

DISPENSATIONS

AS DISTINGUISHED FROM "AGES"

By Arlen L. Chirwood

"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 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 with the latter almost exclusively, 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 1909, 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 enroute 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 millenniums, 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).

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