

The Necessity of Dispensationalism

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One of the evident features of the history of Christian doctrine is the fact that the church generally focused its discussions on one area of theology at a time. In our own day the area is eschatology, and discussions of eschatology are being heard in all groups. In conservative circles these discussions are raising questions in another field—dispensationalism. This is not to say that the liberals are unaware of the growing prominence being given to dispensationalism, but it is to affirm that evangelicals are having to give their attention increasingly to the dispensational question. This is shown by John Wick Bowman's pronouncement that the Scofield Bible because of its dispensational teaching "represents perhaps the most dangerous heresy currently to be found within Christian circles" ("The Bible and Modern Religions. II. Dispensationalism," *Interpretation*, 10:172, April, 1956).

Recent and current interest in eschatology is only one of the reasons for the increased interest in dispensationalism. One ventures to predict that if current discussions concerning the rapture question continue, posttribulationists will be forced to do more than just reiterate the usual arguments against pretribulationism, for they will of necessity have to reckon with the entire dispensational approach to the Scriptures. They will be forced to deal with that which they recognize—namely, that pretribulationism is "an essential element" in dispensationalism (George E. Ladd, *The Blessed Hope*, p. 37).

In addition, the rise of ultradispensationalism has focused increased attention on the whole question. The proponents of this view have propagated it widely and in doing so have accomplished at least two things. They have added to their own numbers, and they have done those of us who consider ourselves true dispensationalists the service of causing us to present more detail concerning our position in order that we may distinguish it from their teaching.

Too, those who embrace covenant theology have contributed and doubtless will continue to contribute to the discussion of dispensationalism. The many individuals and groups which follow the covenant theology tradition will surely not stand by if discussions of the dispensational question increase in the coming days, and by that very participation the whole matter will be brought into more prominence. Therefore, because of the increasing interest in eschatology and especially in pretribulationism, because of the aggressiveness of the ultradispensationalists, and because of the ever-present protagonists of covenant theology, one can scarcely agree with the idea that "the trend today is away from dispensationalism—away from the Scofield notes..." ("Is Evangelical Theology Changing?" *Christian Life*, 17:18, March, 1956).

This article is not an answer to anybody. Neither is it a redefining of the dispensational position, for the author does not feel it needs redefining—the able exponents of this and past generations have ably defined it. Rather, it is an attempt to state a basic approach to the concept of dispensationalism, for it is felt that if the features which make up this approach are basic enough, then the concept to which they lead will have to be deemed necessary or at least be given considered attention.

The Necessity of Biblical Distinctions

Though the statement is bold, it may be stated without fear of controversy that 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 a different thing from Judaism. There may be few or many features of Judaism which 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. In fairness, it must be said 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. Berkhof will serve as an example (*Systematic Theology*, pp. 293-301). After rejecting the usual dispensational scheme of Biblical 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 one New Testament dispensation or five periods of differing administrations of God. Thus the covenant theologian finds Biblical distinctions a necessary part of his theology.

The dispensationalist finds his answer to the need for distinctions in his dispensational scheme. The word *dispensation* (*oikonomia*) is a Scriptural term and is found in Luke 16:2–4; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25; and 1 Timothy 1:4. It simply means an administration or arrangement. Now the dispensationalist uses the word theologically as a title for the distinctive administrations of God throughout the entire Bible. For instance, under Moses God administered the world in a distinctive way; therefore, he calls that *administration* (not *period* necessarily) the Mosaic dispensation. To say that it is not valid to use the word this way because the Bible never uses it in specific connection with certain of the dispensationalists’ dispensations is of no consequence. Do we not use the word *atonement* of the work of Christ on the cross even though it is never used that way in the Bible? Certainly freedom must be granted to use a term theologically which may not be used in that way Biblically as long as the theological use is not un-Biblical.

Thus it is clear that all interpreters feel the need for distinctions. Obviously this does not prove that the dispensationalists’ distinctions are the correct ones, but it demonstrates that the concept of the necessity of distinctions is very basic to the proper interpretation of the Scriptures, and it shows that in a certain sense every Christian is a dispensationalist. Chafer correctly observed that “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” (Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, p. 9). Therefore, dispensationalism is based on a valid and basic approach to the Scriptures in the necessity for Biblical distinctions.

