

# Del Rey Bible Institute

*Fides Quaerens Intellectum*

## SCRIPTURE & HERMENEUTICS

# APPENDIX 3



# THE DISPENSATIONS: UNDERSTANDING THE PROGRESS OF GOD'S TRUTH

Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 1: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 105-54.

Since all Scripture is God's Word, Scripture must be understood in its entirety. To do this, one must validly render its many parts into a satisfactory whole. Of course, such a task must be informed by Scripture itself, remembering that God intends to be understood and, thus, that Scripture is self-interpreting.

One such approach, which will be followed here, is dispensationalism. Dispensationalism emphasizes God's progressive self-revelation and the resulting human responsibilities (or stewardships) this revelation generates. One notable outcome of such an approach is a fundamental theological distinction between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church.

The main alternative approach is called *covenant theology*. This approach understands the entire Bible as giving one, progressively-unfolding plan of redemption, a plan beginning with the so-called covenant of grace in Genesis 3:15. One notable outcome of this plan is an emphasis on the one, redeemed people of God, at times calling Israel the *church in the Old Testament* and the church of the New Testament the *new Israel*. In short, in this approach, there is no fundamental distinction between the two groups.

## DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS

Charles C. Ryrie set the pace for dispensational thought in the latter part of the 20th century with his books and articles. And, his basic thinking is reflected here.<sup>1</sup> Ryrie has given the most definitive and crisp definition of dispensationalism; this will serve well to structure what follows:

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<sup>1</sup> I have utilized Charles C. Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) and his revised and expanded *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995) as standard textbooks in a seminary course on dispensationalism for over forty years. The fundamental ideas of this section are culled from and organized according to *Dispensationalism*, pp. 23–44. I should also say here that I consider the current revisionism within dispensational ranks begun in the early 1980s and self-styled as *progressive dispensationalism* to be an unwelcome aberration and wholly unsatisfactory as an approach to understanding Scripture. For an introduction to this new approach, see Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victory, 1993); and Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

“A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”<sup>2</sup> The three elements of the definition are helpful to explore in turn.

First, Ryrie emphasizes the idea of an “economy,” an English word derived from the Greek word *oikonomia*.<sup>3</sup> In fact, three Greek words illuminate what Ryrie means: *oikonomia*, *oikonomos*, *oikonomeo*. These words are collectively used twenty times in the New Testament and refer respectively to the office of a *steward*, the *steward* himself, and the function of *stewardship*.<sup>4</sup> This, it will be shown, emphasizes that a *dispensation* is a stewardship or management of God’s revelation, which is more appropriate than emphasizing a period of time, as many older dispensationalists did, particularly *The Scofield Reference Bible*<sup>5</sup> and *The New Scofield Reference Bible*.<sup>6</sup>

Second, dispensations are “distinguishable economies.” That is, there are some features in each particular economy that make it sufficiently different from the previous or following economies. The feature creating such distinctions is revelation, specifically *progressive* revelation. In other words, not all revelation calls forth a new economy. For instance, during the fifteen centuries of the dispensation of Law, the various prophets cumulatively gave a vast amount of new revelation, but the content was not progressive in the sense that it fundamentally altered the existing economy.<sup>7</sup> In fact, despite all this new revelation, Jesus indicates that the relationship begun at Sinai was still operative during His own ministry (Matt 8:2–4; 23:2–3; see also 5:17).<sup>8</sup>

Third, these various economies with their progressive revelation are part of “God’s purpose.” It is God who charts the course for history, dispensing new revelation and inaugurating new economies according to His own will. His purpose in all of this, as in everything else, is expressly His own glory (Rom 11:36)—no higher or greater purpose exists. As such, the various stewardships levy responsibilities on human beings to manage the new revelation in such a way that God receives glory.

## *Discontinuity: Progressive Revelation*

Progressive revelation is the engine of dispensationalism. This idea of progressive revelation is put forth, for instance, in Hebrews 1:1: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers

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<sup>2</sup> *Dispensationalism*, p. 28. Clarence E. Mason similarly says: “A dispensation is a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God’s mind and will ... which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God” (*Dispensationalism Made Simple* [Arnold, MO: Shield, 1976], p. 19).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Oxford-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Economy,” 5:60.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. BDAG, s.vv. “*oikonomia*,” “management of a household”; “*oikonomeo*,” “be manager” or “hold the office of an *oikonomos*”; and “*oikonomos*,” “manager,” pp. 697–98. Interestingly, both Jesus and Paul talk about a steward’s responsibilities. Both emphasize (1) that two parties are involved (Jesus: Luke 12:42; 16:1; Paul: Titus 1:7); (2) that stewards have responsibilities and are held accountable for such (Jesus: Luke 12:42–43; 16:1–2; Paul: 1 Cor 4:2); and (3) that the stewardship can change (Jesus: Luke 12:45–46; 16:2; Paul: Gal 4:2). Importantly, Paul further emphasizes that a stewardship responsibility can involve revelation from God (1 Cor 4:1; Eph 3:2, 9; Col 1:25, 26).

<sup>5</sup> *The Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. C. I. Scofield (New York: Oxford, 1917), p. 5.

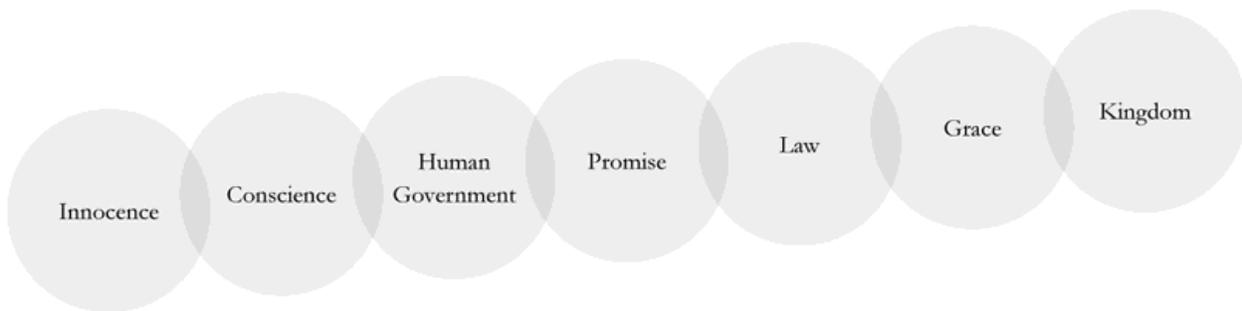
<sup>6</sup> *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. E. Schuyler English (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 3: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God.” This is, however, not to say that *dispensation* and *age* are unrelated. As Paul shows, a new age may bring a particular stewardship to an end (Gal 4:2). It is best to say the terms are related but not interchangeable.

