

AGES AND DISPENSATIONS

PART I

Ages

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN AGES AND DISPENSATIONS

The Greek New Testament uses the word for “age” (*aion*) one hundred twenty-six times. And an indiscriminate translation of *aion* has resulted in a major problem surrounding a proper understanding of “ages.” The word has, numerous times, been translated either “world” or “forever” (e.g., Matt. 12:32; 13:22, 39, 40, 49; 21:19; Mark 4:19; 10:30; 11:14; Heb. 1:2; 5:6; 6:5, 20 [KJV]).

Actually, in the KJV there are only two instances in the entire New Testament where *aion* has been translated “age” (Eph. 2:7; Col. 1:26). Other versions (e.g., NASB, NIV) have, on the other hand, rendered the word as “age” in many instances, though still frequently remaining with the KJV translations, “world” and “forever.”

Then, to further complicate the issue in the KJV, the Greek word *genea* (appearing in a plural form and meaning “generations”) has been translated “ages” twice (Eph. 3:5, 21), and the former mistranslation has resulted in a very misleading thought pertaining to ages.

In Eph. 3:21 both *aion* and *genea* appear together, and both have been mistranslated in the KJV. *Genea*, appearing in a plural form, has been translated “ages”; and *aion*, appearing twice and meaning, within its structured usage, “of the age of the ages” (referring to the climactic age in a sequence of ages, i.e., to the Messianic Era [which is the subject matter leading into this verse — vv. 1-11]), has been translated “world without end.”

(*Aion* and *genea* also appear together in Col. 1:26; and, unlike Eph. 3:21, both words have been translated correctly in the KJV — “...hid from ages and from generations...”)

To translate *genea* as “ages” in Eph. 3:5 sets forth an issue concerning ages which is *NOT at all* in accord with the overall teaching of Scripture. Scripture sets forth the thought that a series of ages began at the time of the creation of the heavens and the earth (I Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Heb. 1:2), which move toward and reach a climax with the Messianic Era.

That is, the 1,000-year Messianic Era is the climactic age in a series of ages — ages in relation to the present heavens and earth — which began with the creation of the heavens and the earth and the placing of Satan over the earth as the earth’s first provincial ruler.

The basic problem though with understanding the word meaning “generations” as *ages* in Eph. 3:5, limiting the time to Man’s Day, has to do with the thought that generations come and go during Man’s Day, but this *would NOT* be true relative to ages. The whole of Man’s Day — 6,000 years — actually covers *ONLY ONE age, NOT many ages as Eph. 3:5 in the KJV would lead one to believe.*

Scripture makes it quite clear that *ONLY* two ages exist within the framework of the 7,000 years foreshadowed by the seven days in Gen. 1:2b-2:3. One age covers the first 6,000 years, and the other age (the climactic age) covers the last 1,000 years.

To understand this within its Scriptural framework, note Matt. 12:31, 32. In these verses, reference is made to two ages, connected with what is called “the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit [attributing to Christ an exercise of supernatural power emanating from Satan rather than from the Holy Spirit].” And the sin of committing this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit by the religious leaders in Israel was such that it *would NOT* be forgiven them, “neither in this

world [‘age’], neither in the world [‘age’ (not in the Greek text, but implied)] to come” (v. 32).

That is, there would be NO forgiveness during either the age in which they lived or in the age which would follow. And, the action by the religious leaders in Israel (looked upon in a larger sense as action by the entire nation), followed by Christ’s announcement to them, forms the major turning point in Matthew’s gospel.

It was on “the same day” in which this occurred that “Jesus went out of the house [alluding to *the house of Israel*], and sat by the seaside [alluding to *the Gentiles*]” (Matt. 13:1; cf. Dan. 7:2, 3; Matt. 23:38; Rev. 13:1). It was also on this same day that Christ began to teach extensively through the use of parables.

Then it was shortly after these things occurred that the Church was first mentioned and the ministry of Christ moved more toward the thought of the Cross rather than the Crown (cf. Matt. 16:17-23; 17:22, 23; 20:17-19).

And then, anticipated by all the preceding, the announcement was subsequently made by Christ in Matt. 21:43 that the kingdom (the proffered heavenly sphere of the kingdom which had been rejected) would be taken from Israel and would be given “to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof.”

