

DISPENSATIONS OF TIME

By Dub McClish

Introduction

Time is a fascinating, bewildering, imponderable, and yet such a vastly important subject to consider. Accordingly, it has called forth numerous interesting observations concerning it, such as the following, gleaned from hundreds of others at *thinkexist.com*:

Yesterday is a canceled check; tomorrow is a promissory note; today is the only cash you have —so spend it wisely.

We all have our time machines. Some take us back, they're called memories. Some take us forward, they're called dreams.

Time is more valuable than money. You can get more money, but you cannot get more time.

Time is free, but it's priceless. You can't own it, but you can use it. You can't keep it, but you can spend it. Once you've lost it you can never get it back.

This quotation Website also referenced the terrible pun by Groucho Marx: "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." On a more serious note, Ben Franklin, the Colonial patriot, wisely quipped, "Time is the stuff life is made of." Since time is truly the most basic measure of life and all that pertains to our universe, it has always been of intense interest to mankind.

Two Facets of *Time*

Personal Time

Time relates to each human being in a very personal way because from one's birth until his death constitutes all of his "time." The foregoing quotations pertain to this personal feature of time. Since our lives are our "time," we should not be surprised that the Bible gives considerable attention to this subject. Thus Solomon advised young people concerning the passing of time: "Remember also thy Creator in the days of thy youth, before the evil days come, and the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them" (Ecc. 12:1). The Lord cautioned His hearers: "Yet a little while is the light among you. Walk while ye have the light, that darkness overtake you not" (John 12:35a).

Paul urged the prudent use of time: "Look therefore carefully how ye walk, not as unwise, but as wise; redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Eph. 5:15–16; cf. Col. 4:5). Time machines that can take one into the past for a "do-over" exist only in science fiction. Paul does not suggest any such impossible "redemption" of time. He is urging us to make the best use of time and opportunity to the Lord's glory and the advancement of His Cause. The motivation for doing so when he wrote these words yet prevails: "because the days are evil."

Historic Time

The other facet of time is the long view that embraces the interval from the beginning point of the material creation to the end of it. This is “time in the aggregate,” including all that will eventually take place between those two epochal boundaries. It is not an interruption between two eternities, but simply a “parenthesis” in the one eternity. It is that peculiar portion of eternity that is partitioned into regular segments of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years, decades, centuries, and millennia. The Bible discusses the beginning and end of time and provides the God-related history of time from its beginning until He revealed the fulness of His plan to redeem mankind from sin.

The third word in our English Bibles is *beginning*: “**In the beginning** God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, emph. DM). At the moment God created the physical universe, He created time—time began. In response to the Pharisees concerning divorce, the Lord Jesus twice ratified Moses’ account of “the beginning” as factual: “And he answered and said, Have ye not read, that he who made them **from the beginning** made them male and female...?” and “**from the beginning** it hath not been so” (Mat. 19:4, 8; emph. DM). John began his Gospel account with words identical to those of Moses: “**In the beginning** was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1, emph. DM). The late Guy N. Woods correctly observed: “The beginning of time and the beginning of creation were contemporaneous. Time began with creation” (22).

The Bible sets forth the end of time even as it does its beginning. Since the beginning of all things material marks the inception of time, so the end of all things marks its end. Our Lord spoke of this occurrence when He promised the apostles and those who would follow as His disciples that, as they continued to faithfully execute His commission, “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:20). In applying the parable of the tares, Jesus said, “the harvest is the end of the world,” at which time the wicked shall be separated from the righteous (Mat. 13:39, 49). This time of separation will be at the coming of the Lord in His glory (Mat. 25:31–32) (I will discuss additional facts pertaining to the end of the world/time in greater detail subsequently).

The Biblical Concept of “Dispensations”

In historic time, God has dealt with mankind through different periods and different law systems, all of which relate to the one great aim—to provide a means of reconciliation of humankind to Himself. These we commonly refer to as “dispensations.” My Online dictionary gives the following as one of the usages/definitions of our English word, *dispensation*:

A system of order, government, or organization of a nation, community, etc., esp. as existing at a particular time: scholarship is conveyed to a wider audience than under the old dispensation. In Christian theology, a divinely ordained order prevailing at a particular period of history: the Mosaic dispensation.

