

Dispensations

Section 1: Article on Dispensations by Rev. Bob Bolender, Pastor, Austin Bible Church, Austin, Texas

Section 2: Notes on Dispensations from the Scofield Reference Bible

Dispensations

I. Introduction and Definition

A dispensation is a period of time which is identified by its relation to some particular purpose of God. [1]

As used in the Greek New Testament, the word is OIKONOMIA (Strong's No. 3622) and is defined as a stewardship, administration, management, direction, arrangement, order, or plan. [2]

Practically speaking, dispensationalism speaks of the differences between the administration of human affairs within the sequential divisions of human history.

1. From Adam to Abraham, for example, when God's administration of human affairs focused on the entire race as descended from Adam.
2. From Abraham to Christ, when God's administration of human affairs focused on one particular family, descendants of Abraham. During this period of time, or age, a distinction is drawn between two divisions of humanity—Jew and Gentile.
3. From Christ until now, and beyond for an undisclosed period of time; when God's administration of human affairs focuses on one particular people, comprised of Jew and Gentile alike in one body—the Church.

Technically speaking, then, the concept of dispensations and dispensationalism sets forth a principle in Scripture as follows: God places humanity under different and progressive operational temporal conditions, for specific and instructional eternal purposes..

1. These conditions are laid out in various revealed covenants..
2. These conditions are instructional to us (Gal. 3:24; Rom. 15:4), as well as to the angelic realm of creation (Eph. 3:10).

The concept of a dispensation is seen in the parable of Luke 16, and the details of a "generic" dispensation are seen.

1. Two parties (v.1): (a) the delegator of duties and (b) the one responsible for performing them.
2. Specific responsibilities are laid out, and understood by the one responsible for performing them (vv.1-3, context).
3. The Delegator holds the one responsible accountable (v.2).
4. As a result of failure, on the part of the one responsible, the stewardship is removed and changed (vv.2,3).

II. Development and Application

The simplest delineation of dispensational truth is to contrast the Old Testament with the New Testament. Any newborn, babe in Christ can pick up his/her Bible and observe that basic division.

1. Old Testament: the administration of Law. God handed down the 10 commandments, and the entire Law of Moses. This presented humanity with the responsibility to work and earn blessings. The end result, however, was to demonstrate that man cannot possibly fulfill such a high (perfect) standard. Man cannot earn his way into heaven, and must be provided for in another way.

2. New Testament: the administration of Grace. God made provision through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the means by which mankind may be restored to a relationship with Him. Jesus Christ performed the perfect work that mankind could not do, and paid the penalty for sin on our behalf. The responsibility in this administration is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved (Acts 16:31).

A more developed study is to view human history (as already mentioned in the introduction) and observe the distinctions between the different groupings—Gentile, Jew, and Church.

1. The Age of the Gentiles. Prior to the calling out of Abraham, all of humanity was treated as one body. All were descendants of Adam. God revealed Himself to various prophets (e.g. Adam, Enoch, Noah, Job).
2. The Age of the Jews. Following the calling out of Abraham (Gen. 12), a distinction begins to be drawn within humanity. Within the descendants of Adam, a particular group is called out that are the descendants of Abraham. A division is drawn between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). It is to the Jews that God reveals Himself (e.g. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the prophets, etc.). This does not mean that God disregarded or ignored the Gentiles during these thousands of years, for there are many notable Gentiles to be found throughout the Old Testament. The significance, though, is that the specific revelations, and the revealed Scriptures were given primarily to the Jews (Rom. 3:2).
3. The Age of the Church. With the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross of Calvary, a wholly new administration is unveiled. This administration had been previously hidden and is referred to as a mystery (Eph. 1:9,10; 3:9). During this age, there is no longer a distinction between Jew and Gentile (Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:28; Col. 1:11).

Further, and more intricate developments can (and ultimately, should) be drawn in the observation and study of the significantly detailed covenants within Scripture. These developments typically break down into a seven-fold division of human history from Adam, through Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Christ, and on to eternity. [3]

1. The Age of Innocence, from the creation of Adam and Eve until they fell into sin.
2. The Age of Conscience, from the fall into sin to Noah's flood.
3. The Age of Human Government, from Noah to Abraham.
4. The Age of Promise, from Abraham to Moses.
5. The Age of Law, from Moses to Christ.
6. The Age of Grace, from the death of Christ to the rapture of the Church.
7. The Age of Christ, His personal 1000 year reign, yet future.

