

LIVING IN THE PRESENT AGE, WAITING FOR THE BLESSED HOPE:

Dispensationalism & the Responsibilities of Believers & and Their Churches

Pastor Ryan J. Martin

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Introduction

Doctrine matters. It always has; it always will. Your view of God, especially his sovereignty and goodness, matters when you undergo trials. Paul and Jesus taught that one’s view of salvation, especially in the majesty and glory of God’s immeasurable grace, will affect our capacity for forgiving others. Even eschatology, the doctrine of last things, matters. Our eschatology affects how we suffer. A biblical eschatology will affect our view of the claims of environmentalists and technocrats. Eschatology also affects how we view the church and its mission.¹ How does a biblical, dispensational interpretation affect the way the church and believers ought to function in relation to this present age? This afternoon, I want to answer that question.

In 1947, Carl F. H. Henry wrote his famous jeremiad against fundamentalism, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.² Henry argued for a renewed social interaction (in part) from a new form of premillennialism that saw “that the kingdom is here, and that is not here.”³ A few years ago Russell Moore declared that now “evangelical theology’s ‘cold war’ over the Kingdom has thawed dramatically.”⁴ Moore argues that covenant theologians and progressive dispensationalists have reached a “growing consensus” that the Kingdom is both “already/not yet” inaugurated in the present age. For Moore, these new insights on “Kingdom-oriented ecclesiology” is immensely practical, for they “offer a starting point for a new paradigm for evangelical sociopolitical engagement.”⁵ Moore even goes so far to argue that an evangelical soteriology that rightly appropriates the present state of the Kingdom will be “holistic.” This means that Christian churches will not only be concerned with the state of souls, but with the “fulfillment of human existence.”⁶ Or, as The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist

¹ Alva J. McClain wrote, “Theological confusion, especially in matters which have to do with the church, will inevitably produce consequences which are of grave practical concern. The identification of the Kingdom with the Church has led historically to ecclesiastical policies and programs which, even when not positively evil, have been far removed from the original simplicity of the New Testament *ekklesia*. ... [P]ractically, once the Church becomes the kingdom in any realistic theological sense, it is impossible to draw any clear line between principles and their implementation through political and social devices.” *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1974), 438.

² Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, foreword by Richard J. Mouw (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003). Also see George Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism: Fuller Seminary and the New Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), 69-82.

³ *Ibid.*, 48. Thus, “Contemporary evangelicalism needs . . . to reawaken to the relevance of its redemptive message to the global predicament.” *Ibid.*, 53-54. Dave Burggraff has noted that fundamentalist dispensationalists were very active in social work before the World War I. What he calls a “Great Reversal” on its social work took place after the fundamentalist-modernist controversies of the 1920s: “With an eschatology that was pessimistic about the present age, an ecclesiology that distrusted the visible church, a view of the Law that may have led to the neglect of some of its ethical teachings, a revivalistic focus on individual morality, a fundamentalist rejection of the Social Gospel, a nationalistic opposition to communism, dispensationalists had plenty of reasons to be disengaged when it came to social issues.” David Burggraff, “Determining Our Place in the World: A Growing Difficulty for Modern Dispensationalism” (lecture, Charles MacDonald Lectures, Central Baptist Theological Seminary, Plymouth, Minn., 2002).

⁴ Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004), 23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 164. Compare Darrell L. Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), 65-66.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 122. To be fair, Moore does not reject the spiritual ministry of the Church, and even argues for its priority. Even so, the emphasis on holistic soteriology is deeply troubling. Moore argues, “Just as an initially realized reign of Christ prevents evangelicals from forestalling all Kingdom activity to a future eschaton, a holistic view of redemption prevents evangelical theology from reducing the

Convention describes themselves: “Since its inception, the ERLC has been defined around a *holistic vision of the kingdom of God*, leading the culture to change within the church itself and then as the church addresses the world.”⁷

The prevailing attitude among many evangelicals today is that churches and believers have a responsibility to build or advance Christ’s “already” kingdom. Dispensationalists, who deny that Christ’s kingdom is “already” here, ought to have a very different view. They ought to hold to the spirituality of the church on the one hand, and, on the other hand, encourage believers to participate carefully in the world while living godly lives.

I. Dispensationalism and the Present Age

For the sake of argument and in the interest of time, I will not be offering a full blown-defense of a dispensational theology. I consider myself to be a traditional dispensationalist.⁸

The question before us is how a biblical, dispensational interpretation affects the way the church and believers ought to function in relation to this present age. Scripture makes a distinction when it speaks of believers’ responsibilities. As I will argue, we have certain narrow responsibilities as covenanted churches of Jesus Christ and certain broader responsibilities as individual believers. Our civic and religious life is not united now as it was for Israel in the Old Testament.

