and perhaps may be supportive of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. However, these churches likewise probably believe that although God's promises to Israel are valid, that such promises *only* affect Israel and not today's Christians. The Church is separate from Israel, and God has separate promises and a separate plan for it.

Many evangelical Christian scholars herald dispensationalism as the key to modern Biblical truth. It provides an easy answer for reading the Bible. No longer do literal promises to Israel have to be spiritualized in some sense as applying to the Church, as is the common premise in replacement theology. On the contrary, dispensationalists assert that the literal promises given to Israel are still valid; they just do not apply to the Church. The serious drawback to this is that Scriptures that specifically apply to Israel do not apply to the Church—namely the Tanach or Old Testament—are often overlooked in Bible study. While these texts are important to understand as part of the Biblical narrative and they contain important principles, most dispensationalists assert that since they are not specifically directed to the Church, they do not have to be followed. Some dispensationalists even believe that parts of the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament do not apply to Christians, especially those parts where Yeshua is to speaking to His Jewish followers. (But this does not include all dispensationalists.)

Dispensationalist theology is the primary basis from which much of popular, evangelical Christian preaching has been formulated. Since it advocates that Israel and the Church are separate entities, or groups of elect, and Scripture is divided along the lines of what "group of elect" a person is a part of, dispensationalism is known more by some of the cardinal teachings it has created than as a methodology for understanding Scripture itself. Perhaps the most widely known teaching that is strongly connected to dispensationalism is the pre-tribulation rapture. The infamous pre- versus post-tribulation rapture debate is quite commonplace among those who discuss the end-times. However, there is another cardinal teaching, which is not as commonly known, that comes as a direct result of dispensationalism.

A wide array of persons in the Messianic movement believe, in contrast to much of mainstream Christian theology, that the Torah or Law of Moses is still to be followed today and that it is relevant instruction for all Believers. We believe that Yeshua the Messiah upheld the

Torah in His teachings and actions, and that all Believers must have a foundation in the Torah in order to best understand the remainder of Holy Scripture. Contrary to this position, many in mainstream Christianity relegate the Torah to only being valuable to know for the sake of Biblical history, and perhaps sometimes for the stories that it tells, but not as direct, relevant instruction for our times. Holding the Law of God in very low esteem can lead to what is theologically termed *antinomianism*—the denial of the importance of the Law of God. Alexander M. Renwick, in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, remarks that “It refers to the doctrine that the moral law is not binding upon Christians as a rule of life. In a wider sense it is applied to the views of fanatics who refuse to recognize any law but their own subjective ideas which they usually claim are from the Holy Spirit.”¹

Dispensationalism, advocating that Scriptures clearly for Israel do not apply to the Church, is a common root cause of what is called antinomianism. Antinomianism, in one of its forms, is the cause of the anti-Torah attitude which asserts that the Law of Moses has been completely abolished and done away by the work of Messiah Yeshua, contrary to His words on the matter (Matthew 5:17-19). As it relates to the restoration of Israel many believe has started to occur in our day, it is arguably the greatest stumbling block on which most opposition to it will rest. Dispensationalists will argue that from their point of view what many Messianics believe is in error. They claim that it is in error because we deny the uniqueness of the Church as a separate group of elect, and advocate that the Torah is still to be followed today. **On these points, they are entirely correct.** It is our responsibility as students of the Word to understand why dispensational methods of examining Scripture are flawed and in error.

Dispensationalism is a false teaching that has spread vociferously throughout too much of Western Christianity since its inception almost two centuries ago. Yet, it is a concept that few question. Why is this the case? Because it brings “validity” to many traditions that the Reformation failed to purge from the Church system. It gives a theological substantiation for keeping Christians out of the “Old Testament” and from examining its words closely. As the Messiah said to a group of Pharisees, “you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: ‘THIS PEOPLE HONORS ME WITH THEIR LIPS, BUT THEIR HEART IS FAR AWAY FROM ME. BUT IN VAIN DO THEY WORSHIP ME, TEACHING AS DOCTRINES THE PRECEPTS OF MEN’” (Matthew 15:6-9).² Is the same true of modern Christianity? Just as various Pharisees nullified God’s written commandments to keep their own position “comfortable,” so to speak, have dispensationalists nullified God’s written commandments to derive their own system of ways to approach the Almighty?

