The Church and Israel: Dispensationalism

Systematic Theology VI: Ecclesiology & Eschatology · Lecture 3 of 10

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Lecture by C. Michael Patton, Th.M., and Rhome Dyke, Th.M., from The Theology Program, published on their public channel. Study notes from Medina Community Church.

BEFORE YOU WATCH

The session opens with a show of hands: how many were baptized as infants? The point lands fast: a practice most churches in history have followed rests not on a passage but on a theology, the very question of Israel and the church from last week. Then dispensationalism finally gets its fair hearing, Eliezer of Damascus returns as promised, and at the end the teachers unveil a surprise: a position of their own that you will not find in any book.

STUDY SHEET

1. Infant baptism and the reach of this doctrine

The teachers begin with a poll on infant baptism and trace where it comes from. Rome practices it, along with Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Episcopalians, and the majority of the church through history has practiced it, yet its defenders do not rest the case on specific passages, at best a passing reference in the household baptisms of Acts. They rest it on a theology: if the church is the new Israel, then the sign that brought a child into the old Israel, circumcision, finds its replacement in the sign that brings a child into the new, baptism. The same logic explains why Rome and the Anglicans still call their ministers priests: a church that carries on Israel carries on Israel's priesthood. The lesson is not that these practices are right or wrong but that so much of our tradition is built on how we relate the two testaments, with the careful caveat that holding replacement theology does not commit anyone to infant baptism or a priesthood, nor does rejecting it forbid them.

2. What dispensationalism actually is

Today the belief that the church is distinct from Israel gets its hearing. Most people who hear the word dispensationalism think of the dispensations, the separate eras of God's dealings, but that is an outcome of the system, not its heart. Every tradition sees God working differently in different periods, with Adam, with Noah, with Moses, with the church; nobody denies that. What defines dispensationalism is the separation between the church and Israel. The common theme of the classical form: since Israel failed at what she was commanded to do, God instituted the church, the body of Christ, to do what Israel could not, which produces the sharp discontinuity between the ages that the dispensations describe.

3. Two myths dispelled

Before defending the view, the teachers clear away two caricatures, and they insist on fairness whatever one's own position. First, dispensationalists do not believe in two ways of salvation, law in the Old Testament and grace in the New. Even very good reformed theologians repeat this charge, which grew from a misreading of the Scofield Reference Bible, and it has never been true; anyone who actually taught it would stand outside orthodoxy. Second, dispensationalism is not date setting. The wild eyed few who chart the end, name the antichrist, and announce the year, the teachers recall the excitement over 1988, do not define the position; they are, as the teachers put it, outside the camp of rationality at times but not of orthodoxy. Dispensationalism is a way of interpreting Scripture built on the church and Israel, nothing more sensational than that.

4. Classic dispensationalism: the map of history

Classic dispensationalism arose in the nineteenth century, just as replacement theology's line goes dotted, spreading through the prophecy movement, the Bible church movement, and most fundamentalists of the era, then surging after 1948 when Israel's return to the land made the literal reading suddenly plausible. Its definition: the church is the body of believers indwelt by the Holy Spirit, distinct from Israel, that began on the day of Pentecost; hyperdispensationalists who start the church with Paul's prison ministry are the exception. Ethnic Israel still has a future in the program of God because the Abrahamic covenant has not yet been fulfilled. The map runs: in the Old Testament age God works primarily through ethnic Israel, dwelling among them, so that meeting God meant meeting him through Israel; in the New Testament age the church is formed of believing Gentiles and believing Israel, the true Israel entering the church; during the seven year tribulation, the seventieth week of Daniel 9, the church is taken to heaven and ethnic Israel returns to the center as God brings her back to himself; through the millennium the Gentile church and redeemed ethnic Israel remain distinct; and on the classic scheme they remain distinct forever, some older writers even placing the church in heaven while Israel reigns on earth from Jerusalem.

5. Where a believing Jew fits, and Ryrie's test

A student asks the obvious question: a Jewish believer belongs to the church and is taken in the rapture, so which people is he in the end? Most classic dispensationalists give priority to ethnic Israel, and the teachers suggest the Old Testament itself as the guide, since God's plan for Israel always made room for foreigners and sojourners to join the people, and God looked after the alien in the land; something similar must govern Gentiles converted during the tribulation. The teachers cite Charles Ryrie's well known test: the distinction between Israel and the church is the most basic theological marker of whether a person is a dispensationalist, the most practical and conclusive test there is.

