



Dispensationalism

Charles C. Ryrie

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Dispensationalism continues to provoke heated debate within the Christian world.

Highly acclaimed theologian Dr. Charles C. Ryrie addresses this crucial issue from the perspective of classic dispensationalism. He confronts the views of covenant theology, historical premillennialism, ultradispensationalism, and in this revised edition, the increasingly popular progressive dispensationalism.

In his best-selling book, *Dispensationalism Today*, written more than 50 years ago, Dr. Ryrie made this complex subject more understandable for thousands worldwide. This revised and expanded version of that book will prove to be an invaluable reference tool for your library.

Dispensationalism Details

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From Reader Review Dispensationalism for online ebook

Clark Goble says

Charles C. Ryrie's purpose for writing "Dispensationalism" is clearly articulated early in the book when he explains his attempt to "present classic dispensational teaching in a positive way in order to correct misunderstandings and allay suspicions about it" (Ryrie - Kindle). In addition, Ryrie writes that he "wanted to show that earlier dispensationalists were more balanced in their statements than usually represented by those who quote them selectively (Ryrie - Kindle). Ryrie reiterates this purpose in chapter twelve when he claims the reasons for writing the book are "to correct some misconceptions" and "to give a positive representation of normative dispensational teaching" (Ryrie - Kindle).

The author begins his text by summarizing the attacks on dispensationalism and demonstrating that its opposition comes from many sources, such as; theological liberals, conservative amillennials, premillennialists who are not dispensational, and post millennial reconstructionists (Ryrie - Kindle). Ryrie writes that attacks on Dispensationalism "range from mild to severe" (Ryrie - Kindle) and quotes extensively from its opponents to illustrate how the attacks take on several forms. Ryrie clearly demonstrates that dispensationalism has been inappropriately labeled and suffered attacks on historical and intellectual grounds; however, his summation of the attacks on Dispensationalism leaves the reader wondering if he isn't guilty of the same "selective quoting" that he finds disturbing in his opposition. It is in light of these attacks that Ryrie launches his defense of Dispensationalism and the strength of his book revealed.

Ryrie asserts that Dispensationalism is helpful in that it answers the needs of Biblical Distinctions, History, and provides consistent hermeneutics. It is in Ryrie's first proposition that the reader detects a hint of common ground between Dispensational and Covenant thought. Ryrie points out that, just like dispensationalism, Covenant Theology recognizes the need for Biblical distinctions by "reducing the number [of distinctions] to two – the Old Testament dispensation and the New Testament dispensation" (Ryrie - Kindle) and adding various subdivisions. Ryrie asserts that "all [Bible] interpreters feel the need for distinctions" (Ryrie) and argues that dispensationalism meets that need. Revealing this common ground strongly contributes to Ryrie's stated goal of presenting dispensational teaching in a positive way.

Ryrie further develops the notion of common ground when he writes that it is helpful "to be reminded of the important doctrines to which dispensationalists subscribe wholeheartedly," such as; "verbal, plenary inspiration, the virgin birth and deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement, eternal salvation by grace through faith, the importance of godly living and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the future coming of Christ, and the eternal damnation of the lost" (Ryrie - Kindle). Ryrie certainly isn't arguing that there aren't important distinctions inherent in dispensationalism; however, by pointing out the doctrines it shares with Covenant Theology, he does put to rest many of its opponents misconceptions and pulls it away from the fringe. When Ryrie points out the common ground between dispensationalism and its opponents he serves to lessen the rhetoric that seems prevalent on both sides of the debate and presents dispensationalism in its most positive light.

