

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Part 10

by Dr. Thomas Ice

It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men [dispensationalists] who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity.

—Anti-dispensationalist, George Eldon Ladd

I believe that dispensationalism is a system of theology that has been properly developed from the Bible itself. Dispensationalism is essential to correctly understanding the Bible. No one will be able to rightly divide or handle accurately God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15) without understanding these great truths. Instead of being a hindrance to correct understanding of God's Word, as is regularly claimed by the opponents of dispensationalism, it is a human label for the correct approach and understanding of Scripture. Dr. Charles C. Ryrie hits the mark when he concludes:

If one does interpret the Bible this way, will it mean that he cuts out some of its parts? Not at all. Actually, the Bible comes alive as never before. There is no need to dodge the plain meaning of a passage or to reinterpret or spiritualize it in order to resolve conflicts with other passages. God's commands and standards for me today become even more distinct, and His program with its unfolding splendor falls into a harmonious pattern. The history of dispensationalism is replete with men and women who love the Word of God and promote its study, and who have a burden for spreading the gospel to all the world.¹

WHAT ARE THE DISPENSATIONS?

Now that I have surveyed the theological system known as dispensationalism, I now want to identify the dispensations that we find in the Bible. Most who are opposed to dispensationalism agree that there are distinguishable economies or dispensations in the outworking of God's single plan for history. Thus, one does not need to be a dispensationalist to hold to the periodization of history. Most Bible teachers down through church history have recognized that there are different phases or eras of history.

Each dispensation includes: 1) revelation of God's will, 2) man's responsibility, 3) consequences. In each succeeding dispensation some features continue into future dispensations while other aspects cease at its conclusion. I believe that there are seven dispensations that can be deduced from God's Word² as follows:

- **INNOCENCE** (Gen. 1:28—3:6)—The dispensation of *Innocence* begins with the creation of Adam and Eve and God's commissioning of them. The dispensation of Innocence was a time when mankind, through Adam (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21,22), was created morally good but able to fall into sin. This apparently short-lived age ceased at the Fall into sin as recorded in Genesis 3. God's revelation of His will was "from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen. 2:17). Man's responsibility was to obey God and not partake. The consequences were: "for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

- CONSCIENCE (Gen. 3:7—8:14)— The *Dispensation of Conscience* begins with the fall into sin leading to the Flood of Noah. This dispensation demonstrates that man needs more than his conscience to walk upright before God. During this dispensation God revealed His will through the curse (Gen. 3:14-24). Man's responsibility was to master sin that desired to rule over him (Gen. 4:6-7). The consequences of neglecting his conscience would be the global flood of Noah (Gen. 6:5-7). The title conscience comes from Romans 2:15 and aptly designates the period between the Fall and the Flood.
- HUMAN GOVERNMENT (Gen. 8:15—11:9)— The *Dispensation of Human Government* begins after the flood when Noah and his family leave the ark. Civil Government was not invented by mankind as the need developed, instead, it was instituted by God Himself after the flood as seen in Genesis 8 and 9. God's will is revealed in that evil is to be restrained through the corporate institution of civil government instead of personal vengeance. With the absence of a threat of God's direct intervention through an instrument like the flood, man's responsibility is to mediate and restrain mankind's evil through capital punishment of certain offenses (Gen. 9:6; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). The consequences relate to man's failure to carry out God's will to restrain evil. Because of this God intervened in the tower of Babel incident (Gen. 11:1-9).
- PROMISE (Gen. 11:10—Ex. 18:27)—The *Dispensation of Promise* (so named by Paul in Galatians 3:15-22; 4:23,28) begins with the call of Abram and ends with the foundation of Israel as a nation through the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19). This period is dominated by the call of Abram and the promise made to him and his descendants, both physical and spiritual. The outworking of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and his descendants is tracked through Genesis and Exodus. During the age of Promise God revealed His will through the giving of the Abrahamic Covenant and its outworking in history. Abram's responsibility was to dwell in the land. The consequences were that when Israel disobeyed God He would chastise His people.
- LAW/ISRAEL (Ex. 19—John 14:30)—This dispensation began when Israel is established as a nation at the Exodus and given the Law. Israel was not and never was saved by keeping the Law, instead, it was how they as a redeemed people were to live. It was their rule of life that governed every aspect of life. But it was temporary until the coming and fulfillment by Christ. Israel's responsibility was to obey the Mosaic Law in order to show their loyalty to the Lord. Israel, as a nation, failed to keep the Mosaic Law which resulted in the many judgments spelled out in Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26, the ultimate judgment resulting in their captivity while scattered among the nations. Today we are in a transition period during which Israel is partially regathered into her land and still partially scattered among the nations.
- GRACE/CHURCH (Acts 2:1—Rev. 19:21)—The church age began on the Day of Pentecost as noted in Acts 2. The rule of life for the church is grace. All aspects of life are to spring forth from grace for the church age believer and the extent of God's grace is expanded to all peoples through the worldwide offer of the gospel.³ This does not mean that there was no grace before the events of Acts 2, rather that this is a time in which God magnifies His grace through the global preaching of the gospel to all mankind. Man's responsibility during the current age is to accept the gift of Christ's righteousness which is freely offered to all mankind (Rom. 5:15-18). The Church age ends with the rapture of the church when the last member of the body of Christ comes to faith in Jesus as their Messiah. This dispensation ends in the judgment of the tribulation upon a Christ-rejecting world.
- KINGDOM (Rev. 20:1-15)—During Messiah's 1,000 year reign from Jerusalem upon His return to the earth, all of the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to Israel as a

