

Literal Interpretation (Hermeneutics) Seminar

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A Book Review of "Dispensationalism" Revised and Expanded **By Dr. Charles C. Ryrie**

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This book is an updated version of an edition Dr. Ryrie originally published in 1966 and again in 1995 and 2007.

After the death of Dr. Ryrie in February 2016, I purchased several more of his writings, including this one on dispensationalism. It is just a relatively small 260-page paperback, so I greatly underestimated what I was in for when I started to read it. Or more correctly, when I started to study it, because it is not light reading. It is a scholar's work on a complex subject. Dr. Ryrie carefully presents all the major viewpoints and each of the issues surrounding dispensationalism, including quotes from the scholars who hold their particular views. This book serves as an excellent resource of references on the subject.

The book is organized as follows:

1. Dispensationalism – Help or Heresy
2. What is a Dispensation?
3. What Are the Dispensations?
4. The Origins of Dispensationalism
5. The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism
6. Salvation in Dispensationalism
7. The Church in Dispensationalism
8. Dispensational Eschatology
9. Progressive Dispensationalism
10. Covenant Theology
11. Ultradispensationalism
12. A Plea

For purposes of our Relational Concepts' Seminar on Literal Interpretation, I am including here select basics and definitions from Dr. Ryrie's book.

"Dispensation" Defined

A dispensation is a period of time during which God deals with man in a certain way.

It is a distinguishable *economy** in the outworking of God's purpose.

**Economy* here is primarily a theological term and may be a poor choice of words for the common Bible student. It has little or nothing to do with finances. Harry Ironsides defined *economy* as "an ordered condition of things... There are various economies running through the Word of God. A dispensation, an economy, then, is that particular order or condition of things prevailing in one special age which does not necessarily prevail in another."

The Essence of Dispensationalism

1. A recognition of the distinction between Israel and the church.
2. A consistent use of the literal principle of biblical interpretation.
3. The basic purpose of God throughout His Word is His own glory rather than the salvation of mankind (doxological rather than soteriological).
4. There is only one way of salvation. It is always what God does by grace for man through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Identifying the Dispensations

Most dispensationalists identify seven dispensations. However, some hold to more, others to fewer. For example, Dallas Theological Seminary officially identifies only three: (1) Mosaic Law, (2) Grace, and (3) Millennial Kingdom.

The seven that most dispensationalists identify are neither inspired, nor nonnegotiable, and not explicitly called out in Scripture. Nevertheless, they are as follows:

1. Innocence (Genesis 1:28–3:6)
2. Conscience (Genesis 4:1–8:14)
3. Civil Government (Genesis 8:15–11:9)
4. Promise or Patriarchal Rule (Genesis 11:10–Exodus 18:27)
5. Mosaic Law (Exodus 19:1–Acts 1:26)
6. Grace (Acts 2:1–Revelation 19:21)
7. Millennium (Revelation 20:7-9)

A Very Brief History of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is a relatively “recent” teaching in Christianity. Therefore, many of its opponents cite this as a reason for rejecting it. However, being recent is not a valid test for biblical truth. The Scriptures themselves are the only valid test. Plus, covenant theology is also “guilty” of being recent.

Dispensational work was done as early as 1687 in Holland and 1699 in England, as well as others in the same time period. The “modern” dispensational movement can be traced to the Plymouth Brethren in the British Isles and the work of J.N. Darby (1800–1882). His work and travels spread dispensationalism to Germany, Italy, the United States, and New Zealand. These principles have been carried forth by many, including great biblical teachers such as Harry Ironsides, C.I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Donald Grey Barnhouse, J. Dwight Pentecost, John Walwood, and more recently, Charles Ryrie.

The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism

Hermeneutics is the science that furnishes the principles of interpretation. These principles guide and govern anybody’s system of theology. They ought to be determined before one’s theology is determined. In most cases, it is not. The reverse is true.

Historically, among evangelicals, there have been two basic and distinctive hermeneutical positions: dispensationalism and covenant. More recently, a third position has appeared, that of progressive dispensationalism, which is somewhat of a middle position.

Basic dispensationalism claims the hermeneutics of literal interpretation. This means that it gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage, whether employed in writing, speaking, or thinking. It is also called the *grammatical-historical* or *normal* or *plain* interpretation.

Classic dispensationalism is a result of consistent application of the basic hermeneutical principle of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. No other system of theology can claim this.

The Hermeneutics of Non-Dispensationalism such as Covenant Theology

One of the key features of non-dispensational hermeneutics is to interpret mostly prophecy, and sometimes non-prophetic portions, figuratively. This is also called a “spiritual” hermeneutic. It allows for a symbolic meaning of a passage. This form of hermeneutic has produced covenant theology.

Baker’s “Dictionary of Theology” defines covenant theology as being distinguished by “the place it gives to the covenants” because it “represents the whole of Scripture as being covered by covenants: (1) the covenant of works and (2) the covenant of grace.” Some Reformed theologians have introduced a third covenant, the covenant of redemption, made in eternity past, which became the basis for the covenant of grace. Covenant theology, like dispensationalism, is a relatively “new” Christian teaching. It does not appear in the writings of the Reformers, such as Luther, Zwingli, or Calvin.

The Unifying Principle

In practice, the unifying principle of covenant theology is soteriological—the redemption of mankind. The unifying principle of normative dispensationalism is doxological—the glory of God. The dispensations reveal the glory of God, as He manifests His character in the differing stewardships (economies or dispensations) given to man. How do we know that the glory of God is the purpose of God above and beyond His saving purpose?

1. Scripture says that salvation is to the praise of God’s glory (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14).
2. Scripture teaches that God has a plan for the angels that does not include a soteriological future (2 Peter 2:4).
3. Likewise, Scripture teaches that the future holds a non-redemptive eternity for some, if not most, of mankind (Matthew 7:14).
4. Biblical eschatology teaches that God has purposes in future events that are not confined to the redemption of mankind (Revelation 21:5).

Other Brief Definitions

Progressive Dispensationalism

Progressive dispensationalism is a very new movement. It is more of a work in process, so of necessity, any definition will be somewhat incomplete or inaccurate. So, I will use Dr. Ryrie’s brief definition as follows:

Progressive dispensationalism is a movement that (currently) teaches:

1. Christ is already reigning in heaven on the throne of David, thus merging the church with a present phase of the already inaugurated Davidic Covenant and kingdom.
2. This is based on a complementary hermeneutic that allows the New Testament to introduce changes and additions to Old Testament revelation.
3. The overall purpose of God is Christological, holistic redemption being the focus and goal of history.

Ultradispensationalism

As the name implies, ultradispensationalism is normative dispensationalism taken to an extreme. More specifically, ultradispensationalism is a movement that is in disagreement about when the church, the body of Christ, began. All normative dispensationalists believe that the church began at Pentecost in

Acts 2, with the coming of the Holy Spirit. Ultradispensationalists teach that it began sometime later—some as late as Acts 28. There is disagreement even among the sub-groups. Many see the whole early chapters of Acts and the Gospels of Matthew and Mark as Jewish and not for the church.

1. The practical outworking of ultradispensationalism regards water baptism as Jewish and not for Gentile Christians. In addition, some groups even view the Lord's Supper in the same way, so they practice neither.
2. Some opponents of dispensationalism falsely accuse them of beliefs and practices that actually belong to the ultradispensationalists.

My Little Summary

One's hermeneutics—literal/plain/normal or spiritual/symbolic—will determine his view of Scripture: dispensational, covenant, or even unbelieving liberal. This, in turn, will determine a host of other issues, including many with practical outworkings for both time and eternity.