

DISPENSATIONALISM

MINING THE RICHES



OF GOD'S WORD

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Many years ago, I was introduced to the system of biblical interpretation known as *dispensationalism*. It revolutionized my life. I received a fresh understanding of the Word of God and was motivated to study it more diligently. At that time the system was better known to the average church member than it is today. It is the intent of this book to produce in as simple and concise a fashion as possible the leading features of dispensationalism, how it contrasts with other systems, and why it is beneficial to the Bible student. Other more scholarly and lengthy works are available for those wishing to pursue the matter further. It is not our purpose to compete with these books.

WHAT IS DISPENSATIONALISM?

Dispensationalism essentially is a system of biblical interpretation. It draws from the Scriptures themselves the principles of interpretation. It has numerous features, some of which we here delineate.

A literal, grammatical-historical hermeneutic. This is basic to the understanding of dispensationalism. David L. Cooper put it this way: “Take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.”¹ In other words, one is not allowed to import meanings into the Scriptures which are not plainly found there. Many systems of interpretation do just that. Some evangelicals have advocated what is called a *theological interpretation*. This yields meaning to passages based upon one’s theological bent rather than an exegesis of the text itself. This is obviously a dangerous approach which bases the interpretation of God’s Word upon one’s personal bias rather than upon a diligent search for the actual meaning of the Scriptures.

Dispensationalists seek to have consistent hermeneutics (principles of biblical interpretation). They do not change their principle, for example, when they seek the meaning of prophetic portions of Scripture. Neither do they ignore the scriptural use of symbols, metaphors, and other figures of speech. These are part of the normal use of language.

A distinction between the Church and Israel. One of the major differences between the dispensational system and other systems lies in this truth. Many refer to the Church as *spiritual Israel* and apply many of the Old Testament promises to Israel to the Church. Dispensationalists, however, reject the

notion that Old Testament promises to Israel have been fulfilled in the Church. God has a separate and yet unfulfilled purpose for the physical seed of Abraham. While the nation has strayed from God and is not now in the place of blessing, in the future, by God’s sovereign power, it will be returned to its land and be the recipient of abundant blessings from the Lord. Since the Church began at Pentecost and is formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, no Old Testament Israelite could possibly have been a member of the Church. Paul speaks of “the Jews...the Gentiles...the church of God” (I Cor. 10:32). Paul prays for the nation of Israel (Rom. 10:1) as an entity apart from the Church. Romans 9:6 (“For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel”) does not infer Israel is the Church, but simply distinguishes between two types of Israelites.

A conviction that the major unifying purpose of God cannot be limited to the salvation of the elect, but is rather the total exaltation of Christ and the demonstration of God’s glory. A popular and competing system of thought, covenant theology, sees the coordinating divine purpose through all the ages as the personal salvation of believers. Out of this assumption rises some of their criticism of dispensationalists, such as their charge that dispensationalists teach different ways of salvation. Dispensationalists, however, do not view the various dispensations as *ways of salvation*. To a covenant theologian, however, a dispensation would be an aspect of God’s provision of personal redemption. This is a misunderstanding of the nature of a dispensation. God is doing more throughout history than just saving individuals from hell. He is working out His purpose for the nation of Israel for the angels, for the Church, and for the physical earth. He is not limited to doing one thing.

Salvation is by grace through faith in every dispensation. Dispensationalists do not teach, for example, Israelites living under the Old Testament law earned Heaven on the strength of their obedience to that law. It is clearly stated “no man is justified by the law in the sight of God” (Gal. 3:11). The offering of sacrifices could “never take away sins” (Heb. 10:11).

The big question here is, “What was the object of the Old Testament believer’s faith?” Anti-dispensationalists bring New Testament revelation back into the Old Testament and teach the Old Testament believer somehow had faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross before such a sacrifice ever occurred. The dispensational approach to this is nicely stated as follows in the Dallas Theological Seminary Statement of Faith:

We believe that it has always been true that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 11:6), and that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that their faith toward God was manifested in other ways as is shown by the long record in Hebrews 11:1-40. We believe further that their faith thus manifested was counted to them for righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:3 with Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:5-8; Heb. 11:7).

There is a distinguishable pattern of progressive revelation in Scripture. During each period, man is especially accountable to God in some particular way. The term *progressive revelation* refers to the fact that God has revealed Himself little by little to man over a period of time rather than all at once. In interpreting any given scripture passage, one must do so from the standpoint of the original author, his knowledge, and his times. One cannot read back into the Old Testament record truths which were revealed many centuries later in the New Testament.

It is evident from a study of Scriptures, New Testament writers possessed truth Old Testament writers did not have. This does not mean Old Testament writers were in error. They simply had more limited information.

One progressive dispensationalist denies that the truth of the union of the Gentiles and Israel in Christ is limited exclusively to the New Testament, but says “the prediction of the indwelling Spirit of God” in the Old Testament established “some connection” with the truths of Ephesians 3.² Saucy cites such verses as Ezekiel 36:27 (“I will put my spirit within you”) and Isaiah 44:3 (“I will pour my spirit upon the seed”). Two problems arise with this. First, the indwelling of the Spirit is not the distinguishing mark of the Church. It is rather the baptism of the Spirit. Second, what did the Old Testament writers themselves understand by their predictions? Certainly they knew nothing of a new entity, the Church, which would be separate from Israel. That truth was revealed at a later time.

