

"Upon this rock I will build my church"

Matthew 16:18

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DISPENSATIONALISM

INTRODUCTION

A large part of denominational emphasis is directed toward upholding the doctrine of premillennialism. There are many ideas being taught about this theory, including the very popular doctrine of premillennial dispensationalism. This lesson is designed to provide information about dispensationalism, particularly by presenting the views of C. I. Scofield, one of the most important names in the realm of premillennial dogma.

The key word of this lesson needs to be understood before we begin our study. To those who hold to this doctrine, there are seven dispensations. Scofield defines a dispensation as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect to some specific revelation of the will of God."

The Bible word dispensation comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which refers to the management of a household or its affairs (see Luke 16:2-4; I Corinthians 9:27; Colossians 1:25; Ephesians 3:2; 1:10; 3:9). It does not necessarily refer to a period of time, although we will learn that there are actually only three Bible ages during which God set up a specific arrangement (Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Christian).

A good text for this lesson is Ephesians 3:1-12.

Our approach in this lesson is threefold:

I. DISPENSATIONALISM: IN THE WORDS OF C. I. SCHOFIELD.

II. BIBLE AGES: THE BIBLICAL PRESENTATION.

III. A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF DISPENSATIONALISM.

DISCUSSION

I. DISPENSATIONALISM: IN THE WORDS OF C. I. SCHOFIELD
(The following quotes are from the New Scofield Reference Bible, as he explains, in his own words, the seven dispensations that are crucial to his system of interpretation and belief).

A. General remarks about dispensations.

"A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.

“Three important concepts are implied in this definition: (1) a deposit of divine revelation concerning God’s will, embodying what God requires of man as to his conduct; (2) man’s stewardship of this divine revelation, in which he is responsible to obey it; and (3) a time-period, often called an “age,” during which this divine revelation is dominant in the testing of man’s obedience to God.

“The dispensations are a progressive and connected revelation of God’s dealings with man, given sometimes to the whole race and at other times to a particular people, Israel. These different dispensations are not separate ways of salvation. During each of them man is reconciled to God in only one way, i.e. by God’s grace through the work of Christ that was accomplished on the cross and vindicated in His resurrection. Before the cross, man was saved in prospect of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, through believing the revelation thus far given him. Since the cross man has been saved by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ in whom revelation and redemption are consummated.

“On man’s part the continuing requirement is obedience to the revelation of God. This obedience is a stewardship of faith. Although the divine revelation unfolds progressively, the deposit of truth in the earlier time-periods is not discarded; rather it is cumulative. Thus conscience (moral responsibility) is an abiding truth in human life (Rom. 2:15; 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2), although it does not continue as a dispensation. Similarly, the saved of this present dispensation are “not under law” as a specific test of obedience to divine revelation (Gal. 5:18; cp. Gal. 2:16; 3:11), yet the law remains an integral part of the Holy Scriptures which, to the redeemed, are profitable for “instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cp. Rom. 15:4).

“The purpose of each dispensation, then, is to place man under a specific rule of conduct, but such stewardship is not a condition of salvation. In every past dispensation unregenerate man has failed, and he has failed in this present dispensation and will in the future. But salvation has been and will continue to be available to him by God’s grace through faith.

“Seven dispensations (see Introduction, p. viii) are distinguished in this edition of the Bible: 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).”¹

B. The seven dispensations of Dispensational Premillennialism.

1. The First Dispensation: Innocence.

“Man was created in innocence, placed in a perfect environment, subjected to a simple test, and warned of the consequences of disobedience. He was not compelled to sin but, tempted by Satan, he chose to disobey God. The woman was deceived; the man transgressed deliberately (1 Tim. 2:14). The stewardship of Innocence ended in the

judgment of the expulsion from Eden (Gen. 3:24).”²

2. The Second Dispensation: Conscience (Moral Responsibility).

“Man had now sinned (3:6-7), the first promise of redemption was to be given (3:15), and our first parents were to be expelled from Eden (3:22-24). Man’s sin was a rebellion against a specific command of God (2:16-17) and marked a transition from theoretical to experimental knowledge of good and evil (3:5-7,22). Man sinned by entering the realm of moral experience by the wrong door when he could have entered by doing right. So man became as God through a personal experience of the difference between good and evil, but also unlike God in gaining this experience by choosing the wrong instead of the right. Thus he was placed by God under the stewardship of moral responsibility whereby he was accountable to do all known good, to abstain from all known evil, and to approach God through blood sacrifice here instituted in prospect of the finished work of Christ. The result is set forth in the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 3:14-21, see v. 15, note). Man failed the test presented to him in this dispensation (witness Gen. 6:5), as in others. Although, as the specific test, this time-era ended with the flood, man continued in his moral responsibility as God added further revelation concerning Himself and His will in succeeding ages (e.g. Acts 24:14-16; Rom. 2:15; 2 Cor. 4:2).”³