In the Old Testament, God drew together in the Sinai covenant the civil and religious life for the nation of Israel.⁹ The religious and common lives of God’s people were intricately joined. The Old Testament prophets made plain that in the future kingdom, a similar union of civil and religious life would be realized. In this time, a son of David will reign as king. The coming King, they said, would be both human and divine, and would reign over Israel and the whole earth. Israel would be reunited in this kingdom, and it will include a majestic temple with God’s presence. This kingdom would be a political reign over a definite land with spiritual vitality never before seen since the Fall. Many prophecies help us form the revealed vision of what this glorious kingdom. For example, note the character, of both the King and his kingdom in Isaiah 9:6–7:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

This will be fulfilled, just as God spoke it. This prophecy, however, is not yet realized. Our present age is far different from the times of God’s mediatorial kingdom in Israel in the past *or* the future Millennial kingdom restoration. So what is the biblical view of the church and individual

mission of Christianity to the rescue of individual souls from the world.” Ibid., 121. Later he continues, “If the Kingdom is concerned with the ultimate transformation of creation, society, and culture, then these things are certainly worthy of the concern of the regenerate church in the present epoch of redemptive history.” Ibid., 123. Gregg R. Allison similarly argues, “Additionally, the church lives the reality of the inaugurated kingdom by seeking to advance that kingdom wherever the church’s members—the citizens of the kingdom—live, work, and play: in neighborhoods, workplaces, governmental agencies, financial establishments, sports programs, and other institutions and structures.” *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2012), 98. Also see, Vincent Bacote, “What is *This Life* For? Expanding Our View of Salvation,” in *What Does It Mean to be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2002), 93-113. Sigurd Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God: A Biblical Theology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2018), 100-1, 104.

⁷ Emphasis mine. “About the ERLC,” <https://erlc.com/about>. Accessed May 3, 2019.

⁸ On a personal note, Alva J. McClain’s book *The Greatness of the Kingdom* is one of the most important books I have ever read. I find myself returning to it so often that it has a permanent spot among the books on my desk.

⁹ See Mark Snoeberger, “Traditional Dispensationalism: Introduction, Historical Backgrounds, and the *Raison D’être* of Dispensationalism.”

believer's responsibilities and roles toward the present age? I begin with four core biblical teachings regarding our present age:

A. The Church is not the Kingdom of God.

We are not the kingdom. The kingdom is wholly future (1 Cor 15:24; 15:50; 2 Pet 1:10-11; Rev 11:15; 12:10).¹⁰ When Christ prayed, *Your kingdom come*, it is plain he himself expected its yet future establishment. The kingdom is what the members of Christ's church inherit. During his earthly ministry, the Lord offered the kingdom to Israel, and they rejected that kingdom offer. This is why the kingdom language is so prominent in the gospels. But with very few exceptions, every other mention of the kingdom after the establishment of the church on the Day of Pentecost is plainly speaking of something yet to come. 2 Tim 4:1: *I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom.* 2 Tim 4:18, *The Lord will ... bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.*¹¹ First Cor 4:8 makes clear that we are not yet reigning. When the disciples asked Jesus if he was about to establish the kingdom in Acts 1:6, our Lord indicated that the kingdom was something yet future.

The strongest argument that nondispensationalists offer for a present spiritual kingdom is inferential. They say they that texts in Ephesians (e.g., Eph 1:20-23; 2:6; 4:9-10) and elsewhere (for example, Rev 3:21) that speak to the ascended Christ upon heaven's throne clearly teach by allusion that the throne of the kingdom is actually located in heaven (rather than Jerusalem).¹² The present throne of Christ, however, is not the throne of David.¹³ In Acts 2:30, Peter can speak of a descendant of David who will sit on the throne of David, and yet continue to distinguish that throne with Christ's current throne in heaven, which fulfills Psa 110:1.¹⁴ Thus, the church is not the kingdom. If the church were the kingdom and Christ's reign a spiritual reign in the present age,¹⁵ it would necessitate a serious reworking of the prophesied role of Israel in the Kingdom and spiritualization of many of the Kingdom promises, especially with respect to the land.

Compared to the Old Testament, the New Testament gives little detail about the state of the earth during the Kingdom reign of Christ on earth, but it does not contradict or even replace the prophecies of the Old Testament. What is most significant in the New Testament is that Jesus is the center, the person in whom all prophecies cohere and are ultimately fulfilled. He is the son of David (Rom 1:3), the King of the Kingdom (Matt 2:1-2), the Messiah (Matt 16:16; Luke 2:11), the Prophet to come (Acts 7:37), and the Priest of Melchizedek (Heb 6:20). He is the one who through his death provides the pardon that secures the forgiveness of sins and new hearts necessary for entrance into His Kingdom. He will come with his angels to execute God's wrath on the earth, and then establish his kingdom in power.

¹⁰ Pace Henry: "The kingdom is not wholly future." *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*, 52. But note his otherwise persuasive comments on the bottom of p. 52 and onto p. 53.

¹¹ Also see Acts 14:22; Eph 5:5; 2 Pet 1:11; Jam 2:4; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; and 2 Tim 2:12.

¹² See McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 436-37. Dave Burggraff has rightly observed, "Lacking terminological justification for the present reign of Christ, it is sometimes offered [by nondispensationalists] that the *concept* of a presently reigning Christ is latent in the New Testament." "Is the Kingdom Inaugurated or Does it Await the Second Coming?" (lecture, Shepherds Theological Seminary, Cary, NC), 3.

¹³ Again, Dave Burggraff is helpful: "The most frequently cited Old Testament passage in the New Testament, Psalm 110, is also the passage the New Testament writers used most in their meditations on the present activity of the exalted Christ. What we see is that Psalm 110 was the basis of a current intercessory ministry of the risen Christ (Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2). Thus, what some want to call regal activity, the New Testament calls priestly activity; the New Testament calls it intercession – reigning is left for another, future time." *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁴ The book of Hebrews also makes this distinction between Christ's current position at God's right hand and his final defeat of all his enemies. *But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet.* (Heb 10:12-13).

