

# Dispensational vs. Covenant Theology

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# This Material is Online

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# Terms

- CT = Covenant Theology
- DT = Dispensational Theology
- Hermeneutic: a method of interpretation
  - Literalism or “originalism”
  - Spiritual
  - Typological
  - Allegorical
- WCF = Westminster Confession of Faith

# Roadmap

- Why does it matter?
- Define CT and DT.
- Show examples that demonstrate DT is a better hermeneutic and structuring mechanism than CT.
- Explain why this is the case.

# Why it Matters

- Reading a different book?
  - Examples: creation and millennial kingdom.
- Substantive issues at stake.
  - Throne and land promises.
  - Replacement and eternal security.
  - Church practice: Infant baptism? Tithe? Sabbath?
  - Church: Is the church a kingdom, and thus has a social mandate?
  - Theology: Is the Bible a “whole”? Does the kingdom = heaven?

# Covenant Theology

- **Covenant of works.** Adam and Eve were promised life for obedience.
- **Covenant of redemption.** The agreement between God the Father and God the Son that provided the basis for the covenant of grace.
- **Covenant of grace.** Since Adam and Eve failed, God in grace provided the way of salvation through Jesus Christ.

# Covenant Theology<sup>2</sup>

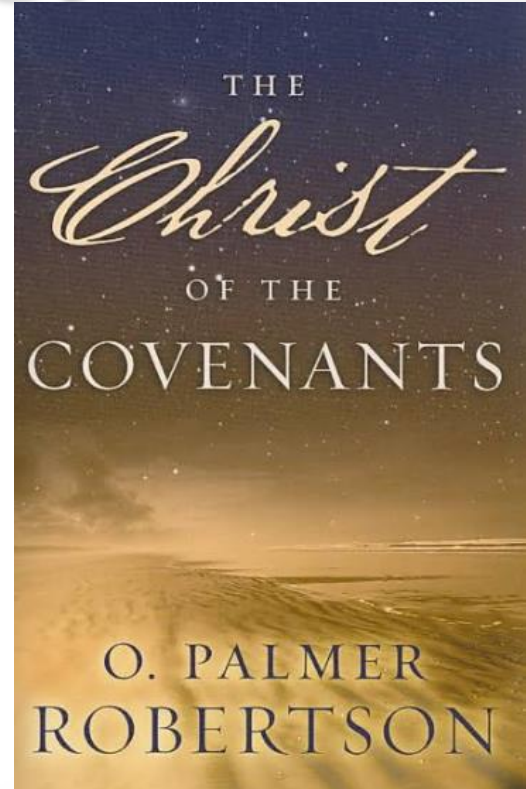
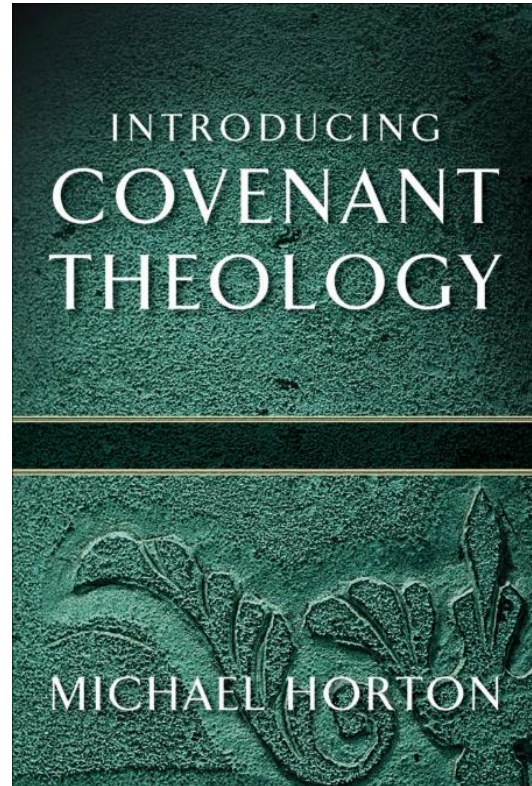
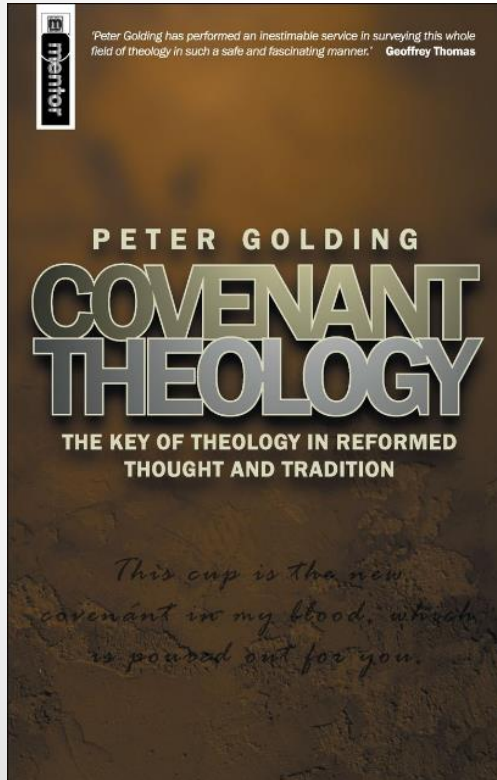
- Above are the **theological covenants**.
- The big idea of CT is that these covenants are the architectural framework upon which hangs the whole story of Scripture.
- The covenants themselves are not the most important ideas of Scripture, but they are the frame in which those ideas are properly understood.

