



# Dispensationalism

## *Course Notes*

### I. THE IMPORTANCE OF DISPENSATIONALISM

#### A. It Answers the Need for Literal Interpretation

1. Dispensationalism is the only approach to scripture that gives full authority to the words of scripture. Other systems, such as covenant theology, tend to spiritualize and weaken clear statements of the Bible. God places great emphasis on the very words of the Bible (Deuteronomy 8:3; Proverbs 30:5; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 3:16).
2. Dispensationalism answers three crucial questions in their proper order:
  - a. What does the passage say?
  - b. What does the passage mean?
  - c. What does the passage mean to me?
3. Examples where other systems diminish the plain meaning of scripture:
  - a. The return of the Israelites to their land (see Amos 9:14-15)
    - (1) Literal interpretation acknowledges that Israel will be finally returned to and planted in their land never to be removed again.
    - (2) John Calvin, a covenant theologian, says of this passage, “In what sense then has God promised what we have just explained? We see this when we come to Christ; for it will then be evident that nothing has been in vain foretold: though the Jews have not ruled as to the outward appearance, yet the kingdom of God was then propagated among all nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun; and then, as we have said in other places, the Jews reigned.” Calvin clearly destroyed the plain statements of scripture by spiritualizing them away.
  - b. The conditions of the millennial kingdom (see Isaiah 11:6-7)
    - (1) Literal interpretation clearly unveils a time in which predators will eat grass alongside their former prey.
    - (2) According to Matthew Henry, another covenant theologian, the wolf with the lion is fulfilled thus: “men of the most fierce and furious dispositions, who used to bite and devour all about them, shall have their temper so strangely altered by the efficacy of the gospel and grace of Christ that they shall live in love even with the weakest and such as formerly they would have made an easy prey of...Christ, who is our peace, came to slay all enmities and to settle lasting friendships among his followers, particularly between Jews and Gentiles: when the multitudes of both, being converted to the faith of Christ, united in one sheep-fold, then the wolf and the lamb dwelt together...”
    - (3) According to Albert Barnes, the passage cannot be taken literally because “such a state of things could not occur with a



perpetual miracle, changing the *physical* nature of the whole animal creation. The lion, the wolf, the panther, are made to live on flesh...To fit them to live on vegetable food, would require a change in their whole structure, and confound all the doctrines of natural history...But where is the promise of any such continued miracle...?"

- (4) Each commentator who denies the literal fulfillment of this passage seems to have a slightly different take on its spiritual fulfillment. This occurs because a spiritual fulfillment has no true laws of interpretation. The teacher can mold the meaning into whatever truth he wants to teach. Only dispensationalism gives full force to the very words of scripture.

## B. It Answers the Need for Rightly Dividing

1. Dispensationalism distinguishes between things that are different. It shows how God expected different things from different people at different times. Other systems, like covenant theology, have a tendency to erase the line between things that are different in scripture.
2. To be correctly understood, God's word must be rightly divided (2 Timothy 2:15; see also 1 Corinthians 2:14).
3. Scriptural truths which must be rightly divided
  - a. Jew, Gentile, and the church of God (1 Corinthians 10:32); one of the most important distinctions in the Bible
  - b. The two advents of Christ (1 Peter 1:11); Prophecies about Christ refer to two comings.
  - c. The two resurrections (John 5:28-29—with no mention of a time difference; Revelation 20:4-6, 12-13—at least 1,000 years between the two); There is one resurrection for the just and another for the unjust.
  - d. The different judgments
    - (1) Nondispensationalists tend to join all the judgments into one general judgment.
    - (2) The Bible rightly divided shows there to be several judgments taking place at different times and places.
    - (3) For instance:
      - a) The judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9-10)
      - b) The judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-32)
      - c) The great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)
  - e. Law and grace (John 1:17; Romans 6:14); It is imperative to understand the distinctions between law and grace.
  - f. The two natures
    - (1) The old nature (Mark 7:21-23; Romans 7:18-19; Romans 8:7-8)
    - (2) The new nature (Ephesians 4:24; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 2 Peter 1:4)
    - (3) The Christian's battle (Romans 7:14-25; Galatians 5:16-17)



- g. The believer's position and practice
  - (1) A believer's position refers to who he is in Christ. In Christ, a believer is pure, sanctified, and complete in every way (Romans 6:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30; Ephesians 1:5-7; Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 2:10; Hebrews 10:10, 14).
  - (2) A believer's practice refers to his present relationship with Christ. Although his practice changes continually, his position in Christ always remains the same (Colossians 2:20; Colossians 3:1-5; 1 Thessalonians 5:5-6; Hebrews 10:10 with 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 10:14 with Philippians 3:12).
- 4. Individual dispensations are also examples of rightly dividing. In dispensationalism, we see that God deals with different men at different times in different ways for His own holy purpose (Revelation 4:11).

