

Dispensational Theology



May 1, 1988

Faith Pulpit

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary

Ankeny, Iowa

March 1988

Dispensational Theology

Myron J. Houghton, Ph.D., Th.D.

Introduction

Faith Baptist Theological Seminary is dispensational in its theology. Many people do not know what dispensationalism really is or how it affects the beliefs we hold. The purpose of this article is to explain dispensationalism by looking at some of our major beliefs.

The Bible

We believe that the Bible is God's Word. All of its 66 books are inspired, and everything the Bible teaches is completely true. At the same time we recognize that the message found in the Bible is more greatly developed in the New Testament. For example, Genesis 3:15 records the first promise of the gospel. In this passage, God confronts Adam and Eve, who have disobeyed Him. God tells Eve that her seed would bruise the head of the serpent and that the serpent would bruise the heel of her seed. The gospel is truly present in this verse: Jesus Christ is the seed of Eve. By His death and resurrection (the bruising of His heel), He has dealt a death-blow to the devil (the bruising of the serpent's head). Hebrews 2:14 Romans 16:20 support this understanding of Genesis 3:15 . And yet we realize that the gospel is not presented in a fully developed form in Genesis 3. Recognizing that all of the Bible is inspired and true but that its message has been made clearer in the New Testament goes hand-in-hand with a dispensational understanding of the Bible.

Dispensational theology recognizes that all Scripture is not only inspired but that it is also profitable (2 Timothy 3:16). If, however, we are not living in the same age and with the same management responsibilities as believers in the Old Testament, how can the Old Testament be considered profitable for us? First, the Old Testament is profitable for us because it is Christ-centered (Luke 24:25–27, 44, 45). These Old Testament references to Christ may be types that find their fulfillment spelled out in the New Testament. Second, Old Testament stories are meant by God to be examples for us (1 Corinthians 10:1–11). Finally, there is truth in the Old Testament that transcends all time (Romans 15:1–5). The question remains: how are we to know whether or not a truth encountered in the Old Testament is suppose to guide us in the church age? The answer is that the New Testament epistles are written in the church age to explain how a believer is to live now. Therefore, we must study the New Testament epistles and grasp the truths they impart for godly living today. Only then will we be able to discern those same principles in the Old Testament.

Salvation

Dispensational theology rejects the idea that there is more than one way of salvation. In the mind of God, salvation has always been based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:19,20). Salvation has always been by grace, that is, undeserved. The animal sacrifices show that this is true. Salvation has always been through faith (see Hebrews 11) although because the message was less clear in some of the Old Testament passages, the content of that faith may have also been less developed in the Old Testament (compare Romans 4:1–3 with Genesis 15:5,6).

Dispensational theology affirms that the principles for living a godly life in this present age differ from many of those given in early eras. Thus, the believer in this present church age is said to be “not under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). This not only means that the law cannot condemn us and send us to hell but also that the law does not give us the guidelines for how we are to live our lives. As a result, the believer today does not keep the Sabbath (Romans 14:1–5; Colossians 2:14–17). It does not mean a believer is free to live in whatever manner he desires. God’s grace teaches us how to live. God’s Word says: “The grace of God hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Titus 2:11,12).

Dispensational theology affirms that the death of Christ has made it possible for us to say “no” to sin in our lives (Romans 6:12,13). It also teaches us that God’s Holy Spirit permanently indwells every true believer in Christ, enabling us to say “yes” to God and to do His will. This is not sinless perfection, but it is saying that victory over specific manifestations of sin in our lives is possible. The Spirit’s indwelling was not enjoyed by Old Testament saints (John 14:16,17).

The Church

At the heart of dispensational theology is the belief that God’s program for the nation Israel is not the same as His program for the Church. In Genesis 12 God singled out a man (Abraham) and promised him a land, many descendants, and certain spiritual blessings. These promises are reaffirmed and amplified throughout the Old Testament, particularly in certain covenants God made with Israel (Deuteronomy 29:1, 12, 13, 19, 20; 2 Samuel 7:12–16; Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:22–38). These promises predict a future for Israel in which a descendant of Abraham and David would rule over the world from Jerusalem. Dispensational theology teaches that this is NOT God’s program at the present time. In the present age (beginning in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost and ending with the coming of Christ to remove His Church from the earth) God’s program concerns the Church rather than Israel. This does NOT mean Israel will never become part of God’s program. Romans 11:25–29 makes it clear that the promises made to Abraham will someday be fulfilled.

Furthermore, most dispensationalists believe that when Jesus and John the Baptist proclaimed “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mark 1:15), they were not speaking of God’s program for the Church but were saying that the kingdom promised to Abraham and reaffirmed to Israel throughout the Old Testament was being offered now to that generation of Jews. Charles Ryrie comments in a note on Mark 1:15:

The kingdom of God is at hand. The rule of Messiah on earth, promised in the Old Testament and earnestly longed for by the Jewish people, was near, for the Messiah had come. However, the people had rejected rather than accepted Him, and the fulfillment of the kingdom promises had to be delayed until God’s purpose in saving Jews and Gentiles and forming His church was completed. Then Christ will return and set up God’s kingdom on this earth (Acts 15:14–16; Rev. 19:15), cf. Ryrie Study Bible, King James Version, p. 1399.

Alva J. McClain, in his book entitled *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, gives seven detailed reasons why the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus was identical to the kingdom predicted in the Old Testament (see especially pages 274–303), and the reader is advised to study Dr. McClain’s arguments.

The church was not predicted in the Old Testament, according to Ephesians 3:1–6. In this passage Paul makes known the revelation he received about this matter (v. 1–4), states that it was not known previously as it is now being made known to New Testament prophets and apostles (v.5), and describes the relationship of Gentiles to Jews in the Church (v.6). In the previous chapter, Paul had said: (1) before Christ’s death, Gentiles were strangers from the Jewish covenants and without Christ (Eph. 2:11,12); (2) by means of Christ’s death, these far-off Gentiles have been brought near (v.13); (3) when Jesus died on the cross He broke down the law, reconciling the Jew and the Gentile, thereby from the two making “one new man,” a new entity: the Church (v. 14,15). Therefore, what kind of officers a church should have, how the church should be governed and our understanding concerning water baptism and the Lord’s Supper must be determined from the New Testament epistles.

Future Events

If God’s program for Israel is distinct from His program for the Church, then those Scripture passages describing God’s program for Israel should not be used to determine our understanding of God’s future program for the Church. With this in mind, we understand that Matthew 24 describes God’s program for Israel and not the church. Understandably, Christ’s return is following the tribulation (Matthew 24:29,30). Yet when God’s program for the Church is described in 1 Thessalonians 4–5, the rapture of the Church (1 Thessalonians 4:13–18) takes place before the tribulation of the Day of the Lord (which is characterized as a time when God’s wrath pours out sudden destruction upon the children of darkness—1 Thessalonians 5:1–5). Believers who are part of God’s program for the Church have not been appointed to God’s wrath (v.9) but to experience deliverance, more specifically, that we should live together with Christ (compare 1 Thess. 5:10 with 1 Thess. 4:17b).

The last four chapters of the Bible (Revelation 19–22) describe Christ’s return after the tribulation to defeat antichrist and the false prophet (19:11–21), the establishment of Christ’s kingdom for 1000 years (20:1–6), the judgment of Satan (20:7–10), the judgment of the lost (20:11–15), and finally the establishment of the eternal state (Revelation 21–22).