# Covenant Theology<sup>3</sup>

- After the fall of Adam, history is the progressive outworking of the one covenant of grace, with one people of God, and one way of salvation.
- CT is implemented by another set of covenants I call the **Biblical covenants**. These covenants are known by the following names:
  - Noahic Covenant
  - Abrahamic Covenant
  - Mosaic covenant
  - Davidic Covenant
  - New Covenant



# Covenant Theology Books



# Dispensational Theology

- Is not the same as a dispensation, or 7 dispensations
- God progressively works out His reign over creation
- Through a series of interconnected administrations
- Climaxing in the mediatorial kingdom ruled by Christ
- This program extends into the eternal state
- It is designed to bring honor and glory to God
- The kingdom consists of Israel, the church, the redeemed of all other ages, under Christ's rule

# Dispensationalism<sup>2</sup>

- **Hermeneutics:** Original intent, stable meaning, and progress of revelation.
- **Israel:** future salvation and restoration
- **Church:** distinct from Israel, brought near to the Israelite covenants
- **Holy Spirit:** unique role in the church—Spirit baptism, gifting, and indwelling
- **Future:** pretribulation rapture, premillennial coming\*

# Dispensationalism<sup>3</sup>

- **The Big Picture:** God is redeeming humanity, the nation of Israel, and restoring all things in a kingdom over which He reigns.
- **Dispensations:** distinguishable administrations in God's sovereign outworking of His purpose.
- Like CT's theological covenants, the dispensations are not in themselves the most important ideas, but they provide the architectural framework in which we believe the Bible is best understood.