<sup>7</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 49. Cf. Heb 1:1–2.

<sup>8</sup> *Dispensationalism*, p. 49. Ryrie also helpfully notes that some features, while found in many dispensations, are not primary features of them (e.g., tests, failure, and judgment, pp. 33–38). This will be revisited later.

in the prophets in *many portions* and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.” In other words, God’s self-disclosure prior to Jesus Christ and the inauguration of the eschaton was parceled out. God unfolded His revelation according to a two-dimensional, tandem manner: as He willed to give it and as humans were able to receive it. It is, therefore, this emphasis on progress that prevents a purely linear view of God’s dealings with mankind, as was often reflected in older dispensationalism. Progressive revelation emphasizes the movement of history toward a goal, which Scripture describes as the “fullness of times” (Eph 1:10), a period dispensationalists call the *millennial kingdom*. This idea of progress also helps to emphasize that each dispensation builds upon the revelation that precedes it, creating a staircase approach that rightly sees both discontinuity (i.e., progress) and also continuity.

And, while still a matter of in-house debate, dispensationalism has traditionally delineated seven such economies. The following graphic lists these, along with illustrating the progress and continuity inherent in the approach.<sup>9</sup>



### *Continuity: Cumulative Revelation*

Giving continuity to dispensationalism is the revelation that is brought forward from one dispensation to the next. This revelation remains viable, even though the dispensation in which it was given is past. This emphasizes that the revelation for which man is responsible and by which God manages the progressive economies is cumulative. While cumulative, the revelation or trans-dispensational principle(s) (which Ryrie calls “carryovers”<sup>10</sup>) is forwarded either intact or adjusted. And its recognition and viability owe *not* to the continuing authority of a past dispensation but rather to the presence of one of the following four criteria.

First, the revelation of the new economy specifically restates this previous revelation. For instance, nine of the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament (Sabbath-keeping is not repeated). Also, the conscience and civil government are still operative in the dispensation of Grace (cf. Rom 2:15 and Rom 13:1–7).

Second, the previous revelation is specifically rooted in God’s nature, as is the case with capital punishment in Genesis 9:6 (the image of God in man). This phenomenon is also seen when Paul tethers women’s subordination in the church to the functional subordination which exists among the persons of the Godhead (1 Cor 11:3).<sup>11</sup>

Third, the previous revelation is grounded in the natural created order. For instance, transvestism violates this order, specifically the man-woman distinction (Deut 22:5). Further,

<sup>9</sup> Paul himself explicitly delineates two economies, while strongly implying a third (Eph 1:10 [Kingdom] and 3:2 [Grace]; also Col 1:25–26 [Law]).

<sup>10</sup> *Dispensationalism*, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> One might also add here Paul’s sin lists, which clearly contain trans-dispensational prohibitions grounded in the divine nature.

adultery violates the husband-wife relationship, also founded upon this order (Matt 19:3–9; Eph 5:31; cf. Gen 2:24). Homosexuality too violates this order (Rom 1:26), as do all forms of deviant sexual behavior (cf. Exod 22:19; Lev 20:15–16; Deut 27:21). Other examples could be given (cf. 1 Cor 11:14; 1 Tim 2:12–14).

Fourth, the previous revelation is not specifically abrogated in the new economy. To state it negatively, if revelation from previous dispensations is fulfilled or annulled in a new dispensation, then it—like the Sabbath—is no longer viable.<sup>12</sup>

### *Continuity and Discontinuity*

The new revelation from God and the continuing principles give both continuity and discontinuity to God's one, unfolding plan. As demonstrated, the new revelation which launches a new dispensation gives a measure of discontinuity to God's plan, while the continuing revelation gives a measure of continuity.

Covenant theologians well-account for continuity in their scheme, but they do not allow for any fundamental discontinuity due to their emphasis on the progressively revealed redemptive motif. Because of this, a dispensation in covenant thought is simply a chronological outworking of the *one* covenant of grace.<sup>13</sup>

### *Primary and Secondary Features of a Dispensation*<sup>14</sup>

Primary features are those without which there could be no dispensational arrangement. These include specific revelation from God, a governing relationship between God and the world (or a portion thereof), and a corresponding responsibility of man. Secondary features are those without which it would still be theoretically possible to have a dispensational arrangement. These include a test, failure, and judgment, which are factors that, in truth, occur with each dispensation but are not necessary for a dispensation. Older dispensationalism included these as necessary ingredients.

The *test* is similar but not identical to the primary characteristic of human responsibility. In that sense, the test is the same in every economy: Will man obey God and discharge his dispensational responsibilities in faith? A probationary test was in fact an integral part of the first dispensation in Eden, but it seems that it was intended to be a one-time occurrence. That is, it does not appear that Adam and Eve were subject to a test every day until the Fall nor are the people of earth today under an ongoing probation such as were the occupants of Eden. In fact, had Adam obeyed God and not eaten of the forbidden tree, he probably would have been confirmed in holiness and neither he nor his posterity would have been tested again. God could have introduced a new dispensation on a higher plane with new revelation and carried out a complete dispensational program without further testing and without the further possibility of sin.

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<sup>12</sup> Paul David Nevin also lists several examples of revelation whose viability extended beyond the economy in which it was given. His evidence can be summed up under the following two heads: (1) the continuation of certain ordinances (such as marriage, animal sacrifice and circumcision) and (2) the continuation of the consequences of divine judgment (such as the Edenic curse and the confusion of languages) ("Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" [Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963], pp. 120ff.).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1939), pp. 293–99. Charles Hodge says that "although the covenant of grace has always been the same, the dispensations of that covenant have changed" (*Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [reprint of 1887 ed., London: James Clarke, 1960], 2:373).

<sup>14</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 32–35.

A *failure* is also a part of each dispensation but need not have been. Failure is not a necessary feature. Still, while not inevitable, most, if not all, of the economies have climactic failure. Paul Nevin posits failure in each economy in at least two realms: (1) governmental—in that man generally failed to discharge his dispensational responsibilities—and (2) redemptive—in that the man, for the most part, failed to believe God and receive reconciliation and forgiveness.<sup>15</sup>

A climactic *judgment* is also not endemic to a dispensational program but can be seen as an occurrence in each of the stewardships, such as the Edenic curse of the dispensation of Innocence, the confusion of languages and dispersion at the Tower of Babel in the dispensation of Civil Government, the Egyptian bondage in the dispensation of Promise, the sack of Jerusalem and dispersion of Israel (both in 586 B.C. and A.D. 70) in the dispensation of Law, and the post-Rapture rise of Antichrist and the ensuing Tribulation period resulting from the apostasy of the professing church in the dispensation of Grace.

