

Sunday, October 30, 2011—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 43 Confronting Dispensational Straw Men, Part 2

Review

- In the previous study we began looking at common charges made against dispensational theology by its opponents.
 - Dispensationalism was a new invention in the 1800s by John Nelson Darby and is therefore wrong because it is not Apostolic. “Dispensational as we know it today is of comparatively recent origin, having had its beginning in England in the last century among the Plymouth Brethren.” (J.E. Bear quoted by Mason, 21)
- In doing so we saw that elements of dispensational thinking can be observed from very early in church history and throughout the Middle Ages.
- In this study we want to continue surveying the history of dispensational thinking from the time of the Reformation until the time of Darby. In addition, we will look at an additional charge made against dispensationalism, the charge of divisiveness. Lastly, we will briefly consider the historical development of dispensationalism’s chief rival, Covenant Theology.

Unsystematized Dispensationalism or Early Dispensational Concepts

- *Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrrhus (390?-457?)*—is credited with having said, “God dispenseth all things suitably to the particular time, and measureth his institutions by the abilities and powers of men.”
- *Islam*—possets a parallel to the idea of successive revelations by dispensations. “The idea in Islam is that there were 12,000 prophets (nabi), most of whom are unknown and unmentioned. The Koran mentions some score of them altogether; of these the following introduced new dispensations or revelations.
 - Adam—the Safi of Allah—God’s first creation
 - Noah—Nabi-Allah—Prophet of God.
 - Ibrahim (Khalil Allah)—the Friend of God
 - Musa (Moses)—Kalim Allah—God’s mouthpiece
 - ‘Isa-Kalimet Allah—Word of God (Jesus)
 - Mohammad—Rasul Allah—Apostle of God (Ehlert, 29)
- *Alfricus Grammaticus (?-1006/20?)*—Anglo Saxon translator of Genesis stated the following: “Now it thinketh me, love, that that work (the translation of Genesis) is very dangerous for me or any man to undertake; because I dread lest some foolish man read this book, or hear it read, who should ween that he may live now under the new law, even as the old fathers lived in that time, ere that the old law was established, or even as men lived under Moyses’ law.” (Ehlert, 30) His views could be summarized as follows:
 - Patriarchal—“in that time, ere that the old law was established”
 - Mosaic—“Moyses’ law”
 - Christian—“now under the new law.”

- *Joachim of Fiore (1130/45-1201/02)*—the abbot of Cosenza in Calabria formulated a system of historico-prophetic theology. “His fundamental argument is that the Christian aera closes with the year 1260, when a new aera would commence under another dispensation. Thus the three persons of the God-head divided the government of ages among them; the reign of the Father embraced the period from the creation of the world to the coming of Christ; that of the son, the twelve centuries and a half ending in 1260, and then would commence the reign of the Holy Spirit. This change would be marked by a progress similar to that which followed the substitution of the new for the old dispensation. Thus man, after having been carnal under the Father, half carnal and half spiritual under the Son, would under the Holy Ghost, become exclusively spiritual. So there have been three stages of development in society, in which supremacy belonged successively to warriors, the secular clergy, and monks.” (quoted in Ehlert, 30-31)
- Ryrie offers the following point in summation, “It is not suggested nor should it be inferred that these early Church Fathers were dispensationalists in the modern sense of the word. But it is true that some of them enunciated principles which later developed into dispensationalism, and it may be rightly said that they held to primitive or early dispensational concepts.” (Ryrie, 70)
- Stuart Allen concurs with Ryrie, “We do not suggest that the church Fathers were dispensationalists as the word is used today. But some of them saw Scriptural principles which later developed into dispensational concepts.” (Allen, 33)

