

# CONNECTION

## EXTRA

TOPICS OF INTEREST TO  
DALLAS THEOLOGICAL  
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## We Believe in Dispensationalism

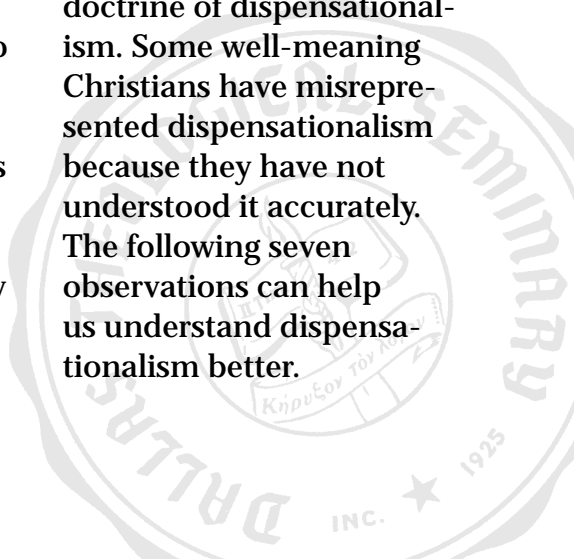
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In World War II President Franklin D. Roosevelt traveled to England to confer with Prime Minister Winston Churchill on several issues pertaining to the war. In their discussions Churchill said, “Let’s table that issue.” This disturbed Roosevelt because he wanted to discuss the matter.

After disagreeing on whether to table it, the two leaders realized they were saying the same thing. When Churchill said, “Let’s table it,” he meant “Let’s put it on the table for discussion.” This was the very same meaning Roosevelt had in mind when he argued, “Let’s not table it”!

**Misunderstandings can be disturbing.**

The same is true in Christianity. Sometimes a person opposes a certain teaching because he does not fully understand it. By misunderstanding a doctrine, he misrepresents it or even rejects it. This has sometimes been true of the doctrine of dispensationalism. Some well-meaning Christians have misrepresented dispensationalism because they have not understood it accurately. The following seven observations can help us understand dispensationalism better.



**“Dispensation” is a biblical term.**

The Greek word *oikonomia* occurs nine times in the New Testament (Luke 16:2–4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4). A combination of *oikos*, “house,” and *nomos*, “law,” *oikonomia* means “administration, stewardship, or management,” thus conveying the idea of a special ruling or dispensation. The verb *oikonomeo*, “to administer or manage,” is used in Luke 16:2, and the noun *oikonomos*, “a steward or manager,” occurs ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1–2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). These words refer to the human administration of a house, property, state, or nation, or to God’s administration of the human race or part of it.

Thus dispensationalism views the world as a household or administration run by God. So while the word “dispensationalism” is not used in the Bible, the concept certainly is.

Nondispensationalists (as well as dispensationalists) also use terms not found in

the Bible such as “Trinity,” “total depravity,” “original sin,” and “eternal security.” But the concepts are there. God is running the world as a steward over a household, “administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time” (Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 31).

**Dispensationalism points up the unity of the Bible.**

Though some say dispensationalism destroys the unity of the Bible, this system of theology actually points to God’s unifying work throughout the ages while at the same time recognizing important distinctions in God’s “economies.” Though God occasionally changed His governmental relationships with humankind, giving individuals differing responsibilities, these economies carry out His overall purpose. John 1:17 clearly points to a distinction in God’s progress of revelation: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came

through Jesus Christ.” In His first advent Christ was “the end of the law” (Rom. 10:4); He abolished it (2 Cor. 3:11, 14). And when Christ returns, He will personally reign on the earth for a thousand years, an “administration” that by His very presence will differ from the period of the Mosaic Law and from the present age.

Paul referred to the present “administration of God’s grace” (Eph. 3:2), which in previous times had been “kept hidden . . . but is now disclosed” (Col. 1:26), and to the future administration “when the times will have reached their fulfillment” (Eph. 1:10).

These three divine economies—the Mosaic Law, the present age, and the future reign of Christ on earth—are readily distinguishable in the Scriptures. Article V of Dallas Seminary’s Doctrinal Statement refers to these three periods of time as subjects of extended revelation in the Scriptures.

These three obviously require a fourth dispensation, a time before the Law,

and a fifth economy, a time before the Fall of Adam and Eve. Most dispensationalists recognize at least these five administrations. In each case there is a progress in the revelation of God’s will.

**Biblical distinctions are not unique to dispensationalism.**

Nondispensationalist Louis Berkhof recognized two dispensations, the Old Testament and the New Testament, with four stages in the Old Testament. Charles Hodge, a postmillennialist, also referred to four dispensations in the so-called covenant of grace, and amillennialist Floyd Hamilton spoke of three dispensations: the time before the Fall, the Old Testament era after the Fall, and the present dispensation. Therefore to argue that dispensationalists “chop up” the Bible is an invalid accusation.

