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# WHAT IS DISPENSATIONALISM?

by Thomas Ice

Many evangelicals and liberals believe that dispensationalism is either downright heresy or close to it. In fact, few years ago, while pastor of a church, a lady in my congregation ask me, "Why is dispensationalism bad?" I asked what provoked her question. She had recently talked to a woman who knew that our church was dispensational. The women spoke harshly against dispensationalism to my congregation and warned her that it was unscriptural and no biblically responsible Christian should be involved in such heresy. For many, dispensationalism is a Christian cuss word! The lady in my church ask: "What is dispensationalism?" That is a good question. I hope to answer it in this article.

## A CLUSTER OF ITEMS

Actually dispensationalism is a cluster of items joined together to form a system of thought. Just as terms like Calvinism, Arminianism, Anglicanism, Catholicism, or Lutheranism are historical labels that represent, not a single idea, but a group of items joined together to form a multifaceted scheme, so is dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is a term that arose in church history to label certain Christians who believe a group of certain things that are taught in the Bible.

Dispensationalists are those who believe the following things:

- The Bible is God's inspired, inerrant (i.e., without any errors) revelation to man. Scripture provides the framework through which to interpret history (past and future). God's written Word tells us of His plan for His creation and this will surely come to past.
- Since the Bible is God's literal Word of His plan for history, it should be interpreted literally and historically (past and future).
- Since the Bible reveals God's plan for history, then it follows that there is an ebb and flow to His plan. Therefore, God's plan includes different dispensations, ages, or epochs of history through which His creatures (man and angels) are tested. Therefore, God is instructing His creatures through the progress of history, as His creation progresses from a garden to a city.
- Since all humanity fell into sin, each person must individually receive God's provision of salvation through the death of Christ by believing the gospel. Thus, Jesus Christ is the only way to a relationship with God.
- Because of mankind's fall into sin, Scripture teaches that all humanity is naturally rebellious to God and the things of God. This is why only genuine believers in Christ are open to the teachings of the Bible. Thus, salvation through Christ is a prerequisite to properly understanding God's Word.
- God's plan for history includes a purpose for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—that is Israel. This plan for Israel includes promises that they will have the land of Israel, will have a seed, and will be a worldwide blessing to the nations. Many of the promises to national Israel are yet future, therefore, God is not finished with Israel.

- God’s plan from all eternity also includes a purpose for the church, however, this is a temporary phase that will end with rapture. After the rapture, God will complete His plan for Israel and the Gentiles.
- The main purpose in God’s master plan for history is to glorify Himself through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the goal and hero of history.

In a nutshell, Christians who believe like this are known throughout Christendom as dispensationalists. I am a dispensationalist. We believe that it is the same as saying that I believe what the Bible literally teaches. Millions of Christians throughout the world are dispensationalists. In fact, the word “dispensation” occurs four times in the King James Version of the Bible (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25).

#### A DEFINITION OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Most likely, 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*,<sup>1</sup> and some additional items are the reference point to look for 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.”<sup>2</sup> The English word “dispensation” translates the Greek noun *oikonomía*, often rendered “administration” in modern translations. The verb *oikonoméō* refers to a manager of a household.<sup>3</sup> “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.”<sup>4</sup>

#### *Scriptural Use of Dispensation*

The Greek word *oikonomía* is a compound of *oikos* meaning “house” and *nómos* meaning “law.” Taken together “the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household.”<sup>5</sup>

The various forms of the word *dispensation* appears in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oikonoméō* is used once in Luke 16:2, where it is translated “to be a steward.” The noun *oikonómos* appears ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10), and is usually translated “steward” or “manager” (but “treasurer” in Rom. 16:23). The noun *oikonomía* is used nine times (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4). In these instances it is translated variously (“stewardship,” “dispensation,” “administration,” “job,” “commission”).<sup>6</sup>

#### *Features of Dispensationalism*

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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.25.

<sup>6</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.25.

Examination of *oikonómōs* in the Gospels finds Christ using the word in two parables in Luke (Lk. 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8). Ryrie notes that in Luke 16 we find “some important characteristics of a stewardship, or dispensational arrangement.”<sup>7</sup> The characteristics are:

(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) play 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.”)<sup>8</sup>

Further features can be gleaned in 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.<sup>9</sup>

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

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<sup>7</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.26.

<sup>8</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p.26.

<sup>9</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 26-27.

## Definitions

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.”<sup>10</sup> Finally, he notes 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.<sup>11</sup>

In his classic work, *Dispensationalism*, Ryrie formulates the following 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

Dispensationalist, Renald Showers, emphasizing a dispensational view of history, gives the following definition:

Dispensational Theology can be defined very simply as a system of theology which attempts to develop the Bible’s philosophy of history on the basis of the sovereign rule of God. It represents the whole of Scripture and history as being covered by several dispensations of God’s rule.

