

## Dispensations

People today have little or no sense of history. Their worldview (such as it is) is conspicuously devoid of the historical base that a worldview needs to be coherent. Without a true, history-based worldview, we're unable to understand life and the world we live in.

Human history is not a long succession of random events that, from some obscure beginning eventually end in some form of (typically, human-caused) cataclysm. No, God is sovereign, which means He purposefully controls all events according to His holy will so that His glory is revealed and that He will be glorified. He invented time, and time serves His great purposes.

In the evangelical world, there are covenant theologians and dispensational theologians. Covenantalists\* too lack a coherent, Scripture-based sense of history. Only the dispensational theologian has the understanding of history that's needed today, and it's biblical. So let's think about dispensationalism.\*\*

The covenantalist sees history as a long struggle between good and evil that ends when God says, "Enough!" and abandons His created world and everyone goes into the eternal state. The dispensationalist, instead, sees God purposely administering all human history in discrete eras, climaxing in a glorious Messianic, millennial kingdom here on earth. In other words, in dispensationalism, God is purposely, progressively, moving human history in a direction that consummates His physical creation. Ideal existence, for the covenantalist, is entirely on another, more "spiritual" plane; for the dispensationalist it's in this present physical world.

The unifying principle of all human history, according to the covenantalist, is the so-called "covenant of grace" (thus the term, "covenantalism"). That theological concept is not found in Scripture; it is, they argue, the outworking of salvation thru Christ from the Fall in the Garden to the end of time. Old Testament revelation thus is regarded as merely typological or allegorical of what's in the New Testament. This view of history is contrived. For dispensationalists, the unifying principle is the glory of God as it's expressed in different stewardships, always with a view toward the future. It's the outworking of God's promises for the future during His different administrations of human affairs. For the dispensationalist, revelation is progressive, it develops over time.

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In dispensationalism, the world is like a household that God administers or manages. God dealt with the pre-Flood civilization differently than He does with people since the Flood. Old Testament saints would have to take an animal sacrifice to an altar to worship God. Israelites had the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week as special. The New Testament saint, in contrast, is expected to rest in the atoning sacrifice of Christ, and for him it's the 8<sup>th</sup> day that's special, the day of resurrection, the day that represents new life. Paul spoke to the Athenians of "a former day" when God overlooked their ignorance, in contrast to "now" when God commands repentance of them (Acts 17). Jesus spoke of "the age to come" (Mark 10, for example), and both Paul (Ephesians 1) and the author of Hebrews (chapter 6) do also. Adam and Eve were tested with respect to eating from a certain tree; we today are being tested regarding our response to Christ. Clearly, God manages His household in different ways in different eras or ages.\*\*\* These are dispensations.

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\* Other terms often used for "covenantal" are Reformed, amillennial and Calvinist. Nuances of difference exist, but (with rare exception) they are all non-dispensational and almost always not premillennial.

\*\* No study of dispensationalism is easy. That's because so many expositors promote their own variants of it or dispute one or another of its features. One soon wonders if dispensationalism is a coherent entity. There are those who love it, those who hate it, and those (most people) who don't understand it because it has been so muddled. It is a difficult subject because Scripture is difficult.

\*\*\* This does not mean that God changes. He is immutable, which means (ad intra) that He is constant in Himself. He remains ever faithful to His covenants, for example, and to His great purposes. But (ad extra) He is free to deal with His human creatures in different ways at different times as His purposes unfold. God is not arbitrary or capricious; He works all things in His creation according to infinitely perfect wisdom, justice and goodness. See also Hebrews 1:1,2 and John 1:17.

