

Five Evangelical Frameworks for Understanding the Bible's Story

Christians agree on the heart of the gospel: God saves sinners by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

However, Christians sometimes differ on how the whole Bible fits together. The following are five common ways evangelicals understand the big story of Scripture.

1. Classic Dispensationalism

Basic Idea

God has worked in different ways at different times in history. These time periods are often called “dispensations.” A key belief is that Israel and the Church are two distinct groups in God’s plan.

The Seven Dispensations (Traditional List)

Many who hold this view describe seven main periods:

1. Innocence – Adam before sin
2. Conscience – From the Fall to the Flood
3. Human Government – From Noah to Abraham
4. Promise – From Abraham to Moses
5. Law – From Moses to Jesus
6. Grace – The present Church age
7. Kingdom – A future thousand-year reign of Christ

Each period ends with human failure and God’s judgement.

Israel and the Church

Israel and the Church are not the same.

Israel refers to the Jewish people, the physical descendants of Abraham.

The Church began at Pentecost and is made up of all who trust in Christ.

God still has a special future plan for Israel.

The End of History

Most who hold this view believe:

- Jesus will take the Church to be with him (often called the rapture).
- There will be a time of great trouble on earth.
- Jesus will return visibly.
- He will reign on earth for 1,000 years from Jerusalem.
- Then will come final judgement and the new creation.

Old Testament Promises

Promises about land, the temple and the kingdom will be fulfilled literally for Israel in the future.

Well-Known Teachers

John Nelson Darby

C. I. Scofield

Charles Ryrie

2. Progressive Dispensationalism

Basic Idea

This view is similar to classic dispensationalism but less strict. It still believes Israel has a future, but it sees more connection between Israel and the Church.

Israel and the Church

Israel still matters in God's plan.

However, the Church already shares in some of the blessings promised to Israel.

The distinction remains, but it is not as sharp.

The End of History

Most believe:

- Jesus will return before a thousand-year reign.
- Israel will have a future role.

There is less agreement about the timing of the rapture.

Old Testament Promises

Some promises are already being fulfilled through Jesus' reign in heaven.

Others will be completed when he returns.

Well-Known Teachers

Craig Blaising

Darrell Bock

3. Covenant Theology

Basic Idea

Covenant Theology teaches that the Bible is united by God's covenants (his binding promises). It emphasises one people of God throughout history.

The Main Covenants (Traditional Summary)

1. Covenant of Works – God's command to Adam
2. Covenant of Grace – God's promise to save sinners after the Fall
3. Covenant of Redemption – God's eternal plan to save through Christ

All of Scripture is seen as unfolding under God's gracious covenant.

Israel and the Church

There is one people of God across time.

Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament belong to the same covenant family.

The Church does not replace Israel; rather, it continues and fulfils it.

The End of History

Most believe:

- Jesus will return once.
- There will be final judgement.
- God will create a new heaven and new earth.

There is no separate thousand-year kingdom for national Israel.

Old Testament Promises

Promises about land and kingship are fulfilled in Jesus and ultimately in the new creation.

Well-Known Teachers

John Calvin

R. C. Sproul

4. New Covenant Theology

Basic Idea

This view tries to take helpful insights from both dispensationalism and covenant theology. It focuses strongly on the New Covenant established by Jesus.

Israel and the Church

Israel belonged to the Old Covenant.

The Church belongs to the New Covenant.

There is no separate long-term plan for ethnic Israel.

The Law

Christians are not under the Old Testament law given to Moses.

Instead, they live under the “law of Christ” — the teaching and example of Jesus and his apostles.

The End of History

Views differ, but there is no expectation of a separate national future for Israel.

Old Testament Promises

These are fulfilled in Jesus and extended to all believers.

Well-Known Teachers

Tom Wells

Fred Zaspel

5. Redemptive-Historical (Biblical Theology)

Basic Idea

This is less a system and more a way of reading the Bible. It sees the Bible as one unfolding story that leads to Jesus.

The focus is on promise and fulfilment.

Israel and the Church

Israel plays a key role in the story because the Messiah comes through Israel.

The Church is the people of God living in the time when those promises are being fulfilled.

The End of History

Jesus will return.

There will be judgement.

God will make all things new.

Different teachers within this approach may hold different views about the millennium.

Old Testament Promises

Old Testament themes — land, temple, kingship — find their fullest meaning in Jesus and in the new creation.

Well-Known Teachers

Geerhardus Vos
Graeme Goldsworthy

Where These Frameworks Disagree Most Clearly

Although these frameworks share core evangelical convictions — the authority of Scripture, salvation by grace through faith, the centrality of Christ — they diverge at several decisive interpretive points. The differences become most visible in the following areas.

