

# DISPENSATIONALISM

## 1. Definition of a *Dispensation*

- A. A *dispensation* may be defined as *a stewardship or administration*.
- B. Definitions by some Bible scholars and teachers:
  1. “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.” (C. I. Scofield)
  2. “The word ‘dispensation’ bears one significance, and means ‘an administration,’ whether of a house, or property, of a state, or a nation, or as in our present study, ‘the administration of the human race or any part of it, at any given time.’ Just as a parent would govern his household in different ways, according to varying necessity, yet ever for one good end, so God has at different times dealt with men in different ways, according to the necessity of the case, but throughout for one great, grand end.” (Scroggie)
  3. “An economy is an ordered condition of things....There are various economies running through the Word of God. A dispensation, or economy, then, is that particular order or condition of things prevailing in one special age which does not necessarily prevail in another.” (H. A. Ironside)
  4. “The word ‘dispensation’ means literally a ‘stewardship’ or ‘administration’ or an ‘economy.’ Therefore, in its Biblical usage, a ‘dispensation’ is ‘a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God’s Mind and will which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given’.” (Clarence E. Mason)
  5. “A dispensation is God’s distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life, or a responsibility for managing God’s affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation.” (Paul David Nevin)
- C. To summarize: “Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these economies are the dispensations. The understanding of God’s differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.” (Charles C. Ryrie)

## 2. Features and Characteristics of a Dispensation

### A. Four features of a dispensation based on the parable of the steward (Luke 16:1-8)

1. There are “two parties” involved....one who delegates duties and one who is responsible to carry out the duties (vs. 1a)
2. There are “specific responsibilities”....the steward failed (vs. 1b)
3. There is “accountability” ....the steward had to give an account (vs. 2)
4. The “stewardship can end”....the steward was dismissed (vs. 2)

### B. Two primary characteristics of a dispensation

1. The governing relationship into which God enters with the world
2. The resulting responsibility on mankind in this relationship
3. Example: At the giving of the Law God’s governing relationship was through the Ten Commandments (i.e., Mosaic code) and mankind (the nation of Israel) was responsible to conform to that code.

### C. Three secondary characteristics of a dispensation

1. There is a TEST...when God entrusts to man a new revelation concerning His method of running the affairs of the world, there is a test to see if man will obey God’s revelation (by living according to the truth in that revelation).
2. There is FAILURE...it is a fact of Biblical history that man has failed to live up to the truth that God has given him in any given dispensation.
3. There is JUDGMENT...again, Biblical history shows that after man has failed to be a good steward of the revelation given to him God has judged them for it.
4. Example: When Israel was given the Law at Mt. Sinai, they were TESTED to see if they would comply with the Law. We know that they FAILED to keep the Law and to allow the Law to show them that they were sinners in need of a Savior (see Romans 3:19, 20). Because of this God JUDGED them by (temporarily) setting them aside (see Romans 11).

### D. The underlying characteristic of “*progressive revelation*.”

1. Progressive revelation is the recognition that God’s message to man was not given in one single act and at one time, but through successive ages (see John 1: 17; Hebrews 1:1, 2), which we call dispensations.

### 3. The Seven Dispensations

#### A. First of all, Scripture only mentions *two* specifically:

1. Ephesians 3:2; Col. 1:25, 26....the Dispensation of GRACE (the Church Age)
2. Ephesians 1:10....the Dispensation of the Kingdom (the Millennium)

#### B. Seven Dispensations implied in Scripture:

##### 1. The *Dispensation of Innocence*....Genesis 1:26-3:24

- A. The TEST...Not to eat of the tree in the midst of the garden...Gen. 2:16, 17
- B. The FAILURE...They ate the forbidden fruit...Gen. 3:6
- C. The JUDGMENT...God drove them out of Eden...Gen. 3:22-24

##### 2. The *Dispensation of Conscience*....Genesis 3:7, 22, 4:1-7:24

- A. The TEST...To obey the dictates of their conscience...Romans 2:15
- B. The FAILURE...Corruption & violence filled the earth...Gen. 6:5, 11, 12
- C. The JUDGMENT...God destroyed the earth with a flood...Gen. 7: 11, 12, 23

##### 3. The *Dispensation of Human Government*....Genesis 8:15-11:9

- A. The TEST...To govern the earth and those on it...Gen. 9:1-7
- B. The FAILURE...Men became independent of God...Gen. 11:1-4
- C. The JUDGMENT...God confounded their languages...Gen. 11:5-9

##### 4. The *Dispensation of Promise*...Genesis 11:10-Exodus 18:27

- A. The TEST...To remain in the Land and serve God...Gen. 12:1-3; 26:1-4
- B. The FAILURE...Jacob led the people into Egypt...Gen. 45:25-28; 46:5-7
- C. The JUDGMENT...God brought them into bondage...Exodus 1:7-14

##### 5. The *Dispensation of Law*...Exodus 19:1-Acts 1:26

- A. The TEST...To keep the Law...Exo. 19:1-8; Rom. 10:5; James 2:10
- B. The FAILURE...They broke the Law...Rom. 2:17-23; 3:19, 20
- C. The JUDGMENT...They were dispersed and set aside...2 Kings 17; 2 Kings 25; Romans 11

##### 6. The *Dispensation of Grace*...Acts 2:1-Revelation 19:21

- A. The TEST...To accept God's offer of salvation freely...John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47
- B. The FAILURE...Most people reject God's salvation...Matt. 7:13, 14
- C. The JUDGMENT...God judges all Christ-rejectors...Rev. 6:1-19:21

7. The *Dispensation of the Kingdom*...Revelation 20:1-6; 21:9-22:5

- A. The TEST...To obey the King and His laws...Psalm 72:1-11
- B. The FAILURE...Many will rebel against the King...Rev. 20:7-9a
- C. The JUDGMENT...God will judge them with fire...Rev. 20:9, 11-15

4. Interpretation and Dispensationalism

- A. Dispensationalists interpret the Bible literally, which results in recognizing distinctions in Scripture, such as the difference between *Israel* and the *Church*, as well as recognizing the different dispensations in the working out of God's purposes.
- B. Non-dispensationalists do NOT interpret all Scripture literally and because of this they fail to see these distinctions. For example they see Israel as the Church of the Old Testament and they apply unfulfilled prophecies that were given to Israel to the Church today; they believe the promises to Israel of reigning with their Messiah are being fulfilled in the Church today.
- C. If we interpret literally Isaiah 65:17-25; 66:10-24, Rom. 11:15-29 and Rev. 20:1-6, we must believe that God's promises to Israel regarding a literal kingdom here on earth, with Jerusalem as the center of God's government, will be fulfilled in the "dispensation of the fulness of times" (the Millennium).

5. Salvation and Dispensationalism

- A. Non-dispensationalists charge dispensationalists with teaching salvation by works in some dispensations (especially in the "dispensation of Law").
- B. Here are 3 replies (by prominent dispensationalists) to this charge:
  1. "The Law was not proposed as a means of life....it neither justifies the sinner nor sanctifies a believer" (C. I. Scofield)
  2. "Salvation has always been, as it is now, purely a gift of God in response to faith" (Pettingill)
  3. "The *basis* of salvation in every age is *the death of Christ*; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is *faith*; the *object* of faith in every age is *God*; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations" (anonymous)
- C. Three examples of sinners justified by faith in the Old Testament:
  1. Abel (Gen. 4:3, 4 with Heb. 11:4)...Abraham (Gen. 15:1-6 with Rom. 4:1-3)  
David (Psalm 32:1, 2 with Rom. 4:6-8)

