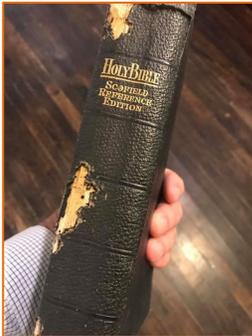


## DISPENSATIONS AND DISPENSATIONALISM

\* \* \* THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING SCRIPTURE \* \* \*

S.L.H.  
Soli Deo Gloria!

"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." (2Tim2:15)



**The Importance of Dispensationalism.** Though formally developed as a system in the 19th century, especially by John Nelson Darby and the Plymouth Brethren, Dispensationalism was popularized with the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 (and continues today with the *Ryrie Study Bible*). Recognition of dispensational distinctions that exist in Scripture allows for a comprehensive understanding of the whole Bible and resolves a multitude of apparent contradictions (e.g., Matt10:5-7 vs. Matt28:19-20). C. I. Scofield asserted, "The Word of Truth, then, has right divisions... [and] any study of that Word which ignores those divisions must be in large measure profitless and confusing". Lewis Sperry Chafer believed "it is probable that the recognition of the dispensations sheds more light on the message of the Bible than any other aspect of Biblical study".

**What is Dispensationalism?** Dispensationalism is a system of theology that includes a comprehensive and Biblical philosophy of history, meaning an overall purpose for and goal of world history that unifies Scripture and is able to explain distinctions and differences at various times in history. Dispensationalism views the history of the world, from its creation to its consummation, as a vast household that God administers through stewards according to divinely-given governing principles. From time to time, the form of God's administration, His appointed stewards, and the governing principles in effect have changed. The various forms of God's administration that have been manifested during different periods of time (i.e., ages) are called "dispensations". Dispensationalism explains distinctions and differences at various times in history and accommodates the concept of progressive revelation, since each successive dispensation necessitates new revelation from God in order to define any changes in His administration.

**Sine Qua Non of Dispensationalism.** Certain elements of Dispensationalism make it unique as a system of theology and a Biblical philosophy of history. Ryrie defined the *sine qua non* (i.e., the absolutely indispensable components) of Dispensationalism as:

- 1) the consistent use of a literal hermeneutic,
- 2) a distinction between Israel and the Church, and
- 3) the glory of God as the overarching purpose of God in the world.

**Definition of a Dispensation.** The English word "dispensation" is a Biblical word, occurring four times in the King James Version of the

Bible (1Cor9:17; Eph1:10; 3:2; Col1:25); "dispensation" translates the compound Greek word **οἰκονομία** (the transliteration of which gives us the English word 'economy'), literally meaning "house law". Sadly, modern English translations of the Bible have forsaken the use of this term, preferring to translate the Greek word as "stewardship" or "administration", thus tending to remove from the contemporary Biblical vocabulary a term of vital theological import.

Scofield defined "dispensation" as used in Scripture as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God". Fruchtenbaum says "dispensations are separate periods of time in which God dispenses His will in a specific and unique way". Chafer taught that "a dispensation can be defined as a stage in the progressive revelation of God constituting a distinctive stewardship or rule of life. Although the concept of a dispensation and an age in the Bible is not precisely the same, it is obvious that each age has its dispensation" (cf. Eph3:9). Finally, Ryrie's classic definition, "a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose".

**Characteristics of a Dispensation.** A dispensation begins with new revelation from God that results in the implementation of governing principles for man not previously in effect and includes a specific test for man; it should be understood, however, that some governing principles from previous dispensations may be carried over as operative in subsequent dispensations, but with additional governing principles added that make each dispensation unique. Each dispensation ends in man's failure of the test and results in a specific judgment from God.

**Dispensations and the Way of Salvation.** It is asserted emphatically that the way of salvation is **not** a dispensational characteristic<sup>1</sup> subject to change! Salvation in every dispensation is always by the grace of God, made possible by the work of Christ on the sinner's behalf (Rom3:26; 1Jn2:2), and appropriated on the part of the believer by personal faith in the revealed Word of God (Rom4:19-22). Since God's revelation in history has been progressive, it follows that the content of the believer's faith has changed with time, but this does not constitute a change in the way of salvation. Rather than defining different ways of salvation, the dispensations implement different governing principles or rules of life for man as the creature and steward of God.

**Dispensations Explicitly Noted in Scripture.** Three dispensations are explicitly mentioned by the Apostle Paul. In Ephesians 1:10, Paul speaks of "the dispensation of the fullness of time" in which God would "gather together in one all things in Christ"; this is equivalent to what Peter called "the times of restitution of all things" (Act3:21) which will come when the Jewish nation repents of her rejection of Christ and He returns (Act3:19-20). Clearly, this dispensation corresponds to the Millennial Kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Critics of Dispensationalism have long attacked the system using a straw-man argument, namely that Dispensationalism teaches different ways of salvation in different dispensations (or different ways of salvation for Jews and Gentiles). Dispensationalists have consistently and emphatically denied this allegation.

