

Definition of Terms Relating to Biblical Interpretation

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Have you ever started watching a miniseries in the middle of its programming? The old adage, “you just about need a program to tell the players” rings true! Sometimes I feel the same way about theological terminology. The following list of definitions may help to sort out some of the players.

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Hermeneutics is the science and art of Biblical interpretation.

Dispensationalism is that system of theology which attempts to develop the Bible’s philosophy of history on the basis of the sovereign rule of God. It represents the whole of Scripture and history as being covered by several dispensations of God’s rule. In this system there are usually, but not always, seven dispensations.

Covenant Theology is that system of theology which represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by two or three covenants. It explains all relationships between God and man from the beginning to the end of time under the Covenant of Works, the Covenant of Grace, and (sometimes) the Covenant of Redemption. Reformed/Covenant theologians teach that Old Testament Israelites and New Testament believers are one people and that the church is but a continuation and successor of Israel. The church is usually understood as including the saints of all the ages. They teach that the church, as the successor of Israel, has now absorbed and appropriated Old Testament prophecies and promises. According to their thinking, the promises which God made to Israel are now being fulfilled by the church or they have been forfeited because of Israel’s unbelief. The aspect of Covenant Theology which teaches that the church has inherited God’s promises made to Israel is known as Replacement Theology. Covenant Theology is directly opposed to Dispensationalism which makes a clear and Biblical distinction between God’s program for Israel and God’s program for the church.

Reformed Theology is closely related to Covenant Theology. The relationship is so strong that R. C. Sproul even acknowledges that Reformed Theology has been nicknamed Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology developed out of Reformed Theology after the Reformation. There are two doctrines which are central to the Reformed Theology: Covenant Theology and Five Point Calvinism.

The Millennium or Millennial Kingdom is a period of one thousand years often identified with the many promises of the Old Testament of a coming kingdom of righteousness and peace on earth.

Premillennialism is that system of theology which teaches that the second coming of Christ precedes the millennium. All Dispensationalists are Premillennial, whereas only a segment of Covenant Theologians are.

Postmillennialism is that system of theology which teaches that the second coming of Christ follows the millennium. Postmillennialism holds that this present age will end with a period of great spiritual blessing corresponding to the millennial promises accomplished through the preaching of the gospel. The whole world will be Christianized before the return of Christ. This view is held by a segment of Covenant Theologians.

Amillennialism (literally No-Millennium) is that system of theology which rejects the idea of a literal millennium. The major segment of Covenant Theology embraces Amillennialism.

Preterism is that system of theology which teaches that prophetic events were actually fulfilled at the time they were written and are now in the past. Christ is viewed as already having come to destroy Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and establish His kingdom. Preterists are either Amillennial or Postmillennial.

Sources: These definitions are taken from the writings of John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Renald Showers, Thomas Ice, George Zeller, Laurence Vance and Arnold Fruchtenbaum.