

B.O.S.S. Study Guide
“The Coming Ages”
Week of February 8, 2010

“Basics of Dispensational Theology”

Throughout the course of Church history two prominent schools of theology have emerged that concern the status and identity of the Church and the Nation of Israel. When we say schools, we are referring to an understanding of specific Bible passages, how those passages are interpreted and the logical conclusions that are drawn. They may be understood in much the same way when discussing social issues as being in the liberal school or conservative school. In politics, right verses left, political parties; Republicans and Democrats.

These two theological schools of thought have taken an overall look at the scriptures and drawn conclusions that have separated them into that which is known as “Covenant Theology” sometimes called “Reformed Theology” and “Dispensational Theology”. As in politics there are shades of liberal and conservative; in the arena of these two schools, there is also room for shading. There is a third theology that would be fascinating to study called “Liberation Theology”. One of the most outspoken teachers is Rev. Wright of Chicago - our Presidents Pastor. Understanding Liberation Theology would help us understand the decisions and direction of our President. But we will leave that for another study.

For this week we will attempt to understand the basics of Dispensational Theology, (I emphasis the word basics).

Theological System

There are several systems that have been developed throughout the centuries that men have used to help them understand the scriptures. They are not scripture, but a lens that helps us to stay consistent and true to the intention of God’s revelation. They are only a tool – we want to use the most accurate tools available.

“Dispensationalism: A system of Biblical interpretation associated with J.N. Darby (1800-1882) and his followers and popularized through the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible. Dispensationalists distinguish seven periods in Biblical history:

- (1) Innocence (before the fall)*
- (2) Conscience (from the fall to Noah)*
- (3) Human Government (from Noah to Abraham)*
- (4) Promise (Abraham to Moses)*
- (5) Law (from Moses to Christ)*
- (6) Grace (The Church Age)*
- (7) The Kingdom (The Millennium)*

Dispensationalists draw sharp distinctions between God’s purposes for Israel and for The Church and emphasizes literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies.”

Theology Primer, John Jefferson Davis.

The term itself is used by Paul in Ephesians 3:2, 9. In the NIV it is translated “administration”.

From your outline of Sunday, what are the main points that Paul makes about this passage?

It is found again in Colossians 1:26 **(read together)**

The basic concept is that since Paul tells us clearly that God has begun a new program (dispensation) called the Dispensation of the Grace of God; then there must be other programs in the past. The Dispensation of God’s Grace has specific elements, so if similar elements can be found throughout the Bible; there could be other dispensations or programs.

For Example:

Dispensation of God's Grace has an ambassador – Paul
Other possible ambassadors – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses

It has requirements, expectations, and consequences.

Dispensation of God's Grace – substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus, faith for salvation, forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Others:

Care for the garden... thou shall not eat... – you will die – in the garden

If a man kills a man... capital punishment – after the flood

10 commandments, plus over 600 others... obey or be punished – offer regular sacrifices to cover your sins – Mt Sinai

Dispensation:

“This definition recognizes that at different periods God has revealed His mind and will to man in various systems or bodies of law... study of the Bible dispensationally will result in noting the differences or distinctions between these several systems or bodies of principles by which God has governed man, as well as in seeing the similarities.” Charles Baker

“A period of time during which man is tested in respect to some specific revelation of the will of God.” C. I. Scofield

“A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purposes... A dispensation is from God's viewpoint an economy; from man's, a responsibility; and in relation to progressive revelation, a stage in it.” Charles Ryrie

Not all agree on exactly how many of these time periods the Bible contains. Some see more or less than the 7 mentioned above.

The question that I want to answer is: Does it really matter?

Though this has been a brief look at Dispensationalism, at its core is the dedication to the literal interpretation of both Old and New Testament. And when it comes to our understanding of future events prophesied by Old Testament prophets, only dispensational theology allows a simple and literal interpretation. This is what Davis is trying to emphasize in the statement we read earlier.

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For example:

The Old Testament prophets predicted the Messiah's literal return to set up The Kingdom for Israel over which He will be King.

Dispensationalist believe that this will literally be fulfilled.

Covenant Theology believes that this is to be taken spiritually and that The Church is now responsible to bring about kingdom principles and blessing on the earth.

So does it really matter what lens one looks through when studying the Bible? Yes, it does.

Christians should have a commitment to the literal interpretation of the Word of God, and whichever theological system is most faithful to that commitment ought to be the one we pay most attention to.