

WHY **DISPENSATIONALISM** MATTERS

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Editor: Alex Bauman

Why Dispensationalism Matters
Adult Bible Study Leader's Guide

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How to Use *Truth for Living*

Truth for Living:

A comprehensive, trustworthy curriculum that presents the truth of God's Word without compromise. The curriculum plan includes through-the-Bible courses as well as topical courses. Perfect for adults who want a guide in using all of God's Word as God intended.

As you prepare to teach these lessons, keep these two factors in mind:

- The FOCUS of productive adult Bible learning is the learner. The intent of teaching is not teaching, but learning—the learner's learning.
- The GOAL of productive adult Bible learning is an appropriate life-response to Biblical truth. You do not teach simply to impart information; you teach so that the Holy Spirit of God can use the truths of the Word of God to change the child of God into the image of the Son of God.

The Lesson Plan

Each *Truth for Living* lesson has three distinct parts. GETTING STARTED is the attention-getter. The questions and activities “set the table,” as it were, for the study. LEARNING DISPENSATIONALISM is the heart of the lesson for this course specifically. A series of study questions leads the teacher and learners through Bible texts. BEING DISPENSATIONAL challenges the learner to consider how the principles of dispensationalism should affect their lives.

As is true of any teaching experience, you can adapt the parts of the lesson to fit your particular class. You may choose to alter the beginning activities or change the focus of the application. You will find more material in the study than you can probably cover in one class session.

The Study Book

This leader's guide is designed to accompany the Bible study book. We encourage you to distribute Bible study books to your learners. Urge them to complete the study before class. The more your learners have studied on their own, the better the class discussions will be. Most of the questions in the leader's guide are picked up from the Bible study book. You will notice the question numbers in parentheses after the questions. The answers to the questions are in italics following the questions.

Other Resources

The resource CD has PowerPoint presentations for every lesson. They incorporate the resource visuals and provide a good way for teachers and learners to track the lesson. The resource CD also has Prezi presentations for some of the lessons. Instructions for using the Prezi presentations are on the CD. Other resources include lesson outlines, case studies, and verse cards.

Preface

What is dispensationalism? How is it different than covenant theology? Do the differences really matter if we all make it to Heaven in the end?

Those questions are important. And dispensationalism does matter because it is more than just a list of doctrines or a way to organize history. Dispensationalism comes from a careful, literal interpretation of Scripture. In fact, it is defined as much by its literal approach to Scripture as it is by its doctrine. This course employs that consistently literal interpretation of Scripture to help your learners understand Israel, the church, Christ's present ministry, the Rapture, Tribulation, Second Coming, and the events leading up to the millennial Kingdom. In the end your learners will have a highly valuable framework for understanding the Bible. That framework will allow them to study passages with greater effectiveness.

This course will also help your learners understand covenant theology. It presents covenant theology's spiritual interpretation of Scripture and evaluates its merit.

This course is foundational. Plan to use it regularly as you have members join your church, especially those who come from different theological traditions.

Pray your learners will grasp the importance of approaching the Bible as God intended. And pray that their new understanding of dispensationalism will strengthen their faith in God and confidence in the Scriptures.



What Is Dispensationalism?



Topic

Introduction to dispensationalism

Theme

Dispensationalism is a natural product of literal interpretation of the Bible.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will have a better understanding of dispensationalism.

Materials

- Resources 1–3

Summary

There is a lot of confusion over what dispensationalism is. This lesson will help to clarify the topic by presenting what dispensationalism is not before looking at the three essential elements of dispensationalism.

Outline

I. What Dispensationalism Is Not

- A. A view of Bible prophecy
- B. Christian escapism
- C. Dividing time into dispensations

II. What Dispensationalism Is

- A. Distinction between Israel and the church
 - 1. The Bible teaches distinctions
 - 2. God made promises to distinct groups
 - 3. Failure to make distinction leads to anti-Semitism
- B. Consistently literal interpretation of the Bible
- C. Recognition of God's glory as His unifying purpose

III. What the Dispensations Are

Memory Verse

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

GETTING STARTED

Dispenwhat?

Some of you might be wondering why you are in a class about dispensationalism. Maybe you have never even heard of dispensationalism. Others of you might have just enough knowledge to be dangerous.

ASK: What word comes to your mind when you hear the word dispensationalism? (Q1)

ASK: What questions do you have about dispensationalism? (Q2)

This course will explain what dispensationalism is, the Biblical basis of it, and how a dispensational approach to Scripture helps us understand God's working in such realms as the church, Israel, human government, the ministry of Christ, and future events.

Should I Be Concerned?

