

The ABC's of Dispensationalism

The following article contains a basic discussion of Dispensationalism in three contexts:

I. The Dispensational Conflict

Denominationalists often call Dispensationalism a Cult.
Cultists dismiss Dispensationalism by falsifying its history and teachings
Our Reformed brethren tend to reject all Dispensational thought
Ecumenical Christians resent Dispensationalism's "negativity."
Dispensationalists themselves have been testing their own system.

II. The Dispensational Imperative

1. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism can the average Christian learn and understand the Word of God for himself without relying on the views of a church or a denominational system.
2. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is Christ given His rightful position
3. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is the doctrine of grace free to flourish
4. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is Israel protected from satanic attack.
5. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is the priesthood of Christ properly administered

III. Dispensationalism Described

Wikipedia

Ryrie

Jim Steel

Excellent resources for understanding the basics of Dispensationalism:

I. The Dispensational Conflict

Denominationalists often call Dispensationalism a Cult.

"Google in" the word Dispensationalism on any given day and be prepared for a kaleidoscopic array of offerings. One author goes as far as to declare Dispensationalism a "pseudo Christian cult" because it allegedly denies that Old Testament saints benefited from the shed blood of Christ:

"What is indisputably, absolutely, and uncompromisingly essential to the Christian religion is its doctrine of salvation... If Dispensationalism has actually departed from the only way of salvation which the Christian religion teaches, then we must say it has departed from Christianity. [John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 150.]

In reality, however, it is this author himself who is a cultist, because he teaches that salvation is received sacramentally through the church which (in his eyes) has existed since Old Testament times.

Cultists dismiss Dispensationalism by falsifying its history and teachings.

Most cultists seek to demean Dispensationalism by constructing a false history of the movement. One cultic group, in particular, has manufactured the ideal that Dispensationalism is the result of an eighteen year old girl's vision!

Others prefer to *misrepresent* what dispensationalists actually teach. Seventh Day Adventists, for example, relish mocking the Dispensational doctrine of the pre-tribulation rapture of the church by incessantly suggesting that we believe in what they call a "secret rapture." [Note: Adventists normally hide their true identity on web postings and in community prophetic campaigns, but they are very much present. An example of Adventists constructing a secret rapture scenario may be found at: http://www.historicist.com/related_subjects/rapturestudies.htm.]

Our Reformed brethren follow in the footsteps of their father Augustine in rejecting all premillennial thought.

These brethren, while disagreeing with Dispensationalism, are usually not so harsh as to call dispensationalists cultists. They take strong exception to Dispensationalism because it does not fall in line with their revered list of certified church fathers, all of whom fall in line with the essential teachings of St. Augustine. Because Augustinian thought has controlled "church history" for centuries, Dispensationalism is considered to be non orthodox. It seems to serve no purpose for Dispensationalists to argue that the principles of their theology are rooted in the Word of God and in early church history and that Covenant theology, the systematization of Reformed thought (Covenant Theology) has, itself, only been around for a couple of centuries.

In the Reformed mind, Dispensationalists dissect the Word of God into seven separate programs, instead of one unified program. This is not at all what Dispensationalists argue.

Ecumenical Christians resent Dispensationalism's "negativity."

On a broader scale, many modern evangelicals also reject Dispensationalism for pragmatic reasons. Following the arguments of Carl F. Henry in his *Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism*, (1947) they insist that fundamentalists (often equated with Dispensationalists) are simply too pessimistic because we hold out no hope for this world. Thus, with a wave of the hand, this book dismisses Dispensational thought as being irrelevant because it offers nothing of value to the culture.

Dispensationalists themselves have been testing their own system.

As though opposition from the outside were not enough, Dispensationalists themselves have not always been consistent in representing who they are and what they believe. Among us, there are classical dispensationalists, hyper dispensationalists, ultra dispensationalists, revised dispensationalists, typical dispensationalists, and now, the theologically mutant Progressive Dispensationalists. While each of these groups (with the exception of the Progressives who are not true Dispensationalists) share the same *core elements*, their conclusions do vary significantly.

Unfortunately, this variety within Dispensationalism is seen by protractors as a weakness in spite of the fact that the core elements of Dispensationalism have not changed. The willingness of Dispensationalists to address their issues, re-clarify their arguments and even concede earlier errors is a testimony to their integrity and humility. In reality, all groups do this very thing. While the core elements of Reformed thinking remain constant, for example, there are wide varieties of Reformed expression among their family groups.

