

The Dispensations (1)

Introduction

The English word 'dispensation' occurs four times in Scripture. It is the Greek word <3622> *oikonomia* and is also translated 'stewardship' which means 'personal responsibility in taking care of a household or household affairs belonging to another'. In the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16.1-18) the steward is entrusted with specific responsibilities to obey the Master's will and look after the Master's interests. If he does not fulfil the requirements he will be removed from his stewardship (cf. 1 Corinthians 4.2).

Oikonomia occurs in Scripture seven times (Luke 16.2-4, 1 Corinthians 9.17, Ephesians 1.10, 3.2, Colossians 1.25). Ephesians 3 indicates that Paul was given an important stewardship/responsibility to administer for God:

Ephesians 3.2-6: If ye have heard of the dispensation <3622> of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery...which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.

Paul had been graciously given great spiritual truth ('mysteries') which was his responsibility to communicate to God's people. What is your stewardship? See 1 Corinthians 4.1-2, 1 Peter 4.10, 1 Corinthians 15.9-11 (grace not a 'barren' gift).

So, a dispensation is stewardship, administration or management of someone else's property. It demands responsibility, accountability and faithfulness. Dispensationalists view the world as a household run by God. In His household God is administering its affairs according to His own will through the passage of time. It must also be noted that just as a parent might govern his/her own household in different ways, so God has dealt with mankind at different times and in different ways for one great and grand end; His glory!

In any dispensation a particular **revelation** of God's mind and will is given which brings added **responsibility** to the whole of mankind or those to whom it is given. Associated with the revelation is the promise of **reward** or **blessing** for those who are **faithful** and the warning of **judgment** upon those who are not or disobey God's revelation. *Note. Though the dispensation may end, certain principles of the revelation may continue. It is also equally true that the earlier requirements of a dispensation may be withdrawn and new requirements added in a later dispensation.*

For example, God's clear command concerning capital punishment has never been withdrawn: *Genesis 9.6: Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.* However, God commanding Moses to kill a man for gathering sticks on the Sabbath (Numbers 15.32-36) would hardly apply today because this command was given as part of the dispensation of Law which has now finished and been withdrawn (John 1.17, Romans 10.4).

The Principles of Dispensationalism

There are **three** important principles in dispensationalism:

- **A literal interpretation of the Scriptures.** Many Christians hold to an allegorical interpretation or spiritualise the text. For example, *Zechariah 14.9: And the LORD shall be king over all the earth... v.16: And it shall come to pass, that every one that is left of all the nations which came against Jerusalem shall even go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the feast of tabernacles.*

Those who spiritualise say that 'Jerusalem' represents a believer's heart (which is where the kingdom is). The 'earth' represents the believer's body where Jehovah reigns. Some others would say Jerusalem means 'city of peace', and since peace is a feeling, then Jerusalem represents my soul. They say that since 'nations' consist mostly of unbelievers, then 'nations coming to Jerusalem to worship' means that unbelievers will be attracted to my peaceful soul!!!

The safest and surest way to interpret the Bible is to believe it means what it says. JEHOVAH shall reign over all the earth from Jerusalem (literally!).

- **A distinction between Israel and the Church.** Those who hold to dispensationalism believe that God has a distinct plan for Israel and a distinct plan for the Church:
"The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism (Israel); while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity (the Church). **LS Chafer** Israel and the Church are distinct. At present, God's plan for Israel is 'on hold' until He completes His current purpose with the Church (Acts 15.14) which will culminate in the rapture. God will then complete His unfinished

business with Israel during the Tribulation (Acts 15.16-18). This is of the utmost importance otherwise promises made to Israel may be applied wrongly to the Church. In the OT God made a number of unconditional promises to Israel which, as yet, have not been fulfilled. Ultimately, God will restore Israel to a place of blessing (Romans 11) but will also fulfil promises to Abraham (concerning the land, Genesis 17.7-8) and David (concerning the Kingdom, 2 Samuel 7.12-16).

- **The ultimate purpose of history is for the glory of God** (Isaiah 42.8, Exodus 14.17). God’s glory is demonstrated in the salvation He provides (Romans 9.23), His dealings with nations (Ezekiel 39.17-21), rulers (Romans 9.17), and Israel (Isaiah 43.1), creation (Psalm 19.1), His judgments (Isaiah 2.19) and even in the storm (Psalm 29.3).

How many Dispensations are there?

There are at least **four** dispensations (although many see seven). *John 1.17: For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.* Here are the dispensations of law and grace. This shows the difference between the Old and New Testaments and brings a change in the way in which God deals with mankind. Salvation by faith is in both Testaments, but in the New Testament faith is specifically directed towards Christ as Saviour (Acts 4.12). There are also ‘policy’ changes. Animal sacrifices are no longer required or accepted. Foods once unclean are now pronounced clean (cf. Leviticus 11, Mark 7.19).

However, the dispensation of Law did not come until Exodus 19, hundreds of years at least after Creation. So there must have been at least one dispensation prior to the Law: *Romans 5.13-14: For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses.*

There is also a fourth dispensation mentioned in Hebrews called “the age to come”. This is the Millennium, the time when the Lord Jesus Christ will return to reign over the earth (cf. Ephesians 1.10; 3.2).

Many bible teachers also see **four** dispensations prior to the dispensation of Law.

All the dispensations contain a stewardship/responsibility given to mankind. It often contains and finishes with the judgment of God upon mankind as they prove unable to keep the responsibility God has given them. Generally there is also a progression in the revelation of God concerning Himself throughout the dispensation.

<i>Dispensation</i>	<i>Stewardship/Responsibility</i>	<i>Judgment of God</i>	<i>Revelation About God</i>
1. Innocence (Genesis 1.26-3.24)	e.g. Genesis 1.28-29	e.g. Genesis 2.17	e.g. Genesis 3.15
2. Conscience (Genesis 4.1-8.19)			e.g. Genesis 4.4
3. Human Government (Genesis 8.20-11.32)			