



II. THE DEFINITION OF DISPENSATIONALISM

A. Basic Definition of *Dispensation*

1. Comes from the Latin word *dispensatio* which means management or charge (as in responsibility or duty; care or supervision over someone or something); “distribution of money or property, management, stewardship, regulation, economy” – Oxford English Dictionary (OED)
2. The early church writers and theologians referred to the system whereby we are saved through the death of Christ on the cross as the dispensation of grace “in opposition to the Law or system of works” – OED.
3. Related to the verb *dispense* and refers to a dispensing or a distribution; a giving out of something. By an expansion of meaning, it refers to the system by which anything is administered or managed.
4. From Oxford English Dictionary (OED): “A religious order or system, conceived as divinely instituted, or as a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time, as the *patriarchal, Mosaic (or Jewish) dispensation, the Christian dispensation...*”
5. Definition by C. I. Schofield (p. 5 of his reference Bible) – “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.”
6. Definition by Charles Ryrie (p. 28 of *Dispensationalism*) – “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”
7. Definition by Lewis Sperry Chafer (p. 40, Vol. I of *Systematic Theology*) – “As a time measurement, a dispensation is a period which is identified by its relation to some particular purpose of God—a purpose to be accomplished within that period. The earlier dispensations, being so far removed in point of time from the present, are not as clearly defined as are the later dispensations. For this reason, Bible expositors are not always agreed regarding the precise features of the more remote periods.”

B. Biblical Usage of *Dispensation*

1. The word *dispensation* appears only four times in the Bible, all in the New Testament. Each reference emphasizes a particular truth that when taken into consideration with the other emphasized truths gives a complete understanding of the nature and purposes of dispensationalism.
2. A dispensation of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:16-17); *emphasizing the responsibility of a messenger*
 - a. Refers to Paul’s responsibility in overseeing the distribution of the gospel. Note: Dispensations often have primary messengers.
 - b. Paul was the primary messenger of the dispensation of grace.
 - (1) He was the apostle of the Gentiles (Romans 11:13; Galatians 2:7-8; 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11).



- (2) He received the gospel of the grace of God by revelation from God (Galatians 1:11-12; Ephesians 3:1-9).
3. The dispensation of the grace of God (Ephesians 3:2); *emphasizing the distinction of various periods of time*
4. The dispensation of God which is given to me (Colossians 1:25-27); *emphasizing the revelation within a given period of time*
5. The dispensation of the fulness of times (Ephesians 1:10); *emphasizing the end purpose of all distinctions*

C. Common Dispensation Divisions

1. Innocence – Adam in the garden in Eden
2. Conscience – from the fall to the flood
3. Human government – from the flood to the call of Abram
4. Promise or patriarchs – from Abram’s call to the law on Mt. Sinai
5. Law – from the law of Moses to the incarnation of Christ
6. Church age – from the incarnation of Christ to the rapture
7. Kingdom – the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth

D. Common Characteristics of the Dispensations

1. They often have one or more primary messengers.
2. They are revelatory – They are based on special revelations [often covenants or commissions] (see Genesis 9:1-7; Genesis 12:1-3; Romans 16:25-26).
3. They are probationary.
 - a. They include a test or tests of obedience for man (Genesis 2:15-17; Exodus 24:3-8; Romans 11:21-25; Revelation 20:6-9).
 - b. They prove man’s inability to obey or to please God.
 - c. They close with God giving man up to his own way.
 - d. They end with destruction or judgment.
4. They are progressive.
 - a. They move toward the fulness of time.
 - b. They grow in the accumulated revelation of God and His will (Acts 17:30; Galatians 3:21-26).

E. Common Objections to Dispensationalism

1. Dispensationalism describes a changeable God.
 - a. The argument
 - (1) God does not change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8).
 - (2) Therefore, God cannot alter in His plan for man.
 - b. The answer
 - (1) No one denies basic differences (i.e., law to grace). Anyone not taking an animal sacrifice to the temple is a dispensationalist.
 - (2) God’s immutability does not mean He always deals with man the same way.



- a) Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8). Yet, Jesus was born as a baby in a manger and died on the cross. He is now seated at the right hand of God and will sit on the earthly throne of David.
 - b) His differences in His dealings with man do not deny His unchangeable nature.
 - (3) What God required of man at one time was not the same as at other times (Acts 17:30; Galatians 3:21-26). Note: Consider God's calling for Noah or Abraham. Does God require the same of us?
2. Dispensationalism destroys the unity of scripture.
- a. The argument
 - (1) All scripture is profitable for doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16).
 - (2) No portion of scripture can teach different doctrine than any other portion of scripture; the teachings of scripture must be understood to say exactly the same thing.
 - b. The answer
 - (1) This argument is never taken to its logical end. The reality is that attempting to make all scripture the same causes the spiritualization of or misrepresentation of present truths.
 - (2) The same Bible book that tells us that all scripture is profitable for doctrine also tells us to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15).
 - (3) This teaching ignores obvious differences in understanding of any present generation. It also ignores obvious distinctions in doctrines such as acceptable diets.
3. Dispensationalism declares the failure of the gospel.
- a. The argument
 - (1) The gospel is part of God's perfect plan.
 - (2) God cannot fail in His plan.
 - (3) If this age ends in failure, then God's plan has failed.
 - b. The answer
 - (1) God's plan does not fail, but man's disobedience is the failure.
 - a) Adam failed to remain in the garden in Eden.
 - b) Israel failed to maintain her kingdom because of sin.
 - c) The law's only weakness was the sinfulness of man (Romans 8:3).
 - d) How are these different from the church age ending in another failure of man to follow God's plan?
 - (2) In reality, dispensationalism is the only doctrinal system that completely establishes the success of God's plans for man.
 - a) The earthly paradise offered to Adam will be realized in the new earth.
 - b) The earthly kingdom offered to Israel will be realized in the kingdom age.
 - c) The heavenly home promised to us will be realized.
 - d) God, not man, will receive the glory for all.