

Fundamentals of Our Faith from the Beginning

Frameworks and the Future

Biblical Theologies: Dispensationalism

2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV)

1. What is Dispensationalism?

- a. οἰκονομία (oikonomia) = stewardship, management, or administration (Luke 16:1-2; Ephesians 1:9-10, "...That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (KJV).
- b. Dispensationalism is a theological framework for Bible interpretation that "sees God as structuring His relationship with mankind through several stages of revelation which mark off different dispensations, or stewardship arrangements. Each dispensation is a 'test' of mankind to be faithful to the particular revelation given at the time. Generally, seven dispensations are distinguished: innocence (before the fall), conscience (Adam to Noah), government (Noah to Babel), promise (Abraham to Moses), Law (Moses to Christ), grace (Pentecost to the rapture), and the millennium."¹ Scripture must be interpreted within the framework of these dispensations.

2. What is the history of dispensationalism?

- a. Dispensationalists argue that this was the teaching of Paul and is found in passages like Ephesians 1:9-10; 3:1-3; Colossians 1:25-27, etc.
- b. Most acknowledge that there is no historical record of dispensational theology until the 19th century and that there are no extent writings from any church fathers or teachers advocating this theological framework.
 - i. Some argue that this teaching was suppressed by the Catholic church.
 - ii. Some argue that Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and other fathers spoke of "dispensations"² and exhibited a pre-understanding of a pre-tribulational rapture. For example Irenaeus wrote, "And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, 'There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.'" But one must finish reading the paragraph, For *this is the last contest of the righteous*, in which, *when they overcome* they are crowned with incorruption.³
- c. Most associate the birth of dispensationalism with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) who founded the Plymouth Brethren and later the Exclusive Brethren.
 - i. In 1827, he came to believe that the kingdom described in Isaiah, etc. did not involve the church but was a separate program. He developed this thinking through 1832.
 - ii. At the same time, he developed his Plymouth Brethren theology including the conviction that even the notion of a "clergyman" was a sin against the Holy Spirit who spoke to all members equally.
 - iii. At this time he also developed his eschatology which taught that Christ would rapture His church before a great tribulation, and his eschatology caught hold, esp. in the U.S.
- d. Darby's eschatology became a focal point in the American prophecy movement and was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible (1909/17).
- e. Other key people and events that have led to widespread acceptance in America:

¹ Desiring God website.

² The fathers cited by dispensationalists all believed the Church to be the fulfillment of Israel and were far from dispensational.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V, chapter 29.

- i. Lewis Sperry Chafer co-founded Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924 which became the flagship seminary for dispensationalism, and he completed his 8 volume Systematic Theology in 1947 which was the first unified summation of dispensationalism.
- ii. Hal Lindsay published *The Late Great Planet Earth* in 1970 which had sold 28 million copies by 1990, and the book spawned a film published in 1978 which garnered 17 million views.
- iii. Charles Ryrie published his study Bible in 1978.
- iv. Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins published *Left Behind* in 1995 and finished the 16 book series with *Kingdom Come* in 2007. The series sold 80 million copies.

3. What are the key beliefs of dispensationalism?

- a. A “literal hermeneutic” must be applied to all areas of scripture including Old Testament prophecies, and this requires that land promises must yet be fulfilled to national Israel.
- b. The Bible reveals seven dispensations in the unfolding of God’s plan for Israel.
- c. There is a lasting distinction between Israel and the church. The promises given to “the people of God” in the Old Testament apply only to national Israel and will be fulfilled in the millennium.
- d. There is a fundamental discontinuity between the Old Testament (Covenant) and the New Testament (Covenant). The Church age is a parenthesis in the larger plan of God for His people Israel and was not prophesied in the Old Testament, it was a “mystery”.
- e. Though God dealt with people differently, the glory of God is the underlying purpose of God in all of history. This is a de-emphasis of *redemption* as the underlying purpose of God.
- f. Though not stated, a belief in a pre-tribulational rapture of the church (a secret rapture) followed by a seven-year Great Tribulation preceding the 2nd coming of Christ followed by a literal 1,000 year millennium is fundamental and treated as essential by most.

