



INTRODUCTION TO DISPENSATIONS

Definition

A dispensation is the way God has chosen to manage His household during the course of human history. God deals with men in different ways at different times. For instance, animal sacrifices, temple worship, and the Mosaic Law characterized the Jewish Age, whereas grace, the ministries of the Holy Spirit, and the formation of the body of Christ characterize the present Church Age. The word *dispensation* is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *oikonomia*, a compound noun composed of two Greek words: *oikos* 'house' and *nemo* 'to manage.' It's used of both human and divine government; specifically, of managing a household, estate, property, money, a nation, or, in our case, the world.

Seven Dispensations

Innocence or Perfection: from the creation of man to the fall of man (Gen. 1:26–3:6)

Conscience or Self-Determination: from the fall of man to the flood (Gen. 3:7–8:19)

Human Government or Civil Government: from the flood to the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 8:20–11:9)

Promise or Patriarchal Rule: from the call of Abraham to the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai (Gen. 11:10–Exod. 19:2)

Law or Mosaic Law: from the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai to the day of Pentecost (Exod. 19:3–Acts 1:26) and from the rapture of the Church to the binding of Satan at the end of the Tribulation (Rev. 4:1–20:3)

Grace: from the day of Pentecost to the rapture of the Church (Acts 2:1–Rev. 3:22)

Kingdom or Millennium: from the binding of Satan to the destruction of the present heavens and earth (Rev. 20:4–21:1)

Importance of Making Dispensational Distinctions

Bible verses must be interpreted dispensationally. For each verse you need to ask the following questions: What period of time does this verse refer to? When does this event take place? Where does it best fit in God's plan for human history? Failure to

do this results in (1) an inability to harmonize many biblical passages, (2) contradictions and confusion, (3) misapplications of Scripture, (4) an inconsistent eschatology (scheme of prophecy), and (5) avoiding the whole subject of prophecy (about one-fourth of the Bible).

The following is a good example. Isaiah 2:4 says, "And they will hammer their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation, And never again will they learn war." This is a favorite verse of the peace movement. It's carved, for instance, on the cornerstone of the United Nations building in New York City. But Joel 3:9–10 says just the opposite: "Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare for war; rouse the mighty men! Let all the soldiers draw near, let them come up! Beat your plowshares into swords, And your pruning hooks into spears." How do we resolve this conflict? By interpreting these verses dispensationally. You have to ask, What time periods do they refer to? The first occurs in a

millennial passage whereas the second occurs in a tribulational passage—one that invites all the nations to participate in Armageddon.

Characteristics of Dispensations

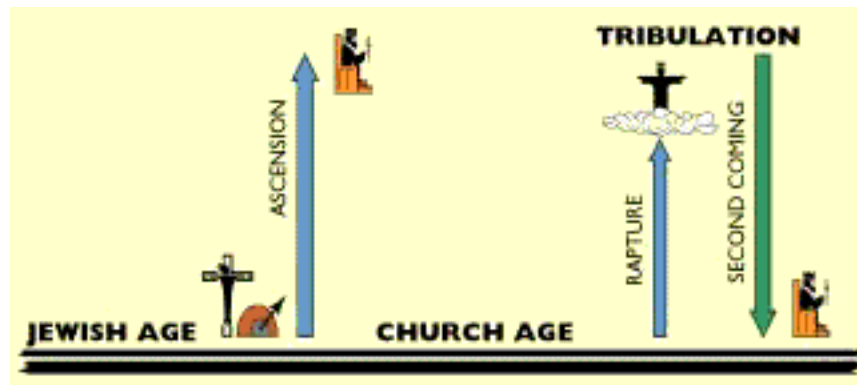
1. Dispensations vary in length.

The dispensation of Conscience, for instance, lasted 1656 years (from adding the ages of the antediluvian patriarchs), Law about 1470 years, Grace is now approaching 2000 years, the Tribulation will last 7 years, and the Kingdom for a thousand years.

2. God tests men in various ways during these different periods of time.

Each dispensation provides a different condition under which man's obedience is tested. Innocence: obedience in perfect environment. Conscience: following the dictates of the human conscience. Human Government: obeying the laws of man. Promise: faith in God's promises. Law: obedience in a theocratic kingdom and to the Mosaic Law. Grace: appreciation for blessings bestowed "in Christ." Tribulation: obedience in an unrestrained Satanic government. Kingdom: obedience in a perfect Messianic government.

