

Dispensational Distinctives Part 1 an introduction to Dispensationalism a paper submitted to Gulf Coast Baptist Church Bible Conference 10/12/19 by Steve Thomas

Introduction

All it takes is the ability to browse the internet and some time to kill, and a person can read as much as they want on any topic. The topic of dispensationalism is no different. Covenant theology, dispensationalism, hyper and ultra dispensationalism - these terms and many more can be read and studied ad nauseum.

Why is it important for the believer to know about these topics? Does it affect his daily life? Can't we all just get along, and study how to be involved, loving Christians? The problem is, each of the groups listed above might go about that process in a different way. People tend to study the Bible based upon what they believe about how the Bible was written. Was it written as a kind of history book to study? Or was it written to change lives?

The Believer's purpose for study of Scripture

Paul, in his second letter to Timothy states that the believer must study to show himself approved, being a workman, rightly dividing the word of truth. He states in the next chapter that the holy scriptures are able to make the believer wise unto salvation, being profitable for the believer's teaching and correction (2 Tim 2:15; 3:15-16). If the believer is to study the historical happenings in scripture, and derive some sort of guidance for how he is to live today, two things must be true. First, he must find some goal or purpose towards which all history is moving. And secondly, he must recognize distinctions, or things that differ in history. (Showers, pg 2-3). For example, Jesus himself presented two distinct gospels for his followers to preach. The first can be summed up with his announcement in the gospels, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The second gospel can be read in detail in 1 Cor 15:1-5. ***Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve:***

Looking at these two announcements, the reader finds that they are in fact very distinct. What does it all mean? Looking through scriptures, there are distinct methods of how to deal with sin, how to arrange a diet, what clothing the follower of God is to wear, how to worship, and so on and so on. How is the believer to sort through all of these different methods? The cynic will say that there are two Gods in the Bible. The Old Testament God who is cruel, and unapproachable. There is also the New Testament God who is kind and loving and forgiving. The cynic says that the Bible is full of contradictions, telling you to avoid drinking in one place, then saying to enjoy wine, give drink, and take wine in another. How is it all to be sorted out?

A proper study of dispensationalism will guide the believer in his study of God's Word. An understanding of how the scriptures were written, from a certain perspective, opens the Bible in a way that it is easier to understand. A proper study will also safeguard the believer from taking passages out of context, which may otherwise lead them to a practice that is not biblical.

Definition of Dispensation

The word dispensation simply means “stewardship” or a method of dispensing one’s property. As it applies to scripture, dispensation means “a particular way of God’s administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for world history.” (Showers, pg 30.) God dealt with His people in a different way through time, in order to teach them something about themselves.

It should be noted that a distinction between those who call themselves dispensational and those who would be labeled hyper-dispensational does exist. Salvation has been consistent through all of time. God has always been saving people by grace, through faith, based on the cross work of Christ. This is the belief of the true dispensationalist. But those that are hyper would say that God saved through works at one time and he will again. Peter Ruckman, for example taught that those in the tribulation period will need to work hard to make it into the kingdom. (*Wayoflife.org Beware of Hyperdispensationalism*, David Cloud, 2007) There are other distinctions which will be delineated later in this paper. The hyper dispensationalist will also confuse the origins of the Church, saying it did not start until the Apostle Paul. They will also exclude portions of the Bible from the believer’s study, saying that James and Hebrews were written for the Jew in the tribulation. (Larkin, pg 19)

“The basis of Biblical dispensationalism is a proper understanding of God's Word. God has explained in His Word how He brought His Word into existence. When we understand this process and the extent of God's work, it should cause us to approach the Bible with a different perspective. We don't need to be superstitious about the Book, but we should desire to grasp the details. By grasping the details, we will see distinctions which require our attention. This is the very basis of Biblical dispensationalism.” (http://bartimaeus.us/pub_dom/gods_house_plans.html)

A dispensation is a different way for God to dispense His property to His people. An easy way to see this would be to contrast God’s dealings with Adam and Eve in the garden and with the nation of Israel during the wilderness wanderings. There are similarities, but also definite differences in how God expected his people to live, how to dress, and what rules to keep. God told Adam that he and his wife could freely eat of everything in the garden, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17). Before the fall, Adam and Eve were naked, not needing clothing, not so the Israelites. God did not allow the clothing of his people to wear out, or shoes to break (Deut 29:5) Why the differences? God was teaching each of these groups something about themselves. In each instance, God provided for the household, asked the steward to follow a rule of life, and blessed or cursed according to how the household kept his rule of life. God was faithful to keep His word to both groups, but they ultimately failed to keep their end of the bargain. This has been the case in each of God’s dispensations. Each dispensation was meant to teach created beings something about themselves and about God.