¹⁵ For example, Grindheim argues, "The kingdom of God is the active rule of God in the world and the presence of his gift of salvation." *Living in the Kingdom of God*, 81. Grindheim advances the typical "already/not yet" view of the present state of the kingdom.

Though several New Testament explain the relationship of the church to the future kingdom, it never explicitly teaches a present kingdom. No passage clearly teaches that the church is the kingdom. Instead, the apostles teach that believers have inherited the kingdom through the grace of Christ. It's as good as ours (Col 1:13). All who believe in Jesus Christ have also, by virtue of the promise of eternal life, been transferred *into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins*.¹⁶ An American citizen may live in France, but still have all the rights and privileges of being an American. So we too are have been given Christ's kingdom. Herein the church has the *keys of the kingdom* in Matt 16 through 18. Through gospel preaching and church discipline, the church of Jesus Christ consists of the representation of all those who will inherit the kingdom. Thus Paul *testified to the kingdom of God* according to Acts 28 and called his cohorts *fellow workers for the kingdom of God* in Col 4:11.¹⁷ God effectually *calls men and women into his own kingdom and glory* (both those are future) as they believe the gospel of Jesus (1 Thess 2:12).¹⁸ Those who through faith believe in Christ are not only given a future inheritance in Christ's kingdom, they are given a seal or promise of future Kingdom blessings in the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom 8:6-17, 23; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:22).

B. The present age will pass away.

Furthermore, this present world order is temporary. It is aligned to the current system broken by sin. This is the *present* age. Without controversy, the current age is, as *present*, by implication temporary. In 1 Cor 7, Paul calls believers to live contentedly in the present place God has called them. Paul says, *The appointed time has grown very short* (7:29). Paul extends the application of this doctrine. We live in this world in an unattached way, *for the present form of this world is passing away* (7:31; cf. Jn 12:25). The tragic irony of a man like Demas, who was *in love with this present world*, is that he is not in love with the world to come (2 Tim 4:10). Being *rich in this present age* is not sinful *per se*, but it is far better to be *rich in good works* and to store up *treasure ... for the future* (1 Tim 6:17-19).

C. The world is under the control of the god of this age.

Any discussion of the relation of the church to this age must account for the present world order. The Bible teaches that present world order is under the control of Satan, the god of this age. According to Eph 2, all unbelievers *follow the course of this world and the prince of the power of the air*. All such are *children of wrath*. Satan and his minions are the rulers of *this present darkness* (Eph 6:12). The godless are co-conspirators with the spirit of the world (1 Cor 2:12). Their minds are blinded by *the god of this world* (2 Cor 4:4).

This does not mean that every cultural product is necessarily evil. There is, however, a sometimes official, sometimes unofficial conspiracy among unbelievers, under the influences of Satan, in rebellion against God. This "conspiracy" often manifests itself in this world's governments, social mindsets, and values. Such evil values will often be embedded in culture. This is why we have the repeated warning in Scripture to shun the world's system. Jas 4:4: *You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy with God.*

Dispensationalists rightly understand this to be evidence of the fact that Christ has not yet subdued his enemies. Again, the kingdom is not yet present; Christ's kingdom is not of this world (Jn 18:36). Satan is not yet chained (Rev 20:1-3). Moreover, the church, as heirs of Christ's future kingdom, finds itself the antithesis to this present world order (Rom 12:1-2; cf. Jn 12:31). The division between us and them is huge; the godless *will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction*,

¹⁶ Also see Rev 1:6 and Heb 12:28.

¹⁷ Also see Acts 19:8.

¹⁸ Also see Acts 8:12. For a helpful survey of *Kingdom* language in the New Testament epistles, see McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, 432-37.

away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, while we wait for the day when he comes ... to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed (2 Thess 1:9-10). Satan's remaining time is very short.

D. God ordained human governments to be his instruments to curb wickedness.

In this age, God does not give any one human government the mediatorial role to rule over religious and civil life (as he did for Israel in the Old Testament). The church of Jesus Christ is the institution in this age that God has ordained for accomplishing his saving work in the world (Matt 16:18-19; 18:15-20; 28:18-20). Yet God still uses human governments with some limited responsibilities to accomplish his purposes in this present age. Paul says in Romans that governing authorities are *God's servants* who have their authority from God (Rom 13:4, 1). Human governments carry out *God's wrath on the wrongdoer* (Rom 13:4). Human governments still hold their Noahic civil responsibilities.

For this reason, the subjects of governments are to obey their rulers and pay their taxes (Rom 13:7; cf. Matt 22:21). Indeed, Christians submit to governments *for the Lord's sake*, with an eye to submitting to Christ (1 Pet 2:13; also see vv 14-17; 4:12-17). They are to pray for the salvation of those who rule them. By their quiet obedience to their government, Christians adorn the gospel in an attractive way for the purpose of evangelism (1 Tim 2:1-7; Tit 3:1-11).¹⁹

What's most interesting about the New Testament's doctrine of human governments is the assumption that such authorities do not deliberately execute God's will. No one is surprised when the Roman Caesar misbehaves. This points to the separate realms the church and governments inhabit. Christ himself sanctioned these separate arenas of church and state when he spoke of the *things that are Caesar's* (Matt 22:21).²⁰

Further, Christ's apostles do not give governments, secular or otherwise, the right to enforce Christianity with the force of violence.²¹ Indeed, the New Testament theology of conversion and regeneration is directly opposed to any such notion (Jn 1:12-13; 3:1-8; Tit 3:4-7). To give the government any such positive spiritual responsibility is seriously to undermine the role of the church of Jesus Christ in this era. A civil government has much right to meddle in religious affairs as a church does in civil affairs. Whenever the Scriptures describe the state to be *God's servant* for good, it is not seen as an act of actual piety or in the interest of true spirituality. Human governments are serving purely on the civil level, as one of God's means of curbing sin and wickedness in depraved men.