3. The Third Dispensation: Human Government.

“This dispensation began when Noah and his family left the ark. As Noah went into a new situation, God (in the Noahic Covenant) subjected humanity to a new test. Heretofore no man had the right to take another man’s life (cp. Gen. 4:10-11,14-15,23-24). In this new dispensation, although man’s direct moral responsibility to God continued (‘Render... unto God the things that are God’s,’ Mt. 22:21), God delegated to him certain areas of His authority, in which he was to obey God through submission to his fellow man (‘Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s,’ Mt. 22:21). So God instituted a corporate relationship of man to man in human government.

“The highest function of government is the protection of human life, out of which arises the responsibility of capital punishment. Man is not individually to avenge murder but, as a corporate group, he is to safeguard the sanctity of human life as a gift of God which cannot rightly be disposed of except as God permits. ‘The powers that be are ordained of God,’ and to resist the power is to resist God. Whereas in the preceding dispensation restraint upon men was internal (Gen. 6:3), God’s spirit working through moral responsibility, now a new and external restraint was added, i.e. the power of civil government.

“Man failed to rule righteously. That both Jew and Gentile have governed for self, not for God, is sadly apparent. This failure was seen racially in the confusion of Babel (Gen. 11:9); in the failure of Israel in

the period of the theocracy, which closed with captivity in Babylon (2 Chr. 36:15-21); and in the failure of the nations in the 'times of the Gentiles' (Dan. 2:31-45). Man's rule will finally be superseded by the glorious reign of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose right to reign is incontestable (Isa. 9:6-7; Jer. 23:5-6; 33:17; Ezek. 21:27; Lk. 1:30-33; Rev. 11:15-18; 19:16; 20:4-6). The dispensation of Human Government was followed as a specific test of obedience by that of Promise, when God called Abram as His instrument of blessing to mankind. However, man's responsibility for government did not cease but will continue until Christ sets up His kingdom."4

4. The Fourth Dispensation: Promise.

"This dispensation extended from the call of Abram to the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex. 19:3ff.). Its stewardship was based upon God's covenant with Abram, first cited here, Gen. 12:1-3, and confirmed and enlarged in Gen. 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-8,15-19; 22:16-18; 26:2-5,24; 28:13-15; 31:13; 35:9-12.

"Observe (1) the specific provisions affecting Abram himself (Gen. 15:15) and his son and grandson, Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 16:1-5; 28:10-16), under which individual blessing depended upon individual obedience (Gen. 12:1; cp. 22:18; 26:5).

"(2) God made an unconditional promise of blessings through Abram's seed (a) to the nation Israel to inherit a specific territory forever (Gen. 12:2; 15:18-21; 17:7-8); (b) to the Church as in Christ (Gal 3:16,28-29); and (c) to the Gentile nations (Gen. 12:3).

"(3) There was a promise of blessing upon those individuals and nations who bless Abram's descendants, and a curse laid upon those who persecute the Jews (Gen. 12:3; Mt. 25:31-46). Consequently this dispensation had varied emphases. To the Gentiles of that period, there was little direct application other than the test implied by Gen. 12:3 and illustrated by God's blessing or judgment upon individuals (Pharaoh, Gen. 12:17; Abimelech, Gen. 20:3,17, etc.), or nations (e.g., Egypt, Gen. 47-50; Ex. 1-15) who treated Abram or his descendants well or ill.

"In the continuance through the centuries of this stewardship of truth, believers of the Church age are called upon to trust God as Abram did (Rom. 4:11,16,23-25; Gal. 3:6-9), and thus enter into the blessings of the covenant which inaugurated the dispensation of Promise.

"God's promises to Abram and his seed certainly did not terminate at Sinai with the giving of the law (Gal. 3:17). Both O.T. and N.T. are full of post-Sinaitic promises concerning Israel and the land which is to be Israel's everlasting possession (e.g. Ex. 32:13; 33:1-3; Lev. 23:10; 25:2; 26:6; Dt. 6:1-23; 8:1-18; Josh. 1:2,11; 24:13; Acts 7:17; Rom. 9:4). But as a specific test of Israel's stewardship of divine truth, the dispensation of Promise was superseded, though not annulled, by the law that was

given at Sinai (Ex. 19:3ff.)”⁵

5. The Fifth Dispensation: Law.

“This dispensation began with the giving of the law at Sinai and was brought to its close as a time-era in the sacrificial death of Christ, who fulfilled all its provisions and types. In the previous dispensation, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as multitudes of other individuals, failed in the tests of faith and obedience which were made man’s responsibility (e.g. Gen. 16:1-4; 26:6-10; 27:1-25). Egypt also failed to heed God’s warning (Gen. 12:3) and was judged. God nevertheless provided a deliverer (Moses), a sacrifice (Passover lamb), and miraculous power to bring the Israelites out of Egypt (judgments on Egypt; Red Sea deliverance).