6. Defense one: a church that did not yet exist

The first defense: the Bible presents the church as a distinct new group with no existence in the Old Testament at all. In Matthew 16 Christ tells Peter, upon this rock I will build my church, a future tense; the church had not been established when he spoke. The teachers add a historical observation: because dispensationalism arose after the great denominational doctrinal statements were fixed, it never entered the confessions of Rome, the Anglicans, or the old mainline bodies; it spread instead through the people, which is why a Baptist, or a whole congregation, may be dispensational or not without the denomination deciding anything.

7. Defense two: Eliezer and the bloodline

The second defense returns to the servant the class was told to remember. In Genesis 15 Abraham, childless, proposes an alternate plan: let Eliezer of Damascus, the legal heir custom supplied, inherit the promises. Eliezer would have been an heir of the promises who was not of Abraham's blood, and God refuses him by name: this man will not be your heir, but one who comes from your own body. The dispensationalist presses the parallel: Gentiles in the church are not of the bloodline of Abraham. If the church now inherits Israel's promises, did God decline the legal heir then, only to affirm the same arrangement later? On this argument the promises of the land and the seed can pass only through the bloodline, and even Paul's remnant principle in Romans 9, that not all Israel is truly Israel, still runs the true Israel through Abraham's line, as the Old Testament's own pattern shows: an unbelieving generation dies in the wilderness, twelve tribes narrow to two, and two return from exile as only a remnant.

8. Defense three: Ezekiel 37 and the land

Ezekiel writes from Babylon, during the exile, after the northern kingdom fell to Assyria and the south to Babylon. Yet God promises through him: I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations, gather them from every side, and bring them to their own land; one nation, one king, no longer two kingdoms; my servant David will be king over them, one shepherd; they will live in the land I gave to Jacob, they and their sons and their sons forever; an everlasting covenant of peace, my sanctuary in their midst forever. The dispensationalist asks how the church fulfills language this specific. The post-exile return cannot be the fulfillment if the words are taken at face value: only a remnant of two tribes came back, and the ten northern tribes were gone. Consistent classic dispensationalists have even held that David himself will reign in the millennium, perhaps co-ruling with Christ, since the text names him; others take David as symbolic of Christ, and their critics answer, then why not take the rest symbolically too, and round it goes. Even the word forever cuts both ways: a thousand years is not forever, so the dispensationalist extends the kingdom into the new heavens and the new earth, and the replacement theologian asks why the fulfillment cannot simply be there. The teachers grin: you thought we came to teach you something, and we came to mess everything up.

9. Defense four: Romans 9 through 11 and the olive tree

The fourth defense the teachers call very important. Romans 1 through 8 argues the gospel to the summit of chapter 8: nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ. Paul then answers the objector he can hear coming: if God's promises cannot fail, what about Israel? From 9 through 11 his argument is that God has not abandoned ethnic Israel. It has always been the remnant: not all Israel is true Israel, Jacob chosen and not Esau, election running through the larger body. Then Romans 11: has God rejected his people? Absolutely not, for I am an Israelite, of the tribe of Benjamin. And the mystery: a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and then all Israel will be saved, the ethnic Israel alive at that time, the teachers specify, not every Israelite of all history; a deliverer will come from Zion and remove ungodliness from Jacob. Regarding the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but regarding election they are dearly loved, and the summit of the whole argument: the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. The olive tree closes it: natural branches broken off, wild branches grafted in, and the natural branches to be grafted back again.

10. An honest verdict

The teachers refuse to pretend the question is easy. Galatians 3 is genuinely strong for replacement theology; Romans 11 is genuinely strong for a future for ethnic Israel. Scripture, for whatever reason, did not make this as clear as it made many other things, and the teachers say that has to be all right: God makes some things very clear and leaves some things obscure, and both sides hold serious arguments made by serious people.

