

# The Dispensational Perspective of the Bible



## **A. The Definition of Dispensationalism**

“Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world, God is dispensing or administrating its affairs according to his own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose and these economies are the dispensations.” C. Ryrie Dispensationalism Today, p 31.

“A period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.” C.I.Scofield The Scofield Reference Bible, p 5.

Based upon this description, Scofield and others usually mark off seven dispensations in Scripture. They are:

1. Innocence – from the creation of Adam and Eve until the Fall (Gen 1:28-3:6)
2. Conscience – from the Fall to the Flood (Gen 4:1-8:14)
3. Human Govt – from the Flood until the call of Abraham (Gen 8:15-11:9)
4. Promise – from the call of Abraham until the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai (Gen 11:10-Ex 18:27)
5. Law – from the giving of the Law until Christ rejected by the Jewish nation (Ex 18:28-Acts 1:26)
6. Grace – from the Ascension of Christ to His Second Coming (Acts 2:1-Rev 19:21)
7. Kingdom – the Millennium, a 1,000 year period from the return of Christ until the end of His reign on earth SRB, p 16.

Three major works must be included in a serious study of dispensationalism. These include the Scofield Reference Bible (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1945), the New Scofield Reference Bible (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), and Charles Ryrie’s Dispensationalism Today (Chicago, Moody Press, 1965). Ryrie’s book is considered the magnum opus on the subject.

## **B. The Theological Underpinnings of Dispensationalism**

1. The three distinguishing features of dispensationalism according to Dr. Charles Ryrie are as follows:
  - a. A sharp distinction made between Israel and the Church. No real relationship exists between them
  - b. The employment of a literal hermeneutic in interpreting Scripture.
  - c. The assertion that God’s purposes center on His glory, rather than on salvation, as covenantalists contend. DT, p 44-48
2. An examination of the three tenets of dispensationalism

## **a) Israel and the Church**

(1) The dispensationalist position:

- (a) There are two separate peoples that God is working with
- (b) Israel is an “earthly” people, the Church is a “heavenly” one
- (c) These two groups have separate promises
- (d) These two groups have separate destinies
- (e) Israel's redemptive plan has been postponed for now
- (f) The Church is a new entity; a “parenthesis” in history

(2) Reply:

The dispensationalist has failed to understand the unity between Israel and the Church. The Church is organically related to Israel. It is the continuation and maturation of Israel. Israel and its kingdom have not been postponed; rather the Kingdom has been advanced to include Gentiles and a remnant of Israel.

Scripture:

- Rom 11:16-24 The Gentile “wild” olive branches are grafted into Israel which is depicted here as the tree. Israel continues! It now includes believing Jew and Gentile.
- Eph 2:11-22 Believing Gentiles are brought near to the commonwealth of Israel. The commonwealth of Israel has not ended; it is here in the Church.
- Matt 21:33-45 The kingdom is not postponed according to this passage; rather it is given to the Church (believing Jews and Gentiles). The kingdom is here.
- I Cor 3:16-17; Heb 12:22-24; Gal 6:15-16 cf Phil 3:3; James 1:1 cf I Pet 1:1  
The nomenclature of Israel which was used to describe it in Old Testament is applied to the Church in the New Testament. The Church is the mature continuation of Israel.
- Rev 21:9-14 The “bride” of Christ (which in the NT always depicts the Church) is Israel in this passage.
- Gal 3:16-29 The OT promises to which Israel looked are given to Christ (the seed). Everyone who believes in Christ now in the NT Church receives those promises. The Church is experiencing the promises Israel looked for.
- Heb 8:6-13 The new covenant promised to Israel in the OT (Jer 31) is fulfilled in the NT Church (believing Jews & Gentiles)

(3) Conclusion

## **b) The Hermeneutic Question**

(1) The dispensationalist position:

- (a) The dispensationalist asserts that he takes the “normal” approach to scripture. His approach is the “natural” interpretation

- (b) “A throne is a throne.” Israel, the land, Jerusalem, the temple, sacrifices, throne of David, the priesthood, etc. were all literal-physical in the OT. They must be the same in the future.
- (c) Example: Ezekiel 40-48. The coming kingdom includes a temple, priesthood, sacrifices (animal) of which the promised result is a covering for sins. The dispensationalist interprets all this “literally”; the sacrifices are going to be memorials.

