

AN OVERVIEW OF DISPENSATIONALISM

THE HISTORY OF DISPENSATIONALISM

- A debate continues today amongst theologians about the origin of dispensationalism
- Dispensationalists argue that the basic beliefs of dispensationalism were held by the apostles and the first-generation church
- Non-dispensationalists often argue that dispensationalism is a new theology that began in the 19th century
- What is clear, though, is that dispensationalism has its roots in early church leaders, but, as a system, it began to take shape in the mid-1800s

Darby

- John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), although not the originator of the system, is often credited with being the one who formally systematized it
- He was a Plymouth Brethren pastor who, in 1819 while at Trinity College in Dublin, came to believe in a future salvation and restoration of national Israel
- Based on his study of Isaiah 32, Darby concluded that Israel, in a future dispensation, would enjoy earthly blessings that were different from the heavenly blessings experienced by the church
- He thus saw a clear distinction between Israel and the church
- Darby also came to believe in the “imminent” rapture of the church that was followed by Daniel’s Seventieth Week in which Israel would once again take center stage in God’s plan
- After this period, Darby believed there would be a millennial kingdom in which God would fulfill His unconditional promises with Israel
- “Darby advanced the scheme of dispensationalism by noting that each dispensation places man under some condition; man has some responsibility before God. Darby also noted that each dispensation culminates in failure.”¹

The Brethren Movement

- Dispensationalism first took shape in the Brethren Movement in early nineteenth century Britain
- Those within the Brethren Movement rejected a special role for ordained clergy and stressed the spiritual giftedness of ordinary believers and their freedom, under the Spirit’s guidance, to teach and admonish each other from Scripture
- The writings of the Brethren had a broad impact on evangelical Protestantism and influenced ministers in the United States such as D. L. Moody, James Brookes, J. R. Graves, A. J. Gordon, and C. I. Scofield
- In the late 1800s, several Bible institutes were founded that taught dispensational theology including The Nyack Bible Institute (1882) and The Moody Bible Institute (1889)

Scofield

- C.I. Scofield (1843-1921) formed a board of Bible conference teachers in 1909 and produced what came to be known as, the *Scofield Reference Bible*
- This work became famous in the United States with its theological annotations right next to the Scripture

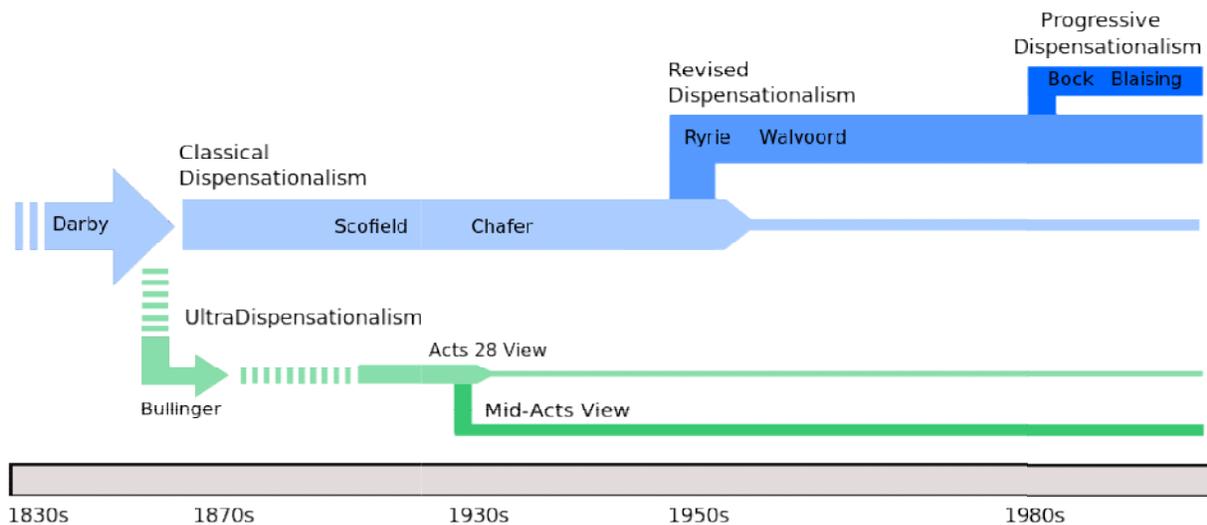
¹ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 516.

