

Why Dispensationalism Matters

By Dave DeWitt

Introduction

First and foremost, there is something very foundational we need to understand about dispensationalism. It is only a product of taking the Bible literally, defined as the author's intended meaning. I will say more about this shortly, but dispensationalism should not be defined without this understanding. Dispensationalism is not about predicting future dates. It is not about different ways of salvation. It is not about the Rapture. It is all based on only one thing: a literal interpretation of the Bible, defined as the author's intended meaning.

A second thing to understand about dispensationalism is why it is important. What are the practical expressions of dispensationalism? What difference does it make?

Answer: There are two significant expressions of Christianity emphasized by dispensationalism:

First Is Inductive Bible Study. It is dispensationalism that emphasizes the Observation–Interpretation–Application of the Bible. The Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Covenant Protestant churches use a deductive method for reading the Bible. They bring their theological conclusion to the biblical text. It could be argued that everybody does that, but these other systems begin with their theology, to the extent that they often do not encourage people to study the Bible without their clergy (or representatives of their theology) present. Only dispensationalism begins with inductive Bible study. The product of a dispensational approach is an emphasis on personal application of daily Bible study.

Second Is Personal Evangelism and Missions. Since before the Reformation, it was the pre-dispensational element of Christianity (those with a consistently literal interpretation of the Bible) who emphasized evangelism and missions. Evangelical missions have been connected to those with a view of the Bible that became dispensationalism. The anabaptists, the Moravian brethren, the Great Awakening, the ministry of John and Charles Wesley, the missionary work of William Carey, the preaching of men like Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the crusade evangelists like D. L. Moody, and campus evangelistic groups, like Navigators and Young Life, all came from a perspective we call dispensationalism. Catholic, Orthodox and Covenant theologies have not emphasized evangelistic missions, and today, their missionary efforts are about fixing the world, not personal evangelism and discipleship.

Definition

Admittedly, dispensationalism is a clumsy word. And it is an old word. It comes from the 1611 King James translation of Ephesians 1:10.

*That in the **dispensation** of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ...*

The Greek word is οἰκονομία (*oikonomia*, *oy-kon-om-ee'-ah*). It occurs 9 times in the New Testament. The word (as translated by the NASB) means:

- *Manager or management* in Luke 16:2-4
- *Stewardship* in 1 Corinthians 9:17
- *Administration* (of the Millennial Kingdom) in Ephesians 1:10
- *Administration* (of the church age) in Ephesians 3:9
- *Stewardship* in Colossians 1:25, and again
- *Administration* (of the church age) in 1 Timothy 1:4

In his book on dispensationalism, Dr. Charles Ryrie said, “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.” [Chapter 2, biblecentre.org/content.php?mode=7&item=814] Although that

definition is technically accurate, we do not tend to use the word “economy” in reference to an administrative period of history. It seems that the most descriptive word is *administration*. So, I simply changed Ryrie’s word “economy” to “administration.”

A dispensation is a distinguishable administration in the outworking of God’s purpose.

The point is, God did not give the same instructions or laws to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the apostles. So, either you ignore the differences or become what dispensationalists call “a dispensationalist.”

Why Should Christians Be Dispensationalists?

Dispensationalism Is Not the Last Thing We Will Ever Know about the Bible

Dispensationalism only represents our best understanding at this time. Ism’s and -ology’s are man-made and need to be improved as our understanding improves. One of the biggest objections to dispensationalism is that it is wrong because it is new (developed by J. N. Darby in the 1830s). For one thing, the idea of different administrations of God is not new. For example, William Watson reports that

...in 1599 Robert Pont “an aged pastour in the Kirk of Scotland,” attempted to divide the ages of history. He cited Augustine [A.D. 400s] as having believed in six ages. [“Dispensationalism before Darby,” Lampion press, 2015, page 104]

As to Darby’s dispensationalism being new:

- The doctrine of the Trinity was new in the A.D. 300s
- Augustine’s definitions of sin, salvation, and God’s sovereignty were new in the A.D. 400s
- When Thomas Aquinas tied faith to reason, it was new in the 1200s
- When John Wycliff said the Bible, not the church, is the source of all religious authority, it was new in the 1300s
- The pre-reformation teachings of Jon Hus were new in the 1400s
- The Reformation was new in the 1500s

But why should all our understanding of the Bible stop in the 1500s, or in the 1830s?

