



Truth

On Tough Texts

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Distinctions, Divisions, and Christian Love

Selected Texts

THIS MONTH'S TOTT IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT. While it certainly deals with a text (several actually), the "tough part" concerns the *application* of the text. The purpose is to share a deep burden that I have had for some time and hopefully encourage all of us to Christian love in a specific area.

Two Theological Perspectives

To lay the foundation, I would first share the barest essentials of the two main theological perspectives.

First, there is *Covenant Theology*, a system of biblical interpretation that develops the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of two (or three) covenants. Most see two, the first of which is the "Covenant of Works," an agreement between God and Adam promising life for perfect obedience and death for disobedience. Adam sinned, however, and therefore mankind failed to meet the requirements of the Covenant of Works. This covenant covers the time from Genesis 1:27–3:6.

Because of man's failure, God instituted the "Covenant of Grace," an agreement between God and man in which God promises salvation through Jesus Christ for those who will receive Him by faith. This covenant covers the time from Genesis 3:7—Rev. 20:7, that is, through the rest of biblical history, Old and New Testaments. The other covenants of Scripture—Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, and New—are administered under the one overarching, all-encompassing Covenant of Grace.

Some covenant theologians see a third covenant prior to those two, the "Covenant of Redemption," which was made between God the Father and God the Son in eternity

past in which the Son voluntarily agreed to die for the elect in exchange for His headship of the elect. This, then, became the basis for the Covenant of Grace.

Second, there is *Dispensational Theology*. Based upon the word "dispensation" (*oikonomia*: *oikos*, "house, dwelling place," and *nomos*, a law; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25), the idea is "the law of a house." The word speaks of the oversight, management, or stewardship one has over the affairs of a household. Applied to Scripture, it simply means that as the owner of His "household-world" God is overseeing, managing, and administering everything according to His will and purpose and is doing so in various stages called "dispensations" (or "economies"). This view recognizes that there have been (and will be) seven specific ways in which God has (and will) deal with man. Each dispensation is marked in Scripture by a different way of dealing with classes or individuals in regard to man's responsibility and sin.

Further, there are four characteristics of a dispensation: 1) man's *condition*, that is, his state and standing at the beginning of that era; 2) man's *responsibility*, that is, the test God gives man for that age; 3) man's *disobedience*, his failure of the test that God gave; and 4) God's *judgment* on man for his disobedience to God's test. Each dispensation also has a *steward*, that is, the chief representative of that age, the one to whom the responsibility of carrying out the commands of the dispensation is given.

The Distinctions

With that basic background understood, these two systems—which, if we may honestly interject, were both de-

veloped and systemized by men and both have their problems—are often at great odds with each other. We mention this briefly because it is essential to the point of this article that we make later.

For example, in its practical outworking, Covenant Theology says there's only one people of God and no distinctions between them. Dispensationalism sees two distinct people, Israel and the Church, which are mentioned together in 1 Corinthians 10:32, along with a third group ("Gentiles"), which is comprised of the lost.

Another great divide involves the Church. Covenant Theology views the church (the Body of Christ) as existing in the Old Testament and consisting of all the redeemed from Adam on. Pentecost was not the *beginning* of the Church, rather the empowering of the New Testament *manifestation* of the church that has existed since Adam. Dispensationalism views the church as nonexistent in the Old Testament, beginning rather at Pentecost.

Still another gulf is formed by a difference in the purpose of history. A "philosophy of history" seeks to interpret and apply history in a meaningful way by: 1) recounting *what* and *why* something happened; 2) interpreting it according to a particular unifying principle that ties all events together; 3) demonstrating how this fulfills the ultimate purpose and goal of history. While the philosophy of history in Covenant Theology views the ultimate goal as the eternal state, Dispensationalism views the ultimate goal to be the earthly Millennial Kingdom, demonstrating the sovereignty of God over human history.

Also, while Covenant Theology views the unifying principle of history as the "Covenant of Grace" (or the Covenant of Redemption, as some covenanters prefer), that is, God's plan of salvation for men, Dispensationalism views the unifying principle of history as being God's glory, as His glory is exhibited in the differing ways that He manifests Himself in the various dispensations.

