

DISPENSATIONALISM AND FREE GRACE: INTIMATELY LINKED

PART 2

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I. INTRODUCTION

In the first installment of this series, I demonstrated that many of the proponents of Lordship Salvation have advanced the argument that normative Dispensationalism and Free Grace go hand-in-hand. Among these are Drs. John MacArthur¹ and John Gerstner, though many others have also made this claim. I agree with this assertion.

To establish this connection, I showed where MacArthur and Gerstner have drawn a correlation between Dispensationalism and Free Grace in their works on soteriology, and did a brief survey of the writings of A. W. Pink both before and after his change from Dispensationalism to Covenant Theology, showing that his soteriology was greatly impacted by the change. In other words, in the first installment of this series, I demonstrated *that* a non-Dispensational approach to interpretation leads to Lordship Salvation.

In this article, I will attempt to show *how* this occurs by interacting with specific methods of interpretation used by proponents of Lordship Salvation as they are applied to various

¹ On one hand, MacArthur states that the link between Dispensationalism and Free Grace is imagined, but on the other he argues later that they are very much linked. I believe that the distinction is that he does not want people to associate all forms of Dispensationalism with Free Grace. Nevertheless, I believe that he would agree that Classical or Revised Dispensationalism in the mold of Chafer or Ryrie (which I have labeled normative Dispensationalism) is the root of Free Grace theology.

Biblical passages. In the last installment of the series, I will attempt to demonstrate how and why Dispensationalism has led so many to Free Grace theology.

Three major distinctions of Covenant Theology most often drive the soteriology of Lordship Salvation. These are kingdom-now millennial views (including already/not yet views), a soteriological view of history, and the application of the Law to Christians. All of these are the fruit of non-literal interpretation and each point will be examined below.

II. HERMENEUTICAL DIFFERENCES

While both sides of the debate over Dispensationalism agree that Dispensationalism and consistent literal interpretation necessarily go together, some have sought to cast doubt on the motivation of Dispensationalists' insistence on consistent literal interpretation. For example, in both *A Primer on Dispensationalism*,² and *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*,³ Gerstner makes the claim that theology drives Dispensationalism to consistent literal interpretation⁴ rather than the other way around. This is a strange assertion because it is so unlikely that an interpreter would come up with a theology independent of the Word that just happened to be the same as the literal interpretation.

²"It is very difficult to say which is the cart and which is the horse in this case. Is it the literalistic tendency that produces this divided Scripture, or is it the belief in a divided Scripture that drives the Dispensationalist to ultra-literalism at some point? I think it is the latter, though that is not easy to prove" John Gerstner, *A Primer on Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1982), 5.

³"Many on both sides think that this minor 'hermeneutical' difference [between literal interpretation of prophecy and non-literal interpretation of prophecy] is a more foundational difference than the theological. We profoundly disagree for we believe that the Dispensational literal hermeneutic is driven by an a priori commitment to Dispensational theological distinctives." John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991), 86-87.

⁴Literal interpretation does not mean that figures of speech are not recognized, but that the original intention of the author, and that alone, is sought. Conversely, to stop seeking the original intention of the author is to cease from literal interpretation, even if an allegorical method is not used.

The fact that literal hermeneutics is indeed primary for Dispensationalists is further evidenced in the fact that while Dispensationalists disagree on many theological points, and even on the interpretation of many passages, the commitment to consistent literal interpretation remains. Some of these different approaches as they relate to the Sermon on the Mount are cataloged in John Martin's article, "Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount" in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*,⁵ and this list is far from exhaustive. The Sermon on the Mount is only one of many passages where Dispensationalists disagree, yet it is fair to say that all of the views arise out of an attempt at uncovering the Sermon's original intention.

