

# CONTENTS

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Foreword	7
My Thanks	9
1. Dispensationalism—Help or Heresy?	13
2. What Is a Dispensation?	27
3. What Are the Dispensations?	51
4. The Origins of Dispensationalism	69
5. The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism	89
6. Salvation in Dispensationalism	121
7. The Church in Dispensationalism	143
8. Dispensational Eschatology	169
9. Progressive Dispensationalism	189
10. Covenant Theology	213
11. Ultradispensationalism	229
12. A Plea	243
Select Bibliography	249
Subject Index	257
Scripture Index	261

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# DISPENSATIONALISM— HELP OR HERESY?

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**T**he mention of the word *dispensationalism* usually evokes an immediate reaction.

For many Christians it reminds them of the help and blessing the ministries and writings of dispensational Bible teachers have been to them. They recall Bible conferences, prophecy conferences, special meetings, or books that awakened in them their first real interest in studying the Bible seriously and in depth.

For others, however, dispensationalism is something to be avoided like the plague. Perhaps they do not even begin to understand what it is, but, if they have heard about it, it has been in a negative way. Indeed, they may have been told that dispensational teaching is heretical. Nevertheless, dispensationalists have occupied a significant place in the history of the church, and they continue to be an important group of earnest believers today.

Like all doctrines, dispensational teaching has undergone systematization and development in its lifetime, though the basic tenets have not changed. At times it has been aggressively attacked.

## DISPENSATIONALISM

Often caricatures and stereotypes misrepresent and ridicule the viewpoint. When this book was originally published in 1965 under the title *Dispensationalism Today*, its purpose was to present classic dispensational teaching in a positive way in order to correct misunderstandings and allay suspicions about it. I also wanted to show that earlier dispensationalists were more balanced in their statements than usually represented by those who quote them selectively.

This revision does not abandon, change, dilute, or minimize the basic teachings of normative, or classic, dispensationalism. The basic scheme involving the different dispensations remains the most helpful tool of consistent, noncontradictory interpretation of Scripture. References will be made to some books published since 1965, and the recent developments in hermeneutics and the major changes being proposed by so-called progressive dispensationalists are addressed. But the positive presentation of normative dispensationalism remains a primary feature of this revision.

It should be remembered that dispensationalists are conservative, evangelical Christians. Many of the differences of opinion discussed in this book are between evangelicals with whom there is agreement in other important areas of doctrine. It is sincerely intended that what is said about these differences be factual, fair, clear, and in a spirit of helpfulness. I hope that every reader, before putting this book down, will read the last chapter, no matter how mildly or violently he or she may disagree with other parts of the book.

### OPPOSITION TO DISPENSATIONALISM

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The opposition to dispensational teaching has come from many quarters, and the attacks have been quite varied in their intensity.

The theological liberal quite naturally opposes dispensationalism, for he finds completely unpalatable its plain interpretation, which is based on a verbal, plenary view of the inspiration of Scripture. Neither would he agree with other beliefs and teachings that dispensationalists hold in common with other conservatives. Whatever else dispensationalists are, they are conservative in their view of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible, an approach unsavory to the liberal.

## DISPENSATIONALISM—HELP OR HERESY?

But certain conservatives also are opposed to the teachings of dispensationalism. On the one hand, the amillennialist recognizes that dispensationalists are invariably premillennialists, which means their teaching cannot be a viable option, since premillennialism and amillennialism do not mix. A. W. Pink, for example, writes of dispensationalists as those who impose “their crudities and vagaries, and make their poor dupes believe a wonderful discovery had been made in the ‘rightly dividing of the word of truth.’ . . . How dreadfully superficial and faulty their ‘findings’ are [is apparent] from the popular (far too popular to be of much value—Luke 16:15!) Scofield Bible.”<sup>1</sup> More recently John Gerstner labeled dispensationalism “a cult and not a branch of the Christian church,” associating dispensationalists with “false teachers” and “heretics.”<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, those who might be called ultradispensationalists feel that normative dispensationalists have not gone far enough in their teachings and thus are unbiblical in their conclusions, which, therefore, must be rejected.

