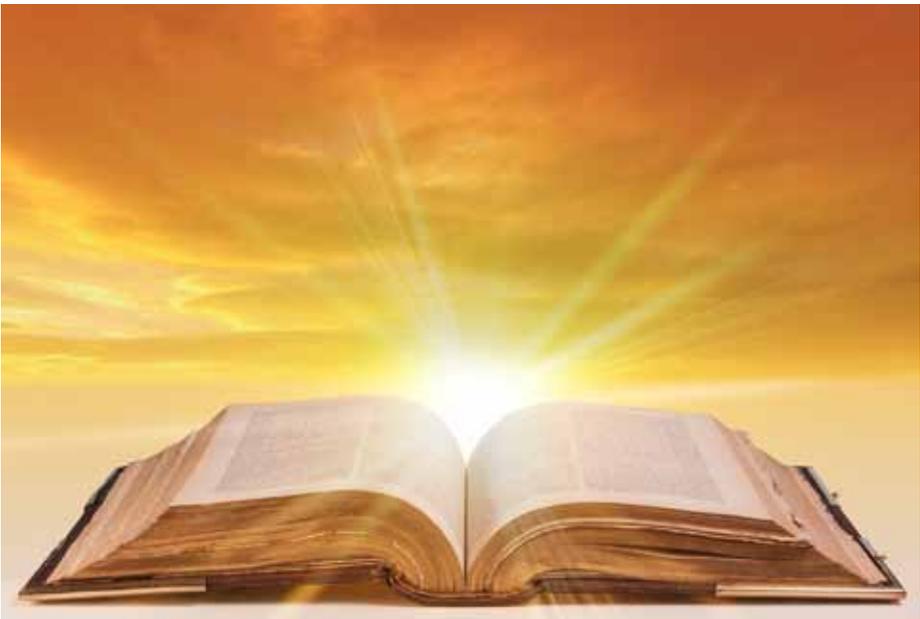


God's Program: An Analysis of the Dispensations

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1. Dispensationalism

"The 'doctrine of dispensationalism' is so called because of its statement that God's whole program is divided into seven 'dispensations'. Five of them are already history. We are now living in the sixth one. The seventh dispensation will be an earthly Kingdom of a thousand years (the Millennium), following the rapture of the Church. The Scofield Bible characterises the seven dispensations as follows: innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace and kingdom. According to Scofield, with each of these dispensations begins a new way by which God 'tests' man's obedience and disobedience, with a related salvation or loss. Obedience to the existing method leads to God's approval of the individual or nation that is being tested by Him. Dispensationalism actually assumes seven different ways in which a person can be saved."

The above quote is from an article in a Dutch magazine under the title: "Dispensationalism, rightly dividing the word of truth?" The question mark is significant. Here we are dealing with yet another attack on what is called 'dispensationalism', and this attack, again, is built up according to the old-fashioned pattern. First, there is the 'guilt-by-association'-method. I found an example of this method in an article that mentions dispensationalism right along with Hitler and National Socialism, Roman Catholicism, Christian Science and Mormonism. The article mentioned above is hardly any more moderate when it states: "In Darby's time (who is promoted to 'the best-known exponent' of dispensationalism) the Mormons also began to frighten the world with their ideas. In 1830 Joseph Smith published the book of Mormon, the same year that is considered to be the year that Darby took command of 'the brethren'. In 1831 also William Miller, the father of Adventism, began to market his 'findings'. The first publications of the sect that later became known as 'Jehovah's Witnesses', sprang from the same period." The use of the word 'also' in this quote suggests that the followers of dispensationalism also frightened the world by marketing their (delusional) ideas. The fact that they do (and did) this at the same time as the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses, is apparently highly despicable. In this context, what should we think of all those prophets in the

Old Testament who steadily acted in times of error and unbelief in God's Word? Israel had reason to thank God for sending them prophets in times when they were most needed.

Secondly, there is the attack 'ad hominem', playing the man. The man here is, as usual, J. N. Darby. Not because he indeed is the best-known exponent of dispensationalism, for that is Dr. C. I. Scofield. But because more facts are known of him, hence more negative facts. Darby himself would not even be able to agree with the above description of dispensationalism, if only because he used a different table. The cited table is Scofield's, for which Darby was not and could not be responsible; for Darby died in 1881, while the 'Scofield Bible' was published in 1909. However, for an attack of this kind Scofield cannot be used, because he 'only' has a reputation as Bible expert, while Darby has been a leading figure in the church all his life and therefore often had to choose a position in the conflicts that sadly occurred already then in every church. That he dared to bear such a great responsibility is still held against him nearly one hundred years after his death. In the above-mentioned article the 'black pages' of his life are again fully emphasized. The argument then is that a doctrine that comes from a man who has so often been involved in conflicts and divisions in the Church, could not possibly be reliable. The truth is, however, that J. N. Darby is not the founder of dispensationalism at all. Moreover, a doctrine does not stand or fall with the conduct of those who profess it, but with the Bible alone.

Thirdly, there is the 'historical argument'. Attempts are being made to show that dispensationalism was first published in the Scofield Bible in 1909, and is therefore fairly recent and therefore modernistic. And which Bible-believing Christian would want to be considered as modernistic? Also this argument is both incorrect and unfair. Historically speaking, the doctrine of dispensationalism is much older than the Scofield Bible. The oldest complete dispensational table I know of was published in Amsterdam in 1687. Moreover, a recently developed or (re)discovered doctrine is only incorrect if it is contrary to the Bible. This issue has been adequately regulated long ago, in the days of the Protestant Reformation. Only the Bible provides the arguments for confirming or rejecting a doctrine.

Fourthly, it is usually claimed that followers of dispensationalism teach two ways of becoming saved. In the article mentioned earlier, this claim is taken to the extreme: "Dispensationalism in fact assumes seven different ways in which a person may be saved." However intimately acquainted with dispensationalism, I have never been able to find more than two ways of becoming saved. The one way is Christ Himself:

"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me." (John 14 : 6)

The other way mentioned in the Bible is obedience to the law. However, this last way is impassable for man with his sinful nature and therefore in practise no alternative.

"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight."
(Romans 3 : 20)

Regarding the law, the Saviour Himself says: "Do this and you will live." (Luke 10:28) The law thus indeed offers a way to salvation; that no ordinary man could follow this path is another matter. Eventually it was the Lord Himself who took that path. He fulfilled the law and He is alive. His life is now offered to us by grace. That is why He says: "I am the way [...]"

"Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." (Romans 3 : 28)

That is how it was in Abraham's day, (Romans 4 : 3) that is how it was during the dispensation of the law and that is how it still is. It is precisely those who are familiar with the dispensations who acknowledge that an ordinary sinner is not justified by law, but by grace.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith [...] not of works, lest anyone should boast." (Ephesians 2 : 8, 9)

But what exactly is 'dispensationalism'? The above quoted description may be very easy in practice; it is not in concordance with reality at all. In fact, it is a very short description of what dr. C. I. Scofield roughly taught. Indeed, protestant theology is divided into two camps or 'schools', both of which provide for a fairly complete systematic theology with statements on nearly every Bible verse and every Biblical subject. The most famous of these two 'schools' is the so-called 'covenant theology'. Covenant theology teaches that God made two covenants with man: The covenant of the works and the covenant of grace. God was supposed to have made the first one with Adam, while the covenant of grace is to be found in what is called the 'proto-gospel':

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” (Genesis 3 : 15)

Some theologians have introduced another, third covenant. This covenant of reconciliation was said to have been established already before the creation of man and is said to be "the agreement between the Father, who gives the Son as head and Redeemer to the chosen, and the Son, who voluntarily takes the place of the ones that the Father has given Him." (Louis Berkhof) These two (or three) covenants are considered all-important in the Bible, so that every Bible verse should be explained within the context of these covenants. To achieve this, the covenant-theologian must make excessive use of the allegorical or 'spiritual' explanation of many Bible passages, especially the prophecies. Because at best they see Israel as a type of the Church, everything the Bible says about Israel is explained spiritually. In that case Israel is the Church, Canaan is heaven, Jerusalem is the heavenly or New Jerusalem, the sabbath is the Sunday, circumcision is baptism, the throne of David is the throne of God, the woman or bride is the Church, a thousand years is eternal, etcetera. In connection with this, the Church is repeatedly indicated with the unbiblical expression: 'Spiritual Israel'. Of course, there are different tendencies within the covenant theology, but that does not matter here. What matters is that within this theological system, nearly every Bible passage is considered or made applicable to every man throughout all ages, without distinction, often ignoring the primary, literal meaning of the Biblical statements.

The only theological trend within Protestantism that also professes to have an explanation for almost all Bible passages, is what is called 'dispensationalism'. This name is derived from the Latin 'dispensatio', which is the translation of the Greek 'oikonomia', which means 'economy' or 'household'. Dispensationalism, through a literal or normal explanation of the Bible, comes to the conclusion that in the course of His plan with the world, God arranged different dispensations or households during different times and with respect to different groups of people. In this sense, at least two dispensations are indicated with a name in the Bible, namely the 'dispensation of the fullness of times' and the 'dispensation of the grace of God' (Ephesians 1 : 10; 3 : 2). Moreover, neither the covenant of reconciliation, nor the covenant of works, nor the covenant of grace are specifically mentioned in the Bible.

