Fallacies Regarding Dispensationalism
Come Let Us Reason Together: Learning To Love God With All Thy Mind
10/5/25

Introduction/Review

- Last Sunday in Lesson 21 we began looking at Fallacies Regarding Dispensationalism. Specifically, we reviewed two *fallacies of distraction* from Lesson 17 and began looking at how people often use them to argue against dispensational truth.

- Those fallacies were: 1) straw man and 2) chronological snobbery. Recall the following straw man arguments noted by Charles Ryrie in *Dispensationalism Today*:

    - Straw Man Number 1 — "The first is the straw man of saying that dispensationalists assert that the system was taught in the post-apostolic times. Informed dispensationalists do not claim that. They recognize that, as a system, dispensationalism was largely formulated by Darby, but that outlines of a dispensationalist approach to the Scriptures are found much earlier. They only maintain that certain features of the dispensational system are found in the teachings of the early church." (Ryrie, 66)

    - Straw Man Number 2 — "Another typical example of the use of a straw man is this line of argument: pretribulationalism is not apostolic; pretribulationalism is dispensationalism; therefore, dispensationalism is not apostolic. But dispensationalists do not claim that the system was developed in the first century; nor is it necessary that they be able to do so. Many other doctrines were not developed in the first century—including covenant theology which is seventeenth century. Doctrinal development is a perfectly normal process in the course of church history." (Ryrie, 66)

    - "This straw man leads to a second fallacy—the wrong use of history. The fact that something was taught in the first century does not make it right (unless taught in the canonical Scriptures), and the fact that something was not taught until the nineteenth century does not make it wrong unless, of course, it is unscriptural. Nondispensationalists surely know that baptismal regeneration was taught in the early centuries yet many of them would not include that error in their theological systems simply because it is historic." (Ryrie, 66-67)

- It was demonstrated that dispensationalism is not "new" seeing that the New Testament uses the word *oikonomia* eight time in eight verses (Luke 16:2, 3, 4; I Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10, 3:2; Col. 1:25). Moreover, Paul is the only Biblical writer to name specific dispensations. Therefore, dispensationalism is not new; it is as old as the Bible itself. What happened in the 19th century with dispensationalism is the same as what happened in the 16th century Reformation with justification by faith. Luther did not invent a "new" doctrine; rather he restored a very old doctrine back to its right place of prominence. It is inconsistent to charge Darby and other early dispensationalists with inventing a new doctrine but then not hold Luther to the same standard.

- After looking at these scriptural facts, we began looking at Arnold D. Ehlert's *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* originally published in volumes 101-103 of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, between January 1944 and January 1946 as a means of surveying folks in church history who taught dispensational concepts before John Nelson Darby in the 19th century.

- It is to Ehlert's survey that we will now turn our attention.

Unsystematized Dispensationalism or Early Dispensational Concepts

- *Justin Martyr (110-165)*—in the *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr states the following when discussing the subject that God always taught the same righteousness. Earlier, in the same work, he spoke of the present dispensation and of its gifts and power.

    - "For if one should wish to ask you why, since Enoch, Noah with his sons, and all others in similar circumstances, who neither were circumcised nor kept the Sabbath, pleased God, God demanded by other leaders and by the giving of the law after the lapse of so many generations, that those who lived between the times of Abraham and Moses be justified by circumcision and the other ordinances – to wit, the Sabbath, and sacrifices, and libations, and offerings. . ." (quoted in Ryrie, 68-69)

- *Irenaeus (130-200)*—wrote about the reason there are four gospels. While he did not call these time periods dispensations, he often spoke of the dispensations of God and especially of the Christian dispensation.

    - ". . .and the Gospel is quadriform, as is also the course followed by the Lord. For this reason were four principal covenants given to the human race; one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom." (quoted in Ryrie, 69)

- *Clement of Alexandria (150?-220?)*—clearly distinguishes four patriarchal dispensations in Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. (Ehlert, 26) "Samuel Hanson Coxe (1793-1880) backed up his own sevenfold dispensational scheme by Clements' fourfold one." (Ryrie, 69)

- *Pelagius (360?-420?)*—"In his discourse on *Original Sin*, Augustine takes Pelagius and Coelestius to task for "dividing the times" so as to say that "men first lived righteous by nature, then under the law, thirdly under grace,—by nature meaning all the long time from Adam before the giving of the law." Augustine then quotes Pelagius as having stated the following:

    - "For then, say they, the Creator was known by the guidance of reason; and the rule of living rightly was carried written in the hearts of men, not in the law of the letter, but of nature. But men's manners became corrupt; and then, they say, when nature now tarnished began to be insufficient, the law was added to it whereby as by a moon the original luster was restored to nature after its original blush was impaired. But after the habit of sinning has too much prevailed among men, and the law was unequal to the task of curing it, Christ came; and the Physician Himself, through His own self, and not through His disciples, brought relief to the malady at its most desperate development." (quoted in Ehlert, 26-27)

- *Augustine (354-430)*—reflects early dispensational concepts in his writings. "Although his oft-quoted statement, "Distinguish the times, and the Scripture is in harmony with itself", does not in its context apply to dispensational ideas, he elsewhere makes some applicable statements." (Ryrie, 69)

- "The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now. For the change suitable to the present age has been enjoined by God, who knows infinitely better than man what is fitting for every age, and who is, whether he give or add, abolish or curtail, increase or diminish, the unchangeable Governor as He is the unchangeable Creator of mutable things, ordering all events in his Providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, the component parts of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some ineffably wise master of song, and those pass into the eternal contemplation of God who here, though it is a time of faith, not of sight, are acceptably worshiping Him." (quoted in Ehlert, 28)

- "If it is now established that that which was for one age rightly ordained may be in another age rightly changed,—the alteration indicating a change in the work, not the plan, of Him who makes the change, the plan being framed by His reasoning faculty, to which unconditioned by succession in time, those things are simultaneously present which cannot be actually done at the same time because the ages succeed each other." (quoted in Ehlert, 29)

- *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*—posits 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-prophetical 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
    sexennial 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'OEconomie 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)

- Edwards' scheme saw three great Catholic and Grand Economies, 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, he 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 Melanchthon 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)

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