Dispensation appears five times in the American Standard Version and four times in the King James Version of our Bibles. It translates the compound Greek word, *oikonomia*, from *oikos*, a house and *nomos*, a law (our English word, *economy* comes directly from this word). Bauer lists “management of a household, direction, office” as its first meaning, with “arrangement, order, plan” as its second (562). It literally refers to administering the “law” or affairs of a “household,” whether one’s own, or that of another (thus a “stewardship,” as the ASV renders the term in 1 Cor. 9:17). Therefore, *dispensation* is not synonymous with *age*, *epoch*, or *period of time*, as is commonly thought. It rather has to do with “a mode of dealing, an arrangement, or administration of affairs” (Vine, 174). T. Pierce Brown stated correctly: “It can be seen, therefore, that the word has to do with the type of administration or method of dealing with an individual or group” (URL). While one who administers affairs or deals with others will do so for a certain period of time, there is no time element involved in the meaning of *oikonomia*, *dispensation*. Thus Biblical “dispensations” are the respective ways God has administered (and still administers) His will to men. The Bible reveals that these administrations devolve into distinguishable periods of time, however.

Bible students have long observed the existence of three major distinct divisions of its historical material and of all of historic time, however long it may continue, which we routinely call “dispensations.” There is perhaps no greater, more common, or more consequential fallacy in Bible hermeneutics than the failure to distinguish correctly between the dispensations, especially the latter two, which fact underscores the significance of this study. Uninspired men have assigned descriptive names to these three periods, and they serve well to provide a framework for Bible study and for making proper application of the Biblical message. However, I will also propose and discuss some “sub-dispensations” within these major dispensations. I now direct our attention to a consideration of these three arrangements of God’s administration of His laws for mankind.

The Patriarchal Dispensation

The word *patriarch* appears only four times in the Bible, twice in the singular and twice in the plural, and all in the New Testament. *Patriarch* is directly transliterated from the Greek word, *patriarches*. It is a compound of *patria*, a family, clan, people, or nation, and *archo*, a ruler, one in authority, a chief, a prince (Bauer 113, 642; Vine 463, 540). Its first usage is in Peter’s

Pentecost sermon, in which he refers to “the patriarch David” (Acts 2:29). Stephen twice used the term to describe the sons of Jacob as “the twelve patriarchs” (7:8–9). The fourth occurrence of the term refers to “Abraham, the patriarch” (Heb. 7:4). We readily see why Abraham and the sons of Jacob are called “patriarchs,” for they are, in the fullest sense (particularly Abraham), heads of vast families of people. One of God’s promises to Abraham was to make of him “a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). He repeated the promise to Abraham’s grandson, Jacob (46:3). The promise in both cases was fulfilled through his twelve sons, as they became the chiefs/princes of the vast descendants of Jacob/Israel. How does David deserve this term, since he did not found a nation or live in the same era as Abraham and his grandson and great-grandsons? A.C. Hervey commented on this question as follows:

The term *patriarch* is elsewhere in Scripture applied only to Abraham and the twelve sons of Jacob (Heb. 7:4; Acts 7:8–9). It is a title of dignity, signifying the head of a house. It seems to be here applied to David, because he is spoken of as head of the family from which Christ sprang. Abraham was the head of the whole Hebrew race: “Abraham our father.” The twelve patriarchs were the heads of their respective tribes (18:53).

Clearly, *patriarch* is capable of shades of meaning, for David was not a “patriarch” in the same sense as were Abraham and the sons of Jacob. Wholly in keeping with our customary use of *Patriarchal Dispensation*, Hervey then notes: “In common parlance, the term is also applied to those chief persons who lived before the time of Moses, and have their records in his books” (18:53).

In the foregoing quotation, the beginning parameter of this dispensation is implied in the expression, *those who lived before the time of Moses*. From the time of Adam to the giving of the Law of Moses, God administered His will to men **only** in a very personal, individual, and direct way (which is not to imply that He ceased all such personal revelation after His written revelations began). There is no record of any written law from God in this period. He generally spoke to principal men of the clans or families (i.e., the “patriarchs”). He thus spoke directly to Adam, Cain, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abram, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 1–9). God gave orders exclusively to some that were never given to others (e.g., forbidding Adam and Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil [2:17], commanding Noah to build the ark [6:14–16], ordering Abram to leave his homeland and kindred [12:1], et al.).

However, he also gave some orders that applied to all (e.g., offering a specific kind of burnt offering), as noted in the case of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:3–5). It seems evident that the burnt offerings—from the one Noah offered (8:20) to those Jacob offered many generations afterward (35:1–7)—were the same that Abel offered, which God “respected” (4:4). The religious “system” was on a family basis, led by the respective family “patriarchs” to whom God

spoke (and who served as priests) and who approached God through said offerings on family altars.