The importance of understanding dispensational truth.

We are commanded to do so! (2 Tim. 2:15)

It is critical in avoiding error! Let us say that I commit a personal sin, an offence before God. Let us say, for the illustration that my sin is stealing. What then, should be my activity/responsibility to deal with that sin, and restore my fellowship with the Lord?

Option #1. I might offer to the Lord a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin I have committed (Lev. 4:3ff.). I might bring the bull to the front door of the church, lay my hand upon its head, and "slay the bull before the Lord." Then, I might ask the priest if he might take some of the blood inside, and sprinkle it around in various places inside the church. Then of course, the entrails, and the hide have to be dealt with, and so forth. [Does all of this seem silly to you? This is what the Bible says is the way to respond after your sin.. Ah, but maybe that administration is no longer in effect . . .]

Option #2. I might simply pray to the Father, and confess my sin.. If I do so, He is faithful and just to forgive me of my sin, and to cleanse me from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). This is the New Testament's instruction for the confession of sin.

Granted, the illustration here presented is somewhat absurd, and intentionally so. No one today would realistically consider operating under the animal sacrifice administration. It does serve to point out, however, that the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament are significant. Other issues for consideration may not be as blatantly clear, but they are no less important for an accurate handling.

III. Summary and Conclusion

Rightly dividing the word of truth means that I must understand the dispensational division of human history.

The age in which I live is a unique age, with a unique responsibility. I am to fulfill that responsibility according to the conditions that are laid down for me in the Scriptures (particularly, the New Testament).

Dispensations in the Scofield Reference Bible

Introduction from Scofield Bible preface

The dispensations are distinguished, exhibiting the progressive order of God's dealings with humanity, the increasing purpose which runs through and links together time periods during which man has been responsible for specific and varying tests as to his obedience to God, from the beginning of human history to its end. Although not all Bible students agree in every detail of the dispensational system presented in this reference Bible [the Scofield], it is widely recognized that the distinction between Law and Grace is basic to the understanding of the Scriptures. As a further aid to comprehending the divine economy of the ages, a recognition of the dispensations is of highest value, so long as it is clearly understood that throughout all the Scriptures there is only one basis of salvation, i.e. by grace through faith; and that strict limits cannot be placed upon the terminations of all the dispensations because (1) there is some overlapping, and (2) the divinely given stewardship may continue after the time of special testing has ended.

The "dispensations" are a progressive and connected revelation of God's dealings with man, given sometimes to the whole race, and at other times to a particular people, Israel. These different dispensations are not separate ways of salvation. During each of them man is reconciled to God in only one way, i.e. by God's grace through the work of Christ that was accomplished on the cross and vindicated in His resurrection. Before the cross, man was saved by in prospect of Christ's atoning sacrifice, through believing the revelation thus far given him. Since the cross, man has been saved by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom revelation and redemption are consummated.

On man's part the continuing requirement is obedience to the revelation of God. This obedience is a stewardship of faith. Although the divine revelation unfolds progressively, the deposit of truth in

the earlier time periods is not discarded; rather it is cumulative. Thus conscience (moral responsibility) is an abiding truth in human life (Rom. 2:15; 9:1; 2 Cor. 1:12; 4:2), although it does not continue as a dispensation. Similarly, the saved of this present dispensation are "not under law" as a specific test of obedience to divine revelation (Gal. 5:18; Gal. 2:16; 3:11), yet the Law remains an integral part of the Holy Scriptures which, to the redeemed, are profitable for "instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16,17; Rom. 15:4).

The purpose of each dispensation, then, is to place man under a specific rule of conduct, but such stewardship is not a condition of salvation. In every past dispensation unregenerate man has failed, and he has failed in this present dispensation and will in the future. But salvation has been and will continue to be available to him by God's grace through faith.