II. The Dispensational Imperative

When considering the kind of emotional responses Dispensationalism evokes, one could be tempted to ask, why bother? Exactly what is Dispensationalism and what is it about Dispensationalism which causes it to thrive in spite of successive waves of opposition? Let's answer those to questions in opposite order.

What is it about Dispensationalism which causes it to thrive in spite of opposition?

Before one even tries to understand what the essence of Dispensationalism is, it is helpful to know what it is such a vital teaching and why, it is so hated by Satan. Dispensationalism is the most Christ honoring, biblically satisfying, rationally cohesive system on the planet.

1. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism can the average Christian learn and understand the Word of God for himself without relying on the views of a church or a denominational system.

This may seem strange at first reading, but it is a watershed. This unequivocal statement can be made because Dispensationalism insists on interpreting God's Word literally. At the core of our belief system is an unchanging God who has chosen to communicate with us in an understandable and predictable way. We believe that the words of scripture can be understood in their basic meanings and that we do not need to allegorize or spiritualize passages in order to make them mean what we want them to say.

The practical beauty of this lies in the fact that two people who embrace this principle can go their separate ways under the control of the Holy Spirit and be reunited years later only to discover that their *basic biblical perspectives* will be exactly the same! They do not need Augustine, the church fathers, or anyone else to help them with additional insight, (1 John 2:27).

The reason why Dispensationalism will not "go away," is because, it arises anywhere men are allowed to have the Word of God in their own hands and interpret it literally for themselves. It does not *need* a Darby or a Scofield in order to survive. It does not *need* an Augustine or a Luther. If this fact is true, it stands alone as reason enough to explain why it is so hated. Dispensationalism does not appeal to human pride because it allows no room for creativity and rationalism or the inspired insight of a select few theologians.

Roman theology is not so fortunate. Not only is it pregnant with allegorical interpretation, it is absolutely dependent on the church fathers (not the literal scriptures) for its mindset. This is how, for example, the church can be so obsessed with Mary when the scriptures say so little concerning her, or how the church can insist that salvation rests in it alone. Rome is heteronomous. It believes in two sources of authority, the Bible and the church fathers.

Our Reformed brethren in Christ are also found wanting here. Each of the varying mixes of Reformed thought (and there are many, such as amillennialism, postmillennialism, preterism, and their variations) are nothing more than varying mixtures of both literal and allegorical interpretation.

This is not to say that Dispensationalists do not recognize biblical metaphors and types. They simply insist that such figures are easily observable and follow consistent rules. Dispensationalism *arises* out of a commitment to literal interpretation. That is why it thrives wherever men are free to interpret God's Word for themselves without theological pressure being placed upon them.

2. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is Christ given His rightful position.

Again, this statement may appear to be biased, but it is another watershed. Consider the aforementioned groups, the Roman church, the Reformed church, and the broad based Evangelicals (sometimes described as Neo-Evangelicals.). It would be dishonest to suggest that these groups do not seek to honor Christ to lesser or greater extents. Each of these groups would argue that Christ is God

and that He is our redeemer (though Rome teaches a false gospel because it insists that we must add our works to Christ's and receive salvation through the church.)

It is one thing to declare Christ simply as our redeemer and another to see Him as the focal point of all history. Not only is this Savior the initiator and executor of all history, He is the reason *for* History. All that the Father does, He does *through His Son alone*. Not only is the Father's plan of reconciliation executed through the Son He does all things through His Son, (2 Cor. 5:19). All of the promises of God are executed both in, and through, and *to* His Son. Thus, when the Father promised Christ that He actually would reign on David's throne He meant it. (Luke 1:32). The early church clearly understood that there must first be a ministry among the Gentiles, but that God would, *after this*, keep His word to Christ, (Acts 15:15:18.) It is one thing to make Jesus Christ the centerpiece of our salvation. It is quite another, to make Him the centerpiece of the creation and of all history. This is only done in Dispensationalism.

3. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is the doctrine of grace free to flourish.

It is assumed the reader understands that salvation results from grace alone and not from a combination of grace and works as Rome and the cultists insist. We are saved by grace through faith and not by ourselves. We become saved when we rest in what Jesus Christ through His sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection, (Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 3:5, 1 Corinthians 15:1-4,ff.) One may become a new creation in Christ, simply by resting in this truth.