11. Why so late? How doctrine develops

If dispensationalism is true, why did no one hold it for eighteen centuries? The replacement theologian answers with the old saying: if it is true it is not new, and if it is new it is not true. The dispensationalist answers from the history of doctrine. The Trinity was not precisely articulated until the third and fourth centuries, when the church had to coin a use for homoousion, of the same essence; Anselm redirected the doctrine of the atonement in the twelfth century; justification by faith was not worked through in volumes until the Reformation. The great theologians of history, the teachers observe, never really dealt with prophecy; they inherited an end times scheme and moved on. Some try to claim Augustine or Aquinas allowed for the later view, and each side reaches back to draft the fathers onto its team, a habit to test rather than trust. Theology always develops: bioethics is developing now, on questions of cloning and life support that Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther never imagined, and the Reformers themselves charged the church with semper reformanda, always reforming. The nineteenth century had its own provocations: Napoleon seized the whole power structure of the known world just as complete world maps made a global ruler conceivable for the first time, and the reborn state of Israel later poured fuel on the fire. Rhome is careful: dispensationalism did not come from Napoleon, but without him it may not have arisen when it did. Eschatology before this was never uniform anyway; Luther, an amillennialist, believed the pope was the antichrist. The issue of the two testaments, the teachers conclude, is the major issue in theology, and everything hinges on it.

12. Progressive dispensationalism

Progressive dispensationalism took shape in the late 1980s, when its framers first began meeting. Its definition tracks the classic one word for word, the church as the Spirit indwelt body distinct from Israel begun at Pentecost, until the end: ethnic Israel and the church will be one people of God, as all benefit from covenants progressively fulfilled and broadened through the ages. On its map, Israel and the church remain distinct through the tribulation and the millennial kingdom, and then in the new heavens and the new earth there is one people of God; they do not remain separate forever. That single change moves the position noticeably toward replacement theology, and progressives take fire from every direction for it. Patton tells of longtime supporters of Dallas Theological Seminary, their estate willed to the school, arriving upset because a broadcast claimed the seminary had gone progressive and abandoned Israel; his answer, that progressive dispensationalism is not all that bad, did not reassure them. The battles between dispensational and covenant theology have run for a hundred years, churches have disciplined members for switching sides, and one prominent covenant theologian has quipped that he no longer disagrees with dispensationalists since the progressives are basically covenant under another name. The teachers add two correctives: leaving classic dispensationalism is not abandoning the Jewish people, and no view here licenses treating anyone with less than dignity. And they point out what the diagrams quietly agree on: in the present age, every position puts believing Jews and believing Gentiles together in the church; the differences all lie in the future. The progressive's best picture is Paul's olive tree: one tree, growing, promises extended wider and wider without excluding those they were first made to, wild branches grafted into the bloodline's own tree, and the natural branches to be grafted back.

13. Progressive covenantalism: the teachers' surprise

Then the promised surprise: a position the teachers have named themselves, progressive covenantalism, which you will not find anywhere else. Patton likes almost everything in progressive dispensationalism except the word dispensation, which for a century has fixed attention on discontinuity, the separate ways God worked in separate eras. He proposes keeping the progress and changing the focus: one covenant of redemption, made first not with Abraham but in Eden, where God promised to fix what was broken, then progressively extended and defined, to the patriarchs, to ethnic Israel, to the church, into the kingdom, until there is one people of God. The one people are called different things across time according to how far the covenant has been revealed, and the way into the people has differed, once by joining Israel, now by faith received into a local church community, but it has always been by faith. On the future he is plain: ethnic Israel has a future in their land, I can do nothing else with those passages, and that is why I am a premillennialist, though he grades his own conviction a two on the ten point scale and admits most of his positions are ones. The advantages he claims: it synthesizes the valid points of the other views, begins where the covenants begin, carries continuity through the whole plan, sees the church as an advancement in the program just as the creation of Israel was, recognizes the historic and future unity of all the people of God, and keeps the focus on the grace and sovereignty of God expressed through his covenants.

14. Israel and the church, and the creed's definition

A closing chart sets the differences and similarities side by side. Differences: Israel was ethnic, the church universal; Israel under law, the church under grace, speaking of the general administration rather than of salvation; the law changed people from the outside in, the Spirit changes from the inside out, the letter kills and the Spirit gives life, as Paul says of the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3; Israel a national theocracy, the church a spiritual one. Similarities: both are God's chosen people, both called a holy nation, both a kingdom of priests, and in both, salvation is through faith. For the nature of the church the teachers reach back to the creed: one holy catholic and apostolic church. One names the church's essential unity; holy, its holy calling; catholic, its universality, belonging to no single ethnic group; apostolic, its orthodox belief handed down from the apostles. What has united the people of God from the beginning is trust in God, now through the Savior and his death, burial, and resurrection, a fuller revelation of the same trust. The summary definition the course will carry forward: the church is the unified continued presence of Christ, composed of all people who have trusted in the gospel of Christ, not Israel but an advancement past Israel, at once a functional description, naming our job of representing Christ on the earth, and an ontological one, naming our union under one head.