Ryrie does list three characteristics that are an indispensable part of dispensationalism and set it apart from other systems of theology. First, Ryrie argues that "a dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct" (Ryrie - Kindle). Ryrie refers to this as the "most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist" as "one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions" (Ryrie - Kindle). Ryrie asserts that an Israel/Church distinction is born out of the second indispensable characteristic of a dispensationalist when he writes, "This distinction between Israel

and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called a literal interpretation [of Scripture]" (Ryrie - Kindle). One could argue that if it is a literal interpretation of Scripture that gives birth to a Church/Israel distinction it only stands to reason that such an interpretation should be the litmus test for whether or not a person is a dispensationalist. In this matter, Ryrie seems to have erred just slightly. More importantly, Ryrie makes an effort to clarify that a literal Biblical interpretation "does not preclude or exclude correct understanding of types, illustrations, apocalypses, and other genres within [its] basic framework" (Ryrie - Kindle). Ryrie's clarification is apt as it serves to clear up misconceptions as to what constitutes a literal interpretation. Finally, Ryrie lists the third indispensable characteristic of dispensationalism as the view that the "underlying purpose of God in the world ... is the glory of God" (Ryrie - Kindle). Once again, Ryrie reveals some common ground between dispensationalism and Covenant Theology when he writes that "the soteriological ... program of God is not the only program but one of the means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself" (Ryrie - Kindle). In this statement, Ryrie is making it clear that the dispensationalist is free to recognize the soteriological program of God as does the Covenant Theologian. One can infer that the opposite is also true; the Covenant Theologian is free to recognize the glorification program of God. The difference merely rests on how much emphasis is placed on each.

In the course of this book, Ryrie explores various doctrines as they are related to dispensationalism. I have a slight quibble in that I would have desired the author to begin his book with definitive working definitions of both Covenant and Dispensational Theologies and then expound from there; however, I cannot argue with the end product. Especially pleasing was Ryrie's final chapter, "A Plea." It is here that Ryrie seems to be calling on students of the Bible to be less dogmatic and more forgiving, "Every Christian has a right to his convictions about Biblical truth, but as long as we are in earthly bodies none of us can be infallible" (Ryrie - Kindle). It is because of this tone that Ryrie's work accomplishes his task of showing that "normative dispensationalism is a legitimate, worthy, and conservative viewpoint" (Ryrie - Kindle).

Joseph says

I definitely learned a lot about dispensationalism or at least how Ryrie explains it today. Overall, I found the book to be uneven. A lot of the arguments were not fleshed out and developed very well. The overall tone of the book was a defensive one. Ryrie spent a lot of time defending his position against his critics. But he didn't do a good job of explaining the position he was attempting to refute. A lot of times it was a few proof-texts to refute and then he moved on to the next item to refute.

Some arguments were challenging to me, however, like the issue of salvation. His arguments in this section were the most compelling or at least challenging.

In the end I have a respect for the dispensationalist who seems to desire to uphold the scripture and teach and hold to it faithfully. I have come to the conclusion however that the dispensationalist hermeneutic is just as inconsistent as the opponents of it are accused. It's taken "literally" when it upholds the system of dispensationalism, but allows for figurative interpretation when it doesn't contradict the system.

Tait Sougstad says

I read this because I assumed it was the *magnum opus* of dispensationalism. Perhaps it is, but it was much more a response to the critiques of the dispensational system than an exegetical argument for it, or even a

clear presentation of it. This made it seem like it would have been a better third or fourth book to read in a study of the system, first reading a description and exegesis, then some critiques, then this book. Throughout, I wanted to see a deeper look at the Scriptures that interact with some of my objections. Also, Ryrie comes off as whining some times, even if his evaluations of various critiques are valid.

That said, I do feel like I now have a fairly good grasp on dispensational perspectives, and have been given an induction into the conversation.

Carlyn Cole says

Good stuff!

vittore paleni says

I picked up this book expecting an exposition, what I received was an apologetic (for revised dispensationalism). I did not get what I was looking for. Let me preface my comments about this book by a caveat: I am not commenting on the theory which the author seeks to describe, but rather on his way going about it.

