

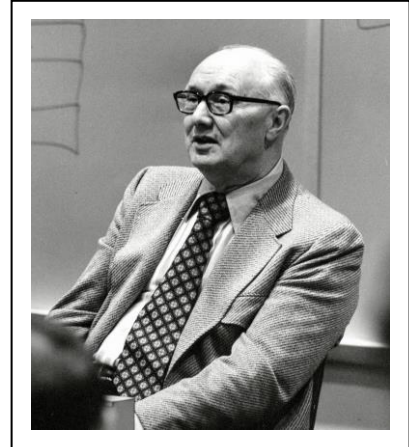
# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Reflections on Dispensationalism

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One of the problems in theology today is that many people who refer to dispensationalism do not adequately understand its roots, and therefore they dismiss it without giving it due consideration.



To understand the long background of dispensationalism, I examined approximately one hundred books on systematic theology to seek to determine how they explain dispensationalism. Most of these theologies in the nineteenth century were postmillennial, and most of the ones in the twentieth century were amillennial. They represented almost every system of theology, including liberal and conservative, Calvinistic and Arminian. Relatively few were premillennial. About half of them, regardless of their theological background, recognized biblical dispensations. One of the most significant was that of Charles Hodge, outstanding Calvinistic theologian of the nineteenth century, who was postmillennial in his eschatology but who wrote that the Scriptures describe four dispensations: Adam to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, Moses to Christ, and the Gospel dispensation.<sup>1</sup> And Louis Berkhof, an amillenarian, wrote that the Bible has two dispensations.<sup>2</sup>

### DISPENSATIONS RELATED TO PROGRESSIVE REVELATION

In the theological works that do discuss dispensations it is evident that acknowledging the presence of dispensations is not limited to a single theological system. Instead, such acknowledgement is based on progressive revelation, the fact that God continued to reveal Himself to humankind through biblical history.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (New York: Scribner's Son, 1857), 2:373–77.

<sup>2</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 293–301. Also Anthony A. Hoekema, an amillenarian who argues against dispensationalism, speaks of the Old Testament as “the period of shadows and types” and of the New Testament as “the period of fulfillment,” thereby acknowledging at least two eras of human history (*The Bible and the Future* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 195).

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Dispensationalism is an approach to the Bible that recognizes differing moral responsibilities for people, in keeping with how much they knew about God and His ways. God's revelation of Himself in different eras required moral responses on the part of humanity. In the Garden of Eden the only requirement for conduct was that Adam and Eve were to keep the Garden and not eat of the fruit of knowledge of good and evil. With the entrance of sin, human conscience came in as the guideline for conduct. It proved to be faulty, however, and people continued to sin. Following conscience there was the Flood and with it the introduction of the concept of government and the command that murderers be executed. This, however, also ended in failure at the Tower of Babel. The introduction of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12 and 15 presented a totally new perspective, as God revealed His special plan for Israel in the future. Then those dispensations or stages of progressive revelation were followed by the Mosaic Covenant.

The Mosaic Covenant, the most extensive code of conduct to be found in the Old Testament, was given only to Israel. The nations were not judged by it. None of the nations, for example, were punished for not keeping the Sabbath. Each dispensation superseded the previous one, continuing some of the revelation and conduct requirements of the past and introducing new requirements as well as eliminating some requirements of the previous dispensation. This situation was similar to raising a child who in his early years was subject to a number of limitations but for whom some limitations, as he grew, were lifted while new ones were added.

The New Testament introduces God's plan and purpose for the church. The numerous requirements of the Mosaic Law do not apply to the present era because the present church age is a different dispensation. For instance, while the Law required executing a man for not keeping the Sabbath, no one would extend that requirement to the present day. In dealing with the legalism present in the Galatian church Paul stated that the Law was like a tutor to bring people to Christ. Just as an adult son no longer needs a tutor, so under grace believers no longer need the Law (Gal. 3:24–25; cf. 4:1–7 on the difference between the rules for children and the rules for adults).

## AREAS OF CONFUSION IN DEFINITION

In the twentieth century many strides forward have been made in interpreting the doctrines of Scripture, especially eschatology and dispensationalism. In this area of theology *The Scofield Reference Bible* played a major part. Written originally by C. I. Scofield in 1909, he revised it in 1917. After World War I and after Scofield's death in 1921 *The Scofield Reference Bible* became an unusually popular study Bible. The Bible conference movement became prominent in this country, and Bible teachers in those conferences often recommended *The Scofield Reference Bible*. As a result millions of copies were sold,

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and the views presented in that study Bible became the views of numerous Bible institutes and many evangelicals of the twentieth century.

This situation changed after the 1930s and in the decade that followed. Many seminaries that were formerly orthodox had turned liberal. Then as their graduates were called to churches that were traditionally orthodox, clashes occurred between pastors and their congregations. If a pastor opposed the doctrinal convictions of his congregants, he would have to challenge the doctrine of inspiration, the virgin birth, and similar issues, and this would immediately cause his people to raise questions about his own theology. A number of pastors discovered that most of the people who opposed them were carrying *Scofield Reference Bibles*, and one of the distinctive factors of the *Scofield Bible* is that it is dispensational. Therefore those pastors hit on the scheme of attacking dispensationalism as a heresy. Because most people did not have clearly in mind what dispensationalism involved theologically, this tactic helped protect those pastors from questions about their own theology and it put those in the pew on the defensive.

