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B0530 – July 31, 2005 – Major Bible Themes

Chapter 20 - The Dispensations

Presented by Dick Roesch

Dispensations

We're in Chapter 20 of the Major Bible Themes dealing with Dispensations. This study was very good study for me, personally, because I did not grow up with this kind of teaching.

However, in this study I found myself ankle deep in big words and bigger ideas:

Dispensationalism,
Pre-tribulation,
Covenant Theology,
Pre-millennial
Ultra-dispensationalism,
Dispensational Theology
Millennialism,
Progressive Dispensationalism,
Traditional (Classic) Dispensationalism
Post-Millennial
Amillennial

And what I quickly found was the problem of getting caught in the weeds as it were. It's easy to get lost in the detail and miss the big picture that you want to present. So I had to keep asking myself the question – what's really important here at a high enough level to teach the basics of Dispensationalism?

Let's start with the Theological Continuum to see where Dispensational Theology fits.

Two camps emerge: Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology.
The saying “It all depends on your interpretation” certainly holds true here.

Both have the same goal. Each is trying to see and interpret God’s plan for His creation - past, present, and future through Scripture. However, their approach is quite different.

Covenant Theology argues that the Bible should be read allegorically or spiritually.

Dispensational Theology argues that Scripture should be read with a literal, historical-grammatical interpretation.

Covenant Theology

Believes that God made a special “**covenant of works**” with Adam; that if Adam would perfectly obey God he would have eternal life. The penalty for not perfectly obeying God was death.

Because Adam failed and sinned, God initiated a second covenant, “**the covenant of Grace**”, whereby sinful man was promised salvation if he would believe in the promised Savior (Genesis 3:15).

It is not my intent to explain these, only to mention that Covenant has three followings.

- Amillennialism
- Postmillennialism
- Pre-millennialism

Covenant Theology argues that the Bible should be read allegorically or spiritually. Therefore, they can read the New Testament into the Old Testament where they see the Church existing in the Old Testament as the “new “ Israel, or the spiritual church.

Other generalities about Covenant Theology are:

- The Covenant of Grace extends from the fall of man to the 2nd Coming
- The purpose of God is the salvation of the elect
- And, again the Church is read back into the Old Testament, making Israel and the Church into the “one people of God”.

By doing this, they nullify the need for a Millennium Kingdom for Israel. This reading of the New Testament into the Old Testament allegorically or spiritually is very dangerous. It causes many problems and confusion – to the point where people can read into the Bible whatever desire tickles their mind. There are no rules in this way of interpretation.

Jeremy may speak more on this subject next week.

Dispensational Theology

Dispensational Theology has four types of belief:

We'll not spend much time on three of these, because I want to concentrate on the Traditional (Classical) approach.

Progressive: This is a mix of Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology
Traditional "Classical" which we concentrate on in a moment

Pauline: Says the Church starts with Paul in Acts 9

Ultra: Says the Church started with Paul and anything before Paul is said to be the Jewish church and not the Body Church.

Traditional (Classical) Dispensational Theology.

Renald E. Showers defines the term Dispensation as "A particular way of God's administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for world history."

Dr Chafer says "It is probable that the recognition of the dispensations sheds more light on the whole message of the Bible than any other aspect of Biblical study."

Dr Walvoord describes traditional Dispensationalism as "an approach to the Bible rather than a system of Theology. He says "it attempts to allow the Bible to open itself to the reader."

First of all the Dispensationalist believes that the Church began in Acts 2.

Matthew 16:18

..."I will build My church."

Acts 1:5
from now."

The Holy Spirit is promised ... "not many days

Acts 11:15 ...the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as He did upon us at the beginning."

1 Corinthians 12:13 The doctrine explained: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."

Ephesians 1:21-23 The doctrine explained: "...the church, which is His body ..."

The Dispensationalist sees 3 core elements:

- 1) A consistent, normal interpretation of all Scripture – including prophecy
- 2) A distinction between God's program for Israel and God's program for the Church
- 3) God's ultimate purpose is to glorify Himself.

Here are the seven dispensations that have shaken out over the centuries.

Innocence: Before Adam's fall (Genesis 1:28-3:6)

Conscience: Age of "moral responsibility" (Genesis 4-8:14)

Government: Capital punishment instituted (Genesis 8:15-11:9)

Promise: Period of the patriarchs (Genesis 11:10-Exodus 18:27)

Mosaic Law: The constitution to the nation Israel (Exodus 19:1-Acts 1:26)

Grace: The coming of Christ (Acts 2:1-Revelation 19:21)

Millennium: Christ returns to reign on earth for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4-6)

Even early in the Church, Clement of Alexandria (150-220 AD) recognized four dispensations.