“The Israelites as a result of their transgressions (Gal. 3:19) were now placed under the precise discipline of the law. The law teaches: (1) the awesome holiness of God (Ex. 19:10-25); (2) the exceeding sinfulness of sin (Rom. 7:13; 1 Tim. 1:8-10); (3) the necessity of obedience (Jer. 7:23-24); (4) the universality of man’s failure (Rom. 3:19-20); and (5) the marvel of God’s grace in providing a way of approach to Himself through typical blood sacrifice, looking forward to a Savior who would become the Lamb of God to bear away the sin of the world (Jn. 1:29), as ‘witnessed by the law’ (Rom. 3:21).

“The law did not change the provisions or abrogate the promise of God as given in the Abrahamic Covenant. It was not given as a way to life (i.e. a means of justification, Acts 15:10-11; Gal. 2:16,21; 3:3-9,14,17,21,24-25), but as a rule of living for a people already in the covenant of Abraham and covered by blood sacrifice, e.g. Passover lamb, etc. One of its purposes was to make clear the purity and holiness which should characterize the life of a people with whom the law of the nation was at the same time of law of God (Ex. 19:5-6).

“Hence, the law’s function in relation to Israel was one of disciplinary restriction and correction, like that exercised over Greek and Roman children by the trusted household slave or tutor (Gal. 3:24, translated ‘schoolmaster’) to hold Israel in check for their own good (De. 6:24): (1) until Christ should come (Christ is actually our Tutor, for the grace which saves us also teaches us, Gal. 3:24; Ti. 2:11-12); and (2) until the Father’s appointed time that the heirs (children of promise) should be removed from a condition of legal minority into the privileges of heirs who have come of age (Gal. 4:1-3). This God did in sending His Son, and believers are now in the position of sons in the Father’s house (Gal. 3:26; 4:4-7).

“But Israel misinterpreted the purpose of the law (1 Tim. 1:8-10), sought righteousness by good deeds and ceremonial ordinances (Acts 15:1; Rom. 9:31-10:3), and rejected their own Messiah (Jn. 1:10-11). The history of Israel in the wilderness, in the land, and scattered among the

nations has been one long record of the violation of the law.”⁶

6. The Sixth Dispensation: The Church.

“A new age was announced by our Jesus Christ in Mt. 12:47-13:52. The Church was clearly prophesied by Him in Mt. 16:18 (cp. Mt. 18:15-19), purchased by the shedding of His blood on Calvary (Rom. 3:24-25; 1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18-10), and constituted as the Church after His resurrection and ascension at Pentecost when, in accordance with His promise (Acts 1:5), individual believers were for the first time baptized with the Holy Spirit into a unified spiritual organism, likened to a body of which Christ is the Head (1 Cor. 12:12-13; Col. 2:19). Because of the emphasis upon the Holy Spirit, this age has been called ‘the dispensation of the Spirit.’

“The point of testing in this dispensation is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the message of good news about His death and resurrection (Jn. 19:30; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 15:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:21; etc.). The continuing, cumulative revelation of the previous dispensations combines with this fuller revelation to emphasize the utter sinfulness and lostness of man and the adequacy of the historically completed work of Christ to save by grace through faith all who come unto God by Him (Jn. 14:6; Acts 10:43; 13:38-39; Rom. 3:21-26; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 10:12-14; 11:6). As those saved individuals who compose Christ’s true Church fulfill their Lord’s command to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:46-48; Acts 1:8), God during this age is taking out from Jews and Gentiles ‘a people for his name’ (Acts 15:14), called ‘the Church’ and henceforth carefully distinguished from both Jews and Gentiles as such (1 Cor. 10:32; Gal. 3:27-28; Eph. 2:11-18; 3:5-6).

“The Lord Jesus warned that during the whole period, while the Church is being formed by the Holy Spirit, many will reject His Gospel, and many others will pretend to believe in Him and will become a source of spiritual corruption and hindrance to His purpose in this age, in the professing church. These will bring apostasy, particularly in the last days (Mt. 13:24-30,36-40,47-49; 2 Th. 2:5-8; 1 Tim. 4:1-2; 2 Tim. 3:1; 4:3-4; 2 Pet. 2:1-1; 1 Jn. 2:18-20).