Why Dispensationalism?

How is the believer to sort through the confusing systems of man, and to distinguish between them and the rightful meaning of scripture? Without the illumination of the Spirit of God, it would be impossible. But many obstacles can be removed by using the right approach. When the believer

understands that the Bible was written from the dispensational perspective, it is easier to keep from error. "Who is God talking to?" and "what does He expect from them?" These are questions whose answers will greatly enrich the believer's study of the Word. Historically, there have been those who teach differing numbers of dispensations, from 3 to 11. Traditionally, most dispensationalists will teach there are 7 dispensations, 7 different ways that God dealt with his people, providing things for them to fulfill His rule of life. These can be found in a chart in the appendix. God would select a steward, or manager, to reveal his rule of life. He then dispensed his property to this group based on how they kept His rule of life. He did not dispense the blessings of salvation this way, Romans clearly teaches us that salvation in multiple dispensations was by grace through faith. An excellent example of this can be found in Deuteronomy chapter 28. The first part of the chapter clearly lists the blessings for the Israelite if he will follow God's law. The second half of the chapter lists the curses for the Israelite if he will not follow that same law. This is not the way God has chosen to bless those under grace. Ephesians 1:3 states that the believer has already been blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ.

The second portion of this paper will deal with some basic distinctions that should be understood from scripture. Arguably, there are three basic indispensable factors pertaining to Dispensationalism - that of a Consistent Hermeneutic (or Biblical Interpretation), the Distinction between Israel and the Church, and the recognition of an ultimate purpose in History being the Glory of God through His demonstration of Himself as Sovereign.

Dispensational Distinctives Part 2 an introduction to Dispensationalism a paper submitted to Gulf Coast Baptist Church Bible Conference 10/13/19 by Steve Thomas

Among dispensationalists there is some agreement on what the indispensable factors pertaining to Dispensational Theology are. These factors can be boiled down to three:

- A consistent hermeneutic,
- the distinction between Israel and the Church, and
- a recognition that the ultimate purpose in history is the Glory of God through the demonstration of Himself as sovereign.

The Covenant theologian will struggle with at least two of these, and the hyper dispensationalist will go beyond them.

These three factors are connected. Without a consistent hermeneutic, the believer cannot see the distinction between Israel and the Church. This clear difference between Israel and the Church is a glorious example of the sovereignty of God, and the restoration of Israel will bring a great amount of Glory to God. A study of Romans chapters 9-11 illustrate this.

A Consistent Hermeneutic

Hermeneutics is vital to getting a grasp on how to study the scripture. Hermeneutics is the study of Biblical interpretation. Some problems with interpretation include a lack of interest in the grammar, allegorizing or spiritualizing scripture, and not giving context the respect it deserves. These problems will lead the believer into false doctrine, chasing the endless genealogies that Paul warns about in 1 Tim 1:4. In his book Protestant Biblical Interpretation Bernard Ramm states: *we need to know the correct method of Biblical Interpretation so that we do not confuse the voice of God with the voice of man. In every one of those places where our interpretation is at fault, we have made substitution of the voice of man for the voice of God. We need to know hermeneutics thoroughly if for no other reason than to preserve us from the folly and errors of faulty principles of understanding God's Word.* " (Ramm, p. 2).

Historical-Grammatical Interpretation

The history and culture of the day should be taken into account when studying a passage. When Paul is discussing the covering of the woman in 1 Cor. 11:4-10 he uses language that would be well understood in his day. Many believers throughout history have taken this passage out of context. The covering is literally "having a veil down from the head". The reference to the angels is a reference to those who kept their first place of appointment. The women in this passage were not keeping their appointment, but were usurping the authority of the men. They were drawing glory to themselves.

Without an understanding of the Greek or Hebrew grammar, much can be missed. The simple preposition "in" for example has a depth for helping the believer understand his position in the Body. What if the husband simply said, I have been in a marriage for 25 years. Does that explain the nuance and depth of understanding needed to grasp what a relationship goes through over the span of two and a half decades. So it is with the believer "in Christ". The baptism of the believer into the Body has much significance. If the believer does not grasp positional truth, he will struggle with his spiritual enemies.

Entire books have been dedicated to the use of the Greek Article. Understanding the presence and absence of the article is key to understanding Romans 6 and 7.

To miss the grammar, the believer might not understand that the sign gift of tongues is no longer operable. 1 Cor 13 is clear that until that which is perfect is come, the sign gifts will be operable. The passage cannot be talking about the return of the perfect one, Christ. But without grammatical interpretation, this could be missed.