The various segments of divine revelation and their resultant human

responsibilities are referred to as *dispensations*. The word *dispensation* comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*. It means “the management of a household” or “the office of administrator.” A biblical dispensation involves a divine revelation of some new approach on God’s relationship with man and a resultant responsibility which man has. For example, in Genesis 8-11, the Lord gives revelation to man on two subjects: (1) the duty to replenish the earth, which had been decimated by the Noahic Flood, and (2) the duty to execute murderers. Mankind was expected to obey these commands. We generally refer to this as the “Dispensation of Human Government.”

Law and grace are mutually exclusive rules of life. Well-meaning Christian teachers often try to put the contemporary Christian under some aspects of the Mosaic Law, thinking by so doing they are encouraging spiritual discipline and helping to provide control over the flesh, which otherwise would be uncontrolled. Paul, however, argues the Law could not produce a holy life. Only the Holy Spirit, indwelling each believer, can succeed in doing that (Rom. 8:1-4). We are not saved nor sanctified by the keeping of the law. We are under grace as a rule of life. This does not mean there was no grace manifested while the law was in force, nor does it mean to live under grace is to live without restrictions. To live as a believer today means we are under grace as our governing rule of life.

The kingdom announced by John the Baptist and Jesus was not inaugurated. It is here historic dispensationalists disagree with so-called *progressive* (revisionist) *dispensationalists*. When John the Baptist and Christ announced, “Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2; 4:17), they were presenting to the nation of Israel the promised Old Testament kingdom. John the Baptist was the announcer of Messiah and His promised kingdom. The Jews knew of no *spiritual* kingdom in the hearts of men, but only of the kingdom spoken of by the prophets of Israel, which was temporal and earthly. Because Israel rejected their King and His kingdom, it was not instituted. It remains for a future time when the King will return. Progressive dispensationalists believe it was partially inaugurated, and thus they confuse the Church with Israel.

Christ told the nation Israel the establishment of the promised Old Testament kingdom was dependent upon their reception of His message. “And *if ye will receive it*, this is Elias (Elijah) which is for to come” (italics added, Matt. 11:14), that is, John the Baptist would be the promised Elijah, and the Messianic kingdom would be inaugurated. The nation, however, did not

receive the message, and the kingdom did not arrive. The Lord prepared the disciples for the postponement of the kingdom by His parable of the nobleman (Lk. 19:11-27). Those who thought the promised kingdom was going to “immediately appear” (v. 11) would be disappointed. First, the Nobleman (Christ) would have to depart into a far country (Heaven). After a passage of time, the Nobleman would return and claim His inheritance (establish Christ’s kingdom). Our Lord (the Nobleman) is now in the glory. At God’s time, He will “receive for Himself a kingdom” and will “return.” The kingdom does not exist now, but awaits the King’s coming.

The consistent, literal interpretation of Scripture will yield two aspects of Christ’s return: (1) the gathering of His Church at the Rapture, and (2) the establishment of His kingdom upon His return to Earth. The dispensational interpretation of Scripture points to the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture. The Church will be caught up to Heaven before the beginning of the Tribulation, a period of divine judgement on the earth. Covenant premillennialists and covenant amillennialists do not believe in a rapture because they do not follow dispensational principles of interpretation. There, of course, are no dispensational amillennialists or postmillennialists. These systems are incompatible with dispensationalism.

In concluding this section, the natural question arises, “What would be a proper definition of a dispensation?” Various definitions have been proposed. One author has come up with this definition: A dispensation is “a particular way of God’s administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for world history.”³ Harry Ironside said, “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.”⁴

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF DISPENSATIONALISM?

Is dispensationalism a legitimate system of biblical interpretation? Does its relatively recent origin as a systematized approach to Scripture invalidate it?

Current Claims. Those who oppose dispensationalism argue it is a recent development in church history. It originated, they emphasize, with an English scholar, J. Nelson Darby, and was popularized by the “Plymouth Brethren,” a group which grew up around his teachings. Any system not found in the early church should not be accepted today, say they.

Historical Facts. Dispensationalism as a **systematized scheme** is of fairly recent origin. This does not prove its rightness nor wrongness. The fact a truth has been newly discovered or recently emphasized does not make it erroneous. The question is, “Is it biblical?” The test of truth is not age but Scripture.

As a matter of record, however, some principles of dispensationalism have been taught for centuries. It is not our purpose here to explore at length this fact, for others have done so. Years ago Arnold Ehlert, in a series entitled “A Bibliography of Dispensationalism,”⁵ researched the many expressions of dispensational truth throughout the centuries of church history. Important principles now incorporated into the system of dispensationalism were set forth by some writers in earlier centuries.

Covenant theologians are among the chief critics of dispensationalism and quick to emphasize its supposedly recent origins. But covenant theology is also recent itself. It arose a number of years after the Protestant Reformation, which does not make it much older than dispensationalism. Again, the proper question is not which system is oldest, but which system is most true to the Scriptures? Dispensationalism arose through an earnest study of the Bible. The merits of dispensationalism should be determined by following the Berean principle: they “searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11).

WHAT IS THE MAIN SYSTEM OF INTERPRETATION OPPOSING DISPENSATIONALISM?

Probably the most outspoken antagonists of dispensationalism have been those who embrace the system known as *covenant theology*.

History of Covenant Theology. Some people have the notion this system arose with the Reformers (Luther, Calvin, etc.). It did not. The Reformers were not covenant theologians. The system actually came from the minds of post-Reformation thinkers in Germany and Holland. More extensive information concerning this can be found in other volumes. Its major haven has been within Presbyterian and Reformed circles.

