

Christ in Our Dispensational Views: Separating the Dichotomy

Some of our greatest discoveries have been by accident. If I am to understand the candy bar marketers correctly, a fine young lady was walking along the street one day eating her chocolate bar when she collided head-on with a fine young man who was eating peanut butter. The ensuing accident effected one of the most wonderful marriages of all time, the Reese's Peanut Butter Cup.

However, not all accidental collisions result in such wonderful creations. When it comes to the history of Dispensationalism we can trace efforts to define distinctive divisions in history as far back (or even earlier) than Justin Martyr's fourfold (or fivefold – depending on how you count them) system based almost exclusively on the failures of God's people. Others offered variations on this scheme and varying combinations, until, (after committing ourselves to standards of literal interpretation) we finally arrived at the dispensational scheme we embrace today.

As noted, however, there was a bit of a collision of chocolate and peanut butter along the way. According to Larry Crutchfield in a Conservative Theological Journal article, the position of a Mennonite author named C. Normal Kraus represents this "collision" well. Kraus averred that the word *dispensation* combines two ideas, the idea of a *time period*, derived from the biblical word *aion*, translated "age" or "world" in our Bible, and, I quote now, "something of the meaning of the New Testament word *oikonomia* which means a plan, arrangement, stewardship, or dispensation." Dispensationalism, then, was a blend of the concept of ages and loosely defined stewardships. I quote Crutchfield, now, as cited in Mal Couch's Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics:

Kraus concludes from this that "dispensations, then, are periods of time which can be clearly discerned and marked off from other periods by the changing methods which God employs in dealing with mankind. They are stages in God's developing plan of the ages." [Underline mine.]

Along with Eve, I like chocolate. Along with Adam (after all, he was a man) I love peanut butter. It would have been the ultimate survival food had not Adam found Eve. But, curiously, I have never been all that fond of combining the two. My wife, who is under grace, loves the peanut butter cup. As a separatist, however, I have chosen not to countenance the combination of such unlike things.

In similar fashion, I like the idea of respecting ages or *aions*. I certainly believe that these ages during which God has dealt with men regarding certain aspects of His will are, for the most part, easily observed. And, I especially like the concept of *stewardships*, (an issue we will address momentarily). I believe Dispensationalism provides the only base for properly understanding the idea stewardships. However, when we combine the two ideas of divinely ordained ages, and stewardships into one and the same concept, we introduce a collision, not of chocolate and peanut butter, but a monumental collision of horizontal and vertical truths. While both concepts are true neither are defensible when homogenized into one concept. The playing out of the ages in terms of time periods, you see, has to do with man's responsibilities toward God and man's subsequent failures. The playing out of stewardships, on the other hand, has to do with God's dealings with man. They are based on different terminal points. These stewardships are linked to God's covenantal program. Unlike the time periods, they do not result in ultimate failure, they result in ultimate success.

Where exactly can we see the failure in Kraus's terminology? Think back on our quote. Kraus combined the idea of ages with what he called "something of the meaning of the New Testament word *oikonomia* which means a plan, arrangement, stewardship, or dispensation." I repeat, "...something of the meaning of the New Testament word *oikonomia*..."

Setting aside the discussion of *aions* or ages, let's throw ourselves into the discussion of the *oikonomia* side of this formula. Our plan is to address the issue on three fronts: First, we must paint with a very broad brush and discuss the whole landscape of history. This shouldn't be too difficult because I set you up for this in the first paper with our little "mantra." Then, let's address the Old Testament background. After that, we'll touch upon the

New Testament culmination of this truth. Finally, we will suggest a new way of expressing these old truths in order to avoid confusing our Reformed brethren who are often seen scratching their heads trying to figure out what we are actually saying.

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I. First the Mantra.