- This reference Bible became the greatest influence in the spread of dispensationalism

Dallas Theological Seminary

- After World War I, many dispensational Bible schools were formed
- Led by Dallas Theological Seminary (1924), dispensationalism began to be promoted in formal, academic settings
- Under Scofield, dispensationalism entered a scholastic period that was later carried on by his successor, Lewis Sperry Chafer
- Further promotion of dispensationalism took place with the writing of Chafer's eight-volume *Systematic Theology*
- Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* is one of the premier descriptions of it
- Other dispensational writings include: *Things to Come* (Pentecost), *The Millennial Kingdom* (Walvoord), *Millennialism: Two Major Views* (Feinberg)

History of Dispensationalism



THE NATURE OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Definition

- “dispensation” comes from the Greek word *oikonomia* which comes from two Greek words: *oikos* (which means “house”) and *nemo* (which means “to manage”)
- The word communicates the idea of a stewardship where someone who has authority delegates duties to another who is a subordinate
- It may be defined as a stewardship, administration, oversight, or management of others’ property
- It involves responsibility, accountability and faithfulness on the part of the steward
- The central idea is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household
- This is how *oikonomia* is used in the NT:

Luke 16:2-4 ~ And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your **management**, for you can no longer be manager.’ 3 The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the **management** away

from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 ‘I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the **management** people will welcome me into their homes.’

- Notice some key elements of a dispensation in this passage:
 - There are two parties – one whose authority it is to delegate duties and one whose responsibility it is to carry out those duties
 - There are specific responsibilities
 - The steward is held accountable
 - A change may be made at any time unfaithfulness is found in the steward

1 Corinthians 9:17 ~ For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a **stewardship** entrusted to me.

Ephesians 1:10 ~ with a view to an **administration** suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth. In Him

Ephesians 3:2 ~ if indeed you have heard of the **stewardship** of God’s grace which was given to me for you;

Ephesians 3:9 ~ and to bring to light what is the **administration** of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;

Colossians 1:25 ~ Of this church I was made a minister according to the **stewardship** from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,

1 Timothy 1:4 ~ nor to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than furthering the **administration** of God which is by faith.

- “A concise definition of a dispensation is this: A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”²
- In this world, God is the authority and He is the One who sets the rules and regulations for mankind
- Depending on the era of human history, the rules God has established has different
- God never changes, but what He requires of people does, and He lets mankind know what those changes are
- Thus, “[d]ispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.”³
- “Dispensationalism is a system of theology primarily concerned with the doctrines of ecclesiology and eschatology that emphasizes the historical-grammatical meaning of Old Testament prophetic passages and covenants, a distinction between Israel and the church, and a future salvation and restoration of the nation Israel in a future earthly kingdom.”⁴
- What a dispensation is NOT:
 - It is not a time period – Although a period of time is obviously involved, a dispensation is a stewardship or a way in which God administers His will in this world. So, what He required of Adam is different from Abraham which is different from Moses which is different from Peter and Paul.
 - It is not a different way of salvation – Probably due to some unclear statements made in the past by some dispensational theologians, it has been concluded that dispensational theology teaches different ways of

² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 28.

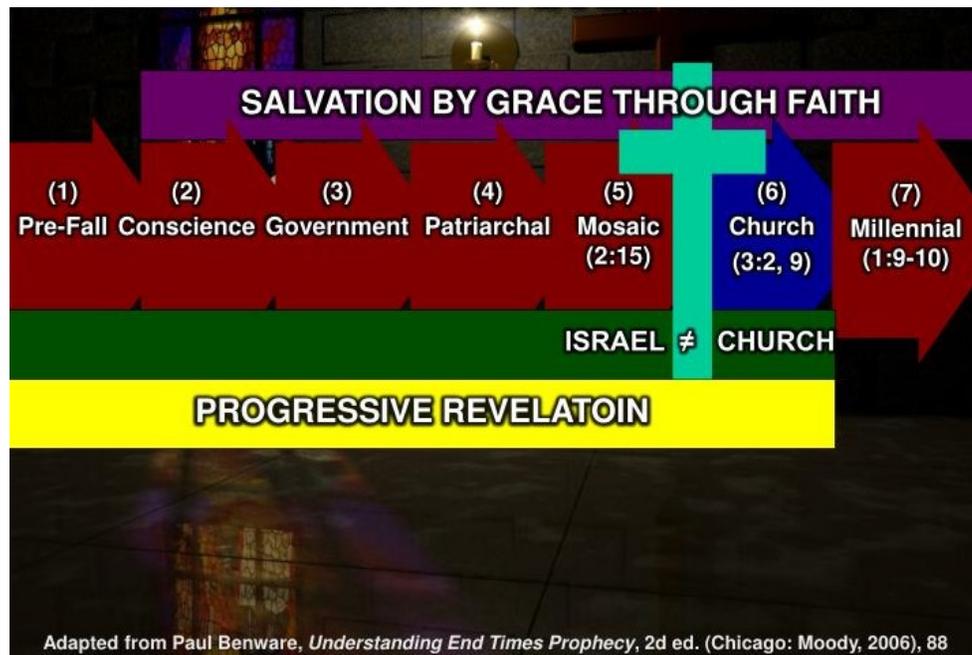
³ Ibid., 29.