Opposition has also developed from those who are premillennial but not dispensational. (Generally they are covenant premillennialists who believe in a posttribulational Rapture.) Their point is that dispensational premillennialism is not historical but that premillennialism without dispensationalism is. Therefore, their attack centers on dispensational distinctives: “The present upsurge of Historical Premillennialism has challenged the Dispensational theory of a Pretribulational Rapture of the Church out of the world. Belief in a Pretribulational Rapture is . . . a deviation.”<sup>3</sup>

These various attacks range from mild to severe. Philip Mauro, a premillennialist who abandoned the dispensational position, is bitter in his denunciation:

Indeed, the time is fully ripe for a thorough examination and frank exposure of this new and subtle form of *modernism* that has been spreading itself among those who have adopted the name “fundamentalists.” For evangelical Christianity must purge itself of this leaven of *dispensationalism* ere it can display its former power and exert its former influence. . . . The entire system of “dispensational teaching” is *modernistic* in the strictest sense.<sup>4</sup>

Only slightly more mild than Mauro's charge of modernism is the conclusion of Oswald Allis that dispensationalism is a "danger" and is "unscriptural."<sup>5</sup> Daniel Fuller reached a similar conclusion, namely, that dispensationalism is "internally inconsistent and unable to harmonize itself with the Biblical data."<sup>6</sup>

John Bowman, in a practically unrestrained attack on the original *Scofield Bible* and its dispensational teachings, said, "This book represents perhaps the most dangerous heresy currently to be found within Christian circles."<sup>7</sup> In a more temperate manner, the editor of *Presbyterian Journal*, in answer to a reader's question, called dispensationalism "a conservative 'heresy'" since, in his own words, "whatever else you may say about a dispensationalist, one thing you can say about him with great assurance: he is conservative in theology."<sup>8</sup>

More recently reconstructionists (also known as dominion theologians or theonomists), who are postmillennial, have joined the fray. One calls dispensationalism "unbelief and heresy,"<sup>9</sup> whereas another labels premillennialism "an unorthodox teaching, generally espoused by heretical sects on the fringes of the Christian Church."<sup>10</sup>

Labeling dispensationalism as "modernism," "unscriptural," or "heresy" is not the only way it has been attacked. Some have practiced the guilt-by-association method. Bowman, for instance, associates dispensationalism with names like Hitler and National Socialism, Roman Catholicism, Christian Science, and Mormonism.<sup>11</sup> The book *The Church Faces the Isms*, written by members of the faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, includes dispensationalism along with such "isms" as Seventh-day Adventism and Perfectionism.<sup>12</sup>

Gerstner (while distinguishing basic differences) puts dispensationalists, in a certain respect, alongside Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons.<sup>13</sup> And in the foreword to Gerstner's book, R. C. Sproul draws an analogy between dispensationalists and Joseph Fletcher, father of modern "situational ethics."<sup>14</sup>

Resort is often made to an *ad hominem* attack, which focuses on a person's character rather than on his teachings. The person often singled out is John Nelson Darby, and the point of attack is usually his separatist principles and practices. He is pictured as the "pope" of the Plymouth Brethren movement, who excommunicated at will those who

disagreed with him and whose separationist practices have characterized the entire dispensational movement for ill. Here is an illustration of this kind of attack: “There exists a direct line from Darby through a number of channels . . . all characterized by and contributing to a spirit of separatism and exclusion. The devastating effects of this spirit upon the total body of Christ cannot be underestimated.”<sup>15</sup>

Sometimes this attack takes the form of pointing to cases in which division in churches was involved in some way or another with dispensational teaching. Of course, in the report of such instances the reader cannot be sure he has been given all the facts that may have contributed to the rupture. But dispensational teaching is usually made the primary, if not the sole, cause.<sup>16</sup> Those who use such an argument in an effort to discredit the totality of dispensational teaching should call to mind some of the basic and most obvious facts about the divisive aspects of the Protestant Reformation.

There is the “intellectual” attack. It is noted that the process of earning a doctor’s degree has delivered the person from the dispensational teaching in which he was reared.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say, there are men with doctor’s degrees who support the dispensational approach. However, unworthy as it may be, the attack is a powerful one. It implies that, whereas dispensationalism is something that may inadvertently be learned in Sunday school or at a Bible school, greater intellectual maturity will certainly lead to its abandonment.