In an extended passage in Ephesians 3:1-10, Paul speaks of the "dispensation of the grace of God" in which Jews and Gentiles are uniquely united in the Body of Christ and which was a mystery revealed by God for the very first time through the apostles and New Testament prophets, especially Paul, and within which the church is being built (Matt16:18). This dispensation is generally called that of Grace or the Church. Lastly, in Colossians 1:25-28 Paul contrasts the "dispensation of God given to [him]", that is the dispensation of Grace, with that in previous "ages" and "generations", implying at least one dispensation prior to that of Grace; this is an obvious allusion to the Dispensation of Law, in which Jews and Gentiles were kept separated by "the middle wall of partition" (Eph2:14). Thus, there can be no argument that the concept of dispensations in general, and those of Law, Grace, and Kingdom in particular, are not mere theological constructs but are decidedly Biblical concepts.

**Dispensations Identified.** While there are three dispensations explicitly mentioned in the N.T., most dispensationalists recognize seven dispensations in the Scriptures. The names used for the seven dispensations vary slightly among Bible teachers, but here they will be designated as the dispensations of: 1) Innocence, 2) Conscience, 3) Human Government, 4) Promise, 5) Law, 6) Grace, and 7) Kingdom.

- 1) Dispensation of Innocence (Genesis 1:28-3:24). The Dispensation of Innocence extended from creation to the fall. Man, who was created in the image of God (Gen1:27) and having no sin nature, was tested in his willingness to obey God (Gen2:16-17). Man failed the test when Adam ate of the forbidden fruit in direct disobedience to the command of God (Gen3:6). The dispensation ended with God's judgment in cursing the creation (Gen3:14-19), which included the introduction of death into the creation (Rom5:12) and the expulsion of man from the Garden of Eden (Gen3:24).
- 2) Dispensation of Conscience (Genesis 4:1-8:19). The Dispensation of Conscience extended from the fall to the flood. Man was tested in his willingness to obey God via his conscience (Rom2:15), having the knowledge of good and evil (Gen3:22), with the aid of the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit (Gen6:3); he was also charged with offering a blood sacrifice to atone for his sins (Gen3:21; 4:7). Man failed the test immediately when Cain refused to bring an acceptable offering (Gen4:3,5), and subsequently killed his brother Abel (Gen4:8); as time progressed, the entire population was revealed to be totally depraved (Gen6:5). The dispensation ended with God's judgment in the world-wide flood of Noah's day (Gen7:17-23). However, God's use of human conscience and the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit continued as governing principles in subsequent dispensations (Jn8:9; 16:7-8).
- 3) Dispensation of Human Government (Genesis 8:20-11:32). The Dispensation of Human Government extended from the flood to the dispersion at Babel. Man was tested in his willingness to obey God and repopulate/fill the earth (destroyed by the flood; Gen9:1) under the construct of a new divine institution, that of human government; the obligation of capital punishment for murder to be executed by human government as the steward of God was added as a means of societal preservation (Gen9:5-6) along with

human conscience and the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit. Man failed when he refused God's command to scatter and fill the earth (Gen11:4). The dispensation ended with God's judgment in confusing human language at Babel, which resulted in the desired scattering of the human race (Gen11:7-8). However, God's use of human government continued as a governing principle in subsequent dispensations (Rom13:1-7).

- 4) Dispensation of Promise (Genesis 12:1 to Exodus 18:27). The Dispensation of Promise extended from the call of Abraham to the Exodus. Man was tested in his willingness to obey God by trusting in the promise made to Abraham (i.e., Abrahamic covenant; Gen12:1-3; 15:18-21), including the land of Canaan as a possession promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen13:14-17) and the promise of blessing extended to the whole world through Abraham contingent upon Gentile blessing of Abraham's descendants (Gen12:3). Man failed when Abraham and his descendants repeatedly forsook the land of Canaan to dwell elsewhere (Gen12:10; 20:1; 47:11) and Egypt persecuted/enslaved the descendants of Abraham (Exod1:8-22). The dispensation ended with God's judgment of 10 plagues on Egypt which decimated the Egyptian empire (i.e., the Gentile world; Exod7:14-12:36). However, the covenant God made with Abraham and all its unconditional promises remain in effect during subsequent dispensations, including the Gentile obligation to bless the descendants of Abraham (i.e., the Jews).
- 5) Dispensation of Law (Exodus 19:3 to Acts 1:26; Revelation 6:1-19:10). The Dispensation of Law, also referred to as the Dispensation of Israel, extended from the Exodus to the crucifixion of Christ, was interrupted by the parenthetical Dispensation of Grace, and will conclude with the seven-year Tribulation (i.e., Daniel's 70th week). Man was tested in his willingness to obey God in keeping the detailed and comprehensive law code given to the nation of Israel at Mt. Sinai (Exod19:5-8). Man failed by his inability to keep the Law (2Kgs17:7-20), which climaxed in Israel's rejection of the promised Messiah (Matt27:1-25). God's judgment began with the destruction of Jerusalem (Luk19:42-44) and the world-wide dispersion of the Jewish nation (Deut28:63-66), was interrupted by the Church Age (Dan9:26), and will continue when His wrath is poured out on the whole world during the Tribulation (Dan9:27; Revelation 6-19). It is acknowledged that many outstanding dispensationalists have viewed the Tribulation as God's judgment ending the Dispensation of Grace, but Daniel 9:24-27 would seem to clearly link Daniel's 70th week with the Dispensation of Law/Israel.
- 6) Dispensation of Grace (Acts 2:1 to 1 Thessalonians 4:17). The Dispensation of Grace, also referred to as the Dispensation of the Church, began at Pentecost, is presently in progress, and will extend to the rapture of the Church. Man is presently being tested in his willingness to accept the redeeming grace of God (Jn3:16) extended to all men via the world-wide proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mk16:15-16). Individuals who accept the gospel are added to the Church (Act2:41-47), the Body (Eph1:22-23) and Bride (Eph5:22-32) of Christ, which is uniquely being built from both Jews and Gentiles (Eph3:1-10) during this dispensation only. Man will fail as seen in the widespread