⁴ Michael Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 50.

being saved. That is not the case. Salvation has always been by faith based on the finished work of Christ on the cross.

The Progress of Revelation and its Relationship to Dispensationalism

- Progressive revelation is the recognition that God's message to man was not given in one single act but was unfolded in a series of successive acts and through the minds and hands of many men of varying backgrounds
- When interpreting the Bible, it is important to carefully observe this progress of revelation...and dispensationalism helps do so
- "It is the marking off of these stages in the revelation of the purpose of God that is the basis for the dispensational approach to the interpretation of the Scriptures."⁵
- Each dispensation has unique aspects to it that are clearly revealed by God...and new responsibilities are spelled out by new revelation
- For example, everyone observes that the requirements and responsibilities for mankind before the Fall of man and after the Fall are distinctly different...the age before the giving of the Mosaic Law and the age after the Law are obviously not the same...things are different pre-cross of Christ than they are post-cross.
- So it is with all the dispensations



- "Progressive revelation views the Bible not as a textbook on theology but as the continually unfolding revelation of God given by various means throughout the successive ages. In this unfolding there are distinguishable stages of revelation when God introduces new things for which man becomes responsible. These stages are the economies, stewardships, or dispensations in the unfolding of His purpose. Dispensationalism, therefore, recognizes both the unity of His purpose and the diversity in the unfolding of it. Covenant theology emphasizes the unity to the point of forcing unwarranted, inconsistent, and contradictory interpretations of the Scriptures. Only dispensationalism can maintain unity and diversity at the same time and offer a consistent system of interpretation."⁶

Characteristics of a Dispensation

⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

- A number of unique features characterize the various economies in the outworking of God's purpose
- Although features from one dispensation may be incorporated into subsequent dispensations, each dispensation has features that are clearly unique to it
- The following elements distinguish one dispensation each the other:

Primary Characteristics

- A change in God's governmental relationship with man
- A resultant change in man's responsibility
- Corresponding revelation necessary to effect the change (i.e. a new stage in the progressive of revelation)

