

Dispensationalism

By Clark Blanchard

- *What is dispensationalism?*
- *Is it biblical?*
- *What are the major competing viewpoints?*

Dispensationalism is the view that in various periods of biblical history people had differing moral responsibilities depending on what God revealed about Himself and His ways. Each period or dispensation followed the previous one, continuing some of the prior revelations of God, introducing some new ones and eliminating some of the prior ones.

In the New Testament, Paul explicitly describes three major dispensations. They are: (1) a *past ages* dispensation (Colossians 1:25-26); (2) the current dispensation (Ephesians 3:1-7); and (3) a future one, *the summing up of all things in Christ* (Ephesians 1:9-10). “There can be no question that the Bible uses the word ‘dispensation’ exactly the same way as the dispensationalist does” (John Walvoord, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol. 158, No. 630, page 135).

The Greek word sometimes translated “dispensation” is *oikonomos* and appears in the New Testament 20 times. It carries the literal meaning “management of a household” or more simply “stewardship.” So a dispensation is a period of biblical time that also carries the concept of a particular stewardship before God.

Dispensationalism is the view that biblical history is divided into periods of time during which humans have a stewardship before God to obey Him in a particular way.

Summary of the Dispensations

Throughout the development of dispensationalism as a theological system, scholars have put forth various lists of proposed dispensations. This has been done by observation of biblical history. Scripture itself nowhere provides such a list. Currently, the list commonly accepted by most “normative” dispensationalists is:

1. **Innocency**—The period of sinlessness and direct fellowship with God that extended from the creation to the fall of Adam (Genesis 1–2).
2. **Conscience**—The period when man’s conscience was the primary basis of man’s relationship with God. This period extended from the fall of Adam through Noah’s flood (Genesis 3–8).
3. **Human Government**—The period characterized by God’s committing self-government to mankind. It extended from the flood to the call of Abraham (Genesis 9–11).
4. **Promise (Patriarchal Rule)**—The period characterized by the promises of God alone sustaining Abraham and his posterity. It extended from the call of Abraham to the giving of the Law through Moses (Genesis 12—Exodus 19).
5. **Mosaic Law**—The period characterized by formation of Israel as a nation and its relationship with God based upon the Law of Moses. It extended from the giving of the Law to the death and resurrection of Christ (Exodus 20—the Gospels).
6. **Grace (Church Age)**—The period characterized by the formation of the Church from people of every nation and their relationship with God based on grace, not the Law of Moses. This period extends from the Pentecost to the Rapture (Acts 2—Revelation 3).
7. **Millennium (Kingdom)**—The period characterized by God’s fulfillment of His covenants with Israel, the creation being delivered from its bondage due to sin, Satan being temporarily bound, and Christ’s literal rule of this earth on the throne of David. It will extend from Christ’s Second Coming to the creation of the new heaven and new earth (Revelation 20; see also Isaiah 11; Ezekiel 40–48; and Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Brief History of Dispensationalism

Although the terms “age” and “dispensation” are not synonymous they are closely related in biblical usage. The term “age” carries the thought of a time period without concern for the stewardship aspect. In Daniel 12:13, the archangel Michael introduces us to the idea that biblical history is divided into ages. Jesus indicated the same thing on several occasions (Matthew 12:32; 13:39, 40, 49; 28:20). Even the disciples seemed to be aware of this fact (Matthew 24:3). Unfortunately, the translators of the King James Bible often mistranslated the Greek word for “age” (*aion* = age, era) substituting the word “world” instead. For example, numerous passages that should be rendered “end of the age” were rendered “end of the world,” conveying a completely wrong sense and losing the idea of ages or eras (Matthew 13:39, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Hebrews 9:26).

Several early church fathers such as Justin Martyr (110-165), Irenaeus (130-200), Clement of Alexandria (150-220), Augustine (354-430) and others recognized that biblical history was organized into ages. However, it was not developed into a formal theological concept until much later.

The French scholar Pierre Poiret (1646-1719) initially formalized it in 1687. It was followed and refined by Jonathan Edwards in 1699 and Isaac Watts (1674-1748). J.N. Darby (1800-1882) further refined and popularized dispensationalism in the British Isles. It became widespread in the English speaking world through the Scofield Reference Bible beginning in 1909. It has also been strongly supported since then in the Christian academic community by scholars such as L.S. Chafer, H. Ironside, J.D. Pentecost, J. Walvoord, C. Ryrie, and others.

Associated Teachings

The doctrine of dispensationalism usually carries with it several associated doctrines as follows:

- The view of biblical unity, and progressive revelation in which God’s purpose is to glorify Himself through self-revelation and the redemption of mankind.
- The literal method of biblical interpretation.
- The substitutionary death and resurrection of Christ as the only way of salvation regardless of the dispensation.
- A clear distinction between Israel and the Church in the purposes of God.
- A premillennial pretribulation Rapture eschatology.

Major Competing Viewpoints

Covenant Theology—The belief that all of Scripture is organized under three main covenants. They are: (1) the Covenant of Works, in effect prior to the Fall; (2) the Covenant of Grace, in effect since the Fall; and (3) the Covenant of Redemption, which is God’s predetermined plan of those He would save during the Covenant of Grace. While several covenants are specifically described in Scripture, a covenant of Works or of Grace and Redemption are never mentioned.

Covenant Theology is normally attributed to the German theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) and is usually associated with the Reformed Movement, Replacement Theology and an amillennial eschatology.

Ultradispensationalism—The belief in dispensations, but it usually assigns two or more dispensations during the Church Age. It sees the early part of Acts as a “Jewish church” and the later part of Acts as the true Gentile church in the Age of Grace. As a result, it considers certain New Testament books and sacraments to be Jewish and not applicable now.

This movement was begun by the Anglican scholar Ethelbert Bullinger (1837-1913). Today it is known through its highly influential groups – Worldwide Grace Testimony, Grace Gospel Fellowship, Berean Bible Society, and Grace Bible College.

Progressive (Revisionist) Dispensationalism—A very recent development, it still seems to be in a formative stage. It holds to four dispensations, yet is a move back toward Covenant Theology and does indeed form a new and revised system. It seems to blur the distinctiveness of Israel and the Church, seeing the Church as “the new Israel” in a somewhat replacement theology manner. Further, the Old Testament covenants given to Israel are seen as being partially fulfilled in a spiritual way rather than literally in the future. [See the Short Topic *Is There a Future for Israel.*]

The concept of Progressive Dispensationalism was first introduced in November 1986. Professors D.L. Bock and C.A. Blaising from Dallas Theological Seminary and R.L. Saucy from Talbot Theological Seminary are at the forefront of this movement.

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is dispensationalism?*

A: Dispensationalism is the view that biblical history is divided into periods of time during which humans have a stewardship before God to obey Him in a particular way.

Q: *Is it biblical?*

A: Yes. The Bible repeatedly speaks of ages or periods of time during which God accomplishes His purposes in differing manners. The Bible nowhere identifies all of these periods. This is left to observation of the biblical text itself.

Q: *What are the competing viewpoints?*

A: Generally, there are three. They are:

Covenant Theology, which simply sees the Church as a spiritual Israel.

Ultradispensationalism, which sees a Jewish Church and a Gentile Church, both separate from Israel.

Progressive Dispensationalism, which sees the Church as progressively becoming Israel.

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