From the Reformation to 1825

- In *Dispensationalism Today*, Charles C. Ryrie refers to this time period as “Developing Dispensationalism or the Period Before Darby”. (Ryrie, 71)
- “The Reformation, as we have seen, was largely concerned with bringing back the basic truths of Christianity and not until Bible students began to be once more concerned with prophecy and eschatology, did dispensational truth begin its part in Scriptural understanding.” (Allen, 33)
- “This is the period during which the larger doctrine of ages and dispensations had its beginning and unfolding. By 1825 there was a considerable literature to be found on the subject, and the doctrine was well established as a theological concept. It is a strange phenomenon that almost without exception dispensational writers since that date, however, have ignored this body of literature.” (Ehlert, 33)
- *William Gouge (1575/78-1653)*—presents the earliest system of dispensations during the time period now under consideration. Gouge was educated at St. Paul’s in London and King’s College, Cambridge. In 1643 he was made a member of the Westminster Assembly of Divines, and was chosen to write the Assembly’s annotation on I Kings to Job. His great work was his commentary on Hebrews which he finished just prior to his death. (Ehlert, 33)
- “Gouge’s scheme of dispensations, while he does not call them such, is based on the ancient sex-millennial tradition. The specific advance that he makes over the mere division of time into six periods consists in this, that he views them in relation to the

development of God's program of redemption. Therein lies the distinction between the terms ages and dispensations. A theological dispensation has two major aspects: a time-period aspect, and a redemptive-program aspect. Either alone is not dispensationalism." (Ehlert, 33)

- "In his notes on Hebrews 1:1, commenting on the phrase, "in these last days," Gouge recalls Augustine's outline of the ages and links them up with the so-called covenant of grace as follows:
 - I—Adam to Noah, the covenant first made to man
 - II—Noah to Abraham, the covenant renewed
 - III—Abraham to David, the covenant appropriated to Abraham and his seed
 - IV—David to the captivity of Israel, the covenant established in a royal line
 - V—Captivity to Christ's coming in the flesh, the covenant revived by Israel's returning
 - VI—Christ's first coming in the flesh to his second coming in glory, even to the end of the world, in which the covenant was most firmly and-inviolably established. (Ehlert, 34)

- *William Cave (1637-1713)*—published a book shortly after Gouge's death in which he identified the following three dispensations:
 - I—Patriarchal, from the beginning of the world till the delivery of the law upon Mount Sinai
 - II—Mosaical, from the delivery of the law till the final period of the Jewish state
 - III—Evangelical, to last to the end of the world

- *Pierre Poiret (1646-1719)*—a French mystic and philosopher who wrote more than forty works "attempted, like many others, to comprehend the whole story of redemption in one sweep, and saw clearly that the work of God through the ages falls into various periods differing in detail yet preserving a unifying thread throughout. His great work, *L'OEconomic Divine*, first published in Amsterdam in 1687, was rendered into English and published in London in six volumes and an appendix, in 1713. . .its most interesting and significant feature is the fact that it is premillennial and dispensational. . . There is no question that we have here a genuine dispensational scheme. He uses the phrase "period or dispensation" and his seventh dispensation is a literal thousand-year millennium with Christ returned and reigning in bodily form upon the earth with His saints and Israel regathered and converted. He sees the overthrow of corrupt Protestantism, the rise of the Antichrist, the two resurrections, and many of the general run of end-time events. . .His outline is as follows:"
 - I—Infancy, to the deluge
 - II—Childhood, to Moses
 - III—Adolescence, to the prophets, or about Solomon's time
 - IV—Youth, to the time of the coming of Christ
 - V—Manhood, "some time after that"
 - VI—Old Age, "the time of his (man's) Decay
 - VII—Renovation of all Things (Ehlert, 34-36)