Because Dispensationalism is variously defined, I have attempted to boil down what are the five basic elements of normative Dispensationalism. They are as follows:

1. Literal, historical, grammatical interpretation should be applied to *all* portions of Scripture.
2. The church and Israel are distinct peoples in God's program for the ages.
3. The Lord Jesus Christ will return bodily to earth and reign on David's throne in Jerusalem for one thousand years.
4. The underlying purpose of God's dealings with the world is His glory, not merely the salvation of man, thus the Scripture goes far beyond evangelism.
5. The Christian is free from the Law in its entirety for both justification (Gal 2:16) and sanctification (Gal 5:18).⁶

Each of these points is fundamental to normative Dispensationalism, but the first point is primary among them because all of the other points flow from consistent literal interpretation.

⁵ Stanley Toussaint and Charles Dyer, editors (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986) 35-48.

⁶ For points 1-4 see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 45-48. For point 5, see *The Ryrie Study Bible: New Testament New American Standard Version*, (Chicago: Moody, 1977), notes on Romans 7, 273-74. See also Alva J. McClain, *Law and Grace: A Study of New Testament Concepts as They Relate to the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

It is commonly taken as axiomatic that conservative proponents of Covenant Theology only adopt a method of non-literal interpretation in passages related to yet-unfulfilled prophecy. This is simply not true as can be seen in the fact that so often the debate between methods of interpretation between Dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists focus on passages that are not prophetic. Some obvious examples are the Sermon on the Mount,⁷ Romans 6-8 (see below), the warning passages in Hebrews,⁸ and the non-prophetic portions of the Old Testament. If the only divergence is prophecy, why would passages such as these be the focus of discussion rather than it being limited to books and passages like Daniel 2 and 9, the Olivet Discourse, and Revelation?

The fact is, because of the analogy of faith (Scripture interprets Scripture), Bible interpretation is systematic. The theology that arises from our interpretation of one passage necessarily effects our interpretation of other related passages unless we are willing to abandon that theology. The doctrine that arises from non-literal interpretation in eschatological passages produces a domino effect where, in order to maintain the theology that arises from non-literal interpretation of these passages, non-literal interpretation is adopted in many other passages as well. By the time the dominoes stop falling, the vast majority of the Bible is impacted and very little is taken in a way that is consistent with authorial intent.

If Covenant Theology has an impact on interpretation in so much of the Bible, it should be an area of concern, then, that even among many Dispensationalist pastors and teachers, their bookshelves are filled primarily with exegetical and theological works from non-Dispensational scholars. The mistake is made of assuming that as long as they are not dealing with eschatology, the non-Dispensational approach is acceptable. The result has been that even many Dispensationalists adopt non-Dispensational interpretations of many passages and

⁷ Even among Dispensationalists that interpret the Sermon as a description of ethics during the Kingdom dispensation, this is not properly considered a prophetic sermon, but a manifesto.

⁸ Compare Joseph Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Haysville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Company, 1992) pp. 433-66, and Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968).

carry away a theology that is inconsistent with a consistently literal approach to Bible interpretation.

John MacArthur is only one example of a Dispensationalist that has been affected in this way by non-Dispensational scholars. This effect can be seen most clearly in his soteriological work, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, where, in his discussion of the Synoptic Gospels, he quotes from thirty-nine non-Dispensationalists and only one Dispensationalist in defense of his position. The effect of this dependence upon non-Dispensationalists can be seen in his open rejection of normative Dispensationalism in both *The Gospel According to Jesus* and *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, especially (out of our five essentials listed above) the principles of the believer's freedom from the Mosaic Law for both justification and sanctification⁹ and Dispensationalism's doxological view of history.¹⁰ MacArthur's adoption of the corresponding principles of Covenant Theology is clearly the foundation for his soteriology.

III. MILLENNIAL VIEWS

Because the impact of the various millennial views upon soteriology has been discussed at length by Free Grace scholars, and because space is limited, this topic will only be dealt with briefly.¹¹

While every major aspect of Covenant Theology has a significant impact on soteriology, nothing has more of an impact than removing the Judgment Seat of Christ from the equation—a byproduct of kingdom-now millennial views. Dave Anderson wrote in *Free Grace Soteriology*,

Free Grace is an outflow of Dispensationalism.
Only Dispensationalism has a judgment seat for
believers some time before the thousand year

⁹ See John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1993, 2000), 105-138.

