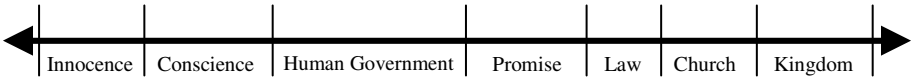


Dispensationalism



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For the Christian who takes the Bible seriously as the Word of God there are only two basic approaches to the Bible: Covenant Theology or Dispensationalism. Covenant Theology holds that the saints from Adam until now are the Church. The term "the Jewish Church" is used for pre-Christian times. This view holds that there are only two basic covenants between God and man. The first is the covenant of works with Adam in the Garden. The second is the covenant of redemption with mankind since the fall. Covenant Theology is usually either post millennial or amillennial. Post millennial means that Christ will return after the thousand years of peace. Amillennial means that there will be no such time of peace and denies any future time for national Israel in God's plans. This is sometimes called "replacement theology," meaning that the Church has replaced Israel in God's plans. Another term is "supercessionism," signifying that the Church supersedes Israel. These are the positions of the so-called mainline churches.

Dispensationalism, however, holds that God has dealt with humankind in different ways in different ages of time. It takes seriously Paul's argument in ***Romans chapters 9 to 11*** for a future of faith for Israel as a nation. This will be the time when the prophecies of the time of universal peace will come. This is called the millennium, the thousand years of ***Revelation 20:2***. It recognizes a fundamental difference between Israel and the Church, and between the Law and the Gospel. This is the position of most Evangelical churches.

The word "dispensation" is from the Latin word "dispensatio." In the Bible it translates the Greek word "oikonomia" which we have in English as "economy." Both words mean the same: responsibility, management. This word is found four times in the New Testament, all in Paul's writings. The first is ***I Corinthians 9:16-17***, "*For though I preach the Gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is unto me, if I preach not the Gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me.*" This is the responsibility

for the message given to Paul as the apostle to the Gentiles. The second is ***Ephesians 1:10***, "*That in the dispensation of the fullness of times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and on earth.*" Here Paul refers to the various ages of time. The third reference is ***Ephesians 3:2***, "*If you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given to me for you.*" It is the message itself that Paul refers to here. And the fourth, ***Colossians 1:25***, "*Of which (the Church) I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you.*" This is the responsibility God gave to Paul. Some contemporary versions of the Bible do not use Paul's word (dispensation). They use other words such as responsibility or stewardship.

The Bible is, of course, in two parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word testament means covenant. This is the primary meaning of the Greek word. ***Hebrews 8:13*** reads: "*In that he says, a New Covenant, He has made the first covenant old. Now that which decays and grows old is ready to vanish away.*" John wrote "*For the Law was given by Moses, but Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.*" ***John 1:17*** Before Jesus' death, under

the Old Covenant, God dealt with Israel by the Law of Moses. Since Jesus' death, under the New Covenant, God has dealt with man in grace in the Gospel. These are two different periods of time during which God dealt with man in two different ways. These times are called dispensations.

Before the time of Moses God dealt with man differently than in the Mosaic age. In the garden of Eden Adam and Eve knew only good, not evil. Satan was right when he said if they disobeyed God's command they would know good and evil and since that time man has known more evil than good. Since they were innocent of evil we call this the Age, or Dispensation, of Innocence. During that time, however long or short it was, God dealt with them on the basis of their obedience to but one command, not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil. We call this the Covenant of Eden, or the Edenic Covenant. In *Genesis 3:21* we read "*Also for Adam and his wife the Lord God made coats of skin and clothed them.*" This means, of course, the death of the animals whose skins were used and whose blood was shed. This is the beginning of the

long story of redemption ending in the blood of the Lamb of God at Calvary.

God, in **Genesis 4:7** tells Cain *"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not well, a sin offering lies at the door, and you shall rule over it."* There was a sacrifice available to Cain. This account of Cain and Abel shows that there was a consciousness of sin. For this reason we call this the Age or Dispensation of Conscience. The rule by which God dealt with people in this age was "let your conscience be your guide." But the conscience of mankind became hardened resulting in the calamity of the Flood. This was the covenant of sacrifice for sin.

Genesis 8:20-9:17 records God's Covenant with Noah and his descendants. Among the provisions of this covenant are the ban on the eating of blood and the requirement, *"The blood of your lives will I require.....whoso sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed."* (**verses 5 and 6**) This is the establishment of human government. Such judgment was not to be personal, but collective, by society. This period, from Noah to Abraham, we call the Age, or Dispensation of Human Government. As Nations, this is still the way God deals with mankind. **Acts**

15:29 records the unanimous decree of the Jerusalem Church enjoining the Gentile believers *"To abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if you keep yourselves, you shall do well."* The Apostle Paul assented to this exhortation.

With Abraham (**Genesis 12**) God begins to deal with a family. God had called Abram out of his country and away from his family to the life of a nomadic pilgrim. God gave Abram a sevenfold promise in the first three verses of chapter twelve. This promise is the covenant of God with Abraham and his descendents. He accepted this promise in faith and *"God counted it to him for righteousness,"* **Genesis 15:6**. By this faith the patriarchs lived their lives, **Hebrews 11**. We call this the Age or Dispensation of Promise.

The Mosaic Age, or the Dispensation of the Law, was a covenant of God with Israel to regulate life in the Promised Land. It was a temporary covenant added to the covenant with Abraham for a period of time. That period was from Moses to Christ. "Wherefore then the Law?" It was added because of transgressions, till the seed (Christ) should

come to whom the promise was made," **Galatians 3:19** "Wherefore the Law was our (the Jews') schoolmaster until Christ," **Galatians 3:24** The Law ended at Calvary. Christ "*blotted out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us*" (Jews), **Colossians 2:14** The Law was never given to Gentiles. The way God would deal with mankind changed at Calvary and a new order, or dispensation began. "*For the Priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the Law,*" **Hebrews 7:12**

This new order is the Age, or Dispensation of the Gospel, or of the Church. It is the Dispensation of the Grace of God. (**Ephesians 3:2**) This is not to say that we are saved by faith and they were saved by the Law. The Law was never given to be a means of salvation even for Israel. They, as well as we, have salvation by faith. One of God's purposes in this age is "*to make of two (Jews and Gentiles) one New Man in Christ,*" **Ephesians 2:15**. Another is that the Gospel be preached in all the earth to all peoples. It is "*to visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His Name.*" **Acts 15:14**.

There is another Age to follow this one.

Verse 16 of this same chapter reads *"After this (age) I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called."* This will be the Age, or dispensation of the Kingdom of God on earth. The nation of Israel will be born (again) at once, **Isaiah 66:8**. This is the golden age that all the prophets foretold. This is the millennium of **Revelation 20:3**.

These are the seven ages of redemption, Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, The Law, The Gospel and The Kingdom of God. This emphasizes the gradual revelation of truth to man over the millennia of time. "Distinguish the times, and the Scripture is in harmony with itself."-Augustine *

Does it matter which approach we take to the scriptures? It does indeed! What has become Covenant Theology began with some of the early Church Fathers and resulted in the beginnings of the anti-Semitism that has often been expressed by the Christian world. There are other and great differences in the

interpretation of the scriptures by these two different approaches to the Bible. The future of God's dealing with Israel is one of them. This has very much contributed to the attitude of Christians toward the Jews. Israel is the key to understanding the Bible.

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