

WHY
DISPENSATIONALISM
MATTERS

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The Doctrinal Basis of Our Curriculum

A more detailed statement with references is available upon request.

- The verbal, plenary inspiration of the Scriptures
- Only one true God
- The Trinity of the Godhead
- The Holy Spirit and His ministry
- The personality of Satan
- The Genesis account of creation
- Original sin and the fall of man
- The virgin birth of Christ
- Salvation through faith in the shed blood of Christ
- The bodily resurrection and priesthood of Christ
- Grace and the new birth
- Justification by faith
- Sanctification of the believer
- The security of the believer
- The church
- The ordinances of the local church: baptism by immersion and the Lord's Supper
- Biblical separation—ecclesiastical and personal
- Obedience to civil government
- The place of Israel
- The pretribulation rapture of the church
- The premillennial return of Christ
- The millennial reign of Christ
- Eternal glory in Heaven for the righteous
- Eternal torment in Hell for the wicked

Alex Bauman, Editor

Why Dispensationalism Matters

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Dr. George Gunn contributed the commentary on which this study is based. Dr. Gunn has been a professor of Bible, Biblical languages, and theology at Shasta Bible College since 1986 and a member of the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics since 2008. His deep knowledge of dispensationalism makes this study both valuable and accessible.

Preface

What is dispensationalism? How is it different than covenant theology? Do the differences really matter if we all make it to Heaven in the end?

Dispensationalism does matter because it is more than just a theology or a way to organize history. Dispensationalism comes from a careful, literal interpretation of Scripture. In fact, it is defined as much by its literal approach to Scripture as it is by its doctrines. This study employs that consistently literal interpretation of Scripture to help you understand Israel, the church, Christ's present ministry, the Rapture, Tribulation, Second Coming, and the events leading up to the millennial Kingdom.

This study also explains covenant theology and its dependency on spiritual interpretation of Scripture. As a result, you will be able to recognize the difference between covenant theology and dispensationalism.

In the end you will have a highly valuable framework for understanding the Bible that will enhance your personal study of Scripture.

What Is Dispensationalism?

Theme

Dispensationalism is a natural product of literal interpretation of the Bible.

Memory Verse

“Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31).

GETTING STARTED

Bits of information about dispensationalism and strong vocal opinions against it have left many people confused about what dispensationalism actually is. This course is the answer to all the confusion and suspicion. It will provide concrete answers to what dispensationalism is and why it is so important.

1. What word comes to your mind when you hear the word *dispensationalism*?
2. What questions do you have about dispensationalism?

When you have completed this course, you will understand God's working in such realms as the church, Israel, the ministries of Christ, and future events.

LEARNING DISPENSATIONALISM

What Dispensationalism Is Not

Probably the most common misconception about dispensationalism is that it is a way of thinking about prophecy. There is a prophetic system that results from dispensationalism, but it is not essentially a prophetic system.

Another misconception about dispensationalism is that it is Christian escapism. This misunderstanding is based on the dispensational view that the church will be raptured before the Tribulation commences. Opponents of dispensationalism think that this is simply wishful thinking.

3. Read Revelation 6:3–8. Which of the occurrences in this snapshot of the Tribulation would you want to escape?

Wanting to escape the horrible circumstances of the Tribulation does not mean dispensationalism was developed as a means to do so. It is true that if one views the Bible from a dispensational perspective, he cannot fail to come to the conclusion that the Rapture will occur before the tribulation period begins. But as with the first misconception, dispensationalism is essentially something other than a prophetic scheme of the end times.

The third misconception about dispensationalism is that it is a system of dividing up time according to time periods known as *dispensations*. Dispensationalists do often make charts to show the divisions of time, but the charts showing the division of time are a byproduct of a careful study of the Bible. The chart is not what defines dispensationalism.

4. What must be true of dispensational charts in order for them to be useful?

Non-dispensationalists, such as those who hold to covenant theology, also believe that the Bible presents a sequence of varying dispensations throughout time. So dividing time is not unique to dispensationalism.

What Dispensationalism Is

In determining what dispensationalism is, we should consider the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. The phrase *sine qua non* (pronounced, *seen'-aye kwa known*) is Latin and means *that without which not*. It is a phrase used to describe the absolutely essential components of a system. Dr. Charles Ryrie identified three essentials, or the *sine qua non*, of dispensationalism. The essentials are (1) the distinction between Israel and the church, (2) literal interpretation of the Bible, and (3) an identification of the glory of God as the underlying purpose of God in the world.¹

Distinction between Israel and the Church

5. Read 1 Corinthians 10:32. What distinct groups are mentioned by the apostle Paul?

If we hold consistently to a literal interpretation of the Bible, we find that Israel and the church form two distinct and separate entities. The term *Israel* occurs over 2,500 times in the Old Testament and never refers to the church. The term *church* occurs 110 times in the New Testament and never refers to Israel. However, non-dispensationalists tend to merge these two into one group of the elect people of God. Many non-dispensationalists believe that Israel in the Old Testament was really part of the church, and the church in the New Testament is what they describe as *the true Israel*.