Although God did not communicate His will to the patriarchs in written documents, He nonetheless administered both moral and religious law to which those of that dispensation were accountable. While we see portions of this law system somewhat incidentally and occasionally (and sometimes by implication), God's moral law is most certainly evident. Only where law exists is sin possible: "But where there is no law, neither is there transgression" (Rom. 4:15). God's "moral law" existed from the beginning, as implied in the expression, *the tree of the knowledge of good and evil* (Gen. 2:17, emph. DM). God warned Cain not to sin (4:7), which he did first by substituting an offering of his choice for that which God specified and which he did when he murdered Abel (vv. 8–11). As confirmed by the Lord and by Paul (Mat. 19:5; Eph. 5:31), God's marriage law ("from the beginning") is clear in Moses' statement, which the Lord and Paul quoted: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24). "The wickedness of man was great in the earth, and...every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (6:5), is sheer nonsense (not to mention an impossibility) apart from a God-given standard of behavior—His law.

The Pre-Mosaic Sub-dispensation

We know when the Patriarchal Dispensation began, but when did it end? Some are under the impression (or at least **leave** the impression) that Patriarchy ended in about 1500 B.C. when God gave the law to Moses, but this is not the case. This question introduces the fact that two "sub-dispensations" existed within the Patriarchal Dispensation. This conclusion inheres in the fact that the administration and application of that system of law did not remain constant for all mankind throughout its duration.

The first of these sub-dispensations spanned from Adam to the revelation of Moses' Law, during which span the prescribed patriarchal worship and God's moral laws were **universally** applicable. As far as God's will was concerned, there were no distinctions between "nations" before Sinai. Thus as noted earlier, the altars of burnt offerings and the moral laws applied to all men of that era.

The Mosaic-Law-Forward Sub-dispensation

The second sub-dispensation began when Moses received the Law, which Law limited the applicability, thus the administration, of the patriarchal laws dramatically. Their authority no longer applied to the descendants of Jacob/Israel. God gave them a new, distinct law system,

centered in the Ten Commandments. Concerning this Law (under the figure of a “covenant”), Moses reminded Israel: “Jehovah **made not this covenant with our fathers** [i.e., the patriarchs], but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day” (Deu. 5:3, emph. DM). Therefore God did **not** give this new Law for/to any who were **not** the posterity of Abraham through Jacob/Israel.¹ This Law was something unprecedented and superior to previous law. Moses asked Israel: “And what great nation is there, that hath statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?” (Deu. 4:8). Moses stated an important intent and effect of the Law: “For thou art a **holy people** unto Jehovah thy God: Jehovah thy **God hath chosen thee** to be a people for his own possession, **above all peoples** that are upon the face of the earth” (Deu. 7:6, emph. DM). *Holy people* means a people set apart from others, “chosen” to be “above all peoples” in God’s care and favor. So Moses’ Law created a grand cleavage between the Israelites and all non-Israelites (i.e., thereafter known as “Gentiles” or “the nations”) for the purpose of keeping Israel separate.

Since the Law of Moses was for Israel alone (except for proselytes), what then became the status of the other nations regarding Divine law? Some teach that the Gentiles were no longer under **any** law from God, misapplying Paul’s *God-gave-them-up* statements regarding the ancient Gentiles (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). Such is sheer absurdity. Were it so, the Gentiles could no longer have sinned or been accountable for their behavior. This assertion conveniently overlooks such phenomena as God’s declaration that Nineveh was wicked and evil five centuries after God gave the Law to Moses (Jon. 1:2; 3:10). The Gentile nations did not cease to be amenable to the laws of patriarchy by the arrival of the Law of Moses. For Israel, Moses’ Law replaced and superseded those laws, but for all others, they remained in effect until that time and event that would mark the cessation of the authority of all previous Divine law—both of Patriarchy and of Mosaic varieties.

The book of Genesis provides the history of the patriarchal administration, barely overlapping into Exodus. This history provides the foundation for and introduction to the dispensation that follows. Without knowledge of the patriarchs and their history, Bible readers would be left with a huge vacuum of knowledge and superabundance of head-scratching questions and curiosities. Compared to subsequent dispensations, God’s revelation to the patriarchs is not only unwritten, but also comparatively sparse. Since stars give little light compared to other heavenly bodies, the Patriarchal Dispensation, compared with those that follow, is often characterized as the “Starlight Age.” Nevertheless, the story of redemption is firmly imbedded in the history of those ancient times as Moses, the inspired historian, unfolds them (e.g., Gen. 3:15; 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; et al.).

