

# DISPENSATIONALISM EXAMINED

*Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. (Rom 5:14-15)*

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There are some students of theology who misunderstand that premillennialism (i.e. the doctrine that Christ will return to destroy this present evil world system so as to set up His kingdom here on a renewed earth and rule a thousand years) is dispensationalism. In so doing, they have failed to realise that there are three main schools of theology, namely, (1) the dispensational, (2) the reformed-amillennial, and (3) the reformed-premillennial schools. All dispensationalists are premillennialists, but being premillennial does not necessarily make one dispensational. Premillennialism is also the eschatological view of a group of reformed scholars. J.O. Buswell's, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, represents the reformed-premillennial faith. It must be categorically stated that the reformed or covenantal belief of God's plan of salvation does not militate against a premillennial understanding of the end-times. The Bible-Presbyterian Church and the Far Eastern Bible College are thus not dispensational, but reformed-premillennial.

## **What is “Dispensationalism”?**

What then is dispensationalism? The word “dispensation” comes from the Greek *oikonomia* (literally “house law”) which means “stewardship,” or “administration.” For a time, dispensationalists

were not able to agree among themselves whether a dispensation is a period of man's stewardship, or a period of God's administration. Lewis Sperry Chafer, for example, said that a dispensation is "a stage in the progressive revelation of God constituting a *distinctive stewardship or rule of life.*" Charles C. Ryrie, on the other hand, explained that in a dispensation, "God is . . . *administering its affairs according to His own will* in various stages of revelation in the process of time." So, is a dispensation a human stewardship or a divine administration? It took quite a while before it is finally agreed that it is both. The doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary (*the dispensational school*) defined the dispensations as "stewardships by which God administers His purpose on the earth through man under varying responsibilities."

## **How did Dispensationalism Come About?**

Dispensationalism may be traced to J.N. Darby (1800-1882) who was an ordained minister of the Church of England. Darby, however, was dissatisfied with the strict clericalism found in that Church, and joined a group of like-minded men who did not see the need for a trained, and an ordained ministry. Everyone was a "pastor" and could preach and teach the Word regardless of whether he was

equipped to do so or not. He became one of the important leaders of the Plymouth Brethren movement. Having a prolific pen, Darby left behind at least 53 volumes (each volume containing about 400 pages) of his writings. He interpreted the Bible in terms of a series of dispensations.

C.I. Scofield (1843-1921) was closely associated with the Plymouth Brethren, and through them he received Darby's teachings. Scofield was so enamoured with Darby's dispensationalism that he systematised his theology. In 1909, he published his Reference Bible which promoted and popularised dispensational theology. He compartmentalised the Scriptures into neat dispensational sections. This made it an extremely attractive Study Bible.

Dallas Theological Seminary, under its founder Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952), became *the* School to champion dispensational theology. Till today, it is unashamedly dispensational. Its dispensational distinctive is clearly spelled out under Article V of its doctrinal constitution where covenant theology is unequivocally rejected. [Covenant theology sees only one unifying dispensation (better termed "covenant") since the fall of Adam when God promised a divine Saviour who will save His people from sin (Gen 3:15, Rom 5:12-21)].

## **What are the Dispensations in the Bible?**

Scofield divided the Bible into seven dispensations: (1) Innocence (Gen 1:26-3:24), (2) Conscience (Gen 4:1-7:24), (3) Human Government (Gen 8:1-11:26), (4) Promise (Gen 11:27-Exod 18), (5) Law (Exod 19:1-Acts 1:26), (6) Grace (Acts 2:1-Rev 19:21), and (7) Kingdom (Rev 20:1-22:21).

It must be said that there is nothing wrong in seeing dispensations in the Bible. Covenant theologians like Charles Hodge, and Louis Berkhof have their own dispensational schemes but all under the umbrella of the covenant of grace. There are not seven dispensations, but only two: (1) the dispensation (or covenant) of works (Gen 1:1-3:14), and (2) the dispensation (or covenant) of grace (Gen 3:15-Rev 22:21). God instituted the covenant of grace in Gen 3:15. The Lord Himself was the first Preacher of the Gospel when He declared, "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." The Lord promised a Saviour from the seed of a woman—the virgin-born Son of God—who will save His people from sin (Isa 7:14, Matt 1:21-23). The covenant of grace consists of the Old Testament and the New Testament. They differ in administration, but not in

substance. The Mediator of both Testaments is the same, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). The means of salvation is also the same—by grace through faith (Hab 2:4, Rom 4:9-25, Gal 3:7-9, Heb 11:6).

The problem with dispensationalists is in their *application* of their theological system. For example, they draw very sharp lines between each of the periods, and especially so between the dispensation of law and of grace. They say that the dispensation of law and of grace do not mix. Since law and grace are like water and oil, what God has given in the dispensation of law, namely, the Moral Law (i.e. the Ten Commandments) is not applicable to those living in the dispensation of grace. The Law has been abrogated, and is therefore not binding to those who live in this age of grace. The question remains: How can the Ten Commandments which is a reflection of the divine character and holy demands of God not be binding to us today? Till today, the Law functions as a sword to slay the reprobates in their stubborn rebellion against God (Rom 3:19-20). But to Christians, the Law becomes a torch to light up the righteous paths they ought to take in this dark and sinful world (Josh 1:7-8, Neh 9:13, Ps 19:7, 37:31, 40:8, 119:33,34,97,105, Prov 6:23, Rom 7:12,22). [For an excellent refutation of the dispensational view of the Law, read Dr Timothy Tow's, *The Law of*

*Moses and of Jesus* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1986)].

