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## **DISPENSATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

**Ed Nichols**

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## DISPENSATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Several definitions of a dispensation exist. One definition is that "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."<sup>1</sup> Economy in this sense is used to show the relationship between God and man as it is played out through the ages of human history. Another definition is that "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."<sup>2</sup> This period of time is divided in the Scriptures into seven periods or dispensations. These dispensations begin with God creating Adam and end with the new heaven and new earth as written in Rev 21.1. These dispensations are sometimes identified as ages, however, the distinction between a dispensation and an age is that an age is a time period, whereas a dispensation is in reference to economy or stewardship and represents what Chafer calls "God's rule of life."<sup>3</sup> The economy takes place in the period of time but is not the dispensation.

The dispensations which are from the past are the first through the fifth dispensations. The present dispensation is the sixth dispensation. The future dispensation will be the seventh dispensation or Christ's return to reign. The seven dispensation mentioned in the Scriptures can be identified as innocence, conscience, government, promise, law, grace, and millennial kingdom. A dispensation begins with a divine appointment and ends with a divine judgment. The study of a dispensation is accomplished by using a literal interpretation of the Bible.

The first four dispensations are unique in that they precede Moses and the writing of the Bible. Consequently, not much is given about the first four pre-Mosaic dispensations. The Scriptures mainly deal with the last three dispensations of law, grace, and the kingdom. The first dispensation begins the "comprehensive view of God's great plan from Eternity to eternity."<sup>4</sup> Each dispensation begins with God placing man in a new position in his relationship to God and each dispensation ends with man failing God and results in God's judgment on man. This divine testing demonstrates the failure of man and his sinful nature. The result of these tests in each of the dispensations clearly exhibits God's grace which was extended to man in each of these dispensational periods.

The first dispensation is the dispensation of innocence. This period of dispensation of innocence brings with it the promise of a

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1Charles Ryrie. Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 29.

2The Scofield Reference Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 5.

3Lewis S. Chafer. Systematic Theology 2 vols. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1988), 209.

4Louis T. Talbot. God's Plan for the Ages (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.,

redeemer. The period of time in this dispensation begins with the creation of man and goes through to his expulsion from the garden of Eden. The rule of life in the first dispensation was that of innocence. Adam and Eve were to follow God in obedience and to accept the responsibility to do what God instructed them to do. They only had one prohibition, and that was not to eat of the tree of knowledge. They failed the test and God intervened on their behalf with grace, a sacrifice of blood shed for their redemption. God's judgment demanded death for all mankind because of man's nature and relationship with God in the first dispensation. The individuals involved in this period are Adam and Eve. They were to follow God's instructions completely and would have had everything they needed to enjoy life. For this first dispensation the Scriptures which apply to it are from Gen 1.26 through Gen 3.6.

The second dispensation of conscience is the period of time after Eden when no apparent rules were given to Adam and Eve. They were to follow the dictates of their conscience. This dispensation of conscience is a revealing of the need for a blood sacrifice offering. This is shown in the sacrifice made by Abel. Cain demonstrated his depravity and man's when he refused to provide the proper sacrifice. This period was the time between Adam and Eve's covenant with God and the flood which God delivered over the entire world. This period was a time of sinfulness and physical death because of man's depravity. The rule of life of conscience was difficult. It was easy to recognize the bidding of the conscience but hard to live up to it with the sin nature present in man. The depravity of Cain and his descendants failed God's test of conscience. Some of those involved in this time of testing who escaped God's judgment because of his grace were Enoch and Noah's family. They received salvation because they trusted God. For this second dispensation the Scriptures which apply to it are from Gen 3.7 through Gen 8.19.

This third dispensation of government is when God gave Noah the covenant concerning the flood, allowed him to continue to multiply, gave him dominion over animals, allowing him to kill and eat animals. This dispensation of government revealed the failure of men and their depravity caused them to rebel against God by building the Tower of Babel. This period was from Noah after the flood to the time of the dispersion of people due to God giving them diverse languages. The rule of life of government was not easily obtained and even Noah with his drunkenness, Ham's sin, and the moral religious depravity point to God's judgment of sinful man. The saving of a godly remnant is shown in Abram's preservation. It should be noted as well that saving Adam's seed also preserved conscience and government. For this third dispensation the Scriptures are from Gen 8.20 through Gen 11.9.