In other words, God has placed limits upon the role governments have as *God's servants for good*. Governments serve a restrained role as God's servants, only insofar as they are a terror to evil conduct. These isolated domains God has given to the church and the state in the current era exposes a great difference from the economy given to Israel in the Old Testament. This difference points to some key theological bases for a dispensational understanding of Scripture.²²

¹⁹ For more on believers' submission to government and the separation of church and state, see Kevin Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives and New Testament Church Order* (Schaumburg, Ill.: Regular Baptist Books, 2012), 129-53.

²⁰ Mark Snoeberger, "A Tale of Two Kingdoms: The Struggle for the Separation of the Spirituality of the Church and the Genius of the Dispensational System," *DBSJ* 19 (2014):55-9.

²¹ On the disaster caused by state religion, see Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, The Dissent and Nonconformity Series 14 (Eerdmans, 1964; repr. Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 1964).

²² What leads to what? Does dispensationalism lead to a biblical view of the role of the church over against the state and the world? Or does a biblical view of the church vis-à-vis the state and the world lead to a biblical understanding of the differences between Israel and the church? Mark Snoeberger argues, "While the dispensational movement will forever be linked, especially in its popular form, with eschatological fascinations and fancy, history divulges that eschatological theory was markedly absent in the opening chapter of the movement. Dispensationalism, it may be demonstrated, was originally a peculiar expression of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church." "A Tale of Two Kingdoms," 65.

II. Dispensationalism and the Mission of the Church

Having laid down some foundational biblical axioms concerning the present age, I will now speak positively about the mission of church in this age.²³ I am drawing an important distinction here between the responsibilities of a church and the responsibilities of individual believers, which I shall return to later. I come at this question with a dispensational (or biblical) framework in mind, but it is important to note that there are many nondispensationalists who agree with much of what I will say, even if they do not build upon the same hermeneutical foundation I do.²⁴ In short, the church is a spiritual institution concerned with the spiritual worship of the Eternal God and the spiritual good of eternal souls.

A. The Spirituality of the Church

Earlier, I argued that the Church is not the Kingdom of God. The spirituality of the church is a related teaching, but slightly different. The New Testament teaches that the mission of all Christ's churches is *spiritual*.²⁵ By spiritual, I mean it is devoted to spiritual activities. The church assembly gathers for true worship *in the Spirit* through the elements Christ has commanded, and *by the working of the Spirit* that worship in turn creates disciples and helps believers grow.²⁶ The church advances and is a means of the Spirit's work in its ministry of evangelism and edification. When Scriptures lay out the responsibilities of churches, those responsibilities are spiritual in nature. Put negatively, the church has no divine right to make political gains or remedy societal ills, let alone "social justice."²⁷

The Great Commission gives a very specific role to churches. It is the clear distillation of what the apostles are to do, not only as apostles, but as "brothers" within the church Christ had earlier foretold in Matt 16:18-20 and 18:15-20. Christ's followers are to *make disciples* by preaching Christ crucified and risen again. Then they are to *baptize* and *teach* those disciples Christ's commands (Matt 28:18-20).

Ephesians 4 is another great passage establishing the mission of the church. This passage is notable because of clarity and its emphasis on the ministry of the Word in local churches. After urging the church members to keep *the unity of the Spirit* because of their calling in the *one body* (Eph 4:3-4), Paul details the gifts Christ gives to his churches for their vitality. These ministers

²³ Bauder argues, "For Baptists to seek to understand their relationship to the state, a solid understanding of the church's mission is foundational." *Baptist Distinctives*, 143.

²⁴ For example, there is much good on a practical level to be found in Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2011). DeYoung and Gilbert argue concerning the kingdom, "And yet the New Testament's declaration about the kingdom of God is that in the person of Jesus the King, the glory of that age to come has broken into and invaded the present age." *Ibid.*, 124. Yet they can argue, "*The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father.*" *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁵ "The mission of the church is spiritual in nature. It centers upon the proclamation of the gospel, which is clearly an element in making disciples. It involves observing the ordinances and teaching believers" Bauder, *Baptist Distinctives*, 144.

²⁶ See Ryan Martin, "The Church Assembles for Worship, Part 1" *Religious Affections Ministries Blog*, July 23, 2008, <https://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-worship/church-assembles-worship-part-1/>; "The Church Assembles for Worship, Part 2," *Religious Affections Ministry Blog*, July 30, 2008, <https://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-worship/church-assembles-worship-part-2/>; and "The Church Assembles for Worship, Part 3," *Religious Affections Ministries Blog*, August 6, 2008, <https://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-worship/church-assembles-worship-part-3/>.

