

# Could Dispensationalism Prevent a *Woke* Church?

By Michael M. Kerns

## Introduction

President Lyndon Johnson created the Great Society because he believed, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘you are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.” [americanyawp.com/reader/27-the-sixties/lyndon-johnson-howard-university-commencement-address] In other words, you must do more than free a person; you must compensate him to make up for his inequity. In 1995, Thomas Sowell called that idea *cosmic justice* and defined it as the elimination of “undeserved disadvantages for selected groups.” [Thomas Sowell, “The Quest for Cosmic Justice,” Free Press, 1999, p. 9] *Social justice* has replaced Sowell’s word, just as “equity” has replaced “equality.”

This paper will limit itself to an examination of the *woke* trend in the American evangelical church in terms of dispensationalism. Disregard or rejection of the dispensational framework of interpretation makes saints vulnerable to the dangers of the *woke* trend, where that trend promotes harmful and unbiblical ideas. This paper will argue that disregard of the hermeneutic of dispensationalism has led ministers to lead their congregations into the trendy practices of the *woke* movement.

## Dispensationalism Rests on Authorial INTENT

Dispensationalism as a tool to interpret Scripture comes directly from a straightforward, plain reading of Scripture and not from external, predetermined imposition of methods, theology, or feelings extraneous to the text. “The hermeneutic of dispensationalism is not dispensational, rather it is simply integral to communication as God created it and revealed it in the Bible, thus undergirding the Biblical worldview.” [drcone.com/2022/09/18/the-double-edged-sword-of-dispensationalism-destructive-as-methodology-constructive-as-outcome/]

To understand the Bible, the interpreter must give attention to the text which the author determined. “To interpret we must in every case reproduce the sense the scriptural writer intended for his own words.” [Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Single Intent of Scripture,” in “Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith,” ed. Kenneth Kantzer, Nelson, 1978, p. 138] Authorial intent governs the message, and the reader must work to understand the intended message through an awareness of the text. “... ‘Interpretation is one; application is many.’ This means that there is one meaning to a passage of Scripture which is determined by careful study.” [Bernard Ramm, “Protestant Biblical Interpretation: a Textbook on Hermeneutics,” 3<sup>rd</sup> rev. ed., Baker, 1970, p. 113]

## Dispensational Hermeneutics Has Its Essentials

### (1) Dispensationalists provide a consistent literal/grammatical/historical hermeneutic.

The late Charles Ryrie, professor emeritus of Dallas Seminary, prolific writer and succinct exponent of dispensationalism, identified three reasons for a literal/grammatical/historical hermeneutic: divine design of understandable language to convey his message, literal fulfillment of the prophecies of Christ, and the objectivity of a literal method. [Charles C. Ryrie, “Dispensationalism,” Moody, 1966, 1995, pp. 81-82] “Philosophically, the purpose of language itself seems to require literal interpretation. Language was given by God for the purpose of being able to communicate with mankind.” [*Ibid.*]

### (2) Dispensationalism portrays man’s history not as circular but as linear in the progressive outworking of God’s plan in a diversity of administrations or stewardships in the unveiling of His revelation for His glory.

“Progressive revelation sees the Bible not as a textbook on theology but as the continually unfolding revelation of God given by various means throughout the successive ages.” [*Ibid.*, p. 33]

The word “dispensation” identifies these means. “A dispensation can be defined as a stage in the progressive revelation of God constituting a distinctive stewardship or role of life.” [Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Major Bible Themes,” Zondervan, 1926, 1953, revised, 1974, p. 126] Most dispensationalists identify seven stewardships or administrations: Innocence (Genesis 1:28–3:6); Conscience (Genesis 3:7–8:14); Human Government (Genesis 8:15–Exodus 18:27); Promise (Genesis 11:10–Exodus 18:27); Law/Israel (Exodus 19–John 15:30); Grace/Church (Acts 2:1–Revelation 19:21); and Kingdom (Revelation 20:1–15). [Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, “Charting the End Times,” Harvest House, 2003, pp. 82–83] “Within each dispensation, God administers His economy, His rule, His authority, and His program in some different way than the previous dispensation.” [messianicassociations.org/ezone-af.dispensation.htm]

Dispensationalists do not abandon the literal/grammatical/historical hermeneutic in viewing the 7<sup>th</sup> dispensation of the Kingdom as literal; it will be inaugurated in the future when Jesus as King returns. “There is no promised kingdom on earth in this age; the Church is a unique mystery. However, she will enter into the millennium and into her promised blessings because of her association with the promised Messiah.” [Stanley Toussaint, “The Church and Israel.” “Conservative Theological Journal,” 1998, Volume 2, 2(7), pp. 348–374]

