

DOCTRINE OF DISPENSATIONS

A. Definition and Description

1. A dispensation is a period of time in human history expressed in terms of divine revelation. The inerrancy of the Word of God is the source for looking at history from the divine viewpoint. Therefore, dispensation is a technical theological term used primarily by the apostle Paul in the presentation of the mystery doctrine of the Church Age.
2. Dispensations are divine categories of human history; therefore, both the divine outline and the divine interpretation of human history. There are many interpretations of history, but the only accurate interpretation is dispensational, i.e., divine.
3. Dispensations are the vehicle by which believers living at a specific time in history can orient to God's will, plan, and purpose for their lives. God's plan is not the same for every dispensation. In fact, the plan is quite different in each dispensation.
4. The most difficult and subtle plan to learn by a believer is the Church Age or the protocol plan of God. Old Testament believers were under the ritual plan of God. Our Lord Jesus Christ was under the incarnation plan of God.
5. A dispensation is defined traditionally as a period of time during which a particular revelation of God's mind and God's will is operative, and during which man is tested as to his obedience to that specific manifestation of God's will, purpose, and plan. The believer's orientation to both time and to human history is vitally necessary for understanding God's plan and God's purpose.
6. Dispensations constitute the divine administration of history. In fact, the Greek word translated "dispensations" also means administration of some organization. Dr. H. A. Ironside defined dispensations in his book, *In the Heavens*, as follows: "It is an economy or a particular order or a condition of things prevailing in a special age which does not necessarily prevail in another age."
7. In every dispensation, God has a plan for believers, and in grace He provides the means for executing that plan. We must understand the other dispensations and then learn why only one dispensation is called the "dispensation of grace" (Ephesians 3:2).
8. While there is a different plan for believers in each dispensation, there is only one way of salvation throughout human history: personal faith in Jesus Christ. In all of human history, there is only one Savior, Jesus Christ, and He is revealed in different ways in different dispensations.



B. The New Testament Greek Vocabulary for Dispensations

1. The Greek word, **οικονομία** (*oikonomía*), is translated “dispensation.” It means the administration of a business or an estate, the management of a household. It is translated by three words: “order” (instead of chaos), “a plan” (instead of confusion), and “arrangement” (instead of disarray).
 - a. It was used in the Attic Greek by Xenophon and Plato, who used it for household administration. It was also used for the authority of parents over children, the provision of parents for their children, and the policy of parents for their children. The study of dispensations always teaches the authority God provides for every period of history. It connotes policy, administration, and provision by God for believers in a period of history. The translation policy, administration, and provision by God for believers in a period of history. The translation of “dispensation” originates from the policies and provisions of God for a particular historical era.
 - b. The word is used in Eph 1:10, 3:2; Col 1:25, all by the apostle Paul, the greatest teacher of all.
 - c. The word is now used as a technical theological term for an era of human history from the divine viewpoint.
 - d. Those who translate this as “administration” are wrong; this word is more technical than that, and it must refer to dispensations as separate from all other types of administrations.
2. The Greek word, **αἰών** (*aiōn*) is generally translated “age.” It refers to a dispensation as a category of human history such as the “age” of Israel or Church “age.” Hence, the noun is used for divine categories in human history in such passages as Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:26.
3. The Greek word, **καιρός** (*kairós*), means time as an epoch or era, a chronological order or system, a period of time characterized by distinctive development within that period. This word is used for the organization of historical events into their dispensational categories as in 1 Thessalonians 5:1.

It is used specifically for orientation to the Church Age in Romans 13:11, 8:18, 11:5. It is used for orientation to the Jewish Age in Ephesians 2:11-12. In Luke 21:24, it is used for the “times of the Gentiles” which runs co-terminus with the Church Age, when only Gentile nations can function as client nations to God. It is used for the word “epochs” in Acts 1:6-7.
4. The Greek word, **χρόνος** (*chrónos*) means time as a succession of events. It is used to portray the chronology of history or time as a series of points.



Occasionally, it is used for a section of time in chronology, which then refers to a dispensation. In Romans 16:25, *chrónos* is used for all dispensations prior to the Church Age. Peter also used this word for dispensations in 1 Peter 1:20. So this word is used three ways:

- a. Time in its course.
- b. A section of time, i.e., a dispensation.
- c. A point of time.

C. Dispensations are a Biblical subject.

Ephesians 1:8 he lavished on us in all wisdom and insight.

v. 9 He did this when he revealed to us the secret of his will according to his good pleasure that set forth in Christ,

v. 10 toward the administration of the fullness of times, to head up all things in Christ—the things in heaven and the things on earth.

