

Modern Dispensationalism – What Does it Teach?

Modern dispensationalism is more than a particular way of viewing the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is also an outlook on life. In an article which, of necessity, is always limited in its scope, I can only give a few highlights of its teachings. As you consider them, you will notice their similarity to Darby's views. (See Dispensationalism – Darby and Scofield)

What It Teaches

1. The Jewish nation rejected Jesus Christ's kingship. If Israel had accepted Jesus as King, the kingdom would have come "but it has been postponed till Jewish disciples will pray again in preaching the coming of the Kingdom, 'Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is done in heaven.' That will be after the church has been removed to the heavenly places."¹⁹ There is no kingdom in this age. Jesus the King is absent.²⁰

After His ascension, the Lord began His rule in heaven and will not rule on earth again until He returns. When the Lord has returned, the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Kingdom will be literally fulfilled and the Kingdom of righteousness will be established. ²¹

The church on earth has no real place in dispensationalism. The church is only an interruption and was not in God's original purpose. There was no church in the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is not the founder of the church. The church was not even fully made known on the day of Pentecost. The real church was not until Paul came on the scene. Through the apostle Paul the full revelation of the church was given.

2. Dispensationalists do not only see Israel and the Church as two separate and distinct people, they also distinguish between the true (Pauline) and the professing (Petrine) church. The Petrine church is in a state of ruin. It is beyond recovery, reformation, or repair, "a church in which there are only tares and bad fish, a church which is to be completely leavened by false doctrine and become completely apostate."²³ The emphasis is upon the gathered-out individuals, thus minimizing the importance of the church as the new humanity, the people of God, and subtly undermines loyalty to existing denominations. Denominations are the Petrine church. The hope of the "true" church is the rapture.

3. The rapture is the vital doctrine of dispensationalism. The centre of interest is not the end of the world, nor the cross, but the rapture which is believed to be very near. The principle feature of the rapture is the saving of the true believers from the world, not the unveiling of the glory of Jesus Christ.²⁴

When the present dispensation ends "the first succession of these events is the taking away from the earth of all who are Christ's, that is to say, of the real church composed of true believers since the crucifixion."²⁵ When the rapture takes place there will be a time of great confusion, consternation and panic for those who are left behind. The

descriptions of the rapture are quite dramatic. Rev. Richard DeHaan of the Radio Bible Class pictured it this way:

"One of these days, as sure as this is the Word of God, those who have pled with you, who have warned you, who have prayed for you, will be missing. The preacher will be gone, mother will be gone, wife will be gone, and baby's crib will be found empty. Oh, what an awakening that is going to be! Imagine getting up some morning and your wife is not there, and you call for her, but there is no answer. You go downstairs, but she is not there. You call upstairs to daughter asking where mother is, but no answer from daughter. Daughter too is gone. You ring the police, but the line is busy. Hundreds and thousands are calling up, jamming the telephone lines. You rush out of doors and bump into the pal of last night's wild party. He is white as a sheet. He is out of breath, and he stammers a few words, and bawls out, 'My wife is gone. My brother is gone, and I don't know where they are.' Down the street runs a woman shrieking at the top of her voice, 'Someone has kidnapped my baby!' and in a moment the streets are full of people, weeping, crying and howling over the disappearance of loved ones. What has happened? The Lord has come, like a thief in the night. He has quietly stolen away those who trusted him, like Enoch, and no one is left behind to warn you any more, to pray or show you the way."²⁶

3. The rapture is the method whereby the Bridegroom takes the Bride home before the wedding ceremony. The church, therefore, will not have to go through the seven year Great Tribulation. The Jews, Gentiles and the professing church (Christendom) will pass through it, but the true church will be exempt.²⁶ The climax of the Great Tribulation "will be the physical return of Jesus Christ to the earth in great glory to introduce the Davidic kingdom; Israel will be saved and restored as a nation; Satan will be bound and the curse will be lifted from the physical creation; following the Millennium, the Great White throne judgment will occur, at which time the bodies and souls of the wicked shall be reunited and cast into the Lake of Fire."²⁶

An Evaluation

1. When we reflect on dispensationalism, we must begin with a word of appreciation. Darby and his followers were very much aware of and resisted the apostasy of the church of their day. Dispensationalists today are also acutely concerned about the trend of modern theology. They love the Word of God and hold it to be infallible and sure. They are earnest Bible students.

Darbyism has also revived the expectation of the church. The hope of Christ's coming had become very dim and reawakening to the truth of Christ's return was very much needed. The church must live in the expectancy of Christ's coming again. When the church no longer expects anything, she loses her dynamics. The Maranatha prayer and hope should be real and earnest. Dispensationalism has shown that the doctrine of the second coming needs far more attention by Reformed theologians than it has received until now. More Biblical studies on this subject should be forthcoming.

2. Dispensationalism has its attractiveness, but we cannot follow it. *Its view of Scripture is not in tune with historic Protestantism.* Literal Old Testament history is often treated figuratively, while prophecy is interpreted literally. No one, however, can be a consistent literalist. No literalist, however thoroughgoing, takes everything in the Bible literally. Some of the fantastic interpretations of prophecy prove this point.

