

DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY VS. RESTORATION THEOLOGY

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In the 20th Century in the United States, two theologies engaged in intense competition in the Evangelical world. The first was classic Reformed Theology and the other was the more recent theology known as Dispensational Theology. Reformed theology goes back to the 16th century, while Dispensational theology goes back to the mid 19th century but really gained its dominance of American Evangelicalism in the 20th Century with its center being Dallas Theological Seminary. The primary Reformed center was Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. It is not germane to the purpose of this little summary to go into detail on these two theologies. I was raised with both from my early teen years. The first embraced the importance of the Law as part of New Covenant Life, but was replacement theology oriented (the Church replaced Israel and is the new Israel). The other largely abandoned the Law and claimed to approach the Bible through a literal interpretation. They believed in a future for ethnic Israel. They were very strong on the idea of a pre-tribulation rapture, that is that the Church of Jew and Gentile will exit this earth seven years before the actual return of Yeshua to earth. The dispensations are different periods during which God acts in different ways and with different requirements for people in his fulfilling his purposes. Many people do not know that there is a third important stream that transcends these two warring theologies. I call it **Restoration Theology**. Its roots go back to some of the Puritans of the 17th century, then into Lutheran Pietism, Count Ludwig Von Zinzendorf, the leader of the Moravians, and is now coming to a new maturity. The following is a comparison of Dispensational Theology and Restoration Theology. Both claim to take the Bible literally when the context and literary genre allows.

Dispensational Theology is changing. There are now progressive Dispensationalists that are closer to Restoration Theology. In addition, Restoration thinkers today are coming into greater clarity and maturity.

What is the Gospel?

Dispensational Theology: The Gospel is the invitation of salvation or everlasting life that is received by believing that Yeshua died for our sins. If one believes this and accepts Yeshua, they will go to heaven at death, or be raptured out before the Great Tribulation.

Restoration Theology: The Gospel is the invitation into the Kingdom of God through the death and resurrection of Yeshua. When we embrace this invitation and submit our lives to Yeshua as Savior and Lord, we can live in and from the Kingdom of God, and through him everything in our lives is put in right order.

The Kingdom of God

Dispensational Theology: The Kingdom is mostly a future time after the return of Yeshua when he rules on his throne from Jerusalem. The Church Age is a parenthesis time between offers of the Kingdom to Israel, first in the first century and then finally in the tribulation period.

Restoration Theology: The Kingdom has broken into this world since the time of the coming of Yeshua and the outpouring of the Spirit at Shavuot (Pentecost). However, the Kingdom has come in a partial way. It is already here but not yet come in fullness. The fullness awaits his second coming. We are called to live in and from the Kingdom which manifests itself in every sphere of life when God's will is done as it is done in heaven.

Israel and the Church

Dispensational Theology: Ethnic Israel and the Church constitute two different but related plans of God. Those who accept Yeshua in this age become part of the Church, the Bride of the Messiah and will be taken off the earth before God's final work with Israel during the Tribulation. The Church has a heavenly salvation and Israel has an earthly salvation in the Millennial Age. God will fulfill all his promises to ethnic Israel.

Restoration Theology: Ethnic Israel was and still remains central to the plans of God. God will fulfill all his promises to ethnic Israel. The Church consists of all people who have embraced Yeshua and his salvation and entered his Kingdom. The Church is the Commonwealth of Israel and is linked to the nation of Israel or ethnic Israel thorough being joined to the King of Israel, Yeshua and to the saved remnant of Israel, the Jewish believers in Yeshua. Without displacing ethnic Israel, the church is an expanded Israel in a larger sense. The Church is the anticipation of Israel and the nations being one under the rule of the Messiah and shows that the future Kingdom has broken into this Age. The identity of the Church is a people who are bonded to Israel and its future.

The Torah or Law of God (Torah is a broader word meaning instruction; but I want to embrace the idea that Torah includes much we would call law or commandments as well)

Dispensational Theology: Messiah is the end of the Law. In other words, the Law of God has now been abolished with regard to the responsibility of those who have embraced Yeshua and the New Covenant. Those who dedicate their lives to Yeshua live according to the instruction of the epistles of the Apostles. The Law was part of the Dispensation of Law for Israel, but followers of Yeshua are not living in the Dispensation of Grace. Even the teaching of Yeshua was part of the Dispensation of Law.

