

The Holy Spirit in Dispensational Theory

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It is not uncommon to hear Bible teachers describe different “dispensations” or “time periods” of how God deals with people here on planet Earth. This scheme of dividing the word of God according to epochs of differing approaches by God to solving the problem of man’s sin and redemption is actually a young one in the history of theological constructions by man. It is only a few hundred years old! If we accept the premise that God does not change (i.e. that He is the same yesterday, today and forever) and also that The Faith was “once for all delivered” then there can be no “new gospel”. All God's truth is ancient.

C.H. Spurgeon said:

"There shall be no new God, nor new devil, nor shall we ever have a new Saviour, nor a new atonement. Why then should we be attracted by the error and nonsense which everywhere pleads for a hearing because they are new? To suppose the Theology can be new is to imagine that the Lord himself is of yesterday. A doctrine lately true must of necessity be false. Falsehood has no beard, but truth is hoary with age immeasurable. The old Gospel is the only Gospel. Pity is our only feeling toward those young preachers who cry: `See my new Theology!' in just the same spirit as little Mary says: `See my pretty new frock!'"

The focus of this paper is on how the Dispensational approach espoused by so many preachers and Bible teachers actually diminishes and subverts the truths of the work of the Holy Spirit in His dealings with mankind over the course of history.

To be consistent with Dispensational theory, the theologians who created and currently espouse such a scheme have to be consistent for their theological “house of cards” to remain standing. Their premise (which I reject) is that there was a linear period of time called “Law” which was replaced by the current epoch of “Grace” or “the Church Age”, and that Israel failed to maintain her status by “keeping the Law” (which statement betrays a total ignorance of that Law) so that God had to create “Plan B”, as it were, which ushered in the current “age of Grace” by the birth of a new entity known as the “Church”. This entity was supposedly created by God during the time described in Acts chapter 2, thereby known as the “birthday of the Church.” To be consistent in the need to separate Law from Grace, a need exists to bifurcate the role of the Holy Spirit. After all, if the church now has the “better covenant” and it’s now all about grace and freedom from the Law, then we can’t allow any interpretation of a passage in the so-called Old Testament to even imply that there ever existed any continuity in the actions of the Holy Spirit that would overlap these time periods. There has to be a complete and obvious wall of separation. We simply cannot have grace in the Old Testament, or for that matter, Law in the New, for this theory to hold.

The problem that this theory finds itself shipwrecked upon is the simple fact that the Bible clearly teaches just the opposite. Facts are stubborn things. Let us examine what the

Scriptures themselves clearly teach and submit our theology to that as the final and absolute determiner of truth.

One of the axioms of the Dispensational theory as it refers to the Holy Spirit is that during “Old Testament” times the Holy Spirit only came upon certain people to empower them for specific works but that He had no other interaction among people. The idea that individuals in “Old Testament” times could experience the same regeneration and salvation as believers in the “New Testament” time period is anathema or cursed to the Dispensationalists. If we examine certain Scriptures, we do see where the Holy Spirit was active in empowering specific people for specific purposes.

ADONAI came down in the cloud, spoke to him, took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy leaders. When the Spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied-then but not afterwards. There were two men who stayed in the camp, one named Eldad and the other Medad, and the Spirit came to rest on them. They were among those listed to go out to the tent, but they hadn't done so, and they prophesied in the camp. Numbers 11:25-26 CJB

Bil'am raised his eyes and saw Isra'el encamped tribe by tribe. Then the Spirit of God came upon him, and he made his pronouncement: "This is the speech of Bil'am, son of B'or; the speech of the man whose eyes have been opened; Numbers 24:2-3 CJB

Sh'mu'el took the horn of oil and anointed him there in his brothers' presence. From that day on, the Spirit of ADONAI would fall upon David with power. So Sh'mu'el set out and went to Ramah. 1 Samuel 16:13 CJB

But when the people of Isra'el cried out to ADONAI, ADONAI raised up a savior for the people of Isra'el; and he rescued them; this was 'Otni'el, the son of Kaleb's younger brother K'naz. The spirit of ADONAI came upon him, and he judged Isra'el. Then he went out to war, and ADONAI gave Kushan-Rish'atayim king of Aram into his hands; his power prevailed against Kushan-Rish'atayim. Judges 3:9-10 CJB

But the Spirit of ADONAI covered Gid'on. He sounded the call on the shofar, and Avi'ezer rallied behind him. Judges 6:34 CJB

Then the spirit of ADONAI came upon Yiftach; and he passed through Gil'ad and M'nasheh, on through Mitzpeh of Gil'ad, and from there over to the people of 'Amon. Judges 11:29 CJB

The Spirit of ADONAI came powerfully upon Shimshon, and barehanded he tore the lion to pieces as easily as if it had been a young goat. But he didn't tell his father or mother what he had done. Judges 14:6 CJB