There was a period of 1500 years that Covenant Theology grew and developed. Then a resurgence of discovering Dispensations began in the 1600s. A good guess would be because of the invention of the printing press, where more and more men were allowed to read God's Word. There were a variety of men writing and defining dispensations around this time.

However, John Darby (1800-1882) became the one that held to seven and became known as the father of Dispensationalism by developing, systematizing, and spreading Dispensationalism.

Scofield (1843-1921) popularized it further with his Scofield Study Bible

Here we have a chart showing the responsibility, failure and judgment throughout the dispensations. Man fails every test. In the end man has to recognize that he really is depraved – and God was right all along!

Dispensation	Responsibility	Failure	Judgment
Innocence	Do not eat	They ate	Curse & death
Conscience	Do good, blood sacrifice	Wickedness	Universal flood
Human Government	Scatter & multiply	Did not scatter	Dispersion & confusion of languages
Promise	Dwelt in Canaan	Dwelt in Egypt	Egyptian bondage
Law	Obey the law	Broke the law, rejected Christ	Worldwide dispersion
Church	By faith in Christ	Rejecting Christ	The Great Tribulation
Kingdom	Obey & worship God	Final rebellion	Eternal Hell

Keeping Israel and the Church separate

Here is something that really struck me as I was reading – there were **two commissions**.

The first commission:

Turn to **Matthew 10:5-6**

“These twelve Jesus sent out after instructing them: “**Do not go** in the way of the Gentiles, and **do not enter** any city of the Samaritans; but rather **go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.**”

The second commission:

Matthew 28:19

“Go therefore and make disciples of **all the nations**, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ...”

How well did the disciples understand this commission?

What was the Jewish mindset? First of all, they hated Gentiles with a passion! They had grown up that – and that’s the way God wanted it.

Why did the Jews have such a hard time accepting Christ as their Messiah?

Even to this day, orthodox Jews are confused by the suffering Messiah and the Ruling Messiah

At least 10 years had passed since the “Great Commission”, and in **Acts 10:34** we have the recording of Cornelius’ vision and sending for Peter and Peter’s previous vision of the four-footed animals coming down with the command “Arise, Peter, kill and eat!” - **with the admonition: what God has called clean do not call unclean.**

So, Peter meets with Cornelius, his family and close friends and they exchange their vision experiences and in: **Acts 10:34-35** – And opening his mouth, Peter said: “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.”

And so Peter preaches Jesus to them.

And in **verses 44 –45 we read:** “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message.”

And all the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because **the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also.**

Now back to Dispensations....

The accusation of more than one salvation has been lodged against the Dispensationalist.

The **basis** of salvation in every age is the death of Christ

The **requirement** for salvation in every age is faith.

The **object** of faith in every age is God.

The **contents of faith** change in the various dispensations.

Grace is present in every age but more so in the CHURCH age,

Progressive revelation is foundational to Dispensationalism.

God did not reveal all truth simultaneously at one point in history.

Content of Faith.

Example; Genesis 15:5-6

Abraham believed God (had faith) in what God (the object of Abraham's faith) revealed to him about what He would do with the nation from his seed, and that faith saved Abraham – "...it was reckoned (accounted) to him as righteousness."

God promised to bless Abraham.

As an aside, the Hebrew word for “bless” implied three things: Many descendants, victory over you enemies, and wealth.

We find God taking him outside:

v5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

v6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Abraham is a saved man because he believed the revelation of God.

Remember, Abraham is 75 years old and he would have to wait 25 more years until Isaac is born.

Why should you care about Dispensationalism?

You expect Christ's coming for you at any moment (creating holiness)

You look at today's land struggles of Israel with greater interest

You read Scripture with more confidence and expectation, watching God at work in human history

You read Scripture knowing which portion of Scripture apply directly to you as a child of grace and which directly pertain to Israel.

Conclusion

I will conclude with remarks of Renald Showers (*There Really Is A Difference*):

- Although a commitment to Dispensationalism does not make you any more a genuine Christian than the Covenant position, still, what is disagreed upon is significantly important as to how you see:
- God fulfilling His ultimate purpose for history
- How prophetic passages are to be interpreted
- God's program for the nation Israel
- The nature of the Kingdom of God
- The beginning, nature, and distinctiveness of the Church
- The means through which the Christian is to live a godly life in this present world

Partial list of references

Dispensationalism: Charles C. Ryrie

There Really Is A Difference: Renald E. Showers

Major Bible Themes: Lewis Sperry Chafer

Dispensationalism Yesterday, Today and Forever and other assorted writings: Jeremy Thomas

Things To Come: J. Dwight Pentecost

Justification By Faith Alone & Its Historical Challenges: Ron Merryman

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