Conservative amillennarians saw an opportunity to further their cause, and they attacked dispensationalism as a departure from the Protestant Reformation. Their motto was "Back to the Reformation" as the cure for apostasy. The Reformation, however, did not deal with the subject of dispensationalism. So these theologians went back to Augustine and his amillennial eschatology.

In the ensuing controversy many liberals attacked dispensationalism. But what they were really attacking was fundamentalism, premillennialism, pretribulationism, and the inerrancy of the Bible. In the process, liberals wrongly identified "dispensationalism" with fundamentalism.

Characteristic of the attacks on dispensationalism is that its opponents say it is heretical.<sup>3</sup> Their approach is often characterized by prejudice and ignorance rather than careful study of the Scriptures and of the history of dispensational thought.

One example of this characterization occurred when a woman indicated to me that in a conversation with her pastor she inadvertently mentioned that her nephew was a student at Dallas Seminary. The pastor immediately replied, "That seminary is heretical." When

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<sup>3</sup> For example the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States stated that dispensationalism is "evil and subversive" (*A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States 1861–1965* [Atlanta: Office of the General Assembly, 1966], 50; see also 45–49). While this accusation was made several decades ago, that general attitude still prevails among many covenant theologians.

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she asked him why he felt that way, he answered that it was dispensational. Then she asked, "What is wrong with dispensationalism?" He replied, "I don't know, but it's bad."

When amillenarian ministers are asked, "What is wrong with dispensationalism?" many of them cannot give an acceptable answer.

The widespread prejudice and ignorance of the meaning of dispensationalism was illustrated when I was asked by a prominent Christian publication to write an article on dispensational premillennialism. In my manuscript I referred to *The Divine Economy*, written in 1687, in which the author, Pierre Poiret (1646–1719), discussed seven dispensations.<sup>4</sup> The editor omitted this from the manuscript, and when I protested, he said, "That is impossible because John Nelson Darby invented dispensationalism." It would be difficult to find a statement more ignorant and more prejudicial than that.

Another work on dispensations, written by John Edwards and published in 1699, was titled "A Compleat History or Survey of all the Dispensations and Methods of Religion."<sup>5</sup> Also Isaac Watts (1674–1748) wrote on dispensational distinctives.<sup>6</sup>

A most important contribution to the discussion of dispensationalism was written by Charles C. Ryrie in 1966. In his book *Dispensationalism Today*<sup>7</sup> he answered many objections to dispensationalism. He presented the subject in such a proper biblical and historical light that for some years afterward the attacks on dispensationalism were muted. After several years, however, those who objected to dispensationalism thought it possible to ignore this work. But in 1995 he issued a revised and expanded work entitled *Dispensationalism*.<sup>8</sup> This work will undoubtedly be unsurpassed by any work on the subject for years to come. Ryrie deals directly with the question of whether dispensationalism is a heresy, and he has a lengthy section on the origin of dispensationalism. He also discusses the hermeneutics of dispensationalism, the doctrine of salvation, the doctrine of the church, eschatology, progressive dispensationalism, covenant theology, and ultradispensationalism.

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Poiret, *The Divine Economy*, 7 vols. (1687; reprint, London: R. Bonwicke, 1713). The seven dispensations he taught are Creation to the Deluge, the Deluge to Moses, Moses to the Prophets, the Prophets to Christ, Manhood and Old Age, the Christian Era, and Renovation of All Things.

<sup>5</sup> John Edwards, *A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations and Methods of Religion*, 2 vols. (n. p.: Daniel Brown, 1699).

<sup>6</sup> Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Waats* (Leeds, UK: Edward Bainer, 1800), 1:555–65; 2:626–60. Both Edwards and Watts discussed six dispensations: Innocency, Adamical, Noahical, Abrahamical, Mosaical, and Christian.

<sup>7</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995).

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Ryrie says this about the scriptural basis for dispensationalism: “The various forms of the word *dispensation* appear in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oikonomēō* is used once in Luke 16:2 where it is translated ‘to be a steward.’ The noun *oikonomos* appears ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Romans 16:23; 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2; Galatians 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 4:10) and is usually translated ‘steward’ or ‘manager’ (but ‘treasure’ in Romans 16:23). The noun *oikonomia* is used nine times (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2, 9; Colossians 1:25; 1 Timothy 1:4). In these instances it is translated ‘stewardship,’ ‘dispensation,’ ‘administration,’ ‘job,’ ‘commission.’ ”<sup>9</sup>

As Ryrie points out, there are three major dispensations in the Scriptures. “At least three dispensations (as commonly understood in dispensational teaching) are mentioned by Paul. In Ephesians 1:10 he writes of ‘an administration [dispensation, kjv] suitable to the fullness of the times,’ which is a future period here. In Ephesians 3:2, he designates the ‘stewardship [dispensation, kjv] of God’s grace,’ which was the emphasis of the content of his preaching, at that time. In Colossians 1:25–26 it is implied that another dispensation precedes the present one in which the mystery of Christ in the believer is revealed. It is important to notice that ... *there can be no question that the Bible uses the word dispensation exactly the same way as the dispensationalist does.*”<sup>10</sup>

The fact that the Bible uses the word “dispensation” as a theological term only a few times is no problem. Theologians use the words “atonement” and “Trinity” even though these words do not occur in the New Testament.