How many dispensations there are and what they are called, is not essential for the 'dispensationalist'. In general, the table of Dr. C. I. Scofield is indeed used, though many dispensationalists, including J. N. Darby, E. W. Bullinger, Ph. Mauro and yours truly, use differing tables. Usually so little emphasis is placed on the number of dispensations and their names, that it is often difficult to determine which table is used by a particular dispensationalist. Incidentally, that is not surprising, as most of the Bible only concerns three dispensations, namely the law, the grace and the kingdom. It is also a fact that someone who distinguishes different dispensations in the Bible is not automatically a dispensationalist. The covenant theologian Dr. Louis Berkhof, for instance, first rejects the usual table of Scofield, then mentions his own table (!), bringing back the number of dispensations to two, namely 'the Old Testament dispensation' and 'the New Testament dispensation'. However, within the Old Testament dispensation, he distinguishes four subdivisions, which he calls "phases in the revelation of the covenant of grace." In reality, he thus finds five different periods or dispensations in the elaboration of God's plan of salvation, yet he is not a dispensationalist. Charles Hodge, also a covenant theologian, distinguishes four dispensations after the fall: From Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, and from Christ to the end. Thus, someone who distinguishes 'dispensations' is not automatically a dispensationalist. The reproach of dispensationalism, that it tears the Bible into pieces, is thus – if it is just - also applicable to covenant theology. The distinction of dispensations

appears in the Bible so emphatically, that every theologian, dispensationalist or not, is engaged in it.

2. Historical origin and development

We have already seen that protestant theology is divided into two camps: that of covenant theology and that of dispensationalism. On the one hand, there is the covenant theology that considers and tries to explain the whole Bible as an elaboration of what is called the covenant of grace, while on the other hand dispensationalism distinguishes between different programs carried out by God in respect of different people and nations, in different times. Somewhat simplified, it comes down to the following: the covenant theologian considers Biblical history as one continuous line from creation to the new creation (the new heaven and the new earth), while the dispensationalist subdivides the same continuous line into smaller pieces of uneven length. As a result, the misunderstanding arose that the dispensationalist cuts the Bible into sections, some of which would apply exclusively to the Church, others exclusively to Israel and yet others exclusively to the nations (the gentiles). When reading 2 Timothy 2 : 15 carefully, we discover that the Word of Truth should be divided by an "approved worker", which can only mean that everyone gets what he deserves.

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Timothy 2 : 15)

Israel, the Church and the nations each have a different calling and destiny in God's plans and when the Bible is explained, each of them should receive what they are entitled to. The Word of Truth should be divided. This "rightly dividing" is the most important feature of dispensationalism, because this is exactly where it differs from covenant theology, that will have nothing to do with dividing, but applies the whole Bible to all people throughout all ages. However, all this does not change the fact that also according to dispensationalism, a large part of the Biblical truths is indeed intended for the whole human race. That also is a part of dividing the word of truth rightly.

In simple terms, the doctrine of dispensationalism not only acknowledges the continuous line of the covenant theology, but in addition, without cutting that continuous line, imposes subdivisions on that line, which are indicated by an unbiased, normal explanation of the Bible. It is remarkable that opponents almost unanimously claim that dispensationalism would historically originate from Dr. C. I. Scofield, who would have developed it from the ideas of John Nelson Darby. The doctrine of dispensationalism was said to be based on the so-called Scofield Reference Bible, a Bible with marginal notes from the hand of Scofield and others, originally published in 1909. From this it is usually concluded that dispensationalism is a modern religious trend and should therefore be rejected by orthodox Christians. Hereby one is made to believe that covenant theology is of an old age and at least is rooted in the views of the reformers. Many regard covenant theology and Calvinism as two words for the same issue, but they are certainly not synonymous. Covenant theology is not found in the works of Calvin, Melancton, Luther or Zwingli. Although they had a lot to say about the covenant between God and man, that does not make them covenant theologians.

The widely-recognized founder of covenant theology was Johannes Coccejus (1603 – 1669), Dutch professor in Franeker since 1636 and after 1650 in Leiden. "He developed the doctrine of the covenant, as explained by other Reformed theologians, into the so-called case or covenant theology." (Prof. Dr. D. Nauta) "His great purpose was to return theology to the Bible as its only living source and to provide it with a vital Biblical foundation. He believed to have found such a foundation in the idea of a dual covenant of God with man [...]. Thus he became the author of covenant theology." (John Henry Kurtz) Coccejus published his ideas in 1648. Covenant theology therefore has a post-reformatory origin. It started as a response to extreme Calvinism (predestination), but was soon assimilated by Calvinism, so that the current covenant theology is based on the works of both Calvin and Coccejus, but it is the latter who developed and systematized it, while Herman Witsius (1636-1708) made it the starting point of the explanation of the Bible. Of course, all of this does not mean that, before the time of Coccejus, there were no ideas among the church fathers that fully or partially fit in the 'covenant concept', but only in the seventeenth century were they systematized into what has since been called 'covenant theology'.

The same is also the case with dispensationalism. Among the church fathers, one finds many views and statements that easily could have been cited from the works of our contemporary dispensationalists. "Henoah, Noah and all the others who were not circumcised, nor held the Sabbath, pleased God, while God, through other leaders and by giving the law, demanded that those who lived between the times of Abraham and Moses would be circumcised and would later keep the Sabbath [...]." (Justin Martyr) And what to think of this: "The gospel is fourfold (meaning the four gospels), as is the Lord's manner of acting. Therefore, four covenants were given to the human race: One before the flood under Adam, the second after Noah's flood, the third, namely the law, under Moses, the fourth that renews man and gathers everything to Himself by the gospel [...]." (Irenaeus, 130-200). Clement of Alexandria (150-220) divided the Old Testament into four dispensations, which he also named as such (dispensatio), starting with Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses, respectively. Later this table was supplemented with three New Testament dispensations by Samuel Hanson Coxe (1739-1880), who completed it bringing it to a total of seven.

In his works, also Augustine gives evidence of a distinction between different dispensations, which he even names as such. One of his most famous statements would not even look bad in a dispensationalist's study: "Distinguish the times and the Scripture is in harmony with itself." Although they distinguished dispensations, these church fathers were no dispensationalists, just as someone who distinguishes God's covenants with man is not a covenant theologian. But like Coccejus in the seventeenth century systematised certain views into the covenant theology, with the covenant as a guiding principle, in that same seventeenth century, certain views were systematized into dispensationalism, with the distinction of the dispensations as 'vital Biblical Foundation'. The first to do that was Pierre Poiret (1646-1719), who published his six-part work in Amsterdam in 1687. It was titled "L'Oeconomie Divine" (The Divine Dispensation; oeconomie = oikonomia = household). Just like the work of Coccejus, this work began in response to and supplement of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, but developed into a quite complete systematic theology. Poiret's table of dispensations is as follows:

1. Adam to Noah
2. Noah to Moses
3. Moses to David
4. David to Christ
5. The Church
6. The falling away and tribulation
7. The Millennium ("1000 year Kingdom")

Undoubtedly Poiret was in all respects a dispensationalist in the present sense of the word: He distinguished between Israel and the Church; he expected the return of Israel to her God and her country; he expected the return of Christ, prior to the millennium in which Christ would be physically present on earth to reign with His saints; he expected the coming of the antichrist and two resurrections. And that in 1687.

"A complete history or survey of all the dispensations," is the title of a two-piece work by John Edwards (1639-1716). As the title already says, he also gave a full summary and explanation of all dispensations from the original creation to the coming of the new creation. Somewhat simplified his table looks like this:

1. Adam to Noah
2. Noah to Abraham
3. Abraham to Moses
4. Moses to Christ
5. The Church
6. The falling away and tribulation
7. The Millennium

A third dispensationalist of the first hour was Dr. Isaac Watts (1674-1748), who incidentally was best known as a lyrics poet, having written several hundred spiritual songs. He has that activity in common with, for example, J. N. Darby and Johannes de Heer. As a theologian, Watts is the author of a work about the dispensations, in which he says: "All these dispensations (households) of God can be regarded as different religions or at least as different forms of

religion, instituted for man in the successive centuries of the world." This is his table:

1. Adam to the fall of man
2. The fall of man to Noah
3. Noah to Abraham
4. Abraham to Moses
5. Moses to Christ
6. The Church

Watt's table ends with the Church, because he did not consider the Millennium as a dispensation. Other than that, it completely corresponds to that of Scofield. Thus, the Scofield table was not derived from Darby's, as is so often claimed, but is completely identical to that of Isaac Watts. The three above-mentioned works are of dispensational design and have the dispensations as subject. It is therefore very remarkable that friend and foe have forgotten these men and their works. It is even more peculiar when it is said that Darby and Scofield are the founders of dispensationalism, because they themselves have not written any work about the dispensations as such. The collected works of Darby (1800-1882) consists of around forty volumes, each with six hundred pages, but from all his works one can barely crystallize a dispensation table. I therefore present the following table of Darby with reservation:

1. Adam to Noah
2. Noah to Abraham
3. Abraham to Moses
4. Moses to the exile
5. The exile to Christ (the times of the Gentiles)
6. The Church
7. The Millennium

However, the man who contributed by far the most to the spread of dispensationalism is Dr. Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843-1921). His table became best known because he published it within his marginal notes in his 'Scofield Reference Bible', by which it gained authority as if it were the Bible itself. As mentioned, his

table is essentially exactly the same as that of Watts. However much authority this table of Scofield may have gained, he himself has never put much emphasis on the distinction of the dispensations in his sparse other works. What was much more important to him and most other dispensationalists, is the distinction that God makes in His Word between Israel, the Church and the nations. A distinction not invented by Scofield, but known and recognized throughout the centuries. Although, of course, Darby was of great influence, the allegation that dispensationalism finds its origin in Darby and was propagated by Scofield, who took over from him, is historically absolutely incorrect. The general line in the development of dispensationalism runs from Poiret through Edwards and Watts to Scofield, who copied the complete table of Watts without alterations and supplemented it with the Millennium, in which Watts believed, but which he did not recognize as a dispensation. We see, therefore, that dispensationalism certainly does not originate from Darby. First of all, because it already existed in black and white in the seventeenth century, and secondly, because the main stream of dispensationalism moves from Watts to Scofield, thereby simply passing Darby.

In addition, we see that dispensationalism and covenant theology arose simultaneously in the seventeenth century in response to extreme Calvinism, thus in principle neither covenant theology nor dispensationalism are Calvinistic. However, covenant theology and Calvinism have swallowed up each other quite rapidly and are now virtually synonymous. Dispensationalism and Calvinism are, however, still opposed, in that dispensationalists try to divide the Word of Truth as rightly as possible, while Calvinists prefer to keep everything for themselves. However, Calvinism and dispensationalism are often close to each other when it comes to universal Biblical truths. That much of the historical background of dispensationalism, as mentioned above, is so little known among both followers and opponents, is because of the fact that dispensationalists certainly do not need a historical defence of their views. Apparently, they consider themselves sufficiently supported by the Bible. They do not rely on Scofield, Darby, Gray, Brookers, Coxe, Watts, Edwards or Poiret, but solely on the Bible itself, the Word of Truth that should be rightly divided and requires no external support or defence.

3. What is a dispensation?

After our brief consideration of dispensationalism in general and its historical development, we must face an important question. If one believes the statement that "God's whole program is divided into seven dispensations or households," first of all, the question will arise: 'What is a dispensation?' To answer this question, usually Dr. C. I. Scofield is quoted, who writes on page 5 of the Reference Bible: "A dispensation is a period of time, during which man is being tested for obedience to a specific revelation of God's will." Remarkably, both dispensationalists and their opponents are scarcely aware of the fact that, in addition to Scofield, many others have tried to define what a dispensation is, while also Scofield himself has added a thing or two to his definition above.

The objections raised against dispensationalism are almost always primarily against the above definition, with the philosophy that if the definition is not sustainable, the whole system must be worthless. For this purpose, the definition is reduced to the sentence: "A dispensation is a period of time," after which it is claimed that the Greek 'oikonomia', in the Bible translated with 'dispensation', has absolutely no relation with a certain period of time. Biblical history then could not be subdivided into seven dispensations because a dispensation has nothing to do with time. In a purely linguistic view, this is perfectly correct: the word 'dispensation' does not mean 'a period of time', but the conclusion is rather naive. A car has nothing to do with time as such, but unfortunately it exists for a limited period of time. Similarly, a dispensation exists for a certain period of time. Just as you can divide the life history of a person according to the cars he had in succession ("He still drove that old Morris then"), so world history can be divided according to the dispensations that existed more or less in succession.

The word 'war' refers to a particular state or situation ('state of war') and not to time, but since that state of war existed for a certain period of time, we use the war as a definition of time, and speak of before, during and after the war. Linguistically a king is not time, but his government marks a certain period of time, and therefore the Bible correctly speaks of 'the days of Uzziah'. Likewise, the dispensations mark a certain period of time, because they arose and eventually ceased at some point. Whatever a dispensation may be, it is a thing and has in

common with all things that it exists for a certain period of time. On this basis, it is entirely feasible to divide the history of salvation into consecutive dispensations, although a dispensation is not necessarily a time period.

Although Dr. Scofield wrongly defines a dispensation as a period of time, he has never emphasized the time aspect. He, and any other dispensationalist, knows that time is not the issue, but it is about the organization of that time. When dispensationalists want to summarize their views in short, they usually speak about seven dispensations succeeding each other in history, so unintentionally the emphasis lies on the time aspect. But when the same people expand their view completely, this aspect utterly disappears and emphasizes the different nature of only three of the seven dispensations, without directly considering the fact that these three dispensations (law, grace and kingdom) indeed belong to different periods of time.

The weakness of Scofield's definition lies in the fact that a dispensation is essentially no time or 'era'. For this reason, many others have suggested definitions in which the term 'time' does not occur. Therefore, it is definitely unfair to judge dispensationalism exclusively on Scofield's definition. However, a summary of other definitions does not seem to be in place here. The only thing that matters is what the Bible says about dispensations, even though it does not meet our 'scientific' need to define. We do not get an answer to the question "What is a dispensation?" by studying dispensationalism, but by studying the Bible, the revealed Word of God. And that is of course as it should be.

The word 'dispensation' is a rather unfortunate translation of the Greek 'oikonomia', which is a contraction of the words 'oikos' and 'nemo'. 'Oikos' stands for 'house', while nemo means 'distribute', 'divide' or more generally 'manage'. So purely etymologically a dispensation is the management of a house, or, as the dictionary states: "the management of the affairs of an inhabited house." A dispensation is simply a 'household'. It is certainly not difficult to recognize the English word 'economy' in 'oikonomia'. A dispensation is therefore a household or economy. Although this explanation is entirely correct, it is not yet complete. One of the basic principles of language study as well as Bible study, is that the meaning of a word is not found in the dictionary, but it appears from the use

of that word. Therefore, when we are interested in the Biblical meaning of the word 'dispensation', we are better served using a (Greek) concordance than a dictionary. Indeed, the Bible gives certain words its own specific meaning, which may differ considerably from the original one. Thus, the study of the word 'dispensation' in the Bible provides us with further details that cannot be found in the dictionary. The word 'dispensation' appears in the Bible in three different forms:

1. The verb 'oikonomeo' can be found in Luke 16 : 2, where it is translated as 'to be a steward'.
2. The noun 'oikonomos' is translated as 'steward', 'treasurer' or 'governor' and is found in Luke 12 : 42; 16 : 1, 3, 8; Romans 16 : 23; 1 Corinthians 4 : 1, 2; Galatians 4 : 2; Titus 1 : 7 and 1 Peter 4 : 10.
3. The noun 'oikonomia' is translated as 'stewardship' or 'dispensation' and is found in Luke 16 : 2-4; 1 Corinthians 9 : 17; Ephesians 1 : 10; 3 : 2 and Colossians 1 : 25.

Certain manuscripts have in Ephesians 3 : 9 the word 'koinonia' (=fellowship), although later discovered, older manuscripts (Codex Sinaiticus) have the word 'oikonomia'. In contrast, some manuscripts have 'oikonomia' in 1 Timothy 1 : 4, although our English translations have rightly assumed the more common 'oikodomia' (=edification). The word 'dispensation' thus occurs exclusively in the statements of the Lord Jesus and the apostle Paul, with the exception of 1 Peter 4 : 10. In the statements of the Lord Himself we find the basic features of a dispensation, while its more practical application is mainly found in Paul's. The words of the Lord in Luke 12 and 16 show, among other things, the following:

1. In a dispensation, there are at least two parties: a) the owner and b) the steward (oikonomos) appointed by the owner to manage the property and who is accountable to him.
2. A dispensation or stewardship can be annulled whenever the owner finds any cause for this.

3. When a dispensation ends, this also means that a new dispensation may be set up to replace the old one: the steward must be replaced.

Without directly addressing the specific meaning of these two parables, we can still state that the above three principles are applied by the apostle Paul:

1. God is Owner of the house, while man, as a steward of Gods property, is accountable to Him. "Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful." (1 Corinthians 4 : 1, 2)

"For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God [...]" (Titus 1 : 7)

2. That a dispensation can be annulled is confirmed by Paul in Galatians 4 : 3: "But (he, a child, see verse 1) is under guardians and stewards (oikonomos) until the time appointed by the father." As is evident from the whole context, he here refers to the stewardship of the Mosaic Law, which was annulled by the crucifixion and resurrection of the Saviour. Therefore he says in the following verses:

"But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son [...] to redeem those who were under the law."