The two ages referred to in Matt. 12:32 cover 7,000 years of time — the age covering Man’s Day, and the age covering the Messianic Era. And this is quite easy to illustrate.

Looking Forward in Time

Note the account of the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-30. This ruler approached Christ with the question, “Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” (v. 17). And Christ told him *EXACTLY* what he *MUST* do (vv. 19-21).

Christ’s answer had to do with obedience to that which God had commanded, *denying self, taking up one’s cross, and*

following Christ (cf. Matt. 16:24-27).

Contextually, the words “eternal life” in verse seventeen could be better translated, “life for the age.” The word “eternal” in the English text is a translation of the Greek word *aionios* (the adjective form of the noun *aion*, meaning “age”).

Confusion can only result when a person attempts to read into this passage that which is not there, while ignoring that which is there. The subject *is entrance into the kingdom during the coming age, NOT eternal life which exists during the present age and extends throughout all the following ages* (the present age, the Messianic Era, and all the ages beyond).

And, verse thirty clearly shows that “age” has to be the correct understanding of *aionios* in verse seventeen. In verse thirty, following the translation in most English versions, Christ refers to “eternal life” in the “world to come [some versions translate, ‘age to come’]” (cf. KJV, NASB, NIV). The overall thought set forth in the various translations of this verse though *is NOT* what the Greek text states at all.

In the Greek text, *aion* and *aionios* both appear together, referring to the same period of time. *Aion* has been translated “world” (or correctly, “age,” in some versions); and *aionios* has invariably been translated “eternal” (as in v. 17).

The latter part of Mark 10:30, climaxing Christ’s dealings with the rich young ruler, should literally read, “...and in the age to come age-lasting life,” or, “...and in the age to come life for that age.”

“Eternal life,” as previously stated, *is NOT even in view. There is NO such thing as inheriting “eternal life” in the “age to come [or ‘world to come’ as some translations erroneously read].”*

Eternal life is NOT inherited; it is a free gift, and it is a present possession rather than a future hope. The possession of eternal life (present) and coming into possession of an inheritance (future) — both spoken of numerous times

in Scripture — *are two different things entirely*. That which is in view in Mark 10:17-30 is an inheritance with Christ as co-heir in the 1,000-year kingdom during the coming age.

But that which needs to be seen here is the fact that there is a reference *to the SAME two ages* referred to in Matt. 12:32. The coming age, in Mark 10:30, *IS* specifically identified as the Messianic Era; and the present age, in existence at a time preceding Calvary in Matt. 12:32, lasts *UNTIL* the Messianic Era.

Looking Back in Time

Now, with that in mind, note several Scriptures which show that the age in existence at a time prior to Calvary — an age which extends forward to the Messianic Era (extends forward to the end of Man's Day, to the Lord's Day) — also extends back to the very beginning of Man's Day.

That is, comparing several other references with Matt. 12:32 and Mark 10:17, 30, it can unquestionably be shown that *ONE age covers the whole of Man's Day*.

“As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets, which have been since the world [‘the age’] began” (Luke 1:70).

“Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world [‘the age’]” (Acts 15:18).

The word “prophet” (Luke 1:70; *cf.* Acts 3:21) is used in Scripture in a somewhat broader sense than it is usually thought of today. The word appears quite often (about 150 times in the N.T.) and is used as a title given to the person whom the Lord had chosen to communicate — “announce,” “declare” — His message to the people.

And the message need not necessarily be prophetic per se for the title “prophet” to be used of the messenger. This title is used referring to those chosen at different times to

declare the will and purpose of God through either a written revelation or a verbal expression. It is used of individuals preceding the existence of the nation of Israel (Jude 14), of individuals in Israel (Matt. 23:37; Luke 24:27), of individuals in the first century Church prior to the completion of the canon of Scripture (I Cor. 12:28; 13:9, 10; Eph. 4:11), and of individuals in Israel once again yet future (Joel 2:27, 28; Rev. 11:3, 10).