Olevianus, professor at Heidelberg, wrote *The Covenant of Grace* in 1570. He

was the first to make the idea of covenant the determinative principle of an entire theological system. Cocceius, professor at Leyden in the Netherlands, authored a large work in 1648, in which he expanded the idea of covenants to include the covenant of works. Turretin more fully elaborated the covenant idea while professor at Geneva. His works have been among the principle fountainheads for later covenant scholars. In 1646, the famous Westminster theologians such as Charles and A.A. Hodge, the Kuypers, Shedd, and others espoused this view as well. With major voices such as these proclaiming it, covenant theology secured a revered position within evangelical theology.

Major Premises of Covenant Theology.

1. Its Essence

Covenant theology holds that in eternity past the members of the Godhead made an agreement between themselves called the *covenant of grace*. This covenant bound them to save the elect and would be the overriding principle in dealing with mankind. Included in this covenant was the obligation to provide for Christ's incarnation, sustain Him in His earthly life, raise Him from the dead, and draw to Him the elect. Christ was to offer Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice for sins. All the biblical covenants are simply aspects of this one overarching covenant of grace. Most covenant theologians see at least two covenants: (1) the covenant of grace between God and the elect sinner, and (2) the covenant of works between God and Adam. If Adam obeyed God, he would receive eternal life. If he failed, he would receive eternal death. Some add a third, usually called the Covenant of Redemption.

2. Its Special Features

Those who teach this scheme see God's main purpose throughout history as the personal salvation of individuals. This is one of the main reasons why they see no future for the literal nation of Israel.

All the biblical covenants are simply outworkings of the covenant of grace. For instance, the Davidic covenant is not an irrevocable covenant with the physical seed of Abraham, but is a covenant only with his "spiritual seed." The spiritual seed now constitutes the Church.

Infant baptism has replaced circumcision as the outward sign a person

is included in the covenant. Some Baptists have embraced covenant theology inconsistently. True Baptist theology cannot accept covenant theology. This concept of infant baptism naturally impacts one's concept of the church. Typical covenant theologians believe a true church is composed of believers **and their children**, even though the children are infants and have not come to saving faith. They do not emphasize the scriptural doctrine of regenerate church membership (a church member must have personal, conscious faith in Christ).

The Church today is spiritual Israel and promises made to the physical seed of Abraham centuries ago have been fulfilled in a spiritual sense in the Church. Such a view immediately destroys a literal interpretation of Scripture. The Church was certainly not in mind when God made His promise to Abraham: "Unto they seed have I given this land" (Gen. 15:18). The Church has inherited no portion of this planet from God. Her possessions are spiritual.

Covenant theologians claim to accept the literal, grammatical, and historical principles of biblical interpretation. In interpreting some portions of Scripture, they do. When they approach prophetic portions, however, they switch gears, forsaking a literal interpretation and substituting an allegorical one. Thus, plain passages predicting physical blessings upon the nation of Israel in the future are robbed of their literal meaning and applied to the Church. While there are persons called "covenant premillennialists," the system they have embraced is incongruous.

A Critique of Covenant Theology. There are several things to be said in critique of this system:

1. It is extra-biblical. The system is derived from logical and theological premises and does not arise from a direct exegesis of Scripture. One writer declares, "The so-called covenant of works is really a fictitious invention which has no scriptural foundation."⁶ After introducing the concept of the covenant of works, Charles Hodge, one of the leading covenant theologians, states: it "does not rest upon any express declaration of Scripture."⁷ Another scholar notes "there is no mention of such a covenant with Adam."⁸
2. It, without warrant, narrows the purpose of God. God is doing more

in the universe than merely saving individuals from sin. God has purposes for creation, for angels, and for the nation of Israel.

3. It rejects the literal interpretation of the biblical covenants.
4. It makes all the biblical covenants outworkings of the covenant of grace. Under covenant theology, for instance, the dispensation of law is simply part of the overall implementation of the covenant of grace.
5. It maintains a false view of the Church, denying its distinctiveness as the Body of Christ.
6. It destroys an accurate interpretation of prophesy. One cannot discover God's plan for the future by spiritualizing prophetic portions of His Word.
7. It undermines the scriptural doctrine of the local church. The teaching of infant baptism, which prevails among covenant theologians, subverts the New Testament emphasis upon a church of believers only. Infants cannot believe.
- 8.

WHY IS THERE A DRIFT AWAY FROM DISPENSATIONALISM?

When I first entered the ministry, dispensationalism was a widely-held and respected approach to the study of Scripture. My first exposure to this system, I recall, was from Dr. Monroe Parker, noted evangelist and teacher of Bible at the time at my alma mater, Bob Jones University. In a simple and powerful way he explained the dispensational approach to Scripture, and his teaching helped me greatly as a young Christian. Later, I attended Dallas Theological Seminary while Lewis Sperry Chafer was president. He and other faculty members, as well as outstanding visiting lecturers, gave me further insight into the system and helped me grow in my understanding. Dr. Charles F. Lincoln, then professor of Bible at the seminary, had an excellent course in "Covenants and Dispensations," which, regrettably, was never placed into book form. In addition to the influence of Dallas, large numbers of Bible institutes and colleges across America, including some of the most prestigious, held to dispensational theology and taught it in their classrooms.

What has happened? Even schools which once were fountainheads of this teaching have now either turned from it completely or offered watered-down,

revolutionist versions. There are a decreasing number of academic institutions which are dispensational in conviction. Some institutions give lip service to dispensational truth, but their younger faculty members have come from schools where they did not receive training in it and are ill-equipped to teach it and, in some cases, have no real convictions about it.

