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Summary Article: **Dispensationalism**

From *Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*

Dispensationalism is a term given to a reading of the Bible based on a particular and distinctive hermeneutic, namely, the principle that biblical history is made up of a series of ‘dispensations’, or specific temporal periods within the divine economy. The idea of separate dispensations is arguably implicit in classical Christian distinctions between the periods of law, of grace, and of eschatological glory, as well as in the idea of distinct covenants characteristic of seventeenth-century federal theology. But the majority of those who describe themselves as dispensationalists follow the list of seven dispensations given in the *Scofield Reference Bible*. These comprise the dispensations of innocence, prior to Adam’s fall (Gen. 1:1–3:7); of conscience, from Adam to Noah (Gen. 3:8–8:22); of government, from Noah to Abraham (Gen. 9:1–11:32); of patriarchal rule, from Abraham to Moses (Gen. 12:1–Exod. 19:25); of the Mosaic law, from Moses to Christ (Exod. 20:1–Acts 2:4); of grace, from Pentecost to the rapture (Acts 2:4–Rev. 20:3); and of an earthly, millennial kingdom yet to come (Rev. 20:4–6). This schema is modified by those who identify themselves as progressive dispensationalists.

The distinction between the various dispensations is not simply temporal. Each dispensation represents a different way in which God relates to human beings over the course of earthly history. Individual dispensations are defined by the transmission of a divine revelation to a particular group of people (e.g., all humanity in the case of the dispensation of conscience, Israel only in the case of the dispensation of the law). Each revelation discloses an aspect of God’s will for human beings that demands the obedience of those to whom it is revealed. In every period the ground of salvation remains Christ’s atonement on the cross, so that under all the dispensations one is saved by faith rather than works; but only under the dispensation of grace is Christ the explicit object of that faith. Prior to that time, the object of saving faith for an individual is the revelation corresponding to the dispensation then in force.

Modern dispensationalism emerged only in the nineteenth century, largely due to the influence of British evangelical preacher J. Darby (1800–82). Darby, who was to become the founder of the Plymouth Brethren denomination, developed a doctrine of the parousia according to which Christ would return twice: first in secret to rapture the Church out of the world and up to heaven, and then again after seven years of worldwide tribulation to establish the Millennium. Darby made numerous evangelistic trips to America between 1859 and 1877 and won many American converts to his premillennial theology (see Premillennialism). His theology was further popularized by evangelist D. Moody (1837–99), though by far the single most enduring tool for spreading this theology was the publication in 1909 of the enormously popular *Scofield Reference Bible*, which annotated the text of the King James Version with extensive notes, maps, and charts, all coordinated with Darby’s dispensational scheme.

Dispensationalism arose in part due to a concern about apparently unfulfilled biblical prophecies. Dispensationalists recognized that the NT has a profoundly eschatological orientation, and that its writers based many of their claims on the conviction that the ministry of Jesus fulfilled prophetic predictions in the OT. If the truth of the gospel was in this way linked with the fulfilment of prophetic texts, in cases where OT prophecies seemed not to be fulfilled, the overall credibility of Christianity

was at risk: biblical prophecy might be seen as false prophecy, or, worse, God might appear to be unfaithful and correspondingly untrustworthy. Dispensationalists attempt to respond to this problem by fitting the OT prophecies into a coherent series of episodes that together constitute the full context of God's saving work.

To its credit dispensationalism has forced a reevaluation of much of the Bible's prophetic, eschatological, and apocalyptic language. Perhaps still more significantly, with its emphasis on the enduring significance of God's covenant with Israel, dispensationalists have also stood firm against supersessionist readings of Scripture, according to which God's promises to Abraham had been somehow annulled by Christ's resurrection (see Supersessionism). Furthermore, dispensationalism has reaffirmed the hermeneutical wisdom of beginning with the plain or apparent meaning of a text. It has also rightly recognized that God has related to God's people in different ways at different times, and that the earliest Christians did anticipate a reign of God upon the earth in space and time, not merely in heaven.

Nevertheless, Christians operating outside a dispensationalist framework have criticized the dispensationalist system on several fronts. From a purely literary perspective, they charge that dispensationalist interpretation of all prophecy as the literal foretelling of the *future* ignores prophecy's primary function in Israel: to shape the life of the community by revealing God's perspective on the *present*. Thus, even the large amount of prophetic material that is predictive in character usually focuses on the near term, for the simple reason that it is addressed to the prophets' contemporaries and not to an audience in the remote future. Similar criticisms are levelled against dispensationalist tendencies to interpret apocalyptic literature like Daniel or Revelation without regard for the metaphorical character of its language.

On a more distinctly theological level, dispensationalism is criticized for a failure to reckon with the finality of Christ as the one in whom all OT prophecy finds its fulfilment (2 Cor. 1:19–20), reducing his ministry to one mode of God's dealing with humankind rather than the ground and goal of the divine economy in every age. In opposition to the dispensationalist understanding of the time of the Church as a sort of parenthesis between the time of OT prophecy and the time when those prophecies are fulfilled for Israel literally on the earth, the majority of Christian tradition sees the Church as encompassing all the faithful from Abel till the end of time.

See also Ultradispensationalism.

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