
Dispensational Interpretation of Scripture

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH. It would be impossible to over-emphasize the importance of understanding dispensational interpretation of Scripture. It is the key that will unlock every portion of the Word of God. God Himself has given us this key. In II Timothy 2:15 we read, “STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH.” Certain things are for specific times and others are for particular people. Thirty or forty years ago dispensationalism was rather popular among fundamentalists. However, it has fallen on hard times in recent years and has been bitterly opposed by many who are called Bible believers. It has been misrepresented by others. Some say such a system throws out large chunks of the Bible. Nothing could be further from the truth. We believe all of the Word of God, but we believe it as God intended. Others say it is all relatively new, started by the Plymouth Brethren a century and a half ago. It is rather clear that belief in the dispensational approach originated in the New Testament; furthermore, a large number of early church fathers refer to it. Like most other truths, it was buried under the false teaching of Rome for a thousand years. While Luther and others rediscovered the doctrine of justification by faith, there were many other things they did not understand. This was one of them.

II. WHAT IS A DISPENSATION? It is a period of time in which God reveals Himself to man and deals with man in a specific way. The purposes of God are ever constant, but God’s method or revelation of Himself and His will varies according to specific rules and times which the Lord has ordained. The Greek word from which the word dispensation comes literally means “house rules”. God does not change, nor does His overall plan, but He has changed the house rules from time to time, and a proper study of Scripture will reveal that. It is rather simple—there are different things for different times. It is very clear that the Church is not under the law and those who endeavored to place it there were sharply reprov'd in the book of Galatians. There is one other basic method of interpretation and it is called Covenant Theology. These people basically see no changes in the program of God from the time of Adam until now. Of course they must make allegories of many portions of Scripture or they could not have any kind of scheme at all. For example, they say that the Church is “spiritual Israel” and then apply all of the literal prophecies of the future concerning Israel to the Church in a spiritual way. They explain away the literal kingdom of God on Earth by saying that the Church is the kingdom. The Bible clearly recognizes different dispensations and ages. If you would turn to Ephesians 3 you could clearly see this in verses 2, 5, and 9. There God says that this present dispensation of grace was not known in other ages and of course those other ages were time periods for the different dispensations. We are told in Romans 6:14, “WE

ARE NOT UNDER LAW, BUT UNDER GRACE.” You can not indiscriminately apply Bible truths; some things are for one time period or people and others are for someone else. How else can one explain David and others calling down a curse upon the enemies of Israel while Jesus says we are to love even our enemies?

III. THE HERMENEUTICS OF DISPENSATIONALISM. The word hermeneutics simply means the method of interpretation. I am often asked why there are so many brands of Christianity and denominations. Well, there are many different interpretations, but who is right? One thing we must understand is that only **a literal interpretation** of Scripture will give us the correct understanding. God says what He means and means what he says and the Bible is to be taken in a literal sense. To be sure, there is figurative speech and there are some allegories; however, these all teach something specific. Furthermore, because there are some allegories in the Bible, one is not warranted to turn every passage or statement into an allegory.

Another point which is most important is that **every Scripture has but one direct interpretation**. If a promise was given to Israel, then it must be interpreted for Israel. Now we may make many applications of that truth, but we dare not take the primary interpretation and apply it to somebody else. It violates not only the rules of Biblical interpretation but common sense. If someone writes a letter to you commenting on some aspect of your life, others may gain some helpful information from that, but it does not change the fact that the letter was written to you and applies to your situation.

Something else must be insisted upon and that is that **salvation has always been by the grace of God through faith**. The basis of our salvation is the blood of Jesus Christ. But if you look at the Old Testament, it seems quite clear that many knew little or nothing about Christ. For example, what did Noah know concerning the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ? If you read Hebrews 11, you have a list of many of the heroes of the faith from various ages or dispensations. Of every one, it says they were saved by faith, and it is quite obvious that all salvation is by the grace of God, for all are sinners. Now the present dispensation, which is the sixth, is called the age of grace. Man is saved by grace in this age, but the rule of God is also grace. Compare that with the previous dispensation where God saved people by His grace but God’s rule for man was to obey His law. God has one overall plan, but there are seven different stages to fulfill it. I think the easiest way to view it is to see it as one complete stairway with seven distinct steps.