The fourth dispensation of promise was given to Abraham and was not recorded until Moses. This promise contained provisions for Israel to be a great nation and receive special blessings from God. This dispensation of promise is not dependent on humans. As such, it is an everlasting covenant in spite of man's sin. The promise included a blessing for all the earth through Abraham in the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ for the propitiation of man's failures to obey God. The period includes the Abrahamic Covenant and continues through to the giving of the Law. The promises given continue into other dispensations. The rule of life was to obey God and to accept His blessings. Some of the blessings included the promise land, spiritual blessings, and divine protection. Man's failure to trust God and His promises brought the Law. God continued his provision of divine redemption and blessing to Israel. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all their descendants demonstrated a lack of faith in God. For this fourth dispensation the Scriptures which apply to it are from Gen 11.9 through Exo 19.2.

The fifth dispensation of law was given to Israel and did not effect the Gentiles. It was a temporary condition and was predicated on Israel's obedience to the law. This dispensation of law was a system of works. All the people had to do was to follow the established religious requirements. The people failed the law and even forgot it. The period begins with Lot in Sodom and goes through to the day of Pentecost. The rule of life was a detailed religious system. All the Israelite people had to do was obey the law in its detailed system of works. The result was continued failure. The sacrificial system was provided for restoration from sin. However, the kings, judges, priests, and people of Israel proved that the Law could not bring righteousness. For this fifth dispensation the Scriptures which apply to it are from Exo 19.3 through to the cross.

The sixth dispensation of grace relates to all people as promised in both the Old and New Testaments. It is called the church age and the age of grace. It is a period of time when God is calling both Jews and Gentiles as His people. The dispensation of grace is related to the church. The period begins with Pentecost and continues through the New Testament to the rapture of the church. The rule of life in this dispensation is that of grace. Grace is the "church's special economy or stewardship."<sup>5</sup> With the coming of Christ, grace is provided and the supreme sacrifice for the salvation of man takes place. For this sixth dispensation the Scriptures which apply to it are from the day of Pentecost and will end with the rapture of the church.

In the book The Meaning of the Millennium, several authors debate the merits of pre-millennium, post-millennium, and amillennium views. The three views differ in circumstances surrounding the

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<sup>5</sup>Chafer, Systematic, 2:243.

return of Christ, but are clear that Christ is returning. This return takes place in this seventh dispensation. One of these authors, Dr. Herman Hoyt gives his view of dispensational premillennialism. He states that a golden age of civilization or a millennial kingdom "will be ushered in by a divine, supernatural and catastrophic manifestation from heaven at the Second Coming of Christ."<sup>6</sup> With the coming of Christ, grace is manifested by the supreme sacrifice for the salvation of man. The fulfillment of the new covenant reveals divine grace and salvation of man (Isa. 12).

Major prophecies deal with the dispensation of the kingdom. The period of the kingdom will begin at the second coming of Christ and will end when He establishes the New Jerusalem. The rule of life in this dispensation will be to obey the King. It will be a theocratic rule. The fulfillment of the new covenant reveals all of God's divine grace in salvation of mankind. In spite of man's attempt to please God, this dispensation will end in a failure like all the rest. For this seventh dispensation the Scriptures which apply to it are from the second coming of Christ and will end with the destruction of the world and the creation of the new heaven and new earth prophesied in Rev 21.1-4. The Scripture references which have been used in these seven dispensations are that which appear in Chafer's Systematic Theology,<sup>7</sup> and may not reflect the thinking of other theologians and students of the Bible. The only conclusion can be that the Scriptures reveal throughout all seven dispensations that God's grace is greater than all sin.

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<sup>6</sup>Robert G. Clouse, ed., The Meaning of the Millennium (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup>Chafer, Systematic, 2:211-217.

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**The Dilemma of Sin.**

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