Another chasm, this one the size of the Grand Canyon, opens between the two views when it comes to prophecy. Covenant theologians are usually either "Amillennial" (believing the kingdom to be present and spiritual) or "Postmillennial" (believing the Kingdom is in the process of being established on earth with Christ's return being the climax). Dispensationalists believe that there will be a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ on the earth based upon the promise of David's perpetual throne.

For lack of a better term, there is also some tragic "in-fighting" between the two groups. For example, on the one hand Covenant theologians accuse the dispensationalist's emphasis on literalness as "wrongly dividing the people of God" (a play on words of 2 Tim. 2:15). On the other hand, dispensationalists make much of the fact that Covenant theologians spiritualize certain portions of Scripture, such as spiritualizing Old Testament circumcision into baptizing infants now, which immediately begs the question, "Why baptize baby girls?"

This leads us to the central purpose of this article.

The Division

In the above, I have not defended either view of theological thought. While in a recent TOTT I admitted to being a Classic Dispensationalist—I do see a distinction between Israel and the church—I am not defending that here. In fact, I disagree with some of the more extreme strains of Dispensationalism. That, however, is not the purpose of this article. Rather my purpose is to challenge some of the unchristian statements that are leveled by advocates of one camp at their brothers in the other, *because we need to be reminded that we are brothers.*

As mentioned earlier, my burden started quite some time ago. While at a pastor's conference, where the preaching was good and the fellowship sweet, the latter was marred for me by a statement one Covenant brother made. Since the views on eschatology in that group are mixed, and because that subject is avoided as a result, he made what I viewed as an inappropriate comment. After sharing an anecdote about a particularly tough week he had had, he said, "I found myself rethinking the Rapture," which brought a round of laughter. Now, I most certainly do not wear my feelings on my shoulder, and I am the first to join in good-natured banter, but I did not view that as an appropriate venue.

Sadly, others nowadays are not as subtle. There are those who laugh and scoff at dispensationalists and look on them condescendingly, considering them little more than unscholarly simpletons. I've read several jabs by one author whose sarcasm drips off the page in his monthly publication. I ultimately stopped my subscription to that otherwise wonderful periodical just because of such uncalled for remarks.

Still others are just downright mean spirited and unchristian. One writer—and for unity's sake, I will not document his statements with a footnote—calls Dispensationalism "a cult and not a branch of the Christian church" and calls dispensationalists "false teachers" and "heretics." Do such comments reflect Christian love? Frankly, I found those comments so discrediting that I had a hard time finishing the book.

I was also deeply distressed by a DVD released in March that was at one point titled, *The Late Great Planet Church: The Rise of Dispensationalism and the Decline of the Church.* While I admit that I am going by the title, description, and previews alone, I find those painful enough. The description calls Dispensationalism a "fraudulent system." Now, according to Webster, "fraud" and "fraudulent" speak of deliberate deceit, dishonesty, and trickery, so the accusation seems pretty clear. Added to that is the indictment that Dispensationalism is a "stumbling block to the Church and a distraction from the Great Commission." Are such accusations indicative of Christian love and a desire for unity with fellow believers?

The DVD description also, like every critic, mentions that Dispensationalism is of “relatively recent development.” While that is true—Dispensationalism was not fully systemized until the early 19th Century—it is also a fact that Covenant Theology as a system is not much older. It is seldom mentioned in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, it does not appear at all in the writings of the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Melancthon), and it was not actually systemized until the 16th Century.¹ It would seem, then, that this point hinges on one’s definition of “recent.”

The DVD’s title is equally distressing in its accusation that Dispensationalism is part of the decline of the Church. I find such a charge shocking in light of the many movements today that truly *are* destroying the Church, such as, seeker-sensitivity, psychology, the Emerging Church, and many others.

I’m not implying that Dispensationalists are not guilty of attacks of their own. On the contrary, I have read such ridiculous statements that Covenant Theology is a “doctrinal, and therefore personal, menace” and that it is “a gospel of works.” Some have also called it “heresy.” One speaker I know of went so unimaginably far that he lumped Covenant theologians in with “agnostics, Mormons, and cults.” My comments later about Christian love are, therefore, aimed at all of us.