One thing many do not like about dispensationalism is that it makes man (mankind) to be a failure. Man has been tested

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by God in every conceivable way (seven ways — seven dispensations) and man fails every test. They say this is all too negative. But it is the truth (we did not say God or His program fails; it cannot). The Garden of Eden presented the ultimate environment, etc., and yet man sinned and was cast out. Has any age yet produced even a majority of God-fearing Bible believers? We are told in Revelation 20 that after the thousand year reign of Christ multitudes as numerous as the sand of the sea will follow Satan and rebel against a good and loving God. Of course, in every dispensation God has saved some and they will forever be trophies of His grace. The truth is, apart from God's grace none would be saved.

IV. WHAT DOES THE FUTURE REALLY HOLD? As in other areas there are various interpretations of the Bible when it comes to the future. The covenant believer, because he does not understand that God is dealing with man in different ways at different times, sees the Church as the continuation of Israel. Of course, there was no nation of Israel for over 1,400 years and these people simply crossed them off as far as any future with God is concerned. But what about all of the promises of God's reign from Jerusalem over an age that will provide peace and plenty for everyone? This is clearly taught in the Old Testament. In order to explain that, they have made an allegory out of these Scriptures and said that those material blessings promised to Israel are being spiritually fulfilled in the Church today. So, in reality, they are amillennialists. That is, they do not believe in a literal reign of Christ on the earth for 1,000 years. He is reigning now in the Church according to them.

However, we believe it is very clear that the Church and Israel are separate entities in the program of God. We believe that the next great prophetic event will be the rapture of the Church when Jesus comes to the air to take with Him those who are truly saved in this age (I Thessalonians 4:13-18). This meeting is in the air with the saints only. The covenant people say that that is identical to the coming of Jesus in Matthew 24 & 25 and other passages. But that is simply not true. For, if language means anything, they are not the same. In Matthew 24 & 25, Jesus is speaking of the end of the tribulation whereas the rapture is at the beginning. Not only that, in Matthew 24 & 25, Jesus comes not to the air but to the earth. The saints do not meet Him, but they come with Him. Furthermore, He divides the sheep from the goats and sets up His kingdom, for He says that the sheep are to enter the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world. Of course, all is mere confusion and some of these things must be ignored or explained away if you are not a dispensationalist. God's program for the future simply put is that Jesus will come next to the air where He will meet the

Church. There will be 7 years of great tribulation on this earth when God prepares Israel to receive the Messiah and to reign with Him. At the end of those 7 years, Jesus Christ will return with the believers of this age to set up His kingdom and rule and reign for 1,000 years.

V. SOME COMMON ERRORS. Perhaps the most common error I have already alluded to and that is making the Church to be spiritual Israel. Nothing could be further from the truth, for if it were so, many, many of the promises of God would go unfulfilled; and we know "THE SCRIPTURES CANNOT BE BROKEN." These represent two of the dispensations of God. And while they have some things in common, they must be kept separate. Another error of the covenant people is that there will be no literal millennium or kingdom of God on earth. They say it is only spiritual, God reigns in the hearts of men and the kingdom is the Church. Such a belief actually cancels out great portions of the Word of God. If one takes the time to really study the issue, he will find that this is the Roman Catholic interpretation which was formalized and popularized by Augustine.

There is a related error which was once rather prevalent but is making a strong comeback. Originally it was called "Post-Millennialism". These people believed that the Church, through its preaching and good works, etc. would convert the world and then the Lord would come and eternity would begin. While that was somewhat popular 100 years ago, it died out. It is now come back and is quite strong among evangelicals and some fundamentalists. It is called "Reconstructionism". Some of the important names connected with it are Rousas Rushdoony, Everett Sileven, James Kennedy, Tim LaHaye, and even Jack Van Impe seems to have gotten into it. They teach that this world has been taken over by Satan (of course, that is true) and that it is the job of Christians to take it away from Satan and usher in the kingdom of Christ so Jesus can return and reign. These men hope to make America a Christian nation and then move out from there and change the whole world. Like many others, they are doomed to failure, for it is based on a false interpretation of the Word of God and they have an impossible task. Only Christ can change this world and only Christ can bring in His kingdom. However, without a dispensational understanding of the Word of God it is impossible to really know what God is doing.

Suggested reading for further study:

- **Dispensationalism Today** by Charles Ryrie
- **Things to Come** by J. Dwight Pentecost
- **"What in the World Is God Doing"** by Rolland C. Starr
(see Books and Booklets link)

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