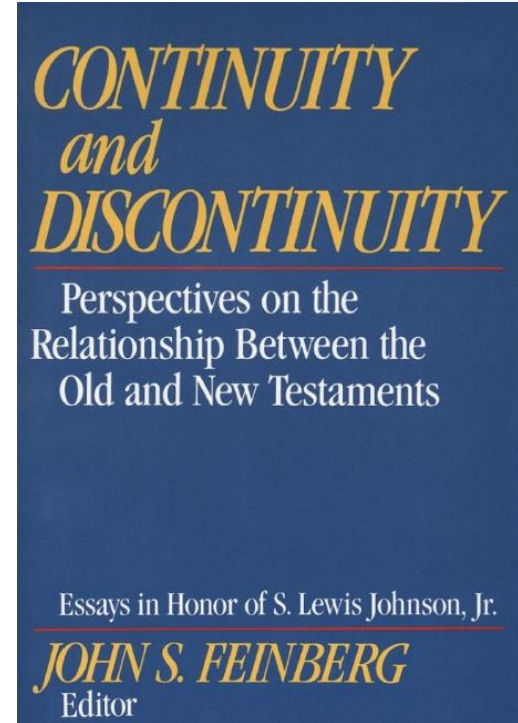
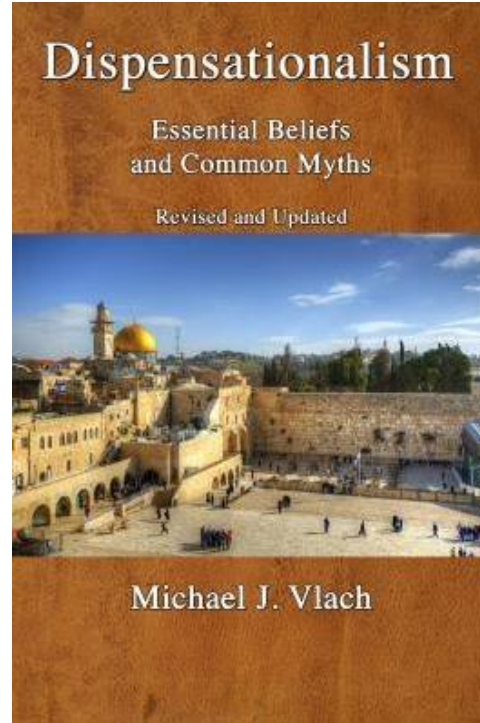
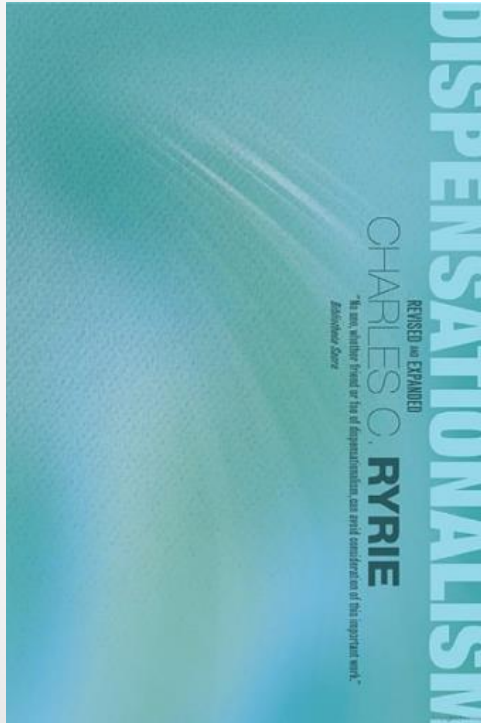
# Dispensationalism<sup>4</sup>

- Dispensations are not isolated administrations. They rather build on one another in staircase fashion.
- The destination of this staircase is the administration of the fullness of times = Millennial Kingdom.
- **Key idea:** It is this kingdom that draws together all the loose ends/discontinuities of God's program and sums them up into one grand unity.
- Thus, DT is *not* ultimately a discontinuity system.

# List of Dispensations

- Innocence                      Creation to Fall
- Conscience                    Fall to Flood
- Human Gov't                Flood forward (still operative)
- Promise                        Abraham forward (Gal. 3:17)
- Mosaic Law                    Exodus to Christ
- Church                         Christ to Rapture/Tribulation
- Kingdom                        Second Coming to Eternal State

# Dispensational Books



# Roadmap

- ✓ Why does it matter?
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# Replacement Theology

- Bruce Waltke writes that in the NT, “no clear passage teaches the restoration of national Israel...” Rather, the “hard fact [is] that national Israel and its law have been permanently replaced by the church and the New Covenant.” (Continuity and Discontinuity, p. 274).
- DT could not interpret the text more differently. Israel has NOT been replaced and still has a future.

# X Replacement Theology

- Israel is prominent in the future (Rev. 7)
- Israel will be saved and restored (Romans 11:25-27)
- If the solemn promises to Israel can be broken, I get an uncomfortable feeling that God's promises can be broken with us (Romans 8:38-39, ch. 9-11)
- Israel and her promises support the church
- The New Covenant cannot be used to replace one of its parties.

# Israel & Church Different

- CT teaches “Israel was not first of all a nation, but a church” (Horton, p. 28). The church in fact extends through all ages.
- This makes me wonder if CT actually believes in supercessionism!
- DT acknowledges that the church and Israel are very different things.