nation. These promises will have been accomplished by Christ, on behalf of a now converted Israel. The church will also reign and rule with Christ as His bride. Since Israel will be in her glory, the Gentiles will also reap great blessing as well. The responsibility during this age will focus on obedience to Christ the King and His laws, since Jesus will Himself be present during the thousand years as He reigns and rules the world from Jerusalem. Dr. Ryrie notes: "Satan will be bound, Christ will be ruling, righteousness will prevail, overt disobedience will be quickly punished. Yet at the end of the period enough rebels will be found to make a formidable army that will dare to attack the seat of government (Rev. 20:7-9). The revolt will be unsuccessful, and the rebels will be cast into everlasting punishment."⁴

THE ETERNAL STATE

Since the dispensations deal with God's plan for history, the eternal state is not considered a dispensation, just as eternity past is one either. Thus, present history ends with the destruction of the present heavens and earth (2 Pet. 3:10) and the creation of the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21:1). The transitional event will be the great white throne judgment where all unbelievers throughout history will have to give an account of their rejection of Jesus Christ as their savior and will be judged according to their works (Rev. 20:11-15), which will result in everyone who appears before God being cast into the Lake of Fire for all eternity (Rev. 20:14-15). All the believers throughout the ages will dwell with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit in bliss in the New Jerusalem for all eternity (Rev. 21:1-8). As the bride of Christ, we shall spend eternity getting to know the Lamb and the Father (Rev. 22:4). There will be no more testing since that is the purpose of history not eternity. We have a great future as a believer in Christ for all eternity. Maranatha!

(End of Series)

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* (Pamphlet published by Dallas Theological Seminary, [1980], 1986), p. 7.

² For a graphic presentation of the dispensations and dispensationalism I recommend that one examine Tim LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting The End Times: A Visual Guide to Understanding Bible Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2001).

³ Some wrongly teach that the seven-year tribulation period is either a separate dispensation or conclusion of the church age. The tribulation is the completion of the Law/Israel dispensation since it is the 70th week of Daniel (Dan. (9:24-27) which is for Israel. Law/Israel is the only dispensation in history that is not completed consecutively or has two stages to it. Since the tribulation is the completion of Israel's dispensation, this provides a strong reason why the church will be raptured before the tribulation.

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), p. 56.