Restoration Theology: Messiah is the goal of the Law. The New Covenant heightens and applies the Law as is fitting to the New Covenant order or the time of the Kingdom having broken into this age. The great example of Torah application for the New Covenant is seen in the Sermon on the Mount where Yeshua applies the Torah to this

order. However, the New Covenant assumes the study and application of the whole body of the teaching of the Torah as is fitting to the New Covenant order. Restoration theology embraces the classic Protestant Reformed view of the Law; that we are saved by grace through faith, but that through the power of the Spirit we are enabled to obey the Torah. This was summarized in the three uses of the Law in classical Protestantism.

1. The Law shows us our sin so we know our need for a savior and for salvation by grace through faith.
2. The Law provides a guide for ordering societies in justice and righteousness. The principles of the Law for societies are applicable today. The New Testament Scriptures alone do repeat all that is important for societies.
3. The Law is a tool for discipleship by the hand of the Holy Spirit. The third use is based on II Tim. 3:16, 17 and other texts like Romans 3:31 and 8:4.

Messianic Jews find a fourth use of the Torah; that is the rooting of the pattern of Jewish life that makes us a unique people. This includes circumcision, the Land of Israel, and the pattern of celebration in Sabbath, the Feasts and more. Again, all is to be applied as is fitting to the New Covenant that preserves Israel and assumes applying the Torah to the New Covenant order. The Goal of God, the Promise/Plan of God, the Kingdom of God, is to establish his Torah in its highest most universal form; hence the Torah will go forth from Zion (Is. 2). So we should be positive and affirming of the Law or Torah of God.

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit and Five Fold Ministry

Dispensational Theology: The supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit and the gifts of apostle and prophet were for the first century transition to the Church age. They were given to establish the Church and have now passed away with the completion of the canon of the Scriptures. This is called cessationism.

Restoration Theology: The gifts of the Holy Spirit are foundational power tools that enable the Body of the Messiah to accomplish the extension of the Kingdom of God and the maturing of the people of God. The ministry gifts of apostle and prophet are given today to establish foundations for the Body of believers. Apostles are those who multiply congregations and ministries and oversee. Prophets give revelatory insight and direction that greatly aids the apostle and all the congregations connected. (Ephesians 4:11 ff. and I Corinthians 12-14). The apostles and prophets will be a key in seeing the Church come into right unity.

The Last Days (Eschatology)

Dispensational Theology: The Church Age is a parenthesis age that brackets the time of the Church before which Israel was God's primary instrument, and after which God will again use Israel as his instrument in the Last Days during the Tribulation.

Seven years before Yeshua comes back to earth, the Church will be raptured out and will experience the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven. On earth the events of the Last Days will unfold including the revelation of the Anti-Christ, his causing the sacrifices in the Temple to cease, and the final invasion of Israel. This is all part of the Great Tribulation where 2/3 of the Jewish people in Israel will die. Finally Israel will call on Yeshua and he will return with his saints and deliver Israel. Thus will begin the Millennium where Yeshua will rule and reign both through Israel and his Bride, the Church. Though the Last Days is mostly about the Great Tribulation and nothing is needed to be fulfilled before the rapture of the saints, we can see signs of the times before his coming.

Restoration Theology: At the end of this Age there will be great tribulation and the Church and Israel will enter a difficult time of trial. The Church will be restored to unity, power and alignment with Israel. The saved remnant of Israel is both part of Israel the nation and the Church. This Body of Believers will remain on earth until the end or near the end of the Great Tribulation and will be the instrument through which Israel will call upon Yeshua and be saved. The events predicted by the Bible, the Anti Christ and the last invasions will take place, but the joint witness of both Jewish (the saved remnant of Israel) and Gentile (the saved remnant of the nations) will bring a growing harvest of Israel and the nations (Rev. 7). When this witness is complete the nation of Israel will turn to Yeshua leading to the second coming, the rapture, the resurrection and ultimately the Millennial Rule. At the beginning of the Millennial rule (possibly the first post return Feast of Sukkot/Tabernacles) will be the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. Yeshua will rule from Jerusalem and the Torah, the Law, will go out from Jerusalem to the whole earth. The eschatology of Restoration brings passionate motivation to see Israel and the Church rightly aligned and to complete our task in this age that we might hasten the day of his coming.

Just a little note: In my 50 year walk with Yeshua, I have never seen a scholar who was not a dispensationalist become one. However, I have seen many dispensationalist scholars leave Dispensational Theology. Such scholars as Thomas McComisky, Walter Kaiser, William Bell, Bruce Waltke and many more. Some became Reformed, but some adopted a theology close to what I am calling Restoration Theology, at least in some part. This was my journey as well.