

UNDERSTANDING DISPENSATIONALISM

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the more controversial “labels” within the theological community, the term “dispensationalism” appears to have become a demarcation point between what is perceived by many to be “old school” theology and “progressive” or “reformed” theology. However, the average layman likely has no formal opinion on the label itself, but is rather resigned to his or her understanding of the unfolding of God’s Word through exposition from a pulpit and periodic reading of the Scriptures. This then will be an attempt to broaden the average reader’s understanding of the basic unity of the unfolding plan of God in the Scriptures....or dispensationalism.

Dispensation Defined

The term “dispensation” is outlined by Roy Aldrich as follows:

The word *dispensation* is a Scriptural term. It occurs in 1 Corinthians 9:17, Ephesians 1:10, 3:2 and Colossians 1:25. The Greek word is *oikonomia*. It is a compound word derived from the words *oikos* (house) and *nomos* (law). The literal meaning is *house rule* and the general meaning is *stewardship, economy or government*. Dispensational truth simply means that God has dealt with the human race or the Jews under different economies or responsibilities¹

A dispensation then is God’s distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history (or age), marked by a crucial event, test, failure and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life or a responsibility for managing God’s

¹Aldrich, Roy L. "An Apologetic for Dispensationalism." *Bibliotheca Sacra* V112, #445 (1998): 48.

affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation.² A *Dispensation* may technically not be a time word (i.e., age), but its inevitable relation to time, and usually a specific period of time, has brought it into usage as a time word, as is confirmed by the dictionary definition and its use in theological writings. There is no such thing as a dispensation unrelated to time.³ With each new series of generations, some new promise is given or some great purpose of God is brought to light. A very broad example of dispensations might be God's provisions with ethnic Israel under the Old Covenant and a redeemed ethnic Israel and the Church under the New Covenant.

What then separates and distinguishes a dispensation? Ryrie has a twofold answer: (1) the different governing relationship with the world into which God enters in each economy; and (2) the resulting responsibility on mankind in each of these different relationships. These characteristics are vitally bound up with the different revelations God gave throughout history and show the link between each dispensation and the various stages in the progress of revelation again.⁴

Based on this understanding of the word *dispensation*, we will now review the origins of the theology of *Dispensationalism*; the key to which is this progressive revelation of God's message to man in a series of successive acts and through the minds and hands of many men with varying backgrounds.⁵

² Nevin, Paul David. "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" (unpublished Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), 97. Quoted by Charles Caldwell Ryrie. *Dispensationalism*. Rev. and expanded ed.: Moody Press, 1995, 30.

³ Mason, Clarence E., Jr. "A Review of *Dispensationalism* by John Wick Bowman: Part II." *Bibliotheca Sacra* V114, #454 (1998): 104.

⁴ Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism*. Rev. and expanded: Moody Press, 1995, 33.

⁵Ryrie, 31.

Origins of Dispensationalism

John Nelson Darby, born in London in 1800, is considered by many to be the father of modern dispensationalism, although the doctrine of dispensations was evident in the writings of the early Church Fathers and is also represented in Scripture (cf. 1 Cor 9:17, Eph 1:10, 3:2 and Col 1:25). Darby was converted at the age of 23 and abandoned an apparent promising career in law. He subsequently became a deacon of the Church of England in 1825 and was a successful evangelist in Ireland. Darby's ministry was bounded by an ecclesiastical commission under the British Parliament, which constituted consideration and reporting on the affairs of the Established Church. However, change came quickly for Darby; the catalyst for which was the Erastian policies of the British Parliament, especially toward the Church in Ireland.⁶ Anti-Catholic measures passed in 1826 greatly hindered Darby's evangelistic work and motivated him to reexamine biblical teaching on the nature of the church. By 1829 he had resigned his ecclesiastical commission, published a tract on the nature and unity of the church, and became associated with a group of believers who collectively became the founders of the Brethren movement – the foundational organization for modern dispensationalism.