The Necessity 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 theology 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” (Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History*, p. 1), 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 proves that dispensationalism alone is the valid system. Notice that the definition centers in three things: (1) the recognition of “historical events and successions” or a proper concept of the progress of revelation; (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 while the covenant theologian regards it as the eternal state. This is not to say that dispensationalists minimize the glory of the eternal state, but it is to 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 as well as in the new 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. McClain points up this contrast very clearly when he says of the covenant theology: “According to this view, 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 of 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” (Alva J. McClain, “A Premillennial Philosophy of History,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 113:113–14, April-June, 1956). Thus in relation to goal in a proper philosophy of history only dispensationalism with its consummating 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 covenant which it is alleged the Lord made with man after the fall 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 perhaps better eschatological, for the differing dispensations reveal the glory of God as He shows off His character in the differing stewardships culminating in history with the millennial glory. If the goal of history is the earthly millennium, and if the glory of God will be manifested then 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). Although the dispensationalist’s principle is much broader and therefore less confining, it must be admitted that this alone does not prove 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 allegorising 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" (James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma*,

p. 303). 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.

Therefore, 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 approach of Biblical distinctions, the approach through the proper concept of the philosophy of history leads to dispensationalism.

The Necessity of Consistent Hermeneutics

On the problem of valid hermeneutical principles much has been written. In relation to the present discussion, the question relates to literal or allegorical interpretation, for if literalism is the valid hermeneutical principle then that is an approach to the Scriptures which if consistently applied can only lead to dispensational theology.

It is not within the scope of this article to rediscuss the entire matter of allegorical and literal interpretation. It must suffice to show that only dispensationalism consistently employs the principles of literal interpretation. Covenant theologians are well known for their stand on allegorical interpretation especially as it relates to the prophetic Word, and they are equally well known for their amillennialism

which is only the natural outcome of allegorizing. Premillennialists who are not dispensationalists also have to depart from literal interpretation at certain points in their eschatology. For example, 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 (*op. cit.*, p. 126). Further, he cannot abide the dispensationalist's idea of the Jewish character of Matthew's Gospel (*ibid.*, pp. 133-34), but he nowhere explains, for instance, how he can interpret in any literal way our Lord's words of commission to the twelve recorded in Matthew 10:5-10. Anyone who attempts to interpret literally this commission which forbade the disciples to go to the Gentiles and the commission which commands the same group to go to the Gentiles (Matt 28:19-20) either gives up in confusion or resorts to spiritualizing one of the passages or recognizes a dispensational distinction. If literal 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 literal interpretation to be, to that extent he will of necessity become a dispensationalist.

The Necessity of Proper Definition

The usually quoted definition of a dispensation is the one that appears in the notes of the *Scofield Reference Bible*: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God” (p. 5). The usual criticism leveled against this definition is that it is not true to the meaning of *oikonomia* since it says nothing about a stewardship and emphasizes the period of time aspect. The criticism may be somewhat valid, for a dispensation is primarily a stewardship, administration, or arrangement and not a period of time. Age and dispensation are not synonymous in meaning even though they may exactly coincide in history. A dispensation is basically the arrangement involved, not the time involved; therefore, a proper definition must emphasize this.

In addition, it is obvious that dispensationalists teach that at least certain features of certain dispensations overlap. Perhaps that idea would more accurately be expressed by saying that each dispensation builds on the preceding ones. Obviously, that means that similar or even the same principles which obtained during former ones are sometimes included in the succeeding one. If a dispensation is an arrangement or economy, then some details of the various arrangements will be the same. Thus, dispensations supersede each other in the sense of building on each other in line with the idea of progress of revelation and the philosophy of history which climaxes in an ultimate goal in time. Therefore, the ideas of dispensations ending, superseding, building, progressing, and having similar and different features must also be included in the definition.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, is it possible to formulate a proper definition of a dispensation? We suggest this one. A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose. If one were describing a dispensation, he would include other things such as the ideas of testing, failure, and judgment, but we are seeking a definition, not a description. The definition proposed, though brief and perhaps open to the criticism of oversimplification, seems sufficiently inclusive. In this theological use of the word *economy* the emphasis is put on the Biblical meaning of the word. Economy also suggests the fact that certain features of some dispensations may be similar. Although socialistic and capitalistic economies are quite different in their basic concepts, nevertheless similar functions of the economy are performed in both systems. Likewise, in the different economies of God’s running of the affairs of this world certain features will be similar. However, the word *distinguishable* in the definition points out the fact that there are some features which pertain particularly to each dispensation and which mark it off as a different economy. The particular features will distinguish, though the distinguishable dispensation will not be dissimilar in all its particulars. Finally, the phrase *the outworking of God’s purpose* in the definition reminds us that the viewpoint in dispensationalism is God’s. These are economies instituted and brought to their purposeful conclusion by God. The distinguishable feature is put there by God, and the purpose is God’s.