The Mosaic Dispensation

The second dispensation of God's Law was obviously (and appropriately) named for Moses. God chose him to lead the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage, give them His exclusive law, and bring the chosen nation—through many toils and tears—to the threshold of Canaan. Moses was the towering figure of the dispensation until God's "prophet...like unto me"—Whom Moses prophesied God would raise up—appeared among men fifteen centuries later (Deu.18:15; Acts 3:22–23; 7:37). The dispensation is also named for Moses because the Law that God gave through him and named after him (i.e., "the law of Moses" [Jos. 8:31–32; 1 Kin. 2:3; Ezra 3:2; Luke 24:44; et al.]) remained in force for fifteen centuries. While a family system of religion characterized the Patriarchal Dispensation, the Mosaic Dispensation involved a national system. As did the Patriarchal Dispensation, the Mosaic Dispensation also contained two major "sub-dispensations."

The Pre-John/Jesus Sub-dispensation

Beginning with the closing pages of Genesis, all of the Old Testament and the first four books of the New Testament record the history of God's chosen nation, at various times known as "Hebrews," "Israelites," and "Jews." This focus continued as long as that law was in force.² Throughout this period, Biblical history generally notices "Gentiles" only as the Israelites interacted with them, which they often did. The Mosaic Dispensation was characterized by an exclusive priesthood that was charged with various rituals, but especially with offering a wide variety of sacrifices, at least one of which had its roots in Patriarchy. The practice of the new religion God established through Moses' Law was centered first in the tabernacle, constructed and furnished according to a very specific God-given pattern (Exo. 25:40; 26:30; Acts 7:44; Heb. 8:5). It would later be succeeded by a series of temples, the first of which Solomon built, also according to a God-given pattern, which temple Nebuchadnezzar destroyed in 587 B.C. (1 Chr. 28:11–19). It was replaced by that of Zerubbabel (after the Jews' return from Babylonian/Persian captivity), and Herod's temple—the one in use at the close of the Mosaical Period—replaced it. The Law of Moses contains not only very specific and detailed religious ritual, but specific and detailed laws concerning morals and ethics, as well. Moreover, it served as the civil law for the newly created nation of Israel. Repeated apostasy, rebellion, idolatry, and infidelity dominate most of Israel's history.

Besides having the foregoing purposes, Moses' Law had other ends as well. Paul explained: "What then is the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made" (Gal. 3:19a). Milligan suggested the following as

the meaning of Paul's words: "It was added to convince and to convict men of sin, by giving to them a perfect standard and code of morality" (84). This statement fits well with another statement by Paul: "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Howbeit, I had not known sin, except through the law: for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet." (Rom. 7:7).

Paul stated yet another purpose of the Law: "So that the law is become our tutor to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). This passage indicates that at least part of the Law's intent was to train and prepare Israel for the coming of the Christ. Paul declared, "Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness to every one that believeth (Rom. 10:4). His point here is not that the Law of Moses ended with Christ (His death in particular), though true (Col. 2:14; et al.), but that the Law incessantly pointed to Christ as its aim. By its types, shadows, symbols, and prophecies it did its work, pointing to Him and His Dispensation. However, it could have its effect only to the degree that the hearts of the Jews were attentive to it. The scholars in—and avowed sticklers for—the Law (i.e., scribes, lawyers, Pharisees) who, of all people, should have been aware of this facet of the Law's purpose, were clueless. So Jesus repeatedly decried and denounced them for their spiritual blindness and deafness (Mat. 13:15; 15:14; 23:16–19, 24; Mark 8:18). Those who should have been the first to recognize and embrace Jesus as their Messiah of the prophets became His crucifiers.

A close and vital relationship exists between the Mosaic Law and the New Testament and between the respective religions they produced. Numerous features of the Mosaic Dispensation foretold features of its successor through types and shadows. These included the priesthood, the tabernacle/temple, the unblemished lamb as a sin offering, and even Moses himself, plus many others, as especially expounded in the Hebrews epistle. During the Mosaic Era, God sent numerous prophets to Israel, beginning with Moses and not ending until the appearance of John the Baptist and Jesus (Luke 7:26–27; Acts 3:22–23). God sent many of these to call Israel to repentance (Jer. 35:15) and/or to pronounce judgment upon various nations (e.g., Jer. 1:4–10). However, many of them prophesied concerning persons, things, and events that would characterize the dispensation to come (e.g., Deu. 18:15; 2 Sam. 7:12–16; Isa. 2:2–3; 40:3; 53:1–12; Jer. 31:31–34; Dan. 2:44; Joel 2:28–32, et al.).