(2) Reply One:

- (a) The dispensationalist is inconsistent with his own “literal” approach
- (b) Example: Ezekiel 40-48. The Scripture explicitly says in Heb 9:11-12, Heb 10:1-10 that sacrifice is no longer made now that Christ, the one true sacrifice, has been made. Furthermore, the NT says nothing about any “memorial” sacrifices being made. Also Ezekiel explicitly says the sacrifices are made to “cover” sins. Consequently, the dispensationalist approach is forced here.
- (c) Example: 1000 years and the “forever” promise of Scripture. The OT promises foretold of David’s throne, the land, etc. continuing on forever, yet because of Rev 20, the dispensationalist is forced to say “forever is not really forever, but only for 1000 years.” What is “literal” about this?
- (d) Example: The horse and the sword. The dispensationalist sees Christ riding on a “literal” horse speaking the word of God (the “spiritual” sword) in the book of Revelation. Why is one literal and the other spiritual? We answer: The dispensationalist simply has looked at it subjectively. It “feels” right, but there is no consistent hermeneutic here. Whether the horse should be literal or spiritual should be decided by Scripture. What does the rest of Scripture have to say about the Lord and horses?

(3) Reply Two:

- (a) The dispensationalist’s “literal” approach to Scripture fails to account for the progressive nature of God’s revelation
- (b) When God gave men revelation in the OT, their understanding may have been embryonic at first. Their understanding would have grown with more revelation. Example: God promises to Abraham a seed.
  - But not all (Isaac, not Ishmael)
  - But not all (Jacob, not Esau)
  - But not all (only believing descendents, Ps 73 Rom 9)
  - But really one (Christ, Gal 3)
  - And all who believe in Him, blessed (Jew & Greek, Gal 3)
- (c) It took 2000 yrs to develop this promise fully. The dispensationalists unfortunately determine the meaning in its embryonic form. They must distort the NT meaning in order not to disturb the premature “literal” OT interpretation.

(4) Reply Three:

- (a) The NT writers see the OT promises being fulfilled in the present. Consequently, they reject the “literal” approach of the dispensationalist. We must allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Let the Bible speak for itself. Allowing the NT to interpret the OT; the question is not “how do

you think this promise will be fulfilled, but rather “how do Christ and Apostles see this promise being fulfilled?”

(b) Passages:

- Acts 2:30-31     The promised king has ascended David’s (God’s) throne
- Acts 13:32-34    The hope of Israel has come to fruition through the resurrection of Christ. Cf Acts 28:17,20,23.
- Acts 15:14-18    The promised temple has been established; it is Christ’s Church.
- Rom 15:7-12     The promised peace has been established in the Church. The wolf and lion may lie in peace together; believing Jew and Gentile may live together in love.
- I Pet 2:9         The future prospering of Israel is here. It is realized in the Church. Cf Phil 3:3
- Heb 8:6-13       The promised New Covenant to Israel is fulfilled in the Church (NB: “Israel & Judah” are NT believers!). Cf Heb 10:15-17

(c) Conclusion

### **c) God’s Purposes and His Glory**

(1) The dispensationalist position:

- (a) “God’s glory is His purpose in history, and not salvation as the covenant position maintains.”
- (b) It is meaningless to argue with the dispensationalist that covenantalism does maintain the glory of God as His purpose, we most certainly do! What bothers the dispensationalist is that covenantalists see God’s purpose in history as primarily salvational. It is understandable that this would bother the dispensationalist, for he sees God pursuing two distinct purposes; one heavenly, the other earthly. Ryrie states, “It the dispensationalist emphasis on the distinctiveness of the Church seems to result in a “dichotomy”, let it stand as a result of literal interpretation.” DT p 154f. The dispensationalist sincerely believes that in certain stages of history, such as the dispensation of government, God was not strictly seeking the salvation of man. Walwood: “In the various dispensationalist periods one finds periods of stewardship not directly related to salvation... (In the Mosaic economy) heaven was not among its rewards, nor hell its punishments.” The Millennial Kingdom p 80

(2) Reply:

- (a) The dispensationalist fails to recognize God’s redemptive purposes in history. His perspective militates against the purpose of the Messiah to “save His people from their sins.”
- (b) Consider I Pet 1:19-20, all of history may be unified under God’s redemptive purposes. In the light of the pre-temporal counsel of the Godhead it appears that the whole of history, after the fall of man into sin may be unified under God’s redemptive history.
- (c) Acts 3:21 The manifestation of the messiah was to the end that... “to you (Jews) first God having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning every one of you from his iniquities.” God brought salvation to them first. Salvation was is purpose for them!
- (d) Beginning with Adam down through history, one finds covenants, promises, pictures, illusions, and types all point to Christ and His work (Jn 8:56; Jn 5:46-46; II Cor 1:20; Lk 24:27,44; Acts 26:20-23). And after Christ all Scripture looks back to Him. He is the redeemer, who has glorified the Father by saving a people for Himself. The result? All things are “summed up in

Christ... to the glory of God the Father.” Rom 11:32-35; Eph 1:10. Could there be anything else, anything “earthly” that we or Moses or Abraham could possibly want? Anything less than His salvation would be “dung” (Phil 3:8).

## C. An Analysis of Dispensationalism

1. A low view of God and the Law of God
  - a. Dispensationalists consider the Law to be closely associated with the OT Jew and the Millennial Kingdom. Grace is associated with the NT church. “They were under law, we are under grace.” The problem with this is that grace was found in the OT (Rom 3, Gal 3) and the law is certainly found in the NT.
  - b. I Jn 3:4                Sin is the transgression of the law
  - c. Rom 7:7,21,23    Without law there is no knowledge of sin
  - d. Mk 10:19ff        The law is an important part of the Gospel
2. A mystical view of sanctification
  - a. An unhappy result of the law-grace distinction has been the perception that believer’s sanctification is a “passive” endeavor. “Spirituality is not gained by struggling; it is to be claimed. It is not imitation of a heavenly ideal; it is importation of divine power which alone can realize the ideal... there will be little blessing for any Christian until he abandons the principle of living by rules and learns to trust in the Spirit.” L.S.Chafer He that is Spiritual p 61,62
  - b. Phil 1:6; I Thes 5:23,24    The Holy Spirit must sovereignly work in us.
  - c. Phil 2:12,13 & NT imperatives. But we must strive. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit that enables us to fight our sinful desires!
3. A rejection of certain parts of Scripture
  - a. Due to theological distinctions, the dispensationalist draws sharp divisions in Scripture. Instead of seeing a progressive revelation of God’s one plan of salvation, the dispensationalist sees conflicting eras of time and revelation. The result: OT, early teaching of Christ & John the Baptist in Scripture are not really for us.
  - b. II Tim 3:14-17; I Cor 9:10. All Scripture is written for us and profitable for our growth. This includes the OT.
4. An overemphasis on eschatology (prophecy) and a deemphasis on soteriology (salvation)
  - a. The dispensationalist often shows a preoccupation with prophecy. Walwood: “The supreme goal of Biblical theology is to determine the detailed program of future events.” The Millennial Kingdom p v. The millennium is on an equal par with salvation, the deity of Christ and the Trinity! See Seminary statements
  - b. Gal 1:6-9; I Cor 2:2; II Jn 7-9. The Gospel alone is the basis for fellowship and a cause for division (along with evil).