1. The Relationship Between Israel and the Church

This is the central dividing line.

Classic Dispensationalism

Maintains a strong, ongoing distinction. Israel and the Church are two distinct peoples with different promises and destinies.

Progressive Dispensationalism

Retains a future for ethnic Israel but allows greater overlap. The Church already shares in some Israel-promises.

Covenant Theology

Sees one covenant people across history. The Church is the continuation and fulfilment of Israel.

New Covenant Theology

Israel belonged to the Old Covenant; the Church belongs to the New Covenant. No enduring theological distinction remains.

Redemptive-Historical Theology

Emphasises fulfilment in Christ and tends to see the Church as the eschatological people of God, though without always formalising the question in systematic terms.

Key Texts in Debate: Romans 9–11; Galatians 3; Ephesians 2; Jeremiah 31.

2. How Old Testament Promises Are Fulfilled

Especially land, temple and kingdom promises.

Literal National Fulfilment (Classic Dispensationalism)

Promises to Israel (land, Davidic throne, temple) will be fulfilled literally in a future millennial kingdom.

Inaugurated and Future Fulfilment (Progressive Dispensationalism)

Some promises are already fulfilled in Christ's present reign but await fuller future realisation.

Typological / Christological Fulfilment (Covenant Theology & Redemptive-Historical)

Land expands to the new creation; temple fulfilled in Christ and his people; kingship fulfilled in Christ's eternal reign.

Christ-Focused Fulfilment with Strong Discontinuity (New Covenant Theology)

Old Covenant structures are fulfilled and transformed in Christ; promises are not expected to return to national form.

Key Texts in Debate: Genesis 15; 2 Samuel 7; Ezekiel 40–48; Matthew 5:17; Hebrews 8–10.

3. The Millennium (Revelation 20)

The nature and timing of Christ's reign divides these frameworks sharply.

Premillennial (Classic & Progressive Dispensationalism)

Christ returns before a literal thousand-year earthly reign. Israel has a defined role in that kingdom.

Often Amillennial (Covenant & Redemptive-Historical)

The "millennium" symbolically describes Christ's present reign from heaven; the next major event is his final return and judgement.

Varied (New Covenant Theology)

Often amillennial or historic premillennial, but without a distinct national programme for Israel.

Key Texts in Debate: Revelation 20; Acts 1:6–7; 1 Corinthians 15.

4. The Structure of Biblical History

The organising principle differs significantly.

Dispensationalism

History unfolds in distinct administrative eras.

Covenant Theology

History unfolds under overarching theological covenants (Works and Grace).

New Covenant Theology

Old Covenant vs New Covenant is the decisive divide.

Redemptive-Historical Theology

Scripture is an unfolding story of promise and fulfilment, with less emphasis on rigid structural categories.

5. The Mosaic Law and the Christian

A surprisingly important dividing issue.

Classic Dispensationalism

The Church is not under the Mosaic Law but under grace.

Covenant Theology

The moral law (often summarised in the Ten Commandments) continues as a binding standard of life.

New Covenant Theology

The Mosaic Law as a covenant has ended; believers live under the "Law of Christ."

Redemptive-Historical

Typically affirms continuity of moral norms but through fulfilment in Christ rather than direct covenantal transfer.

Key Texts in Debate: Matthew 5; Romans 6–7; Galatians 3; Hebrews 8.

6. The Nature of Biblical Fulfilment

At its deepest level, the disagreement concerns how the New Testament uses the Old.

- Does fulfilment mean **literal realisation**?
- Does it mean **expansion and transformation**?
- Does it mean **typological escalation**?
- Or does it mean **complementary addition without cancellation**?

This hermeneutical question largely determines where one lands on Israel, the millennium, and covenant continuity.

Summary Observation

Most disagreements are not about the gospel itself, but about:

- The continuity or discontinuity of redemptive history
- The definition of the people of God
- The nature of prophetic fulfilment

Understanding these interpretive instincts helps explain why thoughtful, Bible-honouring Christians can arrive at different conclusions while affirming the same core faith.

While this paper has been drafted with the assistance of AI (ChatGPT), anyone wanting to explore these themes through the work of thoughtful human theologians can find excellent free resources on The Gospel Coalition website. In particular, the following essays offer rich, accessible introductions to key frameworks: Covenant Theology, Progressive Covenantalism and New Covenant Theology, Dispensational Theology, and The Biblical Covenants.

These can be found at:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/covenant-theology/>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/progressive-covenantalism-and-new-covenant-theology/>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/dispensational-theology/>

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/the-biblical-covenants>