The author, in seeking to systematize and set forth a set of doctrines or a system or a hermeneutic, too often gets lost in polemics/apologetics for the system itself; he does so to such a degree where it becomes difficult in grasping the system itself. Too often instead of reading what the author affirms, I read what the author denies of the critics who accuse the system. I do not doubt that there are covenantal critics who misunderstand/misrepresent dispensationalism in their critiques. But I do find it ironic that, in refuting their claims he does not take the high road, but rather, engages in the same type of straw-man criticism of which he accuses his critics. Half the boo ends up to be complaints about unfair criticisms of dispensationalism. Much of the criticism he refutes is anachronistic, which does not really apply to the system he adheres, but which did apply to previous versions of dispensationalism, which I find to be a cheap shot. The author does this to the point of his frustration, where he resorts to all caps (p.104).

I was disappointed to find an apologetic instead of an exposition of ideas. For a better and more succinct exposition, go to Michael Vlach's book

Doc says

Clearly defines dispensationalism. Addresses and debunks the false accusations against dispensationalism. Shows that dispensationalists use the word *dispensation* the way the NT does.

Interestingly, he shows that (1) Dispensationalism has its origins *centuries* before Darby, and (2) Cocceius's seminal work on Covenant Theology (1648) was published only 39 years before the Poirer's systematic work on dispensationalism (1687).

Laura Carter says

Another satisfying Lady Emily mystery by Tasha Alexander. This was one of the better ones so far in the series. The mystery was believable, the characters interesting, and the plot changed enough to keep it interesting but not too much to make it confusing. I also appreciated that Emily did brood/whine constantly about her treatment by Colin. She was accepting that she could not be involved in everything, and did not go against his wishes when he put restrictions on her. I also appreciated that it not preach to me about the horrors of marriage and staying home, nor did it get bogged down by "votes for women" preaching that would have been annoying.

My only dislike in the book is the fact that the author gives paragraph recaps of other books (sometimes multiple paragraphs) to explain characters. But when you're this far into a series, that is not necessary. Most people don't read a book in the middle of a series and if they do, they don't need complete accounts of past books. But this is not singular to this book, it seems to happen in every Lady Emily Mystery.

Matt Handzlik says

I am not giving this 2 stars because of the theology presented. While he was fleshing out dispensationalism, he often had a defensive tone which made me question more frequently rather than if it was a simple presentation. At times Ryrie stooped to say, " If the covenant theologian can say _____ about dispensationalism, then we can say _____ about covenant theology."

Daniel Thomas says

Overall, the tone of the book is very defensive, and understandably so since Ryrie is offering his apologetic for classical (or normative) dispensationalism. I did, however, have a good, profitable "conversation" with the book, coming to a better understanding of the dispensational program. Nevertheless, I still remain unconvinced. I think the grammatical-historical hermeneutic cannot be maintained "consistently," as Ryrie champions, particularly as it pertains to prophecy. The sharp distinction between Israel and the church also presents a problem for the system, as I see it, because it denies the typological relationship between the two.

With all of that said, I did enjoy the book; and I definitely appreciated the closing chapter. I agree with Ryrie that it is not right to misrepresent a system of thought that we don't agree with. We ought to (especially as Christians) give fair representation to those with whom we disagree... "After all, a man has to be taken at his word or all means of communication break down."

Bryant Rudisill says

For a supposed apologetical work for dispensationalism I was highly disappointed. When it comes to the book, Ryrie spends far too much time whining about how dispensationalism has been oppressed and misrepresented. He even adopts the child-like attitude of "if Covenant theologians can say such and such, then we can say this about them." Sadly I'm not exaggerating. He does explain his dispensationalist views well and found it appropriate to explain ultradispensation, progressive dispensation and Covenant theology.

He represents Covenant theology fairly well, but most definitely from a biased opinion. And I got a kick out of him taking Covenant theologian quotes out of context in order to support his various views.

He goes on to share how some theologians have tried to play people's emotions in order to turn them from dispensationalism, and yet he spends so much time trying to make us feel bad for them being misrepresented.

When it comes to understanding the Scripture, Covenant theology is the only way. I recommend O. Palmer Robertson's "The Christ of the Covenants," for a well-explained, non-whiny, explanation of his views and why it's better than dispensationalism when it comes to interpreting and understanding the Bible.