In this respect, all of those chosen to write portions of the Word of God, beginning with Moses and ending with John, could be called “prophets.” And others, such as Enoch or Noah who communicated the message of God to the people of their day — though they were not chosen to write particular sections of Scripture — could also be looked upon after this same fashion (*cf.* II Peter 2:5; Jude 14). In fact, this word, in its strict Scriptural usage, could be used referring to certain individuals all the way back to and including Adam himself.

The age in which Jesus lived at the time of His earthly ministry is, thus, not only seen in Scripture extending forward to the beginning of the Messianic Era but it is also seen extending back to the beginning of man’s existence on the earth. Understanding the way *aion* (age) is used in Luke 1:70 and Acts 15:18 (*cf.* John 9:32; Acts 3:21), a person can arrive at *ONLY one conclusion*. The present age, looking back in time, covers the entire period of the “prophets,” which, of necessity, would have to include *NOT ONLY* Enoch (who “prophesied” over 1,500 years prior to the appearance of Moses [Jude 14]), *BUT* also Adam.

The Complete Picture

God knew all of His works which would transpire within the framework of the ages at the time of man’s creation (Acts 15:18). And this was something known at a prior time when

He designed and made the ages with the thought in mind that His Son would, in the climactic age of the sequence of ages in view, *inherit* “all things” (Heb. 1:2).

And God — being both Omniscient and the Architect of the ages — in order to make His will known and reveal events transpiring during the ages, simply “spake by the mouth of his holy prophets [revealing His plans and purposes],” *beginning with Adam*.

Accordingly, at least three ages in relation to the present heavens and earth can be seen in Scripture.

At least one age (and there may have been more than one) existed between the creation of the heavens and the earth in Gen. 1:1 and the beginning of the restoration of the ruined creation in Gen. 1:2b.

Then another age began at that point, which covers the next 6,000 years.

And, to bring the first sequence of ages to a close, the climactic age of the ages will be ushered in at the completion of the 6,000 years, an age which will cover the next 1,000 years.

Then, at the end of the 1,000-year Messianic Era, the present heavens and earth (heavens associated with the earth, not the universe as a whole) will be destroyed and be replaced with a new heavens and a new earth; and a new age will begin (which will be the first in an apparent new sequence of ages).

How long that new age will last is unrevealed. But it will have a beginning point and an ending point. And following that age will be another age, and then another, and then another, forming an unending God-designed and arranged sequence of ages, comprising eternity.

PART II
Dispensations

DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN AGES AND DISPENSATIONS

“Dispensations” is the term used in Scripture *to show distinctions in God’s dealings with different groups of mankind during Man’s Day and the following Messianic Era*. The term “dispensations” though is not synonymous with *ages*. One age covers the whole of Man’s Day, and another age covers the succeeding Messianic Era; but, there are more than two dispensations within the scope of these two ages.

The word “dispensation” is the translation of the Greek word, *oikonomia*. A cognate form of the word is *oikonomos*, which is made up of two words — *oikos* (house) and *nemo* (to manage). Thus, *oikonomos* has to do with *the management of a house* — a central person placed in charge, with others holding responsible positions in the house under this person. And *oikonomia* (the word used for “dispensation”) carries the same basic meaning.

Oikonomia has been translated “stewardship” in three instances in the New Testament (Luke 16:2-4, KJV); and the word actually only appears six other times, translated “dispensation” (KJV) four of the six times (I Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; I Tim. 1:4).

“Stewardship” has to do with *household management*. Christians are stewards in this respect since they are members of a household, have been placed in charge of a portion of the Owner’s goods, and are expected to manage those goods within the household (under the leadership of the Holy Spirit) after such a fashion that there will be an increase (*cf.* Matt. 25:14ff; Luke 19:12ff).

Thus, “a dispensation” simply has to do with *the management of the Lord’s household affairs through those whom He has placed in His house (stewards)*. And when there is a *stewardship* change within God’s dealing with mankind, there is, correspondingly, a change in *the dispensation*. This would have to be the case, for *stewardship* and *dispensation* are synonymous in this respect.

Within the scope of the 7,000 years set forth through that foreshadowed by the seven days in Gen. 1:2b-2:3, there are at least four different dispensations. There is a present dispensation (during which God is dealing with Christians), there were at least two past dispensations (one in which God dealt with Israel, and the other in which He dealt with mankind at large [through those in the loins of Abraham] prior to His dealings with Israel), and there is a future dispensation (the Messianic Era).