6. Have you thought about the implications of confusing Israel and the church? What concerns, if any, come to your mind?

Distinguishing Israel from the church does matter. First of all, it's important because the Bible teaches such a distinction, and it's not up to us to judge what is important in the Bible.

7. Read 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. Why is interpreting the Bible literally absolutely necessary?

The key word in 2 Timothy 3:16 is *all*. No one has the right to relegate any part of the Bible as unimportant.

A second reason to distinguish Israel from the church is that God made promises to Israel that do not belong to the church, and He made promises to the church that do not belong to Israel. If we fail to make the proper distinction between these two groups, we may be expecting God to do something for us that He never promised. Belief that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament have been transferred to the church in the New Testament is known as *supersessionism* or *replacement theology*.

In order to make supersessionism work, many of the promises made to Israel need to be interpreted in a non-literal fashion, so that the land of Canaan becomes Heaven, the Jordan River becomes death, bountiful crops become spiritual blessings, and so forth. This introduces confusion into the way we understand the Bible. If it can't be understood literally, then its interpretation is subject to the whim and fancy of each individual interpreter.

8. Read Numbers 13:23–25. In a non-literal interpretation scenario, what might you conclude the grapes of Eschol represent for today?

9. Could anyone tell you that your interpretation was wrong in a non-literal interpretation scenario? Explain.

Another problem with supersessionism is that it portrays God as being unfaithful. If God made promises to Israel but decided to fulfill those promises with someone else, then it implies that God deceived Israel.

10. How much trust would you have in God if He was blatantly unfaithful to His promises to Israel?

11. How has God's faithfulness to Israel bolstered your trust in God?

A third reason for maintaining a distinction between Israel and the Church is that failure to do so has historically led to racial discrimination against the Jews, called anti-Semitism. This anti-Semitism is related to the problem of supersessionism as described above. When the apostle Paul encountered anti-Semitic attitudes among the Gentile Christians in Rome, he wrote to address it (Rom. 11:19, 20). Those whom he called *broken off* were the Jews. The Roman Christians believed they had been grafted in as a permanent replacement for the Jews.

12. Read Romans 11:19, 20. What did Paul tell the Christians regarding their attitude toward the Jews?

A haughty attitude among professing Christians historically has led them to label the Jews as *Christ killers*. Professing Christians used that label as justification for crusades in which they mercilessly slaughtered thousands of Jews.

Finally, recognizing a proper Biblical distinction between Israel and the Church explains the prophecies of Christ's future Kingdom on the earth. The Bible is clear that Christ is returning to rule on earth for a thousand years in a Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and prosperity (Rev. 20:1–6). This literal view of the Kingdom is found not only in Revelation 20, but also in a multitude of Old Testament prophecies about the Kingdom of the Messiah. Failure to recognize a distinction between Israel and the Church usually leads to a denial of the reality of a future, literal Kingdom of Messiah on the earth—a position known as *amillennialism*.

Consistently Literal Interpretation of the Bible

This section will help you understand why some Christians might opt for a non-literal interpretation for some Scriptures. The answer comes from a review of key points in history.

Historically Jesus and the apostles held to a literal interpretation of the Old Testament (Matt. 12:40; 19:4, 5; Heb. 11:17–19). And the normally accepted method of interpreting the Bible by the Jews of the first century AD was the literal method of interpretation. As a result, the early church of the first two centuries was almost exclusively premillennial.

One notable exception to this normal practice was a scholarly Jew named Philo who lived in Alexandria, Egypt (25 BC–AD 50). Philo felt that some of the Old Testament stories were embarrassing and didn't adequately honor God, so he borrowed a novel idea from the Greeks. The Greek gods were capricious, vacillating, lustful, power hungry, and immoral. So the Greek philosophers devised a method of non-literal interpretation whereby they could find hidden behind the literal meaning of their texts about their gods, a deeper, spiritual meaning that was more honorable to their national religion. This method of interpretation is known either as allegorical interpretation or spiritual interpretation. Philo felt that he could adapt this same method of interpretation to the text of the Old Testament, and he became quite a popular Bible teacher among the Jews of Alexandria.

13. What are some Old Testament accounts that someone like Philo might call embarrassing to God when interpreted literally?

Over a century after Philo, a Christian scholar in Alexandria named Origen (AD 184–254) began using Philo's allegorical method of interpretation on both the Old and New Testaments. Until Origen, Christians had practiced literal Bible interpretation almost exclusively. Origen's method gained some popularity, but mostly locally in Alexandria. But in the fourth century an influential Christian theologian named Augustine (AD 354–430) sought for a way to understand the book of Revelation without requiring an earthly Millennium. So he adopted Origen's allegorical interpretation. Augustine's adopted method of interpretation was

subsequently spread as the result of a political situation. In AD 135 the Emperor Hadrian expelled all Jews, including Jewish Christians, from the Holy Land. The churches in Israel consequently lost their Jewish pastors who practiced literal interpretation. Their Gentile pastors were eventually influenced by Greek thought and by Augustine's allegorical interpretation in particular. The Gentile pastors soon became a catalyst for the spread of allegorical interpretation, making it the new normal until the Protestant Reformation about a thousand years later.