Ben Adkison says

Why this book?

I don't consider myself a dispensationalist. I'm not sure what I consider myself, but not a dispensationalist. For one thing, I think dispensational premillennialism is a little silly. It complicates the Bible's teaching on the end times in an attempt to be clear. Certain interpretations of Old and New Testament texts seem farfetched. And I don't think a "literal first" approach to hermeneutics is always the best way to interpret the Bible.

So why did I read this book? One might assume that it was just to gain a better understanding of dispensationalism in order to further discredit it as a theological system. But in truth, this was not the main reason I chose to read Dispensationalism by Charles C. Ryrie. The largest factor contributing to my desire to read this book was the quote on the front cover. It says, "No one, whether friend or foe of dispensationalism, can avoid consideration of this important work." And with that little bit of marketing, I thought I'd check out the theological system known as dispensationalism from one of its prime proponents, Mr. Ryrie.

It's a Good Book.

I have to say that this is a pretty good book. Ryrie's explanation of dispensationalism clears up several misconceptions that I had been taught about the beliefs of dispensationalists over the years. Ryrie does a good job of creating a level playing field upon which everyone can interact with dispensational teachings, whether for or against. And that's good because this is a family fight so to speak. I don't doubt for a second that normative dispensationalists are evangelicals and Christians. And even if I disagree with them, they're brothers. So a level playing field is a good thing.

Central Teachings of Dispensationalism

To quote Ryrie, the three central teachings of dispensationalism are:

1. We believe in the clear and consistent distinction between Israel and the church.
2. We affirm that normal, or plain, interpretation of the Bible should be applied consistently to all its parts.
3. We avow that the unifying principle of the Bible is the glory of God and that this is worked out 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 (247).

I disagree with Ryrie on all these points.

1. Truthfully I do see a distinction between Israel and the church, but not to the extent that dispensationalists

do. I think both groups will share the same future, not separate futures. "The summing up of all things in Christ" seems in my mind to do more justice to the Old Testament's prophecies and promises than does a future, earthly, millennial kingdom.

2. I don't think that literal interpretation is always the method of interpretation that the text demands. Sometimes an overly literal approach creates more confusion than clarity. And it wasn't the hermeneutical method always employed by the apostles. I am by no means claiming to be an apostle, but I do think it's suspect to say that they can interpret the Old Testament one way, but we must interpret it another way.

3. I think that the unifying principle in the Bible is the glory of God through Christ, not the glory of God through multiple means in the various dispensations. I do see evidence for different dispensations, or periods of time, or economies within the Bible, but I think they all led up to, and were summed up in Christ.

I agree with Ryrie on Some Things

I agree with Ryrie that the extent to which the Old Testament saints understood that their salvation was through Christ was hazy at best. However, my understanding of salvation in the "other dispensations" is still different from Ryrie's. He says that "Jesus Christ was not the conscious object of their faith, though they were saved by faith in God as He had revealed Himself principally through the sacrifices that He instituted as a part of the Mosaic Law" (139). Conversely, I believe that OT saints understood that their salvation was a result of God's ability to pardon sin based upon an individual's faith. Salvation was a result of faith in God's ability to pardon, which was later shown to be through Christ (Rom 3:23-26). Progressively OT saints did understand that this would be through the Messiah, but obviously they didn't understand the part that the Messiah would fully play in this pardoning with equal clarity in all ages. So I agree with Ryrie that the OT understanding of salvation through Christ was hazy, but I still conceive of it differently than he does.

I also agree with Ryrie that the validity of dispensationalism and covenantalism should be judged true or false based only upon the Bible, and not upon other factors. Oftentimes both sides are disparaged due to false accusations and the use of straw-man apologetics.

Middle Ground

In the end, I think dispensationalism is short-sided. It has a lot to teach us, but it is short-sided. And by the way, so is really dogmatic covenantalism. Both sides have things to teach us, but ultimately they both need to give a little bit and come towards the middle. The "middle" is not sacred because it is the middle, but in this case the "middle" seems to be more Biblical, and thus better.