# Israel & Church Different<sup>2</sup>

## Israel

- A nation in one location
- Ethnically homogenous
- Contains unbelievers
- Origin: Abraham, Ex 19
- “Come and see”
- KG: Priests for the nations
- Enter by physical birth
- Law = Mosaic covenant

## Church

- Int’l body, local bodies
- Ethnically diverse
- Only true believers
- Origin: Acts 2
- “Go and tell”
- KG: Reign with Christ
- Enter by spiritual birth
- Law = Law of Christ

# Israel & Church Different<sup>3</sup>

- The church's beginning precludes it from existing throughout all ages.
- "I will build" (Matthew 16:18)
- New ministry of the Holy Spirit, awaited by disciples (Acts 2)
- Spirit baptism unites a believer to the body of Christ
- Formerly a mystery how God would save Gentiles now made known and operative

# Infant Baptism

- CT teaches that God makes a gracious covenant with believers **and their children** (Horton, p. 131).
- WCF: “Not only those that do actually profess faith in and obedience unto Christ, but also the infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.” (Williams, p. 207).
- Defender R. C. Sproul draws support from history, tradition, and church authority, but not explicitly from Scripture.

# Infant Baptism<sup>2</sup>

- DT supports Baptist theology.
- Water baptism for believers is clearly revealed in Scripture, both as to candidates and mode.
  - Candidates: believers (Acts 2:41, and household passages)
  - Mode: Immersion (Acts 8:38, John 3:23, Matt. 3:6)
- The symbol of baptism cannot be legitimately applied to unbelievers who have not experienced the reality of the symbol.

# Infant Baptism<sup>3</sup>

- CT: baptized children are members of the visible covenant community.
- Problem with halfway membership in the long-run
- No discipline for unrepentant sinners when older?
- Problem of false assurance.
  - Many times I have evangelized people who say, “I was baptized in \_\_\_\_\_ church as a baby...” Their trust often rests on a work, not on Christ.



# Spirit Baptism

- Important doctrine; often overlooked.
- Check Matt. 3:11, Acts 1:4-5, 1 Cor. 12:13.
- There is no water in Acts 2:1-4, yet Acts 11:15-16 says it fulfilled the baptism promise of Christ.
- It is different and more important than water baptism. It lies under the water baptism symbol.
- When you read of a baptism, ask: what baptism is in view?

# CT vs. DT: Spirit Baptism<sup>2</sup>

- CT merges Spirit baptism with water. Horton, e.g., criticizes those who “spiritualize” baptism.
- Quoting Ridderbos: “We find baptism, in harmony with the whole of the early Christian proclamation, characterized as the symbol of **and means of salvation** for the washing away of and cleansing from sin” (emphasis added, Horton, p. 154).
- DT: there’s an important difference. We can easily avoid incautious or errant statements like above.

# Tithe and Sabbath

- CT: Tithe and Sabbath (shifted to Sunday) seem to be a moral obligation.
- DT: new regulatory regime has 2 Cor. 8-9 “in charge” of the theology of giving.
  - By the way: giving is according to what one *has*, not what one does not have (2 Cor. 8:12).
- DT: Law of Christ has set aside the Sabbath (Col. 2:16, Rom. 14:5).

# Millennial Temple

- Daniel Block, NICOT, Ezek 47-48: “Every detail of the vision is unrealistic and caricatured. Streams do not issue forth from temple thresholds...Waters do not flow over or through hills...Trees do not break the seasonal patterns and produce fruit every month of the year, nor do the leaves of these trees have medicinal value. All these features suggest an impressionistic literary cartoon.”
- DT: Details of the vision should be taken literally.

# Millennial Temple<sup>2</sup>

- Ezekiel reveals:
  - A future kingdom of peace
  - A rearranged land
  - A new temple
  - A new priesthood and sacrificial system
  - A new governmental arrangement
- Raises theological issues, but not hermeneutical ones. Clearly, the intent is to encourage a down-and-out nation of Israel with news of a real revival.

# Covenant of Works

- WCF VII.2: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”
- Williamson, p. 64: “The elements which constituted the ‘covenant of works’ are not formally stated in Scripture. They are nevertheless clearly implied” (p. 64).