Ephesians 3:1 For this reason, I Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—

v. 2 if indeed you have heard of the stewardship of God’s grace that was given to me for you. (NET)

- a. Though a fantastic genius, Paul could not have understood this dispensation on his own. This mystery had to be a matter of revelation in order for him to understand it. This knowledge was given to him, as it is to us, through grace.
- b. Dispensational study is beneficial. It will keep you out of confusion. It will from to function in the wrong dispensation.

Ephesians 3:3 “that by revelation the divine secret was made known to me, as I wrote before briefly was made known to me, just as I have already written you briefly.

v. 4 By reading this, you ought to be able to understand my technical knowledge about the mystery of Christ.” (NET)

- c. The dispensation of the Church is a technical dispensation. It requires understanding technical words and knowing the modus operandi. This is the first time in history that the ordinary believer must think in terms of doctrine, must think like a prophet or an apostle, and must reconstruct his entire mental attitude.
- d. Therefore, every believer is given the ability to think through the filling of the Holy Spirit, and is given the complete Canon as the information about which to think. In order to think you must know the doctrine and be able to think in terms of its application. You think for yourself and do not need others to think for you.



Ephesians 3:5 Now this secret was not disclosed to people in former generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (NET)

- e. “Now” is the time! Now is the greatest opportunity in history. You have been given more invisible assets to become an invisible hero than has ever existed!
- f. So what Paul and the other apostles started communicating in the first century is now the major issue in your life. Whether you will have a significant life or not, whether you save this nation by your advance to spiritual maturity all depends on what you think now.

Ephesians 3:8 “To me, the very least of all the saints, this grace has been given to proclaim to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ **v. 9** and to enlighten everyone about God’s secret plan—a secret that has been hidden for the ages in God who has created all things.

Colossians 1:25 I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship from God —given to me for you—in order to complete the word of God, (NET)

- a. Paul was a minister of this dispensation. Because he oriented to the dispensation in which he lived, Paul probably had the greatest invisible impact and the happiest life of any person who ever lived.
- b. As Saul of Tarsus, he started out to be one of the greatest visible leaders of all time, but became the greatest invisible leader of all time. Because after his salvation, God in His matchless grace not only gave him the gift of apostleship, but at the same time He revealed to him the facts of the time in which he lived. Paul, more than anyone else outside of the Lord, understood the relationship between the great power experiment of the Hypostatic Union and the great power experiment of the Church Age. Hence, he understood more than anyone else the importance of Bible doctrine.
- c. Ministers should only be visible to the extent that they teach Bible doctrine. Those who do not teach Bible doctrine have the tendency to try to become visible by means of human dynamics. There is no place in the plan of God for the coexistence of human dynamics with the omnipotence of God.
- d. Note the same phrase here as in Eph 3:1: “The dispensation from God which was given to me for your benefit.”
- e. We are born again with a deficiency: Bible doctrine. You are deficient until you understand the mystery doctrine. Col 1:26, “That is, the mystery which has been hidden from past dispensations and generations [within those dispensations], but now has been revealed to the saints [royal family of God].”



- f. The mystery doctrine of the Church Age was never revealed in the Old Testament, for they would have been distracted with envy.
- g. As royal family of God, you have greater privileges than ever existed before; the greatest plan of all history. Colossians 1:27, “To whom God has decreed to make known what is the wealth [riches] of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you [indwelling of Christ], the hope [confidence] of glory.”
- h. You actually have the greatest individual wealth ever given to believers in any time of human history. Without understanding the mystery doctrine, you are wealthy without knowing it.
- i. “The glory” is Jesus Christ Himself, who set up all precedence for this dispensation during the great power experiment of the Hypostatic Union.
- j. Paul names just one of the many aspects to your wealth: “Christ in you.” This refers to the indwelling of Jesus Christ as the Shekinah Glory and the guarantee of your escrow blessings.
- k. Hope means very strong confidence. Christ in you is your confidence of glory! You have a glory that is found in immeasurable wealth, in the things God has provided for you in your portfolio of invisible assets. Colossians 1:28, “Which we solemnly communicate, warning and teaching every believer in all wisdom, that we might present every believer mature in Christ.”
- l. Solemn here is used in the sense of being important, requiring concentration. It also means to explain the technical details. To explain something technical, the listener must concentrate. This also means to keep teaching, being consistent in learning mystery doctrine, i.e., what is God’s plan, purpose, and will for you in this Church Age.
- m. “Warnings” are such statements as: You will be a loser if you miss out on this! The nation will go under unless you get with God’s plan! You will have a miserable, frustrated life unless you learn these things! You never teach in a solemn manner without warning of the consequences of rejecting the information.
- n. “Wisdom” means the one who teaches must know his information.
- o. The pastor-teacher must present the members of his congregation at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Yet his job is to present you mature in Christ!

