

Economies of God

Ephesians 3:1-7
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Provocative Question: What should we think of Dispensationalism?

How do we know that there are distinct dispensations or economies of God?

It is taught in Scripture. There are distinct periods of time characterized by God's dealing with mankind being different.

Why don't we hear more from the pulpit on a dispensational view of history?

- It is associated with believing in a literal, physical Millennial Kingdom which has been rejected by most of Christendom.
- Any topic that helps people better understand Bible prophecy is avoided because (1) it is not considered relevant to the here and now and (2) we are in the Age of Scoffers

Why is a dispensational view of history important?

- It helps us better understand the lessons from past economies of God.
- It is essential to properly understand Bible prophecy... it exposes the error of false doctrines related to the return of Christ
- It gives us a better sense for where we are in God's plan for the ages of mankind.

Scripture reveals that there have been a series of stages in God's revelation to us. The fact that there are distinct dispensations become pretty obvious when you consider the different ways God has dealt with mankind in history. And it helps us understand that there will be a future time period when mortal people will receive even more revelation from God.

How can we equate the term "dispensation" with the phrase, "economies of God"?

The English word "dispensation" is translated from the Greek noun *oikonomia*, often rendered "administration" or "stewardship" in modern translations. The Greek word *oikonomia* is a compound of *oikos* meaning "house" and *nomos* meaning "law." Taken together the central idea in the word *dispensation* is the administration of the affairs of a household. The verb *oikoneo* refers to managing a household.

So how may we describe a dispensation?

- *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines a dispensation as: "a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time ...also, the age or period during which a system has prevailed."
- Dallas Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Charles Ryrie described a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose including the ideas of distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment.
- C. I. Scofield, said dispensations are, "periods marked off in Scripture by some change in God's method of dealing with mankind, or a portion of mankind, in respect to sin and man's responsibility. Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment, marking his utter failure in every dispensation."
- And theologian Paul Nevin described a dispensation as 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, a dispensation is an economy, or administration of mankind.
 - From the human standpoint, a dispensation is a stewardship, a rule of life, or a responsibility for managing God's affairs in His house.
 - From the historical standpoint, a dispensation is a stage in the progress of revelation from God.

Let's take a look at one of the times the Apostle Paul uses the word *oikonomia*...

Ephesians 3:1-7

I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—² if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you, ³ how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, ⁴ by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), ⁵ which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: ⁶ that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, ⁷ of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

V1 – What does Paul tell us about himself here?

- He is writing to the Ephesians from prison.
- He was called by God to take the gospel to the Gentiles.

V2 – What is the dispensation of the grace of God?

Paul speaks of the current Church Age which is also known as the Age of Grace. So, Paul here is referring to the Church Age as the Dispensation of Grace.

V2-3 – How is it that this dispensation was given to Paul to take to the Gentiles?

God revealed to Paul the mystery of the Church Age as being a distinct period of time that will precede the promised future dispensation of the Kingdom Age.

V4 – What is the mystery of Christ?

It is the good news that His death on the cross paid the sin penalty of all who know Him as their Savior. This detail was alluded to but veiled in the Old Testament.

Why did God keep the good news of what Christ would do for us a mystery?

- It wasn't necessary for people to know in past dispensations.
- It kept God's enemies from information that might enable them to thwart the plan of God.

V5 – What other ages were there where the good news of Christ was maintained as a mystery?

All previous ones, we'll take a closer look at them.

How did God reveal the mystery of Christ?

- It has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.
- God uses spokespeople to share the good news.

V6 – And what is that good news Paul was passing on to us?

That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs of the Jews who believed God and thus became partakers of His promise of eternal life in Christ... that is the gospel, the good news of Christ.

V7 – What insight did Paul give us about his calling from God here?

That his ministry of sharing the good news of Christ with the Gentiles was by the grace of God to him. As a persecute of Christians, Paul would be the last one you'd think would be preaching Christ but God is powerful and redeemed him. If God could make Paul a follower of Christ, anyone may follow Him.

How do we know that Dispensationalism is true?

As concepts such as the Trinity are obvious from Scripture, so too is Dispensationalism if one applies a consistent literal interpretation of Scripture.

Back in the 1800's Bible teacher Clarence Larkin depicted the seven dispensations Scripture reveals in one of his famous charts titled "The Failure of Man." The Larkin charts are pretty interesting and quite popular among those who study Bible prophecy. I created another chart as part of my own study on the seven dispensations.

