

# DOCTRINE OF DISPENSATIONS

- I. Introduction.
  - A. Dispensationalism should be understood against the background of the principle of progressive revelation.
  - B. In eternity past, God determined to reveal His glory (self-revelation); that revelation has been carried out in a series of stages (progressive revelation).
  - C. Dispensationalism simply recognizes the principle of progressive revelation and notes the distinctions with respect to how God administers His plan during various times in human history.
  - D. While some have objected to dispensational theology based on their contention that it appeared relatively recently, their objections do not square with church history.
  - E. Although dispensationalism did not exist as a developed system of thought in the early Church, early Church leaders did recognize some of the biblical principles which are basic to dispensational theology.
    1. Justin Martyr (110-165), in his *Dialogue with Trypho* spoke of the times of this dispensation, while Irenaeus (130-200) often spoke of the dispensations of God and especially of the Christian dispensation. *Against Heresies*
    2. Clement of Alexandria (150-220 A.D.) recognized four dispensations of God's rule, and Augustine (354-430 A.D.) noted the fact that God has employed several distinct ways of working in the world as He executes His plan for history; he used the term **dispensation** when referring to these different ways.
    3. The first person on record to develop a genuine dispensational scheme in a systematic fashion was the French philosopher Pierre Poiret (1646-1719), who entitled his work "*The Divine Economy: or An Universal System of the Works and Purposes of God Towards Men Demonstrated*".
    4. In 1699 John Edwards (1639-1716) published a well-developed dispensational scheme in his book entitled "*A Compleat History or Survey of All the Dispensations.*"
    5. Isaac Watts (1674-1748 A.D.), the famous hymn writer and theologian, presented a system of six dispensations in an essay named "*The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all his Dispensations towards them.*"
  - F. During the 19th century the Plymouth Brethren, including one of their key leaders, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), played a very significant role in developing, systematizing, and spreading Dispensational Theology.
  - G. Modern dispensationalists include Merrill Unger, Charles Ryrie, S. Lewis Johnson, J. Dwight Pentecost, Louis Sperry Chafer, and John Walvoord.
  - H. While dispensationalism was systematized and developed during and after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, its history is lengthy and references to it can be found throughout the entire course of the Church Age.
  - I. Although those that reject dispensationalism often do so based on the fact that it was not systematized until later in history, that is not a sufficient reason to reject the principle.
  - J. Of course, recency does not mean falsity any more than antiquity guarantees truth.
  - K. One basic reason for this doctrine is found in the fact that the Law of Moses is clearly not incumbent upon the Church, which indicates that there has been a change in the manner in which God is dealing with the human race. Rom. 6:14; Gal. 3:10-13

- II. Vocabulary.
- A. *καίρος* (kairos), eras, seasons, segments of time, strategic periods of time. Eph. 1:10
  - B. *αἰών* (aion), age, dispensation. Heb. 1:2
  - C. *οἰκονομία* (oikonomia), lit. household administration, stewardship, how one manages the affairs of his house. Eph. 1:10
- III. Definition and description.
- A. Webster defines a dispensation as “*a general state or ordering of things; specifically a system of revealed commands and promises regulating human affairs; a particular arrangement or provision especially of God or nature.*”
  - B. According to Walvoord it is a “*stage in the progressive revelation of God constituting a distinctive stewardship or rule of life*”, while Ryrie defines it is a “*distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.*”
  - C. Theologically, the concept relates to how God administers His plan during various portions of human history.
  - D. History is simply a segment taken out of eternity; a dispensation is a period of human history distinguished by a difference in God’s revelation, rules, and operations.
  - E. In that regard, dispensations are both divine categories of human history and a divine outline of God’s plan as well.
  - F. Dispensational Theology can be defined very simply as a system of theology which acknowledged the distinct stages in the sovereign rule of God.
  - G. Therefore, our working definition of a dispensation is the particular way God administers His rule over the world during a portion of human history as He progressively works out His eternal purposes.
- IV. Essential characteristics of a dispensation.
- A. In order to qualify as a separate dispensation, a period of history would seem to have a minimum of three essential characteristics.
    - 1. The primary characteristic that distinguishes one dispensation from another is related to the type of priesthood God establishes.
      - a. From Adam until the Mosaic Law the family priesthood was in force. Gen. 8:20
      - b. From the Mosaic Law until Pentecost, the Aaronic priesthood was the norm. Ex. 28:1-3
      - c. During the Church Age, the royal priesthood serves God’s plan. IPet. 2:9
      - d. During the Millennium, there will be a universal royal priesthood for those raised at the first resurrection. Rev. 20:6
    - 2. Second, it must be characterized by some divine revelation which had not been given previously since man cannot understand what God expects if He does not reveal it to him.
    - 3. Paul indicated that the present dispensation is definitely related to new revelation which God gave to the apostles and New Testament prophets. Eph. 3:2-10
    - 4. Third, it must involve a particular responsibility for man; each dispensation makes man responsible to obey God in accordance with its unique ruling factor or combination of factors.
  - B. A new dispensation may continue or discontinue some ruling factors of previous dispensations, but it will have at least one new administrative factor not in place previously.