²⁷ Colin L. Eakin observes, "across the landscape of modern-day evangelicalism, one tends to find an inverse relationship between interest in "social justice" and interest in evangelism in its historic understanding. In a very real sense, the entire mission of the Church is being hijacked. Among those on the evangelical forefront of the "social justice" movement, the talk is no longer about how sinners might avoid eternal damnation in hell, but how they might gain temporal reparation for past and present injustices." "What Did Jesus Say about Social Justice?" *TeamPyro Blog*, October 17, 2018. <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2018/10/what-did-jesus-say-about-social-justice.html> I encourage you to read this whole article. For an interesting take on social justice and racial issues from a secular perspective, see "Jason Riley on 'False Black Power?'" *Uncommon Knowledge with Peter Robinson*, HooverInstitution on Youtube, March 18, 2019, accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bi2hqL5KkHc>.

speak the truth in love (4:15) so that the whole body is *equipped* (4:12) to do the same, so that those churches grow (4:16) in *maturity* in the *knowledge of Christ* (4:13).

Consider the pattern of the early churches in the book of Acts. The “pastoral team” in Jerusalem refuse to go about the mundane work of the church because they are to give themselves wholly to the much more important and spiritual labor of *prayer* and *the ministry of the word* (Acts 6:4). The early church clearly understood its priorities. When Paul tells the pastors in Ephesus to *care for the church of God* (Acts 20:28), he points to his own example of *declaring ... the whole counsel of God* (20:26) and he *commends them to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified* (20:32). Again, the spiritual ministry of the word is central in the church.

On the other hand, you will search your Scriptures in vain for any place where Christ’s apostles command churches as institutions to be involved with political or large scale cultural agendas. We have no command for churches to bring about societal change, especially on a macro level.²⁸

The spirituality of the church is why Paul again and again pushes his spiritual son Timothy to fulfill the ministry of the Word in his place. In 1 Timothy 4, Paul urges him to *devote yourself ... to teaching*, not to *neglect* his gifts, to *immerse* himself in this work, and *persist* in it (1 Tim 4:13-16). In his second letter to Timothy, he *charges* Timothy before God himself *preach the word* (2 Tim 4:1-2). The examples are numerous. Such a spiritual ministry will have a component of moral proclamation to it. Churches will by its proclamation and the godly living of its members *expose the unfruitful works of darkness* in the present age (Eph 5:11). Even so, the end of even the proclamation of God’s moral will is spiritual in nature.

This spiritual mission is, if you’ll allow me to put it this way, *the* “kingdom work” of Christ’s church in this age. As we proclaim God’s Word and the forgiveness of sins through the gospel of Jesus Christ, for all who believe on Christ will inherit the *kingdom of God* (1 Cor 6:9; 15:23-24, 50; compare Acts 28:31; cf. v. 23).²⁹ As churches go about their spiritual work, church cultures will develop. Certain values will be ascribed to certain kinds of expressions and activities.

The church is a spiritual entity. Its mission is spiritual. This spirituality is seen even in the numerous so-called *one another* commands in the New Testament.³⁰ This is the dispensationalist view of the church, but this view is held by nondispensationalists as well.³¹

²⁸ Compare Charles Hodge: “The kingdom of Christ ... is spiritual, or not of this world, moreover, because it has no power over the lives, liberty, or property of its members; and because all secular matters lie beyond its jurisdiction. Its prerogative is simply to declare the truth of God as revealed in his Word and to require that the truth should be professed and obeyed by all under its jurisdiction. It can decide no matter of politics or science which is not decided in the Bible.” *Systematic Theology* (Hendrickson, 2001), 2:604. More recently, Dave Burggraff says: “Politically, Jesus did not attempt to reform the Roman government. Paul did not advocate reforming the government in any epistle. What our privilege is as citizens in a democracy - as responsible citizens - should not be equated as obligation as a church.” “Determining Our Place in the World,” 20.

²⁹ Dave Burggraff observes, “The apostles lived in a day of grave social problems, yet these are mentioned in the New Testament only incidentally [sic]. Never is the church directed to focus its mission on the social ills of the day.” “Determining Our Place in the World,” 20.

³⁰ For example, 1 Jn 3:11; Jn 15:12; Rom 12:10, 16; 1 Pet 1:22; 4:8; 15:7; 2 Cor 13:11; 1 Thess 4:18; 5:11; Heb 3:13; 10:24; etc. Also see John Gill, “Of the Duties of the Members of a Church to Each Other,” in his *Body of Divinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978), 2:568-73.

³¹ D. G. Hart and John R. Muether argue that the spirituality of the church has been a hallmark, not only of the Reformed tradition in general, but even of Calvin: “The distinction between secular affairs and church matters might strike some Presbyterians as a departure from the Reformed world-and-life view that regards all aspects of life as having religious significance. Yet, the doctrine of Spirituality of the Church, as understood and articulated by Hodge is nothing more than a restatement of what Reformed theologians and churchmen have confessed about the nature and ministry of the visible church. Though this doctrine could look like a Presbyterian brief for the separation of church and state, it also meant that the church is a spiritual institution with a spiritual task and spiritual means for executing that task. Here it is significant to remember what John Calvin wrote about the lordship and kingdom of Christ. The Geneva reformer was no stranger to the kind of dichotomy between churchly and secular concerns implied by the Spirituality of the Church. For instance, in the Institutes at the beginning of his discussion of the state, Calvin clearly distinguishes between the civil and ecclesiastical spheres. The civil realm is concerned with “merely civil or external justice” while the church “rules over the soul or the inner man, and concerns itself with eternal life.” Calvin goes on to say it is a “Judaic folly” not to recognize that “the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil

B. The Church's Nonspiritual Responsibilities (Limited and Founded upon its Spirituality)

Perhaps there is still a nagging doubt in your mind concerning the spirituality of the church. Perhaps you're saying, "Sure, Ryan, but aren't there at least a few places where we see the church handling some worldly matters?" I concede this point. The church is expected to pay its pastor, support widows indeed, and care for other Christians. There are some limited instances in the New Testament where the church does have some responsibility to deal with nonspiritual things. Let me briefly address these.