Search the Internet for the term *dispensationalism* and you will find such hatred and vitriol expressed that you will wonder whether dispensationalism didn't ascend out of the very pit of Hell! What has caused such a strong reaction? Is dispensationalism a heresy? Or is it solidly grounded in the teachings of the Bible?

ASK: What have you heard about dispensationalism?

ASK: What concerns might you have about dispensationalism?

Through this course you will find that dispensationalism is based in the Bible and is the product of a careful interpretation of Scripture. You will learn that the dispensational approach to Scripture helps us understand God's working in such realms as the church, Israel, the ministry of Christ, and future events.

LEARNING DISPENSATIONALISM

I. What Dispensationalism Is Not

A. A view of Bible prophecy

Much of the opposition to dispensationalism comes from a misunderstanding about what it really is. Probably the most common misconception is that dispensationalism is a certain way of thinking about prophecy. Books like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970) and Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* (1995) did much to popularize a dispensational view of prophecy, but they also left many people with the impression that dispensationalism was merely a prophetic scheme of end time events. There is a prophetic system that results from dispensationalism, but it is not essentially a prophetic system.

B. Christian escapism

Another misconception about dispensationalism is that it is Christian escapism. This misunderstanding is based on the dispensational view of the Rapture. Dispensationalists believe the church will be raptured before the Tribulation commences. Opponents of dispensationalism think that this is simply wishful thinking, pie in the sky, escapist nonsense. Dispensationalists are accused of devising a system in which God removes believers from the terrible events of the Tribulation.

READ: Revelation 6:3–8. **ASK:** Which of the occurrences in this snapshot of the Tribulation would you want to escape? (Q3) *All of them!*

Wanting to escape the horrible circumstances of the Tribulation does not mean dispensationalism was developed as a means to do so. It is true that if one views the Bible from a dispensational perspective, he cannot fail to come to the conclusion that the Rapture will occur before the tribulation period begins. But as with the first misconception, dispensationalism is essentially something other than a prophetic scheme of the end times.

C. Dividing time into dispensations

The third misconception about dispensationalism is that it is a system of dividing up time according to time periods known as *dispensations*. Dispensationalists do often make charts to show the divisions of time, but the charts showing the division of time are a byproduct of a careful study of the Bible. The chart is not what defines dispensationalism.

VISUAL: There are several dispensational charts available on the Web. Consider projecting or printing some of them as examples of organizing history.

ASK: What must be true of dispensational charts in order for them to be useful? (Q4) *They must be based on a sound interpretation of Scripture.*

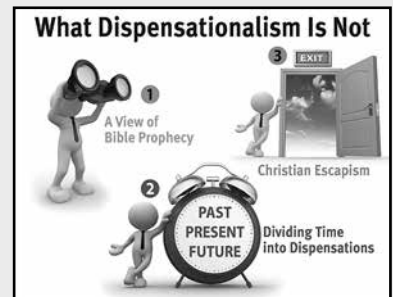
Non-dispensationalists, such as those who hold to covenant theology, also believe that the Bible presents a sequence of varying dispensations throughout time. So, while the existence of varying dispensations is important to dispensationalism, it is not unique to it.

RESOURCE: Display resource 1 as a summary of what dispensationalism is not.

II. What Dispensationalism Is

In determining what dispensationalism is, we should consider the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. The phrase *sine qua non* (pronounced, *seen'-aye kwa known*) is Latin and means *that without which not*. It is a phrase used to describe the absolutely essential components of a system.

Dr. Charles Ryrie, who was dean of doctoral studies and professor of theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, identified three essentials, or the *sine qua non*, of dispensationalism. The essentials are (1) the distinction between Israel and the



The second essential is particularly important. Literal interpretation of Scripture is a constant theme throughout this course.

church, (2) literal interpretation of the Bible, and (3) an identification of the glory of God as the underlying purpose of God in the world.¹

A. Distinction between Israel and the church

READ: 1 Corinthians 10:32. **ASK:** What distinct groups are mentioned by the apostle Paul? (Q5) *Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God.*

If we hold consistently to a literal interpretation of the Bible, we find that Israel and the church form two distinct and separate entities. The term *Israel* occurs over 2,500 times in the Old Testament and never refers to the church. The term *church* occurs 110 times in the New Testament and never refers to Israel. However, non-dispensationalists tend to merge these two into one group of the elect people of God. Many non-dispensationalists believe that Israel in the Old Testament was really part of the church, and the church in the New Testament is what they describe as *the true Israel*.

