

# DISPENSATIONALISM

## A SELF-EVIDENT SYSTEM OF THEOLOGY

**Thesis:** I propose that dispensationalism, as a system of theology, is self-evident to the normal reader of Scripture.

**Contention:** I contend that this principle of self-evidence is almost entirely absent from Covenantalism (a competing system of theology also call Covenant Theology and tightly associated with Reformed Theology and Calvinism).

### **Introduction:**

There are three terms that should be distinguished at the outset:

1. Dispensation(s)
2. Dispensationalist
3. Dispensationalism

**Dispensations:** It is not the purpose here to define and describe dispensations. Suffice it to say the word is found in Scripture (1Cor 9.17; Eph 1.10; 3.2; Col 1.25), therefore the fact of its being a biblical term is not contended.

- For purposes herein we will define a dispensation as a particular arrangement between God and man in which God charges man with a distinct and definable responsibility.
- A dispensation, therefore, is understood herein as a stewardship (e.g., Luke 12.42; 16.1-4).
- Example: Man's responsibility toward God under the Mosaic Law was fulfilled in Christ and God now deals with man outside the Law of Moses (any Antinomian overtures in that statement are completely unintentional; Rom 7.12, 22, 25).
- At this point we should all be in general agreement, for even the Covenant theologian recognizes dispensations according to this general definition.<sup>1</sup>

**Dispensationalist:** As Charles Ryrie aptly points out, "...a person can believe in dispensations ... without being a dispensationalist."<sup>2</sup>

- Therefore, we shall define a dispensationalist herein as one who accepts dispensationalism as his primary system of theology.
- That naturally brings us to the final term we need to briefly define.

**Dispensationalism:** A system of theology that recognizes God's different and progressive arrangements with man in distinct and recognizable stewardships (or economies) throughout history.

### **I. System of Theology: What is a "system of theology"?**

#### **A. Theology: What is theology?**

1. Theology simply refers to the the study of God (His character, attributes, works, ways, etc.).
2. Theology is about knowing God: who He is, what He does, why He does it, how He does it, etc.
3. Theology is important. We might even say a certain amount of theology is essential to life.

And **this is life eternal**, that they might **know** thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. [John 17.3]

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1 "Covenant theologians hold that there are various dispensations (and even use the word) within the outworking of the covenant of grace. Charles Hodge, for instance, believed that there are four dispensations after the Fall—Adam to Abraham, Abraham to Moses, Moses to Christ, and Christ to the end. Berkhof writes ... of only two basic dispensations—the Old and the New, but within the Old he sees four periods and all of these are revelations of the covenant of grace." Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 2:373-377; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 293-300; cited by Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 45.

2 Ibid.

4. Because the Bible (Scripture) is God's specific revelation to man of Himself, His ways, and His works, our “system of theology” is critical. It will determine how we approach and understand revelation (the Bible).

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. [2Tim 2.15]

5. In essence, if our system is wrong, our theology will likely be wrong also.

### **B. System: What is a system?**

1. Webster defines a system as “an ordered and comprehensive assemblage [collection] of facts, principles, doctrines, or the like in a particular field of knowledge or thought.”<sup>3</sup>
2. When we talk about a system in a field of study like theology, we are talking about an ordered collection of teachings (teachings that have been put in order or systematized).

### **C. System of Theology: What is a system of theology?**

1. Here I would like to borrow a very clear and insightful definition given by Timothy Watson in his doctoral dissertation presented to Andrews University.<sup>4</sup>
2. Watson defines a system of theology as a “cognitive whole of articulated theological doctrines.”<sup>5</sup>
  - a) This is exactly what we saw in the Webster's definition given above.
  - b) A system is a “comprehensive assemblage” (a whole) of doctrines (teachings) in a particular field of knowledge or thought (a cognitive field).
  - c) We should not allow the terms to confuse us. All we are talking about is an ordered and comprehensive body of knowledge regarding God (i.e., a system of theology).
3. Key Aspect: Every system will have *one* essential, axiomatic principle which provides the *basis* for the system as a *whole* and for each of its individual *parts*.
  - a) That statement is the “hinge” upon which the entire thesis herein turns.
  - b) Every cognitive system (every system of thought and/or knowledge) “will always include at least one independent, necessary part, which provides the basis for both the whole expected and the articulation of its parts.”<sup>6</sup>
  - c) Watson continues and explains that “this part is axiomatic and transcendent, and can not be validated or invalidated by the system in which it is found, but separately, as a dependent part of a greater system.”<sup>7</sup>
  - d) The last two statements should be read again. They are succinct, profound, and far-reaching in their implication for one's system of theology (for one's system of knowing God).
4. Key Question: What is the one essential and independent part of a system of theology?
  - a) What is the *one thing* that is separate from a system of theology and that will provide the *basis* for the system as a *whole* and for the various *parts* that make up that whole?
  - b) The essential and independent part of any system of theology is *hermeneutics*.

3 Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), 1930.