The John/Jesus Forward Sub-dispensation

Readers of the New Testament cannot mistake the dramatic change in emphasis and aim—and even practice in one respect—upon the arrival of John the Baptizer and Jesus. The Lord remarked on this phenomenon: "The law and the prophets were until John: from that time

the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and every man entereth violently into it” (Luke 16:16; cf. Mat. 11:13). He did not mean that the authority of Moses’ Law ceased when they began their work. He simply called attention to the fact that they came preaching and practicing something unprecedented, not in denial of any of the Law, but in fulfillment of it (Mat. 5:17–18; John 1:23; Acts 3:23–24). The *gospel of the kingdom is preached* is a synecdoche for their words and works.

Many previous prophets had come with a message of repentance, but none before John had come preaching, “Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” and declaring himself to be the forerunner of the Lord (Mat. 3:2–3). Further, none before had come administering “baptism...unto remission of sins” (Mark 1:4). After Jesus’ baptism by John and His wilderness temptations, Matthew records: “From that time began Jesus to preach, and to say, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mat. 4:17). Afterward, upon His selecting them, Jesus commissioned the twelve: “But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:6–7). Elsewhere we learn that the apostles also preached and practiced baptism, doubtless with the same import as John’s: “When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, although Jesus himself baptized not, but his disciples” (John 4:1–2).

John’s work was to “prepare the way of the Lord” by making ready a company for the soon-to-come kingdom, a figure for the church Jesus said He would build (Mat. 16:18–19). In this same context, He declared: “Verily I say unto you, there are some of them that stand here, who shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom” (v. 28; cf. Mark 9:1). The work of the apostles had the same end as John’s work regarding preparation for the soon-to-come kingdom. Further, the Lord sent out an additional seventy disciples with the same instructions and powers He had given to the twelve, and they were to preach, “The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you” (Luke 10:1-9). Meanwhile, Jesus was not only uttering His astounding **words**, but also performing countless miraculous **works**. The purpose of the latter was to confirm the Truth that He spoke, not only about the kingdom, but about His own identity as well (John 20:30–31).

Note Paul’s statement that the Law was added “till the seed should come to whom the promise hath been made” (Gal. 3:19). This statement not only accentuates the existence of this sub-dispensation. It also declares without dispute that the Law of Moses was not God’s final word, but it implies that its authority would cease when “the seed should come.” Paul had earlier

said that “the seed” in God’s promise to Abraham referred to the Christ, rather than to the patriarch’s “seeds” (i.e., descendants) (v.16), and so *the seed* does in verse 19. We learn from this that the terminal point of Moses’ Law, regarding its authority, was in the work of the Christ. Accordingly, Jesus announced:

Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfil.
For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass away from the law, till all things be accomplished (Mat. 5:17–18).

In *destroy* (*kataluo*, “to destroy utterly, to overthrow completely” [Vine 164]), Jesus was talking about the very existence of the Law—He would not obliterate it so that it no longer existed and men no longer had access to it to continue to profit from it. Rather, he would “fulfil” it, and in Him it would “be accomplished.” Without some knowledge of the Law, it would be all but impossible to understand much of the New Testament (e.g., in the Gospel accounts, Romans, Galatians, Hebrews, et al.). Paul argued the value of knowledge of the Law:

For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that through patience and through comfort of the scriptures we might have hope (Rom. 15:4).
Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted.... Now these things happened unto them by way of example; and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come (1 Cor. 10:1–11).

While Christ did not cause the Law (with its invaluable history, prophecies, and examples) to pass from existence, He indeed “abolished” (*katargeo*, “to reduce to inactivity” [Vine 3]) the **authority** of the Law (Eph. 2:14–16). When He died on the cross, the **authority** of Moses’ Law died with Him (Col. 2:14; Heb. 10:8–10; et al.), thus bringing to an end the Mosaic Dispensation. Likewise, by implication, the laws of Patriarchy were repealed with the death of the Lord. The new Law of Christ was for “every nation,” “all the world,” and “every creature,” allowing no other spiritual law to exist (Mat. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16).