There is the historical attack. This will be examined in more detail later (see chapter 4). It seeks to prove that since dispensationalism in its present form is apparently recent it cannot be true, for surely someone would have taught it in the first eighteen centuries of the history of the church if it were true. Some who use this device to discredit dispensationalism are honest enough to admit that history is never the test of truth—the Bible and only the Bible is. But they persist in using the approach and leave the impression that history is a partially valid test, if not the final test. Dale Moody writes, “Dispensationalism with the modern form of seven dispensations, eight covenants, and a Pretribulation Rapture is a deviation that has not been traced beyond 1830.”<sup>18</sup>

There is the ridicule-of-doctrine attack. This is usually based on a straw-man construction of the dispensationalist’s doctrine or a partial

statement of it. Some supposed teaching of dispensationalism is held up to ridicule, and by so much the entire system is condemned. For instance, the opponents of dispensationalism are quite sure that it teaches two (or more) ways of salvation. And they ask, What could be more unscriptural than that? Therefore, the system should be discarded. Or, again, they declare that dispensationalists will not use the Sermon on the Mount, and, since the Sermon obviously contains rich Christian truth, what could be more apparent than that the system refusing to use it is wrong? Indeed, Richard J. Foster, a conservative, says that “the heresy [there’s that word again] in Dispensationalism [is] that the Sermon on the Mount applies to a future age rather than today.”<sup>19</sup> These charges will be discussed in due time (see chapter 5); they are mentioned here only as examples of the method of attack used.

Another jab at dispensationalism in this way: “The nondispensationalist usually finds eschatological factors least important. Evidently the dispensationalist feels that our church creeds are inadequate because they do not include pronouncements on such matters as a pretribulation Rapture or the identification of the 144,000.”<sup>20</sup> Some groups do deem it best for their ministry to have a pretribulation Rapture clause in their doctrinal statements, but I have never seen a creedal statement that considered it necessary to include the identification of the 144,000.

Bruce Waltke (formerly a dispensationalist, now an amillennialist, and always a friend) in a lecture given in 1991 predicted that dispensationalism has “no future as a system.” He went on to say that “unless a new, accredited theologian arises to defend historic dispensationalism, this aberration in Christian theology will die.”<sup>21</sup>

The new “progressive” dispensationalism (see chapter 9), while posing as a legitimate development within the dispensational tradition, appears rather to be a distinct change from classic dispensationalism since it seeks “dispensational structures that are more accurate biblically.”<sup>22</sup> Does this not imply that classic dispensationalism is *less* accurate biblically? One progressive views classic dispensationalism as “the cloud” under which he lives.<sup>23</sup> But the changes of progressive dispensationalism will presumably dispel that cloud.

Of course, the ultimate test of the truth of any doctrine is whether it is in accord with biblical revelation. The fact that the church taught

## DISPENSATIONALISM—HELP OR HERESY?

something in the first century does not make it true, and, likewise, if the church did not teach something until the twentieth century, it is not necessarily false. Tertullian, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Darby, Scofield, and the Westminster divines were all instruments in the hands of God to minister truth to His church, but none of them was perfect in all his thinking. People do not make a doctrine right or wrong. Defective life never enhances doctrine, but neither does it necessarily falsify it. Earning a doctor's degree may make one an expert in a particular field of study, but it does not make one infallible or without need of further light on a given subject. An understanding of the truth of the Bible can be communicated by the Holy Spirit in and through the formal education process and procedures, and it can be communicated apart from them.

If dispensationalism has been called everything from a “dangerous friend” to a “sworn enemy,” is there any point in examining it? What do the dispensationalists say for themselves that could make their teaching worth investigating? Could there be any help in that which is a heresy in the minds of some?

### THE HELP GIVEN BY DISPENSATIONALISM

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#### *It Answers the Need of Biblical Distinctions*

There is no interpreter of the Bible who does not recognize the need for certain basic distinctions in the Scriptures. The theological liberal, no matter how much he speaks of the Judaistic background of Christianity, recognizes that Christianity is nevertheless different from Judaism. There may be few or many features of Judaism that, in his mind, carry over into Christianity, but still the message of Jesus was something new. Therefore, the material of the Old Testament is distinguished from that of the New.

