

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Part 8

by Dr. Thomas Ice

Now that I have surveyed the biblical covenants I want to now move on and deal with the biblical dispensations and the theology known as dispensationalism. Dispensationalism believes that the Bible pictures history as a single plan run by God through successive stages of history known as dispensations. God manages the entirety of human history as a household, moving humanity through sequential stages of His administration, determined by the level of revelation He has provided up to that time in history. Each administrative period is characterized by specific revelation involving stated responsibilities, a test in relation to that revelation, failure to pass the test, and God's gracious provision of a solution despite the disobedience of mankind in every phase. The dispensations have nothing to do with how people are saved from their sin that most important of issues is handled by on the basis of other factors.

WHAT IS A DISPENSATION?

The leading spokesman for dispensationalism is retired Dallas Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Charles Ryrie. Many know Ryrie through his books and articles, but he is best known for his popular *Ryrie Study Bible*. Ryrie's book *Dispensationalism*¹ and is a primary reference point for gaining an understanding of dispensationalism. Since Dr. Ryrie is the expert on this subject, we will let him speak as we summarize his material.

He notes that *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a theological dispensation as "a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time . . . also, the age or period during which a system has prevailed."²

The English word *dispensation* translates the Greek noun *oikonomía*, often rendered "administration" in modern translations. The verb form *oikonoméō* refers to a manager of a household.³ "In the New Testament," notes Ryrie, "*dispensation* means to manage or administer the affairs of a household, as, for example, in the Lord's story of the unfaithful steward in Luke 16:1-13."⁴

The Greek word *oikonomía* is a compound of *oikos* meaning "house" and *nomos* meaning "law." Taken together "the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household."⁵

The various forms of the word *dispensation* are used in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oikonoméō* is used in Luke 16:2 where it is translated "to be a steward." The noun *oikónómos* is used ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; I Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; I Pet. 4:10), and in all instances it is translated "steward" except "chamberlain" in Romans 16:23. The noun *oikonomía* is used nine times (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; I Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; I Tim. 1:4). In these instances it is translated variously ("stewardship," "dispensation," "administration," "job," "commission").

BIBLICAL USE OF DISPENSATION

Further examination of *oikónómos* as it is used in the Gospels finds Christ using the word in two parables in Luke (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8). Ryrie notes that in Luke 16 we find some important characteristics of a stewardship, or dispensational arrangement:

(1) Basically there are two parties: the one whose authority it is to delegate duties, and the one whose responsibility it is to carry out these charges. The rich man (or manager) plays these roles in the parable of Luke 16 (v. 1).

(2) These are specific responsibilities. In the parable the steward failed in his known duties when he wasted the goods of his lord (v. 1).

(3) Accountability, as well as responsibility, is part of the arrangement. A steward may be called to account for the discharge of his stewardship at any time, for it is the owner's or master's prerogative to expect faithful obedience to the duties entrusted to the steward (v. 2).

(4) A change may be made at any time unfaithfulness is found in the existing administration ("can no longer be steward").⁶

Further defining features can be gleaned from the other occurrences of the *dispensation* word group. All other uses, except 1 Peter 4:10, are found in the writings of Paul. Ryrie cites the following features:

(1) God is the one to whom men are responsible in the discharge of their stewardship obligations. In three instances this relationship to God is mentioned by Paul (I Cor. 4:1-2; Titus 1:7).

(2) Faithfulness is required of those to whom a dispensational responsibility is committed (I Cor. 4:2). This is illustrated by Erastus, who held the important position of treasurer (steward) of the city (Rom. 16:23).

(3) A stewardship may end at an appointed time (Gal. 4:2). In this reference the end of the stewardship came because of a different purpose being introduced. This reference also shows that a dispensation is connected with time.

(4) Dispensations are connected with the mysteries of God, that is, with specific revelation from God (I Cor. 4:1; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25).

(5) Dispensation and age are connected ideas, but the words are not exactly interchangeable. For instance, Paul declares that the revelation of the present dispensation was hidden "for ages" meaning simply a long period of time (Eph. 3:9). The same thing is said in Colossians 1:26. However, since a dispensation operates within a time period, the concepts are related.

(6) At least three dispensations (as commonly understood in dispensational teaching) are mentioned by Paul. In Ephesians 1:10 he writes of "an administration [dispensation, KJV] suitable to the fullness of the times," which is a future period. In Ephesians 3:2 he designates the "stewardship [dispensation, KJV] of God's grace," which was the emphasis of the content of his preaching at that time. In Colossians 1:25-26 it is implied that another dispensation preceded the present one, in which the mystery of Christ in the believer is revealed.⁷

It should be noted that dispensationalists have developed the theological term *dispensation* in a way similar to the biblical use of the term. Therefore, I believe that the system of theology we know today as dispensationalism is consistent with biblical teaching.

DEFINING DISPENSATIONALISM

Building upon the above biblical observations, we are now able to define dispensationalism. According to Ryrie, “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.” In addition to a definition of a dispensation, Ryrie notes that if “one were describing a dispensation, he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment.”⁸ Finally, he tells us concerning a dispensation that:

The distinguishing features are introduced by God; the similar features are retained by God; and the overall combined purpose of the whole program is the glory of God. Eric Sauer states it this way:

a new period always begins only when from the side of God a change is introduced in the composition of the principles valid up to that time; that is, when from the side of God three things concur:

1. A continuance of certain ordinances valid until then;
2. An annulment of other regulations until then valid;
3. A fresh introduction of new principles not before valid.⁹

In his classic work, *Dispensationalism*, Ryrie formulates a more extensive definition of dispensationalism:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.¹⁰

Another dispensational scholar, Paul Nevin, summarized dispensationalism as follows:

God’s distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is an economy, or administration. From the human standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life, or a responsibility for managing God’s affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation.¹¹

A BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Dispensationalist Renald Showers notes that a dispensational view of the Bible provides a believer with a biblical philosophy of history, a way of looking at history from God’s divine perspective.¹² This is important for a Christian, because when we understand God’s purpose for each era of history we are able to develop a worldview for living in accordance with God’s will for each dispensation. A believer who has a Divine perspective on the past, present and future is able to know what God expects of him in every area of life in our present day.

In the current church age, the New Testament instructs us in both private and public spheres of life. The dispensationalist, for example, does not live in this age of grace as if he was still under the rule of the Mosaic Law. Instead we understand that we are now under the hundreds of commands that the New Testament calls the Law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). Current dispensational obligations are wisely combined with responsibilities from previous ages, which continue in our own day, to provide a New Testament believer with a complete biblical framework for understanding how to please God in every area of our current lives. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995).

² Charles C. Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* (Pamphlet published by Dallas Theological Seminary, [1980], 1986), p. 1.

³ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, a translation and adaptation by William F. Arndt & F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 562.

⁴ Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* p. 1.

⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 25.

⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.26.

⁷ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 26-27.

⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 28.

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

¹⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

¹¹ Paul David Nevin, "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" (Th. D. dissertation, Dallas Seminary, 1965), p. 97.

¹² Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is A Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, N.J.: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), pp. 49-52.