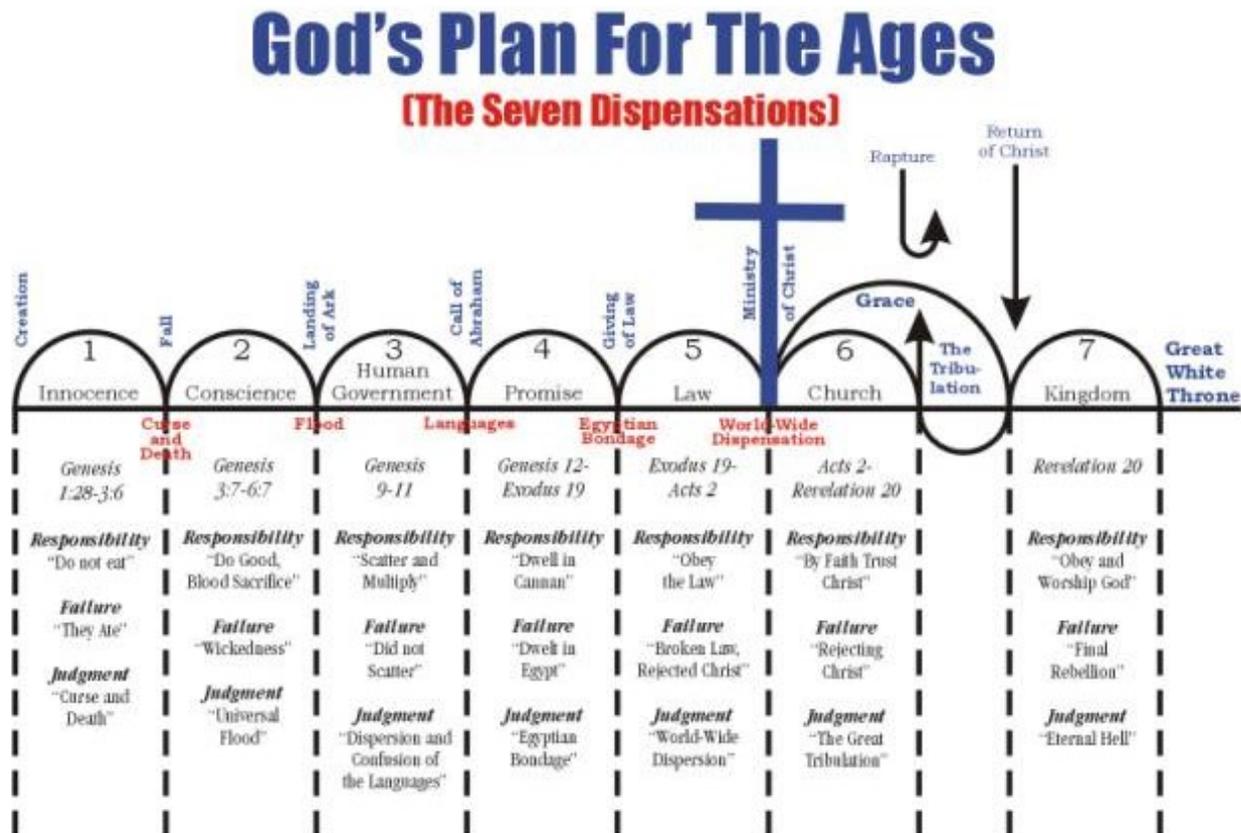
Secondary Characteristics

- A test
 - A failure
 - A judgment
- Thus, in each dispensation God has put man under a test, man fails, and there is judgment
 - In short, a dispensationalist is one who recognizes that God deals differently with people in different ages (this is obvious from the fact that we can eat shellfish and pork, wear mixed fabrics, and don't have to bring a lamb to the altar today)

Number of Dispensations

- The number of dispensations is not as important as recognizing that there are dispensations
- Although there have been slight differences among theologians regarding the number of dispensations, most hold to 7 dispensations:
 1. Innocence (Genesis 1:28-3:6) – Adam and Eve were in a state of unconfirmed holiness
 2. Conscience (Genesis 3:7-8:14) – The conscience (Romans 2:15) was the primary way God governed mankind during this economy; during this time man was responsible to respond to God through his conscience
 3. Government (Genesis 8:15-11:9) – The new revelation of Noah's time included animals given to man to eat, the promise of no further floods, and the institution of capital punishment
 4. Promise/Patriarchs (Genesis 11:10-Exodus 18:27) – Until this dispensation, God related to mankind directly; now God marked out one family and one nation to carry out His purposes
 5. Mosaic Law (Exodus 19:1-Acts 1:26) – The law was given as a constitution to the nation Israel and was in force until the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit
 6. Church/Grace (Acts 2:1-Revelation 19:21) – Although grace is in operation in every age, it is uniquely so in the coming of Christ since it is through Christ that God made His grace known to all mankind
 7. Millennium (Revelation 20:7-9) – “After the second advent of Christ the millennial kingdom will be set up in fulfillment of all the promises given in both Testaments and particularly those contained in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants. The Lord Jesus Christ, who will personally take charge of the running of the affairs of the world during that age, will be the chief personage of the dispensation. It will continue for a thousand years, and man will be responsible for obedience to the King and His laws. Satan will be bound, Christ will be ruling, righteousness will prevail, overt disobedience will be quickly punished. Yet at the end of the period enough rebels will be found to make a formidable army that will dare attack the

seat of government (Rev. 20:7-9). The revolt will be unsuccessful, and the rebels will be cast into everlasting punishment.”⁷



THE *SINE QUA NON* OF DISPENSATIONALISM (OR WHY I AM A DISPENSATIONALIST)

- 3 indispensable elements provide the substance of dispensationalism

A Distinction Between Israel and the Church

- This is probably the most basic theological test of whether a person holds to dispensational or covenant theology
- When the student of the Bible observes the biblical differences (starting with the Abrahamic Covenant) between Israel and the Church, they will almost always end up in the dispensational camp
- To try and make the Church the “new Israel” as covenant theology does is simply not supported by the Scriptures, and it ignores the nature of God’s covenant commitments to Israel
- A number of features mark the distinction between Israel and the church:

1. Different Promises (Earthly vs. Heavenly)

Ezekiel 36:24 ~ For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land

Ephesians. 1:3 ~ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ

⁷ Ibid., 56.

