

# **Orientation to Dispensations**

By Emil E. Schmidt

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II Timothy 2:15 - "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Knowing the system by which God has divided up Human History is of great importance if one is to understand the Word of God within it's own context. Failure to grasp the context of any given text ultimately leads to a misunderstanding and misapplication of the text.

While this is not an exhaustive study, it is anticipated that light will be shed upon the subject and the issues at hand.

## **Definition of Terminology:**

1. Dispensation - Gk. Word - oikonomia, administration, as the administrative activity of a household, an owner of property, or a steward. In our framework of study; A dispensation is a period of time in Human History expressed in terms of Divine revelation, during which God deals in a particular way with man regarding sin, God's solution to sin and man's responsibility to respond to that solution. The word "dispensation" is used in I Cor. 9:17, Eph. 1:10, 3:2, Col. 1:25.
2. Age - Gk. Word - aion,
  1. A very long time or eternity.
  2. A segment of time:
    - Ages past.
    - The present age.
    - The age to come.
    - The age of ages.
    - The end of ages.
3. The term is connected with life. It includes a reference to life filling time or a space of time.
4. An age then is time in which the history or life of the world is accomplished.

For this study we will see the time periods from the standpoint of Administrative Activity (oikonomia) and life with it's Activity (aion). These two terms will give the basic understanding to Dispensational Orientation.

Every dispensation after the fall of man is marked by the need for salvation by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Before the cross the sacrifices of animals were a shadow of what was to come Heb. 8:1-7, 10:1, after the cross we look back to it's provision for our redemption.

Every dispensation has it's distinctive tests, failures, and victories. Notice however, that God has not set the Human Race aside because of failure but has intensified the expression of His grace.

The ultimate for an individual in any dispensation is acceptance of God's provision in salvation and application of the Bible Doctrine provided.

God has given certain administrative responsibility to mankind in every dispensation.

We will deal with four Basic Dispensations; several will be broken down into specific periods of time.

The Four Dispensations:

1. Dispensation of the Gentiles.
2. Dispensation of Israel (Jews).
3. Dispensation of the Church (Grace).
4. Dispensation of Christ (Millennium).

The various periods in these Dispensations:

1. Dispensation of the Gentiles:
  - Period of Innocence.
  - Period of Conscience.
  - Period of Human Government.
2. Dispensation of Israel:
  - Period of the Family (Israel being born).
  - Period of the Law (Israel as a Nation).
  - The Tribulation (70th week of Daniel after the period of Intercalation). Intercalation means - to be inserted between the original and usual elements. The Church is inserted between period 2 and 3 of the Dispensation of Israel.
3. Dispensation of the Church (Grace):
  - Pre-Canon Period.
  - Post-Canon Period.
4. Dispensation of Christ (Millennium).

In Eternity Past, before time was established, God created the Heaven and the Earth, Gen. 1:1. The earth became without form and void, Gen. 1:2. This quite apparently had something to do with the fall of Satan and those Angels who followed him in the angelic rebellion, Isa. 14:13-14.

In Genesis 1:3-2:3 we have the account of the restoration of the Earth as a habitable place for man, we have the creation of time, evening and morning, day and night. Plant life is brought forth from the earth and animal and Human Life is created.

### **The Dispensation of the Gentiles:**

The Dispensation of the Gentiles is marked by the creation of man at it's beginning, and ending with the Tower of Babel and it's judgment by the confusion of the languages. There is no racial distinction of Jew or Gentile during this period and since God takes one man and starts a new race! (Jews) with him, we will designate all of mankind before Abram as Gentiles.

We will see responsibilities and tests in the 3 periods included in the Dispensation of the Gentiles. The three periods are: 1. Innocence, 2. Conscience, 3. Human Government.

### **The Period of Innocence:**

During the Period of Innocence man is in a sinless state, Genesis 1:27-3:24. He is neither righteous nor a sinner, but simply innocent of sin and therefore had continual fellowship with God until sin entered, Gen. 3:8-10.

During this period of time God made a covenant with man, it is called the Edenic Covenant, Genesis 1:28-30, 2:8-9, 15-17. This covenant was conditional. Freedom of choice was the test. It was given so that man might freely choose to continue in fellowship with God. However if he would fall the test, this fellowship would be broken and he would be subject to Satan and his system.

