

## **Dispensationalism Defined**

In common usage the term dispensation is applied to periods of time, the duration being determined by characteristics or events related to the mode of divine revelation and government. The Bible recognizes two: "the law was given to Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." But even then, the advent of Christ did not annul the Law but fulfilled it. The word translated "dispensation" might preferably be understood better by "administration" or stewardship (cp. Isa. 22:19; 1 Cor. 9:17), the principle of divine administration being as immutable was God Himself. Divine government, therefore, is not determined by time boundaries.

## **Dispensationalism's History**

Dispensationalism began with John Nelson Darby (1800-82), a graduate of Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland, who became disillusioned with dead institutional Christianity and set out to form an evangelistic association, eventually known as the "Plymouth Brethren." Convinced that all the major denominations were missing very important distinctions in the way God dealt with mankind throughout history, Darby proposed a sevenfold division of the Scriptures to reflect seven dispensations, or dealings of God with man. Most distinctive was Darby's idea of sharply divergent paths of Israel and the Church, including different salvation plans and eternal destinies.

The system traveled slowly to America where it made its way into the Bible Conference movement, a reaction to the lukewarm social gospel of the late nineteenth century. It was at the Niagara Bible Conference that Cyrus I. Scofield, an attorney, first heard the dispensational system expounded. Excited by the new insights that Dispensationalism provided, Scofield proposed the publication of a Bible with footnotes explaining Darby's theories. With backing from a group of wealthy financiers, the first Scofield Reference Bible went on the market in 1909 where it met with extraordinary success.

Upon Scofield's death in 1921, Lewis Sperry Chafer, a friend, continued the propagation of the system, eventually founding what is now Dallas Theological Seminary, with the purpose of training pastors to *"rightly divide the Word of Truth."* Through the Seminary and its thousands of graduates, Darby's system has gained acceptance in many evangelical circles.