Dispensationalism is portrayed as unscholarly in some academic realms. The great contributions and recognized scholarship of some of its leading advocates have been deliberately overlooked or played down. There have been noted teachers among the dispensationalists who lacked a great deal of formal scholarly training (such as Harry Ironside), but whose pungent and powerful exposition of Scripture was a blessing to thousands. Because such men as Ironside wrote simple Bible commentaries which appealed to lay people, and because such men were dispensationalists, the system of dispensationalism was looked down upon as inferior intellectually. It would help some contemporary scholars to remember simplicity does not always imply intellectual inferiority.

The writings of the Puritans and their followers have been reprinted and widely distributed in the last 30 or 40 years. The Puritans were not dispensationalists. Most of them were covenant theologians. While we appreciate the good things about their writings, they did not enunciate dispensational principles, and young pastors growing up on their teachings are ignorant of dispensationalism.

Unfortunately, a good number of widely-read, contemporary evangelical authors are covenant theologians. People who write books create followings, and those who follow tend to embrace the position of the authors they admire. If a man is a prominent writer, and if he is a covenant theologian, he will have an influence on readers. Many of these men also teach in prestigious colleges and seminaries from whence their influence reaches many students.

In the last 20 or 30 years there has been an increasing fraternization between covenant and dispensational leaders in such organizations as the Evangelical Theology Society. Friendships have been formed. Dispensational scholars have been impressed with the fact that covenant theologians are *nice fellows* (nobody ever said they weren't), and impetus has been given to building bridges between the two positions.

There is a growing climate of evangelical ecumenism today, which tends to play down sharp theological differences and emphasize areas of common agreement. This is viewed by many to be a great step forward for the Church,

but it is breaking down important spiritual barriers and causing some to view rather major theological differences as relatively insignificant. Fellowship and unity are emphasized. Theological problems interfering with such an emphasis are said to be less important. Dispensationalist leaders and writers in the past have not been unkind, but have been forceful and uncompromising in their retention and defense of the position of dispensationalism. Now, however, dispensationalists who do not wish to compromise their principles are often viewed as deterrents to evangelical unity.

Years ago a study Bible known as *The Scofield Bible* (because C.I. Scofield was its editor) was found in the possession of large numbers of Christians in fundamental churches. Most preachers in these churches preached from The Scofield Bible and were familiar with its contents. The Scofield Bible set forth the dispensational approach to Scripture through its introductory articles, extensive footnotes, and chain references. It is not nearly as widely known today as it once was, and it certainly is not as familiar to the average church member. Churches where the principles of dispensationalism were once commonly held are becoming increasingly bereft of such information.

Some men who were formerly dispensationalists have become covenant theologians (e.g., Bruce Waltke), and these men have an influence over younger men who are impressed by their arguments. And now a system called *progressive dispensationalism* has arisen. Proponents of this claim to be dispensationalists, but some of their leading principles carry them away from traditional dispensationalism, causing confusion among God's people.

For all these reasons and more, dispensationalism has suffered in the last few years. Thankfully, some qualified men have become alarmed at the situation and are beginning to address it. The volume, *Issues in Dispensationalism*,⁸ is a defense of the more traditional view of dispensationalism. Hopefully, other writings will be made available.

WHAT IS PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM?

A new school of thought has risen in the last few years which is referred to as *progressive dispensationalism* or *revolutionist dispensationalism*. Just what are the features of this system?

Beginnings. Progressive dispensationalism began to appear first at Dallas Theological Seminary, an institution which through the years has been the

major scholarly headquarters of dispensational teaching. Many, if not most, of the dispensational teachers at educational institutions in this country and others received their training at Dallas. Two of their faculty members in particular, Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, began to develop the progressive approach and defend it in writing. Through their writings in the theological journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* and in later books, they have become the best known advocates though others have followed them.

Characteristics. In progressive dispensationalism, there is an emphasis upon change, particularly change in some time-honored precepts which traditional dispensationalists have followed. When people begin to talk about change, especially theological change, those who are loyal to God's Word and a fundamental position become somewhat nervous. Not all change is bad. Some change, however, is bad. One of the original authors of the progressive position gave an address at a 1986 conference entitled "Developing Dispensationalism." The word *developing* implies movement, but movement from what to what? This is a question of great importance.

Progressive dispensationalists are definitely promoting a concept of biblical interpretation which is different from that held by traditional dispensationalists. Some of them have claimed the interpretive approach held by covenant theologians is not much different from dispensationalists, which is quite a shock to some of us who have felt there is a considerable difference. They say this because they have changed the hermeneutical principles; the ones they have adopted are close to those held by covenant theologians. No longer, say they, should we interpret the Old Testament literally, that is, on the basis of what the writers knew and meant, but in the light of further New Testament revelation of which the Old Testament writers were ignorant. According to this view, the New Testament writers changed some parts of Old Testament revelation giving fuller meaning to them, while at the same time not abrogating the original promises. Reading insights given in New Testament revelation back into the Old Testament supposedly gives a fuller meaning than can be gleaned from the normal, literal interpretation of these passages. Until the arrival of progressive dispensationalism, however, Old Testament texts were interpreted within the historical limitations and understanding of the original author. Insights given centuries later were not to govern the interpretation. To admit such changes considerably alters the whole interpretative approach to the Old Testament and is a major departure from traditional dispensationalism.