At the heart of all this finger pointing, in my view, is the incredibly loose usage of the word “heresy.” But what exactly is heresy and what teachings are dubbed with that label in Scripture? “Heresy” is actually transliterated right from the Greek *hairesis* and is an interesting word. In Classical Greek, it means “seizure, taking, acquisition, choice, desire for something, and purposeful decision.” Later in Hellenistic Greek, it “denotes the teaching or the school of a particular philosopher with which a person identifies himself by his choice.”² In the Septuagint, it speaks of choice, as it translates the Hebrew *nedābāh* in Leviticus 22:18 and 21 (“freewill offering”).

The New Testament usage of *hairesis* follows that of Hellenism and the Septuagint. Heresy is a choice, a deliberate decision to “seize” upon a particular teaching that is not orthodox. Acts 5:17, for example, mentions “the sect [*hairesis*] of the Sadducees,” a Jewish faction that denied the doctrine of resurrection. Acts 15:5 refers to another sect, the Judaizers, who taught salvation by works, such as adding circumcision as a requirement. That issue prompted the Jerusalem Council, as the following verses describe, which definitively stated the principle of salvation by grace alone through faith alone.

There has always been the plague of false teaching and teachers. That is why discernment is so crucial. The main thrust of Peter’s second epistle is a warning against false teachers who will infiltrate the church. That is best summarized in 2:1: “There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even deny-

ing the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.” We see here at least three principles.

First, false teaching is *deceitful*. “Privily” is *pareisagō*, to bring in by the side of, to bring something in by smuggling it. False teaching has to be “brought in the side door” lest someone see it for what it really is. *Second*, false teaching is *degrading*. False teachers deny the Lord and His work in one way or another and in so doing degrade and blaspheme Him. *Third*, false teaching is *destructive*. “Damnably” is *apōleia*, to destroy fully. False teaching not only destroys right doctrine and the lives of its *victims* but also the *propagators* (“swift destruction”). (Note also the other “works of the flesh” listed with “heresies” in Galatians 5:19–21 and the command Paul gives concerning heretics [*hairesitikos*] in Titus 3:10.)

If we may now ask, In view of what we have just outlined, is it honest to call either Dispensationalism or Covenant Theology “heresy”? No one is denying the resurrection, the virgin birth, the Deity of Christ, inspiration, salvation by grace alone, or any one of another dozen or so cardinal doctrines of Christianity. To put it another way, I am ready at a moment’s notice to “lock and load” when it comes to defending the Doctrines of Grace and passionately guarding the Five Solas of the Reformation as Christianity’s very foundation, *but such things are not at issue here*.

Let us be honest. The two theological systems outlined earlier are *not* cardinal doctrines of Christianity, regardless of how fervently we might defend one or the other. For example, while the Doctrines of Grace are most certainly cardinal doctrines, one’s view of the Millennium is not. While one’s view might put him in a different *denomination*, it doesn’t place him into a different *faith* or *body*. We are all members of Christ’s Body, and we need to start acting like it. After all, has your arm ever called your leg a heretic, or has your right big toe ever called your left little toe a cultist? This leads us to our final encouragement.

Christian Love

Please do not misunderstand my next three statements, because I do not wish to appear self-righteous or that I am the more spiritual thinker who is taking “the high ground.” If I may say, however, while I do not agree with their position, I have never called an Amillennial or Postmillennial brother in Christ a heretic. Not once have I ever said of a brother who believes in infant baptism that he is a false teacher. And I have certainly never accused any Covenant theologian of propagating a cult that is not a branch of the Christian church.

If I may lovingly ask, Where has our love of the brethren gone? Now, please understand, I’m not talking about today’s syrupy sentimentality. I’m not implying that we should all hold hands around the campfire and sway to the music as we sing *Kumbaya*. What I *am* saying, however, is that our unkind words and snide remarks to, and about,

one another need to stop.

To illustrate, it's often noted about many in the King James Only camp (and rightly so) that they say some pretty nasty things about anyone who even slightly disagrees with them. They label Christian brethren as heretics, liars, Roman Catholics, and a plethora of other epithets just because they don't agree with their view of the textual issue. But what is the difference in that behavior and what we have noted on the present issue? Is it appalling in them but justified for us?