“The Church Age will be brought to a close by a series of prophesied events, the chief of which are: (1) The translation of the true Church from the earth to meet her Lord in the air at a point of time known to God but unrevealed to men, and ever held before believers as an imminent and happy hope, encouraging them in loving service and holiness of life. This event is often called ‘the rapture’ (see 1 Th. 4:17, note). (2) The judgments of the seventieth week of Daniel, called ‘the tribulation’ (see Rev. 7:14, note), which will fall upon mankind in general but will include the unsaved portion of the professing church, which will have gone into apostasy and thus be left behind on earth when the true Church is translated to heaven. This final form of the apostate church is described in Rev. 17 as ‘the harlot’ which will first

‘ride’ the political power (‘beast’), only to be overthrown and absorbed by that power (cp. Rev. 18:2, note). And (3) the return from heaven to earth of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory, bringing with Him His Church, to set up His millennial kingdom of righteousness and peace (see Rev. 19:11 and 17, notes).”⁷

7. The Seventh Dispensation: The Kingdom.

“This is the last of the ordered ages which condition human life on the earth. It is the kingdom covenanted to David (2 Sm. 7:8-17, see v. 16, note; Zech. 12:8, Summary; Lk. 1:31-33; 1 Cor. 15:24, Summary). David’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rule over the earth as King of kings and Lord of lords for 1000 years, associating with Himself in that reign His saints of all ages (Rev. 3:21; 5:9-10; 11:15-18; 15:3-4; 19:16; 20:4,6).

“The Kingdom Age gathers into itself under Christ the various ‘times’ spoken of in the Scriptures: (1) The time of oppression and misrule ends when Christ establishes His kingdom (Isa. 11:3-4). (2) The time of testimony and divine forbearance ends in judgment (Mt. 25:31-46; Acts 17:30-31; Rev. 20:7-15). (3) The time of toil ends in rest and reward (2 Th. 1:6-7). (4) The time of suffering ends in glory (Rom. 8:17-18). (5) The time of Israel’s blindness and chastisement ends in restoration and conversion (Ezek. 39:25-29; Rom. 11:25-27). (6) The times of the Gentiles end in the smiting of the image and the setting up of the kingdom of the heavens (Dan. 2:34-35; Rev. 19:15-21). And (7) the time of creation’s bondage ends in deliverance at the manifestation of the sons of God (Gen. 3:17; Isa. 11:6-8; Rom. 8:19-21).

”At the conclusion of the thousand years, Satan is released for a little season and instigates a final rebellion which is summarily put down by the Lord. Christ casts Satan into the lake of fire to be eternally tormented, defeats the last enemy—death—and then delivers up the kingdom to the Father (see 1 Cor. 15:24, note, especially point 7).”⁸

II. DISPENSATIONS: THE BIBLICAL PRESENTATION.

The Patriarchal Age was the time during which God spoke to mankind through the heads of families (fathers; patriarchs). There was no written law, so He revealed His will in many ways and through many men. The beginning of the age is very identifiable: the beginning of time. We do not know a great deal about what He required during that age, but we do have several stories which show that God did require obedience. These stories are in the book of Genesis and in Exodus 1-19. Examples are:

- Man in Eden (Genesis 1-3).
- Sin in the world (Genesis 4:1-6:8).
- Noah, the flood, and repopulation (Genesis 6-9).
- The family of Abraham (Genesis 12-50).
- The Israelites in Egyptian bondage (Exodus 1-19).

This period of time was from creation to the giving of the law (approximately 2500 years).

The Mosaic Age was the time during which God spoke to the children of Israel through prophets, beginning with Moses. Some of these men were writing prophets, which accounts for the appearance of the books of the Old Testament. The beginning of this age is also very identifiable. It was marked with the giving of the ten commandments in Exodus 20. Several sections of Hebrew History are covered in the time of the Mosaic Age:

- The wilderness wanderings.
- The conquest and division of Canaan.
- The judges.
- The united kingdom.
- The divided kingdom.
- Judah alone.
- The captivity.
- The restoration.
- Between the testaments.
- The life of Christ.

This period of time was from the giving of the law until the establishment of the church (approximately 1500 years).