Belief in dispensationalism is the reason why many evangelical Christians today discard the importance of the Torah, and do not believe that things like the seventh-day Sabbath, the appointed times of Leviticus 23, or the kosher dietary laws are at all relevant. The understanding of holiness, sadly, is narrowed down to what one exclusively sees in the life example of Yeshua (Jesus). But any understanding of that life example of Yeshua is largely, of course, neutered—because in order to properly understand the Messiah’s mission one must have a strong foundation in the Tanach (Old Testament).³ The all-important truths in the Torah serve to consecrate God’s people unto Him and to set them apart from the world. God told Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 7:6, “For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the

¹ Alexander M. Renwick, “Antinomianism,” in Everett F. Harrison, ed., *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), 48.

² Cf. Mark 7:6-7; cf. Isaiah 29:13; Colossians 2:22.

³ Cf. Luke 24:44.

earth." Ancient Israel was to be holy because they observed His statutes and ordinances, and hence were separated out.

Dispensationalism, advocating that God has two groups of elect, validates many Christians' claim to completely ignore what are improperly viewed as "Jewish commandments," only given to physical descendants of the Patriarchs. Since dispensationalists see themselves as part of a separate entity known as "the Church," Scriptures that without any doubt are given to Israel, do not apply to them as far as obedience, or perhaps even Bible reading, is concerned. In actuality, however, the Torah contains commandments that were given to all of God's people, and according to the Apostle Paul all Believers in Yeshua are a part of the Commonwealth of Israel (Ephesians 2:11-12), or the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).⁴ As today's Messianic community grows and expands, it should be obvious that dispensationalism poses some major challenges to us.

Does the belief that God has two groups of elect have any Scriptural foundation? Should we interpret Scripture from the theological presupposition that God has two groups of elect?

Splitting Up God's People and Wrongly Dividing the Word

The primary Scriptural basis for dispensationalism often comes from the antiquated King James Version translation of 2 Timothy 2:15: "**Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.**" The premise that dispensationalists propose from this verse is that to properly understand the Word of God, one must literally "divide the Bible." One must split it up among God's so-called "groups of elect." Namely, anything that is clearly given to Israel, i.e., the Old Testament, remains for Israel. Anything that is clearly directed toward the Church, i.e., the New Testament, is for the Church. What applies to Israel does not apply to the Church.

The contention supported by dispensationalist C.R. Stam is that "all of the Bible is *for* us, but it is not addressed to us or written about us."⁵ He advocates that only parts of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) clearly directed at non-Jews by the Apostle Paul, are relevant to be followed today. This is because the Apostle Paul was the "apostle to the Gentiles," and since most of the Christian Church today is not Jewish, the bulk of Christians' attention should be focused on the Pauline Epistles. This presents a serious problem as Paul's letters should not stand on their own merit, and they must be interpreted in light of the remaining Apostolic writings, the whole of Scripture, and of course the historical context in which they were written. Even Paul himself would agree that the Messiah's teachings stand primary to his own (1 Timothy 6:3-4).

Stam and other dispensationalists often compare the Bible to a "post office" in which mail is "dispensed" to or siphoned out to post office box owners. The "us" to whom he refers, is the entity called the Church. The premise that most of the Bible is "not about us" is true only in the regard that most of the written Scriptures are very clearly about Israel. Therefore, while texts like the Torah or Prophets or Writings are part of the Biblical story, dispensationalists assume that they do not directly affect "us." Is this interpretation truly justified and can it be supported when we examine the Biblical nature of "the Church"? Is "the Church" an entity separate from Israel?

There is really no such thing in Scripture as a separate entity of elect known as "the Church," which exists outside of Israel. When the Greek word *ekklēsia* (ἐκκλησία), commonly translated as "church," is used in the Apostolic Scriptures, the writers use it as a reference to the people who the Lord first called out of the world at Mount Sinai.

⁴ Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, "Commonwealth of Israel."

⁵ C.R. Stam, *Things That Differ* (Stevens Point, WI: Worzalla Publishing, Co., 1951), 20.