### *Three Irreducible Tenets*

There are three irreducible tenets, which Ryrie calls *sine qua non*, that set dispensationalism off as a distinctive approach and which must be present if an approach is to appropriately use the label *dispensational*.<sup>16</sup> Before these essential tenets are discussed, it is helpful first to note three non-essential features.

First, recognizing distinct economies (and even calling such dispensations) is not an essential feature, not least because it is not an exclusively dispensational practice. Both Charles Hodge and Louis Berkhof speak of dispensations, though, obviously, neither subscribes to dispensationalism. Second, a particular number of dispensations is also not an essential feature. In fact the number of dispensations is an ongoing discussion within dispensationalism.<sup>17</sup> Third, premillennialism is not an exclusively dispensational feature. Many prominent 19th and 20th century commentators and theologians are properly labeled *premillennialists*, but not *dispensational* premillennialists.<sup>18</sup>

### A Distinction Between Israel and the Church

Therefore, the first essential tenet of dispensationalism is the fundamental, theological distinction between Israel and the church.<sup>19</sup> The distinction is helpfully explored along three lines: origin, purpose and destiny.

### *Origin*

<sup>15</sup> "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation," p. 89.

<sup>16</sup> With the introduction of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, Ryrie correctly characterized dispensational thought by essentialism, helpfully distinguishing between essential and non-essential features, i.e., primary and secondary characteristics (*Dispensationalism*, pp. 38–41).

<sup>17</sup> See Ryrie's helpful chart of the various suggested proposals (*Dispensationalism*, p. 71).

<sup>18</sup> These are usually labeled *historic premillennialists*, a label which emphasizes this group's alleged representation of the eschatological opinion of the church through history; e.g., 19th century: Franz Delitzsch, J. P. Lange, Henry Alford, S. P. Tregelles, W. J. Erdman, Samuel J. Andrews, J. C. Ryle, and J. J. Van Oosterzee; 20th century: J. Barton Payne, George E. Ladd, Daniel P. Fuller, Clarence Bass, Millard Erickson, and Norman Douy. Furthermore, some (even pretribulational) premillennialists are vocal in their opposition to dispensationalism. See, e.g., John R. Rice, "Not Landmark nor Dispensationalist," *Sword of the Lord*, 15 March 1974, p. 11; and "Editor's Notes—A Whole Reference Bible," *Sword of the Lord*, 16 September 1977, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> It should be kept in mind that there are, nevertheless, tremendous similarities between the two groups, as Charles Feinberg notes, Both have covenant relations with God. Both are related to God by blood redemption that is centered in the Lord Jesus Christ. Both are witnesses for God to the world. Both are of the seed of Abraham. Both are to be glorified. Both are called to a walk of separation. Both have one shepherd. Both have common doctrines. Both are called the elect of God. Both are dearly beloved of God. Both are vitally related to God as illustrated by the figure of marriage. Both are the recipients of eternal life (*Millennialism: The Two Major Views* [Chicago: Moody, 1980], p. 230).

Israel began as an ethnic group (the Hebrews) with the call of Abram (ca. 2090 B.C.) and as a spiritual/economic/political group (a theocracy) at Sinai (ca. 1445 B.C.) The church, on the other hand, began as a spiritual group on the Day of Pentecost (1st century A.D.), expressed visibly in local churches. In the former, one's racial status set one apart from (and above) *the other nations*. In the latter, one's spiritual status sets one apart *from the world* (a distinctly spiritual designation; cf. 1 John 2:15–17), not to mention all economic, social and racial preferences are obliterated (Gal 3:28). Furthermore, one became a member of Israel by natural birth or, in unusual cases, by proselytism. On the other hand, one becomes a member of the church by spiritual birth (and Spirit-baptism, 1 Cor 12:13).

### *Purpose*

Israel's purpose was to mediate salvation and model true religion to the nations, bring forth the Messiah and give the Scriptures. Noticeably absent in such a list is any missionary mandate. These purposes were realized principally through national, political means and structures. On the other hand, the church is commissioned to take the gospel to all nations (Matt 28:19–20). And, this purpose is primarily fulfilled individually, through the witness of the church's members.

### *Destiny*

Israel, nationally speaking, has a distinct place in God's purposes. And this place will be realized in the coming millennial kingdom. In this kingdom, Israel, as a nation, will rule over other nations as a mediatorial kingdom of priest (Isa 61:6), fulfilling her original theocratic purpose (Exod 19:6). As for the church, as the bride of Christ, it is destined, with Christ, to reign over all the millennial nations, including Israel.<sup>20</sup> So, while Israel and the church share much of the same *future*, they do not actually share the same *destiny* in that future.

## A Consistent Use of Literal Interpretation

This second essential tenet relates to the hermeneutics of dispensationalism. In dispensationalism normal or usual interpretation (historical-grammatical) is employed not only in narrative and epistolary literature but also in prophetic literature. As such, the dispensationalist is convinced that prophetic promises of Israel's future, national restoration were understood as such by the prophetic author and can be abrogated only at his expense.

## The Underlying Purpose of God in Human History is His Own Glory

The third essential tenet is dispensationalism's attempt to capture the goal of God's activity in Scripture and history. In claiming a doxological purpose (Rom 11:36), dispensationalism is not claiming to be the *only* approach that claims such. However, it does claim to be the only one that does so comprehensively and consistently. That is, while covenant theology sees redemption tying together the Scripture's disparate parts, the dispensationalist's doxological claim more easily accounts for man's pre-fall condition, the creation of angels, the role of demons and Satan, and Scripture's emphasis on the messianic kingdom.<sup>21</sup>

## THE DISPENSATIONS

<sup>20</sup> This preeminent place owes also to the church's position as "firstborn" among the saints (Heb 12:23). What is more, this distinction between Israel and the church appears to be eternal (Eph 3:21), something possibly reflected in the gates and walls of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12, 14).

<sup>21</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 40–41.

In what follows, the seven dispensations will be discussed, with special attention being paid to the *progressive* revelation that called each forth. These explorations, each beginning with a brief introduction, will be subsequently divided along two lines: (1) new revelation and (2) new responsibilities.

## *Innocence*

This first dispensation began with creation and ended with the Fall into sin. It is labeled *Innocence* not because Adam and Eve were morally ignorant, having no knowledge whatever of right and wrong or because they were morally neutral, neither sinful nor holy. Rather, it refers to Adam and Eve's positive, though *unconfirmed*, creaturely holiness.<sup>22</sup> That is to say, they each had a holy nature but not a holy character, something which only comes through experience, by the exercise of obedience in the moral realm.