Question: Is that not what the cults and liberals do, find something new in the Bible?

Answer: No! The cults add to the Bible and the liberals take away from the Bible, they do not find something new **in** the Bible, as Christians have done in the above examples.

Many of the early church fathers (of the second to the fifth centuries) abandoned literal interpretation, especially of the Old Testament and prophetic passages, because they saw literal interpretation as being Jewish. Literal interpretation dictated a future for Israel, and these early fathers wanted to distance the church from Judaism. Many were even antisemitic. This led to the allegorical interpretation of Origen (A.D. 185-253) and the covenant amillennialism of Augustine (A.D. 354-430). This allegorical method of interpretation was incorporated into the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches and brought into the reformation era by John Calvin (1509-1564).

But the Reformation was also fueled by the invention of the printing press (in 1436), which put the Bible in the hands of the people, not just the clergy. And people, who are not indoctrinated by a hermeneutical system, always, naturally, take what they read literally (author’s intended meaning).

Dispensationalism was an inevitable historical development, as people began to look at the Bible literally (with the author’s intended meaning). After Darby introduced the concept, it was studied, taught, and developed by people like C. H. Spurgeon, D. L. Moody, C. I. Scofield, Lewis Chafer, John Walvoord, and Charles Ryrie. As we move toward the end times and look at the Bible in a plain ordinary normal way, our understanding will improve.

Dispensationalism should never be seen as a system imposed on the Scripture, but a conclusion derived from Scripture. The logical brain we are born with organizes the pieces of information we learn into some system that makes sense. That includes our theology. It is inevitable that we have this in mind as we come to any text of Scripture. But our first question about any text should not be “What does our theology teach?” but “What does the author mean?” If the author’s intended meaning does not confirm our theology, then our theology must change. The dispensational claim is that literal interpretation leads to dispensationalism, not that dispensationalism is authoritative over the text.

Dispensationalists do not always agree about everything, but our disagreements are about what the biblical author meant, not if we should abandon his meaning, ignore it, or impose something on it (like a supposed purpose, culture, or using the New Testament to interpret the Old). Discussions and position papers, about what a biblical author meant, further the development of our knowledge by challenging our old positions. But if we are imposing something on a passage, which ignores the author, then a better understanding of the Bible is not possible.

Ryrie's *sine qua non*

The currently recognized description of dispensationalism is in the writings of Dr. Charles C. Ryrie (1925-2016). Ryrie described what he called the “sine qua non” (Latin: “without which it cannot be,” English: the essential or necessary conditions) of dispensationalism:

- (1) A distinction between Israel and the Church
 - (2) A consistent use of normal, plain, or literal interpretation when studying the Scriptures
 - (3) A doxological (the glory of God) rather than a soteriological (the salvation of man) goal of history
- [drreluctant.wordpress.com/2020/06/30/the-sine-qua-non-of-dispensationalism-ryrie-and-feinberg/]

You May Already Be a Dispensationalist

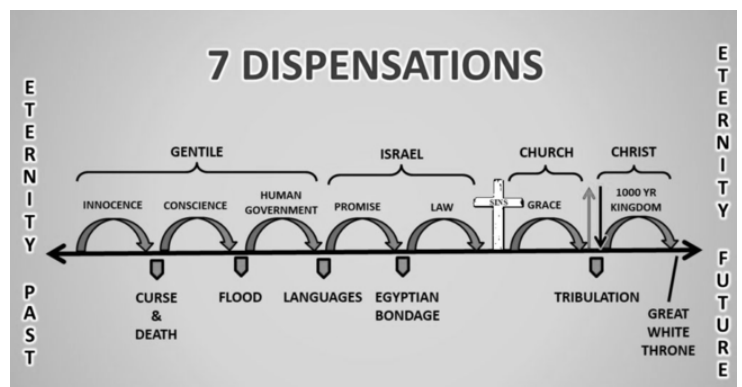
Every Bible-believing Christian, who takes the Bible at face value is, or is on their way to becoming, what we here call a “dispensationalist,” some without knowing it, and it is not important that they know it. If you believe in Ryrie’s three “sine qua non” essentials, then you are what dispensationalists call a “dispensationalist.” For example,