- Poiret writes, “Tho’ I do not pretend precisely to determine the Number nor Duration of these Periods, it is obvious however unto all, that the World hath really passed thro’ Periods of this nature.” (Ehlert, 36)
- *John Edwards (1639-1716)*—was educated at St. John’s College Cambridge, where he later became a scholar and fellow. In 1697, Edwards moved to Cambridge where he spent the following two years devouring the library. “In 1699 he published two volumes totaling some 790 pages entitled *A Complete History or Survey of all the Dispensations.*” The following quotation is from the preface: “I have undertaken a Great Work, viz. to display all Transactions of Divine Providence relating to the Methods of Religion, from the Creation to the end of the World, from the first Chapter of Genesis to the last of Revelation. For I had not met with any Author that had undertaken to comprise them all, and to give us a true account of them according to their true Series: nor had I ever lit upon a Writer (either Foreign or Domestick) who had designedly traced the particular cause and Grounds of them, or settled them in their right and true foundations. Wherefore I betook myself to this Work, resolving to attempt something, tho it were only to invite others of greater skill to go on with it.” (Ehlert, 37)
- Edward’s scheme saw three great Catholic and Grand Oeconomies, the third of which he subdivided constituting the main sweep of Biblical time to the consummation and conflagration. The following is his outline:
 - I—Innocency and Felicity, or Adam created upright
 - II—Sin and Misery, Adam fallen
 - III—Reconciliation, or Adam recovered, from Adam’s redemption to the end of the world, “The discovery of the blessed seed to Adam:”
 - Patriarchal economy:
 - 1) Adamical, antediluvian
 - 2) Noachical
 - 3) Abrahamick
 - Mosaical
 - Gentile (concurrent with a and b)
 - Christian or Evangelical:
 - 1) Infancy, primitive period, past
 - 2) Childhood, present period
 - 3) Manhood, future (millennium)
 - 4) Old age, from the loosing of Satan to the conflagration (Ehlert, 37-38)
- *John Shute Barrington (1678-1734)*—also known as the First Viscount Barrington, was educated at Utrecht and was friends with John Locke. Barrington published an essay titled, *The Dispensations of God to Mankind as Revealed in Scripture*, in which he stated the following in opposition to Deism, “the single notion, that runs through the several dispensations of God to mankind in its full light . . . and that it pursues it in the precise order and manner in which it was exhibited in those several dispensations, and will at the same time shew, how all the peculiar doctrines of revelation refer to it. For such a sketch alone will discover to us all the beauties of revealed truth; shewing it in its proper connection, and in all its revelations (particularly its use and advantage), and in its unity.” Ehlert adds, “He understands the dispensations to be “the various methods in which God has extraordinarily discovered Himself to mankind.” (Ehlert, 38)

- *Isaac Watts (1674-1748)*—the great hymn writer wrote an essay entitled, *The Harmony of all the Religions Which God ever Prescribed to Men, and all his Dispensations Towards Them.*” Ehlert attributes the following quotation to Watts: “The public dispensations of God towards men, are those wise and holy constitutions of his will and government, revealed or some way manifested to them, in the several successive periods or ages of the world, wherein are contained the duties which he expects from men, and the blessings which he promises, or encourages them to expect from him, here and hereafter; together with the sins which he forbids, and the punishments which he threatens to inflict on such sinners: Or, the dispensations of God may be described more briefly, as the appointed moral rules of God dealing with mankind, considered as reasonable creatures, and as accountable to him for their behavior, both in this world and in that which is to come. Each of these dispensations of God, may be represented as different religions, or, at least, as different forms of religion, appointed for men in the several successive ages of the world.” (Ehlert, 39) The following is Watts’ dispensational outline:
 - I—The Dispensation of Innocency, or, the Religion of Adam at first
 - II—The Adamical Dispensation of the Covenant of Grace, or the Religion of Adam after his Fall
 - III—The Noachical Dispensation; or the Religion of Noah
 - IV—The Abrahamical Dispensation; or, the Religion of Abraham
 - V—The Mosaical Dispensation; or, the Jewish Religion
 - VI—The Christian Dispensation (Ehlert, 40)
- “It becomes evident at once, of course, that this is exactly the outline of the first six dispensations that has been so widely publicized by the late Dr. C.I. Scofield in his notes.” (Ehlert, 40)
- It is interesting to consider the following quote from Watts in light of Pauline truth, “This last and best dispensation of grace, *viz.* the Christian religion, was not properly set up in the world, during the life of Christ, though he was the illustrious and divine Author and Founder of it: As the reason is plain and obvious, *viz.* because many of the peculiar glories, duties, and blessings of it, as they are described in Acts, and in the sacred epistles, did really depend upon those facts, which had no existence in Christ’s own life-time, *viz.* his death, resurrection, ascension, and exaltation.” (Ehlert, 40)
- *Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)*—while he does not develop a scheme of dispensations comparable to those of the writers just noted, does speak of the whole plan and development of redemption as “the whole dispensation,” which he outlines in his *History of Redemption* in three major divisions:
 - I—From the fall to the incarnation
 - II—From Christ’s incarnation to his resurrection
 - III—From Christ’s resurrection to the end of the world
- Edwards said the following regarding the law and grace controversy of his day, “All allow that the Old Testament dispensation is out of date, with its ordinances; and I think a manner pertaining to the constitution and order of the New Testament church, that is a matter of fact wherein the New Testament itself is express, full and abundant, in such a case to have recourse to the Mosaic dispensation for rules or precedents to determine our judgment, is quite needless and out of reason. There is perhaps no part of divinity

attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ as the stating the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.” (Ehlert, 41)

- *John Taylor Norwich (1694-1761)*—states the following in his work on Romans published in 1745: “As to the order of time; the apostle carries his arguments backwards from the time when Christ came into the world, (chap. 1:17 to chap. 4) to the time when the covenant was made with Abraham (chap. 5) to the time when the judgment to condemnation, pronounced upon Adam, came upon all men (chap. 5:12 to the end). And thus he gives a view of the principal dispensations from the beginning of the world.” (Ehlert, 41)
- *John Fletcher (1729-1785)*—a friend of the Wesleys, is credited with stating, “If a judicious mariner, who has sailed around the world, sees with pleasure a map, which exhibits, in one point of view, the shape and proportion of the wide seas, . . . a judicious Protestant may profitably look upon a doctrinal map, . . . more especially if this map exhibits, with some degree of accuracy, the boundaries of truth . . . Without any apology, therefore, I shall lay before the reader a plain account of the primitive catholic Gospel, and its various dispensations.”
 - I—Gentilism, “natural religion”
 - II—Judaism, “the Mosaic dispensation”
 - III—The Gospel of John the Baptist, “the Jewish Gospel improved into infant Christianity”
 - IV—The Perfect Gospel of Christ, the other three, “arrived at their full maturity”
- “To these four he adds two ‘great dispensations of grace and justice’ yet to take place ‘with respect to every man: (V) the one in the day of death . . . (VI) the other in the day of judgment.’ Following the second coming of Christ there will yet be (VII) ‘another Gospel dispensation,’ which we have now in prophecy, ‘as the Jews had the Gospel of Christ’s first advent,’ during which the Church now reigns with Christ for a thousand years, and which he connects with the ‘restitution of all things.’” (Ehlert, 42)
- The following is a listing of other less significant dispensational writings and authors from this time period.
 - Joseph Priestly (1733-1804)—in 1771 wrote *Analogy of the Divine Dispensations*
 - George Stanley Faber (1773-1843)—stated the following in the Bampton Lectures in 1801, “connection of the Patriarchal, the Levitical, and the Christian dispensations, viewed as the component parts of one grand and regular system, the economy of grace.” Faber enlarged upon his dispensational system in his two-volume work, *The Genius and Object of the Patriarchal, the Levitical, and the Christian Dispensations*.
 - David Russell (1779-1848)—wrote *A Compendious View of the Original Dispensation established with Adam, and the Mediatorial Dispensation established through Christ*. (Ehlert, 44-45)