¹⁰ See John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988, 1994), 31-33, 96-97.

¹¹ For further study, the reader is encouraged to read: Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, Zane Hodges *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas, Redención Viva, 1981), and G. H. Lang, *Firstborn Sons: Their Rights and Risks*, Reprint Edition (Miami Springs, FL: Conley and Schoettle Publishing Co., 1984).

reign of Christ (in Jerusalem on earth) and a judgment seat for unbelievers after this one thousand year reign.¹²

The Judgment Seat of Christ is a watershed doctrine in soteriology.

There are clearly passages in the NT—lots of them—that speak of a judgment of believers according to works. One unambiguous example is 2 Cor 5:10, “For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” But there are also many passages that simply talk about rewards in the kingdom according to works without mentioning a judgment. The Beatitudes in Matt 5:3-12 is one such passage. For the Dispensationalist, these passages present no problem because we understand that there is a judgment for believers to determine reward which is not to be confused with a general judgment of all men to determine eternal destiny.

When the Millennial Kingdom is removed from the equation—and the Judgment Seat of Christ with it—the non-Dispensationalist is presented with a difficult problem. Passages discussing kingdom inheritance (which is according to works) are equated with passages about the new birth (which is by grace through faith and apart from works). Furthermore, the judgments of unbelievers and believers are joined into one event, one judgment, to determine eternal destiny.¹³ If justification and eternal life are a free gift through faith alone apart from works, how can so many passages speak as if kingdom

¹² David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* (NP: Xulon Press, 2010), viii.

¹³ For example, the Sheep and the Goats judgment in Matt 25:31-46 is distinct from the Great White Throne Judgment. The sheep and goats are separated before any works are mentioned and then judged separately according to works. The non-Dispensationalist sees this as a description of the one judgment where all men will appear to determine eternal destiny. With this basis, the view that works are necessary to escape everlasting punishment cannot be avoided. For contrasting views regarding this judgment, see (the Dispensational view) Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1980) pp. 288-92, and (the non-Dispensational view) David Hill, *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972, 1981) pp. 330-32.

inheritance (which, in their mind is the same thing¹⁴) is according to works? And how can believers be judged by their works alongside unbelievers to determine eternal destiny?

Proponents of various forms of Lordship Salvation seek to solve this problem by denying the dichotomy set forth in Rom 4:1-5 and 11:6, and reintroducing commitment to good works as either an open condition for finally escaping eternal condemnation or as the necessary outcome of new birth.¹⁵

One aspect that is less often discussed is regarding the Biblical description of the righteous life of Israel in the kingdom. For example Zeph 3:11-13 says:

“In that day you shall not be shamed for any of your deeds in which you transgress against Me; for then I will take away from your midst those who rejoice in your pride, and you shall no longer be haughty In My holy mountain. I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD. The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth; for they shall feed their flocks and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid.”

Under Covenant Theology, the Church and Israel are equated and the kingdom is said (at least to some degree) to be now. If this is the case, the certain expectation is that all believers must meet this (practically) righteous description.¹⁶ The fact

¹⁴ See Edmund K. Neufeld, “The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question ‘What Must I do to be Saved?’ from the Synoptics,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June 2008), 272. “The first eight beatitudes (Matt 5:3-10) attract our reader, because each gives a condition and a reward, and the reward generally sounds like eternal life.” Matthew 5:5, for example, presents the reward for the meek, “*autoi klēronomēsousin tēn gēn*,” meaning literally, “they will inherit the land.” The Dispensationalist understands that this has to do with possessing the land promised to Abraham in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15:17-21) in the kingdom. If there is no literal land to possess, as the amillennialists believe, it is understandable that they believe that this “generally sounds like eternal life.” The Dispensational premillennialist does not confuse the two and has no problem here.

¹⁵ This latter view also makes works a condition for spending eternity with God.

¹⁶ See, for example, John Gill’s exposition of Zeph 3:13 in Exposition of the Entire Bible available online at: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/>

that this is observably removed from reality has simply led to Covenant Theologians denying the possibility that someone may be born again and not fit this description, thus, Lordship Salvation is again the conclusion.