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<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> Paul David Nevin, “Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation” (Th. D. dissertation, Dallas Seminary, 1965), p. 97.

. . . the term *dispensation* as it relates to Dispensational Theology could be defined as *a particular way of God's administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for world history.*<sup>14</sup>

### ESSENTIALS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Who is a dispensationalist? Essentials are needed by which to gauge a theology. What are the essentials that characterize a dispensationalist? Ryrie has stated what he calls the three essentials or *sine qua non* (Latin, "that without which") of dispensationalism.

The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain or historical-grammatical interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well.<sup>15</sup>

The three essentials are not a definition or description of dispensationalism, instead they are basic theological tests which can be applied to an individual to see whether or not he is a dispensationalist.

#### ***First Essential: Literal Interpretation***

Ryrie's first essential of dispensationalism is not just literal interpretation, but more fully, a *consistent* literal hermeneutic. "The word *literal* is perhaps not so good as either the word *normal* or *plain*," explains Ryrie, "but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation does."<sup>16</sup> Literal interpretation is foundational to the dispensational approach to Scripture. Literal interpretation is foundational to the dispensational approach to Scripture. Earl Radmacher went so far as to say that literal interpretation "is the 'bottom-line' of dispensationalism."<sup>17</sup>

The dictionary defines literal as "belonging to letters." It also says literal interpretation involves an approach "based on the actual words in their ordinary meaning, . . . not going beyond the facts."<sup>1</sup> "Literal interpretation of the Bible simply means to explain the original sense of the Bible according to the normal and customary usages of its language."<sup>2</sup> How is this done? It can only be accomplished through the grammatical (according to the rules of grammar), historical (consistent with the historical setting of the passage), contextual (in accord with its context) method of interpretation. Literalism looks to the text, the actual words and phrases of a passage. Nonliteral interpretation imports an idea not found specifically in the text of a passage. To some degree, all Bible interpreters interpret literally. However, dispensationalists *consistently* handle the text literally from Genesis to Revelation.

Literal interpretation recognizes that a word or phrase can be used plainly (denotative) or figuratively (connotative). In modern speech, as in the Bible, we talk plainly—"Grandmother died" (denotative), or more colorfully, "Grandmother kicked the bucket" (connotative). An important point to make is that even though we may use a figure of speech to refer to death, we are using that figure in reference to an event that literally happened. Ryrie says:

Symbols, figures of speech and types are all interpreted plainly in this method and they are in no way contrary to literal interpretation. After all, the very existence of any meaning for a

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<sup>14</sup> 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. 27, 30.

<sup>15</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> Earl D. Radmacher, "The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology," ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), p. 171.

figure of speech depends on the reality of the literal meaning of the terms involved. Figures often make the meaning plainer, but it is the literal, normal, or plain meaning that they convey to the reader.<sup>3</sup>

Some are mistaken to think that just because a figure of speech is used to describe an event (i.e., Jonah's experience in the belly of the great fish in Jonah 2), that the event was not literal. Such is not the case. A "Golden Rule of Interpretation" has been developed to help discern whether or not a figure of speech is intended.

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.<sup>4</sup>

E.E. Johnson (Dallas Seminary) notes that much of the confusion over literalism is removed when understanding the two ways it is used: "(1) the clear, plain sense of a word or phrase as over against a figurative use, and (2) a system that views the text as providing the basis of the true interpretation."<sup>5</sup> Thus, dispensationalists, by and large, use "literal" to refer to their *system* of interpretation (the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system), and once inside that system, *literal* refers to whether a specific word or phrase is used in its context figuratively or literally.

Johnson's second use of *literal* (i.e., systematic literalism) is simply the grammatical-historical system consistently used. The grammatical-historical system was revived by the Reformers and was set against the spiritual (spiritualized) or deeper meaning of the text common in the middle ages. The literal meaning was used simply as a springboard to a deeper ("spiritual") meaning, which was viewed as more desirable. A classic spiritualized interpretation would see the four rivers of Genesis 2—the Pishon, Havilah, Tigris and Euphrates—as representing the body, soul, spirit and mind. Coming from such a system, the Reformers saw the need to get back to the literal or textual meaning of the Bible.

The *system* of literal interpretation is the grammatical-historical or textual approach to hermeneutics. Use of literalism in this sense could be called "macroliteralism." Within macroliteralism, the consistent use of the grammatical-historical system yields the interpretative conclusion, for example, that *Israel* always and only refers to national Israel. The church will not be substituted for Israel if the grammatical-historical system is *consistently* used, because there are no textual indicators that such is the case. One must import an idea from outside the text by saying that the passage really means something that it does not actually say. This replacement approach is a mild form of spiritual or allegorical interpretation. So when speaking of those who do replace *Israel* with the church as not taking the Bible literally and spiritualizing the text, it is true, since such a belief is contrary to a macroliteral interpretation.