In the Apostolic Scriptures no reader can deny how *ekklēsia* is used as a term to define the Body of Messiah, and so by extension it is rendered as “church” in most English translations of the New Testament. But whether this is an appropriate rendering or not is something critical to ask, because when many people encounter the word “church” they think not of a living and breathing group of Messiah followers, but instead of a building with a steeple.⁶ *TDNT* offers some rather important remarks on the term *ekklēsia*:

“Since the NT uses a single term, translations should also try to do so, but this raises the question whether ‘church’ or ‘congregation’ is always suitable, especially in view of the OT use for Israel and the underlying Hebrew and Aramaic... ‘Assembly,’ then, is perhaps the best single term, particularly as it has both a congregate and an abstract sense, i.e., for the assembling as well as the assembly.”⁷

This Christian commentary says that “assembly” would be the best, consistent translation for the word *ekklēsia*. The Septuagint, or ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible dating three centuries before Yeshua, frequently translates the Hebrew word *qahal* (קָהָל), or assembly/congregation, as *ekklēsia*. *Qahal* is one of the main Hebrew terms for “assembly” or “congregation” used in the Tanach, which almost exclusively refers to Israel. *TWOT* informs us that “usually *qāhāl* is translated as *ekklēsia* in the LXX.”⁸ When the martyr Stephen speaks of “the church in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV), *tē ekklēsia en tē erēmō* (τῆ ἐκκλησία ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ), “the church” here he is speaking of is actually the assembly/congregation of Israel.

The Hebrew word *qahal* is used in the Tanach to describe the people of Israel. *TWOT* indicates that “*qāhāl* may... designate the congregation as an organized body. There is *qahal yisra’el* [קָהָל יִשְׂרָאֵל] (Deut 31:30), *qahal YHWH* [קָהָל יְהוָה] (Num 16:3, etc.), and *qahal ḏlōhīm* [קָהָל אֱלֹהִים] (Neh 13:1) and then at other times merely ‘the assembly’ (*haqqāhāl* [הַקָּהָל]). We encounter... ‘the assembly of the people of God’ (Jud 20:2). Of special interest is the phrase ‘congregation of the Lord’ (*qahal YHWH*) of which there are thirteen instances (Num 16:3; 20:4; Deut 23:2-4; Mic 2:5; 1 Chr 28:8). **It is the nearest OT equivalent of ‘church of the Lord’**”⁹ (emphasis mine).

When the Apostolic writers used the Greek word (ἐκκλησία), often rendered as “church” in our English Bibles, they did not see the *ekklēsia* as a separate assembly or group of people removed from Israel. **They considered the *ekklēsia* to be Israel**, perhaps better viewed as an *Israel maximized* by the arrival of the Messiah, the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

It is not surprising by any means that one of the lexical definitions given for the word *ekklēsia* does in fact include “Israel.” *Thayer* states that “in the Sept. [*ekklēsia* is] often equiv. to קָהָל, the assembly of the Israelites.”¹⁰ *BDAG* further summarizes that not only does *ekklēsia* correspond to the “OT Israelites assembly, congregation,” but asserts how it was used by the early Messianic Believers “in Greek-speaking areas for chiefly two reasons: to affirm continuity with Israel through use of a term found in Gk. translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, and to allay any

⁶ Note how there are various people one will encounter in the Messianic community, who will not use the term “church” because they somehow think it has pagan origins. **But** we do not readily use the term “church” to describe God’s people on theological grounds, and the confusion it frequently can cause. When “the Church” is typically referred to in the editor’s writings, it is primarily to refer to a religious institution.

Consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website “Church, word of pagan origin.”

⁷ K.L. Schmidt, “*ekklēsia*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 397.

⁸ Jack P. Lewis, “*qāhāl*,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 2:790.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 196.

suspicion, esp. in political circles, that Christians were a disorderly group.”¹¹ This is because in an entirely classical context *ekklēsia* could have been used to describe a civil assembly, such as that of the Athenians,¹² or even the Roman Senate. It is unfortunate that *ekklēsia* in most Bibles has been translated as “church,” whereas it would be best rendered as either “assembly” or “congregation,”¹³ with people able to have an easier time seeing that when Yeshua said that He came to “build” His assembly (Matthew 16:18), it is undoubtedly connected with the Father’s promise to “rebuild” Israel (Jeremiah 33:7).¹⁴

Dispensationalism varies in its many forms. There are those who perceive just the “New Testament” for them, and those who believe that true insight can only be found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. But still, there do remain some constants. Dispensationalists assert that the whole of the Scriptures are not for them and that God has two groups of elect: “Israel” and “the Church.” Ultimately, however, most dispensationalists believe that in the eschaton, when Satan is defeated and humanity is restored to the New Heavens and New Earth, that all of God’s people will be unified. However, some dispensationalists do not believe this. Some believe that Israel has been promised an Earthly Kingdom under a sovereign Messiah, whereas promises to “the Church” are in Heaven with a risen Christ. Of course, Paul’s question of “Is Christ divided?” (1 Corinthians 1:13, RSV/NIV) is a perfectly valid one here. Neither God the Father nor God the Son are divided. It is human mortals, in trying to understand God and His Word, who have divided Him to such a contrasting degree.