IV. SOTERIOLOGICAL VIEW OF HISTORY

Related to the various kingdom-now views is Covenant Theology's soteriological view of history. One prevalent theme that ties the entire Bible together is the hope of a future kingdom ruled by Messiah along with the glory of the Lord that will be both revealed and shared with men during His righteous reign. Because the Millennial Kingdom is either greatly minimized or eliminated altogether in the various non-Dispensational views, an enormous vacuum is left. Scholars have attempted to fill this void by placing the redemption of the elect in the forefront and reading much of the Bible through that perspective. In that regard, the departure from literal interpretation of passages related to the kingdom is the root of the soteriological view of history.

It might also be said, however, that Covenant theology's soteriological view of history has its roots in the Reformed view of election and reprobation, especially in supralapsarianism.¹⁷ This is best illustrated by William Perkins who synthesized the theologies of Theodore Beza and the Heidelberg Theologians¹⁸ (the innovators of Covenant Theology) in his chart of history entitled *A Golden Chain*.¹⁹ This work was enormously popular and had a profound impact on Puritan theology.

Perkins saw human history as a means of working out election and reprobation. In *A Golden Chain*, every major Biblical event along with the lives of both the elect and the reprobate

commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/zephaniah-3-13.html (last accessed October 10th, 2011).

¹⁷ Supralapsarianism is the view that election and reprobation precede the Fall in the logical order of the Divine decrees. In other words, according to supralapsarianism, sin was introduced as a means to accomplish election and reprobation.

¹⁸ See R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 1997), 51-66.

¹⁹ This chart is available online at <http://www.reformed.org/calvinism/index.html?mainframe=/calvinism/perkins.html> (last accessed July 1, 2011).

are mapped from eternity past to eternity future. And each event is seen as a step in the outworking of God's decreed will concerning election and reprobation. In this perspective, all of history is seen as divinely designed toward those particular goals. While supralapsarianism has become a less common position, the soteriological view of history that resulted from it has remained as popular as ever. A soteriological view of history brings with it an almost exclusively soteriological view of the Bible's contents because everything else is seen as almost superfluous.

For example, in Piper's *The Justification of God*, he bases his exegesis of Rom 9:1-23 upon the assumption that Israel's position as recipients of God's kingdom program is not the subject of discussion. His comments on Rom 9:2 demonstrate this: "Paul is not moved to constant grief (9:2) because corporate Israel has forfeited her non-salvific 'theocratic privileges' while another people (the Church or the remnant) has taken over this 'historical role.'"²⁰ The implication is that it is ridiculous to think Paul would be so upset about this, but if we have a proper appreciation for the importance of the kingdom in God's program for the ages (see Rom 8:17-18), and especially the centrality of the kingdom in God's program for Israel, this notion is not so ridiculous. By forfeiting their kingdom inheritance, this disobedient generation is forfeiting its purpose and glory.

A doxological view of God's dealing with man in history, as opposed to a soteriological view, is to some degree the direct result of recognizing the intended audience of the Biblical books. If indeed the only book of the New Testament that was written to unbelievers is the Gospel of John, why would we assume an evangelical purpose for the other books? Is this not a complete dismissal of authorial intent?

In Edmund K. Neufeld's June 2008 *JETS* article, "The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question 'What Must I Do to be Saved?' from the Synoptics," the error of Covenant Theology's soteriological view of history is on display.

Neufeld states that he "will not contend with the common view that the Synoptic Gospels address believers, in Matthew's

²⁰ *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 64-65.

case Jewish believers.”²¹ Nevertheless he proceeds to “examine Matthew, Mark, and Luke, reading each Gospel in turn through the eyes of its own hypothetical reader” each of which is “a late first-century Gentile unbeliever.”²² This seems to be an admission that his interpretation is dependent upon superimposing an audience that was never intended onto the books in question.