Consistently literal interpreters, within the framework of the grammatical-historical system, do discuss whether or not a word, phrase or the literary genre of a biblical book is a figure of speech (connotative) or is to be taken literally / plainly (denotative). This is Johnson's first use of *literal* which could be called "microliteralism."

Within microliteralism, there may be discussion by literalists as to whether or not a given word or phrase is being used in a literal or figurative way within a given passage. Some passages are quite naturally clearer than others and a consensus among interpreters develops, while other passages may find literal interpreters divided as to whether or not it should be taken as a figure of speech. This is more a problem of application than of method.

Reconstructionist, Ken Gentry, in his attack on literalism, argues that "*consistent* literalism is unreasonable."<sup>6</sup> He attempts to prove his point by arguing that, since dispensationalists

take some words and phrases as figures of speech, they are not consistently literal.<sup>7</sup> He says, “the dispensational claim to ‘consistent literalism’ is frustrating due to its inconsistent employment.”<sup>8</sup> Gentry seeks to discredit the dispensational hermeneutic by citing examples of dispensationalists who interpret certain passages as containing figures of speech, citing this as inconsistent with the system of literal interpretation. According to Gentry, the dispensationalist has to abandon literal interpretation when he realizes that Jesus refers figuratively to Himself as a door in John 10:9.<sup>9</sup> Gentry is not defining literal interpretation the way dispensationalists do. Therefore, his conclusions about literal interpretation are misguided because he commonly mixes the two senses noted by Johnson. When speaking of the macroliteral, he uses an example from microliteralism, and vice versa, therefore appearing to have shown an inconsistency in literal interpretation. In reality, his examples fall within the framework of how dispensationalists have defined what they mean by literal interpretation.

This is the first essential of dispensationalism. A way of approaching Scripture that allows the Scripture, through the progress of revelation to interpret itself. It does not approach the Bible through some fantastic interpretational scheme, composed of complex symbolism which reduces Scripture to a mystical code book that requires a special decoding manual in order to figure it out. The second essential, flows from the first. It is a distinction between Israel and the Church.

### ***Second Essential: Distinction Between Israel and the Church***

“A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct,” declares Ryrie. He also notes that anyone “who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does, will.”<sup>18</sup> What does it mean to keep Israel and the church distinct? Dispensationalists believe the Bible teaches that God’s single program for history includes a distinct plan for Israel and a distinct plan for the church. God’s plan for history has two people: Israel and the church. John Walvoord says that “dispensations are rules of life. They are not ways of salvation. There is only one way of salvation and that is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Seminary has described the distinction as follows:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. . . . Over against this, the partial dispensationalist, though dimly observing a few obvious distinctions, bases his interpretation on the supposition that God is doing but one thing, namely, the general separation of the good from the bad, and, in spite of all the confusion this limited theory creates, contends that the earthly people merge into the heavenly people; that the earthly program must be given a spiritual interpretation or disregarded altogether.<sup>20</sup>

If the unfulfilled promises given to Israel in the Old Testament literally refer to the Jews, which they do, then it is clear that many are yet unfulfilled. Therefore, it is clear that God’s plan for Israel, who is currently in dispersion (Deut. 4:27-28; 28:63-68; 30:2-4), is on hold until He completes His current purpose with the church, which is to take out from the Gentiles a people for His name (Acts 15:14), and Raptures His Bride to heaven. After the Rapture, God

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<sup>18</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Biblical Kingdoms Compared and Contrasted” in *Issues In Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936), p. 107, as cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 39.

will then complete His unfinished business with Israel (Acts 15:16-18) during the seven-year Tribulation period. Thus, if one does not distinguish between passages in which God speaks to Israel from those intended for the church, then the results will be an improper merging of the two programs.

