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Dispensationalism

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Although a relatively recent system of theology,¹ dispensationalism has become a helpful and influential approach to interpreting the Bible. Gerstner, no friend of dispensationalism, acknowledges, “Dispensationalism has produced a large body of literature, a great number of schools, and many Christian movements. Its adherents have constituted if not the backbone, at least much of the bony structure of American theological conservatism for the past hundred years.”² What is dispensationalism and how can it help the Christian better understand and apply God’s Word?

Defining Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism is a theological model that emphasizes the distinct ways in which God has dealt with His people throughout the ages. It refers to the diverse ways in which God has “dispensed” His sovereign rule over His creation. Scofield, whose popular study Bible notes helped advance dispensational concepts, wrote, “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.”³ Ryrie, a more recent dispensational writer, offers the following definition: “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”⁴ Whereas Covenant theology focuses on the

continuity of God’s saving work, Dispensational theology emphasizes the distinctions in God’s work in various ages or epochs.

Scriptural Support for Dispensationalism

While the Bible does present a consistent emphasis on salvation based on grace, not works, it also indicates that God has worked in distinct ways in different periods of time. For example, John wrote, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The Law of Moses is distinct from the grace that is offered through Jesus Christ. Paul said, “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14). Clearly, he saw a distinction between the period in which God dispensed His rule through the Mosaic Law and that of the period of grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Paul described this present period of grace as an “administration” (NIV) or “dispensation” (KJV), using the Greek term *oikonomia*, or “economy” (Ephesians 3:2). This term refers to the management of a household. God’s creation is His household. He has administered, or dispensed, His rule over the world in various ways throughout recorded history, including His rule through the Law of Moses and now His rule through the special grace of Jesus Christ. Paul uses this same term in Ephesians 1:9-10 where he mentions the “dispensation of the fulness of times” (KJV) in reference to the future kingdom of Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1:25 Paul again uses the term *oikonomia* to describe the “commission” God had given him in building up the church.

These direct statements of Scripture distinguish between the periods of the Law of Moses, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the future kingdom of Jesus Christ. Further examination reveals other dispensations—at least one dispensation must precede Moses since God was in some way dispensing His sovereign rule prior to the period of the Law.

The Biblical Dispensations

What is it that makes one dispensation distinct from another? Showers describes three essential and three secondary characteristics

of each dispensation. The essential characteristics are “a particular way of God’s administering His rule . . . a particular responsibility for man . . . [and a] divine revelation which had not been given before.”⁵ The secondary characteristics show that each dispensation “applies a test to man . . . demonstrates the failure of man to obey the particular rule of God . . . [and] involves divine judgment because of man’s failure.”⁶ Based on these criteria, many dispensationalists identify seven distinct dispensations. Chafer outlines the seven dispensations as follows:

(1) The Dispensation of Innocence, which extended from the creation to the fall of Adam. . . . (2) The Dispensation of Conscience, which extended from Adam’s fall to the flood (3) The Dispensation of Human Government, which extended from the flood to the call of Abraham (4) The Dispensation of Promise, which is continued from the call of Abraham to the giving and acceptance of the Mosaic Law at Sinai. . . . (5) The Dispensation of the Law, which extended from the giving of the Law of Jehovah by Moses and its acceptance by Israel at Sinai (Ex. 19:3—31:18). It continued as the authoritative government until it ended with the death of Christ. . . . (6) The Dispensation of Grace, which extends from the death of Christ until His return to receive His Bride. . . . (7) The Dispensation of Kingdom Rule, which continues from the second advent of Christ on for a thousand years and ends with the creation of a new heaven and a new earth.⁷

While the exact number and names of the dispensations isn’t essential, recognizing that God has worked in distinct ways throughout human history is essential in understanding His Word.

Distinctives of Dispensationalism

A dispensational understanding of the Bible offers several helpful and practical distinctives for students of God’s Word. According to Ryrie, “The essence of dispensationalism is (1) the recognition of a distinction between Israel and the Church, (2) a consistently literal principle of interpretation, and (3) a basic and working conception of

the purpose of God as His own glory rather than as the single purpose of salvation.”⁸

Dispensationalism distinguishes between Israel and the church. Since Israel and the church are distinct, not all promises made to Israel apply to the church. Furthermore, there is a real future for the nation of Israel as prophesied in the Bible.

Dispensationalism emphasizes the literal interpretation of the Bible. Since God revealed Himself in human language, it makes sense to take His Word in its most natural, literal sense whenever possible. Therefore, “Israel” means Israel, the “church” means the church, and “one thousand years” means a literal millennium.

Identifying dispensational distinctions in the Bible helps us better understand why some practices in the Old Testament don’t apply to us today. Dispensationalism upholds the integrity of the Bible as a literal revelation of God’s heart and mind. Recognizing distinct dispensations also helps us discover the wonderful harmony of God’s plan for the ages. As the ancient church theologian Augustine said, “Distinguish the ages, and the Scriptures harmonize.”⁹

¹ Showers, Renald E. *There Really is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*. Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990, p. 27.

² Gerstner, John H. *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*. Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2000, p. 36.

³ Scofield, C. I. *The Scofield Reference Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1945, p. 5.

⁴ Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism Today*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1965, p. 29.

⁵ Showers, p. 30.

⁶ Showers, p. 31.

⁷ Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *Systematic Theology*. Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, vol. 1, pp. 40-41.

⁸ Ryrie, p. 48.

⁹ Cited by Scofield, p. iii.