The impact of this error cannot be overstated. Throughout the article, Neufeld openly and repeatedly states that works are a condition for receiving eternal life.²³ In fact, this seems to be the main point of the article, as the following thesis paragraph shows:

...we have understood saving *faith* to emerge from God’s call and merit-less human choice, so we should understand saving *obedience* rising from that same dynamic of God’s grace and merit-less human response. Perhaps the crucial distinction is not between faith and works, but between grace and merit. By saying “faith not works,” we intend “grace not merit,” but these are not parallel distinctions. The Synoptics undermine “faith not works,” but they support “grace not merit.”²⁴

The intended audience and purpose of any book are inseparably linked. If Matthew was writing to Jewish believers who already possessed eternal life in the Johannine since, why would he write to them as if they were unbelieving Gentiles

²¹ Neufeld, 271.

²² *Ibid.*, 270.

²³ “Matthew 8:1–25:30... has not altered the offer of life *to those who hear the golden rule and obey it, to those who leave all to follow Jesus. Active obedience to Jesus and his teaching continues to be the narrow gate to life*” (p. 277, emphasis added). “Our reader also finds God working graciously in these chapters [Matt 8:1–25:30], but generally not in a way that overturns *the emphasis on active obedience being rewarded with salvation*” (p. 277, fn 26, emphasis added). “Following Jesus requires surpassing loyalty than that to family and to life itself, and Jesus’ words make these conditions essential for receiving eternal life” (p. 288), and “The Third Gospel usually speaks of *receiving eternal life in terms of some active obedience*. This includes being merciful, being more loyal to Jesus than any other in the face of opposition, even to losing one’s life, and living obediently to Jesus” (p. 290, emphasis added).

²⁴ Neufeld, 268 (emphasis in original).

who did not already possess this gift? To create a hypothetical reader that is different in every significant way from the intended audience is to skew the intention of the author. What Neufeld has done is simply ignore the intended audience and impose an evangelistic purpose onto the text.²⁵

Neufeld's plain admission of this method and resulting works salvation is helpful because it brings out into the open a method—rooted in Covenant Theology's soteriological view of history—that is commonplace among proponents of Lordship Salvation.

Is this a fault of Neufeld's exegesis alone, or is it the natural result of Covenant Theology? I think it is the latter. Covenant Theology unites all of Scripture around the doctrine of soteriology. This naturally results in the Synoptic Gospels playing a central role in the development of their soteriology because soteriology is seen as almost the single purpose of Christ's first advent. If we limit the Synoptics' application to people who are already secure believers, recognizing also Dispensational distinctions that are at play, soteriology ceases to be relevant to their main purpose. Covenant Theology (which unites all Scripture around soteriology) simply doesn't know what to do with a non-soteriological purpose because, in their view, nothing else is really very important.²⁶ In Neufeld,

²⁵ I would like to point out that I do not believe Neufeld wants to intentionally misrepresent the theology of the Synoptic writers. In fact, his article reads like an honest attempt to understand the Synoptics by a writer that is uncomfortable with trying to maintain the contradictory views of justification by faith alone and justification by works and has essentially chosen the latter. It must be instead that he fails to recognize that intended audience and authorial intent are inseparably related. This seems to me to be the primary exegetical pitfall of proponents of Lordship Salvation. Because they see the purpose of history as soteriological, all passages must fit into that box, no matter the context.

²⁶ I would like to point out that this also seems to be the root of the confusion about what Dispensationalists have taught regarding the justification of Old Testament Saints. While the Dispensationalist is discussing their salvation in reference to theocratic privilege, physical and material blessing, possession of the land, etc., the Covenant Theologian naturally assumes salvation from the penalty of sins is in view. Dispensationalists have never taught that in the Old Testament justification before God in an eternal sense was by anything other than faith alone, but Dispensationalists have made many statements that sound that way to Covenant Theologians who are applying the hermeneutics of Covenant Theology to their words. We are simply speaking different languages. See, for example, Gerstner's discussion of this problem in *Wrongly Dividing*, pp. 149-69.

as in others, changing each Synoptic Gospel's audience in order to change their purpose seems to be as much about restoring relevance (and even a primary place) to the Synoptics as it is about defending a prior commitment to works salvation.