It is significant the revisionists are downplaying the importance of even the

term “dispensationalist.” Stan Gundry declares, “...I now attach relatively minor importance to the label itself. To continue to use the label sets up an unnecessary barrier between ourselves and non-dispensationalists, when in fact all sides seem to be gradually moving toward a common ground both methodologically and in terms of conclusions.”⁹

Gundry’s remarks underscore another trend to which we referred earlier—minimizing the distinctions between dispensationalism and covenant theology. This is a strange position, because dispensational theology is different from other theological systems, especially covenant theology to which Gundry particularly speaks. Dispensationalists are right to emphasize the differences because they are significant.

Traditional dispensationalists view the Messianic kingdom as something entirely future and yet to be established when Christ returns to earth. Revisionist dispensationalists have adopted what is called the “already-not yet” concept of the kingdom in which they see the Davidic kingdom as already partially present with the fuller phase yet to come. Christ is now sitting on the throne of David but only in a spiritual aspect. Such an interpretation breaks down the historic, and we believe biblical, method of literal interpretation followed by dispensationalists. The throne of David refers to a literal kingdom on this earth involving a literal nation, Israel. It is not in part or in whole a spiritual kingdom. To say this is a serious departure from what is considered normal dispensationalism. Bruce Waltke, a former dispensationalist who now embraces covenant theology, sees this clearly and comments, “This already-not yet model of dispensationalism, entailing a less than one-for-one correspondence between Old Testament covenants and prophecies and their partial fulfillment in the church, shakes the very foundation of dispensational hermeneutics, which includes a consistent literalistic interpretation of the Old Testament.”¹¹

Any method of biblical interpretation which “shakes the very foundation of dispensational hermeneutics” should certainly be viewed with some alarm. This is especially true if it blurs the distinction between the Church and Israel, which is at the very heart of dispensational teaching.

Gary Breshears, a professor at Multnomah and an advocate of revised dispensationalism, makes a disturbing statement which is certainly more in the camp of covenant theology than of dispensationalism:

I suggest that we see one redeemed people of God, saved by

grace through faith in the promises of God based on the atoning death of Christ. This is the single seed of Abraham Paul develops at length in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 and 4....The promises and prophecies of redemption come to all who are the single redeemed people of God.¹²

It seems plain from the Word of God the Messianic kingdom, as prophesied in multitudes of Old Testament Scriptures, is yet future. There is no Messianic kingdom on earth at the present time. This, however, is denied by progressive dispensationalists. According to them, the kingdom, in part, is already here. They have adopted in substance the position of George Ladd, a former Fuller Seminary professor who, in commenting on Peter’s sermon in Acts 2, stated: “Peter, transfers the Messianic Davidic throne from Jerusalem to God’s *right hand* in heaven...*he has* begun His Messianic reign as the Davidic King.”¹³

Darrell Bock states, “the Davidic throne and the heavenly throne of Jesus...are one and the same.”¹⁴ He elucidates further by saying, “Jesus rules now in spiritual-salvific terms, in a new community that is part of the kingdom program, and in a way that inaugurates Davidic promises....Thus the new community, the church, is the showcase of God’s present reign through Messiah Jesus, who inaugurates the fulfillment of God’s promises” (pp. 64-65). In other words, Christ is now sitting on the throne of David.

Such conclusions are not compatible with historic dispensationalism. They move toward covenant theology, which identifies the Church with Israel. It would not be surprising to see more and more former dispensationalists embracing the covenant system as some already have.

Dangers. There are ecumenical dangers inherent in this system. This was evident in the early days of its development. Many advocates of progressive dispensationalism promote the idea we should “cozy up” to covenant and Reformed theologians because our systems are not really different after all. This seems mighty strange to some who have spent their lives seeking to maintain and clarify the differences between these two systems. For instance, there is this observation from Gerry Breshears, a revolutionist leader:

Too often dispensational theology has tried to define itself as if it were wholly different from any other system of theology. This has resulted in an attitude that all theologians other than dispensationalists have given up truth. Covenant theology is presented as heresy in disguise and evangelical brothers are

viewed with suspicion or outright hostility. We must realize that there are few, if any, factors which are unique to dispensationalism.¹³

This movement tends to reflect the evangelical ecumenism so popular today. Stan Gundry even suggests the label “dispensationalist” sets up “unnecessary barriers between ourselves and non-dispensationalists” and may hinder us from “moving toward a common ground.”¹⁶ We should forget “labels” and “work together.”

We believe some of the above statements are skewed and certainly misleading. There is exaggeration for effect. Those who are loyal to the biblical system of dispensationalism are not seeking to “move toward a common ground” with non-dispensationalists. This does not mean we cannot recognize them as brothers in Christ.

There are deep concerns also about the hermeneutical implications of progressive dispensationalism. Dispensationalists have always been known for their clear and consistent application of the historical-grammatical-literal principle of interpretation. The new dispensationalists deny this literal hermeneutic is essential to dispensationalism. The “spiritualizing” approach adopted by revisionist dispensationalists toward some scripture passages is more in line with the method historically used by non-dispensationalists. If they continue to follow such an interpretive scheme, will it be long until they have abandoned dispensationalism altogether?

There are important ecclesiological overtones to progressive dispensationalism as well. In forsaking a clear distinction between Israel and the Church, one declares, at least to some extent, the Church is the *new Israel*. This opens up other possible errors. Identification with Israel is one of the chief defenses covenant theologians have for their concept of infant baptism. They argue:

1. God’s covenant with Abraham was primarily a spiritual covenant.
2. Circumcision was the sign and seal of this covenant. Infants received circumcision in the Old Testament era.
3. Baptism is the New Testament sign of the covenant.
4. Infants may receive baptism in the New Testament era.