SCRIPTURE IN THIS LECTURE

Genesis 3 · Genesis 15 · 2 Samuel 7 · Jeremiah 31 · Ezekiel 37 · Daniel 9 · Matthew 16 · Acts 2 · Romans 9 · Romans 11 · 2 Corinthians 3 · Galatians 3

KEY TERMS

Classic dispensationalism

> The nineteenth century view that the church, the Spirit indwelt body begun at Pentecost, is distinct from Israel, that ethnic Israel still has a future because the Abrahamic covenant awaits fulfillment, and that Israel and the church remain distinct peoples forever.

Progressive dispensationalism

> The revision framed in the late 1980s: identical to the classic definition until the end of history, where ethnic Israel and the church become one people of God in the new heavens and the new earth, the covenants having been progressively fulfilled and broadened.

Progressive covenantalism

The teachers' own coinage: one covenant of redemption made in Eden and progressively extended through the patriarchs, Israel, and the church into the kingdom, with one people of God throughout, a future for ethnic Israel in the land, and the focus on covenants rather than dispensations.

Hyperdispensationalism

The minority position that starts the church not at Pentecost but later, with Paul's prison ministry. Mentioned to mark the boundary of the mainstream definition.

The remnant

The Old Testament's recurring pattern, and Paul's argument in Romans 9: not all Israel is truly Israel, but within the larger nation God has always preserved a believing remnant, from the wilderness generation to the exiles who returned.

The seventieth week of Daniel

The final week of Daniel 9's seventy, which classic dispensationalism identifies with the seven year tribulation, when the church is in heaven and God deals again with ethnic Israel.

The olive tree

Paul's picture in Romans 11: one tree, natural branches broken off in unbelief, wild branches grafted in, and the natural branches to be grafted back again. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Semper reformanda

Always reforming: the Reformers' own charge to the church, that theology keeps developing toward fuller understanding, the principle dispensationalists invoke to answer the objection that their view is too new.

Homoousion

Of the same essence: the word the church had to coin in the Trinitarian controversies, cited here as proof that true doctrine can wait centuries for precise articulation.

One holy catholic and apostolic church

The creed's four marks, which the teachers take as the best summary of the church's nature: essential unity, holy calling, universality beyond any ethnic group, and orthodox belief handed down from the apostles.

COMPREHENSION CHECK

Answer each question, then check yourself against the key at the end of this section.

1. Why do the teachers open with infant baptism?

A. To argue that infant baptism is required by Scripture

B. To show that a nearly universal tradition rests not on specific passages but on a theology of Israel and the church

C. To announce a change in the church's baptismal practice

D. To prove that no tradition should ever be followed

2. What actually defines dispensationalism?

A. The belief that God works differently in different eras

B. A fixed calendar of end times dates

C. The separation between the church and Israel; the dispensations are an outcome of that separation, not its heart

D. The rejection of the Old Testament

3. What is the truth about the two-ways-of-salvation charge?

A. It accurately describes all dispensationalists

B. It was taught by the church fathers

C. It applies only to covenant theology

D. It has never been true; it grew from a misreading of the Scofield Reference Bible, and anyone actually teaching it would be outside orthodoxy

4. On the classic dispensational map, what happens during the tribulation?

A. The church is taken to heaven and God deals again with ethnic Israel, the seventieth week of Daniel

B. The church converts the nations and the millennium begins immediately

C. Israel and the church merge into one people

D. Nothing; the tribulation is already past

5. What is Ryrie's test of a dispensationalist?

A. Belief in a pretribulational rapture

B. Membership in a Bible church

C. Whether a person consistently maintains the distinction between Israel and the church

D. Acceptance of the Scofield notes

6. How does Matthew 16 serve the dispensational case?

A. Christ says he will build his church, a future tense, so the church did not exist in the Old Testament

B. It names Pentecost explicitly

C. It describes the millennium in detail

D. It abolishes the Abrahamic covenant

7. Why does Eliezer of Damascus matter to the argument?

A. He became Israel's first priest

B. He wrote part of Genesis

C. He led the return from exile

D. God refused a legal heir not of Abraham's blood; the dispensationalist asks whether God would later grant the church the very arrangement he declined