### New (Initial) Revelation

What follows is a listing of the *recorded* revelation which God gave to Adam and Eve.

- **The Command to Reproduce and Fill the Earth**<sup>23</sup>  
Gen 1:28
- **The Command to Subdue the Earth**<sup>24</sup>  
Gen 1:28
- **The Command to Rule the Animals**<sup>25</sup>  
Gen 1:28
- **The Command to Eat Vegetables**<sup>26</sup>  
Gen 1:29–30
- **The Command to Cultivate the Garden**<sup>27</sup>  
Gen 2:15
- **The Command to Abstain from The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil**<sup>28</sup>  
Gen 2:17

### New (Initial) Responsibilities

Man's responsibility was to obey God, recognizing His lordship and dominion, and thus to become confirmed in holy character. In his self-autonomy, man rebelled against God and ate the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>23</sup> The word translated in the KJV as “replenish” means to fill (*male*). There is no thought of populating an earth that had been depopulated at some earlier period. The command here is simply intended to result in man's filling the earth with creatures bearing God's image, who would glorify God and with whom God would fellowship.

<sup>24</sup> This command is sometimes called the *Dominion Mandate*. This *dominion* or *subduing* speaks of the effort and labor that is to be exerted upon the physical earth in order to discover its secrets and treasures for the enrichment of human beings in God's image. By legitimate extension it can also apply to the heavens. This, then, forms the basis of true science, culture and civilization—that which seeks to explain and harness earthly phenomena in light of God as Creator and man as His creature as explained and informed by divine revelation in the Bible.

<sup>25</sup> *Rule (radah)* means to master, speaking of man's natural command over the animal world and the instinctive obedience animals were to render to man. This speaks, too, of the harmonious relationship between man and animals.

<sup>26</sup> Moses speaks of God's *giving (nathan)* this herbaceous and fruit diet to man, implying something more than mere permission. Cf. *NIDOTTE*, s.v. “*nathan*,” by Michael Grisanti, 3:205.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, this command presupposes a vast amount of knowledge concerning the needs of trees, plants, and flowers, among other things. And it presupposes the need, production, and use of various tools for this task.

<sup>28</sup> Again, Adam and Eve were not ignorant concerning good and evil; they simply had no practice in choosing the one over the other. God had given them *descriptive* knowledge of the difference between good and evil, but He also wanted them to have an *experiential* knowledge, which could come in one of two ways: obeying or disobeying. God wanted them to obey and thus to have a character confirmed in holiness.

forbidden fruit. God's judgment, then, consisted of the curse on man, woman, the serpent, and the ground (Gen 3:14–19). Sin's introduction also brought separation and death (Rom 5:12), vividly illustrated by Adam and Eve's expulsion from God's presence in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24).

## *Conscience*

The dispensation of conscience extended from the Fall to the Flood of Noah. In it God's rule was mediated through His Spirit's interaction with the human conscience. Of course, the human conscience was operative in the preceding dispensation (and in later dispensations); however it did not previously form the basis for God's rule.<sup>29</sup>

The key text demonstrating God's method of internal rule in this dispensation is Genesis 6:3:<sup>30</sup> "Then the Lord said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh; nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.'"<sup>31</sup> This verse indicates that God's rule ("strive") was not only internal but also that this arrangement was temporary ("one hundred and twenty years"). A further support of God's internal governance is seen in the "sign" given Cain (Gen 4:15), which was evidently some kind of an attesting miracle accompanying the promise of God's protection. This was apparently necessary for Cain's survival since no external authority yet existed which could provide for his safety.<sup>32</sup>

## *New Revelation*

The dispensation of Conscience is founded upon two (possibly three) strands of new revelation. First, after Adam and Eve's failure, God gave them what is called the *protoevangelium*, the first good news (Gen 3:15), reminding them (and all humans) that evil will only be conquered by divine prerogative. Specifically, the first gospel contained a divinely placed antipathy between the serpent (Satan) and the woman (Eve). This was necessary simply because if Eve (or any human) were to receive rescue from depravity and guilt, she must hate Satan.<sup>33</sup> Further, this first gospel also spoke of hatred between the serpent's seed and the woman's, referring to the history-long struggle between unbelievers and believers.<sup>34</sup> Finally, this first gospel also spoke of God's final triumph over Satan, personified in the woman's seed. God tells Satan that "He [the woman's seed] shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel" (Gen 3:15).<sup>35</sup> In short, this promise (obliquely) indicated that someone, sometime,

<sup>29</sup> Even further, in the dispensation of Innocence, man's conscience was clear, giving an approving verdict to all his actions (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Tim 1:3), something not true of man's post-fall conscience.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1992), p. 45.

<sup>31</sup> Perhaps a better translation of "forever" would be *indefinitely* (as the net has done) and of "strive" would be *rule*. In the latter case, the verb "strive" (*din*) certainly denotes ruling, governing, or administering justice (cf. *NIDOTTE*, s.v. "*din*," by Richard Schultz, 1:938–42). Culver, in fact, ties the verb here with the related verb *shaphat* (to judge or govern) and argues that the chief difference between the two is that *din* is more poetic and elegant (and probably also archaic). He also says that "the chief theological significance of ... [*din*] is that, apparently like *shaphat*, it embodies the idea of government, in whatever realm, in all its aspects" (*TWOT*, s.v. "*din*," by Robert D. Culver, 1:188; cf. also *BDB*, s.v. "*din*," p. 92).

<sup>32</sup> McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 44.

<sup>33</sup> This obviously intends more than that women would have an innate fear of snakes, regardless of how well that corresponds with reality.

<sup>34</sup> Some suggest that this refers rather to enmity between humans and demons.

<sup>35</sup> This promise moves from the generic seed of the two lines to the personal pronoun "he" (*hu*), and this person is predicted to deliver a crushing (*shuph*, to bruise or crush) head-blow to Satan and to suffer a temporary wound ("bruise his heel") in the process.

somewhere, and somehow would fatally defeat Satan and destroy evil (and its effects—guilt and enmity before God) in the process.<sup>36</sup>

The second strand of new revelation involved the need for blood sacrifice. This is seen both in the coverings God provided Adam and Eve after they sinned (Gen 3:21) and the narrative which soon follows detailing the differing sacrifices of their children, Cain and Abel (Gen 4:1–5). While debate exists in the former case, it seems clear that the animal coverings God provided were intended for more than simply clothing, especially since Adam and Eve were not technically naked at the time (Gen 3:7). Even more than this, several additional factors suggest something more than simply clothing was intended here.