The Christian Age is the time since the church was established in Acts 2. This was prophesied in the Old Testament (see Psalm 2, Isaiah 2, Daniel 2, Joel 2). It was also predicted by John the immerser and Jesus the Christ (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 9:1; Luke 24:44-53; Acts 1:1-11). Thus, the beginning of this age is also very identifiable: Acts 2. It should also be clear that since the above mentioned prophets refer to that (this) time as the LAST DAYS, that there is NO OTHER AGE TO FOLLOW THIS ONE ON EARTH.

In this age, God speaks through His Son (Hebrews 1:1,2; Matthew 17:5), and His Son speaks through the word revealed by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 2).

God's word today is addressed to all people on the earth. It is His FINAL word (not His SEMI-final word as premillennialism implies). It includes everything we are to believe and do in order to prepare for the judgment (John 12:44-50; Colossians 3:17).

This period of time has lasted nearly 2000 years, and there is no possible way to know if the end of the Christian age is nearby or far off (Matthew 24:36-51).

III. A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF DISPENSATIONALISM.

The first point of criticism regarding dispensationalism is that there is no Bible basis whatsoever for the arbitrary division of time into seven dispensations. A careful reading of quotes we gave earlier from C. I. Scofield shows that the distinctive dispensations he desired to believe in were not distinctive at all. No Bible writer or prophet ever taught any such thing. But, as we have also noted, the Bible does clearly identify the actual ages in times: Patriarchal, Mosaic, and Christian.

The second point of criticism regarding dispensationalism is that the entire theory is based on a false method of interpretation. They repeatedly claim that the Bible is to be interpreted literally. For example, the 1000 years of Revelation 20 must be literal, according to them, because literal interpretation is a must. However, please read Revelation 20; then take note of the things that actually must be figurative! To take the approach that millennialists take is to do things “sdrawkcaB” (backwards)—they decide on an interpretation and then force the scriptures into a preconceived mold. This is done with such themes as the following:

- 7 Bible Ages.
- Relating covenant events to prophecy (making covenant events their real standard).
- Applying clear Biblical statements about the relationship of God to the Jews in the Mosaic Age to imaginary fulfillments in Israel and other places today (as well as “soon”).
- Devising elaborate doctrines of rapture, great tribulation, THE antichrist, etc. from passages that explicitly deal with either the destruction of Jerusalem over 1900 years ago or with the second coming.

The third point of criticism regarding dispensationalism is that it does so much damage to Bible teaching. Note the following list from Foy E. Wallace in God’s Prophetic Word:9

- Denies that Christ is reigning now (Revelation 1:5-8).
- Annuls this dispensation as last days (Hebrews 1:1,2).
- Makes God false to His promises (Mark 1:14,15).
- Alternates Judaism and Christianity (Hebrews 8:5-7; 9:9,10).
- Minimizes Gospel—belittles church (Ephesians 3:9-11).
- Revokes the great commission (Matthew 28:18-20).
- Nullifies salvation to Gentiles now (Acts 15:14-18).
- Demotes Christ from throne in heaven to the earth, His footstool (Hebrews 1:3-13).
- Makes first coming of Christ a failure (Galatians 4:4,5; John 17:1-14).

The fourth point of criticism regarding dispensationalism is that it is a fleshly, worldly, respect-of-persons, speculative system that changes every time a nation falls, a wicked leader rises, the weather changes drastically, or some current denominational evangelist feels what he falsely calls the “Holy” Spirit. It is a monstrous system that has millions

of adherents, political punch, untold wealth, and NOTHING BUT SAND AS A FOUNDATION!

CONCLUSION

The Bible plan is clear and simple. New Testament writers regularly show us how to use the Old Testament, and premillennial writers regularly ignore those very passages that are explained in the New Testament.

- Psalm 2 (see Acts 4).
- Amos 9 (see Acts 15).
- Isaiah 2; Daniel 2 (see Acts 2).
- Jeremiah 31 (see Acts 8).

Knowing the simple Bible plan of three Bible ages is one of the most important things you can do in order to be sure of what you believe (John 8:32), to rightly divide the word (2 Timothy 2:15), and to be ready to answer the wild speculation of sincere people (1 Peter 3:15).

Premillennial Dispensationalism is not a harmless theory—it is damnable heresy that is taking multiplied millions to eternity unprepared.

Let us learn the truth well enough to stand against error and then lead people to the cross with the wonderful plan of salvation.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The New Schofield Reference Bible, p. 3.
- 2 Ibid., p. 4.
- 3 Ibid., p. 7.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 13,14.
- 5 Ibid., p. 19.
- 6 Ibid., p. 94.
- 7 Ibid., p. 1162.
- 8 Ibid., pp. 1373,1374.
- 9 Foy E. Wallace, God's Prophetic Word, p. 349.

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