The covenant theologian, for all his opposition to dispensationalism, also makes certain rather important distinctions. However, it must be noted that his dispensational distinctions are viewed as related to the unifying and underlying covenant of grace. Nevertheless, within his concept of this covenant he does make some very basic distinctions. Louis Berkhof will serve as an example.<sup>24</sup> After rejecting the usual



dispensational scheme of Bible distinctions, he enumerates his own scheme of dispensations or administrations, reducing the number to two—the Old Testament dispensation and the New Testament dispensation. However, within the Old Testament dispensation Berkhof lists four subdivisions, which, although he terms them “stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace,” are distinguishable enough to be listed. In reality, then, he finds these four plus the New Testament dispensation, or five periods of differing administrations of God. Thus, the covenant theologian finds biblical distinctions a necessary part of his theology, even though the covenant of grace is his ruling category.

The dispensationalist finds his answer to the need for distinctions in his dispensational scheme. The dispensations supply the need for distinctions in the orderly progress of revelation throughout Scripture. His dispensations are not stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace but are God’s distinctive and different administrations in directing the affairs of the world. It makes little difference at this point in the discussion whether there are seven dispensations or not; the point is that dispensations answer the need for distinctions.

All interpreters feel the need for distinctions. Obviously this does not prove that dispensationalists’ distinctions are the correct ones, but it does demonstrate that the need for distinctions as basic to the proper interpretation of the Scriptures is recognized. There is some truth in the two statements “Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice” and “Any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh.”<sup>25</sup> That is true simply because every person who does not bring an animal sacrifice or who does not observe Saturday as his day of worship recognizes the need for distinctions in the interpretation of the Bible. The dispensationalist feels that his system supplies the answer to that need.

### *It Answers the Need of a Philosophy of History*

The Scriptures per se are not a philosophy of history, but they contain one. It is true that the Bible deals with ideas—but with ideas that are interpretations of historical events. This interpretation of the meaning of historical events is the task of theology, and it is a task that is not without its problems. The chief problem is that both covenant and

dispensational theologies claim to represent the true philosophy of history as contained in the Scriptures. The problem is further complicated by the fact that, if a philosophy of history is defined as “a systematic interpretation of universal history in accordance with a principle by which historical events and successions are unified and directed toward ultimate meaning,”<sup>26</sup> then in a certain sense both systems of theology meet the basic requirements of the definition. However, the way in which the two systems meet these requirements affirms that dispensationalism is the more valid and helpful system. Notice that the definition centers on three things: (1) the recognition of “historical events and successions,” or a proper concept of the progress of revelation in history; (2) the unifying principle; and (3) the ultimate goal of history. Let us examine both systems in relation to these three features.

Concerning the goal of history, dispensationalists find it in the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth, whereas the covenant theologian regards it as the eternal state. This does not mean that normative dispensationalists minimize the glory of the eternal state, but they insist that the display of the glory of the God who is sovereign in human history must be seen in the present heavens and earth. This view of the realization of the goal of history within time is both optimistic and in accord with the requirements of the definition.

The covenant view, which sees the course of history continuing the present struggle between good and evil until terminated by the beginning of eternity, obviously does not have any goal within temporal history and is therefore pessimistic. Alva McClain points out this contrast very clearly when he says that according to covenant theology both good and evil continue in their development side by side through human history.

Then will come catastrophe and the crisis of divine judgment, not for the purpose of setting up a divine kingdom in history, but after the close of history. . . . Thus history becomes the preparatory “vestibule” of eternity. . . . It is a narrow corridor, cramped and dark, a kind of “waiting room,” leading nowhere within the historical process, but only fit to be abandoned at last for an ideal existence on another plane. Such a view of history seems unduly pessimistic, in the light of Biblical revelation.<sup>27</sup>

Progressive dispensationalists take a both/and view of the goal(s) of history by combining the millennial kingdom and the eternal state together in a single future dispensation. This is a mediating position between classic dispensationalism and covenant theology since most dispensational outlines see the dispensations operating only within time (and therefore would not include eternity in a dispensation as progressives do). Thus, in relation to goals in a proper philosophy of history, only normative dispensationalism with its consummation within history in the dispensation of the Millennium offers a satisfactory system.

A second requirement of a philosophy of history is a proper unifying principle. In covenant theology the principle is the covenant of grace. This is the alleged covenant that the Lord made with man after the sin of Adam, in which He offered salvation through Jesus Christ. In short, the covenant of grace is God's plan of salvation, and therefore the unifying principle of covenant theology is soteriological.