What is common to each of the seven dispensations?

Each of the seven dispensations are characterized by:

- an opening event,
- some test for mankind,
- a provision from God,
- how mankind collectively failed and
- the resulting judgment or consequences.
- Each dispensation has a purpose which effectively is a lesson-learned for mankind.

What is mankind's responsibility in all the economies of God?

In all dispensations, mankind's responsibility is to believe and obey God. The specific test in each dispensation is different but they are all essentially a demonstration of believing and obeying God.

How is God's ultimate provision to mankind the same in each dispensation?

Our salvation is by the grace of God through faith in Him. After all, ... *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.* (Hebrews 13:8)

What did we learn from the Dispensation of Innocence?

Our ancestors Adam & Eve were the only representatives of humanity to experience the Dispensation of Innocence. There was just one thing for them to believe God about and obey... not eat the forbidden fruit. Well you know how that worked out resulting in the curse of our fallen world. The purpose of the Dispensation of Innocence was that mankind's free will was revealed in our sin nature.

What did we learn from the Dispensation of Conscience?

Next came the Dispensation of Conscience. Mankind's test was to be responsive to our conscience in repressing our sin nature that seeks to control us. But Abel murdered his brother Cain and this dispensation got to the point where *"the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually"* (per Genesis 6:5). God saved Noah and his family to re-boot mankind following the Flood. The lesson learned from this dispensation was that man's conscience is insufficient to make us righteous before God.

What did we learn from the Dispensation of Human Government?

The Dispensation of Human Government followed the Flood where mankind was tested in our capacity to restrain evil through governmental action which included capital punishment. This dispensation culminated in mankind trying to collectively make our own way to heaven at the tower of Babel. And we got all the languages of the world as a result. The lesson learned was that man's corporate efforts will not restrain evil.

What did we learn from the Dispensation of Promise?

Next, God ordained Abraham and his descendants to be the people through which He would reveal Himself to mankind in the Dispensation of Promise. Abraham and his descendants were given promises by God and all they had to do was remain faithful to Him by dwelling in the land He gave them. Well this test didn't end well either with the Hebrew people finding themselves as slaves in Egypt. The purpose for this dispensation was to demonstrate that mankind's pursuit of blessings apart from God will fail.

What began the Dispensation of the Law?

The Dispensation of the Law opens with Israel promising to keep the Law. In Exodus it says, *So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the LORD commanded him. Then all the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."* (Exodus 19:7-8)

What was mankind's responsibility during the Dispensation of the Law?

Mankind's responsibility was to believe & obey the Mosaic Law in order to show loyalty to the Lord. It says in Deuteronomy, *Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers* (Deuteronomy 7:12). God's Provision was grace through faith as demonstrated by blood sacrifice that points to the ultimate sacrifice of the Messiah. As it says in Hebrews, *"without shedding of blood there is no remission"* (Hebrews 9:22).

How did mankind fail during the Dispensation of the Law?

Mankind's failure in this dispensation was seen in the Law being broken repeatedly. This resulted in the consequence of the Jews being dispersed among the nations as prophesied in Ezekiel, *So I scattered them among the nations, and they were dispersed throughout the countries; I judged them according to their ways and their deeds.* (Ezekiel 36:19)

What was the lesson learned from the Dispensation of the Law?

The Purpose of the Dispensation of the Law was to demonstrate that mankind's efforts to meet God's standard will fail. As it says in Galatians, *the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith* (Galatians 3:24). If those living during the Dispensation of the Law thought they could earn God's favor for salvation by keeping the Law, they were deluded themselves. Whoever is honest with themselves would have to conclude that salvation depended on the grace of God through faith in the promised Messiah. During our current dispensation, we have the benefit of knowing what the Messiah did to make it possible for God to forgive our sins.

How did our current dispensation begin?

Our current Age, the Dispensation of Grace began with Jesus commissioning the church as His representatives on earth just before He ascended to the Father. Acts 1:8 quotes Jesus saying, *you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth*

What is mankind's responsibility during this Dispensation of Grace?

Mankind's responsibility during this dispensation is to believe & obey God by accepting the free gift of Christ's righteousness. In Romans it says, *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes* (Romans 10:4).

What is God's provision to mankind during this Dispensation of Grace?

God's provision in this dispensation is grace through faith as demonstrated by belief in Jesus Christ. John 3:16 succinctly states this good news saying, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Should we expect mankind to fail in this dispensation? How so?