Seven dispensations are distinguished in this edition of the Bible:

Innocence (Gen. 1:28)

Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Gen. 3:7)

Human Government (Gen. 8:15)

Promise (Gen. 12:1)

Law (Exo. 19:1)

The Church (Acts 2:1)

Kingdom (Rev. 20:4)

First Dispensation (Gen. 1:28): Innocence

Man was created in innocence, placed in a perfect environment, subjected to a simple test, and warned of the consequences of disobedience. He was not compelled to sin but, tempted by Satan, he chose to disobey God. The woman was deceived; the man transgressed deliberately (1 Tim. 2:14). The stewardship of Innocence ended in the judgment of the expulsion from Eden (Gen. 3:24)

Second Dispensation (Gen. 3:7): Conscience (Moral Responsibility)

Man had now sinned, the first promise of redemption was to be given (Gen. 3:15), and our first parents were to be expelled from Eden (3:22-24). Man's sin was a rebellion against a specific command of God (2:16,17) and marked a transition from theoretical to experiential knowledge of good and evil. Man sinned by entering the realm of moral experience by the wrong door when he could have entered by doing right. So man became as

God through a personal experience of the difference between good and evil, but also unlike God in gaining this experience by choosing the wrong instead of the right. Thus he was placed by God under the stewardship of moral responsibility whereby he was accountable to do all known good, to abstain from all known evil, and to approach God through blood sacrifice, here instituted in prospect of the finished work of Christ. The result is set forth in the Adamic Covenant (Gen. 3:14-21). Man failed the test presented to him in this dispensation also, as he would in others. Although, as the specific test, this era ended with the flood, man continued in his moral responsibility.

Third Dispensation (Gen. 8:15): Human Government

This dispensation began when Noah and his family left the ark. As Noah went into a new situation, God subjected humanity to a new test. Heretofore no man had the right to take another man's life (compare Gen. 4:10,11,14-15,23,24). In this new dispensation, although man's direct moral responsibility to God continued, God delegated to him certain areas of authority, in which he was to obey God through submission to his fellow man. So God instituted a corporate relationship of man to man in human government.

The highest function of government is the protection of human life, out of which arises the responsibility for capital punishment. Man is not individually to avenge murder, but as a corporate group he is to safeguard the sanctity of human life as a gift of God which cannot rightly be disposed of except as God permits. The powers that be are ordained of God, and to resist the power is to resist God. Whereas in the preceding dispensation restraint upon men was internal (Gen. 6:3), God's Spirit working through moral responsibility, now a new and external restraint was added, i.e. the power of civil government.

Man failed to rule righteously. That both Jew and Gentile have governed for self, not for God, is sadly apparent. This failure was seen racially in the confusion of Babel (Gen. 11:9); in the failure of Israel in the period of the theocracy, which closed with captivity in Babylon (2 Chr. 36:15-21); and in the failure of the nations in the "times of the Gentiles" (Dan. 2:31-45).

Man's rule will finally be superseded by the glorious reign of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose right to reign is incontestable (Isa. 9:6,7; Jer. 23:5,6; Eze. 21:27; Luke 1:30-33; Rev. 11:15-18; 19:16; 20:4-6).

The dispensation of Human Government was followed as a specific test of obedience by that of Promise, when God called Abram as His instrument of blessing to mankind. However, man's responsibility for government did not cease but will continue until Christ sets up His kingdom.

Fourth Dispensation (Gen. 12:1): Promise

This dispensation extended from the call of Abram to the giving of the law at Sinai (Ex. 19). Its stewardship was based on God's covenant with Abram, first cited in Gen. 12:1-3, and confirmed and enlarged in Gen. 13:14-17; 15:1-7; 17:1-8; 22:16-18; 26:2-5,24; 28:13-15; 31:13; and 35:9-12.

Observe (1) the specific provisions affecting Abram himself (Gen. 15:15) and his son and grandson, Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 26:1-5; 28:10-16), under which individual blessing depended upon individual obedience.

- (2) God made an unconditional promise of blessings through Abram's seed
 - (a) to the nation Israel to inherit a specific territory forever (Gen. 12:2; 15:18-21; 17:7,8); (b) to the Church as in Christ (Gal. 3:16,28,29); and (c) to the Gentile nations (Gen. 12:3).
- (3) There was a promise of blessing upon those individuals and nations who bless Abram's descendants, and a curse laid upon those who persecute the Jews (Gen. 12:3; Matt. 25:31-46). Consequently this dispensation had varied emphases. To the Gentiles of that period, there was little direct application other than the test implied by Gen. 12:3 and illustrated by God's blessing or judgment on individuals (Pharaoh, Gen. 12:17; Abimelech, Gen. 20:3,17, etc.), or nations (e.g. Egypt, Gen. 47:47-50; Ex. 1-15) who treated Abram or his descendants well or ill.

