**The Number “Seven” and Dispensationalism**

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**Introduction**

Many over-zealous and popular dispensational teachers and preachers have made a big deal of the “seven” dispensations. Their dispensationalism hinges on the exact number of dispensations, and that is always “seven.” Their understanding and definition of dispensation is all based on the number 7. Of course, number 7 is quite significant in the Bible, appearing over 700 times. It symbolizes completion, fullness, wholeness, or perfection. Seven plays a vital role in the events and stories in the Bible.

However, every instance of number 7 in the Bible does not carry a deeper meaning or significance. Before one goes into the details of finding hidden concepts and meanings in the numbers in the Bible (this trend is more among us dispensationalists), one should first understand the words of Scripture that will help make us “complete and thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim.3:16-17). We must be careful in attaching symbolic or deeper meaning to all the occurrences of number 7 in the Bible, especially when the text is not explicit about such meanings. Number 7 in the Bible does not point to dispensational concepts. It is the number of completion and perfection. We should not read into the text our theological preferences and assumptions. After all, even dispensationalism (which I also embrace) is a man-made system of interpretation, but a good one that does justice to God’s revelation in the Bible.

**Essentials of Dispensationalism**

We must always understand the *essential beliefs* that are truly at the heart of dispensationalism and reject the common myths about dispensationalism, not only by its opponents, but even by its proponents. One of those myths is about the *number* of dispensations.

In agreement with Ryrie and other dispensational scholars, a dispensationalist holds to three non-negotiables:

1. A distinction between Israel and the church.
2. A normal, literal, historical-grammatical hermeneutic.
3. A doxological purpose (the underlying purpose of God in the world is His glory).

Ryrie considered these three points as the *sine qua non* (the essential features) of the dispensational system. Dispensational theology is based upon these essentials, and not on the number of dispensations (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 38-41).

**Dispensations: How Many?**

Contrary to popular notion, the number of dispensations is not a major issue in dispensationalism. One could have 3, 4, 5, 7, or 8 dispensations and be a consistent dispensationalist, as long as he is true to the three essentials of dispensationalism.

Dallas Theological Seminary is often viewed as a bastion of dispensational premillennial theology. It is interesting to note that the school’s doctrinal statement mentions only three dispensations by name. “We believe that three of these dispensations or rules of life are the subject of extended revelation in the Scriptures – namely, the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom” (*Article V – The Dispensations*). Ryrie explains that these three dispensations “are the subject of much of the material in the Bible, whereas the others, however many there may be, are not. In other words, the difference of opinion as to number is not due to a defect in the dispensational scheme but rather is due to lack of detailed revelation concerning the earliest periods of biblical history” (Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 46-47).

Most dispensationalists see *seven* dispensations in the history of redemption. This is possible and seems to be valid in view of the distinguishable characteristics of God’s dealing with mankind. The Scofield Reference Bible has, by far, done the most to promote acceptance of dispensationalism and especially the *seven* distinct dispensations. The original Scofield Bible was published in 1909, and there have been three major revisions by three different groups of editors in 1917, 1967, and 1984. Each of these editions contains some revisions and fine-tuning on dispensational matters. Not all dispensationalists are agreed on the number or names of the dispensations and the time periods they cover. There have always been differences of opinion related to these matters. “While it’s not important to agree on the exact details, it is quite important to see that different dispensations exist” (William MacDonald, *Here’s The Difference*, 97).

Though the names and numbers of dispensations are worthy of consideration, they are not determinative to dispensationalism. Some of these matters are not explicitly stated or revealed in the Scriptures. Belief in 3, 4, 5 or 8 dispensations doesn’t destroy one’s credentials as a dispensationalist. The number of dispensations is not the most important matter in dispensationalism. It is a firm and consistent adherence to the non-negotiables of the system that determines whether one is a dispensationalist or not. Unfortunately, many dispensationalists give the impression that dispensationalism is all about seven *dispensations*.

The use of charts is a popular method of teaching by dispensational teachers. To some extent, it is quite helpful. But some charts have also given undue importance to minor matters in dispensationalism. Sometimes theological assumptions and spiritualizing also creep into these charts (e.g. A. E. Booth’s A *Chart on the Course of Time from Eternity to Eternity* sees seven dispensations of human history foreshadowed in the seven days of Genesis. Though the chart is helpful, seeing seven dispensations in seven days of Genesis seems fanciful. See the chart in Brethrenarchive.org).

Michael Vlach, a contemporary dispensational, scholar identifies five common myths about dispensationalism. The fifth myth is “Dispensationalism is Primarily About Seven Dispensations.” He concludes with this statement: “The study of dispensations is a worthy endeavor. But I do not believe the issues of how many dispensations there are and what they should be called are the heart of dispensational system” (*Dispensationalism – Essential Beliefs and Common Myths,* 71*).* I hope and pray that our dispensationalism may not be muddled by names and numbers.