The Mosaical Dispensation involved revelation and provided spiritual light in great abundance compared to that of the Patriarchal dispensation. Therefore, the Mosaic Age is commonly called the “Moonlight Age” in comparison to the “Starlight Age” of the Patriarchal Era.

The Christian Dispensation

We have already cited inspired statements to the effect that the authority of Moses’ Law (and thus the Mosaical Dispensation) ended with the death of Jesus, the Christ, upon the cross. The end of the Dispensation of Moses marks the beginning of the Dispensation of Christ, generally known by Bible students as “The Christian Dispensation.” Likewise, the end of the authority of Moses’ Law marks the beginning of Christ’s Law.³ As God gave His law through Moses in the former dispensation, so He did/does through Christ in this one:

For I spake not from myself; but the Father that sent me, he hath given me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak. And I know that his commandment is life eternal: the things therefore which I speak, even as the Father hath said unto me, so I speak (John 12:49–50; cf. 14:10, 15, 24; 17:18; Mat. 17:5; Heb. 1:1–2).

John, Jesus, the apostles, and the seventy all proclaimed that the time had come for the everlasting kingdom of the prophets—the church of Christ—to begin, and so it did. The Lord allowed Satan to crucify Him so men could be cleansed by His sinless shed blood (John 10:17–18; Heb. 9:22; 10:4; 1 Pet. 1:18–19). However, the Father did not allow Satan to keep Him in the tomb after His cruel death on Calvary (Acts 2:32; 17:31; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12; et al.). Just before Jesus ascended to His throne at the Father’s right hand, He gave His apostles some final instructions. These included preaching the Gospel to all nations throughout the world, beginning at Jerusalem (Mat. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15–16; Luke 24:47). He also told the apostles to wait in Jerusalem where they would receive “power from on high,” which He identified as baptism in the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5, 8). They did so, assembling in anticipation with about 120 other disciples (apparently these were all that proved steadfast among multitudes that heard the appeals of John, the Lord, the apostles, and the seventy over a period of about three and one-half years).

On the Jewish Pentecost (fifty days after Jesus was crucified), the promised power of Holy Spirit baptism came upon the apostles, enabling them to speak in languages they had never learned—to the amazement of the throngs of people gathered from all over the world (Acts 2:1–13). Peter began explaining the occurrence by quoting Joel’s prophecy, which said that “in the last days” God would pour forth His Spirit (Acts 2:16–21). Peter then proceeded to set forth evidence that Jesus, whose crucifixion they had demanded seven weeks earlier, was the Christ of prophecy, that God had raised Him from the dead, and that He had now ascended to His throne in Heaven (vv. 22–36). Upon these powerful words, some who were deeply stirred and convinced interrupted Peter’s sermon with the plaintive question to the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” (v. 37). In response to Peter’s command that they must—on the authority of Christ—repent and be baptized in order to receive forgiveness of their sins, about 3,000 yielded obedience that day, whereupon the Lord added them and others day by day to His church (vv. 41, 47, KJV).

From this point forward to its end, the Biblical text chronicles the growth, development, activities, characteristics, and sufferings of the church as it was established on the wings of the Gospel message. The church not only had the specific entrance requirements to which the 3,000 on Pentecost were obedient, but it also engaged in five authorized acts of worship in each of its several congregations each first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:1–2). These acts

were universally taught and practiced, as indicated by Paul's statement that he taught the same things everywhere in every church (1 Cor. 4:17). These acts included:

- Partaking of the Lord's supper, established by Him to memorialize His death (Mat. 26:26–29; 1 Cor. 11:23–26)
- Addressing the Father in prayer through Christ (Col. 3:17)
- Singing songs of praise and edification (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16)
- Giving money to do the work of the congregation (1 Cor. 16:1–2)
- Studying a message preached from God's Word by a brother (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 2:8–12)

The Christian Dispensation is the final period of human/world history. God inspired some of the Old Testament prophets to refer to it as “the latter days” and like expressions (Isa. 2:2–3; Dan. 2:28; 45; Joel 2:28; Mic. 4:1). Peter said that the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost was the fulfillment of Joel 2:28–32, and he identified the Pentecost event as “the last days” (Acts 2:17; cf. Heb. 1:1–2).⁴ Paul referred to the appearance of Christ as “the fullness of the time” (Gal. 4:4). In a like expression, he wrote of the “dispensation of the fulness of the times” in which God “sum[med] up all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10). It was with this in mind that Jesus told the apostles that, as they carried out His commission, “Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Mat. 28:20). The Christian Dispensation also contains two “sub-dispensations.”