Then the Spirit of ADONAI came over him powerfully. He went down to Ashkelon, killed thirty of their men, took their good clothes, and gave them to the men who had "solved" the riddle. Judges 14:19 CJB

When he got to Lechi, the P'lishtim came running and shouting at him; and the Spirit of ADONAI came on him powerfully. The ropes on his arms became as weak as burnt flax and fell from his arms. Judges 15:14 CJB

Then, in the middle of the assembly, the Spirit of ADONAI came upon Yachzi'el the son of Z'kharyahu, the son of B'nayah, the son of Ye'i'el, the son of Matanyah the Levi, from the descendants of Asaf. 2 Chronicles 20:14 CJB

In all of the above references it is clear that the Holy Spirit "came upon" these individuals empowering them for a specific work at a specific time. If we stop here, however, we may have made the case for the Dispensationalists. We cannot be so selective in our readings. That is the problem with modern theology.

Let us examine for ourselves what the "full counsel" of God's word has to say. If we are diligent in our quest and faithful to the context we will arrive at what the popular radio host Paul Harvey used to say was "the rest of the story."

We will begin by looking at the work of the Holy Spirit in the aspect of regeneration of those faithful souls in the time period of the "Old Testament". The Torah gave the people the command to have their hearts circumcised.

Therefore, circumcise the foreskin of your heart; and don't be stiffnecked any longer! Deuteronomy 10:16 CJB

Then ADONAI your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your children, so that you will love ADONAI your God with all your heart and all your being, and thus you will live. Deuteronomy 30:6 CJB

Jeremiah gave the same word to the people of his day.

People of Y'hudah and inhabitants of Yerushalayim, circumcise yourselves for ADONAI, remove the foreskins of your heart! Jeremiah 4:4 CJB

We know from Paul's writings that this spiritual circumcision of the heart can only ever be accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. Romans 2:29 ESV

In Romans chapter 4, Paul, in describing what true Biblical faith is, gives us the examples of Abraham and David. How were they saved? By keeping the law? Surely we cannot

accept that conclusion because both failed on that account. Besides that, Avraham was declared righteous before the giving of the Torah!

Then what should we say Avraham, our forefather, obtained by his own efforts? For if Avraham came to be considered righteous by God because of legalistic observances, then he has something to boast about. But this is not how it is before God! For what does the Tanakh say? "Avraham put his trust in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness." Now the account of someone who is working is credited not on the ground of grace but on the ground of what is owed him. However, in the case of one who is not working but rather is trusting in him who makes ungodly people righteous, his trust is credited to him as righteousness. In the same way, the blessing which David pronounces is on those whom God credits with righteousness apart from legalistic observances: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered over; Blessed is the man whose sin ADONAI will not reckon against his account." Romans 4:1-8 CJB

If salvation is described as having circumcised hearts and that action can only be accomplished by the Holy Spirit, the obvious conclusion is that the Holy Spirit was active in this role during the Tanach period. This raises the problem, however, of how people could see Yeshua in order to place faith in Him so necessary for salvation. We know from Paul's writings that in ancient times, people's eyes had to be opened to see Messiah.

What is more, their minds were made stonelike; for to this day the same veil remains over them when they read the Old Covenant; it has not been unveiled, because only by the Messiah is the veil taken away. Yes, till today, whenever Moshe is read, a veil lies over their heart. "But," says the Torah, "whenever someone turns to ADONAI, the veil is taken away." Now, "ADONAI" in this text means the Spirit. And where the Spirit of ADONAI is, there is freedom.
2 Corinthians 3:14-17 CJB

Moreover, we know that Yeshua said the following:

Avraham, your father, was glad that he would see my day; then he saw it and was overjoyed." John 8:56 CJB

This can only mean that the Holy Spirit unveiled the eyes so Abraham could see Messiah.

David wrote the following:

The Torah of ADONAI is perfect, restoring the inner person. The instruction of ADONAI is sure, making wise the thoughtless. Psalm 19:7 CJB

Was David saying that the Torah, without the work of the Holy Spirit as the Dispensationalists would assert was absent during that time period, could actually bring restoration to the soul? Doesn't that sound like legalism? Consider Paul's words:

But you, you do not identify with your old nature but with the Spirit - provided the Spirit of God is living inside you, for anyone who doesn't have the Spirit of the Messiah doesn't belong to him. Romans 8:9 CJB

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. Romans 3:20 ESV

The inescapable conclusion here is that this restoration David was speaking of had to be empowered by the Spirit of God, because without the Holy Spirit, Torah observance can only engender condemnation and, therefore, spiritual death.