In the Old Testament God made certain promises to Abraham when He pledged to make him the father of a special people. Dispensationalists understand these promises, and other unconditional covenant promises (i.e., treaty grants) made by God to Israel as still in tact for Israel, even though the church currently shares in some of Israel's spiritual blessings (Rom. 15:27). Ultimately God will not only restore Israel to a place of blessing (Rom. 11), but will also literally fulfill the land and kingdom promises made to Israel in the Abrahamic (Gen. 12:1-3), Land of Israel (Deut. 30:1-10), and Davidic (2 Sam. 7:12-16) Covenants. In the present time, God has another plan for the church that is distinct from His plan for Israel (Eph. 2-3). Dispensationalists do not believe that the church is the New Israel or has replaced Israel as the heir to the Old Testament promises. Contrary to some who say that the church has superseded Israel, the New Testament nowhere calls the church Israel. Dispensationalist Arnold Fruchtenbaum says:

The conclusion is that the church is never called a "spiritual Israel" or a "new Israel." The term Israel is either used of the nation or the people as a whole, or of the believing remnant within. It is never used of the church in general or of Gentile believers in particular. In fact, even after the Cross there remains a threefold distinction. First, there is a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles as in 1 Corinthians 10:32 and Ephesians 2:11-12. Second, there is a distinction between Israel and the church in 1 Corinthians 10:32. Third, there is a distinction between Jewish believers (the Israel of God) and Gentile believers in Romans 9:6 and Galatians 6:16).<sup>21</sup>

Fruchtenbaum gives six reasons why the New Testament keeps Israel and the church distinct. They are:

- (1) the church was born at Pentecost, whereas Israel had existed for many centuries. . . .
- (2) certain events in the ministry of the Messiah were essential to the establishment of the church—the church does not come into being until certain events have taken place. . . .
- (3) the mystery character of the church. . . .
- (4) the church is distinct from Israel is the unique relationship between Jews and the Gentiles, called one new man in Ephesians 2:15 . . .
- (5) the distinction between Israel and the church is found in Galatians 6:16 [i.e., "the Israel of God"] . . .
- (6) In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term *Israel* is used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Third Essential: Glory of God is the Purpose of History***

The third essential of dispensationalism also revolves around another important distinction. Showers says, this "indispensable factor is the recognition that the ultimate

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<sup>21</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church" in *Issues In Dispensationalism*, p. 126.

<sup>22</sup> Fruchtenbaum, "Israel and the Church", pp. 116-18.

purpose of history is the glory of God through the demonstration that He alone is the sovereign God.”<sup>23</sup> Ryrie explains:

we avow that the unifying principle of the Bible is the glory of God and that this is worked out in several ways—the program of redemption, the program for Israel, the punishment of the wicked, the plan for the angels, and the glory of God revealed through nature. We see all these programs as means of glorifying God, and we reject the charge that by distinguishing them (particularly God’s program for Israel from His purpose for the church) we have bifurcated God’s purpose.<sup>24</sup>

This essential is the most misunderstood and often thought to be the least essential. When properly understood, I believe that this is a valid essential. Dispensationalists are not saying that nondispensationalists do not believe in God's glory. We are making the point that the dispensationalist understanding of the plan of God means that He is glorified in history by more areas or facets, than those who see mankind's salvation (probably the most important aspect of God’s plan) as the single area displaying God’s glory.

### A BIBLICAL PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Showers notes that a dispensational view of the Bible provides a believer with a biblical philosophy of history.<sup>25</sup> 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 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.

### CONCLUSION

We believe that dispensationalism is a system of theology that has been properly developed from the Bible itself. Dispensationalism is essential to correctly understanding the Bible, especially Bible prophecy. No one will be able to rightly divide God’s Word without understanding these great truths. Instead of being a hindrance to correct understanding of God’s Word, as is regularly claimed by the opponents, dispensationalism is a human label for the correct approach and understanding of Scripture. We plead guilty to the critic’s charge that say we are dispensationalists. We only wish that they would properly come to understand what it is that we believe and quite misrepresenting dispensationalism as often occurs.

In this paper we have provided definitions, descriptions and essentials in an effort to answer the question: “What is dispensationalism?” Dr. Ryrie concludes:

If one does interpret the Bible this way, will it mean that he cuts out some of its parts? Not at all. Actually, the Bible comes alive as never before. There is no need to dodge the plain meaning of a passage or to reinterpret or spiritualize it in order to

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<sup>23</sup> Showers, *There Really Is A Difference!*, p. 53.

<sup>24</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 213.

<sup>25</sup> Showers, *There Really Is A Difference!*, pp. 49-52.

resolve conflicts with other passages. God's commands and standards for me today become even more distinct, and His program with its unfolding splendor falls into a harmonious pattern. The history of dispensationalism is replete with men and women who love the Word of God and promote its study, and who have a burden for spreading the gospel to all the world.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary, Unabridged, Second Edition, p. 1055

<sup>2</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, (Winona Lake, Ind.: Assurance Publishers, 1974), p. 29.

<sup>3</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Cooper, *The World's Greatest Library: Graphically Illustrated* (Los Angeles: Biblical Research Society, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 148.

<sup>7</sup> For examples of his approach see *Ibid.*, pp. 153-58.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

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<sup>26</sup> Ryrie, *What Is Dispensationalism?* p. 7.