rejection of God's gracious offer of salvation (Jn1:8-12) and in apostasy in the professing church (2Tim3:1-7). The dispensation will end with God's rapture of the Church, the Bride of Christ (1Thess4:17), followed by His judgment in sending a strong delusion so that apostate professing Christendom left behind will accept the Antichrist (2Thess2:3-12).

- 7) Dispensation of the Kingdom (Revelation 20:1-15). The Dispensation of the Kingdom will extend from the second coming of Christ to the conclusion of His millennial reign on the present earth. Man will be tested in his willingness to obey God under the personal and perfectly righteous rule of Jesus Christ, who will be physically present on earth (Isa11:1-5; Zech14:9; Luk1:32-33). The effects of God's curse on creation will be largely removed (Isa11:6-9; 65:19-25), and the deception of Satan present in all prior dispensations will be eliminated (Rev20:1-3). Man will fail this final test when, at the end of the Millennium, Satan is released and is able to instigate a vast human rebellion against Christ (Rev20:7-9). This final dispensation will end with God's judgment of unbelieving creatures of all time before His Great White Throne, when the wicked are cast forever into the Lake of Fire (Rev20:10-15).

**Impact of Dispensational Distinctions on Systematic Theology.** While a dispensational approach to understanding Scripture has ripple effects throughout the whole of theology, it impacts the following doctrinal areas very directly:

Bibliology. Dispensational theology emphasizes a consistent use of a literal, grammatical-historical approach to interpreting all of scripture.

Israelology. Dispensational theology recognizes that the nation of Israel is a unique people of God, distinct from the Church. It is with Israel, not the Church, that God has entered into the primary Biblical covenants (i.e., the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Land, Davidic, and New covenants; cf. Rom9:4-5). Although the nation of Israel has been temporarily set aside during the present Dispensation of Grace (Rom11:25), during which time God is "visit[ing] the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name" (Act15:14), the unconditional (and as yet unfulfilled) promises made by God in His covenants with Israel necessitate her future conversion and return to prominence (Rom11:26-29).

Ecclesiology. Dispensational theology recognizes that the Church is a unique people of God (i.e., the Body/Bride of Christ; Eph1:22-23; 5:22-32), distinct from Israel, whose birth, growth, and completion is confined to a specific period of time during the Dispensation of Grace (from the Day of Pentecost to the Rapture).

Pneumatology. Dispensational theology recognizes that the baptism of the Holy Spirit is a divine work that is unique to the Church Age (Matt3:11), which incorporates the believer into the Body of Christ (1Cor12:13). Furthermore, the permanent indwelling of the believer by the Holy Spirit during the Church Age (Jn14:16-17; Eph1:13-14) makes sanctification during this dispensation different than in others (Gal5:16,25).

Eschatology. Dispensational theology recognizes:

- 1) a pre-tribulational **Rapture** of the Church which brings the Dispensation of Grace to a close (1Thess1:10; 4:13-5:9; 2Thess2:1-3);
- 2) a literal seven-year period of **Tribulation** (i.e., the 70th Week of Daniel; Dan9:27; Rev6:1-19:21) during which God pours out His wrath on the unbelieving Gentile world led by Antichrist and wholly-bent on destroying all Jews (Joel3:2; Zech12:2-3; 14:2; Rev12:13-17; cf. Gen12:3), brings the remnant of Jews who persevere to the end of the Tribulation to repentance and faith in Jesus as Messiah (Ezek20:33-38; 36:22-26; 39:22; Zech12:10; Matt24:13-14; Rom11:26), resulting in the return of Christ (Hos5:15-6:3; Zech14:3-4; Matt23:37-39; Rev19:11-21); and
- 3) a future 1,000-year **Kingdom** in which the glorified Lord Jesus Christ is physically present on earth and personally reigns from Jerusalem (Zech14:9,16; Luk1:31-33; Rev20:1-6) with His Bride (i.e., the completed and glorified Church; 2Tim2:12; Rev5:9-10), and during which the nation of Israel is exalted above all other nations (Deut28:13).

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