Ryrie defines a dispensation as “a stewardship, an administration, oversight, or management of others’ property.... This involves responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the steward.”<sup>11</sup> Dispensationalism as a system in present-day discussions is most commonly associated with and stems from premillennialism because of the emphasis of premillennialists on normal, literal, grammatical interpretation, which points to a clear distinction between Israel and the church.<sup>12</sup>

## BIBLICAL DISPENSATIONS

As noted earlier, only three dispensations are discussed extensively in the Scriptures—the Law, grace (church), and the kingdom (the millennium)—though others are indicated in the Scriptures. For example *The Scofield Reference Bible* lists seven dispensations in the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 25.

KJV King James Version

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 27 (italics his).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>12</sup> However, not all premillennialists accept dispensationalism as a system.

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footnotes and then discusses each one subsequently in later footnotes. The seven are “Innocence (Gen. 1:28); Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 3:7); Human Government (Gen. 8:15); Promise (Gen. 12:1); Law (Ex. 19:1); Church (Acts 2:1); Kingdom (Rev. 20:4).”<sup>13</sup> Wilmington, on the other hand, lists nine dispensations.

1. The dispensation of innocence (from creation of man to the fall of man); 2. The dispensation of conscience (from the fall to the flood); 3. The dispensation of civil government (from the flood to the disbursement of Babel); 4. The dispensation of promise or patriarchal rule (from Babel to Mount Sinai); 5. The dispensation of the Mosaic Law (from Mount Sinai to the upper room); 6. The dispensation of the bride of the Lamb, the Church (from the upper room to the Rapture); 7. The dispensation of the wrath of the Lamb—the tribulation (from the Rapture to the Second Coming); 8. The dispensation of the rule of the Lamb—the Millennium (from the Second Coming to the Great White Throne Judgment); 9. The dispensation of the new creation of the land—the world without end (from the Great White Throne Judgment throughout all eternity).<sup>14</sup>

Each dispensation includes requirements for human conduct. Some Bible students wrongly seek to apply prophecies of the future millennium to the present age. The progressive character of dispensationalism, however, means that it is wrong to bring prophecies of yet-future events and relate them to an earlier era. Nor is it proper to take elements of human conduct and responsibility from passages about Christ’s reign on earth in the millennium and apply them to today. Also a number of writers refer to passages on the Great Tribulation and its terrible disasters as if they will occur in the present dispensation of the church age. However, in the rapture the church will be taken out of the world *before* these events happen.

A recent development in dispensational circles is called progressive dispensationalism.<sup>15</sup> Advocates of this view hold that Jesus Christ is now partially fulfilling the Davidic Covenant, seated in heaven on David’s throne and ruling over His kingdom as the Messiah and King. I believe, however, that Jesus’ present ministry in heaven involves His intercessory work for believers as their great High Priest, and that His messianic rule is not occurring now but will occur in the millennium. Progressive dispensationalists do

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<sup>13</sup> C. I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3. See also Stanley D. Toussaint, “A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 81–91; and Ryrrie, *Dispensationalism*, 51–57.

<sup>14</sup> H. L. Wilmington, *Book of Bible Lists* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993); and Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

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affirm, however, their belief that Christ will reign over Israel in His thousand-year rule on the earth.

One of the best summaries of dispensations is found in the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>16</sup> This states that dispensationalism is a form of stewardship or responsibility of humanity to obey God and to honor Him. Each dispensation recorded in the Bible ends in failure, thus proving that no one under any arrangement can achieve perfection or salvation. Even in the millennial kingdom, with its near-perfect circumstances, humanity will still fail.

In every dispensation salvation is by grace through faith, made possible by the death of Christ. On the one hand the dispensations have diversity of requirements for human conduct, but on the other hand salvation is always by God's grace. Salvation is the unifying factor in Scripture.

It is most unfortunate that many people misunderstand dispensationalism. Even many of those who are dispensationalists tend to avoid using the term "dispensationalism" because it is often misunderstood. Those who claim that they are not dispensationalists are actually rejecting the wrong view of dispensationalism. For everyone is a dispensationalist—to a degree—whether he or she recognizes it or not.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *We Believe: Doctrinal Statement of Dallas Theological Seminary* (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.), Article V.

<sup>17</sup> Walvoord, J. F. (2001). "Reflections on Dispensationalism." *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 158, 131–137.