Dr Author Wright, PhD, MinD, ThD, DD says

Dispensationalism by Charles C. Ryrie is a very powerful and treasured study on the heated debate of dispensation. Mr. Ryrie, a highly acclaimed theologian, takes a bold and methodical approach in addressing this central debate. With his unique ability to unravel complicated biblical concepts, he presents all of the biblical teachings on dispensation in an uncomplicated manner. Written in a mostly non-technical, conversational style, his address toward the crucial issue of dispensation appeared thoroughly researched and easy to understand. This book is an excellent study for pastors and for those who want to know more on the subject of dispensation. It is also a tremendous help and source of material for the Sunday school teacher. It is also suitable for use as a textbook in Bible Colleges and Institutes. This book is a good read!

Mike E. says

The book is clear and informative (for the interested reader). The book was worth reading for this one sentence. Regardless of your theological camp it's hard to disagree with this:

"The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations." [115]

Since the fall of Adam, this sentence is a great summary, whether you are a covenantalist, dispensationalist or like me, just a Bible-guy.

John Weathersby says

Dr Ryrie's book Dispensationalism is truly a great book. Whether you claim Dispensationalism or Covenantal Theology this book presents the Dispensational view(s) very well. Moreover, as well as one with an opposing view can, attempts to fairly represent the ideas and thoughts driving Covenantal Theology. Dr. Ryrie has worked diligently to tackle this hotly debated topic in an abbreviated single volume using both a logical and scriptural backing.

I particularly enjoyed Dr. Ryrie's attempt at presenting fact over emotion and find his approach refreshing as this debate is often one rife with haughty banter. Rather than berate any view he lays out the many variations of Dispensationalism and disusses thier differences while providing a defense of the system of Dispensations over Covenantal Theology.

I appreciated the clear attempt to avoid unwarranted defense of charts and spiraling diagrams which brand Dispensational systems while contending for the thought behind them.

If you are working to reconcile the issues of grace and law with God's character over time this book is worth your study and thought.

Bret James Stewart says

The late Charles C. Ryrie is probably best known for the Ryrie Study Bible, a fine work. This book is great, too, for what it is, which is a more narrowly focused book about, oddly enough, Dispensationalism.

The book is well made. The cover is sufficient if not inspired. The inside is laid out in an easy to read manner with heading and subheadings to help the reader remain on task. The book includes a scripture and subject index, which I think is a necessity for such tomes.

The book is an overall description and defense of the theological system (sometimes referred to as models) of dispensationalism. This model is adopted primarily by conservative evangelicals, and it serves as a philosophy of history that views God as operating differently in different biblical periods. It is not that the Lord changes, but He reveals (generally progressively) different things in various periods. A dispensation is an administration during which man is judged as to his obedience to the will of God by specific criteria. The system allows for the recognition of two or more dispensations, but seven is the most commonly held view.

After a foreward and acknowledgements, Ryrie deals with defining dispensationalism as a concept and identifies the most common seven dispensations that is the hallmark of the old school dispensationalists such as C.I. Scofield and J.N. Darby. He then moves to the history of the model and the hermeneutics involved, which is basically a literal rendering utilizing the historical-grammatical hermeneutic that I believe should be the standard usage. As special concerns, he then grapples with the issues of salvation, eschatology, and the church in the dispensational schemata. To round out the book, Ryrie than addresses some of the compromise forms of dispensationalism such as progressive dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism as well as covenant theology, which is often held in opposition as an alternate theological model. He ends with an epilogue and a bibliography followed by the indices.

Ryrie has done well with this book. He rightly views covenant theology as fundamentally too restricted a view for the Bible. The overall book is presented in a readily understandable manner. I think this book would appeal to those who are studying dispensationalism generally or as it relates to the more liberal forms of the system and/or covenant theology. I imagine seminary students and pastors are the target audience as dealing with theological systems and/or doctrine are, unfortunately, not major concerns of the average Christian. Highly recommended.