MacArthur also applies this non-literal method of interpretation as can be plainly seen in his discussion of the purpose of the Gospels:

There is no more glorious truth in the Bible than the words of Luke 19:10: "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." That verse sums up the work of Christ on earth (...) Unfortunately traditional Dispensationalism tends to miss that simple point. Some Dispensationalists teach that "the gospel of the kingdom" Jesus proclaimed (Matt 4:23) is distinct from "the gospel of the grace of God." (...) That may fit neatly into a particular Dispensational scheme, but Scripture does not support it. We must not forget that Jesus came to seek and save the lost, not merely to announce an earthly kingdom.²⁷

This quote misrepresents the Dispensational position. Dispensationalists also agree that Jesus proclaimed the way to eternal life—the Fourth Gospel is dedicated primarily to this purpose. The difference is that we recognize that Jesus spoke about other things too, whereas MacArthur would force an evangelistic purpose onto all of Jesus' words, no matter the context.²⁸ Would MacArthur, a premillennialist, have us believe that Jesus did not offer an earthly kingdom at all? His words here and the way he uses passages where Jesus offers the kingdom to Israel suggest that he would.

John Piper also reveals this perspective in his discussion of what it takes to obtain what he calls "final salvation." After quoting Acts 3:19; 1 Cor 16:22; Mark 8:34-35; Matt 10:37; Luke 14:33, and many other passages, he goes on to say:

²⁷ MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 96.

²⁸ It should be noted that ironically even in Luke 19:10, Jesus is not discussing an evangelistic intent. It should be understood that this passage refers instead to bringing wayward believers back into obedience to the Shepherd.

These are just some of the conditions that the New Testament says we must meet in order to inherit final salvation. We must believe on Jesus and receive him and turn from our sin and obey him and humble ourselves like little children and love him more than we love our family, our possession, or our own life. This is what it means to be converted to Christ. This alone is the way of life everlasting.²⁹

This comment shows that he is interpreting all of these passages as being about how to obtain eternal life. He does this even though all of these books were written to believers and none of these passages mention faith, eternal life, justification, or eternal condemnation.

Piper's use here of Acts 3:19 is especially telling because the passage is discussing the conditions for bringing in the "times of refreshing" and "times of restoration" which were foretold by the Old Testament prophets (see 3:22-24), clearly a reference to the kingdom.³⁰ Piper, being a premillennialist, should not have missed this.³¹

Though Biblical writers can (and sometimes do) discuss the way to eternal life in books written to believers, even this is done as a reminder and as laying a foundation for other doctrines.³² Because the audience of every book in the New Testament other than the Gospel of John is an audience of

²⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, (Sisters: Multnomah Publishers, Inc., 1996) 65-66. Piper is a premillennialist and has a strong focus on the glory of God in his writings, nevertheless, he is consistent in interpreting the Bible through a lens of individual salvation from the penalty of sins.

³⁰ While the LXX does not use the words *anapsuxis*, "refreshing" or *apokatastasis* "restoration," a related word (*apokathistēmi*) does appear in Acts 1:6 regarding the kingdom and the concept is clearly present referring to the kingdom in Isa 48:6-8; Ezekiel 37, and many other passages in the Prophets. As McClain states: "Reflecting now upon the total content of Acts 3, it is hard to imagine how words could have made any plainer the historical reality of this reoffer of the King and His Kingdom to the nation of Israel." McClain, Alva J., *The Greatness of the Kingdom: And Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974) p. 406. See also the whole context of his discussion of Acts 3 in pp. 403-406.

³¹ MacArthur also makes this significant oversight. *Apostles*, pp. 33, 196.