14. Read 2 Timothy 4:2. What important charge did the Gentile pastors fail to keep?

15. Read 2 Timothy 4:1. Why must pastors be careful to observe Paul's charge?

Reformers such as Wycliffe, Luther, and Calvin were of the conviction that the only acceptable way to understand the Bible was to take it literally. They all rejected the allegorical method that had become the norm through the middle ages. In the sixteenth century, this led the Reformers to rediscover the doctrine of justification by faith. In the nineteenth century, the same devotion to a literal interpretation led John Nelson Darby to begin systematizing dispensationalism. Employing a literal interpretation of the Bible, Darby noticed both a distinction between Israel and the Church and a distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming. These observations led to further conclusions that eventually resulted in what we now know today as dispensationalism. But many in the Reformed tradition, despite their honoring of literal interpretation, continued to hold on to the supersessionists and amillennial ideas of the original Reformers, and this resulted in an inconsistent application of literal interpretation. These Reformed theologians were literal in their interpretation of most of the Bible, but when it came to matters of the second coming of Christ and the Kingdom they continued to practice an allegorical method of interpretation.

Recognition of God's Glory as His Underlying Purpose

The final distinguishing characteristic of dispensationalism is that it views the glory of God as being the basic underlying purpose of God in all He does. Many non-dispensationalists generally give assent to this point, at least in word. For example, the major non-dispensationalist catechism, the Westminster Catechism, states that the chief end of man is *to glorify God and enjoy Him forever*. So you might wonder why this is considered a characteristic of dispensationalism. It is important here to differentiate between the Christian's primary calling—redemption—and God's primary purpose in working in the world—to glorify His name. To be sure, there is nothing more precious and important to a sinner saved by grace than the gospel. When viewed from the perspective of man, salvation is the most important theme there could possibly be. But things look different from God's perspective. The work of redemption is a main focal point of God in the way He relates to His creation. But salvation is not the only purpose that God has in the world. For example, God has a purpose for the family, a purpose for human government, a purpose for the physical creation, and a purpose for the angels. None of these has anything to do directly with the work of redemption, but they all have to do with glorifying God. Consequently dispensationalism has a more comprehensive view of God's purposes in the world than non-dispensational systems.

Virtually all non-dispensational approaches, such as covenant theology, make salvation the focal point of their theological systems. Covenant theology is controlled primarily by what they refer to as the Covenant of Grace. Basically, all of God's dealings with His creation are summed up in terms of what God is doing to bring about the salvation of the elect. Reformed Theology is seeing resurgence in popularity among many Christians today, and this is reflected, among other things, in the preponderance of *gospel-centered* themes.

Dispensationalism does not deny the importance of the Gospel. If anything, dispensationalists have generally been known for being very evangelistic. But in dispensationalism, the work of redemption is understood as being part of a broader theme of glorifying God (1 Cor. 10:31–33).

16. Read Ephesians 1:3–14. What is the ultimate reason for salvation? (See verses 6, 12, and 14.)

Dispensationalism provides a proper Biblical foundation for understanding not only God's purposes in salvation, but also for other means of bringing Him glory.

The Dispensations

Before moving past this first lesson, it would be good to survey the seven dispensations to provide a context for future lessons. When used in a theological sense, the word *dispensation* refers to an administration of God, or the way in which God administers His affairs in the world. Consistently literal interpretation of the Bible yields seven dispensations.

Innocence. Before the Fall, while Adam and Eve were still in their state of innocence in the Garden of Eden, God administered his program through the leadership of Adam.

Conscience. After the Fall the administration changed. Worship included sacrifice. And we can presume that man responded to God based on the dictates of his conscience since there is no record of an oral or written revelation to man.

Human Government. After the Flood, God gave to human government the responsibility of capital punishment, He gave man the right to eat meat for the first time, and He promised never to wipe out all living creatures by a flood again.

Promise. God made a promise to Abraham and began to work in the world specifically through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Law. Still working through descendants of Abraham, which became known as Israel, God gave specific, detailed laws in the Mosaic Covenant. The laws were to mark Israel out as distinct and separate from other nations so they might be a light to those nations.

Grace/Church. The Mosaic Covenant came to an end at the cross and God began administering His affairs through a new group called the church, or the Body of Christ. The church consists of individuals redeemed by faith in Christ regardless of their nationality. This is the present dispensation.

Kingdom. The final dispensation is the future Kingdom of the Messiah, a 1,000-year period of time under the direct rule of Jesus Christ. He will administer a perfect Kingdom of peace and righteousness. At the end of His Kingdom, the Son will hand over rule to the Father as all creation enters the eternal state.

BEING A DISPENSATIONALIST

17. What does a life centered on bringing glory to God look like?

18. What would you say is the central, underlying theme for your life?
Is it to bring glory to God?

Being accurate in interpreting the Bible is not the goal of dispensationalism. To be a true dispensationalist, correct interpretation must be followed by diligent application. See this course as an opportunity to become better equipped to apply God's Word.

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 46–48.