In each dispensation, God provides new revelation and human subjects are held responsible for their response to it. The relationship of humans with God after the Fall, for example, was more demanding from how it was in the Garden before the Fall. And our relationship with Jesus in this Church age is even more radical and more demanding than that between Israel and the Lord during the O.T. era. Of course, some things stay the same from era to era, dispensation to dispensation, such as the presence of both grace and law, and the necessity of faith and obedience. (It's a caricature, often repeated as if slogans, that grace is for the N.T. believer but law is for the O.T., and that belief is for the N.T. era whereas obedience, "doing," was for the O.T. May the Spirit expunge our minds of such nonsense!) In each age, though, new revelation is given. In each age, both faith and failure occur. And in each age, judgment occurs. In the Bible, God makes promises regarding the future and reveals truths that are to be believed and acted upon, or else. This unites all of Scripture. Scripture is coherent, a unified whole, while at different times as God's decrees unfold, the particulars that define each era differ.

What the dispensations are, the names by which to call them, the number of them, and their boundaries is not something to concern us here. I'm confident that my readers are able to identify them in Scripture. It should be evident, though, that the story of Israel is one dispensation and the story of the Church is another. Israel and the Church are distinct. And the Church is not the future Messianic, millennial kingdom.\* The new heavens and new earth are generally not regarded as a dispensation; the Kingdom is repeatedly stated in Scripture to be eternal. All human history comes to a climax with the messianic, millennial Kingdom. Whether the period of the Patriarchs is preparatory for the story of Israel or a discrete dispensation is controversial.

The biblical covenants don't demarcate the dispensations. The Abrahamic Covenant, for example, spans all of Scripture in its outworking because it anticipates Christ, who ultimately fulfills it. And although the Davidic covenant is part of Israel's story, because its fulfillment is Christ at His Kingdom, it also encompasses Gentiles (see Isaiah 55:3-5). The New Covenant is for Israel; it deals with that nation's failure under the Sinai Covenant. The New Covenant is not in any way for the Church.\*\*

What contributes mostly to the difficulty of studying dispensationalism is the issue of Israel *versus* the Church. God has always had a faithful remnant since early in Genesis, and followers of Jesus are that part of the faithful remnant now being called out from among the gentiles to be grafted into, or joined to, the faithful remnant of Israel. (Follow the logic of Hebrews Chapter 11.) This concept, sadly, was lost in the early centuries of the Church.\*\*\* The Israel vs. Church issue has to do mainly with the interpretation of O.T. prophecies, whether they are to be fulfilled literally, so that they refer to a future restored ethnic Israel, as I argue here, or non-literally (typologically, allegorically, or "spiritually"), as covenantalists do, so that they refer to the Church.

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\* *The relationship of the Church to the Messianic Kingdom is admittedly difficult to explicate. Almost every Bible expositor has his own particular view on this issue. Popular right now in evangelicalism is the inaugurated eschatology ("already/not yet") view, which is that the Kingdom has been inaugurated in the Church and is already operative, but it is not yet fully realized and won't be until Christ returns. I find this unacceptable. The Kingdom is primarily for ethnic Israel, a future repentant, regenerated Nation, but during this Church age Israel is (biblically) still in Exile. A Kingdom has to have territory and a reigning, physically present king, and these criteria can only be met in the future at Christ's return in glory. And let's observe that Jesus does not exert coercive rule over His followers. The messianic millennial Kingdom is in the future. The Church is the Body of Christ, the Bride of Christ, God's adopted son. The Church anticipates the Kingdom, calls the elect to it and prepares them for it.*

\*\* *Much difficulty understanding the dispensations derives from misunderstanding the New Covenant, supposing (wrongly) that it's operating in the Church. Nowhere in the New Testament does any text say or even suggest that the New Covenant is for the Church. The oft-cited 2 Corinthians 3:6 verse is one of 3 metaphors Paul uses in that chapter to defend his ministry, and the Holy Spirit links the three metaphors. Paul is saying that his ministry is New Covenant-like in that it depends on the Holy Spirit. He is NOT saying that his ministry fulfills or extends or depends on or expresses the New Covenant.*

\*\*\* *The early church was premillennial. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, Emperor Constantine, who despised Jews, turned the bizarre views of Origen and Eusebius into essential doctrine for the Church. Origen asserted that the O.T. in its entirety was to be interpreted allegorically. And Eusebius, denying any future millennial kingdom, claimed that the Church replaced Israel as the people of God. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Reformers added the so-called covenant of grace (aka covenant of redemption).*