The message of the whole letter to the Galatians is that the dispensation of the Law has been annulled (fulfilled) and has become history.

3. In the next Bible book we logically find that a new dispensation has begun, replacing the old. In Ephesians 3 the apostle emphatically announces the new dispensation of grace: "if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God" (verse 2). In this regard, he mentions two details of the new dispensation: a) Paul received this dispensation, this stewardship, from God Himself, for us (verse 2). And b) In previous ages nothing was revealed about a 'household of grace' (verse 5). This is repeated in verse 9, where this dispensation is called the "dispensation (oikonomia, not koinonia) of the mystery, which from the beginning of

the ages has been hidden in God," which, according to verses 2 and 3 (among others), was revealed to Paul. In Colossians 1:25-27 we find exactly the same truth:

“According to the stewardship from God which was given to me for you [...] the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints. To them God willed to make known [*so it was still unknown*] what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

In a Biblical sense, a dispensation is therefore a Divine household that begins at a certain moment and can be annulled at a certain moment. This obviously implies that different dispensations can follow each other and thus automatically divide the history of Salvation into different periods. The words 'age' and 'dispensation' are therefore related to each other, but that does not make them synonymous. A dispensation is not the age itself, but the design of the age. It is good to reckon with this in our common parlance, to avoid any unnecessary misunderstandings. The becoming operative of a new dispensation is apparently a consequence of the revelation of certain new truths. When new house rules are given, a different type of household will result. The aforementioned dispensation of the law, of course, arose from the revelation of the law on Sinai. But after Christ's resurrection, when was made known that man can be justified by grace and therefore without the law (Ephesians 2 : 8, 9; Romans 3 : 28; Galatians 3 : 11), it was also proclaimed that the dispensation of the law had made way for the dispensation of grace. A new revelation that had not been announced in previous centuries, became the foundation of a new dispensation.

In conjunction with the above, we must realize that a dispensation does not necessarily apply to all humanity. This also appears from the parable of Luke 16, in which not all people were subject to the stewardship that was to be annulled. The law was emphatically given to the people that God had delivered from Egypt and was only applied to others if they were incorporated in Israel (as proselytes). From this scope of operation of a dispensation, it is then conceivable that different nations or categories of people belong to different dispensations that are in

operation simultaneously. For if only Israel was under the dispensation of the law, it is possible that at the same time other nations (gentiles) were subject to, or remained in, another dispensation. The dispensations are the result of specific revelations of God; when those revelations, as the Bible says, were indeed given to different groups, it is very conceivable that those different groups also belong to different dispensations that are operational simultaneously in parallel. That this indeed occurs during the history of salvation, will become evident from the study of the various dispensations separately. Here we were only concerned with the question of the essence of a dispensation. We will return later to the details of the different dispensations separately.

4. The method of Bible interpretation

'Hermeneutics' or 'exegesis' is the 'science' that deals with the method or methods of Bible interpretation. The way we explain a certain Bible passage fully depends on the hermeneutical principles we use for the interpretation of that passage. Discussions about doctrinal matters often turn out to be useless in practice, because the contradictions are not directly related to the doctrines themselves, but result from the use of different hermeneutics. Many Christians know something of the doctrine in which they believe, but do not have the slightest notion of the hermeneutical principles on which that doctrine is based. Therefore, they are often unable to defend their views from the Bible. For everyone knows that you can proclaim anything with the Bible in hand, seeing all the different churches that refer to the same Bible. What these churches have in common is the Bible, while their differences and disputes arise from the use of different hermeneutics. Although, in addition to the Bible, hermeneutics is the base of every doctrine and should therefore be determined before one begins with the study of the Bible, theological practice is usually the exact opposite. Usually, a certain interpretation is ascribed to a Bible passage; an interpretation that fits perfectly into the desired theological pattern, without being bothered with the used hermeneutics. The latter is left to someone who can subsequently determine which hermeneutical principles were applied. Therefore, different doctrines are not the result of an inaccurate Bible, but of different and often random hermeneutics.

What do dispensational hermeneutics consist of? In simpler terms: how does someone who believes in dispensations read and interpret the Bible? What method does he use? This question is of the utmost importance because each doctrine stands or falls with the applied method of Bible interpretation. The answer to this question is surprisingly simple. A dispensationalist actually does not use any special method at all; he simply reads what the Bible says and believes that. He basically reads the Bible as any other book and believes the meaning of the written words. In short, he does not dwell on hermeneutics, because he does not need a special interpretation method that is only relevant for the Bible. He reads the Bible like a child would read a children's book; he believes what it says. And because a label is needed to be taken seriously, this method is called 'literal interpretation'. It might have been better to call it 'normal interpretation', since the literal meaning of words is the normal meaning in all languages. Of the many reasons we could give in support of the literal or normal interpretation of the Scripture, we would like to mention three of them here.

The first is a logical reason. If we do not make use of literal interpretation, but only give a symbolic or so-called spiritual meaning to the words of the Bible, there absolutely can be no more objectivity. How should we judge that endless series of 'spiritual' interpretations that emerge from the seemingly futile human imagination? As soon as one turns away from the normal interpretation, it will appear that a theologian can indeed proclaim anything with the Bible in hand. In that way, anyone can proclaim anything using any book. Then there will be just as many teachings as there are different Bible interpreters. Only when we hold on to the normal meaning of words, is it possible to check the interpretation. When the Bible has something to say, this can only be done through the normal interpretation, because a figurative interpretation cannot be checked or confirmed. Then the Bible remains a controversial book that has no message for man, because that message cannot be established. That would mean that God has revealed so insufficiently of Himself to us, that there is no more revelation. The literal or normal interpretation can thus be the only correct method.

The second reason is a theological one. The Old Testament prophecies concerning the first coming of the Messiah, His birth, life, suffering, death and resurrection, were all literally fulfilled. In the whole New Testament, no figurative fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies can be found. Therefore, there is no Biblical reason to reject the literal interpretation of all other prophecies.

The third is a philosophical reason. Scripture teaches "in the beginning was the Word" and "all things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made." (John 1) The whole creation originated from the Word, the speaking of God. "And God said [...] and it was so." The purpose of the Word was to express and reveal the essence of God, not only in creation but also in the Bible. Now when the revelation of God is the primary purpose of the Word and of language, then the normal literal interpretation of the Word of God can be the only right one. The notion that it is always the so-called 'spiritual' or allegorical interpretation (which one?) that matters in the Bible, implies that the literal interpretation is untrue and makes God a liar. An exclusively figurative Bible interpretation is therefore essentially blasphemous.

Then there is still the notion that language is not a creation of God but of man, and that the Holy Spirit would not be able to formulate spiritual things in purely human words. This would necessitate human beings to seek the true meaning behind the writings of the Bible. Unfortunately, this reasoning has found a lot of acceptance. Presumably this is due to the fact that in a pious manner man is put on a pedestal. For it is evidently of far-reaching pride to presume that man would be able to do something the Holy Spirit could not: namely to put spiritual truths into words. Thus, the literal or normal interpretation of the Bible is the basis of dispensationalism. Because this is so well-known, one has often attempted to defy dispensationalism by demonstrating that even a follower of dispensationalism will sometimes turn to 'spiritualising'. Here we encounter a misunderstanding.

First of all, certain Scriptures must be interpreted allegorically (allegory = symbolical image), as these passages literally say so. In such a case, an allegorical interpretation is not in conflict, but in accordance with the literal meaning. For example, when we read that the Saviour narrates a parable or an 'allegory', we take that literally and thus interpret that parable allegorically. The latter is usually not so

difficult, because often the interpretation is given. A dispensationalist therefore spiritualises wherever the Bible indicates this. Thus, in Revelations 11 : 8 we read that the two witnesses will be killed in "the great city, which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt." It is literally stated that we should not take the names of that city literally, but 'spiritually'. Of course, Jerusalem is compared here with Sodom and Egypt; from which it follows that the Biblical events in Sodom and Egypt are a type of still future events in Jerusalem. And that is why a dispensationalist also 'spiritualises'.

Secondly, each language, also the language of the Bible, has expressions that only have a figurative meaning. They are what we call 'figures of speech'. Recognizing and interpreting those figures of speech are part of the comprehension of a language in general, and thus of understanding and interpreting the Bible. When, for instance, the Pharisees are called a 'generation of vipers', even a dispensationalist will not consider this to be meant literally. Pharisees might belong to a rather odd species, but they were not reptiles. Here the expression 'generation of vipers' therefore has a figurative meaning in which the Pharisees are compared with vipers. When something is called a 'heap of rubbish', this will only rarely be meant literally. However, the normal meaning is obvious to everyone. In all such cases the normal meaning is figurative and this is in accordance with all laws to which language is subject.