In dispensationalism the principle is theological or eschatological or doxological, for the differing dispensations reveal the glory of God as He manifests His character in the differing stewardships, which culminate in history with the millennial glory. This is not to say that dispensationalism fails to give salvation its proper place in the purpose of God (see chapter 6). If the goal of history is the earthly Millennium and if the glory of God will be manifest at that time in the personal presence of Christ in a way hitherto unknown, then the unifying principle of dispensationalism may be said to be eschatological (if viewed from the goal toward which we are moving) or theological (if viewed from the self-revelation of God in every dispensation) or doxological (if viewed from the perspective of the overall manifestation of the glory of God).

In progressive dispensationalism the unifying principle is Christological because of the emphasis on Christ and on the Messianic, Davidic kingdom, already and not yet fulfilled.

Although the normative dispensationalists principle is much broader and therefore less confining, it must be admitted that this alone does not prove that it is the more valid one. We must also consider the third part of our definition of a philosophy of history.

Only dispensationalism does justice to the proper concept of the progress of revelation. Covenant theology does include in its system

different modes of administration of the covenant of grace, and although these modes would give an appearance of an idea of progressiveness in revelation, in practice there is extreme rigidity in covenant theology. James Orr, himself a covenant theologian, criticizes the covenant system along this very line:

It failed to seize the true idea of development, and by an artificial system of typology, and allegorizing interpretation, sought to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old. But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the covenant as an exhaustive category, and attempting to force into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds desirous of simple and natural notions.<sup>28</sup>

Covenant theology, then, because of the rigidity of its unifying principle of the covenant of grace, can never show within its system proper progress of revelation.

Dispensationalism, on the other hand, can and does give proper place to the idea of development. Under the various administrations of God, different revelation was given to man, and that revelation was increasingly progressive in the scope of its content. Though similarities are present in various dispensations, they are part of a true development and not a result of employing the unifying principle of the covenant of grace. The particular manifestations of the will of God in each dispensation are given their full, yet distinctive, place in the progress of the revelation of God throughout the ages. Only dispensationalism can cause historical events and successions to be seen in their own light and not to be reflected in the artificial light of an overall covenant.

Thus, a correct philosophy of history with its requirements of a proper goal, a proper unifying principle, and a proper concept of progress is best satisfied by the dispensational system. Like the need for biblical distinctions, the proper concept of the philosophy of history leads to dispensationalism.

### *It Provides Consistent Hermeneutics*

This subject will be dealt with later (see chapter 5). For now it suf-

fices to say that dispensationalism claims to employ principles of literal, plain, normal, or historical-grammatical interpretation consistently.

Covenant theologians are well known for their use of nonliteral interpretation, especially when interpreting prophecy, and they are equally well known for their amillennialism, which is only the natural outcome of such a hermeneutic. Premillennialists who are not dispensationalists also have to depart from normal interpretation at certain points in their eschatology. For example, George E. Ladd, in order to add support to his posttribulational view, is forced to regard the 144,000 of Revelation 7 as referring not to literal Israel but to spiritual Israel, or the church.<sup>29</sup> Further, he cannot agree with the dispensationalist's idea of the Jewish character of Matthew's gospel,<sup>30</sup> but he nowhere explains, for instance, how he can interpret in any normal way our Lord's words of commission to the Twelve recorded in Matthew 10:5–10. Anyone who attempts to interpret plainly this commission, which forbade the disciples to go to the Gentiles, and the commission that commands the same group to go to the Gentiles (Matt. 28:19–20) either (1) gives up in confusion or (2) resorts to spiritualizing one of the passages or (3) recognizes a dispensational distinction.

If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist. As basic as one believes normal interpretation to be, and as consistently as he uses it in interpreting Scripture, to that extent he will of necessity become a dispensationalist.

### **SUMMARY**

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Dispensationalism, then, claims to be a help in supplying the answer to the need for biblical distinctions, in offering a satisfying philosophy of history, and in employing a consistently normal principle of interpretation. These are basic areas in proper understanding of the Bible. If dispensationalism has the answers, then it is the most helpful tool in consistent biblical interpretation. If not, it ought to be minimized or discarded.

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## DISPENSATIONALISM

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