In Gen. 3:1-13 we find the record that man failed the test. Satan questioned the truthfulness of God Gen. 3:1 and man allowed that questioning to become rejection of God. (In Psa. 1:1 we are told to remove ourselves from the places of temptation and walk in the light of God's Word.) The first temptation of man included questioning God's Word Gen. 3:4-5. Once the sin had taken place Gen. 3:6, man starts to use a similar system of deceit to escape the consequences of sin Gen. 3:13. Adam entered into the sin with Eve which resulted in the conclusion of the period of Innocence. Now mankind is under the curse, established as helpless sinners, expelled from the Garden and fellowship with God is broken.

### **The Period of Conscience:**

The period of Conscience opens with mankind having experiential knowledge of sin. The Adamic Covenant is made by God Gen. 3:15. The Adamic Covenant provides the solution for the sin of man, and shows God's mercy in action.

This period of time lasts from the fall of man to the flood in Noah's time, approx. 1656 years. It's activity is documented in Gen. 3:23 - 7:24. The Conscience becomes the guiding factor for all of mankind's choices between right and wrong.

In this period we notice however that the Conscience, even though it may produce fear and remorse, cannot keep man from sin, nor does it resolve the problems that sin brings. Therefore the Conscience does not acquit the guilty, but makes accusations or excuses.

Man's basic responsibility is illustrated in the "story of Cain and Abel in Gen. 4:3-16. The story indicates God's prescribed sacrifice for a sin covering. It was the offering of the life of an innocent lamb. This was later confirmed in Lev. 17:11 (N .A. S.B.).

Cain made a choice to bring an offering to God. The pattern had been set by the sacrifice of animals for the covering of Adam and Eve in Gen. 3:21. However, Cain chose of the fruit of the ground. His sacrifice did not depict a substitutionary giving of life and therefore was not accepted, Gen. 4:5. In contrast Abel brought an offering to the Lord of the first of his flocks, which the Lord accepted, Gen. 4:4.

As the story progresses, Cain is outraged by the Lord's rejection of his offering. Cain became jealous and then hated his brother. At this point the Lord spoke to Cain about his attitude and reminded him that he had a choice to make, and that his choice of a proper sin offering will resolve his problem.

However failure to correct the error of his way will result in even greater sin Gen. 4:7. Cain has a well instructed conscience, yet he refused to conduct himself accordingly, and followed the way of sin resulting in the murder of his brother Abel.

During this period of time there was no legal standard of sin as recorded later, Rom. 3:20b ..."for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." (N.A.S.B.). We however have sin rebuked by God, i.e. Adam and Eve - "disobedience", Cain - "hatred", and thus a standard is set for the function of the Conscience.

We also find that God communed with Enoch, Gen. 5:32-24, and gave counsel to Noah, Gen. 6:3. But the information given to these messengers which they passed on to the people round about them was rejected, Gen. 6:5. This rejection culminated with the flood in which all of mankind except Noah, his wife, his three sons, and their wives were destroyed.

A new period in the Dispensation of the Gentiles is begun.

### **The Period of Human Government:**

This period of time starts with Noah, Gen. 8:20, and ends with judgment at the tower of Babel in the confusion of the people with many languages, Gen. 11:9.

The account is given in Gen. Chapters 8 - 11. One of the tests of this period is "experience". The time frame encompasses approximately 427 years. This period begins with the Noahic Covenant given in Gen. 8:20-9:17. In this Covenant we see the principles of Human Government, Gen. 9:1-6.

God gave the order to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and yet by the end of that period of time we see man in a Federation under the -evil influence of Satan attempting to set aside God's order, Gen. 11 :4.

So this period began with Noah, a righteous man, building an altar to the Lord, and concluded with the people attempting to make a name for themselves.

God however has control of the situation as seen in Psa. 2:1-5.

Now we come to the Dispensation of Israel.

### **The Dispensation of Israel:**

We will divide this Dispensation into three periods of time:

1. The Family.
2. The Law.
3. The Tribulation.

This Dispensation begins with God's call to Abram to leave his country and his father's house and to go to a land which the Lord God would show him. It ends an unknown number of years later at the end of the Tribulation. The dispensation of the Church enters in between the period of the Law and the Tribulation.

## **The Family (Promise):**

In this period we have another test: would Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob accept the promise given in the Abrahamic Covenant and conduct their lives accordingly? They were required to accept the promise without evidence of its fulfillment outside of God's promise and provision.

Gen. 11:10 - Exodus 19:8 provide the historical account of this period of time.