The Lord told Ancient Israel in Deuteronomy 25:13, “You shall not have in your bag differing weights, a large and a small” (cf. Leviticus 19:36). He prohibited Ancient Israel from having differing weights and measures, or different standards. Proverbs 20:10 states quite candidly, “Differing weights and differing measures, both of them are abominable to the LORD.” Have these basic premises changed? Does God change His mind about holding all those who are within His Realm to the *same standard* (Malachi 3:6)?

The Lord says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (Isaiah 55:8). God does not change His mind because theologians decide that it is more appropriate and convenient for them to split up and compartmentalize the Bible, because they can more easily understand God this way. The Almighty is not divided. God does not have a double standard. *But human beings with a fallen sin nature often do.*

Think of dispensationalism this way: God’s children are all in one house, but His children are split up. Some children (the Christians) think they can go to the refrigerator and eat anything they want, while others (the Jews) feel prohibited from eating certain things. Some children (the Christians) can watch television on any channel they want, while others (the Jews) feel limited to only a few channels. When we take it to an extreme, some children (the Christians) are permitted to bring home boyfriends and girlfriends and engage in promiscuity, while others (the Jews) feel they cannot.

Is this a problem? Yes. It demonstrates that those in the house are not being held to the same set of standards, and causes a disparaging inequality as far as what people are supposed to. Would this cause disunity among those who follow the Almighty? Yes. Then why is this

¹¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

¹² H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 239.

¹³ Two Christian translations that render *ekklēsia* as “assembly” include Young’s Literal Translation and the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible by Jay P. Green.

¹⁴ Consult the editor’s article “When Did ‘the Church’ Begin?”, which includes discussion on the linguistic connections between the verbs *banah* (בָּנָה) and *oikodomeō* (οἰκοδομέω), employed in Jeremiah 33:7; Matthew 16:18; and Jeremiah 33:7 (LXX).

essentially what dispensationalists teach? Why do they teach that God tells some to do certain things and others do to other things, contradicting Himself? Is God divided?

The basic dispensationalist premise is that God has dealt and deals with different people in different ways, which goes against the Scriptural admonition “there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11), meaning that all will be judged by the same basic set of standards.

Paul writes in Romans 1:18-20, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” This is what is generally referred to as *natural revelation*, inasmuch that Paul tells us that all human beings will be accountable before their Creator even if they have not heard the good news preached to them, for the Lord has revealed Himself through His Creation. All are going to be judged. But notably with this understanding is the fact that the Lord has not fully revealed His plan for humanity all at once. Hebrews 1:1 affirms, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets” (RSV).

God does not have a double standard nor is He divided with how He will judge humanity, but human beings certainly do. Is the premise of “dividing up the Bible” valid as 2 Timothy 2:15 implies for many people? No, it is not valid. The Greek verb that has been translated as “**divide**” in the KJV, *orthotomeō* (ὀρθοτομέω), has a more complete meaning. *Vine* says that *orthotomeō* means “to cut straight,” explaining that “What is intended here is not ‘dividing’ Scripture from Scripture, but teaching Scripture accurately.”¹⁵ *LS* simply says that it means “to teach it aright.”¹⁶ *Orthotomeō* is rendered as “**rightly handling**” in the RSV and “**correctly handles**” in the NIV. The NASU has, “**Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.**” Properly handling or dealing with Scripture is what “dividing” Scripture correctly means. The *Life Application Bible* (KJV), commenting on 2 Timothy 2:15, correctly remarks that “Because God will examine what kind of workers we have been for him, we should build our lives on his Word and build his Word into our lives—it alone tells us how to live for him and serve him.”¹⁷

Has the admonition to split up God’s Word among so-called groups of elect like Israel and “the Church” ever existed? No. The God of Israel has only one Instruction for His people. If God divides His Word then He divides Himself and will contradict Himself. This kind of false understanding gives our Heavenly Father *human* characteristics and causes people to doubt the reliability of the Holy Scriptures. Mortal beings have a double standard; our Eternal God does not.