2. Different Seed (Physical vs. Spiritual)

Romans 9:6 ~ For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel

Galatians 3:29~ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise

3. Different Births (Sinai vs. Pentecost)

- Israel became a nation at Sinai (Exodus 19-20)
- The Church began at Pentecost (Acts 2)

4. Different Nationality (Jewish vs. Heavenly)

Jeremiah. 31:31~ 'Behold days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah'

Philippians 3:20~ For our citizenship is in heaven

5. Different Temple (Physical vs. Spiritual)

1 Kings 8:11~ the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord

1 Corinthians 3:16-17~ Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?

6. Different Relationship w/ Christ

1 Peter 2:7-8~ The Stone which the builders rejected... a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense

Ephesians 2:20~ [God's household] having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone

CHURCH	vs	ISRAEL
A mystery unrevealed in prior ages (Eph 3:5)		Never spoken a mystery
Began in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost		Began with the promises of Abraham
"Memberships" is by spiritual birth		Membership is by natural birth
Citizenship emphasis is heavenly		Citizenship emphasis is earthly
Believers are priests		Priests from Israel

- “The present [church] age is something of a parenthesis. From Genesis 12 through the Gospels and deep into Acts, God’s primary purpose dealt with Israel. In the Gospels and Acts, the Lord Jesus is offered to Israel as Messiah. The coming of the kingdom was contingent upon their response. Because of Israel’s negative response, God is now working with the church, distinct from Israel...The church, therefore, is a mystery, never prophesied in the Old Testament...It is neither a “new Israel” nor a new form of the kingdom.”⁸
- Therefore, this has eschatological implications...God is not done with Israel!
- This logically leads to Premillennialism...Christ will return to rescue ethnic Israel and set up a literal 1,000-year rule from Jerusalem
- What is essential to dispensational premillennialism is the belief that the nation Israel is saved and restored with a mediatorial role to other nations in the millennium...this mediatorial role occurs under the headship of The Mediator--the Messiah, Jesus Christ

A Literal Interpretation

- Dispensationalism emphasizes a literal, historical, grammatical method of interpretation
- “The word *literal* is perhaps not as good as either the word *normal* or *plain*, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation often does...To be sure, literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is. This does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within the basic framework of literal interpretation.”⁹
- Thus, the meaning of OT passages is anchored in the OT passages themselves
- Rather than assuming that the NT is the interpreter (or even reinterpreter) of the OT as covenant theologians do, dispensationalists begin with a literal understanding of each OT text
- The key issue relates to authorial intent: What did the prophetic author intend?
- This allows for the biblical writer to use symbolic language, but insists that any interpretation must be based on the author’s intent
- While it is acknowledged that many prophetic passages do contain figurative language and that they are often written in poetic style, one must question whether the method for interpreting prophecy should be distinct from the method for interpreting other kinds of biblical literature
- The question is not between a strictly literal versus a strictly symbolic approach...even the strictest literalist takes some things symbolically
- The differences between literalists and symbolists are relative, rather than absolute, involving questions of "how much" and "which parts" of prophecy should be interpreted symbolically rather than literally
- If one accepts an "absolutely literal" perspective, the text itself becomes the clearcut authority without question

The Glory of God as the Theme of Scripture

- Covenant theologians emphasize salvation as the unifying theme of the Bible...they assume that the unifying feature of the Bible is God’s grace
- Thus, this becomes the lens through which they view all of Scripture

⁸ Stanley Toussaint, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 249.

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 40.

- However, while it is true that a major focus of God’s redemptive activity in both the OT and NT is the redemption of the elect, it is not God’s all-inclusive purpose
- The ultimate goal of history has to be large enough to incorporate all of what God is doing, not just part of it
- “God does have varying purposes for the church, Israel, Gentiles, the saved, the unsaved, holy angels, fallen angels, and the universe itself. All these factors cannot be forced into the confines of the theological covenant of grace.”¹⁰

- Therefore, dispensationalism emphasizes that the unifying theme of the Bible is the glory of God
- Only this theme is broad enough to encompass all that God is doing in the universe
- “To the normative dispensationalist, the soteriological, or saving, program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center. The Bible itself clearly teaches that salvation, important and wonderful as it is, is not an end in itself but is rather a means to the end of glorifying God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14). John F. Walvoord, Chafer’s successor at Dallas Theological Seminary, puts it this way: ‘The larger purpose of God is the manifestation of His own glory. To this end each dispensation, each successive revelation of God’s plan for the ages, His dealings with the non-elect as with the elect...combine to manifest divine glory.’”¹¹

¹⁰ Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy*, 82.

¹¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 40-41.