Allegorization of Scripture

Allegory is a sense that the actual meaning lies beneath the obvious and literal meaning. I Chronicles 7:14 is an example of this. How many times have we heard a well meaning patriotic preacher plea for America to remember God and return to its Christian roots? However, the facts of this passage are often left out. This passage is narrative, God gave these words to Solomon at the coronation of the temple. They were not written to the United States of America and do not apply to the church today. I am a proud American, but no amount of love for my country and burden that I may have for it, will make this passage apply to the world system nations of today. The believer is a stranger and a pilgrim with his politics in heaven. Allegory is subjective instead of objective. Instead of the intended meaning of the author, clearly derived, the reader takes away meaning that is personal. The facts of the passage are often not accounted for. False doctrine is easily accepted if it feels good or makes some kind of sense. Allegory obscures the true meaning of the Word of God and should be avoided at all costs.

The Distinction between Israel and the Church

The greatest distinction of a Dispensationalist is to mark the difference between the nation of Israel and God's purpose for it, and the Church. In the book of Romans, Paul sets forth the relationship that individuals have with the gospel in the first 8 chapters. In chapter 9 he arrives at a serious problem. The nation of Israel has rejected God. Because of this God has set them aside. He is vindicated in doing so because the problem is not with the Word of God, or the message, or the Messiah, but with the people themselves. Paul vindicates the ways of God in rejecting Israel by three lines of argument, one in each chapter: the absolute sovereignty of God -*election* (chap 9), the moral responsibility of man - *rejection* (chap 10) and the final purpose of God - *reception* (chap 11). (McClain, pg 174).

In his book *Romans, The Gospel of God's Grace*, Dr. McClain draws attention to the distinction between Israel and the Church. To miss this fact will cause confusion in the area of election, as well as eschatology, the study of the last things, and the gospels. Although the church was an essential part of God's plan for history which he determined in eternity past, God did not put that part of His plan into effect until ten days after His son ascended from earth into Heaven - Pentecost (Showers, pg 170).

The Church was not formed apart from the baptism with the Spirit (Col 1:18, 24). 1 Cor 12:13 tells us that the believer is placed into the Body by Spirit baptism. John the Baptist clearly indicated that he was not baptizing with the Spirit, but that Jesus would do that in the future (Luke 3:16).

Another proof that the Church did not begin until Pentecost is Peter's assertion in Acts 11:15-16 that something new had begun (Showers, 173). Peter was present when Christ predicted that the

believer would have rivers of water flowing out of his heart (Jn 7:37-38). Jesus reinforced this in the upper room the night before he was crucified (Jn 14:2-4,16-17,26).

The Church was a mystery, hidden from ages and from generations, only to be revealed by the steward of the dispensation, the Apostle Paul. Eph 3:3-5, Col 1:26, 1 Cor 2:7-8. These passages all refer to mysteries that are woven through this truth. A study of the mysteries of scripture would greatly enrich the believer.

The church could not exist until the death of Christ. The believer was afar off, but brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph 2:13-16). Since the uniting of Jew and Gentile as equals to form one body was the result of Christ's death, and since that was new and different in nature and kind from anything that had ever existed before (vs 15), then the Church did not and could not exist until after the death of Christ (Showers, 178).

How is the relationship between Israel and God likened to a split marriage? And how is the Church to be presented to Christ as a pure bride? These are conflicting issues, unless the distinction between Israel and the Church is clearly understood.

God's Sovereignty

Was God just in setting Israel aside? The answer of course is "yes". The potter can do as he wishes with the clay. But the mercy and grace is in full view with the restoration and reception of His people Israel during the tribulation period.

How can God receive glory through the sin of man? It was the deception and betrayal of Judas that brought Jesus into the custody of the soldiers of Caiaphas, and then the Romans who crucified him. This was the payment made for the sin of man, the key to the redemptive story about which the believer is learning more every day.

The sin of the nation of Israel, and God's pursuit of these unworthy people shows the depth of his love, mercy, and long suffering. The covenant theologian will argue that the purpose of God is the redemption of the elect. This is just one of the main programs going on through history, but God is working out many other programs that will contribute to the ultimate purpose of human history (Showers, 53). Through progressive revelation, an element essential to understanding a literal interpretation of the Bible, God has been revealing more of this purpose through time.

Dispensationalism is not a theological construct, but an understanding of the perspective from which the Bible was written. Missing this places the believer in a situation where he will see the rapture of the church in the later pages of Matthew, or trying to place the United States in the book of Chronicles. A study of the 7 Dispensations will yield a backdrop upon which the landscape of the Scriptures were painted.