“The Mystery”

Concurrent with much dispensationalist understanding about God’s elect, are dispensational views concerning what Paul calls “the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints” (Colossians 1:27). No Bible reader, from any theological persuasion, should deny that there are surely multiple dimensions to this, as it regards our Heavenly Father’s plan of salvation history. The term *mustērion* (μυστήριον) widely means, “a mystery, a divine secret, something above human intelligence” (*LS*),¹⁸ or

¹⁵ W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 178.

¹⁶ H.G. Lidell and R. Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 567.

¹⁷ *Life Application Bible*, KJV (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989), 2139.

¹⁸ *LS*, 523.

perhaps even, “the secret counsels which govern God in dealing with the righteous, which are hidden from ungodly and wicked men but plain to the godly” (*Thayer*).¹⁹ Yeshua said in Mark 4:11, “To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables,” meaning that only His true followers can understand what He is really communicating.

According to many dispensationalists, the true mystery of the ages is the existence of a second group of elect outside the community of Israel, which is a separate “Church.” But can we justifiably conclude that the existence of “the Church” is the true mystery? Certainly, even though Paul talks about a mystery that has been hidden, there would be clues to its existence in other Scripture texts. I find no allusion whatsoever in the Tanach about God establishing a second group of elect. Isaiah 49:6 for example, tells us that the purpose of the Messiah is “to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I {God} will also make You a light of the nations so that [My] salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” This is a text speaking of the restoration of all Israel, which will be raised up and used by the Lord to extend His salvation to the entire world. People the world over can only come to eternal salvation via some kind of direct association with Israel. Where is a specific Old Testament prophecy that speaks of the Messiah coming to establish the Church? You are not going to find one.

Colossians 1:26-28 in its entirety gives us a better understanding of the mystery that the Apostle Paul was writing about:

“Of *this [assembly]* I was made a minister according to the stewardship from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the *preaching* of the word of God, *that is*, the mystery which has been hidden from the *past* ages and generations, but has now been manifested to His saints, to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, **which is Messiah in you, the hope of glory.**”

Paul makes it clear what the mystery that has been “manifested” or “disclosed” (NIV) is. The verb *phaneroō* (φανερῶω) means “to make manifest or visible or known what has been hidden or unknown” (*Thayer*).²⁰ What had been unknown in previous generations prior to Paul’s writing this was not the existence of “the Church” as a separate group of elect. He specifies the mystery as: “the fact of Christ’s presence among you [is] your hope of glory” (Moffat New Testament).

The importance of this life-changing revelation cannot be overstated! As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Examine yourselves to whether or not you are living the life of trust. Test yourselves. Don’t you realize that Yeshua the Messiah is in you?” (2 Corinthians 13:5, CJB). Of the dispensationalists we are forced to ask: If you have been truly born again do you not realize that the Redeemer lives inside of you? **And is that not enough of a profound mystery?!**

What is a “dispensation”?

Most of the confusion that exists when dealing with those committed to a dispensational ideology, is a lack of understanding what a “dispensation” actually is. Consider the fact that in the New American Standard Bible, widely considered to be the most literal Christian version on the evangelical market today, the word “dispensation” does not appear once. It is, however, found four times in the King James Version:

- “For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a **dispensation** of the gospel is committed unto me” (1 Corinthians 9:17, KJV).

¹⁹ *Thayer*, 420.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 648.

- “That in the **dispensation** of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him” (Ephesians 1:10, KJV).
- “If ye have heard of the **dispensation** of the grace of God which is given to you-ward” (Ephesians 3:2, KJV).
- “If ye have heard of the **dispensation** of the grace of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God” (Colossians 1:25, KJV).

What exists among many dispensational Christians today is a misunderstanding of what a “dispensation,” or more specifically, what an *oikonomia* (οἰκονομία) encompasses. This Greek word, according to *Vine*, means, “the management of a household or of household affairs.” An explanation given for *oikonomia* is that it is “a mode of dealing, an arrangement or administration of affairs.”²¹ It is composed of two nouns, *oikos* (οἶκος) and *nomos* (νόμος), which translated side-by-side mean “house” and “law.” However, the interpretation of *oikonomia* popularized by dispensationalists is that when a “dispensation” is being spoken of, it is representative of a particular age or time period in which God has dealt with a particular group of people in a particular way, as opposed to the administration or responsibility God gives to someone.