Moreover, we must note that the 'spiritual' meaning of such expressions is essentially derived from the literal meaning; without the literal meaning such an expression cannot have any spiritual meaning at all. This brings us to the phenomenon that the dispensationalist does indeed distinguish a spiritual meaning behind the literal or normal meaning of the words of Scripture, whether indicated as such, or not. An example can clarify this. The normal interpretation of the book Jonah teaches that this servant of God stayed "three days and three nights" in the belly of the "big fish." Nowhere it is stated that this is a parable and not an account of events. We therefore believe in the historical reliability of the book Jonah. However, this does not alter the fact that the Bible itself gives this story a spiritual meaning and applies it to the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 12 : 40) and to the destruction and restoration of the Jewish nation (Hosea 6 : 3) as well.

However, recognizing the spiritual and prophetic meaning of the book of Jonah does not give anyone the right to deny the literal meaning. How could the Saviour have given the sign of Jonah to "an evil and adulterous generation" if Jonah never existed? When there is no literal meaning, there is no spiritual one either. The expression: "As the tree, so the fruit" only has a 'spiritual' meaning if trees actually exist. If we do not believe in literal trees, how can we give this expression a spiritual meaning? Only when we understand the literal meaning, is it possible to understand the deeper spiritual and prophetic meaning of the accounts and statements of the Bible. When we deny the literal meaning, we are actually ridiculous by looking for a spiritual meaning, for what are we then looking for? The very fact that the dispensationalist first interprets the whole Bible literally, is the reason that the same dispensationalist has so much to say about the spiritual meaning of the things and events in the Bible. Knowledge of typology, symbolism, the spiritual meaning of numbers, knowledge of the spiritual meaning of the tabernacle, the 'creation days', and so forth, is mainly found among dispensationalists and is based on the literal meaning of all these issues. What is the meaning of a type if there was no type; what is the meaning of the tabernacle if there was no tabernacle? What is the meaning of something that never existed?

It is especially the dispensationalist who knows about the spiritual meaning of Scripture, because he first accepts the literal meaning. He acknowledges the literal as well as the (usually several) spiritual and prophetic meanings. Of course, literal interpretation is not the exclusive property of dispensationalism. No doubt, many orthodox Christians will wholeheartedly agree with the foregoing. What then is the fundamental difference between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists? The distinction lies in the fact that dispensationalists apply the normal interpretation consistently throughout the Scripture, while non-dispensationalists stop doing so when it comes to interpreting the Biblical prophecies. For example, as soon as Israel is mentioned in the prophecies, it is said that 'spiritual Israel' is meant, which is understood to be the Church. Jerusalem and Palestine then become heaven, the throne of David becomes the throne of God, Babylon becomes the apostate church, the temple becomes the church building, gentiles become unbelievers, and so forth. In this way, prophecies that are still to be literally fulfilled in the future are applied

exclusively to the Church, overlooking their literal meaning for Israel and the nations (gentiles).

Now we get to the most important feature of dispensationalism. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer summarized it as follows: "The dispensationalist believes that through the ages God is working out two plans: One relating to the earth with an earthly people and earthly blessings (spiritual blessings that are enjoyed on earth), that is Israel; while the other relates to heaven with a heavenly people and heavenly blessings (spiritual blessings that are fundamentally enjoyed in heaven; Ephesians 1 : 3), that is the Church. In contrast, there is the theologian who bases his scriptural interpretation on the assumption that God only does one thing, namely separating the good and the evil [...] which requires him to ascribe a spiritual or allegorical meaning to the prophecies concerning God's program with the earth or to even completely ignore this program."

This distinction between Israel and the Church is the most important practical feature of dispensationalism and is the natural result of the hermeneutical system of normal or literal interpretation. However, both the covenant theologian and the dispensationalist make use of 'spiritualizing' when dealing with certain Bible passages, just as the Bible does. But unlike the covenant theologian, a dispensationalist never does this at the expense of the literal meaning. The dispensationalist primarily claims a literal interpretation and secondarily an allegorical or spiritual application based thereon, whereby certain Biblical promises, for instance, are literally related to God's earthly people Israel, while they also have a spiritual application for the Church, without depriving Israel of her promises. This is rightly dividing the Word of Truth. Every theologian, from whatever denomination, knows that a consistent application of the normal interpretation, simply believing what the Bible says, without first twisting or spiritualizing it, leads directly to a dispensational theology that leaves God room for His plans with Israel, the Church and the nations. (1 Corinthians 10 : 32) Plans that can only be known to those who also give the Biblical prophecies their normal literal meaning.

5. Which dispensations are there?

The fact that the Bible distinguishes between different dispensations or households, is a fact recognized by both the covenant theologian and the dispensationalist. As we have noted before, discernment of dispensations does not make somebody a dispensationalist. The covenant theologian Louis Berkhof even applies a table of five dispensations, without becoming a dispensationalist by doing so. He avoids that appearance emphatically by labelling only two dispensations as such, after which he subdivides the first (the 'Old Testament dispensation') into four 'phases in the revelation of the grace covenant'. Apparently distinguishing between dispensations is indeed an activity of both parties. However, the basic characteristics of dispensationalism are:

- a. The consistent application of the literal or normal interpretation, resulting in:
- b. Distinguishing between Israel, the Church and the nations (gentiles).

From this position, the question of the names of the dispensations and their correct number appears less important. For a dispensational table is not the base for the interpretation of the Bible, but a result of unprejudiced Bible study. Studying the Scriptures should not be undertaken with a particular dispensational table as starting point, but leads to a particular table. The table someone uses therefore depends on the method of Bible interpretation (hermeneutics) and on someone's definition of a dispensation. That is why even a covenant theologian can come up with a table. The fact that the question which one is the only correct dispensational table is not fundamental for dispensationalism, appears from two remarkable facts.

First of all, many 'forerunners' of dispensationalism have each drawn up and published their own table in the course of time, without substantially differing from one another. Their tables were different, but by this they became absolutely no opponents. The latter was caused by the fact that they did not regard the names and the correct number of dispensations of principle importance. Secondly, anti-dispensationalists never perceived the wide variety of dispensa-

tional tables as an argument against dispensationalism. Indeed, it would have been very obvious to argue that these many tables can only arise because of the lack of sufficient Biblical ground and that apparently, the Bible does not provide adequate ground for dispensationalism in general. The virtual absence of such anti-dispensational arguments proves that they too considered the issue of the correct table of less importance. It is also remarkable that people like J. N. Darby, who is considered to be one of the founders of dispensationalism, and Dr. E. W. Bullinger, who is reputed to be an 'ultra-dispensationalist', have never published their own dispensational table. This proves yet again how little they valued this. On the other hand, we find the phenomenon that some use different tables on different occasions. For example, my father (Jacob Klein Haneveld) almost always used the table that became known by Watts and Scofield, while in his book 'The life of Joseph', he discussed a table in which the dispensation of the law and that of the promise together are called the 'dispensation of Israel'. This table also leaves room for a dispensation of the great tribulation. He too, shows here that the distinguishing between dispensations as such, is more important than the search for a table that could be Biblically founded for one hundred percent. As said, this broad view is the most common among the followers of 'the doctrine of dispensationalism'.

However, the issue of the correct number and nature of separate dispensations is worth considering, because dispensationalism is still presented on the basis of some table. Therefore, we give an overview of the most important tables as they were published in the course of time. The table of Watts and Scofield are well known. Philip Mauro's table was originally published in his work 'The day of Man', but to my knowledge is only still attainable at antiquarian bookshops. However, the same table is illustrated and explained in 'From eternity to eternity' by A. E. Booth. Furthermore, I have taken the liberty to display my own table in the last column of the overview. For convenience, the dispensations in the various tables have been numbered. That does not mean that the authors valued the figure with which they indicated a particular dispensation. The numbers only serve as a substitute for the names given to the dispensations. However, this does not apply to the last table, since I believe that the numbers of the Bible are indeed of typological or spiritual significance. In this way, for example, the typological meaning of the number five should correspond to the nature and character of the

fifth dispensation. The numbering of the dispensations in the other tables on the other hand, does not have any typological significance.

How does one establish which table is the correct one? Scofield never explained how he exactly came up with his table, apart from the fact that it is essentially identical to that of Watts. Others have never done this either, to my knowledge. If they had attached more importance to the correct table, they undoubtedly would have elaborated on how they came into being. Here too, we see how little they attached to their own table. How can we explain this phenomenon? Undoubtedly, it is caused by the scarcity of Biblical data about the majority of dispensations, when we consider them purely as historical periods. Based on Scofield's table we see that four of the seven dispensations had passed, when the Exodus began. The first four dispensations are described in the first Bible book, while the remaining three are covered by the rest of the Bible. Therefore, Scofield did not take his first four dispensations very seriously, but with the Bible emphasized the next dispensations of law, grace and the kingdom. These three are covered by the greater part of Scripture and distinguishing between these three is therefore rightly the content of most of the dispensational literature. That this is indeed the common factor, appears at a glance from the overview. All, except Philip Mauro, who unfortunately turned his back on dispensationalism in later years, distinguish the beginning of a new dispensation respectively at Noah's flood, the exodus out of Egypt (the law), the resurrection of Christ and the return of Christ.