4. What are some key arguments for dispensationalism?

- a. A literal hermeneutic is the only right and faithful practice that prevents against speculation or allegorizing or spiritualizing the text.
- b. The OT covenants clearly hold out unfulfilled promises to national Israel:
 - i. Genesis 13:15, “...for all **the land** which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants **forever**.”
 - ii. Genesis 17:7, “I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations **for an everlasting covenant**, to be God to you and to your descendants after you.”
 - iii. 2 Chronicles 13:5, “Do you not know that the LORD God of Israel gave the **rule over Israel forever** to David and his sons by a covenant of salt?”
- c. The Bible teaches eras or epochs or dispensations:
 - i. Acts 17:30, “Therefore having overlooked **the times of ignorance**, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent...”
 - ii. Luke 21:24, “and they will fall by the edge of the sword, and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles **until the times of the Gentiles** are fulfilled.”
 - iii. Eph. 1:10, “That **in the dispensation** of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ...” (KJV).
 - iv. 1 Thess. 5:1, “Now as to the times and the epochs...”
- d. Paul said we must rightly “divide the word” implying interpretive divisions (2 Tim. 2:15 KJV).

5. What are some key arguments against dispensationalism?

- a. The church has always spoken of dispensations of grace and has recognized progressive revelation, but this is very different from dispensationalism.
- b. As far as the land promises go, Joshua says that the Lord fulfilled them all to national Israel: “not one of the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed; *all came to pass*” (Joshua 21:43-45). Do we apply the “literal hermeneutic” here?
- c. The New Testament interprets the Old and clearly identifies the fulfillment of prophecy in Christ (e.g. Isaiah 9:2/Matt. 4:16; Micah 5:2/Matt. 2:6; Hosea 11:1/Matt. 2:15; Deut. 18:15/Acts 3:22).
- d. The New Testament holds out Christ as Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), Israel (Matt. 2:15), and David (Luke 1:32). In other words, He is the fulfillment of all the promises associated with the covenants.
- e. Believers are “in Christ,” and it is in Him that there is neither Jew nor Greek (Gal. 3:28). In other words, all of the covenant promises are fulfilled in Christ, and all believers are in Him.
- f. Paul taught the following:
 - i. That Gentiles were “fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:6).
 - ii. That “those who are of the faith of Abraham” are his children (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:7).
 - iii. That it was “in Christ Jesus [that] the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles” (Gal. 3:14).
 - iv. That “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise.”
- g. Believers are “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17), have “obtained an inheritance” and given a “pledge of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:11, 14), and have “an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God” (Eph. 5:5) and a “share in the inheritance of the saints in Light” (Col. 1:12).
- h. Paul taught in Romans 11 that the Lord is grafting Gentiles into the olive tree, but there is only **one tree**, not two; and it was always God’s purpose to gather the Gentiles into His one tree or one people (1 Peter 2:20 vs. Hosea 1:10-11).
- i. Paul and the other Apostles consistently apply the language of Covenant to the church in ways that clearly associate the church with Israel (cf. “Church of God”, “beloved by God”, “the elect of God”, “the Bride”, “a holy nation”, “treasured possession”, “royal priesthood”, etc.).
- j. Paul designates believers “the Israel of God” in Galatians 6:16 (most likely meaning).
- k. Jeremiah’s new covenant is specifically applied to the church by Jesus and Paul (“new covenant in my blood”) and by Hebrews (8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24) and the language of that covenant clearly ties the church to Israel and Judah (“when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”, Jeremiah 31:31 in Heb. 8:8).
- l. Dispensationalists sever the continuity of Scripture by teaching that the church is a parenthetical period, a sort of “pause” in God’s plan.
- m. Dispensationalists claim to practice a “literal hermeneutic” but in many cases practice a “literalistic” hermeneutic (e.g. Isaiah 2 teaches that there will be a literal tectonic shift lifting the temple of Jerusalem up above all other mountains or that Satan will be bound with a literal chain, Rev. 20:2), and they are inconsistent even with their own method when it does not fit their framework (e.g. Josh. 21:43-45 or 1 Peter 2:9-10).

- n. Dispensationalists have used an interpretive framework to read into the Bible two elect peoples, two new covenants, two returns of Christ, multiple resurrections, and two final judgments.
- o. They have divided up Scripture into Jewish and Gentile portions (e.g. Synoptic Gospels are Jewish, John is Gentile), undermining its continuity and unity.
- p. The dispensational assertion that “the understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies” (Ryrie) is a circular fallacy because it requires one to understand the dispensations before he can properly understand the Scriptures that teach those dispensations.
- q. The absence of dispensationalism in church history and the sketchy history of its development along with significant and continuing revisions raise legitimate and serious concerns.
- r. Dispensational eschatology has spawned no end to foolish speculations about current and future events (e.g. the Soviet Union was Gog, the EU was the ten-horned beast, Apache helicopters were the locusts of Rev. 7:9-10, etc.).