### **(3) Dispensationalism preserves the distinction between Israel and the Church.**

The Church does not replace Israel. Israel continues as the recipients of her promises, although the Church benefits from them. God has made two distinct entities and put each in their place in history for His glory. Dispensationalists also interpret “the New Testament in light of the Old Testament (and not vice versa).” [Christopher Cone, “Four Pillars of Dispensationalism,” “Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond,” Tyndale, 2008, p. 28]

The consistent witness of Scripture is to the distinctiveness of Israel and the church. Israel is an elect nation called to witness to the glory of God as a nation among nations and serve a distinct phase in the kingdom program. The church, on the other hand, is a people called out from every nation as ‘a people for his name’ (Acts 15:14)... [Robert L. Saucy, “The Church in God’s Program,” Moody, pp. 73–74]

### **(4) Dispensationalism points to the praise of God who unites all of history for His glory.**

This doxological purpose of history provides a unity of purpose that unites all its individual parts. We may not know the purpose of the parts of history, but we can know the purpose of the whole. Everything works together for His glory. John Walvoord, second president of Dallas Seminary, commented, “The larger purpose of God is the manifestation of His own glory. To this end, each dispensation, each successive revelation of God’s plan for the ages, His dealings with the non-elect as with the elect...combine to manifest divine glory.” [John F. Walvoord, “Review of *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* by George E. Ladd,” “Bibliotheca Sacra” 110 (January–March 1953), pp. 3–4]

## **“Woke” Means “Aware”**

Merriam Webster defines *woke* as “Aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).” “Woke was originally a term used largely by Black people to signify a consciousness around racial issues in America.” [AAVE (African American Vernacular English)] “But ‘woke’ in its original incarnation rests on activism and blackness.” [theguardian.com]

In 2013, a jury acquitted George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin’s murderer, and in response, “three radical Black organizers—Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi—created a Black-centered political will and movement building project called #BlackLivesMatter.... Black Lives Matter is an ideological and

political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise.” [Blacklivesmatter.com]

*Woke* now adds those who identify as LGGBBTTQQAAPP+ [Lesbian, Gay, Genderqueer, Bisexual, Demisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Two spirit, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, Asexual, Allies, Pansexual, Polyamorous (Netlingo.com)] as recipients of oppression. “Plus” includes allies of these groups. GSM (gender and sexual minorities) also identifies this group. GSM wants America to be *woke* and quit treating them as victims. GSM, and especially the self-named “trans” group, has cornered the media market to have constant attention to lead the culture to accept all the GSM group. [americanprogress.org/article/widespread-discrimination-continues-shape-lgbt-peoples-lives-subtle-significant-ways/]

## **“Woke” Calls Its Followers to Activism**

This “awareness” activism begins with confession of guilt by white people for past sins toward “black folks” [BLM phrasing] and present sins of discrimination against GSM to bring social justice to America. The Social Work School of Yeshiva University in New York City identifies “pressing actions” to impact society: exercising the right to vote; climate justice; access for health care for all; refugee crisis to aid displaced persons; racial injustice to include police and prison reform; income gap; gun violence; hunger and food insecurity; equality. [online.yu.edu/wurzweiler/blog/2020-biggest-social-justice-issues]

Not every *woke* organization would agree with the whole of the university’s plan, but it reflects the overall thrust of the *woke* to establish justice in America. Social justice does not mean social equality but social equity, where the so-called disenfranchised receive financial compensation because they lack a fair start in life than those more fortunate. “Rather than simply not discriminating (which is the basic promise of equality), equity recognizes structural oppression and is accommodating based on peoples’ experiences.” [humanrightscareers.com/issues/what-is-social-equity/]

## **Conservative Church Leaders Participate In Social Justice**

The commitment to social justice finds itself in churches that hold to historic orthodox doctrines of the faith. Church leaders act *woke* when they confess their sins or confess others’ sins by neglecting their responsibility for the slavery of African Americans. A cross-section sampling of these leaders follows.

George Robertson, Senior Pastor of the 4000-member Second Presbyterian Church in Memphis, proclaimed, “I openly acknowledge I am not a self-made man, but rather one who was born into a privileged societal status on account of the color of my skin.” [2pc.org/media/the-jesus-gospel-part-2]

Albert Mohler Jr., President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, prefaced a report to the Southern Baptist Convention in December 2018, “We must repent of our own sins; we cannot repent for the dead. We must, however, offer full lament for a legacy we inherit...” [Religion News Service, May 18, 2020]

Max Lucado, the preaching pastor at the 5500-member Oak Hills Church (formerly Church of Christ) in San Antonio, Texas apologized for the church, “Our heavenly Father has used this pandemic to bring to the forefront the most ancient sin of humanity and certainly of our nation and that is the sin of racism.” [sanantonioreport.org/pastor-max-lucado] He made headlines in December when he adapted the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus’ escape to Egypt from the book of Matthew as that of a family on a journey through Mexico, fleeing violence from cartels. [sanantonioreport.org/pastor-max-lucado]

