

An Introduction to Dispensationalism
ECIC 2022

- I. Introduction
 - A. Dispensationalism has many fanciful manifestations in our culture over the last several decades that make it an easy target of ridicule.
 - B. Our goal here is not to deal with the most absurd presentations of this doctrine but rather to give it the fairest hearing.
 - C. If we address it in its strongest arguments then the wilder elements easily fall away.
 - D. We will draw from the most studious proponents of dispensationalism as we strive to define it and the various elements that make it up.
- II. Defining Dispensationalism
 - A. The idea of dispensation is about “dispensing.”
 1. Ryrie says, “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”
 2. It is not primarily about a period of time, though that is a tangential element.
 3. The idea is one of stewardship, management or economy (Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25-26; cf. Lk. 16:1-13).
 - a) These verses are used to point to three of the dispensations.
 4. So the dispensations are the ages (there’s the time element) where God has given men different ways of managing.
 5. “The word dispensation means literally a stewardship or administration or economy. Therefore, in its Biblical usage, a dispensation is a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God’s mind and will which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God.” (C. E. Mason)
 6. They equate this to the management of a household where in the parents govern the children differently at different ages.
 - B. This language of dispensations has been around for a long time but without all of the implications.
 1. Many of the proof quotes concerning the historical espousal of dispensationalism fall into this category.
 2. We have no issue with someone saying that God has communicated to men in different ways in different times (Heb. 1:1).
 - C. 2 Timothy 2:15 has been often used as a descriptor of the process dividing up the Bible into these dispensations.
 1. At least two books written against dispensationalism are titled “Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth.”
 2. This isn’t a critical element of dispensationalism, but it surely isn’t a great support of the doctrine.
 - D. There are seven traditional dispensations:
 1. They are as follows:
 - a) Innocency - Garden of Eden
 - b) Conscience - Adam to the Flood
 - c) Civil Government - Noah to Abraham
 - d) Promise (or Patriarchal Rule) - Abraham to Moses
 - e) Mosaic Law - Moses to Peter
 - f) Grace - Acts - Present
 - g) Millennium - 1000 year reign of Christ
 2. These dispensations are not accepted by all dispensationalists.
 3. Dispensationalists are generally willing to differ on the number and nature of a few of these.
 4. Some go as far as 8 or 9 dispensations adding one for the period of tribulation and another for the period after the Millennium.

5. Most reject a dispensation after the millennium because time will be no more then.
- E. All of this is a system meant to support the theory of premillennialism.
1. They are borrowing the concept of “dispensation” from history but then doing things with that concept that no one did before John Darby.
 2. The idea of premillennialism existed before Darby as did the notion of different dispensations, but they were not combined and systematized before the 19th century.
- F. The key here is that there is admitted “discontinuity” between these dispensations.
1. The most important example of this is that Israel and the church bear no resemblance to one another.
 2. The major unifying theme they see is God bringing glory to Himself.
 - a) It is important to understand that this does not mean the dispensations are related in and of themselves.
 - b) Just that they all bring glory to God in various way.
 - c) This is like saying that a collection of Sherlock Holmes stories are related because they all involve Sherlock Holmes.
 3. The theme of salvation is only secondary.
 4. They believe that God is doing something with Israel and something completely separate with the church (for instance).
- III. The Dispensational Hermeneutic
- A. The dispensational hermeneutic is called the “literal, historical-grammatical” hermeneutic.
- B. There are two key elements of dispensational hermeneutics that are of critical import.
1. The “literal” or “normal” or “plain” interpretation style.
 2. The historical element means that you must fully interpret any text using only the information that would have been available at the time of the prophecy.
- C. Concerning the “literal” element, their commitment here sounds a lot like our own, to simply take the Bible at face value.
1. The problem is that of course even the phrase face value is not a literal phrase.
 2. They are not as rigid in their commitment to literalness as they claim.
 3. They act like all prophecies taken literally are very easy to interpret and then spend the next couple hundred years arguing over what these “very plain” passages mean.
 4. The only confusion is supposedly when you introduce spiritual interpretations.
- D. Regarding the historical element, they believe that the New Testament cannot modify interpretation of the Old Testament in any way.
1. When reading Old Testament prophecy, one must read it and interpret it completely without using any New Testament revelation as aid.
 2. When telling people about this part of their hermeneutic, the most common question is what about all of the passages that talk about types, shadows, and mysteries in the New Testament.
 3. The general idea is that when a mystery is referred to in the New Testament, they take that as completely new revelation not additional information concerning anything revealed in the past.
 4. This goes along with their idea of the discontinuity of the dispensations.
- IV. Some Distinctions
- A. Virtually all dispensationalists are premillennialists but not all premillennialists are dispensationalists.
1. Premillennialists predate dispensationalists as such.
 2. The basic idea of premillennialism is that Christ will establish a 1000-year reign on the earth in Jerusalem.
 3. Some believe the kingdom is already here but only in some sort of truncated way.
 4. They may also view the kingdom as the culmination of God’s plan for all mankind.
 5. Dispensationalists strictly do NOT believe the kingdom is already here.