Then, the period prior to the creation of Adam in which Satan ruled over the earth apart from a successor being present could probably be called a dispensation in the strict sense of the word (for a stewardship did exist, one in which Satan rebelled against the Lord within his assigned position and trust). And on the other side of the 7,000 years a similar situation will exist with respect to the thought of dispensations, with man, at that time, occupying positions in God’s government of the universe.

However, time and events both before and after the 7,000 years are spoken of in Scripture *ONLY* to an extent which will allow man to properly understand time and events during the 7,000 years. Scripture deals centrally with the latter, having very little to say about the former.

Thus, to speak of dispensations outside the framework of the 7,000 years is doing little more than surmising. There is very little revelation to work with in this respect, and the subject has been mentioned only to carry some continuity

of thought from the past age or ages into the 7,000 years, and then from the 7,000 years into the future ages.

The Normal Dispensational Outlook

When referring to dispensations, *The Scofield Reference Bible* is usually looked to more than any other source, for its references follow, to a large extent, a dispensational framework set up in different places in the footnotes. And this is the same dispensational framework which is usually taught in Bible colleges and seminaries when viewing Scripture after a dispensational fashion.

Footnotes in *The Scofield Reference Bible* call attention to seven dispensations:

1) *Innocence*, from the creation to the fall; 2) *Conscience*, from the fall to the Flood; 3) *Human Government*, from the Flood to the call of Abraham; 4) *Promise*, from the call of Abraham to the giving of the Law at Sinai under Moses; 5) *Law*, from Sinai to Calvary; 6) *Grace*, from Calvary to the Kingdom; and 7) *Kingdom*, the 1000-year Messianic Era.

The preceding though, in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, is based on an incorrect understanding of what constitutes a dispensation. In this reference Bible, a dispensation is defined as “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God” (footnote for heading of Gen. 1:28ff).

Then, relative to “the dispensation of the fulness of times” in Eph. 1:10, a footnote in the *The Scofield Reference Bible* states, “This, the seventh and last of the ordered ages which condition human life on the earth...”

(The preceding quotations were taken from *The Scofield Reference Bible* of 1917, the original edition. The same definition of a dispensation was retained by the editors in *The New Scofield Reference Bible* of 1967, the updated edition; but the

footnote commenting on “the dispensation of the fulness of times” in Eph. 1:10 was deleted in the later edition.)

Thus, in both editions of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, there is an incorrect definition of a dispensation. And in the original edition, in the footnote commenting on Eph. 1:10, “dispensation” and “age” are looked upon as synonymous, *i.e.*, the seven dispensations are set forth as seven ages.

This is probably the point to which a high percentage of the existing confusion concerning both dispensations and ages can be traced, for footnotes in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, rather than Scripture itself, have established the mold for much of the dispensational thought in Christendom today. And this is also probably why the present dispensation is, more often than not, erroneously called “the Church Age” by many Christians.

The Scriptural Divisions

Using the strict definition of the Greek word *oikonomia* (dispensation), Scripture will logically divide itself into four dispensations during the 7,000 years extending from the creation of Adam to the end of the Messianic Kingdom. In I Cor. 10:32, mankind is divided into three groups, and God’s dealings with these three groups — separately during Man’s Day, and together during the coming Messianic Era — establish *the only* Biblical, dispensational scheme of the matter.

“Give none offence [‘do not be offensive,’ or ‘do not provide a cause for stumbling’], neither to *the Jews*, nor to *the Gentiles*, nor to *the Church of God*.”

God deals with mankind in cycles of time. There were, for example, 7-year, 70-year (7X10), and 490-year (7X7X10) cycles in which He dealt with Israel (Ex. 31:13-17; Jer. 25:11, 12; Dan. 9:2, 24-27), and these cycles occurred within a larger

2,000-year cycle in which He dealt (and will deal) with the nation (seven years yet remain — the seven years comprising the coming Tribulation, Daniel's unfulfilled Seventieth Week — to complete not only a final 490-year cycle but the full 2,000-year cycle).

There are actually three of these 2,000-year cycles (though only one pertains to Israel); and the three 2,000-year cycles, comprising the whole of Man's Day — covering God's dealings with the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church of God (His dealings with each occurring separately within one of the 2,000-year cycles) — is followed by the last cycle of time, lasting 1,000 years.

