

Dispensationalism

Dispensations: How Many?

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This is part one of a series on Dispensationalism.

The essential problem of Dispensationalism becomes apparent when Dispensationalists try to apply their own definition of a dispensation to Scripture.

Sincere Love for the Brethren

Many of us have dear friends, whose fellowship in Christ we treasure, who embrace some form of the Dispensationalist view of the Bible. I say "some form" because many Christians assume that Dispensationalism is a monolithic system, and that all its adherents are agreed on the details. But as we shall see, that is not the case.

I owe much of my own love for the Word of God to Dispensationalist teachers and preachers. I have benefited greatly from their teaching and example in many ways, perhaps most especially from their passion for winning lost souls to Christ. What I am about to say stems not from a spirit of condemnation, but out of sincere love for my brethren who hold to that system.

But let me be clear: I am speaking of self-described Dispensationalists who have the Gospel right. They haven't gone into any of the extreme forms of Dispensationalism that deny the one true Gospel (and yes, such branches of the movement do exist). The men of whom I speak are not in any of the extreme camps that teach, either explicitly or implicitly, multiple ways of salvation. Unlike the extreme Dispensationalists, the men of whom I speak believe and preach that salvation is now,

always has been, and always will be, by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, totally apart from works of any kind.

Looking at Scripture Through a Man-Made Lens

But at the same time I believe that even my Dispensationalist friends who are sound on the Gospel are looking at Scripture through an untrustworthy, in fact dangerous, lens. Some have come to recognize that. Men who were trained in the Dispensationalist system have expressed growing concerns about Dispensationalism to me in private conversation and correspondence. I know that my experience is not unique; others have had similar encounters. Some of these men are now publicly distancing themselves from Dispensationalism, while others still wrestle privately with the issues that have risen in their minds.

Their struggles can perhaps best be summed up thus: Through their own study of the Scriptures they have come to understand that Dispensationalism is not a system of doctrine derived from and fully supported by Scripture alone, but imposes an extra-Biblical, man-made system upon the Bible. It requires a Christian to look at all of Scripture through a particular matrix that divides the Bible into man-made categories. Yet Dispensationalism has become the predominant theology among Bible-believing Christians during the past 150 years. How has this happened, and what is the danger in it?

Revisionist Histories of Dispensationalism: More Heat Than Light

Writing a history of Dispensationalism is beyond the scope of this series of articles. What I intend to do, instead, is to focus on the key issues that transcend personalities, historical events, and even the marked differences in systems that are to be found among Dispensationalist teachers. I wish I could point readers to a good,

unbiased history of Dispensationalism, but I know of none among the many books that have been written on the subject.

Let me add this further note: In this series I do not intend to follow the ungodly pattern of most other critiques of Dispensationalism that have been written in the past forty years. Virtually without exception, those books add far more heat than light. The authors, by and large, simply press their case for another man-made system in place of Dispensationalism. They often erect an inaccurate, straw-man version of Dispensationalism as the object of their criticisms. While these books do contain some valid criticisms of Dispensationalism, the authors' approach invalidates much of what they have to say. Furthermore, many of the biographies of leading Dispensationalist figures, which come from authors with similar agendas, contain misleading statements and even outright falsehoods. God forbid that I should follow in their steps.

Dispensationalists' Definition of a Dispensation

Let us begin by considering the Dispensationalist's definition of a dispensation. For this purpose I am citing the notes that appear at the beginning of Genesis in the four major editions of the Scofield Reference Bible, which has long been the "gold standard" study Bible of the movement. All four Scofield editions give this definition: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."

The validity of the definition of any term, in any field, must be tested through application. When we are dealing with theological terms, that means application to Scripture. This is where the inherent problem of the Dispensationalists' definition of their foundational term first becomes apparent.

Even more importantly in the case of theological terms, they must *agree* with Scripture because they are *derived from* Scripture. The Dispensationalists' definition of a dispensation also fails this test, and that will be the subject of our next article.

How Many Dispensations?

The Scofield Reference Bible has, by far, done the most to promote acceptance of the Dispensationalist approach. The original Scofield Bible was published in 1909, and there have been three major revisions by different groups of editors, in 1917, 1967, and 1984. Millions of copies have been sold over the past one hundred years. Each of the four major editions of the Scofield Bible contains significant differences in the set of dispensations it defines as a way of dividing up the Bible.

But that is only the beginning. I have in my library numerous study Bibles, systematic theologies, commentaries, and study books by Dispensationalist teachers. Among them are men who use the definition cited above to delineate as few as three dispensations. Some have four. Some have six. Some have seven. Some have eight. Some have nine. Obviously, their applications of the definition of a dispensation don't agree with one another. Several of the men who define the same number of dispensations, don't agree on what those dispensations are, and what time periods they cover. I have before me two commentators who both define seven dispensations, but their two lists of the seven are significantly different. I have before me another pair of commentators who both define eight dispensations, but they disagree on what those eight dispensations are, and when they begin and end.

In one commentator's system, the "dispensation of the church age" — the one in which Dispensationalists say we are now living — is the third dispensation. In another commentator's system, it's the fourth dispensation. In yet another commentator's system it's the fifth dispensation. In another man's system, the church age is the sixth dispensation. And in yet another Dispensationalist commentator's system, the church age is the ninth dispensation.

In recent decades a view called Progressive Dispensationalism has developed. Progressive Dispensationalists, as the name implies, see dispensations as more

progressive than sequential in nature. They also view various dispensations as more directly related to the Bible's clear teaching of an Old Covenant and a New Covenant. But Progressive Dispensationalists also disagree among themselves as to the number of dispensations, when they begin, and when (or in some cases if) they end.

A Fatal Flaw

The widely varying applications of the man-made definition of a dispensation underscore this fact: Dispensationalism is a system of human thinking imposed upon God's Word, rather than a system of doctrine derived from it. That is a fatal flaw. Why? Because at its essence, any system that imposes human thinking *upon* the Bible puts human thinking *in authority over* the Bible.

Dispensationalism is not the only system that does this. There are many forms of Covenant Theology that also do this — especially forms of Covenant Theology that say that God is finished with Israel. (We'll have more to say about that later.) Also, the problem isn't limited to Protestants. Roman Catholicism does the same thing with its traditions. All of these systems, to a greater or lesser degree, put an interpretive lens or matrix between God's people and the Bible, and they require you to view and interpret the Bible through that man-made lens or matrix.

Dispensationalists' own definition of a dispensation fails the test of application. But as we noted above, there is an even more critical test: Our theological terms must *agree* with Scripture because they are *derived from* Scripture. As we shall see in our next article, Dispensationalists' definition also fails this test.

[Next: What is a Dispensation According to Scripture?](#)

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