- C. For example in the dispensation of the Jews, God employed the nation Israel as his representative, in the dispensation of the Church, independent local churches are His chosen vehicle.
- D. Further, there are some secondary characteristics that relate to each dispensation.
  - 1. First, each dispensation applies a test to man; the nature of the test is whether or not man will obey God's rule by fulfilling the responsibility which is characteristic of that dispensation. I Tim. 4:15
  - 2. Second, each dispensation demonstrates the failure of man to obey the particular rule of God which characterizes that dispensation. Matt. 21:43; Rev. 2-3
  - 3. Third, each dispensation involves divine judgment because of mankind's failure. Rom. 11:20-23; Rev. 20:9
- E. However, it is quite important to recognize that while different dispensations are different ways of God's administering His rule over the world, they are not different ways of salvation.
- F. Throughout human history God will employ at least four distinct dispensations but only one way of salvation, which has always been by the grace of God through faith in Messiah.
- G. Secondly, a change of dispensations does not abrogate moral laws of God, which remain incumbent on mankind even if ritual or other changes are observed. Ex. 20:13-14; Matt. 5:21-32

V. The dispensations and their characteristics.

- A. The first dispensation was the dispensation of the Gentiles, which extended from Adam to the giving of the Mosaic Law.
  - 1. It was a period in which the four Divine institutions were established.
    - a. Divine institution #1, volition. Gen. 2:16-17
    - b. Divine institution #2, right man/right woman. Gen. 2:18-25
    - c. Divine institution #3, the family. Gen. 4:1-2
    - d. Divine institution #4, nationalism. Gen. 10:32
  - 2. The family priesthood was employed, with the father serving as priest for the entire family. Gen. 8:20, 12:7-8, 26:25
  - 3. There was one race entirely comprised of Gentiles, who originally spoke a single, universal language. Gen. 11:1.
  - 4. There was no comprehensive written canon; Bible doctrine was revealed by a number of methods including dreams, theophany, and direct revelation. Heb. 1:1
  - 5. This dispensation saw the institution of the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants.
- B. The second dispensation is generally called the Age of Israel and extended from the giving of the Mosaic Law until Pentecost.
  - 1. It was a time in which Israel was established as a unique nation to represent God before the Gentiles. Ex. 20:5-6
  - 2. The priesthood became specialized, limited only to the direct descendants of Aaron. Ex. 28:41
  - 3. This period is characterized by the Mosaic Law, which included tremendous amounts of ritual. Lev.
  - 4. Bible doctrine was recorded beginning with Moses and continuing until the time of Malachi, which completed the entire Old Testament revelation.
  - 5. This dispensation saw the addition of the Davidic covenant.
  - 6. The Holy Spirit could come upon believers and leave them as He sovereignly desired. I Sam. 16:14

