

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*

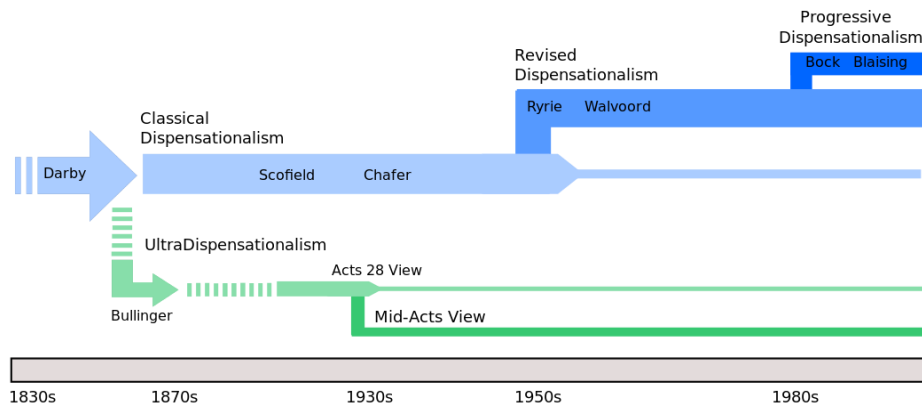
¹ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, 516.

- This work became famous in the United States with its theological annotations right next to the Scripture
- 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.’

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;

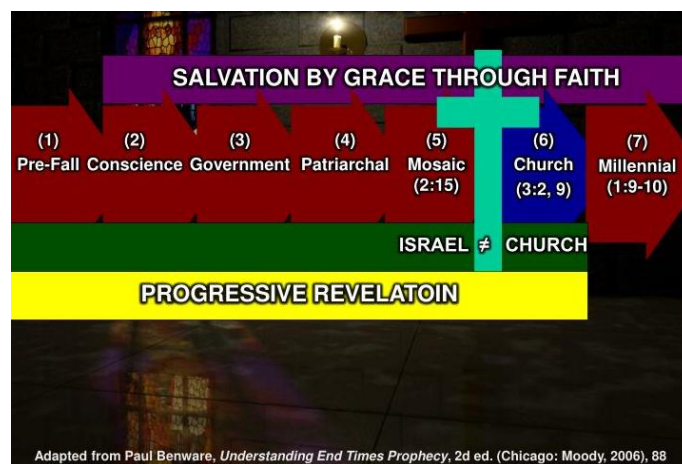
Colossians 1:25 ~ Of this church I was made a minister according to the **stewardship** from God bestowed on me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out the preaching of the word of God,

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 are different
- God never changes, but what he requires of people does, and he lets mankind know what those changes are
- “[A] dispensation is a noticeable era when God administers and deals with His creation in a unique way.”³
- Dispensations are distinguishably different economies in the outworking of God's purposes

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
- “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.”⁴
- Each dispensation has unique aspects to it that are clearly revealed by God...and new responsibilities are spelled out by new revelation



- “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

² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 28.

³ Michael Vlach, *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*, 70.

⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 31.

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.”⁵

Number of Dispensations

- Although there have been slight differences among theologians regarding the number of dispensations, most hold to 7 dispensations:
 1. Innocence/Pre-Fall (Gens 1:28-3:6) – Adam and Eve were in a state of unconfirmed holiness
 2. Conscience (Gen 3:7-8:14) – The conscience (Rom 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 (Gen 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 (Gen 11:10-Ex 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 (Ex 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-Rev 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 (Rev 20:7-9) – Christ will return and set up his kingdom on this earth in fulfillment of the promises contained in the Abrahamic, Davidic, and New covenants and will rule for 1,000 years

WHAT DISPENSATIONALISM IS NOT⁶

It Does Not Teach Multiple Ways of Salvation

- Some have argued that dispensational distinctions between law and grace and Israel and the church inevitably result in multiple ways of salvation
- A note on John 1:17 in the 1909 *Scofield Reference Bible* added to this understanding: “As a dispensation grace begins with the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom 3:24-26; 4:24, 25). The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as the fruit of salvation.”
- Some saw in this statement the belief in two ways of salvation
- However, no credible dispensational theologian or school teaches this

It is Not Tied to Arminianism

- Some critics of dispensationalism have argued that the system is opposed to Calvinism because it is linked with Arminianism
- However, dispensationalism as a system is not primarily about the doctrine of salvation...it is primarily concerned with the doctrine of the church, the doctrine of the end times, and hermeneutics
- Also, although some dispensationalists have Arminian leanings, there are many who are Calvinists (David Turner, S. Lewis Johnson, James Buswell)

⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁶ Adapted from Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 51-73.