This will be the 1,000-year Messianic Era in which God will deal with the Jews, the Gentiles and the Church of God together at the same time. And all of this has been foreshadowed by the seven days which God placed at the very beginning of His revelation to man, in Gen. 1:2b-2:3.

That would be to say, God, throughout the 6,000 years comprising Man's Day, deals with the three divisions of mankind on an equal-time basis — for 2,000 years each.

Then, following the 6,000 years, He will continue His dealings with these three divisions on an equal-time basis. He will deal with all three together, at the same time, for 1,000 years. And these divisions (*three* divisions of mankind, dealt with during *four* time periods) form the dispensational divisions *which Scripture itself provides*. This is how four dispensations logically fit into the 7,000-years, foreshadowed at the beginning, in Gen. 1:2b-2:3.

God began His actions after this fashion through dealing with mankind at large — through what would be considered His 2000-year dealings with the Gentiles — though during the first 2,000 years of human history there was, in the strict sense of the word, no such thing as Gentiles. "A Gentile" in Scripture is simply *someone who is not a Jew (or today, when*

the expression "in Christ" is used, not a Christian as well [Gal. 3:28]; and prior to the call of Abraham and the separate creation which emanated from his seed through Isaac and Jacob (Isa. 43:1), a division within mankind of this nature did not, it could not, exist.

However, God's dealings with mankind in general during the first 2,000 years of human history was, in the main, with those who would later be looked upon as Gentiles. And His dealings with this division of mankind must either be placed in the first 2,000-year period or not be placed at all.

Or, to turn that around, the first 2,000-year period must either relate to the Gentiles or not relate to any one of the three divisions of mankind.

Then God dealt another 2,000 years (seven years yet remain) with those called Jews, or Hebrews (Abraham was not a "Jew" [a name derived from Judah], but he was the first person in Scripture called a "Hebrew," with his descendants being called "Hebrews" [a name thought to mean "the one who crossed over," *i.e.*, crossed over the Euphrates en route to the land to which he had been called, with his descendants looked upon as having crossed over with him, in his loins — Gen. 14:13; 40:15; 43:32; Ex. 2:11; Joshua 24:2, 3]).

After that, which brings us into the present 2,000 years, God is dealing with *a new creation* "in Christ" — with Christians — called into existence for a specific, revealed purpose. And we are today living very near the end of the present two millennia, which would also place man (Jew, Gentile, and Christian) very near the end of the entire triad of three 2,000-year periods.

That which will end the 6,000 years though, as previously shown, is not the completion of the present 2,000-year period but the completion of the previous 2,000-year period (for seven years yet remain to complete that period, which will occur after the completion of the present period).

This previous 2,000-year period will be completed through the fulfillment of Daniel's full Seventy Weeks. One Week — the Seventieth Week — remains, which comprises the coming seven-year Tribulation.

THEN, and ONLY THEN, will God deal with all three divisions of mankind together, at the same time. *And He will, at that time, deal with these three divisions after this fashion for 1,000 years, completing the full 7,000 years.*

Thus, Scripture begins with a 2,000-year dispensation having to do with God's dealing with the Gentiles; it continues with another 2,000-year dispensation having to do with God's dealings with the Jews; it continues with another 2,000-year dispensation having to do with God's dealings with Christians; and it concludes the full 7,000 years with a 1,000-year dispensation in which God will deal with all three groups of mankind together at the same time.

This is the manner in which Scripture naturally divides itself in a dispensational respect, which is in perfect keeping with the framework of time foreshadowed by the six and seven days opening the Book of Genesis. And following these natural divisions is really the best way to divide the whole of Scripture to show an overall dispensational picture which can be easily understood:

- 1) From Adam to Abraham (2,000 years).
- 2) From Abraham to Calvary, plus the future seven-year Tribulation (2,000 years).
- 3) From Calvary (or, more specifically, from Pentecost fifty days following Christ's resurrection) to the Tribulation (2,000 years).
- 4) Then 1,000 years toward which everything will have moved since God, in the beginning, "made the worlds ['the ages']" (Heb. 1:2).