Ligon Duncan, Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, expressed sorrow for “the staggering amount of injustice against African Americans.” He also repented of behalf of the seminary for its longtime commitment to “slavery, segregation, lynching, and injustice” before 12,000 participants in the Together for the Gospel (T4G) in April 2018 in Louisville, Kentucky. [Gospelcoalition.org]

## **“Woke” Calls the Church to Social Justice**

Dr. Eric Mason, founder and pastor of Epiphany Fellowship in Philadelphia and member of the black community, received degrees from two conservative seminaries: Dallas Seminary and Gordon-Conwell Seminary. He has written, “Woke Church, An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice.” His primer reveals what typically identifies a church as *woke*. He concludes his book with criticisms or laments of the church. The following samples his explanation of a woke church.

Mason calls the church to wake up about the problems in our society. Mason applies Paul’s admonition to the church about making visible “everything exposed to the light” (Ephesians 4:13) to point out racism. “The church in America is not awake to the reality of what is happening in communities across this nation, and we are missing out on our calling to shine the light into these places of darkness for Christ’s glory.” [Eric Mason, “Woke Church, An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice,” Moody, 2018, p. 22] That shining comes from loving our neighbor [Ibid., p. 21]

Acknowledging racism releases our muted voice. “To apply this we must be awakened to the reality of implicit and explicit racism and injustice in our society. Until then, our prophetic voice on these matters will be anemic and silent.” [Ibid., p. 32] Mason and all *woke* advocates see bigotry and prejudice not in an individual’s action but in a whole system of oppression especially of people of color.

[nationalequityproject.org/frameworks/lens-of-systemic-oppression] Despite a false assumption about systemic racism, he calls the church “to proclaim the gospel to change people in systems.” [Mason, p. 47]

Mason equates the church with the kingdom and sees the proclamation of justice as part of the gospel. “It is important for us not to disconnect the gospel from the Kingdom. In proclaiming the gospel, we are to proclaim the reality of an already and not yet kingdom.” [Ibid.] The *woke* gospel message includes justice. “Thankfully, many of us are waking up to the recognition that justice is a core message of the Bible. The Bible is filled with justice as a main theme.” [Ibid., p. 51]

The *woke* church demonstrates the glory of God by being *woke*. “As we walk as a Holy Spirit community, we are empowered by His divine presence to fight for peace in multiple layers of society. Our witness depends on our commitment to showing off the glory of Jesus in how we work in the world to be agents of change.” [Ibid., p. 57] Mason says all this and fails to define social justice.

## **“Woke” Disregards the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism**

Saints have solved the problem of epistemology: we accept the Bible as the Word of God—His special revelation of Himself and His purposes to us. We may know what God has said, but do we know how to understand what we know? This issue of understanding falls into the discipline of hermeneutics, and in that discipline, all saints must work to find out the meaning of the author.

The dispensational hermeneutic gives an objective method for discovering the meaning of the author. The text *informs* the dispensational hermeneutic of literal/grammatical/historical method. The dispensational hermeneutic does not *impose* itself on the text. That conflict of “informing” vs. “imposing” affects every interpreter. Will our system derived from the text inform us about the meaning of the author or will we continue to impose our system upon the text?

Dr. Mason failed in this regard because he imposed upon the text his meaning to justify his commitment to eliminate systemic racial injustice. In this matter, he has also neglected dispensationalism by making the church equal with Israel. Mason argues that countless verses in the Old Testament provide “the source and practice of justice for the church.” [*Ibid.*, p. 51] Let’s look at two examples:

- **Isaiah 1:7**, *Your country lies desolate; your cities are burned with fire; in your very presence foreigners devour your land; it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.*
- **Amos 5:24**, *But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.*

Both Isaiah and Amos address Israel and speak of coming judgment then and later unless the nation repents. They also point to a future restoration for Israel. Dr. Mason ignores the concept of dispensations as he interprets Old Testament books as speaking directly to the church, to justify his call to eliminate injustice in society. He does not merely apply these texts but he sees them as a direct interpretation of the text. He can interpret in this way because apparently he sees the church as the replacement for Israel, although he does not state that. His interpretation of the Old Testament also denies the author’s intent and banishes the author from the text as he interprets the words for the church.

Mason must use the text of the Old Testament because the New Testament calls the church to make disciples, not to correct injustices. He makes one attempt to support his view from the New Testament when he argues that Jesus called the Pharisees to practice justice when they tithed their mint and dill but neglected the weightier matters of justice (Matthew 23:23).