First, the very fact that Christians need benevolence—like the Jewish believers afflicted by famine in the early church—that fact indicates that Christ's kingdom glories are not yet realized. The Church is not removed from the cursed brokenness of this present age. According to Paul in 2 Corinthians, there are many reasons why believers should give to help other believers. Giving to the Jerusalem church's need is a response to Christ's grace (8:9), a way of sharing regional bounty with those in need (8:8-15), so that God can work thanksgiving to himself in the hearts of those receiving the gifts (9:12-15), and for the encouragement of long-distance love between believers (9:14). Notably their gift is not coerced; throughout Paul's charge, he returns again to a willingness to give (8:8, 11; 9:5, 6-7, 11). Nowhere does Paul present the gift to support the famine-stricken believers as a way of bringing about "Kingdom justice" on earth. He makes no demands. He sees the necessity of the gift to be a matter of survival, not of wealth redistribution or of remedying the curse on a macro-level. The gift is about loving ecclesiology (and the spiritual fellowship of those churches), not eschatology.

I already touched on the work of deacons. Deacons support the necessary day-to-day material aspects of church life so that the more important church work can go forward. By the way, in Acts 6, the distribution to widows is connected with the circumstantial (non-normative) communal sharing that the most primitive church held. Even so, the spiritual service of deacons is a means to an end: it is subservient to the foundational, spiritual work of pastors. In so doing, deacons themselves end up having a spiritual ministry, for they *gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus* (1 Tim 3:13).

This is why churches pay their pastors. Paying your pastor is, to put it in contemporary parlance, a "gospel issue." Every minister has a right to receive from churches (1 Cor 9:14; 1 Tim 5:17-18).³² But this use of the "material" goods speak to our commitment to the Great Commission and the proclamation of Christ. Paying a pastor is all about the spirituality of the church. By reasonable extension, this applies to the whole church budget. The church budget is a spiritual thing.

Even more important are the limits Paul puts on the church's benevolence in passages like 1 Timothy 5. Paul limits the care of widows to those who are *widows indeed*, and demands that widows' families first care for them (1 Tim 5:3, 8). This is an explicit limitation of the church's benevolent action (1 Tim 5:16b). In this age, the responsibility of financial care of others falls to other God-ordained institutions. In this case, the primary responsibility to care for widows remains with her family. Moreover, if a widow is young and can be married, Paul delays the assistance they receive (1 Tim 5:14). This limitation speaks volumes as to the nature of a church's responsibilities

government are things far removed from one another." A similar understanding of the Spirituality of the Church appears in Calvin's description of Christ's office as king, which he writes is strictly "spiritual in nature" (Institutes, II.xv.3). Calvin adds that Christ's kingdom is "not earthly or carnal and hence subject to corruption, but spiritual" and because of that "lifts us up even to eternal life" (II.xv.4). "The Spirituality of the Church," *Ordained Servant* 7 (1998): 64-66. Online: <https://www.opc.org/OS/html/V7/3d.html> Accessed 27 February 2019.

³² For an especially helpful take on "Pastoral Pay," check out Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, "On Pastoral Pay," "Pastors' Talk Podcast," Episode 76. <https://www.9marks.org/interview/episode-76-on-pastoral-pay/>

to show mercy. I grant that a list of widows receiving regular benevolence differs from ad hoc, one time acts of benevolence, but Paul's words should still inform church's benevolence. Moreover, all this is to encourage the gracious lives of believing widows, for in so doing true widows are freed to *set their hope on God* and give themselves to *supplications and prayers night and day* (1 Tim 5:5).

Finally, the only place in the epistles where an apostle seems to give the church as an institution a responsibility for benevolence to outsiders is Gal 6:10: *So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.* The word translated *especially* (μάλιστα) may have the sense of "that is," as it does elsewhere (e.g., 1 Tim 5:17), so, *to everyone, that is, to those who are of the household of faith.* The word *especially* at least emphasizes good works toward other believers. If churches choose to organize corporate mercy ministries, they need to understand the New Testament limits on such work, and, even more importantly, the extreme danger of churches not keeping the proper emphases once they begin to embark on "ministries" they have little or no authority to do.

In sum, in the New Testament, the church's spiritual mission produced a culture that reflected the values the church placed on the unity of the faith and propagation of the gospel. Its allegedly "nonspiritual" activities were at core *very* spiritual. Their values and behaviors reflected their emphasis on their spiritual work.

III. Dispensationalism and the Lives of Individual Christians

Having discussed the responsibilities of churches to this present age, let me speak to the responsibilities of individual believers. Given the fact that we have an inheritance in Christ's future kingdom and the realities of our present age, what are our responsibilities as believers?