In order to prepare our canvas, I want to repeat that mantra I share with my students, (This is not an eastern chant, but a catechetical expression of a core world view). I do this because I want to give you a few hooks on which to hang our discussion:

God exists as a Triunity. He is unique, holy, and entirely separate from His creation. He is unchanging. He has chosen to create men and to communicate with us. Because He is holy and unchanging we may rightfully believe that His communication with us will be both understandable and unchanging. In these things, God is separate from all the imagined gods of men. God has further chosen to communicate His purpose to us through His word and His promises. No man has ever approached God except through a promise. The promises of God are made in general to men and their seed or their households. The great foundational promises of God are called covenants. Because these covenants are made to men and their seed or households over time, they often require administrations or stewardships. Ultimately, all of the promises of God consummate in one Man, Jesus Christ.

II. Secondly, the Old Testament Background.

I want to camp briefly on those words "The promises of God are made in general to men and their seed or their households."

The ancient Jewish people, the scriptures, and the early dispensationalists seem to have placed far more emphasis on this than we seem to do today. The seed of this truth, pardon the pun, is in Genesis 3:15. But that is just the beginning of a long array of biblical verses and facts concerning His promises and the seed of men.

In order to gain the broad perspective the reader might consider keying a couple of word combinations into his computer in order to explore this theme. Key in the word *seed*. Key in the words *seed AND house*. Read the verses and their contexts. Among other things, you will always see these terms associated with covenants.

When dealing with covenants in this paper we can only skip our rock over the surface of the discussion. The proposed Edenic and Adamic covenants, though they likely exist, are not explicitly specified as covenants. At the risk of omitting some important truths, we just scan a few covenants as they relate to our present discussion.

A. The Noahic Covenant. While we will not visit this covenant directly, a quick scan of Genesis 9 will refresh you. God made that covenant with Noah and *all his seed* for all time. This covenant was probably asserted over the very coals of that first altar Noah made when he left the ark. God made that covenant with Noah and *all his seed* for all time. Thus, He made it with you. Because you are Noah's seed you are named in this covenant.

B. The Abrahamic Covenant. Abram was instructed to leave his *father's* household because God was going to begin a new household through him. Camp for awhile in Genesis 17 and learn how Jehovah made His promise to Abraham *and* his seed. And be sure to notice the discussion of his *house*. We could continue this discussion by showing that God affirmed what He was going to do in Isaac, and in the patriarchs.

Note: You will also want to read about the Palestinian Covenant in the last chapters of Deuteronomy. This covenant, made with Israel and her seed spell out the rules for *occupying* the land which was titled to Israel. The principles of occupation and expulsion are outlined.

C. The Davidic Covenant. It is important that we stop by and visit the Davidic Covenant for a basis for our study. This is the covenant God uses to showcase His *household* theology. Read the first 16 verses of 2 Samuel 7 with me:

2Sa 7:1-16 And it came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the LORD had given him rest round about from all his enemies; (2) That the king said unto Nathan the prophet, See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains. (3) And Nathan said to the king, Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the LORD is with thee. (4) And it came to pass that night, that the word of the LORD came unto Nathan, saying, (5) Go and tell my servant David, Thus saith the LORD, Shalt thou build me an house for me to dwell in? (6) Whereas I have not dwelt in any house since the time that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. (7) In all the places wherein I have walked with all the children of Israel spake I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed my people Israel, saying, Why build ye not me an house of cedar? (8) Now therefore so shalt thou say unto my servant David, Thus saith the LORD of hosts, I took thee from the sheepcote, from following the sheep, to be ruler over my people, over Israel: (9) And I was with thee whithersoever thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great men that are in the earth. (10) Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more, as beforetime, (11) And as since the time that I commanded judges to be over my people Israel, and have caused thee to rest from all thine enemies. Also the LORD telleth thee that he will make thee an house. (12) And when thy days be fulfilled, and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. (13) He shall build an house for my name, and I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever. (14) I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: (15) But my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee. (16) And thine house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee: thy throne shall be established for ever.

David, feeling both guilty and generous offers to build a house for the Lord and Nathan quickly approves. It is a reminder for all servants of God to be sure before we offer God's stamp of approval on the actions of others, no matter how well meaning they may be.