In the continuance through the centuries of this stewardship of truth, believers of the Church Age are called upon to trust God as Abram did (Rom. 4:11,16,23-25; Gal. 3:6-9), and thus enter into the blessings of the covenant which inaugurated the dispensation of Promise.

God's promises to Abram and his seed certainly did not terminate at Sinai with the giving of the law (Gal. 3:17). Both OT and NT are full of post-Sinaitic promises concerning Israel and the land which is to be Israel's everlasting possession

(e.g. Exo. 32:13; 33:1-3; Lev. 23:10; 25:2; 26:6; Deut. 6:1-23; 8:1-18; Josh. 1:2,11; 24:13; Acts 7:17; Rom. 9:4). But as a specific test of Israel's stewardship of divine truth, the dispensation of Promise was superseded, though not annulled, by the law that was given at Sinai.

Fifth Dispensation (Exo. 19:1): Law

This dispensation began with the giving of the law at Sinai and was brought to its close as a time-era in the sacrificial death of Christ, who fulfilled all its provisions and types. In the previous dispensation, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as multitudes of other individuals, failed in the tests of faith and obedience which were made man's responsibility (e.g. Gen. 16:1-4; 26:6-10; 27:1-25). Egypt also failed to heed God's warning (Gen. 12:3) and was judged. God nevertheless provided a deliverer (Moses), a sacrifice (Passover lamb), and miraculous power to bring the Israelites out of Egypt (judgments in Egypt; Red Sea deliverance).

The Israelites as a result of their transgressions (Gal. 3:19) were now placed under the precise discipline of the law. The law teaches: (1) the awesome holiness of God (Ex. 19:10-25); (2) the exceeding sinfulness of sin (Rom. 7:13; 1 Tim. 1:8-10); (3) the necessity of obedience (Jer. 7:23,24); (4) the universality of man's failure (Rom. 3:19,20); and (5) the marvel of God's grace in providing a way of approach to Himself through typical blood sacrifice, looking forward to a Savior who would become the Lamb of God to bear away the sin of the world (John 1:29), as "witnessed by the law" (Rom. 3:21).

The law did not change the provisions or abrogate the promise of God as given in the Abrahamic Covenant. It was not given as a way to life (i.e., a means of justification, Acts 15:10,11; Gal. 2:16,21; 3:3-9,14,17,21,24,25), but as a rule of living for a people already in the covenant of Abraham and covered by blood sacrifice, e.g. Passover lamb, etc. One of its purposes was to make clear the purity and holiness which should characterize the life of a people with whom the law of the nation was at the same time the law of god (Ex. 19:5,6).

Hence, the law's function in relation to Israel was one of disciplinary restriction and correction, like that exercised over Greek and Roman children by the trusted household slave or tutor (Gal. 3:24, translated "schoolmaster") to hold Israel in check for their own good (Deut. 6:24): (1) until Christ should come (Christ is actually our Tutor, for the grace which saves us also teaches us, Gal. 3:24; Ti. 2:11,12); and (2) until the Father's appointed time

that the heirs (children of promise) should be removed from a condition of legal minority into the privileges of heirs who have come of age (Gal. 4:1-3). This God did in sending His Son, and believers are now in the position of sons in the Father's house (Gal. 3:26; 4:4-7).

But Israel misinterpreted the purpose of the law (1 Tim. 1:8-10), sought righteousness by good deeds and ceremonial ordinances (Acts 15:1; Rom. 9:31-10:3), and rejected their own Messiah (John 1:10,11). The history of Israel in the wilderness, in the land, and scattered among the nations has been one long record of the violation of the law.

Sixth Dispensation (Acts 2:1): The Church

A new age was announced by our Lord Jesus Christ in Mt. 12:47-13:52. The Church was clearly prophesied by Him in Mt. 16:18 (cp. Mt. 18:15-19), purchased by the shedding of His blood on Calvary (Rom. 3:24,25; 1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18,19), and constituted as the Church after His resurrection and ascension at Pentecost when, in accordance with His promise (Acts 1:5), individual believers were for the first time baptized with the Holy Spirit into a unified spiritual organism, likened to a body of which Christ is the Head (1 Cor 12:12,13; Col. 2:19). Because of the emphasis upon the Holy Spirit, this age has also be called "the dispensation of the Spirit."