ASK: Have you thought about the implications of confusing Israel and the church? What concerns, if any, come to your mind? (Q6)

1. The Bible teaches distinctions

At this point, you might wonder if it really matters whether someone distinguishes between Israel and the Church or not. It does matter. First of all, it's important because the Bible teaches such a distinction, and it's not up to us to judge what is important in the Bible and what isn't important.

READ: 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. **ASK:** Why is interpreting the Bible literally absolutely necessary? (Q7) *Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable to make us mature and ready for service.*

The key word in 2 Timothy 3:16 is *all*. No one has the right to relegate any part of the Bible as unimportant.

2. God made promises to distinct groups

A second reason that maintaining a distinction between Israel and the church is important is that God made promises to Israel that do not belong to the church, and He made promises to the church that do not belong to Israel. If we fail to make the proper distinction between these two groups, we may be expecting God to do something for us that He never promised. Belief that the promises made to Israel in the Old Testament have been transferred to the church in the New Testament is known as *supersessionism* or *replacement theology*. Most non-dispensationalists are supersessionists to a certain extent.

The biggest problem with supersessionism is that in order to make it work, many of the promises made to Israel need to be interpreted in a non-literal fashion, so that the land of Canaan becomes Heaven, the Jordan River becomes death, bountiful crops become spiritual blessings, and so forth. This introduces confusion into the way we understand the Bible. If it can't be understood literally, then its interpretation is subject to the whim and fancy of each individual interpreter.

READ: Numbers 13:23–25. **ASK:** In a non-literal interpretation scenario, what might you conclude the grapes of Eschol represent for believers today? (Q8)

ASK: Could anyone tell you that your interpretation was wrong in a non-literal interpretation scenario? Explain. (Q9)

Another problem with supersessionism is that it portrays God as being unfaithful. If God made promises to Israel, but then decided to fulfill those promises with someone else, then it implies that God deceived Israel in the Old Testament.

ASK: How much trust would you have in God if He was blatantly unfaithful to His promises to Israel? (Q10)

ASK: How has God's faithfulness to Israel bolstered your trust in God? (Q11)

3. Failure to make distinction leads to anti-Semitism

A third reason for maintaining a distinction between Israel and the Church is that failure to do so has historically led to racial discrimination against the Jews, called anti-Semitism. This anti-Semitism is related to the problem of supersessionism as described above. When the apostle Paul encountered anti-Semitic attitudes among the Gentile Christians in Rome, he wrote to address it (Rom. 11:19, 20). Those whom he called *broken off* were the Jews. The Roman Christians believed they had been grafted in as a permanent replacement for the Jews.

READ: Romans 11:19, 20. **ASK:** What did Paul tell the Christians regarding their attitude toward the Jews? (Q12) *That they should fear God instead of being highminded, or haughty.*

A haughty attitude among professing Christians historically has led them to label the Jews as *Christ killers*. Professing Christians used that label as justification for crusades in which they mercilessly slaughtered thousands of Jews.

Finally, recognizing a proper Biblical distinction between Israel and the Church explains the prophecies of Christ's future Kingdom on the earth. The Bible is clear that Christ is returning to rule on earth for a thousand years in a Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and prosperity (Rev. 20:1–6). This literal view of the kingdom is found not only in Revelation 20, but also in a multitude of Old Testament prophecies about the kingdom of the Messiah. Failure to recognize a distinction between Israel and the Church usually leads to a denial of the reality of a future, literal Kingdom of Messiah on the earth—a position known as *amillennialism*.

B. Consistently literal interpretation of the Bible

This section will help us understand why some Christians might opt for a non-literal interpretation for some Scriptures. The answer comes from a review of key points in history.

Historically Jesus and the apostles held to a literal interpretation of the Old Testament. For instance, Jesus understood the Biblical account of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish as being literally true (Matt. 12:40); He also believed that

Adam and Eve were historical people who actually lived in the Garden of Eden and were the first human beings created directly by God (19:4, 5); and the author of Hebrews assumed the literal truth of the account of Abraham offering his son Isaac on Mount Moriah (Heb. 11:17–19). Other examples could be multiplied many times over, but suffice it to say here that the normally accepted method of interpreting the Bible by the Jews of the first century AD was the literal method of interpretation. This resulted in the early church of the first two centuries being almost exclusively premillennial.

One notable exception to this normal practice was a scholarly Jew named Philo who lived in Alexandria, Egypt (25 BC–AD 50). Philo felt that some of the Old Testament stories were embarrassing and didn't adequately honor God, so he borrowed a novel idea from the Greeks. The Greeks had a similar *problem* with their religious writings. The Greek gods were capricious, vacillating, lustful, power hungry, and immoral. So the Greek philosophers devised a method of non-literal interpretation whereby they could find hidden behind the literal meaning of the text, a deeper, spiritual meaning that was more honorable to their national religion. This method of interpretation is known either as *allegorical interpretation* or *spiritual interpretation*. Philo felt that he could adapt this same method of interpretation to the text of the Old Testament, and he became quite a popular Bible teacher among the Jews of Alexandria.