It is Not Tied to Antinomianism

- Antinomianism is the belief that it is not necessary to preach God’s moral law and therefore it leads to the lawless conduct
- Some have believed that dispensationalism is antinomian because it asserts that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law and because it asserts that it is possible to be justified without being sanctified
- However, antinomianism is not at the heart of dispensationalism because dispensationalists do not believe that Christians are without any law...they are under the Law of Christ
- Furthermore, “not only is there nothing within dispensationalism that would cause a dispensationalist to separate justification from sanctification, many dispensationalists view justification and sanctification as inseparable.”⁷

It Does Not Lead to Non-Lordship Salvation

- A non-lordship view of salvation holds that repentance and surrender of one’s life to the lordship of Christ are not necessary for salvation...leading to a “free grace” position or “easy-believism”
- While some dispensationalists have promoted a non-lordship view of salvation (Zane Hodges at DTS), the non-lordship view is not a necessary result of dispensationalism
- Many dispensationalists have strongly argued against the non-lordship view (MacArthur, Saucy)

It is Not Primarily About Seven Dispensations

- Although dispensationalism has been usually associated with seven dispensations, these dispensations are not what primarily define dispensationalism
- In other words, belief in seven dispensations is NOT essential to the dispensational system, nor is it primarily what dispensationalism is about
- In fact, the Tribulation and Eternal State should probably not be omitted as eras in which God is working differently than other eras

THE ESSENTIALS OF DISPENSATIONALISM (OR WHY I AM A DISPENSATIONALIST)

- “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.”⁸

A Consistent 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

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 50.

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 40.

- 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
- Thus, in Vlach's words: "The primary meaning of any Bible passage is found in that passage. The New Testament does not reinterpret or transcend Old Testament passages in a way that overrides or cancels the original authorial intent of the Old Testament writers."¹⁰
- Dispensationalism holds to passage priority as opposed to Testament priority...as a result, the meaning of any Bible passage is found in that passage
- If later revelation changes the meaning of earlier revelation, what was the purpose of the earlier revelation?
- "The primary meaning of Old Testament texts is found there. As progressive revelation unfolds, later revelation complements and harmonizes with the older revelation, but it does not change previous Scripture...the New Testament writers do not reinterpret or transcend the original intent of the Old Testament writers. The teachings and themes of the Old Testament are found in the New Testament without reinterpretation."¹¹
- To say it another way, later Bible passages do not transform or change the meaning of earlier passages, nor does the New Testament reinterpret the Old Testament...rather, the meaning of OT passages lies in those passages and the NT builds on them
- There is no need for a NT passage to have priority over an OT passage since all Scripture is inspired by God and makes its own unique contribution
- If later revelation changes or spiritualizes the meaning of earlier revelation, it results in a change of the Bible's storyline
- Thus, dispensationalism believes that the proper way to understand a passage of Scripture is through consistent use of grammatical-historical hermeneutics
- This is the primary feature which distinguishes dispensationalism from non-dispensational systems

The Covenants are Fulfilled in all Their Dimensions

- Dispensationalism views the covenants of the Old Testament as distinct promises made to the nation of Israel
- The unconditional nature of the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic, and New Covenants requires God to fulfill his Word to Israel which necessitates a future realization of those covenantal promises
- "Dispensationalists believe there is strong continuity between the storyline of the Old Testament and the storyline presented in the New Testament. While the New Testament adds details to the Bible's storyline it does not change the story. It does not alter the trajectory of what came before. Dispensationalists believe the covenants, promises, and prophecies of the Old Testament are and will be fulfilled literally through the two comings of Jesus. This includes all physical and spiritual realities along with all particular (Israel, Israel's land) and universal entities (all nations, their lands). While affirming the importance of spiritual realities such as salvation, forgiveness, new heart, and indwelling Holy Spirit, dispensationalists do not believe physical

¹⁰ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

realities are spiritualized or transcended with the coming of Jesus and the New Testament era. This contrasts with non-dispensational systems which often see the New Testament as transcending, transforming, transposing, or spiritualizing the message of the Old Testament.”¹²

A Distinction Between Israel and the Church

- 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

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

¹² Ibid., 77.