The Lord, however, has other ideas. He has chosen to use this occasion to dress David down just a bit and to teach us all a whole lot about household theology.

1. First, we notice that God does not need a house in which to dwell, though He did ordain a tabernacle for Israel's benefit as He walked with her. Later in Hebrews we learn, of course, that that tabernacle was only a pattern of the one God pitched for Himself in the heavens. God does not dwell in buildings made of stone.

2. The second thing we notice is that, while God is going to allow David's son to build a house, its purpose will be to bear His name. Verse 13. Even then, if you will read 1 Kings 5:5 God must and did initiate the building of this earthly temple Himself. Furthermore, according to Zechariah 6:12 & 13, Messiah will build His own temple for Himself. But there is a third thing which must not escape us as we observe the cutting of this Davidic Covenant. Specifically:

3. The concepts of *house* and *household* are inseparably linked to each other and to David's seed line.

This is foundational to temple theology. The narration begins with the discussion of David building a physical *house* for God in verse 2. It ends with the discussion of God building a *household* for David in verse 16. David's seed, verse 12, his household, and his throne are to be established forever. Keep this in mind, by the way, when you start messing with seed.

We do not intend to exhaust this discussion. The singular intent is to have us understand *how God works*. He makes His promises *to men and their seed* or their *households*.

III. Thirdly, the Concept of Household as it Relates to the New Covenant

A. A Tale of Two Covenants and Two Households

Turn quickly to the second half of your Bible, the half which is dedicated to the implementation of the New Covenant or New Testament. There find Hebrews, that marvelous book where our Messiah is illuminated ten ways past Sunday as our New Covenant priest.

In chapter three we discover that this great High Priest of ours has a superior stewardship over Moses.

Heb 3:1-6 Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; (2) Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. (3) For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. (4) For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. (5) And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; (6) But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.

Two faithful men, Moses and Christ. Two men who were faithful to their covenants and to their households. One was worthy of more honor than the other because He built His own house. Moses was faithful as a *servant*, but Christ as a *son* over His own house. Jesus Christ not only was, but IS a faithful steward over His own household, a household over which he presently administers His covenant.

Don't slip on the ice here. Jesus Christ is not merely a faithful priest, He is a faithful covenant administering priest just as Moses administered his covenant through Aaron's priesthood. Christ's priesthood is clearly and indelibly linked with the New Covenant. In fact, in my mind Christ *is* the New Covenant. If you have even so much as a shade of doubt that Christ is administering His New Covenant read Hebrews 8, especially verses 7-13!

We are now touching upon the soft underbelly of Dispensationalism, the discussion of the role of the New Covenant. We leave that discussion for yet another presentation. It is important that we stay on task. We have one remaining thing to do and then we must draw our conclusions.

B. The Concept of Household \ Covenant Stewardship.

Let's get back to that Greek word *oikonomia* and Norman Kraus's "somewhat" view of stewardship. When we examine the biblical context of the word *oikonomia*, we have two choices.

a. We can view stewardship etymologically against the singular backdrop of contemporary Roman practices. We know that it was common practice for those household stewards to administer the households of the Romans. In this context, we can simply content ourselves as stewards of the mysteries of Christ. After all, the household stewards were called *oikonomos*. If our discussion ends here, we are satisfied that a dispensation is nothing more or less than somewhat of a stewardship. Or,

b. We can go beyond the Roman conception of *oikonomos* and return our thinking to its rightful biblical place. In this case, as *believer priests*, we undertake our priestly duties of sharing with Christ in the administration of His New Covenant. I do not believe I have to take you to very many verses to prove my point, but I cannot resist citing just a few.

Exhibit # 1 – Ephesians 1:9-14. I read only 9-11. You scan down through verse 14. As you read these verses, ask the critical question, which stewardship is being addressed here – a general one, of a specific household stewardship associated with the New Covenant?