Not all progressive dispensationalists would follow this reasoning. The tendency to equate Israel with the Church makes it easier to do so.

There are, of course, also eschatological implications to the position of

progressive dispensationalism. They are not as clear-cut and aggressive in speaking of the Rapture as dispensationalists have historically been. This is possibly because of their weakening of the distinctions between Israel and the Church since the doctrine of pretribulationism depends upon such a distinction. Time will tell as to how the views of progressive dispensationalists will affect their teaching concerning the Rapture.

WHAT DISPENSATIONS ARE SEEN IN THE SCRIPTURE?

Historically, a good number of dispensationalists have found seven dispensations revealed in Scripture. The popularity of this view is no doubt in large part due to the fact it was presented in The Scofield Bible and, thus, spread among the churches. Some dispensationalists have noted as few as three dispensations—law, grace, and kingdom. It should be emphasized, however, being a dispensationalist does not require one to believe in a certain number of dispensations. It relates more to the adoption of certain principles, some of which we have presented earlier. For our purpose, we set forth seven dispensations without suggesting all must agree on the exact number.

A clear grasp of the dispensational scheme of divine administration greatly assists the average believer in understanding the Scriptures.

Dispensation of Freedom.

THE TEST: Would man accept and obey what God said or operate by his own reason?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Genesis 1-3

This is often referred to as the dispensation of *INNOCENCE*. It describes the initial encounters of man and God prior to his disobedience in the garden of Eden. Under this particular revelation of the will of God, man was responsible to tend the garden and obey God. God provided for man ideal conditions in which to live. He also provided for him a mate in the person of Eve.

The term *freedom* is used by some to characterize this dispensation because man was free in a moral sense before sin enslaved his will. He did not pass the test, however. This dispensation ended in divine judgment, which included the permanent fall of Adam, his expulsion from the garden, and God’s curse upon the ground.

Dispensation of Moral Responsibility.

THE TEST: Guided by his conscience, would man bring blood sacrifices and obey God?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Genesis 3-8; Romans 2:14,15

Scofield denominated this the dispensation of *CONSCIENCE*. It is suggested in Romans 2:14 and 15 where the Gentiles, who were not recipients of the Mosaic law, “do by nature the things contained in the law...which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness...” By using the term *conscience* to describe this dispensation, Bible students are not suggesting there was no conscience present after this time. They are merely saying during this time, man’s principle responsibility was to obey the prompting of his conscience. He was to bring a blood sacrifice, and because Cain did not do this in faith (Gen. 4:3, 4), he was rejected. The great Noahic Flood was the judgment concluding this dispensation.

Dispensation of Civil Government.

THE TEST: Can man make himself acceptable to God through social and civil organization?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Genesis 8-11

God called Noah, bestowed His grace upon him, and commanded him to build an ark in order to save the human race. A basic ingredient of human government—the right to take a human life—was instituted. Paul explains this right of capital punishment as necessary to human government for “he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Rom. 13:4). Murder became punishable by capital punishment. This test of the human race ended with the destruction of the Tower of Babel and the divinely-instituted confusion of human languages.

Dispensation of Patriarchal Rule.

THE TEST: Motivated by great divine promises, would Abraham and his descendants believe and obey the Lord?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Genesis 11-Exodus 19

Often this is called the dispensation of *PROMISE* because of the prominent nature of God’s promises to Abraham and the patriarchs. The designation *Promised Land* became common, and we still use it today. In Galatians 3, distinction is made between promise and the law (3:15 ff). The responsibility

of man was to believe God and serve Him in light of His promises. As in other cases, man did not perfectly please God in this test, and the dispensation ended with the judgment of slavery in Egypt and the wilderness wanderings.

Dispensation of Mosaic Law.

THE TEST: Can man live a holy life as he obeys detailed regulations from God?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Exodus through the Gospel of John

God gave the Mosaic law to the nation Israel. They were responsible to keep it. “Behold, I have taught you statutes and judgments, even as the Lord my God commanded me...Keep therefore and do them” (Deut. 4:5-6). The Israelites promised to keep God’s words, but they did not do so on a consistent and continuing basis. It should be noted that obedience to the law was never a way to obtain personal salvation. Critics have misunderstood this and falsely accused dispensationalists of teaching more than one way of salvation.

Israel rebelled against God, worshiped the idols of the surrounding heathen nations, and thus incurred divine wrath. Judgment was administered as Israel was removed from her land, was enslaved by godless nations, and later enslaved by the Roman Empire.

Dispensation of Grace.

THE TEST: Will man accept eternal life in Jesus Christ and then walk in the Spirit?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Acts 1-Revelation 3

Following the resurrection of Christ and the Day of Pentecost, a new dispensation was inaugurated: *the dispensation of grace*. We are presently living in this dispensation. Man is expected to now receive God’s gift of salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ and to walk in the Spirit following conversion. Since the vast majority of the world will reject the Savior, God will take His people home by the Rapture and then pour out the judgments of the Tribulation.

Dispensation of the Kingdom.

THE TEST: Will man, under ideal conditions and under Christ’s personal reign, obey God?

KEY SCRIPTURE: Old Testament millennial prophecies and Revelation 20

Following the Age of Grace and the Tribulation period, Christ will return in glory to rule over this world, fulfilling the vast number of Old Testament prophecies speaking of this time. It will be man's responsibility to submit to Christ's rule and His authority extended through His laws. The reign of Christ will last for one thousand years, during which time the earth will prosper spiritually, socially, and economically. Even so, people will be born with evil hearts and many will not accept Christ. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be allowed to stir up a rebellion against the Lord. God will judge the rebels with fire from Heaven (Rev. 20:9). Then man will enter the eternal state either as a redeemed child of God to be forever with the Lord or as a condemned child of the Devil to be forever punished.