4 Andrews University is a Seventh Day Adventist Theological Seminary. I do not espouse Seventh-Day doctrine. However, what Watson says about theological systems (system of theology) is independent of his denominational beliefs and I believe it is so well stated that it is worth citing.

5 Timothy Watson, “The Meaning and Function of System in Theology” (Ph.D. dissertation, Andrews University, 2012), under “Abstract,” <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/dissertations/165/> (accessed September 30, 2017).

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

## II. **Hermeneutics: The essential, independent basis for theology**

### A. Definition & Description

1. The word “hermeneutics” is just a fancy term for interpreting (studying and understanding) the Bible.<sup>8</sup>
2. Charles Ryrie correctly points out that the principles of hermeneutics “guide and govern anybody's system of theology.”<sup>9</sup>
  - a) This means that hermeneutics (the principles governing and guiding our study and understanding of Scripture) form the “greater system” to which Watson referred when he said a system of theology had one essential element of another greater system, and that one essential element provided the basis for the system of theology.<sup>10</sup>
  - b) Hermeneutics, therefore, is the larger (super-) system and theology is a “sub-system” of hermeneutics (because theology will be determined and developed based on one's hermeneutics).

### B. Hermeneutics & Theology

1. Ryrie also highlights this critical aspect of the relationship between hermeneutics and theology when he says that our principles of interpretation (our hermeneutics) should be established *before* our theology is systematized. Why is that? Because *how* we approach and interpret the Scripture (hermeneutics) will influence our understanding of Scripture (theology).<sup>11</sup>
2. Ryrie sees a problem here, though. He says, for most people “hermeneutics is one of the last things to be considered consciously.”<sup>12</sup>
  - a) Is this truly a “problem” for most people? It obviously could be.
  - b) However, it could also be by divine design.

## III. **Normal-Literal Interpretation: The essential part of Dispensationalism**

### A. Focal Questions (questions to help focus on the salient point in the argument presented)

1. What is the one essential element in the system of theology called Dispensationalism?
2. What is the one independent and necessary part of Dispensationalism that provides the *basis* for the system as a *whole* and for the various *parts* that make up that whole?
3. What is that one axiomatic and transcendent part of Dispensationalism that can not be validated or invalidated by the system itself (what is that part of the system that is found outside of Dispensationalism; that element that forms part of a greater system, the system of hermeneutics)?

### B. Dispensationalism, as system of theology, is based on the hermeneutical principle of the normal-literal (plain) interpretation of Scripture.

1. Ryrie explains this method of approaching and understanding the Bible using three words: literal, normal, and plain.
  - a) He describes this as a method of interpretation “that does not spiritualize or allegorize” what the Bible says.<sup>13</sup>

8 J. Edwin Hartill explains that the word comes from the name of the mythical Greek god Hermes, “who was the messenger and herald of the gods, and interpreter of Jupiter.” It has been borrowed and applied to theology. The word simply refers to the “science of interpretation and termination.” Think of it as principles or rules of how to study the Bible. J. Edwin Hartill, *Principles of Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Academie Books, 1947), 7.

9 Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 89.

10 Watson, under “Abstract”.

11 Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 89.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 47.

b) He elaborates by saying:

This means interpretation that gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal usage... since the literal meaning of words is the normal approach to their understanding in all languages. It might also be designated *plain* interpretation so that no one receives the mistaken notion that the literal principle rules out figures of speech.<sup>14</sup>

2. David Cloud says the same thing a bit more conclusively: “Dispensationalism is the only theological system that uses the normal-literal method of interpretation consistently throughout Scripture.”<sup>15</sup>

### C. Providence: Divine design in the normal-literal hermeneutic

1. Although Ryrie laments the fact that most people begin developing their system of theology before consciously considering their hermeneutics that form the basis for their understanding of Scripture<sup>16</sup>, I wonder if we might not rather see a providential provision in most people's simple, plain approach to reading the Bible.
2. Most people who read and/or study the Bible will naturally (unconsciously) apply a normal-literal method of interpretation to what they are reading.
  - a) Why? Because most people who choose to read the Bible will usually read it like they would any other non-fiction book. That means they will understand the words normally in their grammatical and historical context.
  - b) This leads us to my main thesis.

## IV. Self-Evidence: Dispensationalism is a self-evident system of theology

- A. This self-evident aspect of dispensationalism is why so many readers and students of Scripture (just common, ordinary folks who want to learn the Bible) will have one of those “Aha!” moments when they finally receive some type of formal instruction on dispensations.
- B. The different dispensations (the stewardships or economies) in the Bible are self-evident. People see them and recognize them even when they do not know how to define them or systematize them.
- C. David Cloud aptly describes this self-evidence in his Encyclopedia of the Bible:
 

It is **plain** that God has different dispensations in the sense of dealing with man in different ways in different eras. Man is no longer tending the Garden of Eden, or building arks, or setting up tabernacles, or offering animal sacrifices, or rearing magnificent temples. Creation is over; the Flood is over; the Law is over; Pentecost is over. It is **apparent** that we have moved from the Mosaic dispensation to the Church dispensation.<sup>17</sup>
- D. The casual reader and student of the Bible naturally and normally applies a “plain sense” hermeneutic to the progressive revelation in Scripture (as it unfolds in the course and context of history). It is plain and apparent that God deals in different ways with different people through the different stages of biblical history.
- E. What formal Dispensationalism does is take the self-evident aspects of the different dispensations (the stewardships or economies seen throughout biblical history) and systematizes it.
  1. The dispensationalist studies out the parts individually and also in the context of their relationship to the whole of revelation.
  2. He then organizes the results of his systematic study into a coherent “theology.”