# Covenant of Works<sup>2</sup>

- Heads-up about the doctrine of republication.
  - That the covenant of works was republished at Sinai
  - Some controversy surrounds this doctrine in CT
- This could be called CT's "other way of salvation," but to be charitable, we have to acknowledge that CT is very clear about one way of salvation, like DT.
- The ink spent in CT literature to prove the CW is evidence against it.

# Covenant of Works<sup>3</sup>

- DT does not labor to create a full covenant structure around a simple prohibition.
- Not all of God's dealings are covenantal. Some are simple commands and prohibitions.
  - Yes, God is relational, and He is the promise-keeping God
  - But He is also the King.



# How Promises are Applied

- The Land Promise
- In all Israelite covenants—Abraham, Mosaic, Davidic, and New—the promise of dwelling peacefully in a specific geographic location plays an important role (Genesis 12:7; Exodus 6:4 and Deut. 6:23; Jeremiah 32:41 and Ezekiel 37:12).
- DT: the promises are understood according to original intent. The land is, simply put, the land.

# How Promises are Applied<sup>2</sup>

- CT spiritualizes the land promise. “To understand the nature of the land promise from a Gospel point of view, we need to view the land in a spiritual way.” ([creationconcept.wordpress.com](http://creationconcept.wordpress.com))
- Abraham “understood the promise of land to be an assurance of his resurrection.”

# How Promises are Applied<sup>3</sup>

- The Throne Promise
- The earthly throne of David is a “type” of the Messiah’s throne, where the latter is a “heightened” antitype or fulfillment of the merely earthly throne of David. “[Jesus] now occupies Messiah's throne, which has been typified by the earthly throne of David.” Robertson (*Continuity and Discontinuity*, p. 105-6)

# How Promises are Applied<sup>4</sup>

- DT: The CT view is untenable for a couple of reasons.
- The original author/readers would understand the throne to be literal.
- The Lord Jesus has to return to earth; it is to take up this throne, in part, that he does so. To place the throne in heaven eliminates the need for the second coming.

# Roadmap

- ✓ Why does it matter?
- ✓ Define CT and DT.
- ✓ Show examples that demonstrate DT is a better hermeneutic and structuring mechanism than CT.
- Explain why this is the case.
  - There is more than just the underlying hermeneutic to “blame” for the shortcomings of CT.

# Basis of Covenants

- Covenant of works is overbuilt; no promise of life is mentioned in Genesis—only implied. No time limit on required obedience is another problem. Suggests salvation based on works is possible, but I believe that can never be the case, for it would not be secure for man, nor glorifying to God.
- Covenant of redemption is debated among CTs, and even Robertson doubts its existence and suspects it is “artificial” (*Christ of the Covenants*, 54).

# Basis of Covenants<sup>2</sup>

- Covenant of grace is not clearly revealed in Scripture. Some candidate passages like Hebrews 13:20 can be identified with a Biblical covenant.
- CT appeals to the many references to “covenant” for support. It is illegitimate to appeal to this term in its uses by the explicit Biblical covenants to support the theological covenants.
- The 3 CT covenants have no blood basis.

# Basis of Covenants<sup>3</sup>

- All covenants that DT focuses on have an explicit and sturdy Biblical basis.
  - Noah – Genesis 6:18, chapter 9
  - Abraham – Genesis 15:18
  - Moses – Exodus 19:5-8
  - David – 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 89:3
  - New Covenant – Jeremiah 31:31-34
- No theological covenants? No problem.
- Overarching idea is not a covenant—it's a Kingdom



# Covenant Idea Limited

- The structuring/theological covenants are focused on soteriological issues.
- History of the world is not merely a salvation-history (Genesis 3-Rev. 19).
- It is a kingdom-history (Genesis 1-eternal state).
- The meta-covenant idea - covenants on top of covenants – is not convincing.
- Covenant is one “thing” in God’s toolbox
- Last will and testament type is hard to fit with ANE covenant emphasis of CT

# DT Handles Discontinuity

- DT easily handles law and grace. CT does not.
- Example of eating pork. We need not determine whether this is a ceremonial, moral or civil law. We simply acknowledge that we are not under the Law. We are supported in this by Peter's lesson in Acts 10.
- Example of keeping Sabbath. We are not under the Law, and have NT revelation to support this.
- DT handles discontinuity in a continuous way 😊

# DT Hermeneutics Better

- As is clear by now, CT reads the Bible with a typological or spiritualized hermeneutic.
- DT reads Scripture using an originalist approach. Texts do not change meaning. Even NT texts cannot change the meaning of OT texts.
  - There is another presupposition built in here, and that is that Scripture speaks with one voice (univocal). Double meaning is not “a thing” in my understanding of Scripture.

