

The Historicity of Dispensationalism

Introduction to Lesson 3

- This lesson explores the **historicity of Dispensationalism**, showing that it is not a recent invention but has existed since the earliest days of Christianity.
- **Definition of Dispensationalism:**
 - Recognition that God has revealed His plan **progressively** through distinct **dispensations** (periods of time).
 - Each dispensation involves different responsibilities **given to mankind** concerning God's commands, covenants, and redemption plan.
- The **importance** of understanding Dispensationalism:
 - To "rightly divide the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV).
 - To comprehend **God's prophetic plan** unfolding in the End Times.
- The **lesson structure:**
 - Define Dispensationalism and contrast it with other eschatological perspectives.

- Examine **the seven dispensations** outlined in Scripture.
 - Review historical support from **church fathers**, medieval theologians, and Reformation leaders.
 - Establish Dispensationalism's **role in prophecy** and End Times doctrine.
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WHAT IS DISPENSATIONALISM?

Comparison with Other Eschatological Views

1. Idealism/Spiritualism/Symbolism

- Treats prophecies **allegorically** (symbolically).

2. Preterist Postmillennialism and Amillennialism

- Views apocalyptic events as **already fulfilled** in the past.
- Considers the "millennium" as the **progress of Christianity** since Constantine.

3. Historic Millennialism

- Believes the Church is experiencing **apocalyptic events now**.
- Seventeenth and eighteenth-century adherents **placed themselves in Revelation 11**.

4. Futurist Premillennialism (including Dispensationalism)

- Teaches that **apocalyptic events are yet to come.**
- Believes in a **literal rapture**, Great Tribulation, Antichrist, and a **1,000-year reign** of Christ.
- Maintains that the **Jews have a major role in prophecy**, returning to their land before Christ reigns.

Defining Dispensationalism

- **Scofield Reference Bible (1909) definition:**
 - "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."
- **New Scofield Bible (1967) elaboration:**
 - Each dispensation includes a **stewardship responsibility** to divine revelation.
 - **Salvation is always by grace through faith in Christ's finished work.**
- **Greek Terms for Dispensation** (οἰκονομία - oikonomia)
 - Found **22 times** in the NT.
 - Translated as "stewardship," "administration," "dispensation" (e.g., **Luke 16**).
- **Key Characteristics of Dispensations:**
 1. **Two parties** – One (God) delegates, the other (mankind) obeys.

2. **Specific responsibilities** in each dispensation.
3. **Accountability** – Stewards are judged based on faithfulness.
4. **Change** occurs if unfaithfulness is found.

Definitions by Theologians

- **Charles Ryrie (1966):**
 - "A Dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."
- **W. Graham Scroggie (1918):**
 - Compared Dispensationalism to a parent managing a household differently over time.
- **H.A. Ironside:**
 - "An economy is an ordered condition of things... [A dispensation] prevails in one special age which does not necessarily prevail in another."

THE SEVEN DISPENSATIONS

(with associated Scriptures, responsibilities, and judgments)

1. **Innocency (Genesis 1:3–3:6)**
 - Responsibilities: **Tend the garden, do not eat of the tree.**
 - Judgment: **Curses and death** (spiritual & physical).

2. **Conscience (Genesis 3:7–8:14)**
 - Responsibility: **Do good.**
 - Judgment: **Flood and mass death.**
3. **Civil Government (Genesis 8:15–11:9)**
 - Responsibilities: **Repopulate the earth, enforce capital punishment.**
 - Judgment: **Tower of Babel confusion and scattering.**
4. **Patriarchal Rule (Genesis 11:10–Exodus 18:27)**
 - Responsibilities: **Stay in the Promised Land, believe and obey God.**
 - Judgment: **Egyptian bondage, wilderness wanderings.**
5. **Mosaic Law (Exodus 19:1–Acts 1:26)**
 - Responsibilities: **Keep the Law, walk with God.**
 - Judgment: **Captivities, foreign rule.**
6. **Grace (Acts 2:1–Revelation 19:21)**
 - Responsibilities: **Believe in Christ, walk in Him.**
 - Judgment: **Death, loss of rewards.**
7. **Millennium (Revelation 20:1-15)**
 - Responsibilities: **Believe and obey Christ's government.**

- Judgment: **Great White Throne Judgment.**
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HISTORICAL CONCEPTS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Before the Reformation

- **Early Church Fathers believed in the Millennium and Tribulation.**
 - **Justin Martyr (150 A.D.), Irenaeus (170 A.D.), Tertullian (180 A.D.)** all affirmed a future **millennial reign of Christ.**
 - Early Christian sources like **Shepherd of Hermas** hinted at a **pre-tribulation rapture.**

Medieval and Reformation Period

- **Joachim of Fiore (12th Century)** revived dispensationalism but was condemned.
- **William Gouge (1645)** divided history into **seven dispensations.**
- **William Sherwin (1665)** taught a **pretribulation rapture.**

Pretribulation Rapture Before Darby

- **Robert Prudom (1704)** described a **rapture of the Church.**
- **Cotton Mather (1727)** spoke of saints being "**caught up to meet the Lord**".

- **John Gill (1740s)**, a Baptist pastor, taught **pretribulation rapture** and a **literal millennial reign**.
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HISTORICAL CONCLUSIONS

1. **Dispensationalism is not new**; it has historical roots **long before John Nelson Darby**.
 2. **Premillennialism was the early Church's belief**, later suppressed by the Catholic Church.
 3. **Dispensational concepts existed before the Reformation** and were revived in **Puritan and Reformation theology**.
 4. **Biblical basis**: The division of history into dispensations **aligns with God's progressive revelation**.
 5. **Covenant Theology is eisegetical**, reading **extrabiblical concepts** into Scripture, whereas **Dispensationalism arises from Scripture**.
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FINAL THOUGHTS

- **Dispensationalism is essential for correctly understanding God's unfolding plan**.
- **Biblical prophecy should be taken literally**, aligning with **God's historical dealings with mankind**.
- **Next Lesson: "The Plotline of Prophecy"**—mapping out **God's grand prophetic narrative**.

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