The larger passage in Romans mentioned above is also quite instructive:

For those who identify with their old nature set their minds on the things of the old nature, but those who identify with the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. Having one's mind controlled by the old nature is death, but having one's mind controlled by the Spirit is life and shalom. For the mind controlled by the old nature is hostile to God, because it does not submit itself to God's Torah - indeed, it cannot. Thus, those who identify with their old nature cannot please God. Romans 8:5-8 CJB

(One cannot help but note that those theologians who are so adamantly hostile to observing God's Torah may find themselves on the wrong side of this categorization but that is a subject for another day)

This is a clear binary separation of those who even the Dispensationalists would categorize as those who are "saved" and those who are "lost". The issue of the work of the Holy Spirit within individuals in the Tanach period becomes clear when we simply ask whether those same individuals were submissive to God's Torah and did they please God? Clearly the record indicates that many were not and did not but there has always been a remnant of faithful believers, sanctified and empowered by the Spirit who were faithful to God's Torah and placed their faith in his coming Messiah. They were "saved" in every qualitative sense that "New Testament" believers are. Those who would challenge this statement fail to effectively deal with the listings of all of the "Old

Testament” heroes of faith that we are exhorted to emulate as described in Hebrews 11. Did all these early believers know that they were children of God?

All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to bring you back again into fear; on the contrary, you received the Spirit, who makes us sons and by whose power we cry out, "Abba!" (that is, "Dear Father!"). The Spirit himself bears witness with our own spirits that we are children of God; and if we are children, then we are also heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with the Messiah. Romans 8:14-17 CJB

Were these remnant believers during the Tanach era sons of God? If so, they were certainly led by his Spirit as the text above so clearly indicates. That same Spirit gave them assurance in their hearts of their status. If they were sons and knew that fact, it was only due to the work of the Holy Spirit in their individual lives.

Did these remnant believers know the thoughts of God? Consider what Paul says:

It is to us, however, that God has revealed these things. How? Through the Spirit. For the Spirit probes all things, even the profoundest depths of God. For who knows the inner workings of a person except the person's own spirit inside him? So too no one knows the inner workings of God except God's Spirit. Now we have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit of God, so that we might understand the things God has so freely given us. 1 Cor 2:10-12 CJB

How could these remnant believers have known the thoughts of God without the aid of His Spirit?

We understand that sanctification is totally a work of the Spirit:

Some of you used to do these things. But you have cleansed yourselves, you have been set apart for God, you have come to be counted righteous through the power of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah and the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:11 CJB

What I am saying is this: run your lives by the Spirit. Then you will not do what your old nature wants. Galatians 5:16 CJB

Those who keep sowing in the field of their old nature, in order to meet its demands, will eventually reap ruin; but those who keep sowing in the field of the Spirit will reap from the Spirit everlasting life. Galatians 6:8 CJB

For if you live according to your old nature, you will certainly die; but if, by the Spirit, you keep putting to death the practices of the body, you will live. Romans 8:13 CJB

It was not on the ground of any righteous deeds we had done, but on the ground of his own mercy. He did it by means of the mikveh of rebirth and the renewal brought about by the Ruach HaKodesh, whom he poured out on us generously through Yeshua the Messiah, our Deliverer. Titus 3:5,6 CJB

The believers in the remnant had to have had the Holy Spirit active in their lives to obtain sanctification and personal holiness as well as regeneration and “salvation”.

One of the Scriptures that Dispensationalists use to advance their theory is as follows:

Whoever puts his trust in me, as the Scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from his inmost being!" (Now he said this about the Spirit, whom those who trusted in him were to receive later - the Spirit had not yet been given, because Yeshua had not yet been glorified.) John 7:38-39 CJB

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’ ” Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. John 7:38-39 ESV

This text can be problematic due to the fact that different translators have attempted to “play” with the translation of the phrase “the Spirit had not yet been given”. The actual Greek text simply says “...for the Spirit was not yet...”. Various translators are apparently not happy with this simple phrase so they attempt to “color in the page”, so to speak. The NASB, ESV, NIV and others add the word “given”. Obviously, Yeshua did not mean that the Holy Spirit did not exist prior to this, so what did He mean? The larger context of His teaching on the subject of the yet future and expanded role of the Holy Spirit had to be in mind. He had been telling his disciples that the Holy Spirit would empower them to do the very important work of fulfilling His great commission to make disciples of the nations. This was a new work but that does not mean that the Holy Spirit was not active in individual lives prior to that date for all of the Biblical examples mentioned so far in this paper. He says this:

Now I am sending forth upon you what my Father promised, so stay here in the city until you have been equipped with power from above. Luke 24:49 CJB

This is what the disciples were to await to enable them to follow His instructions regarding the outreach to the nations. It will be experienced in Acts 2 as the additional and necessary empowerment of individuals who were already in an existing body of believers. It was not the birthday of a new entity entitled the “Church” which is divorced from the remnant of believing Israel.

So what does it mean that “the Spirit was not yet”? The context gives us the answer. It clearly says that it was “because Yeshua had not yet been glorified.” What is this linkage between these two events? It was not until Yeshua would be demonstrated as the victor over sin and death. He had to be resurrected. He had to ascend to his Father. He had to be glorified. Only then could His message have validity and power. This is the culmination of the Abrahamic covenant of the promise whereby “all the nations/families of the earth will be blessed”.