

DISPENSATIONS

Those who would hold to Dispensationalism make a clear distinction between Israel and the Church as understood and interpreted in the Divine economy of His progressive revelation.

The term 'Dispensation' is best understood in the definition given by Clarence E. Mason Jr., Dean of the Philadelphia College of the Bible. I quote from his book, "Dispensationalism Made Simple", (Arnold, MO, Shield Press, 1976, p.19 - "The word *dispensation* means *literally a stewardship or administration or economy*. Therefore, in its *biblical* usage, a *dispensation* is a Divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God's mind and will which is instituted in the first instance with a new age, and which brings *added* responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God."

A Dispensation is the administration of a specific revelation that God has given. The introduction of a new revelation often demanded human responsibility. When one dispensation ended, a new one began, thus the concept of time entered in. However time is not the important issue that we might give it, as time can be considered as the 'distance between two events', the beginning of a dispensation through to its conclusion and the beginning of a new revelation - another dispensation. L.S. Chafer includes in his definition of a dispensation a quote from the Century Dictionary, bearing on the theological import of the word.

- (a) The method or scheme by which God has at different times developed His purpose, and revealed Himself to man; or the body of privileges bestowed, and duties and responsibilities enjoined, in connection with that scheme or method of revelation: as the Old or Jewish *dispensation* and the new Gospel *dispensation*.
- (b) A period marked by a particular development of the Divine purpose and revelation as the *patriarchal dispensation* (lasting from Adam to Moses); the *Mosaic dispensation* (from Moses to Christ); the Christian *dispensation*."

In the light of this statement, the definition put forward by Dr. C.I. Scofield, in his reference Bible, page 5, is as follows, "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".

Since L.S. Chafer, C.C. Ryrie gives us his definition. He worked through a word study of the Greek word *oikonomia* and came to the conclusion that "the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household". (Charles Caldwell Ryrie, 'Dispensationalism Today'; Chicago: Moody Press, 1965, page 25). Ryrie then goes on to give the following definition: "As far as the use of the word in Scripture is concerned, a dispensation may be defined as a stewardship, administration, oversight or management of others' property. As we have seen, this involved responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the steward." Ryrie continues to give the theological definition of the word, based on the Biblical usage and characteristics: "A distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. We could include other ideas, such as distinctive revelation, testing, failure and judgement.

But, we seek a definition not a description, in using the word *economy*. We must give emphasis to the Biblical meaning of the word itself. There are some features which are distinctive to each dispensation and which mark them off from each other as different dispensations. These are contained in the particular revelation distinctive to each dispensation". (Ibid. pp 29-30).

Consider the two key words in Ryrie' s concise and precise definition of a dispensation. The first is "economy", which emphasises that certain features of different dispensations might be the same or



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similar. The second word is "distinguishable", which emphasises that there are some features which are distinctive to each dispensation and which mark them off from each other as different dispensations". A new dispensation became "distinguishable" when progressive revelation brings in something new, recognising that God did not give His entire revelation at anyone time, but in stages through human history.

Dispensationalism does not put back the New Testament into the Old Testament, thus not placing the Church back into the Old Testament. Both these are major principles of Covenant Theology. To summarise, Ryrie concludes, "Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this house-hold world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies. (Ibid. p.31).

The distinguishing primary characteristics of different dispensations are, according to Ryrie:

- (1) A change in God's governmental relationships with man (though a dispensation does not have to be composed entirely of completely new features).
- (2) A resultant change in man's responsibility, and
- (3) Corresponding revelation necessary to effect the change (which new revelation is a stage in the progress of revelation through the Bible. (Ibid.p.37-38). Secondary characteristics are the testing of man, his failure and consequential judgement. But these are not as essential.

Now it must be emphasised that the chief and major factor of Dispensationalism is the clear distinction between Israel and the Church. This will define whether a person is a Dispensationalist or not.

In this study there is the statement that the distinction between Israel and the Church comes out of a literal interpretation system of hermeneutics, thus taking the plain or normal view of understanding and interpreting Scripture. Dispensationalism does not spiritualise or allegorise Scripture.

There are three marks of Dispensationalism according to Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum in his excellent book, "Israelology - the Missing Link in Systematic Theology", (Ariel Ministries. 1993, pages 325-326). He says, "The first is a consistent distinction between Israel and the Church. This is the key. It is this, more than anything else, that distinguishes Dispensationalism from all three schools of Covenant Theology - that is, Amillennialism, Postmillennialism and Historic Premillennialism. As Ryrie says, "A man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to Dispensational distinctives; and one who does, will".

The second mark of a Dispensationalist is a consistent usage of a literal hermeneutic. This means letting the Scriptures mean what they say unless there is something in the context that indicates that it cannot be that way. While this does not rule out the usage of figures of speech and symbols, it does rule out allegorising or spiritualising the text when the passage does not call for it. It is this approach to the Scriptures that leads the Dispensationalist to make a consistent distinction between Israel and the Church, for when the text says Israel, it means Israel. and when the text says the Church, it means the Church. The third mark concerns the issue: What is the ultimate purpose of God? The Dispensational answer is: the Glory of God. Though Covenant Theologians claim the same thing, as Ryrie points out, "In practice he makes this purposes salvation ... "

This has become quite evident in our own investigation of the three schools of Covenant Theology. For the Dispensationalist, God's plan of salvation is only one of several plans by which God intends to Glorify Himself. In fact, He will glorify Himself in His righteous judgements upon the



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nations and even His chastening of His people Israel, before He saves a remnant nation. The LORD says of the nations in Ezekiel chapter 38 verse 23, during the future timed plan to destroy specific nations that come against Israel - the Gog and Magog war "Thus will I magnify myself, and sanctify myself, and I will be known in the eyes of many nations (not as Saviour but as Judge), and they shall know that I am the LORD." Also chapter 39 verses 21 and 22, "I will set my Glory among the heathen (Gentiles), and all the heathen shall see my judgement that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid upon them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God from that day and forward".

In Eschatology, Ryrie points out the clear announcement of the Dispensational Premillennialism:

- (1) A literal hermeneutic the literal fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies.
- (2) A clear distinction between Israel and the Church.
- (3) A Pre-Tribulational Rapture of the True Church.
- (4) A literal Millennium - thousand years reign and rule of Christ upon the earth. (Ibid. pages 158 - 161).

Both Dispensationalists and Covenant Premillennialists believe in a literal Kingdom on the earth however there is a sharp difference as to how the two groups arrive at their conclusions.

Seven Dispensations

1. Innocence (before Adam's fall)
2. Conscience (after Adam's fall)
3. Government (Nations)
4. Promise (Patriarchs – call of Abraham)
5. Law (Mosaic Law)
6. Grace (sometimes referred to as The Church Age – The Gospel, Tribulation, Armageddon)
7. Kingdom (Millennial Kingdom of Christ for 1000 years on the earth)