Using this definition in light of the above explanation, let us apply it first to the usual dispensational scheme and second to the problem of ultradispensationalism. It is not difficult to justify most of the usual seven dispensations on the basis of this definition. If one is a premillennialist, then the distinguishable economy of God in the millennium during which Christ is visibly present is easily recognized. This present dispensation whose principal, not exclusive, characteristic is grace also is easily justified by the definition. The same is apparent with the

Mosaic dispensation of the law, and the point need not be labored. It is the time between the beginning of creation to the giving of the law that gives rise in some minds to the question of the validity of all the dispensations which are said to belong to that period. However, before the fall of man the arrangement was certainly distinguishably different from that after the fall. Already we have accounted for five dispensations: innocence, whatever name should be given to that which obtained after the fall and to the time of Moses, the law, grace, and the millennial kingdom. The very fact that it is difficult to find a suitable name to cover the entire economy from the fall to Moses ought to make one examine carefully the validity of trying to view that entire period as having only one dispensation operating during it. It should be apparent that up to the time of Abraham God's administration concerned all nations, whereas with Abraham He began to single out one nation, and in the singling out He made a very distinctive covenant with Abraham. Therefore, the distinguishable characteristic of God's dealing with Abraham in promise seems sufficient to delineate the dispensation of promise. The only question that remains is whether or not the dispensations of conscience and government are valid. Suppose there is only one dispensation during this period, what will it be called? If there are two, what are the distinguishing features that justify two?

The problem is complicated by the fact that the revelation of Scripture covering this long period is very brief, but from what is revealed we must seek an answer. It seems to this writer that there is sufficient warrant in God's new arrangement for human government in the time of Noah to distinguish a dispensation at that time (cf. Gen 9:6 with 4:15). If this be agreed with, then there are seven dispensations, and one must admit that the more one studies in the light of a basic definition the conclusion is that there are seven dispensations. It seems to be somewhat fashionable these days to avoid this conclusion or at least to minimize the earlier dispensations, but if one has a consistently workable definition and if one applies it throughout all history, then it seems hard not to conclude that there are seven.

But what of the ultradispensationalists who insist on dividing the present economy of grace? Is something distinguishably different being done since Paul that was not done from Pentecost to Paul? (It matters little for purposes of this discussion whether the ultradispensationalists' dispensation of grace or of the church begins in Acts 9, 13, or 28. The point is that a separate dispensation is made of the Jewish church and of the Pauline church.) What the ultradispensationalist fails to recognize is that the distinguishableness of a dispensation is related to what God is doing, not to what He reveals at the time. It is certainly true that within the scope of any dispensation there is progressive revelation, and in the present one it is obvious that not all of what God was going to do was revealed on the Day of Pentecost. These are economies of God, not of man, and we determine the limits of a dispensation not by what any one person within that dispensation understood but by what we may understand now from the completed revelation of the Word. Actually we today are in a better position to understand than the writers of the New Testament themselves. Ultradispensationalists fail to recognize the difference between the progress of doctrine as it was during the time of revelation and the representation of it in the writings of the Scripture. On this point Bernard has well observed that "there would be a difference

between the actual course of some important enterprise—say of a military campaign, for instance—and the abbreviated narrative, the selected documents, and the well-considered arrangement, by which its conductor might make the plan and execution of it clear to others. In such a case the man who read would have a more perfect understanding of the mind of the actor and the author than the man who saw; he would have the whole course of things mapped out for

him on the true principles of order” Thomas Dehany Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*, p. 35). The distinguishable feature of this economy is the formation of the church which is His body. This is the work of God; therefore, the question which decides the beginning of this dispensation is, When did God begin to do this? not, When did man understand it? Only by consulting the completed revelation can we understand that God began to do this work on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 11:15–16 {Acts 11}; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 1:18), and therefore whether Peter and the others understood it then does not determine the beginning of the dispensation. The distinguishable feature of this dispensation is the formation of the church, and since that began at Pentecost there has been only one economy since that day. The ultradispensationalist can offer only the distinguishing feature of a Jewish church as over against a Gentile church which is the body of Christ, but such a distinction has no validity since there are Jews in today’s Gentile church and since the baptism of the Spirit first occurred at Pentecost. Thus the same economy has been operative since the Day of Pentecost.

We have tried to show in this brief discussion the validity of dispensational theology. It is based on the valid necessity for Biblical distinctions, it alone most fully satisfies a proper philosophy of history, only dispensationalism provides the key to consistent literalism, and properly defined it becomes the only valid system of Biblical interpretation.