First, the implicit death of an animal suggests that a moral penalty was in view, since prior to the Fall there was no sin and, consequently, no death. Second, this death was inflicted by God *Himself*. This seems to imply a necessary penal satisfaction for Adam and Eve’s moral guilt. And, third, God’s clothing of Adam and Eve suggests the application of the substitute’s death in the place of their own (i.e., guiltless animals for guilty sinners). This application also proclaims propitiation, the satisfaction of God’s anger.

A possible third strand of new revelation relates to Jude’s comments in his short epistle (vv. 14–15). In these verses Jude tells of Enoch’s prophecies concerning the Lord’s coming in judgment on the ungodly. Since Enoch’s ministry would have been contemporaneous with this time (Gen 5:18–24), his revelation would necessarily figure into the revelatory structure of this stewardship, though how this would be is impossible to say.

## New Responsibilities

Man was responsible to respond to God as His rule was mediated through the conscience. Obedience would result in man’s bringing an acceptable blood sacrifice with a heart of trust in the *protoevangelium*. Added to this, of course, were the continuing responsibilities of the first dispensation, namely man’s responsibility to “reproduce and rule.”<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, this dispensation also tells of climactic failure. Cain refused to bring the prescribed offering and was rejected (Gen 4:3, 7), leading to his retaliatory murder of his brother Abel (Gen 4:8). This in turn gave rise to the godless Cainite civilization, which was marked by sensuality (Gen 4:19) and brutality (Gen 4:23–24). This failure is only eclipsed by the intermarriage of the woman’s godly seed (believers) with that of the serpent’s ungodly seed (unbelievers), something contributing to the eventual filling of the earth with wickedness and violence (Gen 6:5–12). This climactic failure brought even more climactic judgment as God destroyed all but eight of the human race with a universal flood (Gen 6:13–8:19).

## Human Government

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<sup>36</sup> That Adam and Eve saw the crucified Christ in this promise is far too sophisticated an assumption. It is based rather in an unjustified importation of later revelation, which certainly does indicate that this One who would deal the crushing blow was none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

In fact, the New Testament is replete with narrative (principally the Gospels) and didactic material which point to Christ’s final triumph over Satan. This is especially seen in John’s assertion that “the Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8; cf. v. 12; 5:18–19; also John 12:31 and 16:11). The author of Hebrews speaks similarly, saying, “Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb 2:14).

<sup>37</sup> NET, Gen 1:28, n. 59

The dispensation of Human Government extended from the Flood to Abraham.<sup>38</sup> In it, God's rule was mediated through the external, judicial constraints of human government.<sup>39</sup>

## New Revelation

This dispensation consisted of four new strands of revelation.<sup>40</sup> First and most fundamentally, God instituted civil government, including the ultimate penal sanction of capital punishment (specifically for murder, Gen 9:6). The basis of this latter sanction was that premeditated murder strikes at the very center of the human personality—man as God's image-bearer. Therefore, in response to this sort of crime against both God and man, the murderer must forfeit his life to the state—man in the collective sense (“by *man* his blood shall be shed”).<sup>41</sup> Second, God disclosed that He would place the fear of man in animals (Gen 9:2). This appears to have had a very practical purpose at this particular juncture in human history when the human race was reduced to a mere eight people. That is, in order for mankind to propagate and refill the earth, some sort of protection was needed from the rapacious natures of certain beasts that had survived the Flood in the ark. Third, God permitted man to have a meat diet (Gen 9:3–4).<sup>42</sup> Fourth, God bound Himself in covenant with Noah and the human race, promising never to send another worldwide flood (Gen 9:8–17).<sup>43</sup>

## New Responsibilities

Man was responsible to rule for God and believe the Noahic covenant. In doing so, he was to protect the sanctity of human life by orderly rule and to cause righteousness to prevail on the earth. Man's failure is again climactic, evidenced by Noah's lack of self-control and, thus, his inability to rule for God (Gen 9:21) and, even more so, by humanity-at-large's refusal to fill the earth (Gen 9:7; cf. 11:4).<sup>44</sup> The judgment of God culminated in His confusion of human language and the consequent dispersion of the human race (Gen 11:7–9).

## *Promise*

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<sup>38</sup> With Abraham, formal Old Testament dating becomes possible, assuming that the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 do not depict strict father-son descent. Traditionally, Abraham is thought to have left Ur and migrated around the Fertile Crescent to Canaan in the early third millennium B.C. (ca. 2090 B.C.).

<sup>39</sup> Some have argued that capital and corporately-inflicted punishment are instinctive and are part of any type of society (extending even to small family units). However, this is not the tenor of Scripture here, which speaks rather of an earlier internal rule in contrast to this post-flood revelation.

<sup>40</sup> As will be clear, this new economy contained no new redemptive revelation, as the previous economy had (i.e., blood sacrifice). This is problematic for covenant theology since such an approach insists, as stated above, that new redemptive revelation is essential to each economy (especially those with explicit covenantal language; cf. Gen 9:8–17).

<sup>41</sup> It should be assumed that this institution of capital punishment carried with it the requirement for due process. Also, it should also be assumed that it was prescribed for more than simply capital murder offenses.

<sup>42</sup> No doubt the apostate pre-Flood generations had no compunction about killing animals for food—much less taking human life for sport (Gen 4:8, 23). Still, it appears to have been God's will that the pre-flood civilizations were to maintain a vegetable-type diet. Why God now permitted the post-flood world to eat flesh is not stated. Rather, a near *carte blanche* is given, with the only restriction being *how* the meat was to be consumed. That is, the blood was to be accorded the sanctity of special handling, apparently in deference to the practice of blood sacrifice as the only avenue of approach to God at that time (Gen 8:20–21).

Further, it is interesting to note the contrast between human and animal life here. Human life—as the bearer of God's image—was to be highly valued and protected, while animals could be killed and eaten for food.

<sup>43</sup> Some limit the Noahic covenant to this particular promise. However, that seems unduly restrictive. There is no compelling reason which prohibits including Genesis 9:1–7 as well. Also, this promise from God was represented by (given the sign of) the rainbow, a sign that was meant to remind (a highly anthropomorphic expression showing God's condescending graciousness) God of His covenant (Gen 9:14–15).

<sup>44</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 53.