CHURCH	vs	ISRAEL
A mystery unrevealed in prior ages (Eph 3:5)		Never spoken of as a mystery
Began in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost		Began with the call of Abraham (Gen.12)
"Membeship" is by spiritual birth		Membership is by natural birth
Citizenship emphasis is heavenly		Citizenship emphasis is earthly
Believers are priests		Priests from Levi
One "new man" of Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:15)		Given Covenants and promises

- “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.”¹³
- All dispensationalists reject “replacement theology” or “supersessionism” in which the NT church is seen as replacing or fulfilling God’s promises to Israel in the OT
- The NT uses the term “Israel” 73 times and it always refers to ethnic Jews, including the disputed reference to Israel in Galatians 6:16
- It is also significant that after the establishment of the church, the NT still refers to the nation of Israel as “Israel” (Acts 3:12; 4:8, 10; 5:21, 31, 35; 21:28)
- “Dispensationalists take seriously that believing Gentiles have been brought near to Israel and the covenants of Israel (see Eph. 2:11-22), but they also point out that the New Testament distinguishes Israel and the church in such a way that rules out the idea that the church is now identified as Israel or that the church entirely inherits Israel’s promises and covenants to the exclusion of Israel...In sum, the Israel/church distinction and the rejection of replacement theology continues to be a defining characteristic of dispensationalism.”¹⁴

Israel Will be Saved and Restored in a Future Earthly Millennial Kingdom

- God is not done with Israel...this logically leads to Premillennialism...Christ will return to rescue ethnic, national 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 Christ
- “What distinguishes all dispensationalists...is belief in a restoration of Israel. The concept of restoration certainly includes the idea of salvation for Israel, but it goes beyond that. ‘Restoration’ involved the idea of Israel being reinstated as a nation, in her land, with a specific identity and role of service to the nations. In a

¹³ Stanley Toussaint, *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, 249.

¹⁴ Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 41, 43.

literal, earthly kingdom – a millennium – the nation Israel will serve a functional role to the nations (Isa. 2:2-4). This point is something all dispensationalists affirm while non-dispensationalists often deny. Even some historic premillennialists who agree with dispensationalists on the issue of a national salvation of Israel and a future millennial kingdom disagree concerning whether Israel will be restored with a unique identity and function that is distinct from the church. Thus, there is a difference between saying Israel will be saved into the church, and saying the nation Israel will be saved and restored with a unique identity and role to other nations in an earthly millennium. Dispensationalists affirm the latter.”¹⁵

KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DISPENSATIONALISM AND COVENANTALISM¹⁶

Hermeneutics

- Ultimately, dispensationalists and covenantalists approach Scripture in a different manner
- Dispensationalists affirm a consistent historical-grammatical or literal hermeneutic applied to all areas of Scripture
- “There are no non-literal or spiritual fulfillments of physical and national promises in the Bible. Nor does the New Testament reinterpret, transcend, transform, or spiritualize promises and prophecies in the Old Testament. With dispensationalism, what you see is what you get in the Bible. Its meaning is on the surface. There is no underlying typological trajectory or canonical progression that erases or transcends the Bible’s storyline or the significance of the details of the covenants and promises in the Bible. Historical-grammatical hermeneutics will discover types in the Bible, but the concept of ‘typological interpretation’ that overrides the plain meaning of Bible texts is not accepted in dispensationalism.”¹⁷

Storyline

- “When it comes to Israel, covenantalism perceives Jesus as the true Israel and that Old Testament promises to national Israel in the Old Testament are shadows that find fulfillment in Him. And when all believers, including Gentiles, become united with Christ, they join ‘Israel’ as well. This means the concept of ‘Israel’ expands to include Gentiles. Thus, the church in Jesus is the new/true Israel and the culmination of God’s plans for His people. There is no need for a restoration of national Israel since Jesus is ‘true Israel’ and the church in Jesus is now Israel.”¹⁸
- “Unlike covenantalists, dispensationalists do not believe the concept of ‘Israel’ expands to include Gentiles. Instead, the concept of the ‘people of God’ expands to include believing Gentiles alongside believing Israelites. It is not God’s plan for all believers to become Israel, but for there to be ethnic diversity in the people of God as the people of God idea includes both Israelites and Gentiles without either losing their ethnic identities. Even in the Eternal State the people of God are referred to as ‘the nations’ (Rev. 21:24, 26).”¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

¹⁶ Adapted from Vlach, *Dispensationalism*, 85-91.

¹⁷ Ibid., 87.

¹⁸ Ibid., 89.

¹⁹ Ibid., 90.