A. Saints should preach the gospel to sinners

Having been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, we now proclaim that reconciliation to those still estranged from God (2 Cor 5:18). We too must go and make disciples of all nations (Matt 28:19-20). Our spiritual work as believers in the church spills over and transforms and contours to our relationships with nonbelievers (Tit 2:1-10).

B. Saints should let Christ's selfless love influence their relationships with others

Having received the love of Christ, this love ought to shape our relationships both with other believers and with all others made in the image of God. This theme is so fills the New Testament, you can hardly land on one of its pages without finding it.

C. Saints should walk worthy of the future kingdom in holiness

Christ has given his people an inheritance in his kingdom. This high and holy calling demands holiness of us in return. If you've been invited to dine with a king, you will dress and act in manner suitable for such an occasion. If you will inherit Christ's kingdom, you ought to live and love in a manner worthy of this gracious calling. So Paul says to the Thessalonians of his time there: *we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory* (1 Thess 2:12; cf. 2 Thess 1:5).

We do not live for this present age. We must renounce the kind of godless, vain, and sinful living so characteristic of this present age doomed for destruction. This is the logic behind Tit 2:11-13: *For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus.* It is by our spirituality—our holiness—in this age that we anticipate the kingdom life to come. This holiness of life is empowered by and rooted in an anticipation of the life we will have with God and Christ (Phil 3:10-11). When Paul speaks of believers *walking worthy of the calling* they have

received (which calling certainly has a forward-leaning aspect to it), he prescribes the kind of spiritual unity and love that will be the hallmark of Christ's kingdom reign and then the Eternal State (see Eph 4:1-6).

The New Testament gives believers the responsibility to be filled with the Word of Christ, and thereby choose what is excellent with discernment (Phil 1:9-11; Rom 12:1-2; Col 1:9-10; 1 Thess 5:19-24; Eph 5:7-11; Heb 5:11-14; Rom 14).³³ Since we belong to the future age of Christ's glory, our values as believers have changed. Our personal, family, and church culture ought to reflect this.

D. Saints should not remove themselves entirely from the present age

Although our vibrant hope means that we understand that the present, evil age is passing away, we should still work zealously now for Christ; "short-term gains are possible."³⁴ Such gains are not only restricted to those attained in Christian ministry (see no. 1, above), but our daily mundane lives should be Godward. In the New Testament, Christians are engaged in the manufacture of goods and commerce and employment for God's glory (Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 9:6; Eph 4:28). Paul worked for a living, and says that all men professing Christ must do likewise (Acts 18:1-3; 1 Cor 9:6; 1 Thess 4:11-12; 5:14; 2 Thess 3:6-15). This means that though this world is tainted by the curse and under Satan's rule, we can still be involved with culture in very practical ways and not be guilty of transgression. Even believing slaves were urged to work for their masters and their good with an eye to their future riches in Christ's kingdom (Col 4:22-24; compare Eph 6:5-8; Tit 2:9-10).

We are to pray for our leaders, which implies at least some regard for their good and the good of the realm they control (1 Tim 2:1-2; cf. Jer 29:7). Besides submission, the command to *pray* for political leaders is the clearest biblical imperative for believers in relation to their governing authorities. The New Testament permits Christians to work as officials in government (Phil 1:13; 4:22; Luke 3:12-14; Acts 16:25-34; compare Acts 10:1-2).³⁵ As citizens, we are to be submissive and quiet and dignified, not rabble-rousers (1 Tim 2:2; 1 Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:12). In all our relationships, we must return the proper regard to others, whether as those in authority or in submission (Eph 5:22-6:9; 1 Pet 2:13-18).

In order for us fulfill commands like *let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths* (Eph 4:29; see Eph 5:4) and *addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs* (Eph 5:19), Christians must understand the language arts of the present age (Eph 5:11). Hereby believers determine ways to use both speech and the arts to communicate in ways the glorify God.

Christ calls his followers to take up even the most mundane activities and turn them for the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). Even our manners are the incarnation in us of Christ's love for others (1 Cor 13:5a). God's gifts in this life are received with thanksgiving (1 Tim 4:1-5). Yet our future hope means we have a level of indifference to this world's lawful enjoyments (1 Cor 7:29-31).

Many Evangelical scholars advocating for church engagement in the culture do so on the basis of the cultural mandate in Gen 1:28.³⁶ They identify Kingdom redemption with the creation mandate argue that when Christians subdue the earth by culture, believers realize Kingdom

³³ See Ryan Martin, "Discernment for the Glory of God," *Religious Affections Ministries Blog*, Aug 16, 2011. The series begins here: <https://religiousaffections.org/articles/articles-on-aesthetics/discernment-for-the-glory-of-god-part-1/> As Snoeberger argues, "This is accomplished not by casting about for elusive Bible verses that condemn or condone specific practices, but by discerning carefully the values, motives, and worldviews that bring those practices into common use." "More Notes Towards the Definition of Culture."

³⁴ Kevin T. Bauder, "Eschatology and Cultural Engagement," *In the Nick of Time*, July 25, 2008.

