

Dispensing with Dispensationalism

History of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism came on the scene in 1830s with the Brethren Movement. It included a rejection of historic Christian theological thinking on eschatology. Nowadays, in more simplified form, in particular stressing the Rapture and an emphasis on right-wing Christian Zionism, it underlies much American Christian fundamentalism.

John Nelson Darby came on the scene. Ordained into the Anglican ministry in 1826 in Ireland, he left a year later to join the Brethren, a new Christian group. He taught a dispensationalist form of premillennialism. Darby greatly influenced Cyrus Ingerson Scofield who was ordained into the American Congregational Ministry in 1882. The latter produced the Scofield Reference Bible which has sold over 2 million copies since it was published in 1909. Scofield had no formal theological training when he wrote it. It is this Bible which has popularised Dispensational Premillennialism.

Before this there was another form of Premillennialism – Classical Premillennialism – which was very widely accepted by the early church Fathers.

Characteristics of Dispensationalism

MAIN TEACHINGS

1. The Jews are saved through legal obedience and repentance and will remain for ever God's people on earth.
2. The Gentiles are saved through faith and will be raptured to Heaven
3. The church is a parenthesis in God's purposes and will end in apostasy
4. The kingdom of heaven is the Davidic kingdom and the kingdom of God is God's universal kingdom. (The kingdom of God is postponed until Christ establishes his reign on earth, having overthrown the god of this world. The kingdom of heaven is postponed because of the rejection of Messiah by the Jews)
5. There are seven dispensations (different ways in which God deals with humanity. "Dispensation" means stewardship or type of economy). The way God dealt, or will deal, with people in any other dispensation is irrelevant, or at best, secondary to the dispensation in which we live. The seven dispensations are:
 - i. *The Dispensation of Innocence* - Creation to the Fall (Edenic)
 - ii. *The Dispensation of Conscience* - The Fall to the Flood (Antediluvian)
 - iii. *The Dispensation of Human Government* - The Flood to Babel (Noahic)
 - iv. *The Dispensation of Promise* - Call of Abraham to Giving of Law (Abrahamic)
 - v. *The Dispensation of Law* - Giving of the Law until Death of Christ, tearing of temple veil and Jewish rejection of Messiah (Mosaic).
 - vi. *The Dispensation of Grace* - The Cross to the Rapture of the Church (just before the Tribulation). (The Church Age: Apostolic)
The word "Rapture" comes from the Latin translation of 1 Thess.4:17 "After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" is based on the Latin "rapere" which means to seize or snatch.
 - vii. *The Dispensation of the Kingdom or the Millennium* - The Second Coming to the Final Satanic Revolt

The Seven Dispensations

Dispensations = different ways in which God deals with people

C r e a t i o n	1 Innocence (<i>Edenic</i>)	F a l	2 Conscience (<i>Antidiluvian</i>)	F l o o d	3 Human Government (<i>Noahic</i>)	A b r a h a m	4 Promise (<i>Abrahamic</i>)	T h e	5 Law (<i>Mosaic</i>)	C h r i s t	6 Grace (Church/ Apostolic Age) RAPTURE TRIBULATION	R e t u r n	7 Millennium (<i>Kingdom</i>)	J u d g m e n t
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More detail on the 6th Dispensation

- This dispensation is often seen as depicted by the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. Their characteristics are prophetic of seven consecutive spiritual stages in the church's history.
- The church is a parenthesis in God's purposes (which are primarily with the Jews), unforeseen by the OT and only established because the Jews rejected the Kingdom (it is the "mystery" of Eph.3:3-6).

The Tribulation

- The Tribulation is a seven year period of great tribulation. Dispensationalists say this is the 70th "week" of years – seven year period – foretold in Daniel 9:25-27 ““Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two 'sevens,' the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one 'seven.' In the middle of the 'seven' he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing *of the temple* he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.” The same seven year period is described in Revelation 6-18.

During the tribulation:

- the seals, trumpets and bowls judgements of Revelation will take place.
- the Jews will be gathered to their own land in unbelief. Many of them will die in unbelief but a remnant will survive and be saved (Rom.11:26).
- the nominal church remaining on earth during the tribulation will fall into apostasy.
- eventually the nations will gather against Israel.

[Some dispensationalists have taught a partial Rapture, with only believers who are spiritually prepared for it being included. Also some have taught a mid-tribulation Rapture, normally at the half way stage: three and a half years.]