- Do you advocate putting to death everyone who does any work on Saturday (Numbers 15:32-36)?
- Do you consider it a sin to wear clothing of *two kinds of material mixed together* (Leviticus 19:19)?
- Do you keep a Sabbatical Year (Leviticus 25:5)? Do you keep a Jubilee Year (Leviticus 25:10-15)?
- Do you sacrifice a lamb in Jerusalem on Passover (Deuteronomy 16:2)?

If you do not do these things, then you are a dispensationalist. Lewis Sperry Chafer, who founded Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924, said, “If you do not take bulls and goats to an altar on Saturday, you are a dispensationalist.” [From Dallas Theological Seminary, not a direct quote].

Why Seven Dispensations

There are a plethora of charts outlining the seven dispensations. Most of them are cluttered and hard to read. I like this one because it is simple. [gracegospelpress.org]



It is important to understand that it is an author-based (literal) interpretation of the Bible, not seven distinguishable ages, that defines a dispensationalist. The Bible only lists three dispensations:

1. The Mosaic Law (Colossians 1:25)
2. Grace, the age of the church (Ephesians 3:1-10)
3. The fullness of time (Ephesians 1:10), the Millennial Kingdom (Revelation 20:1-10)

So How Do Dispensationalists Get from 3 to 7?

Since the Mosaic Law did not exist before Mt. Sinai, there must be a dispensation before the Law, which we shall call Pre-Law. We are forced to conclude, therefore, that there are at least **four** dispensations, three plus the period before the Mosaic Law.

But, did God deal the same with everyone before the Mosaic Law? Or we might ask, “Was obedience defined the same?” Clearly, God dealt with Adam in the Garden differently than mankind after the curse on creation due to Adam’s sin. We choose to call the first Innocence and the second Conscience. So now there are **five**.

But, did God make any changes in His administration of people between Adam operating by Conscience and the Mosaic Law? Well, there is one obvious change and that is with Noah at the Rainbow Covenant. Clearly, God changed His administration with Noah after the Flood. For example, the new administration included capital punishment for murder (Genesis 9). Since someone has to decide “who done it,” this implies some form of government, so we call this the dispensation of Government. So now there are **six**.

				Law	Grace	Millennial Kingdom
Pre Law				Law	Grace	Millennial Kingdom
Pre Fall	Pre Law			Law	Grace	Millennial Kingdom
Innocence	Post Fall Pre Promise	Promise		Law	Grace	Millennial Kingdom
Innocence	Conscience	Government	Promise	Law	Grace	Millennial Kingdom

But is the arrangement with Noah the same as before the Mosaic Law? There is one clear change. When the people built a tower of Babel, God scattered them over the earth and chose one man who He named Abraham. God brought Abraham into the Land called Canaan and promised him He would make a nation of people from him. We call that the dispensation of Promise. So now there are **seven**.

An example of the dispensations can be seen in the administration of the affairs of our families. We have different governmental relationships with each child, depending on their age. We do not require of our two-year-old what we require of our twelve-year-old, or our twenty-two-year-old. Some of the requirements are the same, but they are different codes. The status of our children, as being one of our children, does not change, but obedience is defined differently. Also, the idea behind the rules we give to our two-year-old is the same as for older children. Similarly, God had a different governmental relationship with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and us because each had a different amount of revelation, from the same God.

[Notice, we are discussing interpretation, not application. All of Scripture should be applied, from the older dispensations to the newer dispensation, but that discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper.]

Dispensationalism and Non-Dispensationalism

The primary opponent to dispensational theology is a system known as covenant theology.

1. **Covenant Theology** believes the prophetic literature in the Bible should not be taken literally. They believe the promises of the prophets to Israel are figuratively (metaphorically or allegorically) fulfilled in the church. Covenant Theology believes there is no literal future for the nation of Israel or the Jewish people. They also believe Revelation 6–18 was fulfilled in history, and it is not a prediction of a future tribulation on earth.