There is ample evidence that we are beginning to see the prophesied failure of mankind in the apostasy of the church. It says in 1 Timothy, *the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons* (1 Timothy 4:1). Apostasy means departing from the faith. We have today professing Christians who believe that following Jesus is just one of many ways to heaven. Christian pollster George Barna found that 25% of people claiming to be born again Christians in the U.S. said that all people will eventually be saved. And he found that 40% of professing born again Christians indicated they believe Christians and Muslims worship the same God.

What will be the consequences of mankind's failure in this dispensation?

The consequences for apostate cultural Christians is that they will not be taken in the rapture of the church and will be left to enter the Tribulation. The Tribulation will be a terrible time because the role of the Holy Spirit in restraining evil will cease when the church is removed. As it says in 2 Thessalonians, *the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way* (2 Thessalonians 2:7).

What purpose does God have for this Dispensation of Grace?

The purpose for the Dispensation of Grace is to demonstrate that man's efforts at faith apart from God will fail. In Ephesians it says, *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast* (Eph 2:8-9).

What will initiate the next dispensation?

The Dispensation of the Kingdom begins when Jesus Christ physically returns to earth as King of kings. One place this is described is in Revelation where it says, *Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True ...and the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses* (Revelation 19:11-15). We know that the resurrected believers from the Church Age will be among the armies in heaven because the context indicates that we will be clothed in white linen representing the righteousness of Christ. Jesus promised us that where He is, we may be (John 14:3) and that we would rule with Him on the earth (Revelation 5:10). The believers who survive the Tribulation will be the mortals who will repopulate the earth during the Millennial Kingdom.

What will characterize the Dispensation of the Kingdom?

Isaiah 65 gives us an amazing description of the Millennial Kingdom revealing that God will remove most of the curse that currently plagues mankind and even lions will eat straw like an ox (verses 17-25). Liberal theologians interpret this passage to be talking about the Eternal State, but that can not be the case because this passage represents death as still being part of the human experience during this time period. The Millennial Kingdom will be the peaceful, utopian environment the nations long for where swords are beaten into plowshares (Isaiah 2:4).

What will mankind's responsibility be during the Dispensation of the Kingdom?

Mankind's responsibility during the Millennial Kingdom will be a simple one... believe & obey God by observing the Feast of Tabernacles. In Zechariah it says, *And it shall come to pass that everyone who is left of all the nations*

which came against Jerusalem shall go up from year to year to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, and to keep the Feast of Tabernacles. And it shall be that whichever of the families of the earth do not come up to Jerusalem to worship the King, the LORD of hosts, on them there will be no rain (Zechariah 14:16-17).

What provision will God have for mankind during the Dispensation of the Kingdom?

God's provision during His Millennial Kingdom is again grace through faith; this time as demonstrated by being one of Christ's people. In Isaiah it says, *the sinner being one hundred years old shall be accursed ...For as the days of a tree, so shall be the days of My people* (Isaiah 65:20, 22). We have trees in California that were growing when Jesus first walked the earth. So those who follow Jesus will live in their mortal bodies the entire time of the Millennial Kingdom. Those who reject the salvation Jesus freely offers to all people will live about a hundred years then die. If a person doesn't respond to Christ for salvation by the time they are a hundred years old, they never will.

How will mankind fail during the Dispensation of the Kingdom?

The book of Revelation describes the failure of mankind at the end of the Millennial Kingdom when Satan is released from the pit to incite unbelievers to rebel against the Lord (Revelation 20:7-9). The Millennial Kingdom unbelievers are destroyed (Revelation 20:9) then resurrected to be judged at the Great White Throne with the rest of humanity from all dispensations who rejected God's provision of salvation (Revelation 20:11-15).

What will be the lesson learned from the Dispensation of the Kingdom?

The purpose of the Dispensation of the Kingdom is to show that man will still sin even with Satan bound in a perfect environment. No one will be able to use the Flip Wilson defense: "the devil made me do it."

Alright, so what? What is the significance of our realizing that God used a series of dispensations to test mankind?

- Well, it is comforting to know that God has a plan for the Ages. We are not on some unguided planet hurtling through the cold, dark expanse of cosmos without knowing where we are headed.
- God has revealed to His faithful the end from the beginning. He is in control of His creation and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
- While mankind has consistently failed our tests collectively, the good news is that none of us as individuals have to suffer the consequences of those who do not know Jesus as Savior and Lord.