Darby, as a Brethren teacher and evangelist along with other Brethren expositors, tirelessly spread both the Brethren movement and dispensationalism around the world. In the United States, dispensationalism became particularly influential among Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians. One hundred nine years after Darby's birth, C. I. Scofield, another converted lawyer, published *The Scofield Reference Bible*, which is described

⁶ Erastianism, named after the Swiss theologian Thomas Erastus (1529–83), is the belief in the supremacy of the state over ecclesiastical affairs.

by Blaising as an “attractive and wonderfully accessible synthesis of dispensationalism with the expository heritage of the Bible Conference movement.”⁷

DISPENSATIONALISM UNPACKED

Dispensationalism is a system of interpretation that opens up the most Scripture and allows Scripture to be consistent with itself. It is likely better viewed as an approach to the Bible, rather than a system of theology. While dispensationalism certainly includes specific truths regarding the Church, prophecy and Israel, it is basically an outlook on the Bible that works on the basis of historic, orthodox doctrines of the faith, and attempts to allow the Bible to open itself to the reader. This is clearly the factor that divides it from other conservative systems of interpretation.⁸

The key features of dispensationalism as an approach to the Bible are 1) the recognition of God’s goal of glorifying Himself in spite of and through sinful man and our failures; 2) a consistent approach to Old Testament and New Testament prophecies regarding the future of ethnic redeemed Israel; 3) a stress on the New Testament distinction between Israel and the Church. While many arguments have arisen as to precise separations in the various dispensations, the basic premises remain the same within dispensationalism. For example, Darby’s dispensational scheme was as follows:

- I. Paradisiacal state to the Flood
- II. Noah
- III. Abraham
- IV. Israel

⁷Blaising, Craig A. "Developing Dispensationalism-Part I: Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy." *Bibliotheca Sacra* V145, #578 (1998): 135-136.

⁸Karleen, Paul S. *The Handbook to Bible Study : With a Guide to the Scofield Study System*. "This book is intended as a companion to the Scofield Reference Bible"--Pref.; Includes indexes. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

- a. Under the Law
- b. Under the priesthood
- c. Under the kings
- V. Gentiles
- VI. The Spirit
- VII. The Millennium⁹

Darby's philosophy of dispensationalism can be summed up in his own words.

"...the dispensations themselves all declare some leading principle or interference of God, some condition in which He has placed man, principles which in themselves are everlastingly sanctioned of God, but in the course of those dispensations placed responsibly in the hands of man for the display and discovery of what he was, and the bringing in the infallible establishment in Him to whom the glory of them all rightly belonged."¹⁰

OPPOSITION AND VARIATIONS

When good men disagree as to doctrine, it is usually due to a fundamental difference in premise. Perfect logic, when built on divergent premises, will usually result in irreconcilable conclusions.¹¹ The controversy between progressive, ultra, and non-dispensationalists, to cite a few, and classical dispensationalists is due to a wide difference in premise. Non-dispensationalists, such as Covenant Theologians, would reject dispensationalism, although they would agree in principle with certain dispensations, arguing for the Church as a replacement for the ethnic redeemed Israel and a receptor of the specific prophetic blessings promised to Israel. Ultra-dispensationalists, while agreeing on the distinction between the Church and a redeemed Israel, make a separate dispensation out of part or all of the book of Acts and abolish water baptism, or both water baptism and the Lord's supper for this age. A progressive

⁹ *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (London: G. Morrish, 1867), 2:568-73.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:192-193.

¹¹ Chafer, Lewis Sperry. "Dispensationalism." *Bibliotheca Sacra* V93, #372 (Oct. 1936): 397.

dispensationalist, while agreeing with the distinction between the Church and a redeemed Israel, compresses the biblical dispensations into four broad categories, argues for a current fulfillment of the Davidic Kingdom yet with the associated blessings not yet realized, and views the Church as a redeemed humanity in the present dispensation.

While there is room for difference of opinion in regard to many details of some of the dispensations, it is vitally important for all dispensationalists to understand and apply the basic premise which distinguishes law and grace and the kingdom.

CONCLUSIONS

From our discussion one might be moved to recall the Apostle Paul's statement to the Corinthians, "Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."¹² Too often students of theology and the Bible get absorbed in the quagmire of academic doctrines and "higher-order" critical thinking, being compelled to associated themselves with a specific "group" or category of beliefs. As such, the purpose of our discussion has not been to present an apologetic for dispensationalism *per se*. However, it is the opinion of this author that classical dispensationalism is the most direct, accurate, and meaningful approach to biblical interpretation. When approached with a proper historical perspective and with the application of sound hermeneutical techniques, dispensationalism opens God's Word to the reader and offers the reader a clearer understanding of God's grace as He has intervened in human society.

Who then is a dispensationalist? As Chafer has pointed out: "(1) Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice. (2) Any

¹²*New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update*, 1 Co 1:12. La Habra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995.

person is a dispensationalist who disclaims any right or title to the land with God covenanted to Israel for an everlasting inheritance. And (3) any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh.”¹³

¹³Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Dispensationalism*. Revised ed.: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1951. 9.

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