



Bible Doctrines III - Survey

Dispensationalism

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF DISPENSATIONALISM

A. It Answers the Need for Literal Interpretation

1. Dispensationalism is the only approach to scripture that gives full authority to the words of scripture. Other systems, such as covenant theology, tend to spiritualize and weaken clear statements of the Bible. God places great emphasis on the very words of the Bible (Deuteronomy 8:3; Proverbs 30:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16).
2. Dispensationalism answers three crucial questions in their proper order:
 - a. What does the passage say?
 - b. What does the passage mean?
 - c. What does the passage mean to me?

B. It Answers the Need for Rightly Dividing

1. Dispensationalism distinguishes between things that are different. It shows how God expected different things from different people at different times.
2. To be correctly understood, God's word must be rightly divided (2 Timothy 2:15; see also 1 Corinthians 2:14).
3. Scriptural truths which must be rightly divided
 - a. Jew, Gentile, and the church of God (1 Corinthians 10:32)
 - b. The two advents of Christ (1 Peter 1:11)
 - c. The different judgments
 - (1) The judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9-10)
 - (2) The judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-32)
 - (3) The great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)
 - (4) Etc.
 - d. Law and grace (John 1:17; Romans 6:14)
 - e. The two natures
 - (1) The old nature (Mark 7:21-23; Romans 7:18-19; Romans 8:7-8)
 - (2) The new nature (Ephesians 4:24; 2 Corinthians 5:17)
 - f. The believer's position and practice
 - (1) Positionally, a believer is pure, sanctified, and complete in every way (Romans 6:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Ephesians 1:5-7; Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 2:10; Hebrews 10:10, 14).
 - (2) A believer's practice refers to his present relationship with Christ. Although his practice changes continually, his position in Christ always remains the same (Colossians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:5-6; Hebrews 10:10 with 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 10:14 with Philippians 3:12).



C. It Answers Apparent Contradictions

1. Dispensationalism recognizes distinctions in what God has said to different people at different times. This distinction clears up what would otherwise be contradictions.
2. A rule to remember is this: **All scripture was written for us but all scripture was not written to us.** In other words, all scripture has a profit for us in our understanding and Christian life (2 Timothy 3:16), but all scripture is not written as a direct command for us to obey.

D. It Answers Doctrinal Heresies

1. Many heresies are the result of trying to follow a teaching that was proper for another dispensation or the attempt to obey a command that was given to someone else, but is no longer in effect.
2. A *dispensation* is a *dispensing* or a *giving out of duties and responsibilities*. The whole concept of dispensationalism is that God progressively changes His requirements of man as He moves time toward the end and brings glory to Himself.

E. It Answers Supposed Conflicts

1. Many systems explain one part of the Bible and leave other parts obscure. Dispensationalism makes sense out of every part of the Bible, whether Leviticus or Hosea or Acts or Revelation. Dispensational distinctions do not destroy understanding, but rather put everything into its proper place.
2. By understanding the differences, the applications to today are much more clear.
 - a. All scripture becomes profitable (2 Timothy 3:16).
 - b. All God's precepts concerning all things are right (Psalm 119:128).

F. It Answers the Purpose of All

1. Through history God unveils the mystery of His will which concludes with the dispensation of the fulness of times (Ephesians 1:9-10).
2. An understanding of history can only be given by God (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
3. A proper philosophy of history will provide the following:
 - a. An ultimate goal or purpose of history toward which history moves.
 - b. An understanding of things that differ and why they differ.
 - c. A concept of progress in the succeeding stages of history.
 - d. A connection between the past and the future with an understanding of where we have come from and where we are going.
4. The dispensationalist sees a unifying principle in history. However, this principle is higher than man's salvation. The purpose, climax, and goal of all history is God's glory. There is no higher goal (Isaiah 43:7; Proverbs 16:4; Romans 11:36; Revelation 4:11).



