

# ***Dispensationalist Theology***

## I. Introduction to Dispensationalism

### A. Place in historical theology

1. A leading influence on the development of Fundamentalism
2. A driving force in the rise of prophetic studies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century
3. Interdenominational in appeal (from Charismatics to Fundamentalists)
4. An evangelical theology

### B. Periods

1. Classical (19<sup>th</sup> & early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries)
2. Revised (From mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century)
3. Progressive (From late 20<sup>th</sup> century)

### C. Tenets

1. Foci: Eschatology and ecclesiology
2. Dispensations
  - a. Periods of time in which God tests the stewardship of man
  - b. Each ends with man's failure and judgment
  - c. Traditionally, seven dispensations
3. "Literal" (Natural) Grammatical-Historical Interpretation
  - a. Uses symbolic interpretation only when unavoidable
  - b. Normally insists on a single meaning of a text
  - c. Literal rather than symbolic interpretation of prophecy
4. Pretribulation rapture
  - a. Belief in two stages to Christ's return
  - b. Pretribulation rapture almost universally identified w/ dispensationalism
  - c. Includes a stress on the imminent ("any-moment") return
5. Concern with prophecy
  - a. Futurist approach
  - b. Not a prophetic scheme only, but more closely tied to prophecy than most systems of theology
6. Distinction between Israel and the church
  - a. Israel and the church have separate places in God's plan
  - b. *A sine qua non* of dispensationalism (Ryrie)
  - c. Church has "other-worldly" character because political-social aspects of God's rule relates to Israel
7. God's purpose in history is His glory (doxological)
8. Ramifications
  - a. Staunch support of inerrancy
  - b. Pessimistic or realistic?
    - 1) Charged with being pessimistic but defended as realistic
    - 2) "Pessimism" is relative
    - 3) Corrective to ideas of irreversible progress
    - 4) *Can* create a pessimistic outlook → Idea of irreversible declension before Christ's return

## II. Classical Dispensationalism

### A. Distinctive Emphases

1. Two purposes/two peoples: Stress on duality of Israel and the church

2. "Postponed kingdom" and "parenthesis"
    - a. Idea that Christ offered the kingdom to the Jews and was rebuffed
    - b. The kingdom is "postponed" until after the church age
    - c. As a result, the church becomes a "parenthesis" (not in the revealed plan)
  3. "Mystery form of the kingdom"
    - a. Present form of Christendom
    - b. Church a part of the kingdom, but not the whole kingdom
- B. Leading figures
1. J. N. Darby
    - a. Early leader of Plymouth Brethren
    - b. Popularized most controversial doctrines (distinction between church and Israel & "secret" rapture)
    - c. "Ruin of the church": Church fell into irredeemable apostasy very early & believers now need to form small communities (cf. Plymouth Brethren)
  2. James H. Brookes
    - a. Presbyterian minister and leader of Niagara Bible Conference
    - b. Credited with being the link between Darby and Scofield.
    - c. Bible conference movement in general served to popularize & disseminate dispensationalist teaching.
  3. C. I. Scofield
    - a. *Scofield Reference Bible* single most important contributor to the popularity of dispensationalism
    - b. Distinction of kingdoms
      - 1) Kingdom of heaven (political theocratic kingdom of Israel)
      - 2) Kingdom of God (God's ethical, moral rule in the human heart; see Scofield note on Matt. 6:33.)
    - c. The Sermon on the Mount was "pure kingdom," intended for the millennial reign (Scofield and Chafer)
  4. Lewis Sperry Chafer
    - a. A founder of Dallas Theological Seminary
    - b. Height of classical dispensationalism
    - c. Two "new covenants" (one Jewish and one for the church)
- III. Revised Dispensationalism
- A. Setting
1. Heated controversy (1930s-50s) with Reformed covenantal theologians
  2. Led to revising of more controversial tenets
  3. Major shift: Move from two people/two purposes to a common salvation
- B. Leaders
1. New Scofield Ref. Bible (1967) from which "revised" label comes
  2. Charles Ryrie
    - a. Professor of systematic theology at Dallas Seminary
    - b. Refers to his position as "normative dispensationalism"
    - c. "Spiritual kingdom": God's rule over believers today
  3. Alva McClain
    - a. Founder of Grace Theological Seminary
    - b. Wrote *The Greatness of the Kingdom*

- 1) Universal kingdom (God's sovereign rule over His creation)
- 2) Mediatorial kingdom (God's kingdom expressed through political rule on earth—but not present in the current age)

#### IV. Progressive Dispensationalism

##### A. History

1. Began in 1986 with Dispensational Study Group at the ETS in Atlanta
2. Leaders
  - a. Darrell Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary)
  - b. Craig Blaising (Southern Baptist Seminary, at that time)

##### B. Revisions

1. Progressive, not merely successive, view of dispensations
2. Kingdom of God the unifying theme of biblical history
3. Christ has inaugurated kingdom of David, but it is not yet fulfilled in an earthly reign
4. Church is not completely distinct from Israel
5. Holistic redemption
  - a. Personal, societal, cultural, political
  - b. Political-social purposes and spiritual purpose complement one another