The Miraculous Sub-dispensation

Jesus had empowered the apostles and the seventy to perform miracles as they preached the soon-to-come kingdom (Mat. 10:8; Luke 10:9, 17). However, in His upper room discourse before His betrayal, trials, and death, Jesus promised additional powers for the apostles. He said that His Father would send the Holy Spirit upon them, further empowering them. These powers included teaching them all things, reminding them of the things He (Jesus) had taught them, guiding them into all the Truth, and declaring unto them the things that were to come (John 14:26; 16:13). Jesus linked the promised sending of the Holy Spirit upon them with their baptism in the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5, 8; 2:1–4, 16–21).

The apostles alone possessed and exercised miraculous powers in the earliest days of the church in Jerusalem, confirming their words thereby as Truth and confounding the Sanhedrin. The twelve demonstrated the great degree of power with which they were entrusted when they enabled seven brethren to work “great wonders and signs” by laying hands on them (Acts 6:6, 8; 8:5–7, 13). As indicated in Acts 8 (just cited), Philip, one of the seven, preached the Gospel and exercised his recently received powers with great effect in Samaria. However, he could not confer this power on others. Not until Peter and John came from Jerusalem and laid

their hands on them (as they had done to the seven) could any Samaritan saints work miracles (vv. 17–18). Likewise, only when Paul (an apostle) laid his hands on the dozen brethren in Ephesus were they able to prophesy and speak in languages they had never learned (Acts 19:6). There is no hint that any besides an apostle had this power of transmission of the gifts. Paul may have alluded to this fact when he wrote of “the signs of an apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12).

These gifts were necessary for both revelation and confirmation. The various documents of our New Testaments were not dumped into the minds of the inspired men in one “lump,” but the inspired men received revelations of the Truth and “prophesied in part” (1 Cor. 13:9). Until the completed (and written) record of all the Truth (into which the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles [John 16:13]) was accomplished, they had to have a means of confirming that their words were from God. The “signs and wonders, and... manifold powers, and... gifts of the Holy Spirit” provided the needed confirmation (Heb. 2:3–4). The gifts also served as a source of edification, exhortation, consolation, and learning (1 Cor. 14:3, 26, 31).

The revelation and the confirmation were companions that traveled together. As long as revelation was incomplete, confirmation was required, and when revelation ceased, miraculous confirmation likewise ceased as no longer necessary. Paul argues this very point:

Love never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall be done away; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall be done away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part; but when that which is perfect is come, that which is in part shall be done away (1 Cor. 13:8–10).

When the perfect/completed Word was achieved, the miraculous gifts such as prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would no longer be needed for confirmation, and they would thus be—and were—“done away.”

Since the apostles alone could impart the gifts to others, it must follow that with the death of the last apostle (John, apparently, at the very close of the first century), there was no means of further empowering others, even as there was no need to do so. With John’s book of Revelation, the New Testament reached its perfect/complete state. This achievement was, as earlier noted, according to the Lord’s promise that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles “into all the truth”—necessarily meaning that before the last apostle died, all of the Truth would be revealed. Thus the completion of revelation marked the end of the need for the confirmatory gifts, and the death of John marked the end of their source. So the possession of miraculous gifts ended with the death of the last brother or sister on whom an apostle had laid hands. At the latest this would not likely have been later than the middle part of the second century.

The Non-miraculous Sub-dispensation

This second sub-dispensation begins with the end of the miraculous manifestations necessary for the infancy of the church (1 Cor. 13:11) and will continue until the Lord returns. Since the closing days of the first century, mankind has been blessed with the final and complete revelation of God's Word. It is "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). It is all that anyone needs to enable him to reach Heaven at last:

All **scripture** is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for **doctrine**, for **reproof**, for **correction**, for **instruction in righteousness**: That the man of God may be **perfect**, **thoroughly furnished unto all good works** (2 Tim. 3:16–17, KJV; emph. DM).

And now I commend you to God, and to **the word of his grace**, which is **able** to build you up, and to **give you the inheritance** among all them that are sanctified (Acts 20:32, emph. DM).

There will not be another administration of God's Law or Dispensation of time upon the earth. Jesus promised the apostles that, although He would soon leave them to return to the Father, "I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:3). Inspiration describes the events that will transpire at the Lord's coming: the resurrection of the dead with spiritual (i.e., immortal) bodies, the instantaneous change of the mortal bodies to immortal bodies of those alive at His coming, the gathering of all who have ever lived for Judgment by Jesus, the ascension of the righteous to meet the Lord in the air, and their being delivered up by the Lord to the Father where they shall ever more be (Mat. 25:31–32; John 12:48; 1 Cor. 15:21–24, 42–53; 1 The. 4:13–17). As earlier noted, Peter terms the Lord's return as "the day of the Lord," saying that when He returns, "the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10).