Colossians 1:29 “Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me.” (NET)



- p. The most exhausting work in the world is using your mind. This is required constantly when studying the Word of God, day and night! Muscle exhaustion is nothing compared to mental exhaustion.
- q. “Striving” means studying the passage over and over until you know it enough so that you can teach it.
- r. The enabling power which works in him refers to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

1 Timothy 1:3 As I urged you when I was leaving for Macedonia, stay on in Ephesus to instruct certain people not to spread false teachings,

v. 4 not to occupy themselves with myths and interminable genealogies. Such things promote useless speculations rather than God’s redemptive plan, that operates by faith. (NET)

D. Categorical Outline of Dispensations.

1. Theocentric dispensations are the two in the Old Testament:
 - a. The dispensation of the Gentiles began with the creation of mankind and continued to the Exodus.
 - (1) Era of positive volition was from the creation of man until the fall; the Garden of Eden era. Volition and marriage as divine institutions both failed miserably under perfect environment.
 - (2) Era of negative volition was from the fall of man to Abraham. There were two more divine institutions: family and nationalism. This was the era of great disasters on the earth, such as the angelic infiltration of Gen 6, the flood, and the Tower of Babel.
 - (3) Era of the patriarchs was from Abraham to Moses. Technically, the Gentiles began with the three sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. This era sees the creation of the new racial species, the Jewish race, which began with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It includes the history of the Jews from Abraham to Moses. Abraham was the father of the new racial species, created by God, when Abraham at age 99 was circumcised. Circumcision was the demonstration of Abraham’s use of the faith-rest drill. So this dispensation included both Jews and Gentiles without any client nation function.
 - b. The dispensation of the Jews, or Israel, runs from the Exodus to the birth of Christ, B.C. 1441 until 4 B.C. However, God gave Israel an additional seventy-four years into the Christocentric dispensations. The Passover was the sign of the new dispensation.



The sign that they were about go out under the fifth cycle of discipline was the gift of tongues starting on the Day of Pentecost, which evangelized Jews in Gentile languages.

- (1) The Exodus was the calling out of Israel as God's first client nation.
- (2) The Mosaic Covenant.
- (3) Three Unconditional Covenants: Abrahamic, Palestinian, and Davidic.
- (4) The New Covenant to Israel which emphasizes how the other three covenants will be fulfilled in the Millennium.
- (5) There are five Jewish client nations in the Old Testament:
 - (a) The Theocratic Kingdom, the Exodus to Samuel, B.C. 1441-1020.
 - (b) The United Kingdom, Saul to Rehoboam, B.C. 1020-926.
 - (c) The Northern Kingdom, Jeroboam to Hoshea, B.C. 926-721.
 - (d) The Southern Kingdom, Rehoboam to Zedekiah, B.C. 926-586.
 - (e) The Babylonian Captivity, B.C. 586-536, a period when there was a client nation, but instead visible heroes like Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Zechariah. a period of 490 years.
 - (f) This was a period of 70 years to give back to the Jews the 70 Sabbatical years which they had ignored over restoration of Israel as Judah, B.C. 536ff.
 - (g) By 4 B.C., the Romans were occupying the land and Judah was no longer functioning as a client nation. Yet the Jews were still given tremendous grace opportunities for 74 years, until 70 AD. They were permitted to continue as a nation, but not as a client nation.
 - (h) The final administration of the 5th cycle of discipline came when the Jews were completely wiped out and scattered across the earth in A.D. 70 (though Israel had not functioned as a client nation to God since 4 B.C.).
2. Christocentric dispensations are two in the New Testament:
 - a. The great power experiment of the Hypostatic Union runs from the birth of Christ in B.C. 4 to the resurrection and ascension of Christ in A.D. 30, a period of 33 years. This is the time of the incarnation or First Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the time of the Gospels.
 - b. The great power experiment of the Church Age runs from the Day of Pentecost in 30 A.D., until the Rapture of the Church, time unknown by all but God. It is divided into two parts:



- (1) The pre-Canon period, the time of the Book of Acts and temporary spiritual gifts, runs from 30–96 A.D.
 - (2) The post-Canon period, the period at present, runs from 96 A.D. to the Rapture of the Church. This is the era of the epistles of the New Testament.
3. Eschatological dispensations are two:
- a. The Tribulation or Doomsday dispensation, the great power struggle from the Rapture of the Church to the Second Advent, also called Daniel's 70th week, is technically the end of the Jewish Age. From the Book of Revelation it must also be classified as the time of Satan's desperation, lasting seven years. It is prophesied in the Old Testament as well as by our Lord in the Olivet Discourse of Matthew 24-25, in most of His parables, and by John in the Book of Revelation, chapters 6-19.
 - b. The Millennial reign of Christ runs from the Second Advent of Christ to the end of human history, lasting 1,000 years. It is the time of the restoration of Israel and the fulfillment of their unconditional covenants. Israel will again be the client nation in history for the last 1,000 years. It is a time of perfect environment on the earth. It is preceded by the judgment of the Baptism of Fire, so that only believers will enter the Millennium. At the end of the Millennium is the judgment of unbelievers and fallen angels. Sequentially, it includes:
 - (1) The Second Advent of Christ.
 - (2) The judgment of the human race coming out of the Tribulation, the Baptism of the Fire, in which there are two separate judgments: that of the Gentiles and that of the Jews.
 - (3) The restoration of Israel.
 - (4) The Millennial rule of Jesus Christ.
 - (5) The Gog Revolution.
 - (6) The final judgments of history: the judgment of fallen angels who are cast into the Lake of Fire, and the resurrection and judgment of all unbeliever homo sapiens at the Great White Throne who are cast into the Lake of Fire.
4. The Eternal State includes:
- (1) All believers in resurrection bodies forever.
 - (2) The destruction of the present universe.
 - (3) The creation of a new universe.



E. The Theocentric Dispensations of the Old Testament.

1. The Dispensation of the Gentiles.

a. This dispensation begins with the creation of mankind and continues until the Exodus,? - B.C. 1441. It has three parts:

(1) The Era of Positive Volition begins with the creation of mankind and continues until the fall of Adam and the woman. This is the historical epoch of the Garden of Eden.

Adam and the woman were involved in two categories of perfection.

(i) They were created perfect beings: body, soul, and spirit. With their spirit they had the ability to have social life with God every day. They had a perfect social life with each other, total admiration for each other, and had perfect bodies.

(ii) Secondly, they were placed in perfect environment in the Garden of Eden. But perfect environment is not the solution to anything and doesn't mean happiness. Perfect environment was rejected by man. This indicates that environment is never the solution to man's problems.

(b) No Canon of Scripture existed in the Garden. Therefore, both Adam and the woman were recipients of direct revelation from God. They came to Bible class daily because Jesus Christ taught the class!

(c) Two divine institutions were operational during this time of perfection: #1, volition, and #2, marriage. Both ended in total failure by two perfect persons living in perfect environment.

(d) There was only one volitional test in the Garden of Eden related to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The only way mankind could sin overtly was to reject the divine prohibition and take the fruit from that tree. The fall of our original parents is failure to pass the test.

(e) Marriage as a divine institution was tested with two perfect people who had the best of everything in marriage - perfect partners, perfect sex, etc.; yet the first marriage in perfect environment completely failed! This was because of the potential for arrogance in any marriage, which seeks to avoid boredom in human relationships. The woman fell because she resented the man's authority, became bored, and wanted to be equal with the man.

You have to have capacity for perfect environment, and such capacity cannot exist in man's natural state!



- (f) Man must be regenerated, born-again, have eternal life, and fulfill post-salvation epistemological rehabilitation to even begin to have capacity for good environment.
- (g) So, marriage failed through the woman's rejection of the man's authority. She should never have been talking to the serpent once he communicated in her language. In fact, the woman undermined the man's authority through bringing him the fruit.
- (h) When Adam took the fruit from the woman's hand, he lost all his God-given authority at the moment of his original sin. He lost his rulership over the world and all the creatures in it, as well as over his wife. Satan won round one in his appeal trial.
- (i) Neither perfect environment nor the divine institutions then in existence prevented mankind from the original sin.
- (j) Obviously then, neither perfect environment nor marriage is designed to be a problem-solving device. From this time on, God in His matchless grace would provide problem-solving devices for mankind, beginning with salvation.
- (k) Moses wrote about this time period in Gen 1-3.
- (2) The Era of Negative Volition extends from the fall of man to Abraham, sometime after B.C. 10,000 - B.C. 2050. While there was no written Canon during this time, this period of time is covered by Genesis 4-11.
 - (a) While Adam and the woman had sinned and become dichotomous under real spiritual death, they both believed in the Lord, as demonstrated in the new name of the woman, Eve, meaning "living." She would become the mother of all living. Her judgment was to be the child-bearer.
 - (b) This is the historical era of the first murder in the human race. Cain murdered his brother Abel.
 - (c) There were two Gentile lines at the beginning of this era: the lines of Cain and Seth.
 - (d) Great believers during this era included Enoch and Noah.
- (i) God gave the equivalent of our escrow blessings to Enoch, and he had one of the greatest "deaths" of all time, for he didn't die but was simply taken from the earth into heaven just before the Flood. Everything that Enoch stood for would now be set aside in violence.

(End JAS5-33. See JAS5-34 beginning on p. 331.)