God has called us to personal righteousness, and that has to do with an inward change. Mason even agrees with that and undermines his woke plan to eliminate systemic racism when he states, “You have to be intrinsically changed by God in order for justice to be done.... justice doesn’t come by legislation, because you can legislate things and nothing changes” [Mason, “Woke,” p. 50]. Yet, he continues with his call to justice. He says that he does not want to “neglect proper exegesis and hermeneutics, but we must prioritize our call to serve the needs of justice.” [*Ibid.*, p. 49]

Dr. Mason failed when he argues that the present form of the kingdom demands a call to fight injustice. He sees the kingdom as many non-dispensationalists and progressive dispensationalists see it—as “here and now” in some form. His call to justice sounds in his views like an amillennial when he wants to eliminate injustice now—as if we could eliminate injustice.

A dispensationalist argues for a future, literal rule of Christ on earth that would exercise justice.

**Isaiah 11:4**, *“With righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.”*

Dr. Mason concludes his book with his commentary on the book of Revelation and sees Christ’s return as the conclusion to injustice. In the meantime, “If the church can keep this image of what is to come before us, we will be energized to work to accomplish His purposes in the earth.” [*Ibid.*, p. 180]

## **“Woke” Fails In Its Hermeneutic**

The hermeneutic of the *woke* church has kinship with its predecessors in the church that practiced social change as preeminent to spiritual change. This social gospel in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries “interpreted the kingdom of God as requiring social as well as individual salvation and sought the betterment of

industrialized society through application of the biblical principles of charity and justice.”

[britannica.com/event/Social-Gospel] In 1896, Charles Sheldon wrote the small book *In His Steps* that gained such popularity in the 1930s that it sold 30 million copies worldwide. In 1993, his great-grandson Garrett W. Sheldon updated the book, and immediately, “What Would Jesus Do?” stood out as the meme of the day with WWJD on bracelets, bumper decals, and programs.

Saints and religious non-saints naturally gravitate to a program or idea that has immediate rewards. Since social justice cannot be defined and *woke* varies in its definition, a person can practice both in any way that they desire and be successful. The NFL proved that by giving money to BLM and putting *woke* sayings on helmets. Now, more and more churches slip into adopting a cultural trend and work to better society.

When Jesus commanded the Church to “*make disciples of all the nations*,” it implies the spreading out of all the saints to make those disciples. Work, play, leisure all provide venues for the gospel. Certainly, God has called saints to work with the poor, but that work with the poor should not make the poor just richer in goods but richer in spirit by hearing the gospel.

## **“Woke” Opposes the Gospel**

LBJ had high-minded and political notions in his basic vision to help the less unfortunate, but government help to continuing generations has failed to produce a great society. Despite millions of dollars and dozens of programs into impoverished city areas, poverty continues.

[confrontingpoverty.org/poverty-dacts-and-myths/americas-poor-are-worse-off-than-elsewhere]

Work with the poor or with the disenfranchised just to meet their material needs comes as a choice, not based on a command from the Old or New Testament. Notables stand out in the history of Christendom as those who have dedicated their lives for the betterment of others, such as Mother Teresa or William Wilberforce, and organizations like World Vision that “empowers” the disenfranchised. [worldvision.org] In contrast, Samaritan’s Purse exists to “promote the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ” in impoverished areas of the world. [samaritanspurse.org/our-ministry/about-us/]

Faulty exegesis may produce good works, but good works cannot justify faulty interpretation. The saints must produce good works, but those good works must find their basis in objective interpretation—something that dispensationalism offers. Yes, a dispensational hermeneutic can prevent the *woke* expression, but it takes work in the text and not submission to cultural trends as a lens to view Scripture.

By the way, dispensationalists do not “own” the literal/grammatical/historical method.

“To be sure, literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is. This does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation.” [Charles C. Ryrie, “Dispensationalism,” 1995, Moody, Rev. and expanded, p. 47]

In 1976, in Memphis, Tennessee, a young black Christian couple saw those in need in their own inner-city neighborhood as a gospel outreach. They supplied clothes, jobs, counseling and more to those in poverty as the conduit to reach those in need with the gospel. The wife wanted those in need materially to come to see their need for Jesus spiritually. She did not meet the needs of those around her to bring about equity or social justice or remedy what the white people had done to keep them in poverty.

Almost fifty years later that ministry has expanded to eighteen locations, still primarily in poor neighborhoods. The co-founders of the organization no longer lead the ministry, after the death of the husband and the retirement of the wife. Their daughter, who lived under the vision of her parents, now runs that ministry, but not necessarily like her parents, as a vehicle for the gospel, but for the *woke* agenda in “sustainability and empowerment” of “those in need” for “empowerment programs” but through “Christ-centered ministries.” [NCC.com] Whether the daughter intended to or not, the means to the gospel has pushed the gospel to the side, and that is what social or cosmic justice does in the church—it makes the gospel secondary or even irrelevant.

Cosmic justice begins when Jesus arrives, and not one second sooner, when the Millennium delivers God’s truly great society. Until then, the call to “make disciples” leads the way for ministry for the saint.