7. Jesus Christ was born and lived His life under this dispensation. Gal. 4:4
- C. The dispensation of the Church (commonly called the Church Age) is the third dispensation, which is actually an intercalation or interruption of the Age of Israel, which will be completed with the final seven years of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week.
  1. This dispensation extends the time from Pentecost to the rapture.
  2. This was a mystery dispensation, only alluded to in the Old Testament, but not fully revealed to, or understood by, even the greatest of prophets. Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:16; Col. 1:25-26; IPet. 1:11
  3. During this dispensation, the entire canon of Scripture was completed, which is designed to carry believers until the Second Advent. Rev. 22:18-19
  4. The Holy Spirit indwells each believer at the point of salvation. Jn. 14:16-17; Rom. 8:9
  5. Each believer is a priest, provided with a spiritual gift, which he is to employ in his service toward others. Rom. 12:1-2; IPet. 4:10-11
  6. The dispensation is characterized by a minimum of ritual the two extant rituals include water baptism and the Lord's table. Matt. 28:19; ICor. 1:14-16; ICor. 11:23-26
- D. The fourth and final dispensation of human history is the Millennium.
  1. It begins with the establishment of the Kingdom and extends for 1000 years. Rev. 20:4
  2. Christ rules the nations from Jerusalem under perfect environment; there is universal peace and prosperity administered under operation rod of iron. Isa. 2:2-5
  3. There is a radical change in nature; the curse on the earth is lifted, and longevity is greatly increased. Isa. 65:18-25
  4. All covenants to Israel are fulfilled; Israel will be exalted among the nations as Jesus Christ rules from Jerusalem.
  5. All the Divine Institutions are observed: marriage, families, volition, and nations. Rev. 20:8-9
  6. This dispensation is characterized by a universal, royal priesthood that is comprised of all believers that received resurrection following the Second Advent. Rev. 20:4,6
  7. There is no religion per se; however, there is universal knowledge of God. Jer. 31:34
  8. People that repopulate the earth in their physical bodies will still possess old sin natures and negative volition will continue to be an issue, as seen in the Gog/Magog rebellion. Rev. 20:8

## VI. Extremes and distortions of biblical dispensationalism.

- A. While some attempt to divide these dispensations into smaller segments (many like seven), it seems that there must be a change of priesthood in order to qualify as a new dispensation.
- B. Therefore, such distinctions as the dispensation of innocence (Adam and Eve in the garden), human government (life after the flood), etc. do not meet the test and must be rejected.
- C. Another extreme is found in the concept of the dispensation of the hypostatic union, which makes the time from the birth of Christ to His death a separate dispensation.
- D. Paul makes it quite clear that Jesus Christ was born under the Law, which refers to the dispensation of the Age of Israel. Gal. 4:4
- E. Another distortion is found in attempting to make Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week a separate dispensation and not classifying it as the final seven years of the Age of Israel. Dan. 9:24ff
- F. Another extreme is found in the camp of **ultra-dispensationalists**, who advocate at least five radical positions.

1. The first insists that the four gospels are entirely Jewish and have no real message for the Church since they were written in the Age of Israel.
2. However, we have a clear passage that indicates that inspired writings from any dispensation are profitable for Church Age believers. Rom. 15:4
3. Second, it is maintained that the book of Acts covers a transition period between the dispensation of the law and the dispensation of the mystery; that is, that in the book of Acts we do not have the Church, the Body of Christ, a different Church from that of Paul's prison epistles.
4. However, Paul spoke of persecuting the Church in his pre-salvation state and then instructs Timothy on how to act in the Church; there is no evidence that he considered the two to be different. Gal. 1:13; I Tim. 3:15
5. Third, they contended that Paul did not receive his special revelation of the mystery of the Body until after his imprisonment in Rome, and that his prison epistles alone reveal this truth and are, strictly speaking, the only portion of the Holy Scriptures given to members of the Body.
6. Romans was written before Paul's visit to Jerusalem and he indicates that he had already been teaching the mystery. Rom. 16:25-26
7. All of the other epistles of Paul, save those written during his imprisonment and the general epistles, are relegated to the earlier dispensation of the book of Acts, and have no permanent value for us, but were for the instruction of the so-called Jewish church of that time. II Tim. 3:16-17
8. Fourth, they suggest that the body of Christ is not the same as the bride of Christ, which they deem to be strictly Jewish.
9. The fact that there are two different figures for the same group is easily explained in light of the various figurative expressions used of Israel in the Old Testament.
  - a. Israel is called a vineyard. Isa. 5:2
  - b. Israel is called a fig tree. Joel 1:7
  - c. Israel is called son. Hos. 11:1
  - d. Israel is called a wife. Isa. 54:5
10. In that regard the Church is called a nation (Matt. 21:43), a virgin (II Cor. 11:2), the body of Christ (Eph. 4:23), a bride/wife (Rev. 19:7) and an army. Rev. 19:14
11. Since their view teaches that the dispensation of grace did not begin until Paul's Roman imprisonment, they (not all of them) tend to reject the ordinances of water baptism and the Lord's Table.
12. However, Paul makes it clear that he engaged in both these rituals and claimed his understanding of the Lord's Table came by direct revelation. I Cor. 1:14, 11:23-26