In the overview this is reflected by the four continuing horizontal lines. So, on five dispensations everyone agrees. The other common factor is that all come to a total of seven dispensations. In order to get to this total of seven it is necessary to make subdivisions within the already mentioned five dispensations, which indeed already comprise the entire human history. One must therefore look for two more special events in the history of Salvation that could mark the beginning of a new dispensation. The most obvious are: the fall of Adam (6x), the covenant with Abraham (6x), the great apostasy, possibly associated with the rapture of the Church (4x) and the advent of the new creation (2x). Remarkably, all dispensation tables show a total of seven. The only explanation for this phenomenon is that someone who knows his Bible and has some understanding of its order and

system, must arrive at the amount of seven, even without the Scripture stating this explicitly. There is no better explanation and we see no need for another. Although our summary shows a total of nine different tables, there is indeed a high degree of similarity. All have five dispensations in common and a total of seven.

The high degree of similarity between the tables is of course the result of Bible study, for though the Bible names only two dispensations as such, the others are indeed mentioned in the Bible. The for us most relevant dispensation is mentioned in Ephesians 3 : 2: "the dispensation of the grace of God." Even covenant theologians agree with us that this expression stands for this present age, the time between the first and second coming of Christ. However, this dispensation of grace began only after the resurrection of Christ. In Romans 6 and 7 the death and resurrection of the Saviour are linked to the end of the law and the revelation of grace. (Hebrews 9 : 15) Law and grace are placed opposite each other.

“[...] you are not under law but under grace.” (Romans 6 : 14)

If 'grace' is the name of a dispensation, then 'law' must also be the name of a dispensation; indeed of the one immediately prior to grace. The dispensation of the law, of course, came about when the law was given on Sinai. Now we already have two dispensations. A similar Scripture we find in Galatians 3 and 4, where the law is stated opposing the promise to Abraham, which preceded the law 430 years. Hence the dispensation of the promise. From there it is not difficult to discover the beginning of the preceding dispensation in the covenant between God and Noah. (Genesis 9 : 1-17) The 'house rules' Noah received there differ considerably from God's covenant with Adam, so that we can rightly speak of a new household or dispensation. Whether we should consider Adam's fall as the beginning of a new dispensation depends on how we define a dispensation. Indeed, when we consider a dispensation to be a household, then we must also distinguish a new dispensation here. After all, the household that existed before the fall was dramatically altered by the expulsion from the garden and the associated change in man's living conditions. In this simple way, we come to the following dispensations:

- a. From the creation to the fall of man
- b. From the fall of man to the Flood
- c. From the Flood to the covenant with Abraham
- d. From Abraham to the Exodus from Egypt (Sinai)
- e. From the Exodus to the resurrection of Christ
- f. From the resurrection of Christ to the rapture of the Church.

This last dispensation needs some explanation. In most tables this dispensation runs until the Second Coming of Christ, which usually refers to His appearance on the Mount of Olives. In our opinion, however, this dispensation ends at the first phase of the series of events summarized in the Scripture under the term 'the future (parousia) of the Lord'. This term does not refer to a single event, but to a series of events (parousia = presence). This first phase of Christ's return is the rapture of His Church. (1 Thessalonians 4 : 15-17) In addition, the Scripture teaches that the Church is built only in this dispensation of grace. From this it follows that this dispensation will end when the completed Church is caught up into heaven.

As for the future, the whole Scripture - including Paul's letters and the Revelation of John - speaks of the still future dispensation of the Messianic Kingdom. From Daniel 9 and many other prophecies, however, it appears that this kingdom will not begin immediately after the rapture of the Church, but that there will be a period of at least seven years (the 'seventieth week' of Daniel) between the rapture of the Church and the final establishment of the Messianic Kingdom by the binding of Satan. (Revelation 20). However, many believe that this period will last 40 years. As the dispensation of grace ends with the rapture of the Church and the dispensation of the kingdom will not begin immediately, the period in between of at least seven years and with a maximum of 40 years, must provide for an independent dispensation. This relatively short dispensation is the 'dispensation of the fullness of times' from Ephesians 1 : 10. Thus we can add the following households to the above-mentioned series:

- g. From the rapture of the Church to the binding of satan
- h. From the binding of satan to the new creation (Revelation 21, 22).

According to this brief explanation, we find a series of dispensations which each appear separately in most of the tables of our summary. Whether this series is indeed correct, can, of course, only become evident by studying the dispensations separately and in their mutual context.

Survey of various dispensation tables in chronological order									
	Poirrot	Edwards	Watts	Darby	Brookes	Gray	Scofield	Mauro	author
Creation			1		1	1	1		
Fall of Adam	1	1	2	1	2	2	2	1	1
Great flood		2	3	2			3	2	2
Abraham	2	3	4	3	3	3	4		3
Moses									
David	3			4					
Exile	4	4	5		4	4	5	3	4
Christ's birth				5	5				
Christ's arising									
Rapture of the Church	5	5	6	6	6	5	6	4	5
	6	6						5	6
Christ's second coming									
	7	7	7	7	7	6	7	6	7
The Last Judgement						7		7	

When we consider the dispensations as a series of seven consecutive ages, the thought rapidly emerges that there could be a connection between these dispensations and the seven days of creation in Genesis 1. Dr. Philip Mauro was, as far as

I know, the first to publish such a view in 'The day of man' (1908). The seven days of (re-)creation would then be types of the seven dispensations. In that case, Genesis 1 is not just an account of the genesis of the world, but also the Bible's table of contents. Since everything in the old creation is a type of the new creation, we can conclude that the new creation will come into being in seven phases, just as the old one. These seven phases are then the seven dispensations. In addition, we refer to the explanation of the 'doctrine of restitution' in Chapter 4 'Regeneration: the hope of creation', in which we have seen that the seven days of Genesis 1 were preceded by the creative work as such and the subsequent judgment. When summarizing the events in this chapter the following structure thus arises:

- A. Creation of the world
- B. The fall (into sin) of the world
- C. The series of seven days of (re-)creation.

This sequence corresponds exactly with the history of mankind:

- A. The creation of man
- B. The fall (into sin) of man
- C. The series of seven dispensations.

Already before, we extracted a total of eight dispensations from the Bible, while they actually should be seven. This problem, however, is solved by itself, when we place the dispensations and days of creation next to each other. For the earliest dispensation ('innocence') ended with Adam's fall, while on the other hand, the first day begins after the fall of the earth in Genesis 1 : 2. Apparently, the numbering only begins after the fall, so that the dispensation beginning after the fall of Adam should bear the number 1, and the dispensation of innocence is not part of the seven, but precedes them. This is of great importance when we apply the symbolic meaning of the numbers. The scope of this is that the typological meaning of the number 1 corresponds to the nature of the first day of creation and that of the first dispensation. In addition, we find that same typological meaning in the first seven human generations from Adam up to Enoch, "the seventh of Adam" (Jude : 14) and in for instance the series of seven fruits in Deuteronomy 8 : 8 and so on. A study of this not only demonstrates the correctness of the

doctrine of dispensation as such, or of our dispensational table, but also the wonderful cohesion and harmony of the living Word of God, in which all things, as in creation and history, have their appropriate time and place and function.

The table

Previously we have already shown that the seven numbered dispensations begin after the expulsion from the garden, as also the seven numbered days of (re-)creation begin after the judgment of creation in Genesis 1 : 2.

Creation of the world	Creation of man
Fall of the world	Fall of man
1st day of creation	1st dispensation of the conscience Begins with the fall of Adam
2nd day of creation	2nd dispensation of human government Begins after the great flood
3rd day of creation	3rd dispensation of the promise Begins with the covenant with Abraham
4th day of creation	4th dispensation of the law Begins with the exodus out of Egypt
5th day of creation	5th dispensation of grace Begins with Christ's resurrection
6th day of creation	6th dispensation of the fullness of times Begins with the rapture of the Church
7th day of creation	7th dispensation of the kingdom Begins with the binding of satan

The dispensation of the conscience (1)

This first dispensation begins with Adam's fall and to the average dispensationalist is known as 'the dispensation of the conscience'. This name is from Dr. Scofield and derived from Romans 2 : 15. Of course, other dispensationalists have used other names for this dispensation in an effort to express its nature as fully as

possible. However, the main issue is that a name primarily serves to distinguish, where it is less important if the name is a complete representation of the character of the named objects. To the extent that the Bible itself does not give the name of a dispensation, we will therefore stick to the names of Dr. Scofield, seeing that they are best-known. The main feature of this dispensation is that humanity is not yet divided into nations, but each individual bears only a personal and direct responsibility to God. It is about the personal relationship of man to God and the question of whether he, like Adam before his fall, is able to walk with God, as for instance Enoch did (Genesis 5 : 22, 24). Unfortunately, history shows that Paul's description in Romans 3 of sinful man is absolutely true: He is not capable of any good, despite the working of the conscience (Romans 2 : 15) and the promise of the coming and victorious seed of the woman. (Genesis 3 : 15)

The dispensation of human government (2)

After the flood, God introduces a new dispensation, in which man is placed under a human government. To that end, humanity is divided into the seventy nations of Genesis 10, each of which is allotted with its own land (Genesis 10: 5, 20, 31) and each has its own government or reign. From the flood, man as an individual is not only accountable to God, but also to the human government, whose duty as God's servant is to keep man going straight. (Romans 13 : 4) Moreover, it appears from the Scriptures that the nations themselves are accountable to God and, as such, will also be judged as a nation at the return of Christ, when he will come to rule over all the nations. During his life, natural man is therefore subject to two different dispensations. The first relates to his personal relationship with God. The second is related to the nation to which he belongs. Also in this case, the nation of Israel serves as an example (1 Corinthians 10 : 6, 7): as a whole it has a certain calling and responsibility, whereas for each individual Jew, the same applies as to a heathen: He must come to believe in the Lord Jesus to be saved, just like everyone else.