It is *not* assumed that all readers understand how grace functions as a dynamic both in salvation and in the walk of the believer. Walking in grace is a rudiment or a first principle which produces a changed life. We never change our life in order to experience grace, (Rom. 11:6). We experience grace in order to change our life. The purpose of the Old Testament law was to argue this very point, that man cannot change in order to be blessed. Sadly, some folks living in Paul's day thought otherwise and had to be rebuked by Paul. He said in one place,

Gal 2:21 I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness *come* by the law, then Christ is dead in vain.

The Galatians had made a critical error. They had returned to the use of the law as a first principle or a rudiment. Other Galatians had returned to some of the first principles of their former works-based pagan religions as well, (Gal. 4:3-9).

Herein lies the danger for you and me. When churches and denominations insist that the present church is spiritual Israel they inevitably begin mixing the principles of law with grace. They say, for example that baptism is equated with circumcision and Sabbath keeping is a covenant sign between Christ and His church. This dangerous mix of law with grace produces the deadly effect of placing believers once again under the bondage of the law, (Gal. 5:1) and nullifies the effect of the grace life in Christ, (Gal. 5:4.). In a word, the Holy Spirit is hindered from administering the New Covenant from within us any time we seek to place ourselves under the authority of the Old Covenant. This is no small matter. Untold thousands of believers hear countless messages stressing obedience, but they never learn that obedience is a *product* of grace which abounds in us, (Titus 2:11-13). This bondage and sense of inability to please God neutralizes them. Only in Dispensationalism is the grace life allowed to flow freely.

4. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is Israel protected from satanic attack.

God made His terms clear at the very beginning. Beginning with His promise to Abram, God made it clear that there was a blessing for those who blessed him and Israel and a curse for those who cursed them, (Genesis 12:3, Numbers 22, and similar passages.) Satan, on the other hand, has made his goals and intentions clear and will do so to the very end, (Rev. 12:1-12). Neither Satan nor his followers have ever learned this lesson and nation after nation have met their doom as a result of toying with the apple of God's eye.

Strange as it sounds, however, some of God's people have not learned this lesson. As a result of believing that they are now spiritual Israel they argue that the present earthly Israel has been disenfranchised from God's program and that we have no obligation to her. Rome has never been able to hide her anti-Semitism well. Those Reformation followers of Luther have also had a poor track record. Luther himself was a Jew hater who wrote cruelly about "The Jews and Their Lies." Keep in mind that many German "Christians" sat idly by and even tacitly approved Hitler's initial tactics. In the current Arab Israeli conflict many *evangelicals* can be seen as quietly siding with Palestinians because they feel that Israel, now dispossessed from the land, has no right to it. These are sad days for believers who know full well that the separation of the sheep and the goats and the very future of the nations themselves will be determined by the treatment of His brethren, Israel.

This is not to suggest that all non dispensationalists are Jew haters or that many non Dispensationalists have not come to the defense of God's special people. It *is* to argue that, disobedient as the Jewish people are, the heart of the dispensationalist beats for the Jewish people because the heart of Christ beats for them. A dispensationalist loves the Jews and prays for the peace of Jerusalem. One simply cannot be a dispensationalist and be anti-Semitic. One *can* however, be a respected member of one of these other systems and remain anti-Semitic.

5. Only in Biblical Dispensationalism is the priesthood of Christ properly administered.

Throughout the ages God has dealt with men in terms of His promises, the most significant of which are called covenants. Because covenants are made with men *and* their seed, they are administered or stewarded over generations. The stewardship of a covenant is entrusted to a priest. Jesus Christ is our priest, established forever, after the priesthood of Melchizedek, Heb. 7:1-28).

What makes the present age unique from all others is that Jesus Christ is personally executing the stewardship of His covenant through His body, the church, in His physical absence. This mystery, (unknown to previous generations) is declared and explained by Paul in Ephesians and Colossians and in other places. (Eph. 1:7-14; 2:11-18; 3:1-11, Col. 1:24-28.)

As a result of having been placed *in Christ* you are fellow members in Christ's temple and are called upon to build up and edify that temple through the priestly gifts which were given to you. Every person who is in Christ is in His body. You may call this a spiritual body in order to differentiate it from His physical body, but please understand that this body is very *real* and Christ functions through it. Every believer who is in this body is a priest and has a priestly ministry to carry out. The Bible, for example, indicates that our prayers, our efforts to win the lost, our gifts to Christ, and even our speech are all priestly ministries. (1 Cor. 3:1-17)

As a result, no earthly priesthood is necessary in either a literal form (as in Romanism and Episcopal traditions) or in any pseudo-priestly forms as in those groups who have established their own clergies. God has graced us with *offices* to edify His temple, but no earthly priestly order. (Eph. 4:7-11, 1 Tim. 2:5).