Throughout Biblical history, we certainly find that God has not revealed His plan for humanity all at once. Changes have undoubtedly occurred as His plan of salvation has steadily moved forward. But even so, is it justifiable to say that we currently live in an “Age of Grace” which was preceded by an “Age of Law,” with other “ages” having existed as well?

Have not concepts such as law and grace always existed? If grace had not existed in the Tanach or Old Testament, should not the Lord have destroyed the whole of Ancient Israel in the desert for transgressing His commands (cf. Exodus 32:7-14)? He did not do this. There is no example in Scripture of our Heavenly Father “flip-flopping” around between two plans and two groups of elect, like an adulterous husband would with his wife and his lover on the side. But if we believe in the dispensationalist premise of dividing up the Bible, these are conclusions that we can draw. Contrary to what the dispensationalists may derive from Scripture, our Heavenly Father only has one plan and one people.

As far as Christian Bible translations go, the NASU presents more accurate renderings of *oikonomia*, translated as either “stewardship” or as “administration,” in what are considered to be the critical dispensational passages:

- “For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a **stewardship** entrusted to me” (1 Corinthians 9:17, NASU).
- “He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an **administration** suitable to the fulness of the times, *that is*, the summing up of all things in Messiah, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:9-11, NASU).
- “...[I]f indeed you have heard of the **stewardship** of God’s grace which was given to me for you” (Ephesians 3:2, NASU).
- “Of *this [assembly]* I was made a minister according to the **stewardship** from God bestowed on me for your benefit, that I might fully carry out the *preaching* of the word of God” (Colossians 1:25, NASU).

²¹ *Vine*, 174.

It makes much more logical sense that Paul speaks of the stewardship or administration God entrusted to him, rather than a vague “dispensation.” If we believe that the Lord actually does work in different time periods (“dispensations”) in completely different ways, then why did Yeshua *only speak* of “this age or...the *age to come*” (Matthew 12:32; Mark 10:30; Luke 18:30)—the age to come referring to His future Messianic Kingdom? Was He a dispensationalist? Should we not take our theological cues from the Lord Himself? Where does He speak of dispensationalism?

Nobody can deny that we do live in a post-resurrection era, where His sacrifice for human sins has changed a few things—but such changes do not make the Law of God, and the Tanach or Old Testament, irrelevant instruction as far as His people are concerned. Such changes would concern the penalties of the Torah decreed upon Law-breakers being absorbed by the Messiah’s sacrifice (Colossians 2:14), and necessary reorientations regarding the animal sacrifices of the Torah incumbent upon the Messiah’s Melchizedkian priesthood (Hebrews 7:12).²² Yet, God’s standard of sin still remains consistent, and His immutable character and requirement for His people to live holy remains constant.

How do we respond?

What should be the proper response from Messianic Believers to some of the ills of dispensationalism? Those of us who believe that our Heavenly Father is in the process of restoring the Kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), might very well be the only ones who can properly answer and respond to the false teachings of dispensationalism, without resorting to replacement theology. Many in today’s Messianic Judaism cannot expose dispensationalism, because they too largely believe God has two groups of elect, and that as “redeemed Jews” they can co-belong to both Israel and “the Church.” As a sad consequence of this, many of these people are either anti-Torah, or they believe that the Torah is to be only followed by Jews and non-Jewish Believers need not really concern themselves with any of God’s Law at all.

Some of the key issues that we must face as a direct result of dispensationalism are those which we have already addressed. Our ministry frequently must discuss the fallacies of pre-tribulation rapture, the attacks upon the validity of the Torah or Law of Moses, and whether or not there is a separate group of elect known as “the Church” outside of Israel. But the primary job of us handling these issues, and addressing what we believe to be some considerable problems, relates to more our attitude than anything else. We must not be like those who “know better,” *rabidly* exposing dispensational falsehoods like a junk yard dog ravaging through a piece of meat. Certainly, while we fully affirm that dispensationalism is in error, we recognize that many dispensationalists do not know any better. We must encourage those who have ears to hear.

This analysis I have offered is but a brief description of dispensationalism and the problems we as Messianic Believers commonly have with it. No doubt, of all the external theological controversies that we will have to continually deal with, this one may be the largest.

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²² Consult the article “The Significance of the Messiah Event” by Margaret McKee Huey and J.K. McKee.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard, Updated Edition* (NASU), © 1995, published by The Lockman Foundation.

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