The dispensation of Promise<sup>45</sup> extended from Abraham to Sinai (roughly 2090 B.C. to 1445 B.C.).<sup>46</sup> The name of, and revelatory basis for, the dispensation comes from the new promise of God to Abraham.<sup>47</sup>

## New Revelation

This promise to Abraham, called the Abrahamic covenant, comprised the new revelation of this dispensation. And, this covenant contained three broad provisions. First, God promised Abram (Abraham, Gen 17:5) a seed, a posterity (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:13; 17:2, 6). This promise explicitly enlarged and furthered the promise God had given Adam and Eve following their fall (Gen 3:15).<sup>48</sup> This promised seed, following the Sethite line (Gen 4:25–26), was traced through Noah, his son Shem, and eventually to Terah and his son Abram (Gen 10:21–31).<sup>49</sup> Second, God promised Abraham land (Gen 12:1, 7; 13:14, 15, 17; 18:18–21). This land had specifically defined boundaries, extending “from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen 15:18),<sup>50</sup> and it was *Abraham’s eternal* possession (cf. Gen 13:15). Third, God promised to bless Abraham and to bless others through Abraham (Gen 12:2, 3; also 22:17).<sup>51</sup> This blessing consisted both of temporal, material blessings (Gen 13:2) and of spiritual blessings, which would extend from Abraham to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:3; cf. 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). This latter blessing awaits final fulfillment when Abraham’s greater Son, Jesus, rules the world in the millennial kingdom.<sup>52</sup>

## New Responsibilities

Man is given a four-fold responsibility in this Abrahamic covenant. Of course, this responsibility was especially applicable to the patriarchs, but it also applied to any others desiring a right relationship with God (e.g., Melchizedek).

First, man was responsible to believe the promises of the covenant. As in all previous dispensations, faith in God’s revelation was required not only for redemption from sin but also for fulfilling one’s dispensational obligations (Gen 15:6).

Second, man was responsible to receive the sign of the covenant—the rite of circumcision (Gen 17:10, 14, 23). As with most of the biblical covenants, the Abrahamic covenant included a sign as a tangible reminder of the covenant.<sup>53</sup> And, this rite was so important that neglect led to the covenant member’s exile or execution (“cut off from his people,” Gen 17:14).<sup>54</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Ryrie also calls this dispensation *Patriarchal Rule*, saying by this that “the governmental feature of the economy is best emphasized” (ibid.).

<sup>46</sup> This presupposes a transition of undetermined length between the Tower of Babel and Abraham.

<sup>47</sup> This name is explicitly referred to by Paul when he says the Law of Moses did not “nullify the promise,” which antedated the Law by several centuries (Gal 3:17). The author of Hebrews likewise says that Abraham “obtained the promise” (Heb 6:15) and that he “lived as an alien in the land of promise,” along with Isaac and Jacob who were also “fellow heirs of the same promise” (Heb 11:9).

<sup>48</sup> This was one of Moses’ key authorial purposes. He wanted to show Israel her roots as a special people of God with a national agenda that only God could plan and execute.

<sup>49</sup> At this point in salvation-history, saving faith comprised the redemptive implications of the Abrahamic revelation within the generic promise of the coming, Satan-crushing seed of Genesis 3:15.

<sup>50</sup> The parameters here refer to the southwest border (Egypt) and the northeast border (the northwestern extension of the Euphrates, not the eastern edge of modern Iraq).

<sup>51</sup> In the latter case, those who blessed Abraham, presumably indicating their faith in Abraham’s God, would be blessed in return.

<sup>52</sup> Peter quotes the covenant in preaching to the Jews at Solomon’s portico (Acts 3:25), indicating that this blessing is associated with the “times of refreshing” that will come from the Lord (Acts 3:19). At that future time, Peter indicates that God would send Jesus the Christ, the one who was appointed for Israel’s and the world’s blessing (Acts 3:20).

<sup>53</sup> For instance, the rainbow functioned this way for the Noahic covenant (Gen 9:13), the Sabbath functioned this way for the Mosaic covenant (Exod 31:3), and the Eucharistic cup functions this way for the new covenant (Luke 22:20).

<sup>54</sup> It is true that this practice was not peculiar to Israel. However, it was given a special theological and covenantal significance for God’s chosen people. Still, as to why this particular procedure was chosen for the task, the Bible is silent. It was probably tied in some way to the ongoing procreation/propagation of the promised seed of Abraham (see *EDT*<sup>1</sup>, s.v. “Circumcision,” by Martin Woudstra, p. 245).

Third, man was responsible to stay separate from the nations. This separation was primarily a prohibition against intermarriage with pagan nations, since such would dilute the promised seed of Abraham and eventually dissolve the covenant, with all its provisions and ramifications.<sup>55</sup> This obligation is illustrated when both Isaac and (later) his son Jacob are ready to marry. Both of their wives are selected from relatives and *not* from the surrounding Canaanite civilization (Gen 24:3–4, 10; 27:46–28:4). In fact, in the former case, Abraham specifically forbids the selection of a Canaanite woman for his son Isaac.

Fourth, man was responsible to remain in the land of promise. God declares this responsibility to Isaac at a time of famine in Canaan, prohibiting him from leaving Canaan and resettling in the potentially more fertile land of Egypt (Gen 26:2–3a).<sup>56</sup>

This dispensation evidences climactic failure and subsequent judgment as well. Failure is evident in Abraham's lying, unbelief, and (very) presence<sup>57</sup> in Egypt (Gen 12:10–12). Abraham's failure is evident as well in his sojourn in Gerar during a famine, his repeated, duplicitous performance in Egypt (Gen 20), his lack of faith in fathering a son through Hagar (Gen 16), and in his claim that the covenant seed would come through this son (Gen 17:18). Further failure is evidenced by Isaac's deceit in Gerar (Gen 26) and in his son Jacob's deception of his brother Esau (Gen 27).

Climactic failure comes with Jacob's flight to Egypt and Israel's subsequent four hundred year bondage there (Exod 12:40). While God's providence certainly overruled in the person of Joseph (granting Israel favor even after his death), the harshness of life in Egypt (Exod 1:8–14) seems to point to an underlying judgment caused by Israel's unbelief and disobedience, attitudes most notably seen in her egregious, ultimate apostasy (Lev 17:7; Josh 22:17; 23:14–15; Ezek 20:7; Amos 5:25–27).<sup>58</sup>

## *Law*

The dispensation of Law extended from the giving of the Law at Sinai (ca. 1445 B.C.) to the Day of Pentecost (1st century A.D.). The title *Law* comes from the Law of Moses, which was the governing legal instrument mediating God's rule in this age (Exod 19:6). And, it was this Law which provided for the new dispensational arrangement.<sup>59</sup>

## New Revelation

The new revelation consisted of the Mosaic covenant, a comprehensive law code comprising civil, ceremonial, and moral aspects. While governing life in these three areas, the Law itself was an indivisible unity (Jas 2:10).

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<sup>55</sup> In fact, this proscription was later laid out in the Mosaic covenant as well (Exod 34:16; Deut 7:3–6). And, as Israel's history reveals, it was not heeded, leading to all manner of trouble in Israel's history (e.g., Judg 14:8–20; 15:1–2; 1 Kgs 11:4; Ezra 10; Neh 13:23–29). Interestingly, similar trouble is evidenced in the case of Esau's two Hittite wives (Gen 26:34–35; 27:46).