The dispensation of the promise (3)

Apart from these first two dispensations of individuals and nations, that are apparently still operational because there are still people and nations and because

the Bible teaches nothing about the elimination of these two households, God begins a new dispensation with Abraham. This third dispensation refers only to one man who is separated from the nations. He had to go "out of his country, and from his kindred and from his father's house [...]." (Genesis 12 : 1, Hebrews 11 : 8) After Abraham has allowed himself to be placed outside his own people, God enters into a covenant with him that is described by Paul as "the promise" (Galatians 3) because there were no conditions for Abraham himself. According to Genesis 12 : 1-4 this promise was only applicable to the person of Abraham. Only later the promise appears to be hereditary and to pass on to his descendants, so that this household of promise applies to a group of people that are united in Abraham, and who occupy a special position outside the nations. That this dispensation was not annulled either when the next one began, is explained in Galatians 3.

The dispensation of the law (4)

This fourth dispensation was furnished at the exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt. On that occasion, a nation was born from the descendants of Abraham that, unlike the other nations, was placed under a law given by God Himself. In this dispensation we meet a people that was equipped with conscience, a human government, the promise that all the generations of the earth would be blessed in them, and with the God given law; and that, in spite of this, totally failed to walk with God. The history of the people of Israel is the history of an unfaithful wife (Ezekiel 16), who is not capable to any good. In that regard, she does not distinguish herself from the other nations. This is the only dispensation of which the Scripture teaches that it has now been annulled. In Romans 7, Paul teaches that the people of Israel, according to very many Scriptures in the Old Testament, were married to the Lord by the Mosaic law and that this marriage ended automatically at the death of the husband, the Lord Himself. That is also why he says in Romans 10 : 4 that Christ is the end of the law.

“But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4 : 4, 5)

Furthermore, in Galatians 3 Paul teaches that though the dispensation of the law has been annulled, that of the promise is still in effect, as well as that of human government (Romans 13 : 1-7) and that of the conscience. (Romans 2 : 14-17)

The dispensation of grace (5)

When the dispensation of the law ended at the death of the Lord Jesus, the dispensation of grace began with His resurrection. When Paul reveals the nature of this dispensation in Ephesians 3, he states in verse 6 that this dispensation is in fact the extension of the dispensation of promise, which corresponds to the meaning of Galatians 3:

“[...] the Gentiles should be fellow heirs [*with the seed of Abraham*] [...] and partakers of His promise [*to Abraham*] in Christ [...].”

The idea here is that the promise was made to Abraham and his seed, namely Christ (Galatians 3 : 16) and that those who become believers under the dispensation of grace are part of the Body of Christ and thus inherit the promise with Him. Therefore, in this fifth dispensation, we find essentially the same as in the third: Apart from the nations, there is a group of people that has "no continuing city" here and know of their union in Him who is their Leader. They live from the promise that a place has been prepared for them in a land that they will inherit and that they will be a blessing to all nations. In the present fifth dispensation, God visits the Gentiles "to take out from them a people for His name." (Acts 15 : 14) As God formed a people with an earthly future destiny from the third dispensation, during this fifth dispensation He forms a people with a heavenly future from the seed of Abraham (= Christ). And as the third dispensation resulted in the exodus from Egypt, this fifth dispensation will end with the exodus of the Church from the world, of which Egypt is, as known, a type.

The dispensation of the fullness of times (6)

“that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ.” (Ephesians 1 : 10)

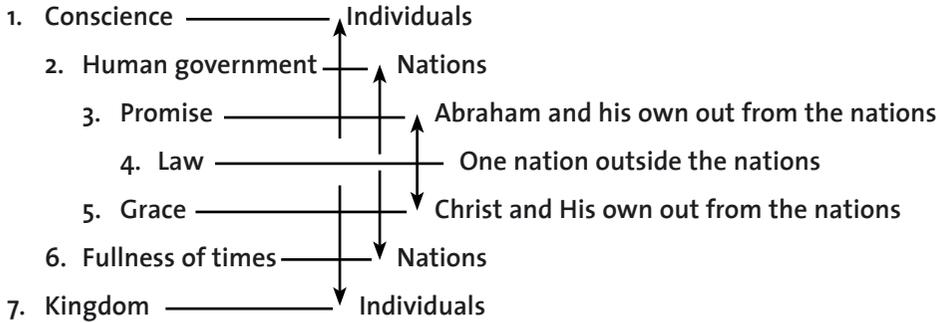
God's plans for this still future sixth dispensation are the subject of a very large part of the Biblical prophecy. In that dispensation, all nations will be subjected to Christ, beginning with the nation of Israel. Then all nations will be united under the Messiah of Israel. That this sixth dispensation is in continuation with the second dispensation, is abundantly clear. In this sixth dispensation, the nations of the second dispensation will be judged. In the second dispensation, the earth was divided among the nations (Genesis 10 : 25), while in the sixth everything on earth will be gathered together in one in Christ. As man appeared on earth on the sixth day to rule over it, so will the Son of Man appear on earth in the sixth dispensation to rule over it. Therefore He will begin by gathering the nations of the second dispensation before Him to judge them. (Matthew 25 : 32)

The dispensation of the kingdom (7)

When the work of the sixth dispensation will be completed, the seventh – the Sabbath – will dawn. This dispensation will be characterized by rest. After all, the word 'Sabbath' means 'seven' as well as 'rest'. In this dispensation, Israel and the nations will have entered into rest (Hebrews 4). It is the Messianic Kingdom of peace, in which the earth and the nations will no longer be divided, but united under one King, Christ Himself, the Prince of Peace. This dispensation is therefore in line with the first, in which each individual is directly accountable to the Lord Himself. It is the dispensation in which every man will be able to walk with God, because God is in Christ among the people and the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. (Isaiah 11 : 9)

It is also the last dispensation, because, according to all the prophecies, the Kingdom of the Messiah will be an eternal kingdom, because it is based on an eternal covenant that, unlike the old, cannot be broken. This kingdom of the seventh dispensation will continue, after more than a thousand years, in a new heaven and a new earth wherein righteousness will dwell. (2 Peter 3 : 13) However, this new creation no longer falls under the seventh dispensation, but is depicted in the Scriptures by the eighth day, the day after the Sabbath, the day of the resurrection of Christ, shortly, the day of the new creation. Therefore, God used seven days to restore the fallen creation of Genesis 1 : 2 and in the same manner He uses seven households or dispensations to enable the old creation to bring forth a new one.

(Romans 8 : 22) From this very brief dissertation we can draw up our table in the following manner, immediately emphasizing the mutual cohesion and structure of the dispensations:



Such a symmetrical structure is very common in the Bible and is called 'introversion', because it points to the inside or centre. That centre is here the dispensation of the law, in which the Lord Jesus was born and suffered and died to reconcile the world. That is the central theme of the Bible and the centre of the dispensational table. The introversion arises from the resemblance between the 1st and 7th, the 2nd and 6th, and the 3rd and 5th dispensations. It should also be noted that these dispensations are not only in line with each other, but will also be annulled simultaneously. The first dispensation – that of the individual – will end when the individuals who have lived throughout the centuries will be judged before the great white throne on the day of the Lord. (Revelations 20 : 11-15) This will happen after the thousand years that form the seventh dispensation, so that the first and the seventh end at the same time. The second dispensation - that of the nations - will end when those nations will be judged. This judgment of the living nations will happen in front of the throne of the Lord Jesus in Jerusalem, according to Matthew 25 from verse 31 onwards, and, of course, ends with the submission of all humanity living on earth. According to Ephesians 1 : 10, this was the objective of the sixth dispensation, so that the second and sixth dispensation will end at the same time. The third dispensation – that of the promise – will end when that promise will be fulfilled. Paul teaches in Romans 11 that the promise to Abraham's natural seed will only be fulfilled when the Church is completed and

thus caught up, so that the dispensation of the promise and that of grace will end at the same time. Further details on the structure and the interdependence of the dispensations can only be addressed when the dispensations are dealt with separately.