³⁵ See J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes and Dissertations* (London: Macmillan, 1913; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1953). 171-78. Also see Peter T. O'Brien, "Caesar's Household, Imperial Household," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

³⁶ Allison, *Strangers and Sojourners*, 98 and 459-63; Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 85; Grindheim, *Living in the Kingdom of God*, 5-6.

redemption now. This passage, however, contains no mandate. Instead, Gen 1:28 is a blessing, and human beings, even with the curse, have realized that divine blessing.³⁷ Further, the New Testament writings give no hint that having children or subduing the earth now advances Christ's kingdom. The true reverse of the curse is reserved for the life to come (Rom 16:20). The church's present role in Christ's future kingdom to be in the preaching of the gospel (see above).³⁸

E. Saints should by word and deed expose the works of darkness

Further, believers are not to leave the unbelieving world simply to slide into hell unhindered. Even while we avoid at all costs *the unfruitful works of darkness*, we are by God's truth and holy living to *expose them* (Eph 5:11). We do not expose such sins by *speaking of the things they do in secret* (Eph 5:12), but by *walking as children of light* (Eph 5:8). So by holy living we can do some good in this present age. This is the way God wants society changed. It is not by political action, but by godliness ourselves.³⁹

Believers must be resolute to live holy lives before a watching world. The world is not going to like this. Unbelievers stress tolerance because they don't like either God or you regarding their acts of sin to be sin. Like all sinners throughout human history, today's unbelievers have a problem admitting their sin. But our calling in this age is to expose that sin, both by speaking God's moral truth to this age of wickedness, and by living by the grace of God consistent godly lives before them. We should also point out the inevitable consequences of sinful choices.

F. Saints must exclude themselves from the world's expressions of sinfulness

While they live in this present evil age, Christians must not be involved in any actual sin (Tit 2:12). They may not be involved in any idolatry or false religion, such as eating food offered to idols (1 Cor 8-10). Godly living *puts to silence the ignorance of foolish people* (1 Pet 2:15). Godly living is also what is expected of those who are *servants of God* (1 Pet 2:16). Such obedience is the fruit of Spirit in the lives of those who are united to Christ (Gal 5:22-24). Keeping Christ's commands is what those who love Christ do (1 John 1:6; 2:5-6; etc.).

G. Saints should wisely practice deeds of love and mercy.

While churches have a spiritual mission, individual believers should wisely practice deeds of love and mercy. Christians have a responsibility first and foremost to care for their own families (1 Tim 5:8). Yet we have been commanded to use our wealth generously, just as God has been generously gracious towards us. So Paul says that one of the purposes of honest income is so that *we may have something to share with anyone in need* (Eph 4:28). Acts of love and mercy are best done in the context of personal relationships and investment, understanding the limits of moral proximity or subsidiarity.⁴⁰ Wisdom is our rule, not virtue signaling or ephemeral shame of social media.

Our deeds of mercy flow out of the second great commandment: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Matt 22:39; compare Luke 10:25-37). They are the practical outworking of our

³⁷ Kevin T. Bauder observes, "Genesis 1:28 does not contain a mandate, cultural or otherwise. It expresses a blessing. It does not give humans a series of orders to obey; rather, it describes certain capacities with which God has bountifully endowed the human race. Human beings have been fruitful and multiplied. They have filled the earth. They have subdued it. They have exercised dominion over the created order. Because they are now sinful, they have done these things imperfectly, but even their sin has not been able to drive out these innate capacities with which their Creator has blessed them." "Mandate?" *Nick of Time*, February 16, 2018. <https://centralseminary.edu/mandate/>

³⁸ For a better evangelical explanation of the so-called "cultural mandate" from the perspective of inaugurated eschatology, see DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church*, 208-19.

³⁹ Kevin Bauder writes, "How should Christians influence their governments? The first and most obvious way is through the proclamation of the gospel. The gospel is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). The gospel transforms those who receive it, altering their identity and progressively remaking them in the image of Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21); Col. 3:8-17). This transformation affects not only the inner life of believers, but also their social relationships (Col. 3:18-25). When the gospel begins to transform enough people within a single society, the society itself will necessarily be altered." *Baptist Distinctives*, 145.

⁴⁰ DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 183-86.

commitment to personal holiness. The deeds of mercy are first directed towards Christ's brothers, the *least of these*, as they endure suffering and hardship for bearing Christ's message (Matt 25:31-40; Gal 6:6-10; also see Jam 2:15-16).⁴¹ Believers are to *visit orphans and widows in their affliction*, for this is *pure and undefiled religion* (Jam 1:27). This kind of religion is one where individual believers are not living *in luxury and self-indulgence*, like the world (Jam 5:7), but embrace the life of suffering like the Old Testament prophets (Jam 5:10). Again, such we must first act in charity toward fellow-believers, ideally in the context of personal relationships, but also with an understanding that *you always have the poor with you* (Mark 14:7).⁴²

Conclusion

What does a dispensational interpretation of Scripture mean for the church's and the believer's relation to the present age? The mission of the church is spiritual. Churches have no Kingdom or eschatological basis for social work or large-scale societal. Any change for good in the present culture ought to be the direct result of individual believers, not churches. Yet even for individual believers, while we live godly lives now and do what we can for good in the present age, our ultimate outlook is one of hope in Christ's kingdom to come.

⁴¹ On the original context of these familiar words, see Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, Oreg.: Multnomah Press, 1980), 291. Also see DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 162-65. Pace Philip Graham Ryken, *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 2003), 147-64.

⁴² Cody Floate, "Poverty and the Moral Law," *Founders Ministry Blog*, February 20, 2019. <https://founders.org/2019/02/20/poverty-and-the-moral-law/>