<sup>56</sup> Isaac did obey in this instance, bringing a reaffirmation of God's promise of fidelity (Gen 26:3b–4; cf. 26:23–25).

<sup>57</sup> The later problems with Hagar, whom Abraham acquired in Egypt, seem to support this conclusion (Gen 16), not to mention that upon returning to Canaan Abraham was exceedingly blessed (Gen 13:1–4).

<sup>58</sup> The blessing pronounced on Jacob when he started for Egypt during the famine (Gen 46:1–4) may seem contradictory to this point (and Gen 26:1–5). But, God's approval on Jacob's journey to Egypt must be understood in terms of His *permissive* will. Jacob was in Beersheba at the time, the southern outpost of Canaan, which means that he was well on his way to Egypt when God providentially acquiesced and brought eventual order out of the impending chaos. The Egyptian episode was overruled and used by God to accomplish certain benefits. Jacob saw Joseph again and the family was given physical sustenance, the Amorites were given four centuries of divine mercy (Gen 15:16), and Israel was welded into a political entity at Sinai after this period of Egyptian bondage.

<sup>59</sup> This new arrangement is especially seen by the way Scripture contrasts *Law* with *Promise* (Deut 5:2–3; Gal 3:17).

## New Responsibilities

Israel alone was given this new Law and its responsibilities. For instance, Moses records: “Thus you shall say *to the house of Jacob* and tell *the sons of Israel*” (Exod 19:3). And, God summarizes the giving of the Law, saying, “These are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the Lord established between Himself and *the sons of Israel* through Moses at Mount Sinai” (Lev 26:46). Further, concerning the additions to the covenant made on the plains of Moab at the end of the wilderness sojourn, Moses reports: “These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with *the sons of Israel* in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which he made with them at Horeb” (Deut 29:1<sup>60</sup>). The psalmist likewise was restrictive concerning the recipients of the Law: “[God] declares His words *to Jacob*, His statutes and ordinances *to Israel*. He has not dealt thus with any nation; and as for His ordinances, they have not known them” (Ps 147:19–20). In fact, one of God’s last commandments to Israel in the Old Testament is for Israel to “remember the law of Moses My servant, even the statutes and ordinances which I commanded him in Horeb for *all Israel* (Mal 4:4). Paul similarly affirmed that it was Israel “to whom belongs . . . the giving of the law” (Rom 9:4).

Israel’s (and proselytes’) responsibility, then, was simply to keep the whole Law (Lev 18:5). This meant perfect obedience to the entire Law, all of the time and with perfect motives. Paul affirms this, saying in Galatians 3:10 that “as many as are of the works of the Law [those under the Law’s jurisdiction] are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them.’ ” James, too, talks of total obedience, arguing that disobedience in one area meant disobedience in all areas (Jas 2:10).<sup>61</sup>

This dispensation also ended with climactic failure and subsequent judgment. Specifically, Israel attempted to establish her own righteousness and refused to submit to God’s (Rom 10:1–3). God met this systemic failure with the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities. However, even greater failure and judgment was to come. Israel crucified God’s promised messiah and this led to God’s rejection of the nation, the delay of His kingdom program (Matt 21:43), and the destruction of Jerusalem and ensuing dispersion of the nation in A.D. 70 (Luke 19:42–44).

### *Exkursus: Perfect Law-keeping*

The mention of the requirement of perfect obedience raises the obvious question: Could the responsibility be fully met? Or, to put it another way, could anyone actually keep all the Law perfectly (all of the time with perfect motives)? There is a two-tiered answer to the question, one hypothetical and the other actual.

Hypothetically, or in principle, perfect Law-keeping promised acceptance with God. Leviticus 18:5b affirms as much: “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which *a man may live if he does them*; I am the Lord” (cf. Deut 30:16; Neh 9:29; Ezek 18:9; 20:11). To “live” could be understood in a narrow sense to mean the blessings of this temporal life (e.g.,

<sup>60</sup> Some dispensationalists see a separate covenant in this text, specifically calling it the *Palestinian covenant* and seeing it as an amplification of the Abrahamic covenant (see Mal Couch, ed., *The Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996], p. 292). I have never been persuaded that such is the case.

<sup>61</sup> It must be remembered that the Law, particularly the priesthood it established, stood between the individual Israelite and God. That is to say, there was no individual priesthood of the believer during this time. This is illustrated in a few places. For instance, David talks about the importance of the central altar saying, “They [Saul and his men] have driven me out today so that I would have no attachment with the inheritance of the Lord, saying, ‘Go serve other gods’ ” (1 Sam 26:19). What David means is that approaching God at any other place and in any other manner except through the central altar and through the established priesthood was tantamount to idolatry (Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23–24; 26:2). This was, David feared, the inevitable result of having to flee from Israel. Elsewhere David expressed his intense spiritual thirst for God, concluding with a telling question: “When shall I come and appear before God?” (Ps 42:2). David’s spiritual thirst could only be quenched by coming before the Lord, at the central altar and through the established priesthood.

longevity) that normally accompanied covenant fidelity (cf. Exod 20:12; Deut 5:16, 33; 28:1–14; Prov 3:9–10). However, it seems difficult to limit its focus this way and to wholly exclude the spiritual dimension. It is true that an Israelite could demonstrate outward acquiescence and conformity to the covenant and enjoy these temporal benefits, even without a renewed heart. But, *true* life in the Old Testament goes much deeper than this to include the redemptive blessings springing from faith in the covenant God and His theocratic king. Moses makes this point clear when he says that the Law indeed offered “life and prosperity and death and adversity” (Deut 30:15) and “life and death, the blessing and the curse” (v. 19). But, this “life” (which did include longevity, cf. v. 20) is predicated upon loving God, obeying His voice, and keeping His commandments (30:16).

Jesus reflects this thinking in his response to the rich young ruler’s question: “Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18). Jesus’ reply is, “You know the commandments” (v. 20), a statement (seemingly) rooted in Moses’ promise in Leviticus 18:5 and implying that doing the commands brought life. Paul too reflects this thinking saying, “the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom 2:13) and in another place that the Law “was to result in life” (Rom 7:10).<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, *actually*, or in practice, the Law was *not* a means of justification. Paul says, for instance, “if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:21) and “if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law” (Gal 3:21). The point of these texts is not to contradict the conclusion above that perfect obedience to the Law brings life. That is, the problem was *not* with the Law; in fact, as Paul says, “the law is holy ... and righteous and good” (Rom 7:12). Rather the problem was that Law-keepers made the Law “weak ... through the flesh” (Rom 8:3). In short, human sinfulness prevented perfect obedience to the Law and the life such obedience promised.