ASK: What are some Old Testament accounts that someone like Philo might call embarrassing to God when interpreted literally? (Q13) *The Flood; the violent conquering of the Promised Land; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the tribulation judgments of Revelation.*

Over a century after Philo, a Christian scholar in Alexandria named Origen (AD 184–254) began using Philo's allegorical method of interpretation on both the Old and New Testaments. Until Origen, Christians had practiced literal Bible interpretation almost exclusively. Origen's method gained some popularity, but mostly locally in Alexandria. But in the fourth century an influential Christian theologian named Augustine (AD 354–430) sought for a way to understand the book of Revelation without requiring an earthly thousand year kingdom on the earth. He found that way in Origen's allegorical interpretation. Augustine's influence then spread because of a political situation in the Holy Land. In AD 135 the Emperor Hadrian had expelled all Jews, including Jewish Christians, from the Holy Land. The churches in Israel consequently lost their Jewish pastors who practiced literal interpretation. Their Gentile pastors were eventually influenced by Greek thought and by Augustine's allegorical interpretation in particular. The Gentile pastors soon became a catalyst for the spread of allegorical interpretation, making it the new normal until the Protestant Reformation about a thousand years later.

READ: 2 Timothy 4:2. **ASK:** What important charge did the Gentile pastors fail to keep? (Q14) *To preach the Word.*

READ: 2 Timothy 4:1. **ASK:** Why must pastors be careful to observe Paul's charge? (Q15) *Jesus will judge them for their handling of the Word, and He will also judge the people the pastors minister to.*

The fact that Paul wrote to Timothy about preaching the Word in light of coming end time events is telling. When the Gentile pastors lost sight of preaching the Word, they also lost sight of the reasons to do so.

Reformers such as Wycliffe, Luther, and Calvin were of the conviction that the only acceptable way to understand the Bible was to take it literally. They all rejected the allegorical method that had become the norm through the middle ages. In the sixteenth century, this led the reformers to rediscover the doctrine of justification by faith. In the nineteenth century, the same devotion to a literal interpretation led John Nelson Darby to begin systematizing dispensationalism. Employing a literal interpretation of the Bible, Darby noticed both a distinction between Israel and the Church and a distinction between the Rapture and the Second Coming. These observations led to further conclusions that eventually resulted in what we now know today as dispensationalism. But many in the Reformed tradition, despite their honoring of literal interpretation, continued to hold on to the supersessionists and amillennial ideas of the original reformers, and this resulted in an inconsistent application of literal interpretation. These reformed theologians were literal in their interpretation of most of the Bible, but when it came to matters of the second coming of Christ and the Kingdom they continued to practice an allegorical method of interpretation. Again, 2 Timothy 4:1 and 2 is clear that such a practice is to violate the command to preach the Word.

C. Recognition of God's glory as His underlying purpose

The final distinguishing characteristic of dispensationalism is that it views the glory of God as being the basic underlying purpose of God in all that He does. This may seem like an obvious point. And it is a point that non-dispensationalists generally give assent to, at least in word. For example, the major non-dispensationalist catechism, the Westminster Catechism, states that the chief end of man is *to glorify God and enjoy Him forever*. So you might wonder why this considered a characteristic of dispensationalism. It is important here to differentiate between what the Christian's primary calling is and what God's primary purpose in working in the world is. To be sure, there is nothing more precious and important to a sinner saved by grace than the Gospel! When viewed from the perspective of man, salvation is the most important theme there could possibly be. But things may look a little different from God's perspective. There can be no doubt that the work of redemption is a main focal point of God in the way He relates to His creation. But salvation is not the only purpose that God has in the world. There are other purposes of God that really do not pertain to His work of redeeming the lost. For example, God has a purpose for the family, a purpose for human government, a purpose for the physical creation, and a purpose for the angels. None of these really has anything to do directly with the work of redemption. And here is where dispensationalism has a more comprehensive view of God's purposes in the world than non-dispensational systems.

Virtually all non-dispensational approaches make salvation the focal point of their theological systems. In Protestantism, the primary alternative viewpoint to dispensationalism is covenant theology, also known as Reformed theology. Covenant theology is controlled primarily by what they refer to as the Covenant of Grace.