Through the family of Abram (later Abraham) God would bring about a three fold purpose:

1. God would give to the world his written Word.
2. God would bring into the World his promised redeemer.
3. God would salvation bring the fulfillment of the promise of for mankind as given in Gen. 3:15.

Abraham was saved by grace through faith, Gal. 3:6, just as all other members of the Human Race. After salvation, Abraham found it difficult to follow the Lord in complete obedience which resulted in a number of years spent without the greater grace blessing of the Lord in his life.

He first moved from the Ur of the Chaldeas to Haran, and did not separate from his father. Next we see him moving from Haran to Canaan and still not leaving Lot his brother's son behind. These incidents show the failure of incomplete obedience, and yet the gracious hand of the Lord working out His plan to accomplish His objective.

Finally in the land at Shechem, Gen. 12:6-7, the Lord identifies the land for Abram and confirms His promise. Later God makes a covenant with Abram, Gen. 15. This real estate which Abram never possessed, however at that point became the rightful property of Abram and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob. The ownership is still theirs today, even though the Jews do not possess it.

Abram is told that his descendants will go into slavery, Gen. 15:13-16, and in the fourth generation they will come out and possess the Land of the promise.

Abram's problems with Lot further illustrate that ultimately a person must separate from those who reject the Word of God even though we are encouraged by the same illustration to have compassion on them and concern for them Gen. 13:5-14:24.

Abram's problems are not gone after Lot has moved out and he is no longer part of Abram's daily life. In Gen. 16 we find the plan of mankind attempting to bring the fulfillment of the plan of God. This too brings only more heart ache and failure.

In Gen. 17, God again comes to Abram, but at this time to affect a name change to Abraham, and the call to maturity vs. 1. We see the head of the family in his spiritual development without the Written Word and yet with God's plan revealed in an unmistakable manner.

In Gen. 21, Abraham finally advances far enough in faith, that the Lord, in the midst of the impossible, fulfills the promise of a 'seed in Isaac. Then the greatest test of this family man comes in Gen. 22. It is the sacrifice of Isaac his only son according to the promise. The test of faith at Mt. Moriah is the highest point in his life, for it gave irrefutable evidence of his love for God, and he is called "the friend of God".

Now Isaac comes into the picture. He must perpetuate this family under the covenant with its provisions. Isaac has the covenant conferred upon him by the Lord, Gen. 26:1-5. His life, however, is rather uneventful until Jacob and Esau are born. Through the varied situations of life the Lord brings Jacob to the forefront as the one through whom this family will have the perpetuation of the blessings of the covenant.

Jacob and his wanderings were attended with the Lord's blessing. To him were born 12 sons who were to become the heads of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel. And so the family begins to take on the characteristics of the nation which they will become under the promise. In Gen. 28 we see the Abrahamic Covenant conferred upon him as he fled from his brother Esau whom he had offended.

After a number of years in Haran, Jacob retraces his steps to go back to the place of promise and blessing.

Many years later we find Jacob's son Joseph in Egypt. There is a severe famine in the land of Canaan. Again the Lord has turned cursing into blessing and the people of his choice are preserved in Egypt where they remained in servitude until the iniquity of the Amorites was full, as God had said to Abraham.

So God raised up Moses of the tribe of Levi to lead his people back to Canaan, the land of promise and blessing. The Passover in Egypt is the judgment that concludes this period of time.

### **The Period of the Law:**

The period of the Law extended from Exodus 19:8-Matt. 27:35. This is from the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai until the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus Christ on the Cross. (Now the Law was given to point to Christ and God's matchless mercy given through him, Gal. 3:19).

The Law demanded a righteous life or strict retribution for breaking that law. It proved to be inadequate to make man either positionally or experientially righteous, Rom. 3:20, 8:3-4, Gal. 2:21. It is noteworthy that the period of the Law began with deliverance from bondage, and the opportunity to freely respond to God's provision.

The Lord chose various systems by which to rule Israel, even though it was His desire for them to be under His rule. He started to lead Israel by Moses, and Aaron his brother as Moses' mouthpiece. Moses had experience in Pharaoh's court, and in survival in the wilderness. Therefore he was quite prepared to lead Israel from Egypt through the wilderness to Canaan. On the way they stopped at Mt. Sinai where God gave them the Law. Strict adherence to the Law would guarantee great blessing, stability, and perpetuation to the nation.