Dispensational Theology believes prophecy, like all of Scripture, should be taken literally (the author's intended meaning). For example, they believe there is a future for Israel in the Land, and Revelation chapters 6–18 describe a seven-year future tribulation on earth, because no plain, ordinary, normal, reading of those chapters would conclude those things have already happened.

2. **Covenant Theology** believes the purpose of history, and the Bible, is the salvation of mankind. They refer to the Old Testament as “redemptive history.”

Dispensational Theology believes the purpose of history, and the Bible, is to bring glory to God. Our salvation brings glory to God, but so do the other works of God, such as revealing His holiness and judging sin.

3. **Covenant Theology** believes the world is getting better, and it will continue to get better as the church brings in Christ's kingdom on earth.

Dispensational Theology believes the world is getting worse, building toward the antichrist's one-world government of Revelation 13–17. The church is never told to bring in Christ's kingdom on earth. Jesus Himself does that catastrophically, at His Second Coming, after the tribulation.

4. **Covenant Theology** does not believe there is a Rapture of the church, only a Second Coming of Christ.

Dispensational Theology believes the description for the resurrection of the church (1 Thessalonians 4:13-15) is significantly different from the Second Coming (Matthew 24:27-31)—up vs. down, blessing vs. judgment, encouragement vs. fear, meeting Christ in the clouds vs. Christ judging earth.

5. **Covenant Theology** believes we are already in the kingdom of God. Many describe this with the phrase, “already, not yet.” The idea is that we are already in the (not literal) Millennium, but it is not yet complete, and it is the task of the church to finish it by spreading the gospel and changing the world. Many teach that this earth is our eternal home, so we should fix it, morally, ecologically, and spiritually. They do not teach that everybody will be saved but that those who are saved will change the world, then Jesus will return.

Dispensational Theology believes that the church is a band of believers suffering for their faith, while on earth. This world is not our home, we are aliens and strangers here. The world is headed for a tribulation period ended by Christ at His Second Coming. Jesus brings in His kingdom suddenly by Himself, not as a product of the church improving the world. After His 1000-year kingdom there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1) and concerning this cosmos, *the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up* (2 Peter 3:10).

Here is a criticism of Dispensationalism from Covenant theologian Anthony Hoekema:

The Bible does not teach a millennial restoration of the Jews to their land. ... To understand these prophecies (about returning to the land) only in terms of a literal fulfillment for Israel in Palestine during the thousand years is to revert back to Jewish nationalism and to fail to see God's purpose for

all his redeemed people. To understand these prophecies, however, as pointing to the new earth and its glorified inhabitants drawn from all tribes, peoples, and tongues ties in these prophecies with the ongoing sweep of New Testament revelation, and makes them richly meaningful to all believers today. [Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, chapter 15. Posted on September 16, 2014 reformedreader.wordpress.com/2014/09/16/8-points-a-critique-of-dispensational-premillennialism/]

Notice:

- Hoekema criticizes literal fulfillment of prophecy, even though all prophecy that has been fulfilled, such as the empires of Daniel 2 and 7 and those of the first coming of Christ, have all been fulfilled literally.
- The return of Israel to the Land is about God literally fulfilling His promise to Abraham, not about Jewish nationalism.
- Hoekema's reference to "God's purpose for all His redeemed people" assumes all God is doing is redeeming people. What if God is returning Israel to the Land for His own glory, not just their salvation?
- Instead of interpreting Old Testament prophecy literally, Hoekema brings the New Testament into the Old. The reason for this is not to better understand the Bible, but because changing the author's intended meaning of prophetic passages "makes them richly meaningful to all believers today."

Conclusion

I end where I began. Dispensationalism is not about predicting future dates. It is not about different ways of salvation. It is not about the Rapture. It is all about only one thing: a literal interpretation of the Bible, defined as the author's intended meaning. The path to understanding the mind of God is understanding the biblical author. If you seek the biblical author's intended meaning, then you will become, if you are not already, a dispensationalist.