Special Case. Into which dispensation does the Tribulation fit? The question is not crucial to the main issues of dispensationalism. One of three answers are usually given:

1. It is a separate dispensation.
2. It is a continuation of the dispensation of law.
3. It is the divine judgment concluding the Age of Grace.

HOW HAS DISPENSATIONALISM BEEN IMPORTANT TO FUNDAMENTALISM?

A number of years ago, there arose a controversy in large American denominations over the Bible and its teachings. Theological liberals had become dominant and were denying many, if not most, of the great Christian doctrines. In defense of historic and biblical Christianity, there arose a group of people who became known as *fundamentalists*. The name was given because they were defending the *fundamentals*, that is, the time-honored and God-blessed doctrines of the Scripture, which had comprised the orthodox Christian faith for centuries.

Many (though not all) of the early fundamentalists were dispensationalists. A thoughtful evaluation would indicate dispensationalism has made some important contributions to the cause of fundamentalism. For one thing, it has kept an emphasis upon the full inspiration and the literal interpretation of Scripture in a day when there have been growing attacks upon these truths. Dispensationalists, for instance, have consistently opposed weakened views of

inspiration (such as those emanating from Fuller Theological Seminary). They have also stood opposed to the new so-called *cultural hermeneutics*, an attempt to seek interpretations of Scripture based on the current culture of the day rather than on the literal statements of Scripture. An example would be evangelical feminism's rejection of Paul's injunction, "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands" (Eph. 5:25). They declare this reflects the cultural bias of the day rather than a direct teaching of the Lord.

The doctrine of the Rapture of the Church has been perpetuated due to dispensationalist diligence. While not all fundamentalists have been, or are, advocates of the pretribulation Rapture, it is probably accurate to say the vast majority of them are pretribulationists. This *blessed hope* has been kept alive in the hearts of believers because of dispensational teaching.

In recent years, there has arisen an emphasis upon *evangelical social concern*. Dispensationalists have been criticized, even by some fundamentalists, for their supposed lack of social concern. Years ago, Evangelist Dwight L. Moody declared believers should not be polishing the brass on the decks of a sinking vessel, but should be seeking to rescue individuals from hell through the preaching of the Gospel. Some have castigated Mr. Moody for this statement, but many would feel his observation to be accurate. Rather than become deeply involved in programs to aid the poor and the distressed (a program of self-betterment), dispensationalists have emphasized the Church as committed, not to a program of social betterment, but a program of evangelism and discipleship. This does not mean fundamentalists are heartless regarding the needs of the poor. However, they do not see social programs as part of Christ's Great Commission to the Church.

In the same vein, dispensationalism has been a deterrent to a tendency among some evangelicals to deeply involve local churches in the political process. Dispensationalists emphasize that citizens of the country should exercise their franchise, be knowledgeable about issues, and vote intelligently for those persons whom they believe will best govern. They have resisted the idea, however, of using the local churches as instruments of political power in order to establish a righteous government on earth.

Because of its clear distinction between law and grace, dispensationalism has helped to combat the errors of Reconstructionism (also called *Theonomy* and *Dominion Theology*). This scheme of thought has been promoted by Rousas Rushdoony, Gary North, and others. It sees the task of the Churches subduing the world to the obedience of God's law. The Mosaic law is applicable to all men and nations, say they, and diligent promotion of this law

will bring in the kingdom. They are postmillennial, not premillennial.

While much maligned in recent days, the dispensational scheme, as set forth in The Scofield Bible, assisted thousands of believers in their Bible study and made the Word of God live. Current critics look down their noses at The Scofield Bible as lacking scholarship. Few human books, however, have had the tremendous impact of the Bible and spurred lay people on to a study of the Scriptures.

One of the features of dispensationalism most despised by many of its critics is its teaching on the apostasy of the professing Church. This teaching has produced some large-scale separations from the apostate denominations. The largest number of separatists have been dispensationalists. This, to many, is the great sin of dispensationalism. It is, however, merely a manifestation of loyalty to the teaching of God's Word.

Advocates of the modern charismatic and signs-and-wonders movements look upon what they call *old-line* dispensationalists as among their chief opponents, and indeed they are correct in this. "Signs and wonders" advocates argue that Christ came to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom, they say, which was established and which we are now heralding, is to be accompanied by signs and wonders (miraculous works) as it was in Jesus' day. Dispensationalists teach the miraculous signs and wonders, which were demonstrated in the early Church, were never intended to be perpetuated throughout the Church Age. They were special and temporary signs to authenticate the preaching of Jesus and the apostles. Once the Scriptures were completed, the need for such miraculous signs ended.

There is much current discussion about the Gospel and its nature. Dispensationalists have guarded the purity of the Gospel by carefully defining it according to Scripture and by emphasizing its uniqueness to the Church Age. One prominent evangelical preacher, for instance, has declared the Sermon on the Mount is full of the Gospel. Where it would be found, however, is not clear. While revealed during Christ's ministry (particularly in John's Gospel), the Gospel was first publicly preached at Pentecost.

HOW DOES DISPENSATIONALISM ASSIST THE BIBLE STUDENT?

Dispensationalism has been a great boon to those who seek an ordered and understandable system of Bible study. Over the years, many have been enabled

to open up the treasures of God's Word.