Israel accepted that Law in Exodus 19:1-8. They declared, ..."all that the Lord has spoken we will do"... As time went by it became evident that they would fail to claim the power of God to do His will and attempted to do his commands by human strength.

There is no period in Human History in which man has the ability to please God in his own strength. God's provision must always be accepted and applied to be successful in bringing honor and glory to Him. This principle is very evident in Moses' life. It is also amplified in the life of Joshua, Moses' successor, Josh. 24:14-15.

Now Joshua successfully led the people into the Land of Promise and the inhabitants were partially subdued. But again the people became impatient for God to promote them into rest in the Land and therefore failed to fully subdue all of the people whom they were sent to dispossess.

After the death of Joshua the nation of Israel was oppressed by the nations around them and the Lord delivered them through the leadership of Judges for approximately 450 years. The continued failure of the people in their rejection of the Lord is seen in Judges 21:25 - "...every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

Then the people called for a king to rule over them. The Lord again allowed them their wish even though this did not correct their attitude toward Him. As went the ruler so went the people, and much corruption and suffering followed.

The period of the Law concluded with the rejection of God's promised deliverer the Lord Jesus Christ. And so that period of history also concluded with judgment.

### **The Dispensation of the Church:**

At this point we break into the Dispensation of Israel and take notice of the Dispensation of the Church which is also known as the period of intercalation.

The Church is called a period of intercalation because it breaks into the normal sequence of events in time. The break came because Israel rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah and coming King. God therefore inserted the Dispensation of the Church here to callout a people from every nation to be the Body of Christ, which at the time of the Rapture will become the bride of Christ. When we have dealt with the Dispensation of the Church we will go back to finish the Dispensation of Israel in the Period called the Tribulation.

The Dispensation of the Church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) and concludes with the Rapture (I Thess. 4).

### **The Pre-Canon Period:**

The first period in the Dispensation of the Church is the Pre-Canon Period. (Pre-Canon means: the time before the Bible was completed.) The time frame is from Pentecost to 96 A.D.

We give space to the pre-canon period because it was a time of transition from the Law and it's sacrificial system, to the fulfillment of the Law in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and a new administration of Priesthood responsibility placed upon each believer.

This required a shift of authority and responsibility. Since there was no written set of guidelines for the Church, God chose to use certain people called Apostles (vested with maximum authority) to bring about this change.

The book of Acts gives us \_historical account of the early Church. Certain things were done at that time which were later set aside as impractical in the function of the body of Christ, (Example: They had all things in common by selling possessions and pooling their resources, in anticipation of accomplishing their mission and seeing the return of Jesus Christ. The result of this was isolation, privation, and starvation of the people involved.) Therefore we say that not all of the action of the early Church can be applied

as a bona fide activity for today. However the book of Acts gives an accurate record of what did occur. In I Cor. 14 we find an example of misuse of Spiritual Gifts in the early Church, which Paul corrects by putting the entire situation into the historical perspective (I Cor. 14:21-22, cf. Deut. 28:15-62 and Isa. 28:8-12).

The record as given in the epistles sets the stage for the function of the Church and each believer's responsibility to it. At times the local Church is brought into focus, its authority structure and responsibility is outlined in view of the plan of God.

Much of the New Testament record must be viewed from the standpoint of the pre-canon period so that we may be kept from some of the errors of the early Church.

### **The Post-Canon Period:**

The Post-Canon Period of the Church began in approx. 96 A.D. and continues until the Rapture of the Church, I Thess. 4:13-18. The Authority of the Church is Jesus Christ. He has provided us with the completed Canon of the Scripture, and the Holy Spirit to indwell every believer for the purpose of stabilized function in the Christian Way of Life. John 14:16-17,26; Eph. 4:12-16; Eph. 5:18, 4:30; I Thess. 5:19; I John 1:9.

The responsible agency of this Dispensation is the Church. In order to accomplish his objective the believer is provided with the local assembly (Church), which he is commanded not to forsake, Heb. 10:25. In the local Church the Pastor is provided to communicate the Word of God for the growth of the believer Eph. 4:11-16. The Pastor has a responsibility to discharge; therefore adherence to his ministry is of great importance Heb. 13:7 and 17.

All of this comes back to the priestly function of the believer who is part of the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is the missionary agency during the Dispensation of the Church.

A warning is in order here. Some have set aside the local Church because of errors which have crept in. God however has not set aside the local Church as the framework for the edification of believers and the base from which the witness of Christ goes out.