# DT Hermeneutics Better

- Example: Amos 9:11-12 and Acts 15
- Robertson argues that **Gentile blessings depend on the restoration of David's throne**. Therefore, the throne in Amos must be typical, and it must be fulfilled now with Christ in heaven.
- But the opposite is actually the case: **Gentile blessings depend on the stumbling of Israel and God's rejection of her** (Romans 11:12, 15).

# DT Realism and Optimism

- DT is realistic about the depraved condition of man and the degrading condition of the world. CT in the post-millennial version is unrealistically optimistic.
- DT is not pessimistic like “rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.”
- Rather, DT is optimistic in that the Titanic is going down, but Lord will come and rescue it, fix it, and set it to sail again for 1000 years.

# Clarity on Role of Church

- DT supports the Baptist doctrine of separation of church and state. CT arose in a state-church milieu that I think affects it to the present.
- DT arises out of the doctrine called the spirituality of the church. The priorities of the church are not civil, secular, or social (as in Israel). The mission of the church is the Great Commission.
  - The church can and must touch the civil sphere, but not be entirely enmeshed in it as a second “mission.” If that happens, usually the second mission eats up the first.

# DT Explains Spirit's Ministry

- We mentioned this earlier, but to expand just a little bit, DT shows how the ministry of the Holy Spirit has “expanded” in the church age.
  - Spirit baptism is new
  - Spirit gifting of all believers is apparently new, particularly in the context of the body of Christ.
  - Spirit indwelling is also expanded. This is a debated point in DT, but I think most DTs concur with this conclusion.

# DT and the Kingdom

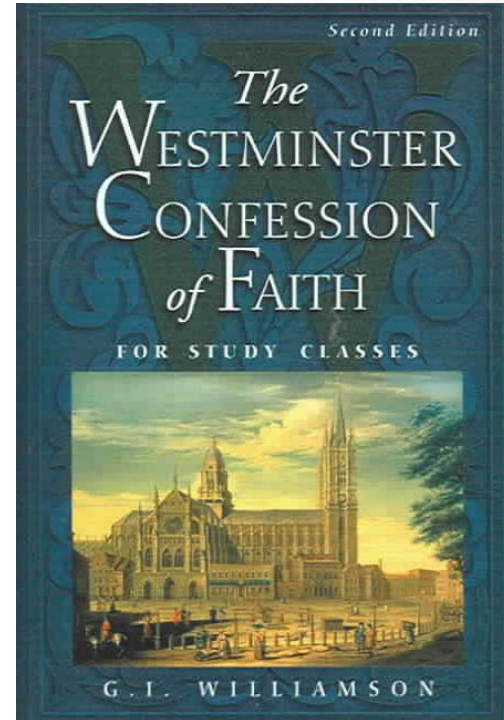
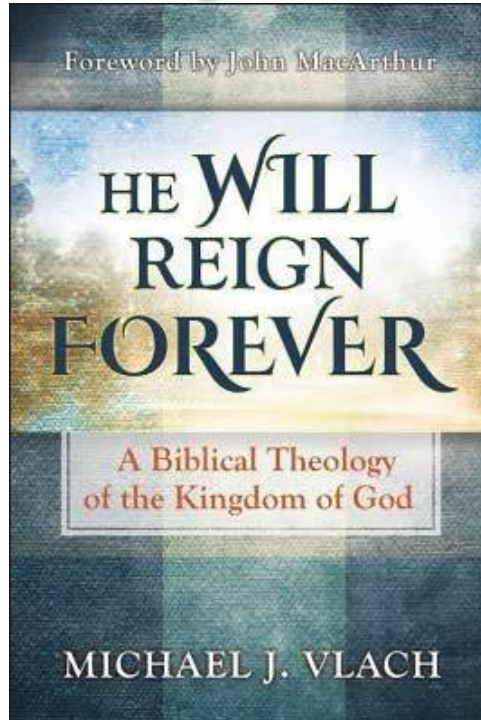
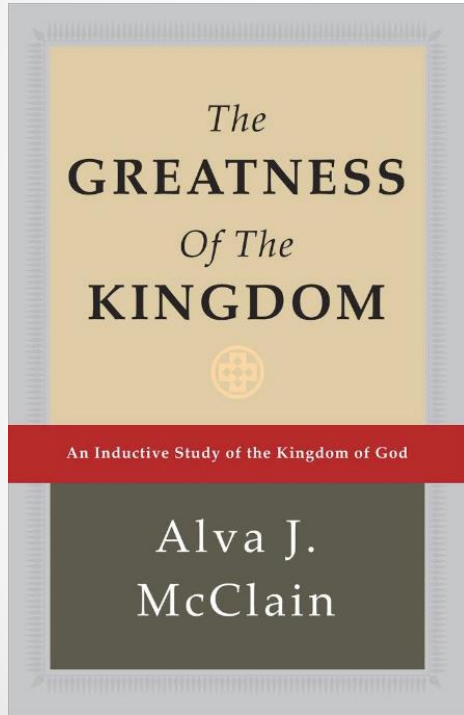
- Unfortunately, neither CT nor DT present a united doctrine of the Kingdom. They have multiple kingdoms:
  - DT—Kingdom of heaven, spiritual kingdom, kingdom of God, mystery kingdom, already/not yet, etc.
  - CT—already/not yet, kingdom = heaven
- My understanding is simpler: there is no kingdom today. We pray the kingdom will come because it is not here yet.