The Return of Christ

- a. Christ will return to the Mount of Olives with his saints. This return, foretold in both OT and NT, will be heralded by "signs of the times".
- b. Christ will win the Battle of Armageddon.
- c. He will overthrow the trinity of evil: Satan, the Antichrist and the Beast. Satan will be bound for a thousand years. Sin will be judged and righteousness will fill the earth.
- d. The tribulation martyrs will be raised.
- e. Christ will apply the efficacy of his death to the sins of the Jews which have been temporarily covered by the animal sacrifices. The Holy Spirit will cause the Jews to accept Christ's death for their national salvation (Rom.11:26)
- f. All OT Jews who were unfaithful to the law of Moses will be cut off from Israel.

The Millennium

- a. All faithful Jews from every age other than the church age will inherit the land.
- b. The Gentiles who treated Israel well during the tribulation will join Israel in the millennium, but will be inferior to Israel.
- c. Israel will head the nations in worship (centred on a glorious new temple) in this Golden Age of peace and righteousness. So the promises of the OT to literal Israel will be fulfilled. This will include the re-building of the temple and the resumption of the Levitical worship.
- d. The church will remain in heaven during the millennium. Some dispensationalist hold that the New Jerusalem (containing the church) will hover over the land of Israel during the millennium. They say it will be either a cube or a pyramid with a 1500 mile square base and 1500 miles high, or it may be a sphere 1500 miles in diameter. Moderate dispensationalists say the OT saints will be with the church in the New Jerusalem. The saints in the New Jerusalem will be able to travel to and from the earth. They also hold the New Jerusalem will descend to earth - centred on Israel - at the end of the millennium.
- e. At the end of the millennium Satan will be released and deceive many, leading them to rebellion.
- f. This rebellion will be crushed by the Lord and will lead to the Great White throne judgement with Satan, his angels and unbelievers being thrown into the Lake of Fire
- g. God will create the new heavens and new earth. Dispensationalism teaches that Israel and the church will be permanently separated - Israel on the new earth, the church in the new heaven.

	Hermeneutic	Israel/Church	OT Salvation	Union with Christ	New Covenant
Classical Dispensationalism	NT interpreted through a literal interpretation of OT	Distinct forever	By works	OT saints not in union with Christ	Two new covenants -one for Israel: Millennium; one for church
Neo-Dispensationalism	Literal	Distinct forever	By faith (not in Christ)	OT saints not in union with Christ	Two aspects to one new covenant
Moderate Dispensationalism	Not entirely literal	Distinct only in Millennium	By faith (usually not in Christ)	Unclear but implied not	One new covenant

	Hermeneutic	Israel/Church	OT Salvation	Union with Christ	New Covenant
	Christ came for Millennium	Church	Davidic Covenant	Holy Spirit	Law-Grace
Classical Dispensationalism	Christ offered the Millennium to the Jews	Parenthesis (Eph 3:3-6)	Not for the church	Not a permanent experience of OT saints	The church is not under OT law at all
Neo-Dispensationalism	Christ offered the Millennium to the Jews	Parenthesis	Not for the church	Not a permanent experience of OT saints	There was grace in OT; Church generally not under OT law
Moderate Dispensationalism	Christ didn't offer the Millennium to the Jews	Church a secondary fulfilment of OT prophecy	The church shares	Not a permanent experience of OT saints	There was grace in the OT; OT laws may be for church

Literalism in Dispensationalism

- a. The idea that there are as many as four resurrections:
 - Resurrection of believers at the Rapture.
 - Resurrection of tribulation martyrs.
 - Resurrection of believers who die in the millennium.
 - Resurrection of unbelievers to the second death.

- b. The idea that there are four gospels:
 - i. The gospel of the kingdom: the news about an earthly kingdom of Israel (initially preached by Jesus until the Jews rejected him), i.e. *Jesus came not to die but to establish an earthly kingdom*. S D Gordon: "There is no cross in God's plan of atonement." (Quiet talks about Jesus p. 118)
 - ii. The gospel of the grace of God: that Jesus died and rose again (preached by Jesus after the Jews rejected him and by the apostles other than Paul).
 - iii. The everlasting gospel: this is preached by the Jews in the tribulation, after the Rapture. It is news that all who are saved in the tribulation will enter the millennium.
 - iv. Paul's gospel: an expansion of the gospel of grace including the "mystery" of the church.

NB. The Gospels are said to relate to three different dispensations - law, grace and kingdom - so not all the teaching is relevant to us, e.g. the Lord's Prayer and the Sermon on the Mount. Some dispensationalists say that only the Gospel of John, Acts and the Epistles apply to Christians. The latter is the Messiah's Manifesto of the Kingdom and so is for the millennium, not now.