Relating the Old Testament to the New Testament. There are clear differences between God's workings in Old Testament times and His working in New Testament times. This seems evident from a careful study of Scripture. Covenant theology and progressive dispensationalism tend to blur these distinctions, emphasizing rather a perceived unity. In doing so, they confuse God's programs. An example is the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament there was no baptism of the Spirit. In the New Testament the baptism of the Spirit is explained and is closely related to the uniqueness of the Church. Dispensationalists have historically pointed this out.

A System Derived from Scripture. Some systems of biblical interpretation are inventions of men and have been imposed upon Scripture rather than derived from Scripture. As one studies the Bible, he sees the progressive principle of revelation in operation and observes God's dealings with men change from time to time. It is these various aspects of His dealings which we refer to as "dispensations."

Clear Distinction Between Law and Grace. One of the most important principles in Scripture is the difference between law and grace. Those who adopt the position of covenant theology state there is an over-arching *covenant of grace*. In order to hold this position, one must somehow include the Mosaic Law within the covenant of grace. To mix law and grace in this fashion is contradictory. Law and grace are different principles. This is emphasized in the New Testament and was a great burden of Paul as he wrote the Book of Galatians. He pleads with believers not to be "entangled again with the yoke of bondage" (Gal 5:1). He declares "no man is justified by the law" because "the law is not of faith" (Gal. 3:11-12). This does not mean grace was never revealed under the Mosaic law, but as systems of life, the two are incompatible.

A Distinction Between Israel and the Church. Possibly, the greatest single distinguishing factor in dispensationalism is its insistence that the Church and Israel are two completely different entities. The Church is a *mystery*, something unrevealed in the Old Testament. Revisionist dispensationalists are now claiming the word *mystery* simply means it was **unrealized** rather than **unrevealed**. This is not consistent with the inherent meaning of *mystery*. Many truths, however, depend upon one truth—the Church was not in the Old Testament, it began at Pentecost, and its future is to be distinguished from the future of the nation Israel.

A Distinction Between the Church and the Messianic Kingdom. As has

been mentioned, some are teaching today that Christ is already seated on the throne of David. If this be true, then the Messianic kingdom, in some manner, must already be a reality. This is a particularly disturbing doctrine, originating as it has from professors at Dallas Theological Seminary which, through the years, has steadfastly maintained the *throne of David* was a phrase describing the millennial office of Christ. This would support the conclusion the Church was not part of the Davidic kingdom. Traditional dispensationalism has been correct in distinguishing the two. To declare the Church is a partial fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant is to drift toward covenant theology, which has held this position all along.

The Irremedial Apostasy of the Professing Church. In an explanatory note on *apostasy*, The Scofield Bible declared: "Apostasy in the church, as in Israel...is irremedial and awaits judgment" (note on 2 Tim. 3:1). By apostasy is meant a deliberate rejection of the doctrines of the Faith. This aspect of dispensational teaching has been much resented and criticized by those who seek to turn the tide of liberalism within the old-line denominations. Dispensational premillennialists are accused of being overly-pessimistic concerning the future of the professing Church. For the most part, dispensationalism has flourished among the separatist segments of Christendom, among those organizations and churches who do not participate with the National and World Council of Churches¹⁴ and other such groups. Dispensationalists would view the task of believers as building up the true Church, the Body of Christ, not seeking to rescue the apostate church from its unbelief. As Charles Ryrie points out, "The Bible does definitely and clearly teach that there was, is, and will be apostasy in the professing church. The doctrine is not a figment of the dispensationalist imagination."¹⁷

WHAT SHOULD DISPENSATIONALISTS BE DOING NOW?

Some non-dispensational scholars are saying traditional dispensationalism is dead, and it was never an authentic expression of true evangelical scholarship, but an aberration, appearing for a time and now vanishing away. To report the death of dispensationalism may be somewhat premature. Dispensationalists, however, should take note of the strong opposition which has arisen to their system, and take some positive steps to strengthen their witness.

Bible Colleges and Seminaries. Historically, Bible institutes and Bible colleges have been strongly in the camp of dispensationalism. As was noted, this has been changing since the faculty members not trained in this system have become more prominent on faculties of these institutions. Traditional

dispensationalists need to exert their influence at such schools and do what they can to see that dispensationalism is properly taught to the students who will be future leaders in the church. Many alumni of schools such as this are not aware that the system of truth they were taught is no longer being emphasized.

Literature. Literature on the subject of dispensationalism needs to be written by those capable of doing so. While there are some books of fairly recent origin, they are beyond the grasp of average church members. Regrettably, few people today are going to read large complicated books on any subject. Books and booklets need to be produced for the average church member enlightening them on the principles of dispensationalism. Such books, as well as magazines, used to be readily available, but in recent years their number has declined.

A Dispensational Pulpit. Unfortunately, too many preachers today, in an effort to hold on to straying members and to attract outsiders, have reverted to psychological rather than theological preaching. As a result, large numbers of believers are ignorant of great theological and biblical truths with which they should be familiar. Dispensationalism is one of these. The preacher of the Word of God must teach his people correct dispensational principles. If he does not do so, who will? Solid expository messages are the key here.

Provide Literature and Instruction. Pastors should expose their people to good dispensational teaching other than their own pulpit ministry. A good series of Sunday school studies would be in order and perhaps some special messages by a visiting speaker who would be competent in this field. Literature on the subject should be made available for loan or purchase, and the pastor should call attention to it.

CONCLUSION

Battles can be lost because good men do nothing. We cannot afford to lose this battle. Let us rise up and do what we can to perpetuate this fine system of biblical study, which has blessed and helped so many of God's people.

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