Eph 1:9-11 Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: (10) That in the dispensation (oikonomos) of the fulness of times he might gather together in one [notice that word one] all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: (11) In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:

By what *means* does Christ gather into one all things in Himself? It is through adoption. It is through sonship. It is through inheritance. Christ is administering His New Covenant here.

Exhibit # 2 Ephesians 2:19-22. Which stewardship is being addressed here – a general one, of a specific household stewardship associated with the New Covenant?

Eph 2:18-22 For through him we both have access by one [notice the word one] Spirit unto the Father. (19) Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household [oikeios] of God; (20) And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; (21) In whom all the building [oikodome] fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: (22) In whom ye also are builded together [sunokodomeo] for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Hmmm, "foundations"; that is *temple* talk. Temple talk is *household* talk. We learned that from the Davidic Covenant. Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of this Gr.: *oikeios*, this household of God. We are built together as an habitation through the Spirit. It certainly does appear that Jesus Christ is administering His covenant as God's priest here in the building of His temple!

Exhibit # 3. Colossians 1:25-25. You scan down through verse 29...

Col 1:24-25 Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church: (25) Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation [oikonomos] of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;

The amazing privilege of the believer priest is to share in the priestly ministry of Christ. Paul was made a minister according to this marvelous *oikonomos*. The Christ's body here is His temple, His church.

Which stewardship is being addressed here – a general one, of a specific household stewardship associated with the New Covenant? This is the New Covenant stewardship.

A stewardship is far more than a general term for an economic period we call an age. Stewardships relate to promises made to men and their seed or their households. Those promises are called covenants and are administered over time by priests who are either faithful or unfaithful.

You are a priest. You have an administration. You have a covenant to administer. As a part of being in Christ you are endowed with priestly duties. What amazes me is how many dispensational pastors speak of our priesthood, but do not understand that it is a dispensation, a dispensation of a covenant which we share as a result of our in-Christ position. You *cannot* be a priest except on the basis of a tabernacle and a covenant, (Consider reading Heb. 9:11 and following as time allows).

There are many more things to say in order to fill out this concept, but the core element is that Dispensationalism has *first*, to do with stewardships of covenants, and secondly, with age periods. When we reverse that order, we diminish the uniqueness of this mystery age. We misunderstand what Christ is doing and how we figure in His program.

IV. The Proper Expression of Dispensationalism in Light of Household / Covenant Stewardship.

Consider each of the four attached charts:

Typical dispensationalist – Slide 17

Typical dispensationalist – Slide 18

Typical dispensationalist – Slide 19

Typical dispensationalist – Slide 20

Slide 17 simply illustrates how a typical Dispensationalist would loosely define Dispensationalism. Those quintessential elements are there: an unrelenting determination to respect the literal interpretation of scriptures, and an unswerving commitment to the separation of the church and Israel.

A typical dispensationalist would loosely define Dispensationalism as:



- A period of ***time** during which God tests men with respect to a specific revelation of His will.
- A period which begins with **grace** and ends in **judgment**.
- A period which corresponds roughly to the ***administration** of a covenant.

The singularly most important goal of the dispensationalist is to recognize that God has **separate** programs for Israel and the Church

ALL DISPENSATIONALISTS HOLD TO THE
LITERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE AS
THEIR FOUNDATIONAL PREMISE.



*The concept of *time* derives from the Greek word age (or world), *aion*. The idea of administration comes from the Greek *oikonomia* (translated dispensation.) The idea of looking at God's dealings with men through specified time periods can be traced back to the early church fathers. The idea of developing dispensations related to God's *redemptive dealings* with men can be traced as far back as Justin Martyr (c 100-165). However, the modern idea of systematized dispensations is probably best attributed to John Nelson Darby (1800-1882)

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Slide 18 lays out the dual concepts embraced by typical dispensationalists. It argues for progressing *ages or time periods*, (Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, etc...) and it loosely superimposes these on those all important *covenants*. Notice that the beginnings of most dispensations are marked by the beginning of a covenant. However, dispensations only last until another covenant is put in place. Covenants can overlap each other depending on their purpose. Time periods, however, do not.