Dispensationalists today are beginning to see the weakness of their traditional dispensational divisions. They now reduce the dispensations to three: (1) Law, (2) Grace, and (3) Kingdom. Others prefer to term them (1) Old Testament, (2) New Testament, and (3) Millennium. However, the problem of application still exists. They continue to insist that the Moral Law as a whole has been cancelled, but its *principles* still apply. This begs the question: Is not the Moral Law a set of principles for godly living? This is simply an attempt by dispensationalists to have their cake and eat it too.

## **Dispensational Antinomianism**

The dispensational aversion to the Moral Law has led some dispensationalists to advocate that salvation involves receiving Jesus only as Saviour, but not as Lord. This has to do with the “Lordship Salvation” debate. The whole controversy arose when John MacArthur Jr. wrote his book—*The Gospel According to Jesus*—where he propounded that a person must receive Jesus both as Saviour and as Lord in order to be saved. In his book, he attacked Dallas Theological Seminary for teaching that it is not necessary and even unreasonable to impose the need to surrender one’s life to God as an added

condition of salvation. Out of Dallas came two rebuttals; one from Zane Hodges—*Absolutely Free*—which represents the *radical* non-Lordship position, and Charles Ryrie—*So Great Salvation*—which represents the non-Lordship view. Hodges’ radical non-Lordship view which is tantamount to easy believism is to be rejected. Both Ryrie and MacArthur have their valid points. Both are really speaking of the same thing but from two different perspectives; a case of Paul (Rom 4:2-3) and James (Jas 2:21-23).

Reformed theology teaches that saving faith (*fides salvifica*) consists of these three factors: The (1) knowing (*noticia*) of the Word of God, (2) agreeing (*assensus*) to the Word of God, and (3) willingness (*fiducia*) to obey the Word of God. Romans 10:9 says, “That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the LORD Jesus (which means SAVIOUR), and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Saving faith is not only intellectual (i.e. of the mind), it must also be volitional (i.e. of the heart).

Therefore, the salvation equation is neither (1) Faith + Works = Salvation, nor (2) Faith = Salvation – Works, but (3) Faith = Salvation + Works.



## Dispensational Calvinism

Most dispensationalists are four-point Calvinists. The point they reject is the third point—Limited Atonement. They believe that the atonement of Christ is *unlimited* in both its sufficiency and efficiency. Christ died sufficiently and effectively for the whole world, though only the elect are saved. This is no different from Arminian view of the atonement. The Calvinistic expression of the atonement is that the cross-work of Christ is “sufficient for all, efficient for the elect.” [For elaboration, read the “Desiderative (Will of God),” by Timothy Tow, in *The Clock of the Sevenfold Will of God* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1991), 40-6].

There are also dispensationalists who believe that the atonement is unlimited in the sense that it includes non-soteriological aspects like the restoration of the physical or created world order during the time of the millennium. Christ’s atonement made it possible for the lion to live peaceably with the lamb during that time (Isa 11:6-7, Rom 8:22-23). It is true that the whole troubled creation is groaning for God’s redemption. But redemption will come only when Christ returns to set up His millennial kingdom. The problem here is not in that teaching but in the unnecessary dispensational

imposition of an eschatological point onto a soteriological system.

## **Dispensational View of the Church and Israel**

Dispensationalists see a *distinction* between Israel and the Church. According to His eternal counsels, God is dealing with two groups of His people throughout biblical history, namely, (1) Israel as a nation, and (2) the Church as the body of Christ. This position is taken because dispensationalists employ literal/normal hermeneutics in their interpretation of prophetic Scripture. The prophecies and promises of the Bible which God has given to Israel must find fulfilment in Israel. Such passages should be taken at face value, and not spiritualised away to refer to the Church. The golden rule of interpretation is this, “When the plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense.” For example, God promised David that his son will have a physical throne and kingdom (2 Sam 7:12-13). Thus, Christ—the Son of David—must sit on the throne of his father one day to rule over the whole earth (cf Acts 1:6). And Christ will do just that when He returns to rule over a rejuvenated world in the millennium. The nation of Israel occupies a prominent place in God’s plan for the last days. He has not given up on Israel. Israel being the natural

branch will be grafted back to the good olive tree at the divinely appointed time (Rom 11:24-26). This is one thing we can *agree* with the dispensationalists; they are *correct* in their *eschatology*. [Read Timothy Tow, *Prophescope on Israel*, with a foreword by John C. Whitcomb (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1992), for a discussion on Israel's place in the end-times].

## What Constitutes Dispensationalism?

The *sine qua non* (i.e. essential elements) of dispensational theology are the (1) distinction between Israel and the Church, (2) literal interpretation of prophetic texts, and (3) unifying principle of the glory of God. We, as reformed-premillennialists, can agree to all three points. For us, the point that may cause some difficulty is the third, but the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 2.1 states, "God . . . [works] all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, *for His own glory*."

Therefore, have we as Bible-Presbyterians become dispensational? No, because we do not hold to a dispensational scheme but a covenantal one. Covenant theology is succinctly expressed in our doctrinal constitution—*The Westminster Confession*

*of Faith*—in Chapter VII, “Of God’s Covenant with Man.” Neither would dispensationalists accept reformed-premillennialists as belonging to their camp. This is because dispensationalists do not agree that the dispensations are “different methods of administering the so-called Covenant of Grace.” Dispensationalists see the divine goal as the glorification of God, while covenant theologians see the divine goal as the salvation of man. To us, the glory of God is not so much the goal but the *result* of God’s salvific work. Dispensational theology is a *discontinuous* system; it uses a chopper to cut up the Bible into separate pieces. Covenant theology, on the other hand, is a *continuous* system; it uses a needle with a scarlet thread to tie up the whole Bible. Although we accept the premillennialism of dispensationalists, we categorically reject their theological grid.



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