In verse after verse, Scripture commands believers to love each other. Why? *Obviously because we need constant reminding.* As our Lord Himself declared in Matthew 22:35–40, second only to a love for God is a love for our fellow believers. In John 13:34–35, He adds that while love itself is not a new command, to love as sacrificially as Christ did is the new standard. He goes on to say that it is “by this shall all men know that ye are my disciples.” Is it not a little odd to think that we love each other and can be a witness to the world while we are calling each other heretics? John Gill comments here:

Love one another: as brethren in the same family, children of the same Father, and fellow disciples with each other; by keeping and agreeing together, praying one for another, bearing one another's burdens, forbearing and forgiving one another, admonishing each other, and building up one another in faith and holiness.

As one of my professors used to say early in my training, “We can agree to disagree agreeably.” If we are sincerely burdened for what we think is a brother's error, what happened to “speaking the truth in love” to him and praying for him instead of maligning him in print?

So crucial, so fundamental is this principle, that our Lord declares again, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:12–13, 17). Is that not a pretty tough order to carry out with brothers whom we are calling cultists?

Being profoundly impacted by Jesus' teaching, the Apostle John repeatedly emphasizes this in his first Epistle. In this crucial letter, John presents several tests for knowing whether we are truly saved and have “passed from death unto life” (3:14; 5:25). One, for example, is obedience: “we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments” and “whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him” (2:3, 5). Well, in 2:8–10, we see another. A crucial test for whether or not we are true believers is whether we love other believers. As the always wonderful Lehman Strauss puts it: “Love for the brethren is an infallible test of one's salvation, a distinguishing mark of true conversion.”

Now, we are judging no one here, but what is John saying? Is he saying that any hatred, despising, disgust, loath-

ing, scorning, contempt, ridicule, mockery, or other such attitude for another Christian is simply wicked and ungodly and might even be coming from an unregenerate heart? It would certainly seem so. As Strauss adds, “So long as brotherly love is wanting, that is proof conclusive that the one with hatred in his heart ‘abideth in death.’”

We will leave the reader to examine John's many other encouragements on this point: 3:10–11, 14–19, 23; 4:7–8, 20–21. As one reads each of those, it's hard to imagine being able to carry them out while writing scathing attacks on the character and teaching of sound, godly men. If we may add, who do we think is pleased by such name calling, Christ or Satan?

Although I know some readers will think this ridiculous, I would still lovingly ask, What if either the Covenanter or dispensationalist gets to Heaven and finds out he was wrong? Then again, what if *both* arrive and discover they were wrong? Again, let's be honest. To dogmatically declare that either system is 100 percent correct is ridiculous. If either is wrong in only a single tiny point, then it is not perfect and, therefore, does not deserve to be elevated to infallibility and absolute authority. This alone should end all condescending attitudes and unchristian comments.

I would close with an illustration and challenge. A Claymore antipersonnel mine is a lens-shaped block of C-4 explosive with 700 steel balls embedded in it. Embossed on the front surface of the mine are the words “Front Toward Enemy” to remind the soldier of the “business end” of the weapon. Dear brethren, we need a reminder as well, a reminder that our *real* enemies are secularism, humanism, pragmatism, relativism, mysticism, materialism, postmodernism, historical (higher) criticism, rationalistic textual (lower) criticism, and the list goes on. We need to start unifying against those enemies and, indeed, attack with all guns blazing and all our “Claymores” pointed in the right direction. Yes, we can certainly debate the issues and passionately defend our views, but the unloving attitudes and unchristian speech must cease.

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NOTES

¹ Significantly, renowned Covenant theologian Louis Berkhof admits, “In the Early Church Fathers the covenant idea is seldom found at all.” In the system's defense, he adds, “Though the elements which it includes, namely the probationary command, the freedom of choice, and the possibility of sin and death, are all mentioned.” But he then goes on to report that the system was not yet developed in the time of the Reformers and that Kasper Olevianus (1536-1587) “was the real founder of a well developed federal theology, in which the concept of the covenant became for the first time the constitutive and determinative principle of the entire system.” (*Systematic Theology*; [Eerdmans, 1939, 1941], pp. 211-212.)

² Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1971), Vol. 1, p. 533.