Some variations

- a. Some dispensationalists (e.g. Darby) believe the church is not related to the new covenant as such but nevertheless benefits from the blood of the new covenant.
- b. Others (e.g. Scofield) believe the new covenant is primarily for Israel (to be fulfilled politically in the millennium) and only secondarily for the church.
- c. Others distinguish between the kingdom of heaven (professing Christians) and the kingdom of God (genuine believers).

Critique of Dispensationalism

It is my belief that Dispensationalism is a different creed from that taught in Scripture:

1. A Different Bible

Dispensationalism teaches that the NT must be interpreted in the light of a literal interpretation of the OT.

It is, however, clear from the way the NT deals with the OT that the OT must be interpreted through the NT and particularly Christologically.

2. A Different Gospel

Dispensationalism teaches that OT salvation was not through faith in the coming Christ but through legal obedience.

But

- ***All (OT) Scripture is about Christ***

Jesus said to the two disciples on the Emmaus Road: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. (Luke 24:25-27). Later when he met the rest of the disciples he said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. (Luke 24:44-47).

- ***The OT Sacrifices also refer to Christ***

- ***The gospel (of faith in Christ) was preached to Abraham***

Jesus said that Abraham saw Christ's day (John 8:56). The NT gospel was announced in advance to Abraham (Gal 3:8). The gospel was promised through the OT prophets Rom 1:1-3 cf. 1 Peter 1:11).

3. A Different Christ

- ***This Christ is not a necessary atoning Saviour and sin offering (contrast, for example, Col. 1:19-22)***

- ***This Christ does not currently rule the world (contrast, for example, Col. 1:15-17)***

- ***This Christ's present reign at right hand of the Father has no direct relationship to the fulfilment of the Davidic covenant and Messianic kingdom prophecies.***

By contrast, the NT teaches the kingdom has, in some sense, already come in the work of Christ. Jesus said: "But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you. (Matt 12:28). He added: "nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21)

4. A Different Kingdom

The Dispensational distinction between the Kingdom of heaven and the Kingdom of God is invalid. They are simply different terms for the same thing. Note the following interchangeable use of the two terms in the NT.

Matthew 11:12-13 From the days of John the Baptist until now, the *kingdom of heaven* has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John.
cf.

Luke 16:16 ``The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the *kingdom of God* is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

Matthew 10:7 As you go, preach this message: `The *kingdom of heaven* is near.'
cf.

Luke 9:2 and he sent them out to preach the *kingdom of God* and to heal the sick.

Matthew 4:17 From that time on Jesus began to preach, ``Repent, for the *kingdom of heaven* is near."
cf.

Mark 1:14-15 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ``The time has come," he said. ``The *kingdom of God* is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Matthew 19:23-24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, ``I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of heaven*. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the *kingdom of God*."

5. A Different Church

The Dispensational Church is:

- *Not Jew and Gentile Believers together, one new man in Christ*

Yet the NT teaches the opposite: "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." (Eph 2:14-16). "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Eph 3:10-11)

- *Not the blossoming of the one people of God*

But the following passage shows that the church is no parenthesis: "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills everything in every way." (Ephesians 1:22).

- *Not an eternal purpose of God*

Yet the NT teaches otherwise: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:10).

- *Not the main agent of God's sovereignty*

Much Dispensationalism also teaches that Christians are not party to the New Covenant.

However the NT teaches otherwise:

- Paul and Timothy are ministers of New Covenant 2 Cor 3:6 “He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant-- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”
- Holy Communion celebrates the New Covenant
- The church will carry out God’s main purpose (Eph 3:10-11).

6. A Different Hope

The Dispensational Hope is:

1. *Escapist*

The pre-tribulational Rapture theory removes the church from the sufferings of the world. Yet the Lord normally keeps us safe when we go through tribulation rather than keeping us out of tribulation.

The Greek word *apantesin* (meeting) in 1 Thess 4:17 was often used as a technical term for the elders of a city going out to give a public welcome to a visiting dignitary and to lead him back into the city with red-carpet treatment. It is used three times in the NT. The other two references have this meaning (Matt.25 the foolish virgins; Acts 28 the brethren meeting Paul outside Rome). Hence this may be the meaning here. The saints meet the Lord in the air and immediately return with him to earth.

Also in 2 Thess.1:5-10 Paul comforts the saints with the hope of rest when Christ returns in flaming fire to judge their enemies. This implies a post-tribulational, single return of Christ.

2. *Divisive*

It permanently divides Jew and Gentile believers and creates an apartheid hereafter. Sadly this erroneous dispensational teaching underlies much American fundamentalist views of the End Times and fuels their prophetic interest in Israel to the present day.

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