The power of Dispensationalism, when properly taught, is that we fill a unique role *in* this age only as members of His body, carrying out His program in His *physical* absence. This was not true under the Old Covenant and will not be true in the age to come when Christ reigns in His physical body as both king and priest. This is not to say that the Holy Spirit did not work in the loves of Old Testament believers and that He will not be at work in the age to come. It *is* to say that we are living in a unique period of time during which Christ is working in a unique way characteristic of this time only. God's plan and program will consummate in the age to come.

Does God have seven different programs or even two programs, one for the Jew and one for the Gentile? The answer is absolutely no. God has one program, implemented in one Person, the person of Jesus Christ, who has administered the Father's will and plan in phases through out time. This God who spoke in various ways in times past by the fathers, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son,(Hebrews

1:1-2) His son is carrying out His plan in two phases, first in His body the church, and finally, when He returns in His physical body.

Dispensationalists are the *only* ones on the planet who make the above claims.

III. Biblical Dispensationalism Described

Rather than re-inventing the wheel, consider the following sources:

Wikipedia.

Wikipedia's definition is an example of how quickly the discussion can become complicated:

Dispensationalism is a conceptual overview and interpretive framework for understanding the overall flow of the [Bible](#). As a branch of [Christian theology](#), it teaches biblical history as a number of successive economies or administrations under God known as "[dispensations](#)" and emphasizes the continuity of the [Old Testament](#) covenants God made with His chosen people through [Abraham](#), [Moses](#) and [King David](#). Dispensationalist Christian [eschatology](#) emphasizes a [premillennial futurist](#) view of prophecy of the "[end times](#)" and a [pretribulation](#) view of the [rapture](#) (although recently this pretribulation rapture has been questioned by some and there is no "official" dispensational view).

Dispensationalism stands in contrast to [Covenant Theology](#) in understanding the Bible. Regarding the theological status of modern [Jewish](#) people, dispensationalism rejects [supersessionism](#) (also referred to as Replacement Theology); hence many dispensationalists believe in [restorationism](#).

Ryrie

On a contemporary level, many Dispensationalists embrace Ryrie's basic description of Dispensationalism as cited here by Paul Enns:

Ryrie clearly delineates the *sine qua non* of Dispensationalism:

1. Dispensationalism keeps Israel and the church distinct. This is the most basic test of dispensationalism.
2. The distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation. Dispensationalism interprets words in their normal or plain meaning; it does not spiritualize or allegorize the text. The strength of dispensationalism is its consistently literal, or plain, interpretation of Scripture.
3. The underlying purpose of God in the world is the glory of God (pp. 39-40). In contrast to covenant theology (which sees salvation as the underlying purpose) and progressive dispensationalism (which emphasizes a Christological center), dispensationalism sees a broader purpose – the glory of God. (This theme is developed in *Transformed By His Glory*) For this reason, the number of dispensations is not the critical issue in dispensationalism – as long as one is true to the three essentials of dispensationalism. Three dispensations – law, grace, and kingdom – receive most of the treatment in Scripture; however, it is possible to recognize other dispensations and while the historic sevenfold scheme of dispensations is not inspired, they seem to be distinguishable economies in God's program.

[http://amawg.tripod.com/form_copy\(12\).htm](http://amawg.tripod.com/form_copy(12).htm)

Jim Steel

As will be noted in other articles, the discussion of the New Covenant is integral to one's understanding of Dispensationalism. While this author is in general agreement with Ryrie, it should be stressed that the New Covenant is being administered *in phase* with what Jesus Christ is presently doing. Those who are prepared for this discussion are encouraged to read (or listen to) the third article in Christological Packet I entitled Christ in our Eschatology found at www.BiblicalDispensationalism.com.

As also noted in other articles on that site, it is this author's contention that the concepts of *ages* and *stewardships* should be treated uniquely and labeled separately.

End.

A few good resources:

Excellent resources for understanding the basics of Dispensationalism:

Pastor Dick Gregory explains Dispensationalism in simple terms:

<http://www.byronbible.org/study/believe/dispensationalism.html>

For an in-depth study and defense of Dispensationalism be sure to go to the Middletown Bible Church site:

<http://middletownbiblechurch.org/dispen/dispensa.htm>