The point of testing in this dispensation is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, the message of good news about His death and resurrection (Jn. 19:30; Acts 4:12; 1 Cor. 15:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:21). The continuing, cumulative revelation of the previous dispensations combines with the fuller revelation to emphasize the utter sinfulness and lostness of man and the adequacy of the historically completed work of Christ to save by grace through faith all who come unto God by Him (Jn. 14:6; Acts 10:43; 13:38,39; Rom. 3:21-26; Eph. 2:8,9; 1 Tim. 4:10; Heb. 10:12-14; 11:6). As those saved individuals who compose Christ's true Church fulfill their Lord's command to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Mk. 16:15; Lk. 24:46-48; Acts 1:8), God during this age is taking out from Jews and Gentiles "a people for his name" (Acts 15:14), called "the Church" and henceforth carefully distinguished from both Jews and Gentiles as such (1 Cor. 10:32; Gal. 3:27,28; Eph. 2:11-18; 3:5,6).

The Lord Jesus warned that during the whole period, while the Church is being formed by the Holy Spirit, many will reject His Gospel, and many others will pretend to believe in Him and will become

a source of spiritual corruption and hindrance to His purpose in this age, in the professing church. These will bring apostasy, particularly in the last days (Mt. 13:24-30,36-40,47-49; 2 Th. 2:5-8; 1 Tim. 4:1,2; 2 Tim. 3:1; 4:3,4; 2 Pet. 2:1,2; 1 Jn. 2:18-20).

The Church Age will be brought to a close by a series of prophesied events, the chief of which are: (1) the translation of the true Church from the earth to meet her Lord in the air at a point of time known to God but unrevealed to men, and ever held before believers as an imminent and happy hope, encouraging them in loving service and holiness of life. This event is often called “the rapture” (see 1 Th. 4:17). (2) The judgments of the seventieth week of Daniel, called “the tribulation” (see Rev. 7:14), which will fall upon mankind in general but will include the unsaved portion of the professing church, which will have gone into apostasy and thus be left behind on earth when the true Church is translated to heaven. This final form of apostate church is described in Rev. 17 as “the harlot” which will first (ride) the political power (“beast”), only to be overthrown and absorbed by that power (cp. Rev. 18:2). And (3) the return from heaven to earth of our Lord Jesus Christ in power and glory, bringing with Him the Church, to set up His millennial kingdom of righteousness and peace (see Rev. 19:11 and 17).

The Seventh Dispensation (Rev. 20:4): The Kingdom

This is the last of the ordered ages which condi-

tion human life on the earth. It is the kingdom covenanted to David (2 Sam. 7:8-17; Zech. 12:8; Lk. 1:31-33; 1 Cor. 15:24). David’s greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rule over the earth as King of kings and Lord of lords, for 1000 years, associating with Himself in that reign His saints of all ages (Rev. 3:21; 5:9,10; 11:15-18; 15:3,4; 19:16; 20:4,6).

The Kingdom Age gathers into itself under Christ the various “times” spoken of in the Scriptures: (1) the time of oppression and misrule ends when Christ establishes His kingdom (Isa. 11:3,4); (2) the time of testimony and divine forbearance ends in judgment (Mt. 25:31-46; Acts 17:30,31; Rev. 20:7-15); (3) the time of toil ends in rest and reward (1 Th. 1:6,7), (4) the time of suffering ends in glory (Rom. 8:17,18), (5) the time of Israel’s blindness and chastisement ends in restoration and conversion (Ezek. 39:25-29; Rom. 11:25-27); (6) the times of the Gentiles end in the smiting of the image and the setting up of the kingdom of the heavens (Dan. 2:34,35; Rev. 19:15-21); and (7) the time of creation’s bondage ends in deliverance at the manifestation of the sons of God (Gen. 3:17; Isa. 11:6-8; Rom. 8:19-21).

At the conclusion of the thousand years, Satan is released for a little season and instigates a final rebellion which is summarily put down by the Lord. Christ casts Satan into the lake of fire to be eternally tormented, defeats the last enemy, death, and then delivers up the kingdom to the Father.