

A Study of “Dispensationalism” {part one}

2 Timothy 2: 14-15

Intro:

This evening we would like to begin a study of what is Called “Dispensationalism”

Many years of my Christian experience was spent within the context of this system of theology.

From my conversion in 1985 till 2007 I had some connection with “Brethrenism” which is dominated by Dispensational thinking.

Many of Dispensationalisms most ardent advocates have come from the Plymouth Brethren camp.

Q. What is Dispensationalism?

The word “dispensation” is used four times in the KJV from the GK word:

οἰκονομία oikonomia *oy-kon-om-ee'-ah*
“administration” “stewardship”

The English word “Dispense” means to give out something. Or a “Dispensary” is the place from where something is distributed.

Q. How do Dispensationalists define Dispensationalism?

We quote the Scofield Reference Bible: {1909, page 5}

“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. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in scripture”

Now,

In the rest of our study we will be testing this definition to see if this is what scripture teaches!

But let us say immediately:

The scripture makes it clear that there was one specific time and one specific place where man was tested – and he failed the test!

Ever since then God has not been testing man but proving and showing to man his need of God!

Consider:

There were only two men who were really “tested” in this sense.

One failed and one passed the test!

Therefore we read:

Rom 5:19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

So,

We are not being tested but we have already failed therefore we are commanded to believe in the one who has passed the test!

Q. How does the scripture use this word?

Let us read together those places in scripture where this word appears.

1 Cor 9: 16-17

Ephesians 1: 9-10 {note fullness not a different time period!} {compare Gal 4:4}

Ephesians 3: 1-2

Colossians 1: 25-27

Note:

“Hid” does not mean that the OT believers did not know about this – the scripture is full of this prophecy! {note verse 25 says – to fulfil the word of God}

It was hid from the Gentiles until Christ came!

Read Isaiah 49: 6

Ok;

So much for our introduction.

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Q. What will be our method of study?

In 1966 a book was published by one of the leading lights of mainstream dispensationalism: Charles Ryrie.

The book was called “Dispensationalism Today”

In 1995 a revision of this book was published simply titled:

“Dispensationalism”

{which I read back in the late 1990’s}

We will use this book as the basis for our study and seek to answer its claims from a biblical perspective.

Ryrie also published the “Ryrie Study Bible” which in many ways replaced the “Scofield Reference Bible” as the standard for many Dispensationalists.

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Frank Gaebelin in his foreword says:

“Dr. Ryrie’s book is the first book-length contemporary apologetic for dispensationalism to be written by a recognised scholar. As such it commands attention.” {page 7}

He goes on to say:

“this book is mandatory reading for those who have attacked dispensationalism and for all who would understand what it really is.” {page 8}

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Chapter one of the book is entitled:

Dispensationalism = Help or Heresy

He suggests 3 areas where Dispensationalism is helpful:

1} It answers the Need of Biblical Distinctions

He says:

“the message of Jesus was something new. Therefore, the material of the Old Testament is distinguished from that of the New.” {Page 16}

There are two points here.

A} The assertion that our Lord taught something “new”

Now,

Q. Did our Lord actually teach “Novel” doctrines?

Remember in John 3 our Lord criticises Nicodemus for not understanding his doctrine!

This would have been unfair if what our Lord was saying was not rooted in OT theology.

Read:

John 13:34-35 {where our Lord actually uses the word “New” in connection with his teaching}

Now,

Q. Was this new Doctrine?

Compare:

Lev 19: 18 and 34

So;

Q. Why is the word “new” used by our Lord in John 13?

Three reasons:

- 1} He was personally giving this command to his disciples “I give unto you”
- 2} He was giving himself as the great example “as I have loved you”
- 3} He gives a motivating factor “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples”

So:

It is not true to say that our Lord, in the strictest sense, taught new doctrine.

Compare:

Mar 1:27 And they were all amazed, insomuch that they questioned among themselves, saying, What thing is this? what new doctrine is this? for with authority commandeth he even the unclean spirits, and they do obey him.

What was new was the power!

B} The second point to be considered is the conclusion he comes to:

“the message of Jesus was something new. Therefore, the material of the Old Testament is distinguished from that of the New.” {Page 16}

This is the great error of Dispensationalism!

They erect a false Dichotomy between the Old and New Testament as we call it.

Part of the problem is calling these two portions of God’s word by these names.

Consider:

The Old covenant properly speaking is the parts of God’s word which are temporary and passing.

Ie the ceremonies, priesthood etc.

They are Old and passing away!

But there is much in the first 39 books of the Bible which is essential the New Covenant!

He quotes Lewis Sperry Chafer in his book called simply “Dispensationalism” published in 1936:

“Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice” {page 17}

In response we say:

All true believers in the OT did not trust in animal sacrifices but in Christ alone!

Read Psalm 51: 16-17

Also: Psalm 40: 6-8 and 16

So we would change Chafer’s statement to:

Any person is a true believer who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice

The second helpful point of Dispensationalism according to Ryrie is:

2} It Answers the Need of a Philosophy of History

Ryrie writes:

*“concerning the goal of history, dispensationalists find it in the establishment of the millennial kingdom on earth, whereas the covenant theologian regards it as the eternal state. This does not mean that normative dispensationalists minimize the glory of the eternal state but they insist that **the display of the glory of God who is sovereign in human history must be seen in the present heavens and earth.**”*

He goes on to call the Covenant view “pessimistic”

Firstly,

The Scriptures say that:

The Heavens declare the glory of God! That is already true!

Read Psalm 19: 1-6

Secondly:

God is glorified on earth by his Church already!

Read 2 Cor 2: 14; 3:17-18; 4:6,18; 5:17

He goes on to say:

*“A second requirement of a philosophy of history is a proper unifying principle. In covenant theology the principle is the covenant of grace. **This is the alleged covenant that the Lord made with man after the sin of Adam,** in which he offered salvation through Jesus Christ. In short, the covenant of grace is God’s plan of salvation, and therefore the unifying principle of covenant theology is soteriological” {page 18}*

Read:

Genesis 3:15

Q. Is this not a Covenant?

Note:

A covenant is simply a solemn promise or agreement, where one or both parties bind themselves!

He goes on to say:

*“Only dispensationalism can cause historical events and successions to be seen **in their own light** and not to be reflected in **the artificial light of an overall Covenant**” {page 19}*

Note:

“In their own light”

This reveals the way that these men approach the word of God. They see it as a disjointed conglomeration of different messages which cannot be brought together to form God’s overall message to man!

{compare Luke 24, Christ on the road to Emmaeus}

Finally:

The third point that Ryrie suggests is helpful with regard to Dispensationalism is:

3} It provides consistent hermeneutics

He says:

“If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist”

We answer by saying:

1} Normal to who?

2} Consistency is the real test, and so often this is where dispensationalism falls down.

{But we will get into that more in the weeks ahead}

Finally he closes off chapter one with words with which we agree:

“If dispensationalism has the answers, then it is the most helpful tool in consistent biblical interpretation. If not, it ought to be minimised or discarded.”

May God help us to understand these things in the weeks ahead.

Amen.