# DT and the Kingdom

- Title: The Kingdom of the God of Heaven
- The King is absent, so the kingdom is too.
- Point of confusion: present kingdom citizenship is incorrectly forced to mean the kingdom itself is present.
  - Nope. We are citizens of the future kingdom. Our citizenship drives our current conduct. But we are expats.
  - Allows us to take all texts literally; a couple must be understood in the “we are constituted as citizens” sense. Most NT texts fit the future context.

# Other Key Resources



# Who's Who? Covenant

- O. Palmer Robertson
- R. C. Sproul – Ligonier
- Michael Horton
- Louis Berkhof
- Charles Hodge
- Al Mohler – Reformed Baptist, pre-mill
- Charles Spurgeon – Reformed Baptist, pre-mill
- Mark Dever - Reformed Baptist
- Jonathan Edwards

# Who's Who? Dispensational

- Charles Ryrie – DTS
- C. I. Scofield
- Alva McClain – Grace
- Rolland McCune – DBTS
- Michael Vlach – TMS
- John MacArthur – TMS
- Mike Stallard – FOI
- Mark Snoeberger – DBTS

# Aside: Other Systems

- **NCT, New Covenant Theology:** no theological covenants; no infant baptism; unity of Mosaic Law; replacement theology; non-literal understanding of some OT passages; kingdom today.
  - Very close to progressive covenantalism.
- **PD, Progressive Dispensationalism:** Jesus is ruling on the Davidic throne presently; complementary hermeneutic, aka “sensus plenior” in which previous revelation gets an added or expanded meaning alongside the original meaning; kingdom today.

# New Covenant Theology

- John Zens
- John G. Reisinger
- Fred G. Zaspel
- Tom Wells
- Steve Lehrer
- Providence Theological Seminary, Sound of Grace Ministries, John Bunyan Conference, and In-Depth Studies

# Progressive Dispensationalism

- Craig Blaising
- Darrell Bock
- Robert Saucy

# Who's Who

- John Piper? Definitely not DT; affinity for CT and NCT.
- Paul Washer? Reformed Baptist. As far as eschatology, he seems to be post-tribulational and amillennial. The rapture and the second coming will happen essentially simultaneously.
- Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry are progressive covenantal, basically equal to New Covenant Theology.



# Fine Print

- This material was presented to FBFI at its conference June 11-13, 2018.
- Its contents are solely the responsibility of its author.
- It is presented in hopes that it will be a help and blessing to all, although it is likely that not all will agree with every point!