8. Why can the post-exile return not satisfy Ezekiel 37 taken at face value?

A. Because the return happened before Ezekiel wrote

B. Because only a remnant of two tribes returned, while the prophecy promises one reunited nation gathered from all the nations to its own land forever

C. Because Ezekiel was written after the return

D. Because the passage concerns Egypt rather than Israel

9. What have consistent classic dispensationalists held about David in Ezekiel 37?

A. That the name David is a scribal error

B. That David represents the church

C. That David himself will reign in the millennium, perhaps co-ruling with Christ, since the text names him

D. That the passage was fulfilled in Solomon

10. What is the mystery Paul announces in Romans 11?
    A. That the Gentiles will replace Israel permanently
    B. That the law will be reinstated
    C. That the church existed secretly in the Old Testament
    D. That a partial hardening has come on Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and then all Israel, those alive at that time, will be saved

11. What closing line sums up Romans 9 through 11?
    A. The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable
    B. The law came through Moses
    C. Faith comes by hearing
    D. The wages of sin is death

12. What honest verdict do the teachers give on the biblical evidence?
    A. Scripture settles the question decisively for one side
    B. Neither side has any real texts
    C. Galatians 3 is genuinely strong for replacement theology and Romans 11 for a future for Israel; God left this less clear than many things, and that has to be all right
    D. The question is meaningless

13. How do dispensationalists answer the objection that their view is too new?
    A. They deny that it is new
    B. Doctrine develops: the Trinity, the atonement, and justification were each articulated centuries in, and the great theologians never really worked through prophecy
    C. They claim the apostles taught it explicitly
    D. They concede the objection and abandon the view

14. What role did Napoleon play in the discussion?
    A. He wrote the first dispensational commentary
    B. He restored Israel to the land
    C. He banned replacement theology in France
    D. His near conquest of the world's power structure, just as complete world maps appeared, made a global ruler conceivable and helped provoke the era's new reading of prophecy

15. What single change separates progressive from classic dispensationalism?
    A. Progressives deny the tribulation
    B. Progressives start the church before Pentecost
    C. Progressives hold that Israel and the church become one people of God in the new heavens and the new earth rather than remaining distinct forever
    D. Progressives reject the Abrahamic covenant

16. Why does Patton prefer the name progressive covenantalism for his own view?
    A. Because the word dispensation fixes attention on discontinuity, while the covenant, made first in Eden and progressively extended, carries continuity through the whole plan
    B. Because covenant theology invented the term
    C. Because he denies any future for Israel
    D. Because dispensationalism was condemned by a council

17. Why does Patton say he is a premillennialist, and with what strength?

A. Because his denomination requires it; a ten out of ten

B. Because he cannot spiritualize the land passages away, ethnic Israel has a future in their land; though he grades the conviction only a two out of ten

C. Because of the church fathers; a nine out of ten

D. Because of Napoleon; a five out of ten

18. What summary definition of the church does the course carry forward?

A. The church is the invisible number of the elect only

B. The church is Israel under a new name

C. The church is any gathering for worship

D. The church is the unified continued presence of Christ, composed of all who have trusted in the gospel of Christ, an advancement past Israel

Answer key (fold under before you begin): 1 B · 2 C · 3 D · 4 A · 5 C · 6 A · 7 D · 8 B · 9 C · 10 D · 11 A · 12 C · 13 B · 14 D · 15 C · 16 A · 17 B · 18 D

TALK IT OVER

1. The infant baptism discussion showed that practices you inherited may rest on a theology you never examined. What practice in your own church background can you now trace to a position on Israel and the church, and does the tracing change how you hold it?

2. The teachers modeled saying, my conviction here is a two out of ten. Where in your eschatology have you been holding a two with the grip of a ten? What would it look like to keep studying that question with both seriousness and honesty about its difficulty?

3. Both sides reach back to draft Augustine or the fathers onto their team. When you hear a teacher claim history for a position, what questions should you ask before accepting it, and how does the principle of semper reformanda keep you both humble and careful?

ONE VERSE TO CARRY

Paul closes his argument about Israel in Romans 11 with the ground beneath every promise in this debate: the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.