#### C. It Answers Apparent Contradictions

- 1. Dispensationalism recognizes distinctions in what God has said to different people at different times. This distinction clears up what would otherwise be contradictions, for God does not always tell everyone the same thing.
- 2. A rule to remember is this: **All scripture was written for us but all scripture was not written to us.** In other words, all scripture has a profit for us in our understanding and Christian life (2 Timothy 3:16), but all scripture is not written as a direct command for us to obey.
- 3. Some examples of solved contradictions:
  - a. Dietary laws
    - (1) Before the flood (Genesis 1:29-30)
    - (2) After the flood (Genesis 9:2-3)
    - (3) Under the law (Leviticus 11:1-47)
    - (4) Under grace (1 Timothy 4:3-5)
  - b. Sabbath-keeping
    - (1) Under the law (Exodus 31:12-18)
    - (2) Under grace (Romans 14:5-6; Galatians 4:9-11; Colossians 2:16-17)

#### D. It Answers Doctrinal Heresies

- 1. Many heresies are the result of trying to follow a teaching that was proper for another dispensation or the attempt to obey a command that was given to someone else but is no longer in effect.
- 2. A *dispensation* is a *dispensing* or a *giving out of duties and responsibilities*. The whole concept of dispensationalism is that God progressively changes His requirements of man as He moves time toward the end and brings glory to Himself.
  - a. Sin entered into the world (Romans 5:12).
  - b. God's choice of a people (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)
  - c. Law brought greater responsibility for sin (Romans 5:13-14).



- d. Righteousness without the law revealed (Romans 3:20-22)
  - e. Faith in Christ frees from the law (Galatians 3:23-25).
  - f. Jew and Gentile one in Christ (Ephesians 2:11-18)
3. Some examples of heresies that can be corrected by a proper understanding of dispensationalism:
- a. Dietary requirements of another dispensation (already discussed)
  - b. Any requirement that we are under the Mosaic law (Romans 6:14-15; Galatians 5:18)
  - c. Tongues and apostolic healing for today

#### E. It Answers Supposed Conflicts

1. Many systems explain one part of the Bible and leave other parts obscure. Dispensationalism makes sense out of every part of the Bible, whether Leviticus or Hosea or Acts or Revelation. Dispensational distinctions do not destroy understanding but, rather, put everything into its proper place.
2. By understanding the differences, the applications to today are much clearer.
  - a. All scripture becomes profitable (2 Timothy 3:16).
  - b. All God's precepts concerning all things are right (Psalm 119:128).

#### F. It Answers the Purpose of All

1. Through history, God unveils the mystery of His will which concludes with the dispensation of the fulness of times (Ephesians 1:9-10).
2. An overall understanding of history can only be provided by God (Ecclesiastes 3:11).
3. A proper philosophy of history will provide the following:
  - a. An ultimate goal or purpose of history toward which history moves
  - b. An understanding of things that differ and why they differ
  - c. A concept of progress in the succeeding stages of history
  - d. A connection between the past and the future with an understanding of where we have come from and where we are going
4. Covenant theology accuses dispensationalism of having multiple purposes for God. Mostly, they criticize the belief that God has a plan for Israel on the earth and a plan for the redeemed in heaven. Covenant theologians prefer to combine God's plan for Israel and the church into one and the same. However, in doing so, they destroy the clear biblical distinction between Israel and the church.
5. The dispensationalist sees a unifying principle in history. However, this principle is higher than man's salvation. God has many other goals (i.e., He will establish the kingdom for Israel; He will judge the wicked; He will gather a people for His name from the Gentiles); yet, none of these acts as the sole principle of history, which is the glory of God. The purpose, climax, and goal of all history is that glory. There is no higher goal (Isaiah 43:7; Proverbs 16:4; Romans 11:36; Revelation 4:11).