6. This is why they do not believe Jesus' teachings regarding the kingdom are in effect.
 7. They also view the millennial kingdom as strictly fulfilling God's promises to Israel and separate and apart from the gospel message of eternal salvation.
- B. Premillennialism itself falls into two basic categories:
1. There are the pre-tribulation premillennialists (most dispensationalists) and the post-tribulation premillennialists.
 - a) This refers to the tribulation (Rev. 7; Matt. 24) in relation to the second coming of Christ.
 - b) Pre-tribulation is the belief held by dispensationalists.
 - c) Post-tribulation is the belief held by non-dispensationalists.
 - d) The major distinction is the view of the relationship between Israel and the church.
 - e) Dispensationalists believe there is essentially no relationship while non-dispensationalists believe that the church becomes the anti-type of Israel.
 2. Yet another category among millennialists is the "post-millennialist."
 - a) Post-millennialists believe that we are moving toward a millennial kingdom where Christianity will reign for 1000 years and Christ will come at the end of that 1000 years.
 - b) They believe we are in the kingdom age now but that the kingdom must reign politically and fully before the 1000 years begins.
 - c) This view lost much favor after WWI and WWII but is still believed by some prominent theologians.
- C. Finally, there are progressive dispensationalists.
1. These are dispensationalists who believe in a moderated form of dispensationalism.
 2. They are strongly rejected by traditional dispensationalists.
 3. They believe that the kingdom is already here and use the now/not yet language to describe it.
 4. This means they see dual meanings in certain prophecies which the literal hermeneutic does not allow.
 5. Because they reject the strict application of the literal hermeneutic (though they claim to still follow it) they are said not to be true dispensationalists.
 6. The word "progressive" refers to their belief that God's revelation is progressive as opposed to a distinct revelation in each dispensation.
 7. This view brings progressive dispensationalists much more into line with the historical view of dispensations and also the views of the millennial kingdom where it is found in history.
 8. In fact, the progressive dispensationalists spend much time trying to distinguish themselves from covenant theologians and end up making very little distinction.
- D. Historical Appeals:
1. One of the major attacks against dispensationalism is that it is a relatively recent doctrine (1830s).
 - a) The basic structure was laid out by John Darby and then popularized more broadly by the Scofield Reference Bible.
 - b) The defense against this attack is first that church doctrine has undergone many revisions through the ages.
 - c) But secondly, they argue that their beliefs are found throughout history, just not in a systematic way.
 - d) This would be similar to tracing Calvin's views back to Augustine.
 2. While there are references to the millennial kingdom in ancient texts, they mostly fall into the same category as scripture in that they are very open to interpretation.
 3. As to references to dispensations in history, the vast majority of them are similar to the way we might refer to dispensations.

4. Isaac Watts is used in one book as evidence of the historical nature of dispensationalism and he doesn't even mention the millennial kingdom among his dispensations.
5. Not that it ultimately matters whether a view is espoused throughout history but the defense on this point is pretty weak.

V. Conclusion

- A. Dispensationalism is a systematic theology developed to support a particular premillennialist view.
- B. The key elements are the discontinuity between the dispensations and the literal millennial kingdom as a fulfillment to physical Israel distinct from anything to do with the church.
- C. It is helpful to understand these distinctions like knowing the difference between someone who adheres to Calvinism and someone who just believes in "once saved always saved and total depravity."