6. Divide or rend?

“Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”
(2 Timothy 2:15)

For years, the dispensationalist has referred to this verse in Timothy's letter. He is aware that an approved worker of God should rightly divide the Word of Truth. And rightly so! But when this verse is used as an argument to support the 'doctrine of dispensationalism', opponents always retort that dispensationalism does not divide the Bible, but cuts it into pieces or even rends it. Among non-dispensationalists it seems to be believed that the supporters of the 'doctrine of dispensationalism' only accept a small part of the Bible for themselves, while referring the rest to the trash bin. They themselves reject dispensationalism by announcing that the doctrine of dispensationalism is far too poor and limited for them and that they believe the Bible 'from cover to cover'. But who is actually rending pages from his Bible?

During the Christmas holidays we celebrate the birth of the great 'Prince of Peace'. He was the promised one, who would bring peace on earth. He would establish a kingdom that would not end and in which peace would prevail and war would no longer be taught. Peace on earth, but what does the Prince of Peace Himself say?

“Do you suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” (Luke 12 : 51, Matthew 10 : 34)

The urgent question is the following: When we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as the promised Prince of Peace, what should we do with the verses that teach the contrary? Whoever absolutely refuses to distinguish between dispensations is

forced to rationalize one of both categories or to rend it from his Bible. Only the dispensationalist is able to give full meaning to the literal meaning of both kinds of Scriptures.

“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6 : 12, 14, 15)

With these words the Lord teaches us with particular emphasis that man must first forgive his fellowman before he can receive forgiveness from the heavenly Father himself. It could not have been stated any clearer. But what does Colossians 3 : 13 say?

“Bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.”

Here the apostle Paul says that Christ has forgiven us, and that we, as a result, must forgive the other. The order here is the exact opposite. What Scripture do we now apply to ourselves? Do we take Colossians 3 or do we believe that our own forgivingness is a condition for our salvation? Whoever wants to know of no dispensations will have to remove Colossians 3 : 13 or Matthew 6 : 12 from his Bible. The dispensationalist has by now already seen that this is a 'dispensational issue' and has little trouble with the choice. He applies Colossians 3 to himself and also knows what to do with Matthew 6. The two Scriptures speak of different dispensations.

“Therefore do not pray for this people, nor lift up a cry or prayer for them, nor make intercession to Me; for I will not hear you.” (Jeremiah 7 : 16)

“So do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer for them; for I will not hear them in the time that they cry out to Me because of their trouble. What has My beloved to do in My house [...]” (Jeremiah 11 : 14)

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Do not pray for this people, for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry [...]’ (Jeremiah 14 : 11-12)

[...] Then I said, “Ah, Lord God! Behold, the prophets say to them, ‘You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you assured peace in this place.’” And the Lord said to me, “The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them [...]” (Jeremiah 14 : 13-14)

Citing the above-mentioned Bible passages is certainly not a popular pursuit. Yet, the prophet Jeremiah is repeatedly forbidden to pray for the people of Israel who were living in unbelief in the land of Canaan. He indeed obeyed this prohibition. When in the course of further history Jeremiah is asked to pray for Israel, he refuses resolutely. (See Jeremiah 21 : 2 and further and 37 : 3 and further.) But despite this prohibition to pray for Israel and Jerusalem, we read in Psalm 122 : 6:

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: May they prosper who love you.”

The question that arises in this regard is: When we abide by the verses in Jeremiah, what should we do with Psalm 122? And when we still pray for Israel and the peace of Jerusalem, what do we do with the repeated prohibition in Jeremiah? Rend them from our Bible? Ignore them? Spiritualize them? Here, too, we are forced to distinguish between different times and dispensations. The Israel of Jeremiah was an unbelieving Israel. Moreover, it was only a small part of Israel, as the vast majority of the people had long disappeared in the Assyrian and Babylonian exile. As an unbelieving people, they essentially had no right to the land in which they dwelled, as the Lord had the prerequisite that they should serve Him. Shortly after these events in Jeremiah, Jerusalem and the temple were indeed destroyed. The Jerusalem of Psalm 122 is a very different Jerusalem. It is a Jerusalem that honours its name. It is the city of peace wherein the house of the Lord stands. (verse 1) Where the tribes of Israel (thus all twelve!) go up according to the testimony of Israel to give thanks unto the name of the Lord. (verse 4) It is the Jerusalem where the thrones of judgment are, the thrones of the house of David. (verse 5) In short, it is the Jerusalem where the Lord Himself is seated on the throne of His father David as the promised Messiah and Prince of Peace. Both Scriptures therefore deal with different dispensations. Where we make this

distinction, we can give both Scriptures their full value and meaning. If we refuse to see this distinction we are forced to remove either Jeremiah or Psalm 122 from our Bible. But who cut his Bible into pieces?

“These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: “Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matthew 10 : 5, 6)

This mission assignment is perfectly clear. The twelve disciples could only preach their message to those who belonged to the house of Israel. In addition, they were forbidden to go abroad. This limited mission assignment is clearly contrary to all those that speak of the 'utmost parts of the earth' and 'all nations'. With what right do we actually apply those general missionary assignments to ourselves and ignore this limited assignment from Matthew 10? Did we tear it from our Bible or do we understand which time and dispensation it deals with? What we need today more than ever is knowledge of the revealed Word of God. God wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 2 : 4) When the first phase lies behind us and we have become saved by the reconciling work of Christ, it is God's will that we come to the knowledge of the truth. This knowledge is not fragmentary. It is not limited to those truths that are related to our own daily lives. It is the universal truth that applies to the whole creation. We should stop looking for the answers to our little questions and wonder what God has told us about His plans. We should keep our mouths shut and set aside our own thoughts. We must open ourselves to "all the counsel of God." Then we will receive answers to questions we have not yet had. Then we receive insight and vision of the perfect work God is carrying out through His Christ. Only when we desire to live from a complete Bible in which every word has a normal meaning will we learn to realize how rich we have become in Christ and how far He has raised us in Him above this world of sin and death. Displacing or messing with the Bible or parts of it will inevitably be at the expense of our own spiritual life.

Luke 24 tells us the story of two sad people. They were sad because they had never heard of dispensations. They knew a great deal of their Bible, but their knowledge was fragmentary. They personally knew the Lord Jesus and put their trust

in Him. Their only mistake was that they were merely aware of those prophecies that fit into their own world view. "We trusted that it had been He who should have redeemed Israel." Undoubtedly this was a well-founded trust. He was the one who would redeem Israel. But He would do much more. They knew the prophecies about the glorified Christ – the Messiah of Israel – who would come to redeem His people from their enemies. But it was a half-truth. And the Lord reproaches them accordingly: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" They believed a large part of the prophecies, but that part was very random. Because they did not believe everything that the prophets have spoken they are called "fools and slow of heart to believe." They had a torn Bible. They did not believe the prophecies about the suffering and death of the Lord's servant. They probably thought they were incompatible with the prophecies about His glorification. They did not want to accept dispensations. But their religious life suffered damage. If they had believed "all that the prophets have spoken," they would have walked exactly the other way. Then they had known that on that day the Lord would rise from the grave. Then they had not been on their way to Emmaus, but to Jerusalem. "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?" Do you also have such a partial faith? Do you also have many Bible passages that do not fit into your vision? Do you also have a torn Bible? Then let yourself be taught as the men of Emmaus.

“And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” (Luke 24 : 27)

That is what they needed: Systematic Bible study, starting at the beginning (the books of Moses) and after that the prophets as well as the Scriptures. That is what we need, too. Maybe, as the men of Emmaus, we must give up certain visions or expectations. Their hopes of a redeemed Israel have still not been rewarded. But they gained a risen Christ. Their eyes were opened (verse 31) and they repaired their mistake:

“So they rose up that very hour and returned to Jerusalem [...]” (Luke 24 : 33)

Is it not embarrassing and also a serious warning for believers: "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken."

Not a part, but:

"All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete." (2 Timothy 3 : 16, 17)

Amen

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Original title:
Gods programma

God's Program: An Analysis of the Dispensations



For good Bible study on God's plan of salvation on the way to a new creation, knowledge of the dispensations is indispensable. Unfortunately, that knowledge often appears to be extremely limited or even nil. However, the Bible cannot be studied if we do not know of which dispensation a particular Scripture speaks. If you try anyway, as, for example, the covenant theology, you must systematically weave the old and new covenant, law and grace. Law when it seems appropriate, and grace when it seems appropriate. All this to make the theological system right. The covenant theology sees God's actions with creation as one continuous line from Adam until the Last Day. Thus, every bit of Scripture is applied to every human being throughout all ages, without distinction, often ignoring the primary, literal meaning of Biblical statements.

Dispensationalism, on the other hand, teaches that there are different phases in God's total plan, each with specific features. The Lord can set a regime, like that of the law, but also terminate it again. At times, He began new parts of His plan next to, or parallel to, existing principles. The doctrine of the dispensations is not explained in the Bible in a straightforward manner. Nevertheless, there are good Biblical grounds for dispensationalism: in the New Testament, at least two dispensations are mentioned in particular. This Bible study aims to clarify the principles and key features of the dispensations set by God. This will provide the reader with a solid foundation for Bible study.