³² A good example is the discussion on justification in Romans 1-4 setting up the discussions on sanctification in chaps. 5-8, Dispensationalism in chaps. 9-11, and liberation in chaps. 12-16.

believers, we should not assume that every serious discussion in the Bible is about the eternal destiny of its readers, but that is exactly what non-Dispensationalists often do. The Covenant Theologian and the “leaky Dispensationalist” (MacArthur) find their justification for this assumption in their soteriological view of history and, in MacArthur’s case, the over-application of Luke 19:10. Non-soteriological passages thus form the foundation of the soteriology of Lordship Salvation proponents, and this necessarily results in confusion regarding the condition for spending eternity with God.

V. THE MOSAIC LAW

The intermingling of law and grace that is common (though not universal³³) among those who reject normative Dispensationalism is the result of the continuity principle of Covenant Theology (which Progressive Dispensationalism has also adopted). While Daniel Fuller disagrees with the Dispensationalist position, he sums up the Dispensationalist’s argument on this point well:

Dispensationalism is convinced that covenant theology is unable to keep law and grace separate because it insists on maintaining a continuity between God’s dealings with Israel and with the Church. It argues that covenant theology, in insisting upon this continuity, must mix the law, which characterizes God’s dealings with Israel, with the message of grace and the gospel, which is a unique characteristic of God’s dealings with the Church.³⁴

³³ For example, Luther endeavored to maintain a clear distinction between law and grace. Martin Luther’s work *Christian Liberty* (Philadelphia: Luther Publication Society, 1903) is considered a classic work in drawing this distinction. In it he wrote: “a Christian man needs no work, no law, for his salvation; for by faith he is free from all law, and in perfect freedom does gratuitously all that he does,” p. 33.

³⁴ Fuller, Daniel P., *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 6. I would only want to amend this by stating that while the Law was exclusively for Israel, grace is not exclusively for the Church, but for all people of every age who believe.

By prioritizing continuity above literal interpretation, Covenant theologians deny the distinction between the Church and Israel and seek to give primary application to every portion of the Bible, often including the Mosaic Law. This principle of Covenant Theology³⁵ is best illustrated by Arthur Pink in *The Law and the Saint*.

It is a superficial and erroneous conclusion that supposes the Old and New Testaments are antagonistic. The Old Testament is full of grace: the New Testament is full of Law. The revelation of the New Testament to the Old is like that of the oak tree to the acorn. It has been often said, and said truly, “The New is in the Old contained, the Old is by the New explained”! And surely this *must be* so. The Bible as a whole, and in its parts, is not merely for Israel or the Church, but is a written revelation from God to and for *the whole human race*.³⁶

This quote is illustrative of the main theme of his book and of Covenant Theology’s application of the Law to today.

Though MacArthur claims a form of Dispensationalism, he has largely adopted Covenant Theology’s position on the application of the Law today, especially as it relates to sanctification. MacArthur does state the Christian’s freedom from the Law,³⁷

³⁵ It should be noted that Progressive Dispensationalism maintains this theme of continuity as well and also places the Christian under the Law. For example, Turner states, “Matthew portrays the church as a Jewish community whose mission is to summon all the nations to obey Jesus, the ultimate Torah teacher who fulfills Moses and the prophets. Matthew’s Jewish church is distinct from Israel only because of its messianic faith, and the church today is redemptively continuous with these Jewish roots.” Turner, David L., “Matthew Among the Dispensationalists” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* vol. 53, no. 4 (Dec 2010) p. 714. And “[Recognizing the Church’s Jewish roots] equips the church to fulfill its role as the vehicle through which Torah, as fulfilled through the instruction and example of Jesus, is extended to all the nations of the earth.” p. 715.

³⁶ Pink, Arthur, *The Law and the Saint* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library) available online at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pink/law.pdf>. Last accessed October 12, 2011. Emphasis in original. While I would agree that the Old and New Testaments are not antagonistic, this does not lead to Pink’s conclusion that the Law is applicable today.