A typical dispensational breakout would look like this:



Note: Each of these *time periods* began in *grace* and end in *judgment*.

	Conscience	Human Government	Promise	Law (Israel)	Grace (Church)	Kingdom (Israel Again)
I N N O C E N C E						
				Mosaic Covenant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administers the Abrahamic • Tables of Stone • Temporary Purpose • Was abolished 	N.C. The Suffering Servant Phase <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A Light to the Gentiles • Messiah ministers through His body (temple) in His physical absence. 	N.C. The Reigning King Phase <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Messiah's justice thru Israel's throne.
				Abrahamic Covenant - Principles of land ownership and blessings through Abraham and his Seed through Isaac for the blessing of many nations. This is an <i>everlasting</i> covenant. Its <i>land aspect</i> is amplified in the Palestinian Covenant and <i>throne aspect</i> in the Davidic Covenant.		
				Noahic Covenant - Principles of landlord obligation, blood required, and promise extended through seed. Incumbent upon all, but many argue that authority for human government arises from this covenant.		
	Adamic Covenant - Principles of sacrifice, prophets and priests, and God's promise to and through seed are unveiled. Its dynamics are seen in future covenants.					
	<i>The Fall</i>	<i>Noah</i>	<i>Abraham</i>	<i>Moses</i>	<i>Christ</i>	<i>The Millennium</i>

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Essentially, we are viewing time periods vertically and covenantal administrations horizontally!

Slide 19 explains why this can be confusing. We are combining two concepts, the concept of time periods (during which God tests men with respect to certain aspects of His will), and the concept of covenantal stewardships. We often mix and match these terms so much that we end up calling a dispensation a stewardship. This confuses the fact that age periods and covenantal administrative periods are two separate ideas.

While all of these things may be true...



This typical dispensational *presentation* leaves much to be desired.

There is a great potential for confusion because dispensations are defined by *converging (non confluent)* elements and not by a single thread.

- For example, most dispensations begin with the initiation of a new covenant but do not cover the same length of time as the covenant which initiated them.

A Dispensationalist uses the same term to define two separate aspects of God's dealings:

-> *age* periods, and
-> *administrative* periods.