Metaphors abound in the Hebrew Scriptures, but they can be recognized easily enough. The trees clapping their hands and mountains leaping for joy are metaphors. But when God alone walks thru the pieces (Genesis 15), saying to Abram that may He be as dead and cut up as these animal parts if He fails to fulfill the promise He made that the Land will belong to Abram's descendents—that is *not* metaphor! That is an eternally valid unconditional promise that must be fulfilled in time and space. The covenantalist argues that New Testament should determine the meaning of prior revelation, which essentially renders that promise void because the New Testament makes no reference to the Land. Hey, no wonder the gentilized modern church has little interest in knowing what's in the Old Testament! Dispensationalism takes the text plainly, in its normal sense. Yet we can't be wooden about Scripture's interpretation, because the Holy Spirit, its ultimate author, may have intended more ultimate meanings than are evident. Interpretation can be difficult!

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Now let me explain why dispensationalism is important.\* We must adopt a biblical worldview to understand our character, identity and role in life. We must be gripped by the Bible's timeline, the Bible's understanding of history, not the modern one in Western civilization. So three significant things immediately emerge:

(1) God is not finished with ethnic Israel.\*\* In God's wisdom and justice, Israel is presently in Exile according to God's sovereign will. But the Exile will end, also according to God's will (see Deuteronomy 30 and many texts in the Prophets), and national Israel will be restored. There must therefore be no anti-Zionism or anti-semitism in the Church. Israel is still, and always will be, God's "son," "bride," and "the apple of His eye."

The Church age is a transitional, prophetically un-foreseen dispensation made necessary by the rejection of Jesus at His 1<sup>st</sup> Advent. It has features of both the story of Israel (i.e., serving the Lord by calling the Gentile nations to a knowledge of God) and the future Kingdom (i.e., loving obedience to the King). See Matthew 13:52, the kingdom is like "new treasures as well as old." We in the Church especially have an obligation to bless Israel, or else (Genesis 12:3).

(2) The Daniel 2 statue along with Revelation's visions state prophetically the future of our current era. The present world is under condemnation. God's wrathful judgment upon a world in rebellion is imminent. Failure in the form of apostasy and mass deception will characterize the end of this age. Our engagement with the world we live in should therefore be as tenuous as possible. We're to be living in the present as if we're already in the Kingdom, serving the King and practicing righteousness. The promise of the Kingdom is to be so real to us that, with deep commitment, we serve it in the way that Jesus instructed, by reaching out to all with the Gospel.

And (3), every dispensation, including the one we're in, includes responsibilities with accountability. We can expect to have to give an account to God some day for how we responded to the revelation given us. We dare not presume upon grace. And we dare not be complacent about this, nor indifferent.

Let's be real. Scripture determines reality, not what we see and not what we learn from others. We need to immerse ourselves continually in the Scriptures so that they mold our thinking, our worldview, our character, our identity, our values and desires, indeed, our lives. That is how we glorify God.

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\* The argument has often been made that dispensationalism, like covenantalism, is a man-made system and can be ignored. I hope this essay has demonstrated that that's not the case, that in Scripture differences exist in different eras of history as God administers His world according to His purposes, and that we're responsible for the revelation given us. I reject the assertion that dispensationalism is a theological system; if anything, it's a heuristic, a way to resolve difficulties in interpreting Scripture. If the concept of and use of the term dispensationalism is ignored, may Scripture not be ignored and may the hermeneutic that's used be one that enables a correct understanding of Scripture (2 Timothy 2:15).

\*\* The Church has not replaced Israel as the "people of God," nor has it absorbed Israel into it. The Church is not a new, spiritual Israel, and America is not a new, earthly Israel. When Jesus returns to establish the promised millennial Kingdom, a repentant Israel will be regenerated and become the chief of all nations on earth. It will be like a national resurrection. And it will be glorious. Readers should think carefully about Romans chapters 9 to 11. The Church is grafted into Israel! Not vice versa.