When the Dispensation of the Church has run its course, the Rapture of the Church will take place I Thess. 4:13-18.

The key to victory in the Christian Way of Life during the Dispensation of the Church is learning the Word and applying it under the control of the Holy Spirit.

When the Church has been taken out of this world at the Rapture, each believer will be confronted with result of his activity while on earth, II Cor. 5:10; I Cor. 3:10-15; Rom. 14:10. This is called the Judgment Seat of Christ, which takes place in Heaven during the time of the Tribulation on earth.

At the time of the Rapture all unbelievers will remain behind and face the Tribulation. The opposite of this situation takes place when the 2nd Advent of Jesus Christ takes place after the Tribulation. Believers of the Tribulation stay behind with Christ on earth to repopulate the Millennial world. Unbelievers are taken off and are thrown into hell waiting the final disposition of the Great White Throne Judgment, Matt. 24:23-44; 25:46 cf. Rev. 20:11-15.

### **The Tribulation:**

The conclusion of the Dispensation of the Church brings in the Tribulation which is the closing period of the Dispensation of Israel. This period is seven years in duration. It begins at the time of the Rapture of the Church and ends at the 2nd Advent of Jesus Christ to earth, Daniel 9:27; Rev. 11:2-3; Matt.24:14; 24:21-22; 24:36-42; Rev. 18:11-20:3; Zech. 14:1-4.

The scripture cited gives an outline of events and activities during the Tribulation. These seven years are divided into two 3½ year periods. The last of these two periods is called the Great Tribulation.

There will be a great evangelistic thrust, Israel will be the agent of evangelism. There will be the 2 witnesses, and the conversion of at least 144,000 Jews, 12,000 from each tribe. These will be the messengers of the gospel to all people during that time.

As the Satanic conspiracy strengthens and the Anti-Jewish sentiment becomes very strong, there will be a battle set against Israel which will be of magnificent magnitude.

This is called "The Battle of Armageddon". The 2nd Advent of Jesus Christ will occur to conclude the battle of Armageddon, Rev. 19:11-21.

### **The Millennium:**

At the 2nd Advent, Jesus Christ will establish His Authoritative ruler ship as the greater son of David sitting and ruling upon the Throne of David according to God's promise in the Davidic Covenant, II Sam. 7:4-13.

The Millennium is a one thousand year period (Rev. 20:4-6) during which there will be a perfect rule on earth. The animal kingdom will again be at peace, Isa. 11:1-10. Instruments of war will be set aside. The great test will be: can man under perfect environment be righteous? Satan will not be present to infuse turmoil into the scene for he is bound and placed into the bottomless pit for these 1000 years.

Church Age believers and Tribulation martyred believers, all in resurrection bodies will reign with Christ.

At the end of the 1000 years Satan will be loosed for A short time Rev. 20:7. Those who during the Millennium rejected Jesus Christ as personal savior will be deceived, and will again be gathered together for the last great battle by Satan and his hosts against God and the Saints Rev. 20:8. Fire will come down from God and devour them Rev. 20:9.

At that time Satan will be cast into the Lake of Fire to remain forever, Rev. 20:10.

The old heaven and the old earth will be destroyed, Rev. 20:11; II Pet. 3:10.

### **The Great White Throne Judgment:**

When Satan has been cast into Hell, there will be one final Judgment to settle all issues with regard to Unbelievers of all time, Rev. 20:12-15.

In the passage cited we notice that the Book of Life is opened, and the first line of evidence is presented. The names of those present to be judged are not found in this Book.

Next we notice that the Books containing the record of their works are opened. These books contain the second line of evidence used in their condemnation, because in the Books of their works there is no record of Divine Good (work acceptable to God). They did not accept the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ while alive on earth, and in their attempt to please God by their own works did not receive Eternal Life.

With all of the evidence in review from the Book of Life and the Books of Works, the unbeliever comes short and therefore is cast into the Lake of Fire. This is the Second Death Rev. 20:14-15.

When all of these things have been accomplished, time will be abolished, Rev. 21:23-25.

We conclude with the realization that time is for man's orientation while here on earth. God has an event orientation and when the conditions are right, the events of His plan take place, II Pet. 3:8.

God has placed into the hands of mankind the responsibility to honor and glorify Him. We have noticed that He has been using (and will use) various types of Administration in time, giving mankind the opportunity to discharge this responsibility.

Therefore we say, ..."thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." I Cor. 15: 57.