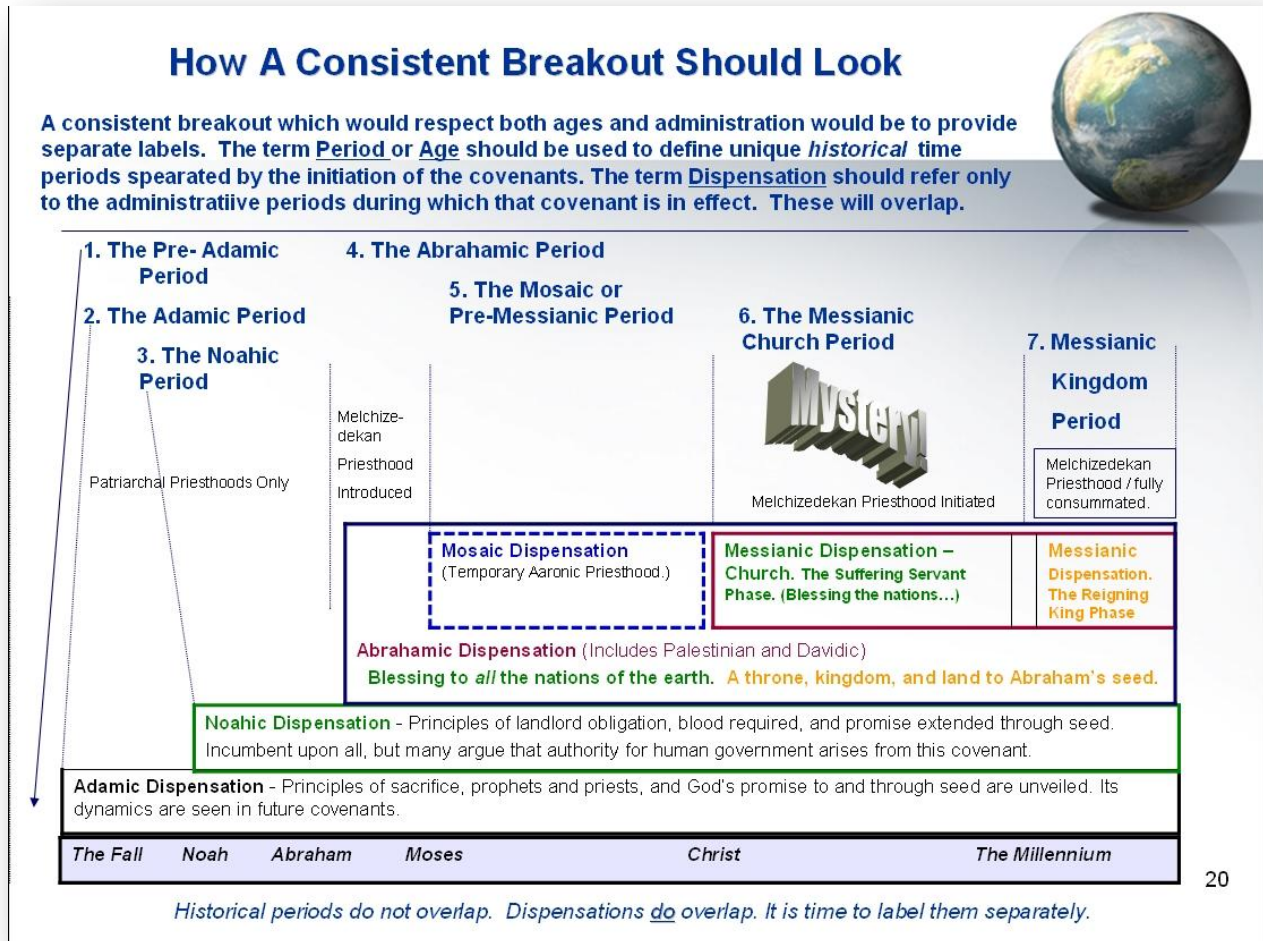
No wonder our Reformed brethren shake their heads in confusion!

A better way to arrive at what a *dispensation* is:

- God deals with men through *promises*.
- These promises relate to men *and* their seed.
- The pivotal promises are called *covenants* which require *administration*.
- This administration (or stewardship) is *not* defined by a specified number of years, but by the *covenant* which is being administered.

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Slide 20 offers a simple solution. Refer to the dispensational age periods for what they are, dispensational ages or age periods. Refer to the covenantal administrations for what they actually are, administrations or stewardships of covenants. By separating the concepts and using correct terminology we strengthen the unique role of Christ in this Dispensation and avoid confusing it with Moses' covenantal administration. Because historical periods do not overlap, but covenantal promises do overlap, we need to separate the concepts.



Summary

- A dispensationalist is first, last, and foremost, one who recognizes that God deals with men through His promises made to them and their seed or households. These promises are called covenants.
- We may understand exactly what God is doing through Christ based upon His covenants made with men. All of God's covenants, (except the one He specifically declared to be temporary) are permanent.
- All of the covenants consummate in the New Covenant and subsequently, in Christ.

- Dispensationalists also recognize *historical time periods* during which men's responses to God may be evidenced. These periods of time may be recognized as periods occurring between the beginning of each subsequent covenant.
- Dispensations, unlike historical time periods, should be labeled relative to the covenant they administer. As we have yet to show, this is not a minor technical point; it is the basis upon which to build a Christologically sound dispensational system.
- Failure to recognize exactly what God is doing through His covenants inevitably leads to confusion about the role of our Messiah Christ in His body the church and in His future role as King of Israel and the world.
- Failure to recognize exactly what God is doing through His covenants inevitably ends in the admixture of law and grace, the admixture of kingdom principles and grace, and general confusion about how grace functions in both salvation and in the sanctified walk.

End supplemental article: Christ in our Dispensationalism.