14 Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 91.

15 David Cloud, “Study the Bible Dispensationally,” (Way of Life Literature, 2004), under “The Benefit of Dispensationalism,” [https://www.wayoflife.org/database/study\\_bible\\_dispensationally.html](https://www.wayoflife.org/database/study_bible_dispensationally.html) (accessed September 30, 2017).

16 Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 89

17 David Cloud, *Way of Life Encyclopedia of the Bible and Christianity* (Port Huron, Michigan: Way of Life Literature, 2008), 180. Emphasis mine (not in the original).

3. The result is a “system of theology” called Dispensationalism.
4. And all of this is based on the one essential and axiomatic principle of the normal-literal (plain) interpretation of what the Bible says.

F. My thesis, therefore, is echoed in Charle Ryrie's conclusives statement:

Classic dispensationalism is a result of consistent application of the basic hermeneutical principal of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. No other system of theology can claim this.<sup>18</sup>

G. My Contention

1. The last sentence in the previous quote from Ryrie leads us to my contention that this self-evident principle of Dispensationalism is almost entirely absent from Covenant Theology (or, as Ryrie stated, from any other system of theology). Why is that?
2. First, let's briefly state what we mean by Covenant Theology (“briefly” because my purpose here is to focus on the aspect of self-evidence and not on the actual system of theology itself).
  - a) Covenant Theology is an attempt to systematize biblical theology under the overarching idea of two major covenants God made with man.
    - (1) The first was the Covenant of Works purported to have been established with Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam is said to have failed in his works when he sinned; this therefore invalidated the covenant.
    - (2) The second covenant, therefore, is the Covenant of Grace. God supposedly established this covenant to provide salvation to fallen man based entirely on His grace and the future work of Christ on the cross.
  - b) In Covenant Theology (commonly taught by Reformed theologians, i.e., Calvinists) these two covenants form the basis for all interpretation of Scripture.
3. Second, there is a problem with Covenant Theology: the two major covenants (the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace) are not formally stated in Scripture.
  - a) If one were to simply read the Scripture normally (as he would any other work of non-fiction), he would see various covenants clearly established, defined, and described in the biblical text. For example:
    - (1) Genesis 12: The covenant established with Abraham.
    - (2) Exodus 19, 24: The covenant established with Israel.
    - (3) 2Samuel 7: The covenant established with David.
  - b) Yet, even though one can see the ideas and concepts of God's dealings with man by works and grace, the specific “Covenants” of works and grace are not named in the Bible.
    - (1) God obviously deals with man after the Fall based on His grace (unmerited favor). I am not disputing this.
    - (2) What I am saying here is that the specific covenants (their definition, explanation, definition, etc.) are not found stated in Scripture as are many other covenants (like the ones mentioned above).
  - c) Therefore, a normal-literal approach to plainly understanding the biblical text will not result in what is commonly referred to today as Covenant Theology.
4. Also, Covenant Theology is notorious for its allegorical (symbolic) interpretation of Scripture.
  - a) James Orr, a Scottish Theologian from the late 1800s (and certainly not a dispensationalist) wrote:

[Covenant Theology], by an **artificial system of typology** and **allegorizing interpretation**, sought to read back practically the whole of the New Testament into the Old. But its most obvious defect was that, in using the idea of the Covenant as an exhaustive category, and attempting to force into it the whole material of theology, it created an artificial scheme which could only repel minds of simple and natural notions. It is impossible, e.g., to justify by Scriptural proof the detailed elaboration of the idea of a covenant of works in Eden, with its parties, conditions, promises, threatenings, sacraments, etc. Thus also the Reformed theology—the more that it had assumed this stiff and artificial shape—failed to satisfy the advancing intellect of the age...<sup>19</sup>

- b) This allegorized “forcing” of Scripture is quite evident in the Covenant theologian's interpretation of prophecy. In the Covenant system of theology, Israel has been rejected and the Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel are now allegorically fulfilled in the Church, the new and spiritual Israel.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

In summary, if one simply reads the Bible normally, accepting the plain sense of the words in their grammatical and historical context, he will see God dealing with man under distinct economies (dispensations) throughout biblical history.

Dispensationalism is the self-evident system of theology contained and revealed in Scripture.

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19 James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 303-304. Emphasis mine (not in the original).

20 David Cloud, “Study the Bible Dispensationally,” under “Contrast Covenant or Reformed Theology.”