While the New Testament gives us the "what" of Jesus' return in some detail, neither man nor angel can know the "when" of the Lord's return (Mat. 24:36–51; 1 The. 5:2–3; 2 Pet. 3:10a; Rev. 3:3). It is certain, however, that when the Lord returns, all time and earthly history will cease. Each human being who has lived since Adam and who was capable of responding to the Will of God will either enter Heaven, the place of eternal bliss with God and His Son or will be cast into Hell, the place of eternal torment with the devil and his angels (Mat. 25:34, 42, 46; John 5:29; Rom. 2:9–10; 2 The. 1:9; Rev. 20:11–15). Let us all heed the Lord's warning: "Watch therefore: for ye know not on what day your Lord cometh" (Mat. 24:42).

The Christian Dispensation can only be described as the "Sunlight Age," for in it we have the consummation and revelation of God's plan to reconcile man to Himself through His Son.

Conclusion

A movie projector may serve to illustrate the progression of spiritual light and revelation through the dispensations. In a movie theater, if one is near the screen and looks up toward the projector, he can see dust particles in the beam of light coming from the projector. At the point of the projector, the beam of light is very small, but the nearer to the screen it gets, the broader it becomes until it finally strikes the screen with the projected image. So it is with God's revelation. It begins very small in the time of the patriarchs. It gradually becomes fuller in and throughout the Mosaic Dispensation as it moves through time. With the coming of Christ and His completed revelation, the picture of grace, redemption, and salvation fully bursts upon the screen of history.

What great privileges are ours to live in this age in which we have the fullness of God's revelation! "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things that were heard, lest haply we drift away from them" (Heb. 2:1).

Works Cited

- Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957—1974 ed.
- Brown, T. Pierce. "Dispensations": <http://www.oldpaths.com/Archive/Brown/T/Pierce/1923/dispens1.html>
- Hervey, A.C. *Acts and Romans, The Pulpit Commentary*, ed. H.D.M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1950.
- Milligan, Robert. *Scheme of Redemption*. Saint Louis, MO: Christian Board of Pub., 1868.
- Vine, W.E. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996.
- Woods, Guy N. *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John*. Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate Co., 1981.

Endnotes

-
- ¹ This fact alone demonstrates the folly of the multitude of Catholic and Protestant sects—composed entirely of Gentiles—that often turn to the Law of Moses to justify their religious practices.
- ² None should infer that (from the fact that the Gospel accounts continue the Old Testament **history** of the Jews) the first four books of the New Testament therefore belong in the Old Testament—as some erroneously advocate. While the Law of Moses was still in effect when Christ was born (He was born and died "under the law" [Gal. 4:4; Col. 2:14]), He nonetheless proclaimed a new Message/Law that would take effect with the beginning of—and would usher in—the subsequent dispensation. While the **history** in the Gospel records is Old Testament **history**, the **message** in these books is **Gospel**, the **New Testament message** (Mark 1:1). The four Gospel accounts are correctly positioned as the beginning books of the New Testament.
- ³ Yes, Christ has a law, contrary to the denials of the grace-only advocates who contend that grace and law are mutually exclusive. Inspired writers did not so believe or teach. Paul stated the obvious fact that in absence of law, transgression is impossible (Rom. 4:15; 5:13; 7:8). If Christ has no law, how does one explain New Testament references to the law of Christ (Rom. 8:2; I Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; Jam. 1:25; 2:12)?

⁴ Premillennial dispensationalists consistently misapply *the last days*, saying this phrase points to alleged cataclysmic events that are to take place immediately before the Lord's return. They are grievously wrong. In the first place, there are no such "signs of the times" that warn of the Lord's coming. In the second place, the entire administration of God through His Son, beginning at Calvary and ending with His return, constitutes "the last days." Men have been living in "the last days" since Pentecost (Acts 2:17).

[Note: I wrote this MS for and I presented a digest of it orally at the Bellview Lectures, hosted by the Bellview Church of Christ, Pensacola, FL, June 6–10, 2014. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Understanding the Will of the Lord*, ed. Michael Hatcher (Pensacola, FL: Bellview Church of Christ).]