II. THE DEFINITION OF DISPENSATIONALISM

A. Basic Definition of *Dispensation*

1. Comes from the Latin word *dispensatio* which means management or charge (as in responsibility or duty; care or supervision over someone or something)
2. Related to the verb *dispense* and refers to a dispensing or a distribution; a giving out of something. By an expansion of meaning, it refers to the system by which anything is administered or managed.
3. Definition by C. I. Schofield (p. 5 of his reference Bible) – “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”
4. Definition by Charles Ryrie (p. 28 of *Dispensationalism*) – “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”
5. Definition by Lewis Sperry Chafer (p. 40, Vol. I of *Systematic Theology*) – “As a time measurement, a dispensation is a period which is identified by its relation to some particular purpose of God—a purpose to be accomplished within that period.”

B. Biblical Usage of *Dispensation*

1. A dispensation of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16-17); *emphasizing the responsibility of a messenger*
2. The dispensation of the grace of God (Ephesians 3:2); *emphasizing the distinction of various periods of time*
3. The dispensation of God which is given to me (Colossians 1:25-27); *emphasizing the revelation within a given period of time*
4. The dispensation of the fulness of times (Ephesians 1:10); *emphasizing the end purpose of all distinctions*

C. Common Characteristics of the Dispensations

1. They often have one or more primary messengers.
2. They are revelatory – They are based on special revelations [often covenants or commissions] (see Genesis 9:1-7; Genesis 12:1-3; Romans 16:25-26).
3. They are probationary.
 - a. They include a test or tests of obedience for man (Genesis 2:15-17; Exodus 24:3-8; Romans 11:21-25; Revelation 20:6-9).
 - b. They prove man’s inability to obey or to please God.
 - c. They close with God giving man up to his own way.
 - d. They end with destruction or judgment.
4. They are progressive.
 - a. They move toward the fulness of time.
 - b. They grow in the accumulated revelation of God and His will (Acts 17:30; Galatians 3:21-26).



D. Common Objections to Dispensationalism

1. Dispensationalism describes a changeable God.
 - a. The argument (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8).
 - b. The answer
 - (1) No one denies basic differences (i.e., law to grace). Anyone not taking an animal sacrifice to the temple is a dispensationalist.
 - (2) God's immutability does not mean He always deals with man the same way.
 - (3) What God required of man at one time was not the same as at other times (Acts 17:30; Galatians 3:21-26).
2. Dispensationalism destroys the unity of scripture.
 - a. The argument
 - (1) All scripture is profitable for doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16).
 - (2) No portion of scripture can teach different doctrine than any other portion of scripture; the teachings of scripture must be understood to say exactly the same thing.
 - b. The answer
 - (1) This argument is never taken to its logical end. The reality is that attempting to make all scripture the same causes the spiritualization of or misrepresentation of present truths.
 - (2) The same Bible book that tells us that all scripture is profitable for doctrine also tells us to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).
 - (3) This teaching ignores obvious differences in understanding of any present generation. It also ignores obvious distinctions in doctrines such as acceptable diets.
3. Dispensationalism declares the failure of the gospel.
 - a. The argument
 - (1) The gospel is part of God's perfect plan.
 - (2) God cannot fail in His plan.
 - (3) If this age ends in failure, then God's plan has failed.
 - b. The answer
 - (1) God's plan does not fail, but man's disobedience is the failure.
 - a) Adam failed to remain in the garden in Eden.
 - b) Israel failed to maintain her kingdom because of sin.
 - c) The law's weakness was man's sinfulness (Romans 8:3).
 - d) How are these different from the church age ending in another failure of man to follow God's plan?
 - (2) In reality, dispensationalism is the only doctrinal system that completely establishes the success of God's plans for man.
 - a) The earthly paradise offered to Adam will be realized in the new earth.
 - b) The earthly kingdom offered to Israel will be realized in the kingdom age.
 - c) The heavenly home promised to us will be realized.
 - d) God, not man, will receive the glory for all.