Nor, for that matter, do those who lean to a more figurative interpretation insist that everything is figurative. Dispensationalism advocates an artificial and rigid periodization of history. Scripture cannot be compartmentalized - some parts of Scripture only for Jews, others only for Gentiles, and others for Christians. Historic Christianity has always maintained the unity of Scripture. "Since the canonization of the New Testament, a unitary view of the Bible has been the guiding principle of interpretation for the church. A continuity in the message of the Scriptures has been accepted as the basis for understanding it. Dispensational compartmentalization is a departure from the historic faith."²⁹

This view of the history of revelation also makes law and grace mutually exclusive. Grace characterizes the present age, as the law characterized the age from Sinai to Calvary. Dr. C. I. Scofield writes: "Grace, then, characterizes the present age, as law characterized the age from Sinai to Calvary. 'For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. And this contrast between law as a method and grace as a method runs through the whole Biblical revelation concerning grace.' . . . "But the law as an inflexible rule of life was given by Moses, and, from Sinai to Calvary, dominates, characterizes, the time; just as grace dominates, or gives its peculiar character to, the dispensation which begins at Calvary, and has its predicted termination in the rapture of the Church."³⁰

3. A very serious matter raised by dispensationalism's teaching is that certain parts of the Bible apply most exclusively to natural Israel and not to Christians. God's dealing in history is centered in Israel. It is Judaistic in its emphasis. Dispensationalists use Old Testament prophecy to prove that the Jews have a theocratic destiny outside the church. The church was not in God's original plan. She is only an interruption. The rapture of the church is to be looked forward to not only as a means of the true church to meet her Christ, but also for the founding of an earthly Jewish kingdom.

This thinking is most noticeable in the great interest displayed in every event that occurs in the Middle East. The Jewish-Arab struggle is looked at rather one-sidedly. But the hope of the world is not the restoration of Judaism, but the proclamation of the liberating gospel of the cross and the resurrection, the physical, visible return of Jesus Christ, and the new heaven and earth of eternal righteousness and justice.

The future of the saved Jews cannot be apart from the church, it falls within the general life of the church. The writers of the New Testament clearly believed that the New Testament church was foretold in the Old Testament. Historically, Protestantism has always believed in only one true church (Eph. 2:20). The converted Jew becomes a

member of the spiritual Israel (Gal. 3:26-29). Considering these facts, we must conclude that dispensationalism replaces the spirit of the gospel with the spirit of Judaism.

4. Does the Bible teach a secret rapture? No! It does speak of a resurrection of the believers that shall be immediately followed by the last judgment (I Cor. 15:23, 24). And Revelation 13, for example, teaches very clearly that the whole church will have to experience the woes of anti-Christian powers. Also, there are neither two nor even three second-comings, as some dispensationalists teach. The texts used to prove their case teach something different.³¹

5. Dispensationalism's view of the church is also found wanting. It is the gathering-out of individuals. The preaching of the gospel is expected to serve only a minority of individuals and to snatch souls like "branches out of the fire." The church is reduced to loose associations of individuals, and pietistic individualism is cultivated. No wonder that Darby disagreed with the Reformed concept of the church. He vehemently opposed the doctrine of the covenant.

Modern dispensationalists clearly follow Darby here. Dr. Pickering asserts that covenant theology "cannot lay claim to being a Biblical system of thought."³² He states that he rejects "the reductive error of covenant theology (which historically has gone hand in hand with amillennialism) which says that all of God's purposes with men are simply out-workings of His plan to redeem the elect."³³

6. Dispensationalism in its rather brief history has also proved to be divisive. Its early history was dominated by rivalry and controversy. The British Brethren lived in an atmosphere of continual schism. Dispensationalism wages major battles over minor issues. Churches have been divided over whether or not the rapture should occur before or after the tribulation.

7. Dispensationalism can be called catastrophic *Christianity* as it seems happy to discover evil. There is an increase in famine and war. Look! Another proof that Jesus will soon rapture the church. Through its "philosophy of ruin," dispensationalism has effectively sealed the church off from involvement in the world. The world is held to be incurably evil. There is no way that improvements can be made. And if you are getting ready for the imminent rapture, why bother with social, political, or ecclesiastical problems? The church should not spend her energy trying to solve the problems of a society doomed for destruction.

Concern is shown through rescue missions, which is very laudable, but this is far less costly than seeking political reform, social justice, and just legislation. In their reaction to the optimistic social gospel, the Christianization of society, dispensationalists have made: the mistake of nearly completely neglecting to work out a comprehensive application of the gospel. I vividly recall a remark made to me years ago by a Canadian radio evangelist: "You should be concerned only for souls. All the world's problems will be solved in the millennium." As Kraus writes:

"Men's souls are to be prepared to escape the judgment which will come upon the world. This understanding of the nature and task of the Church has led those who adhere to this teaching to think of missionary witness almost solely in terms of preaching. One group strongly influenced by this doctrine established a mission in an area where there were thousands of refugees who were in dire need of food and clothing. They refused, however, to be involved in any ministry of relief to these people because their job was simply to preach the gospel. Furthermore, they were critical of those Christians who sought earnestly to combine relief and preaching in a spiritual ministry to them."³⁴

8. Dispensationalism has become a flight from the world, instead of an involvement. A Christian must be busy in this world, because the King is coming! Scripture indicates that the kingdom is already here, and yet it is on the way. May the Lord, when He comes again, find us to be culture builders, busy at work in His world, showing a concern for the great needs of our desperate age.

Much more can be said about dispensationalism. I have only sketched the main points of its history and teaching. I have also given a brief critique and hope that it will be of help to the readers. We disagree with our dispensationalist brothers in Christ, but we need to remind ourselves constantly that while the Word of God is infallible and stands secure, our understanding of that Word may be faulty and imperfect. Let us be prayerfully careful as we search the Word of God for deeper understanding of the rich truth of Christ's second coming. Maranatha! Lord Jesus, come soon!

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