Dispensationalists see both continuity and discontinuity in the Scriptures, though earlier dispensationalists stressed the latter more than the former. Distinctions do not rule out

continuity. God's nature is unchangeable; Christ is the focus of all Scripture; salvation is always by God's grace, based on Christ's death on the cross; believers of all ages are part of God's people; and God's grace is always needed to enable His people to lead lives pleasing to Him.

**Dispensationalism teaches only one way of salvation.**

Some have accused dispensationalists of teaching various ways of salvation. However, can anything be any clearer than the statement that "these dispensations are not separate ways of salvation" (The Scofield Reference Bible, 1967 ed., p. 3)? Dispensationalists have consistently taught that individuals in every age are saved in only one way—by God's grace through faith. Hebrews 11 recounts numerous Old Testament individuals who were redeemed because of their faith in the Lord. Abraham and David stand as special examples of men of faith (Rom. 4:1-17).

Keeping the requirements of the Mosaic Law did not bring salvation to Old Testament saints from Moses to Christ. The Scriptures clearly state, "No one is justified before God by the law" (Gal. 3:11), and the Law could not "impart life" (v. 21).

What then was the purpose of the Law? It (a) revealed sin (Rom. 7:7), and it (b) enabled believing Israelites to maintain fellowship with God. As Clarence E. Mason wrote years ago, the Law "was not a way to life...but a way of life.... Personal salvation to [Israel] as to us, depended upon a personal response of faith" ("A Review of 'Dispensationalism,' by John Wick Bowman, Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 [April 1957]: 111).

**Dispensationalism has been taught for centuries.**

Opponents often say dispensationalism is a recent invention. But this overlooks the fact that various doctrines have been detailed at various times in church history.

For example, the early church spelled out the doctrines of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In other eras the doctrines of the Bible, the church, and salvation have been clarified and expanded.

True, dispensationalism has been systematized in recent centuries, notably by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) of England. But even early church fathers wrote of God’s working in various epochs of time from creation to the present age. Since doctrinal refinement has always characterized the church, it should be no surprise that dispensationalism has been refined in recent centuries.

**Dispensationalism builds on literal interpretation.**

While dispensationalism stems from a consistent literal interpretation of the Scriptures, the word “literal” does not rule out recognizing the extensive use of figurative language in the Bible. Figures of speech are not antithetical to literal interpretation; they are part of it. “Literal interpretation”

means that the Bible is approached like other books, with figurative language conveying literal meanings in colorful, picturesque ways.

Words are taken in their normal sense unless their contexts suggest otherwise. For example Revelation 9:1 refers to a star to which “was given the key to the shaft of the Abyss.” Obviously “star” in this verse refers figuratively to an angel. And yet only two verses earlier, Revelation 8:12 refers to literal stars.

This attention to grammatical-historical interpretation, with a proper understanding of literal/figurative language, leads to a distinction between Israel and the church—an essential component of dispensationalism. Dispensationalists say the word “Israel” always means the nation Israel, not the church. They say that God’s promises to Abraham that his descendants will exist as a nation and will possess a designated portion of land in the Middle East (Gen. 12:1–3; 15:18–21) have never been transferred to the church.

In dispensationalism the church had a distinct beginning (Jesus said, "I will build my church," Matt. 16:18) on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 2:1), an event Peter referred to as "the beginning" (Acts 11:15). Therefore the church did not exist as an entity in the Old Testament. The church is not equated with Israel; Old Testament saints, though part of the people of God, were not part of the church.

### **Dispensationalism teaches God's universal rule over the universe.**

Some dispensationalists teach that the messianic era was inaugurated by Christ at His first advent, so that Christ is now seated on David's throne ruling over the church. The present age is viewed as the beginning of His messianic reign which will be culminated in His millennial rule over the earth. Other dispensationalists teach that in Christ's first advent the nation Israel rejected Christ as her King, so the earthly messianic kingdom was not inaugurated then but will be when

Christ returns. They say He is seated at God's right hand, not on David's throne. But whichever view dispensationalists teach, all agree that Christ, the resurrected Lord, is ruling today over the universe, as God has always ruled, and that Christ will return to the earth to rule from Jerusalem as Messiah.

### **Conclusion**

Dispensationalism is an interpretive approach to the Scriptures that is consistent and that recognizes built-in, divinely intended distinctives. It acknowledges development in God's progress in revelation, as He accomplishes His will in various stages in history.

How else can one explain God's instructions to the nation Israel in the Mosaic Law which are no longer valid for believers today? How else can one explain Jesus' instructions to His disciples before the Cross to go only "to the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:6), whereas after the Cross He told them to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19)? How else can one be consistent in

interpreting the Bible in its normal and figurative language? Recognizing changes in God's administration of the world helps Bible stu-

dents focus clearly and accurately on the Scriptures, God's inspired, inerrant Word. ■

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