3. In each dispensation God comes down to earth.



Innocence: God came "walking in the garden" (Gen. 3:8). Conscience: God talked with Noah (Gen. 6:13–7:5) and closed the door to the ark (Gen. 7:15–16). Human Government: "The LORD came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built" (Gen. 11:5) and "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language" (Gen. 11:7). Promise: God ratified a covenant with Abraham by passing through dismembered animals (Gen. 15:8–21, esp. 15:17) and God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exod. 3:2–4:17, esp. 3:8). Law: at the beginning of this dispensation God came down upon Mount Sinai to give the Law to Moses and to Israel (Exod. 19:11, 18, 20) and, near the end of this dispensation, God's own Son became incarnate (John 1:14). Grace: at the beginning of this dispensation God sent the Holy Spirit from heaven to be a Helper (1 Peter 1:12) and, at the end of this dispensation, "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven" (1 Thess. 4:16). Tribulation: the second coming of Christ. Kingdom: Jesus Christ is personally present on earth to rule over His kingdom for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4, 6).

4. Each dispensation begins with new revelation from God.

At the beginning of each dispensation God gives new instructions, commands, promises, and principles to men. A dispensation is, from man's viewpoint, "a responsibility to the particular revelation given at the time" (Ryrie). Therefore, things valid in one dispensation may not be valid in another. Former commands may cease, continue in effect, or be replaced with new commands. When the dispensation of Grace began, for example, many older commands were annulled (animal sacrifices, festivals, Sabbath observance, dietary laws), many continued to be valid (not taking revenge, feeding your enemies, being angry without sinning), and many began for the first time (walk in the Spirit, be filled with the Spirit).

5. Each dispensation begins with believers.

Innocence: Adam and Eve. Conscience: a redeemed Adam and Eve. Human Government: Noah, his wife, his three sons (Ham, Shem, Japheth), and their wives. Promise: promises made to Abraham. Law: God gave the Law to Moses. Grace: on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out upon 120 believers, both men and women, who were waiting and praying in an upper room in Jerusalem (comp. Acts 1:12–15 with 2:1–4). Kingdom: surviving tribulational saints.

6. Each dispensation ends in man's failure.

Innocence: ends in Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6). Conscience: ends with man refusing to follow the dictates of his conscience (Gen. 4:8; 23–24; 6:5; 11:13). Human Government: proves human laws and law enforcement are not enough to keep men from sinning. Promise: shows the desires of the flesh are stronger than the promise of future blessings. Law: proves sin increases when there are laws (Rom. 5:20). Grace: shows that God Himself living inside men is not enough to keep man from sinning. Tribulation: ends in widespread acceptance of the Antichrist. Kingdom: proves perfect government and perfect environment

are not the answer to man's problems.

7. Each dispensation ends in a world crisis.

Innocence: man falls (Gen 3:6–7), the animal kingdom (3:14), the woman (3:16), and the ground (3:17–19) are cursed; Adam and Eve die spiritually (2:17); man is expelled from the Garden of Eden (3:22–24). Conscience: the flood destroys the antediluvian civilization (Gen. 6:7, 13, 17; 7:4, 21–23). Human Government: confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel and scattering of the people "over the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:6–9). Promise: the Exodus was a crisis for Egypt—the land was destroyed by a series of plagues, the firstborn died, and their entire army destroyed in the Reed Sea (Exod. 12:29–30). (This is not a world crisis because God is dealing with one group of people—Israel. The rest of the world continues under human government.) Law: the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Grace: the rapture of the Church (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Tribulation: the second coming of Christ and the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 19:11–21). Kingdom: the final revolt (Rev. 20:7–9).

8. Each dispensation ends in judgment.

Innocence: Adam and Eve were found guilty of sin (Gen. 3:8–13). Conscience: God passed judgment on the antediluvian civilization because "the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence" (Gen. 6:3, 11). Human Government: God confused man's language and scattered them over the face of the earth (Gen. 11:6–9). Promise: The exodus generation was not allowed to enter into the promised land (Num. 14:22–35). Law: Jesus was judged for the sins of the world. Grace: After the Rapture all Church Age believers will appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:10–15; 2 Cor. 5:10). Tribulation: ends in the Judgment of the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25:31–46). Kingdom: ends in the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11–15).

9. Each dispensation is greater and more spectacular than the one before.

This means human history is getting better and better in terms of spiritual blessings. The blessings of the Sinaitic Covenant are superseded by the blessings of the New Covenant. The greatest blessings are reserved for the last dispensation—the Kingdom. For example, the Holy Spirit's ministry was selective and temporary in the Jewish Age; is universal and permanent in the Church Age, and reaches its greatest manifestation in the Millennium.