³⁷ MacArthur, *Apostles*, 59, 120.

but he limits this to the freedom from the Law's penalties,³⁸ and often removes the emphasis on freedom from the Law in Paul's writings. For example, he treats Rom 7:1-4 as if Paul is discussing freedom from sin, rather than freedom from the Law,³⁹ and places almost no emphasis on freedom from the Law in his extended discussion on Romans 6-8. In his discussion on Romans 7, he skips vv 5-11 entirely and never mentions the fact that the Law actually arouses indwelling sin (one of the necessary reasons why we are freed from it, and the main point of Romans 7. See Rom 7:5, 9-11). As a result, Rom 7:14-24 is not seen as an abnormal experience for a Christian—one Christians experience when trying to live under the Law—but as, "the state of every true believer."⁴⁰

This may seem like a small matter soteriologically. It is about sanctification after all. But Dispensationalism recognizes that the freedom from sin described in Romans 6-8; Gal 2:19-5:23; and elsewhere *is conditioned upon the Christian realizing his freedom from the Law* (see esp. Rom 6:14; 7:5-6; and Gal 2:19-21). And when that condition is removed or minimized, the freedom from sin it describes can be manipulated into a discussion of what it means to be a true Christian. This is precisely what MacArthur and many other Lordship Salvation proponents do.

By applying the Law to Christians for sanctification, the passages in the Bible that discuss freedom from the Law in regards to sanctification are twisted into being discussions about proof of justification. This can be most clearly seen in

³⁸ Ibid., 119. As McClain adeptly observes, "To emasculate the law of God of its divine penalties and still call it 'law' is a serious misnomer. It can only confuse the minds of men and finally bring all law, whether human or divine, into contempt or indifference. Moreover, eventually such a procedure tends to empty the cross of Christ of its deepest meaning. The law loses its absolute holiness, sin loses its awful demerit and Calvary loses its moral glory." *Law and Grace*, 11-12.

³⁹ MacArthur, *Apostles*, 117.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 134. It is odd that someone who claims that "Those who think they are Christians but are enslaved to sin are sadly deceived" (ibid., 120) can at the same time say that Rom 7:23 ("But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members") describes "every true believer." This seems like a description of slavery to sin to me. Ironically, Lordship Salvation and binding the Christian to the Law inevitably lead to this kind of acceptance of sin.

that in MacArthur's *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, a book about soteriology. In that book Romans 6-8, which comes *after* the issue of justification is considered settled (see 5:1) and is entirely about sanctification, receives two whole chapters (chaps. 7-8) which is more attention than any other Biblical passage. Once again, non-soteriological passages form the basis for the soteriology of Lordship Salvation. This is no less true in passages discussing freedom from the Law as it is in passages discussing the Millennial Kingdom or other non-soteriological issues. Recognizing the Christian's freedom from the Law for justification and sanctification is vital to both literal interpretation and right soteriology.

VI. CONCLUSION

All conservative Bible interpreters believe in literal interpretation, but only the Dispensationalist applies this consistently. But because Bible interpretation is systematic, non-literal interpretation in one area necessarily affects other areas as well. Each of the four theological points of Dispensationalism listed above (points 2-5) is a means to protect the first point, consistent literal interpretation. When any of those points are abandoned or minimized,⁴¹ the interpreter necessarily steps away from literal interpretation and consistent literal interpretation is the only way to maintain a Biblical soteriology.

Denying a literal Millennial Kingdom confuses the Judgment Seat of Christ with the Great White Throne Judgment and brings in a final judgment for believers according to works to determine eternal destiny. Having a soteriological view of history rather than a doxological one leads to interpreting non-soteriological passages soteriologically and confuses the conditions for spending eternity with God. Finally, placing the Christian under the Law removes realizing Christian freedom as a condition for a holy walk and thus makes a holy walk the necessary outcome of new birth. These are just some of the

⁴¹ While this article did not separately address the impact of denying the distinction between the Church and Israel, maintaining this distinction is necessary for maintaining the points of Dispensationalism that were addressed here.

areas where departing from Dispensationalism results in confusion about the message of life.

In the final installment of this series, I will attempt to show how the rise of Dispensationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries resulted in a revival of grace, demonstrate the clarity of Scripture regarding the message of life revealed by consistent literal interpretation, and offer some practical applications to pastors and teachers on how to communicate these truths to others.