- Ryrie sums up the main reason for presenting the preceding chronology, “To sum up: In answer to the charge that dispensationalism is recent and therefore suspect, we have tried to show two things: (1) Dispensational concepts were taught by men who lived long before Darby. (2) It is to be expected that dispensationalism, which is so closely related to eschatology, would not be refined and systematized until recent times simply because eschatology was not an area under discussion until then. The conclusions drawn from the charge of recency by opponents of dispensationalism are therefore unjustified. In all of this discussion, too, it is necessary to remember that the verdict of history is not the final authority. Every doctrine, whether ancient or recent, in the final analysis must be tested by the light of the revelation of Scripture.” (Ryrie, 77-78)

The Charge of Divisiveness

- “Dispensationalism is not only charged with being recent but also with having originated in divisiveness. The inference is that anything that is factious in origin cannot be valid. Darby was a separatist; Plymouth Bretherenism is a separatist movement; and many adherents of dispensationalism today are found in movements which have separated from the larger denominations of Christendom; therefore, dispensationalism is a teaching which causes nothing but dissension in the church.” (Ryrie, 78) Consider the following example of this line of reasoning:
 - “One need not scrutinize contemporary evangelical church life too closely to see this principle at work today. Nor does it take more than a casual survey of the history of theology since Darby’s day to trace the continuity of his view of separation to our day. There exists a direct line from Darby through a number of channels—prophetic conferences, fundamentalist movements, individual prophetic teachers, the Scofield Reference Bible, eschatological charts—all characterized by and contributing to a spirit of separatism and exclusion. The devastating effects of this spirit upon the total body of Christ cannot be underestimated.” (Ryrie, 78)
- “This kind of attack is based on two basic premises: (1) ecclesiastical separatism is always wrong, and (2) dispensationalism has been the principal (the inference is “only”) factor causing ecclesiastical separation in the modern period. Both premises are fallacious.” (Ryrie, 78-79)
- “One can be schismatic and still remain with a group, which does not make his schism right simply because he did not break away from that group. And one can be a separatist and break away from a group and be right. Whether or not organizational unity is maintained or broken is not the criterion for judging the rightness or wrongness of an action. To say that ecclesiastical separation is always wrong is not thinking clearly about the Biblical concepts involved.” (Ryrie, 79)
- To say ecclesiastical separation is always wrong would result in the condemnation of some of the most fruitful movements in church history, i.e., the Reformation.

Is Covenant Theology Old?

- *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* offers the following definition of Covenant Theology. It is a system of theology that represents the whole of scripture being covered by two covenants: (1) the covenant of works, and (2) the covenant of grace. It is a system of theology based upon the two covenants of works and of grace as governing categories for the understanding of the entire Bible. (Ryrie, 177)
- “In covenant theology the covenant of works, is said to be agreement between God and Adam promising life to Adam for perfect obedience and including death as the penalty for failure. But Adam sinned and thus man failed to meet the requirements of the covenant of works. Therefore a second covenant, the covenant of grace, was brought into operation. Berkhof defines it as ‘that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience.’” (Ryrie, 178)
- “Systematized covenant theology is recent. It was not the expressed doctrine of the early church. It was never taught by church leaders in the Middle Ages. It was not even mentioned by the primary leaders of the Reformation. Indeed, covenant theology as a system is not any older than dispensationalism is. . . There were no references to covenant theology in any of the great confessions of faith until the Westminster Confession in 1647, and even in that confession covenant theology was not fully developed as it was later by Reformed theologians. . . The covenant (or federal) theory arose sporadically and apparently independently late in the sixteenth century. The first proponents of the covenant view were reformers who were against the strict predestinarianism of the reformers of Switzerland and France. Covenant theology does not appear in the writings of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, or Melancthon even though they discussed at length the related doctrines of sin, depravity, redemption, etc. They had every opportunity to incorporate the covenant idea, but they did not.” (Ryrie, 180)

Works Cited

Allen, Stuart. *The Early Centuries and the Truth*. London, England: The Berean Publishing Trust, 1969.

Ehlert, Arnold D. *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1965.

Mason, Clarence E. *Eschatology*. Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia College of Bible, 1970.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Dispensationalism Today*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1965.