

## **Dispensationalism** by Rev. Tom Aicken

That school of theology known as Dispensationalism began with a British pastor, John Nelson Darby, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was also the founder of the Plymouth Brethren, a denomination which grew out of a reaction to other established churches, but is today one of many denominations which make up the worldwide Dispensational movement.

The name 'Dispensationalism' comes from what this movement considers to be the 7 different ages, or dispensations, of history. They are as follows:

Innocence (Gen. 1:1 – 3:7)

Conscience (Gen. 3:8 – 8:22)

Human Government (Gen. 9:1 – 11:32)

Promise ((Gen. 12:1 – Ex. 19:25)

Law (Ex. 20:1 – Acts 2:4)

Grace (Acts 2:4 – Rev. 20:3)

The Millennial Kingdom (Rev. 20:4-6)

According to this view, God deals with people in a different way in each of these dispensations, and that this is what distinguishes these time periods from one another. Old Testament believers, they say, did not know about Christ and the gospel. Salvation for them was by their faithfulness to the ordinances of God. (They may still call that 'faith', but it is so only if you spell it w-o-r-k-s.) Salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, specifically, was not introduced, they tell us, until New Testament times.

Is it really true that Old Testament believers did not know about Christ and the gospel? What about Abraham (John 8:56), Moses (Heb. 11:24 – 26), and David (Acts 2:29 – 31)? And, if they knew and embraced the gospel, why would they believe in God and not also in Christ? See Gen. 3:15; Psalm 2:7 - 12; Psalm 110:1; John 5:21 -23; John 14:1,6. Clearly, these Old Testament saints did know about Christ, however darkly, and they, too, believed in Him as their only hope of glory.

According to Dispensationalists themselves, there are 3 matters which distinguish their thinking from other brands of Christianity:

1. *They interpret all the Bible, especially prophecy, literally.*

The Reformed view, on the other hand, is to interpret words and expressions in their most natural sense – sometimes literally, yes, as for instance in the historical books of the Bible; but sometimes also figuratively, as in the poetic and apocalyptic books. Sometimes even the Jews made mistakes by interpreting things too literally, not understanding that 'Elijah' had already come (Matt. 11:14), or that the kingdom of God was 'in the midst' of them (Luke 17:21).

2. *They see two distinct peoples of God, with two distinct destinies: Israel and the Church.*

Because of their literal interpretation, Dispensationalists insist that God has made certain promises to the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and certain other promises to the Church in the New Testament. The Church, according to this view, is not the new Israel, or spiritual Israel, but is a separate entity unto itself.

What is the Israel of God (Gal. 6:16) if it is not the Church? See Gal. 3:29; Rom. 9:6; Phil. 3:3. Sometimes in the Bible, "Israel" is the nation of Israel, that is true, but sometimes, too, it is the Church, and it is only the context in which we find it that will make it clear which it is. Dispensationalists draw attention to Rom. 11 as the defining passage to distinguish Israel and the Church. But look carefully. Rom. 11 is about ONE olive tree (the Church, Old Testament and New Testament), from which some branches are cut off, and to which other branches are grafted in!

3. *They say that we are now living in the dispensation of grace (no.6), in which the Church and Israel live side by side, and should help one another.*

This is why many Americans are very pro-Israel, and you can imagine, then, the excitement when (after World War II and all the atrocities of the holocaust) Israel again became its own independent state back in the land of Palestine! Indeed, we should be thankful for Israel as a pro-western ally in the middle east, but there is a very grave danger in reading back from historical events as a means of interpreting biblical prophecy.

### The Rapture

According to this school of thought, a time is coming, and it could be anytime, when the great event known as "the pre-tribulation rapture" will occur. Christ will appear in the air and take all Christians (the Church) away into heaven. When that happens, the Lord will then turn His attention back to Israel.

There are 3 passages in the New Testament which are said to teach the rapture, namely, John 14:1 - 4; 1 Cor. 15:51 -54; and 1 Thess. 4:13 – 17. Look at them carefully. Do you see anything in these passages which suggests anything other than the Second Coming of Christ and the end of the world?

### The 7-year Reign of Antichrist

After the rapture, they tell us, the Antichrist will sign a 7-year peace treaty with Israel. The suffering of the Jews during this period known as "the tribulation" will be very severe.

### The 1,000-year Reign of Christ

After the tribulation, they go on, Christ will come again, but this time He will come to the earth (not just to the air above us), and, when He does, He will establish Himself on the throne of David in Jerusalem, will re-introduce the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament (including all the sacrifices), will reign over

Israel for 1,000 years – this is the dispensation of the millennial kingdom (no.7) – and so fulfil all God's promises to the nation of Israel from Old Testament times.

### Concluding Statement

There are many problems with Dispensationalism, problems which render it an unsafe and altogether untrustworthy guide to understanding the Bible. In the interest of providing a brief summary, I will state just three of the most serious problems:

1) God's covenant of grace gives the Bible unity. We speak of old covenant and new covenant, but these are two administrations of the same covenant, the Person of Christ being the only Mediator between God and men, the author and finisher of our faith who met all the demands of the covenant, coming among us at the pre-appointed time and through whom God has obtained the eternal redemption of all His people from the beginning to the end of the world. Dispensationalism has no such unity, but is very piecemeal in its view of history and of God's changing purpose from one dispensation to the next. Is the Lord our God not the One who declares the end from the beginning, whose counsel shall stand and His word will not return to Him void? Then why, according to Dispensationalism, does He keep changing His mind and appoint such contrary means of calling sinners to Himself and securing their salvation?

2) Sinners are declared righteous before God by grace alone, through faith alone, and such saving faith is in Christ alone. This is the way it has been from the beginning of the world, and in the justice of God it could never be any other way. For Dispensationalists to turn Old Testament faith into faithfulness, therefore, thus transforming it into a means of salvation by works, is to overturn the gospel completely, to undermine the finished work of Christ as something that was ultimately unnecessary, and to say that there will be sinners from ancient history who had somehow found, in their own day and age, another door and pathway into the kingdom of heaven.

3) The sacrifices of the Old Testament sacrificial system were never intended to save anyone; indeed, all those sacrifices combined never contributed to the cancellation of any sin. Their only purpose was to point ahead in time to the offering up of Christ on the cross, so that all those (and only those) who sought and found refuge in Christ would be approved of God and received into His favour for Jesus' sake. As a result, to suggest that these Old Testament sacrifices will be reinstated at any time, and will be the means of Jews being saved in what Dispensationalists call the post-tribulation period, otherwise known to them as the millennial reign of Christ, is the most blatantly insulting statement they can hurl against the finished work of Christ. I am not suggesting that these heirs of Darby are not Christians, but for anyone to get so caught up in their own ill-conceived theology contrary to the plain teaching of Holy Scripture should be a clear warning to us all.