There are dispensations in covenant theology, but the dispensations are viewed as various ways of administering the Covenant of Grace. Basically, all of God's dealings with His creation is summed up in terms of what God is doing to bring about the salvation of the elect. Reformed Theology is seeing resurgence in popularity among many Christians today, and this is reflected, among other things, in the preponderance of *Gospel-Centered* themes. A recent search of popular Christian books revealed the following titles: *The Gospel-Centered Life*, *Gospel-Centered Discipleship*, *Gospel Centered Leadership*, *The Gospel-Centered Woman*, *The Gospel-Centered Community Participant's Guide*, and *Gospel-Centered Family*.

This is not to say that there's anything wrong about our being focused on the gospel as Christians, but it does reflect the salvation-centered focus of Reformed theology and its influence on today's Christian world. Dispensationalism does not deny the importance of the Gospel. If anything, dispensationalists have generally been known for being very evangelistic. But in dispensationalism, the work of redemption is understood as being part of a broader theme of glorifying God (1 Cor. 10:31–33).

READ: Ephesians 1:3–14. **ASK:** What is the ultimate reason for salvation? (See verses 6, 12, and 14.) (Q16) *To the praise of the glory of God's grace.*

Dispensationalism provides a proper Biblical foundation for understanding not only God's purposes in salvation, but also for other means of bringing Him glory, such as His purposes for the family, human government, the physical creation, and angels.

RESOURCE: Display resource 2 as a summary of the three essentials of dispensationalism.

III. What the Dispensations Are

Before moving past this first lesson, it would be good to survey the seven dispensations to provide a context for future lessons. When used in a theological sense, the word *dispensation* refers to an administration of God, or the way in which God administers His affairs in the world. Consistently literal interpretation of the Bible yields seven dispensations.

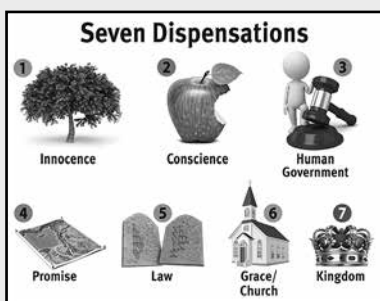
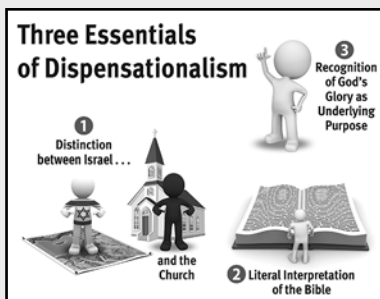
RESOURCE: Display resource 3 as you give the brief descriptions of the dispensations.

Innocence. Before the Fall, while Adam and Eve were still in their state of innocence in the Garden of Eden, God administered his program through the leadership of Adam.

Conscience. After the Fall the administration changed. Worship included sacrifice. And we can presume that man responded to God based on the dictates of his conscience since there is no record of an oral or written revelation to man.

Human Government. After the Flood, God gave to human government the responsibility of capital punishment, He gave man the right to eat meat for the first time, and He promised never to wipe out all living creatures by a flood again.

Promise. God made a promise to Abraham and began to work in the world specifically through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



Law. Still working through descendants of Abraham, which became known as Israel, God gave specific, detailed laws in the Mosaic Covenant. The laws were to mark Israel out as distinct and separate from other nations so they might be a light to those nations.

Grace/Church. The Mosaic Covenant came to an end at the cross and God began administering His affairs through a new group called the church, or the Body of Christ. The church consists of individuals redeemed by faith in Christ regardless of their nationality. This is the present dispensation.

Kingdom. The final dispensation is the future Kingdom of the Messiah, a 1,000-year period of time under the direct rule of Jesus Christ. He will administer a perfect Kingdom of peace and righteousness. At the end of His Kingdom, the Son will hand over rule to the Father as all creation enters the eternal state.

BEING A DISPENSATIONALIST

There is much confusion about dispensationalism. In essence it is a consistently literal understanding of the Bible that acknowledges a distinction between Israel and the Church and views the glory of God as a central, underlying theme.

Central, Underlying Theme

ASK: What does a life centered on bringing glory to God look like? (Q17)

The person is sensitive to God's will, humble, known for praising God, obedient, and sacrificial.

ASK: What would you say is the central, underlying theme for your life? Is it to bring glory to God? (Q18)

A True Dispensationalist

Being accurate in interpreting the Bible is not the goal of dispensationalism. To be a true dispensationalist, correct interpretation must be followed by diligent application.

Encourage your learners to see this course as an opportunity to become better equipped to apply God's Word.

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 46–48.