## Grace

The dispensation of Grace extends from Pentecost until the second coming of Christ to set up His millennial kingdom. The name *Grace* is taken from John 1:17, where John says that “grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ,” and from Ephesians 3:2, where Paul speaks of “the stewardship of God’s grace [that] was given to [him].” The dispensation of Grace is an economy that is especially characterized by the grace that came with the life and death of Jesus Christ; its name does not imply there was no grace previously.

## New Revelation

The new revelation from God is so vast that it cannot be easily reduced to a nice catalogue. It actually consists of the new provisions, promises, commands, and exhortations that resulted from the life and death of Jesus Christ. This includes how to approach God via the “new and living way” (Heb 10:20), the church as the “new man” (Eph 2:15), and all the accompanying revelation about this new man.

## New Responsibilities

Man’s responsibilities in this dispensation are at least three-fold. First, he must receive God’s gift of righteousness, offered to all, through faith (Acts 16:31). Second, he must join himself to a

<sup>62</sup> And, clearly, in Paul’s theology, “life” is equated with justification itself (Rom 2:13; 10:5; Gal 3:21).

local church. This includes the responsibility to be baptized and the other, related responsibilities of church membership (e.g., attendance, worship, participation in the Lord's Table, et al.; cf. Acts 2:41–42; Heb 10:25). Third, he is responsible to take the gospel to the world (Matt 28:18–20). This responsibility includes the making of disciples, a term signaling conversion, baptism, and participation in the life of the church.<sup>63</sup>

Not surprisingly, this dispensation too will end in climactic failure, something especially seen in Paul's discussion of the great apostasy to come (2 Tim 3:13) and the universally-accepted "lawless one" following the Rapture of the church (2 Thess 2:6–12). Climactic judgment will again follow climactic failure, most notably in this instance in the seven-year Tribulation.

## *Kingdom*

This dispensation extends from the second coming of Christ, following the Tribulation, to the dissolution of the present heavens and earth. Paul speaks of this time as "the administration suitable to the fullness of the times, the summing up of all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10). Its name derives from the fact that Christ will rule on the earth from David's throne. In the words of Isaiah, the government of the universe "will rest on His shoulders" (Isa 9:6). This is the golden age of history to which God's prophets and apostles point and for which humanity was created.

## New Revelation

New revelation will come from whatever proceeds from the direct rule and reign of Christ (Isa 2:3). And, as well, there will be a great outburst of revelatory activity at the beginning of this age, specifically coming from God's elect nation Israel. Joel speaks of this, saying, "It will come about after this that I will pour out My Spirit on all mankind; and your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days" (Joel 2:28–29). Israel will be tasked with diffusing this revelation throughout the world, as Isaiah describes, "And in that day you will say, 'Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name. Make known His deeds among the peoples; make them remember that His name is exalted'" (Isa 12:4).<sup>64</sup>

## New Responsibilities

Man will be responsible to obey the King and receive the blessings of the new covenant. These responsibilities are principally for those in their natural, unglorified bodies (those believers who entered the Kingdom from the Tribulation and those born to these in the Kingdom).<sup>65</sup> The other citizens of the kingdom (Old Testament believers, the church, and

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<sup>63</sup> As stated earlier, there was no missionary mandate in the Old Testament since there was, technically speaking, no universal message of redemption. That is, personal redemption was ethnically-bound, found exclusively in the covenant community of Israel with its special revelation and established priesthood. Jesus speaks to this point when He tells the Samaritan woman that "salvation is *from the Jews*" (John 4:22). This is also seen in Paul's references to the exclusive benefits of the covenant community (Rom 3:2; Rom 9:4–5) and especially in his discussion of the Gentiles as (formerly) "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph 2:11–12). Now, however, this side of Calvary, a "new and living way" (Heb 10:20; cf. 9:15, 24–28) has been opened, bringing (1) the right of individual priesthood for the believer, (2) a bona fide universal gospel, and (3) the responsibility for believers to proclaim it universally.

<sup>64</sup> Part of this revelation is the already-revealed blessings and provisions of the new covenant, a covenant to be made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer 31:31–34).

<sup>65</sup> It is important here to note that kingdom-rule will not be a re-institution of Mosaic Law. This is principally due to the several missing elements from that Law, namely the Ark, the tablets of the Law and the mercy seat, among other things. And, added to these are some additional elements not found in the Law, specifically the increased dimensions of the temple, the living waters flowing from the temple and the trees of healing (Ezek 40–48).

Tribulation martyrs) by this time will be glorified, and, consequently, their sanctification will be complete.

Amazingly, human failure here will be climactic as well, demonstrated by the unnumbered multitudes which follow Satan upon his release from imprisonment (Rev 20:8). To be expected, God's judgment will be climactic and final. Fire will come down from heaven and consume the rebels (Rev 20:9) and, eventually, the heavens and earth as well (2 Pet 3:10). And, with the close of (earth) history will come the end of the dispensational program.<sup>66</sup>

## A UNIFYING CENTER TO GOD'S ACTIVITY

As noted, the Bible teaches that whatever God does is always for His self-glory. He exists both *from Himself* (i.e., He is self-existent or uncaused) and *for Himself* (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 15:28b; Col 1:16). There is nothing outside of God with which He can compare/contrast Himself; neither is there anything external to God from which to offset Himself in order to define Himself. He exists in self-contained tri-unity and does all things for His own self-glory.

The question remains whether there is a unifying principle to all of God's activity. That is, is there some kind of rubric that can comprehend all of God's activity external to Himself (i.e., with reference to the universe)? This principle will also include one's approach to the Bible, answering the question: What is the unifying center or theme of Scripture? That is, this unifying center of all of God's activity with reference to the universe will also be the unifying theme of the Bible. The two are correlative and inseparable.

### *The Difficulties of Finding a Unifying Center*

There are several difficulties attending such a project. First, there is the problem of the diversity of the biblical literature. The different genres of the Bible include narrative, wisdom, law, poetry, prophecy, epistle, gospel, et al. Each of these carries its own hermeneutical maxims, making it more difficult to find the central thread of biblical teaching. Is there a certain kind of biblical literature more fruitful and important than another? Second, there is the historical difficulty. God's activity with reference to the universe must be viewed as beginning with creation and carrying on into the eschaton (the so-called *diachronic* approach). What can unify God's attitudes and work through all of this vast amount of time? Third, there is the problem of the diversity of themes in the Bible. The themes of Scripture generally run along the lines of systematic theology (i.e., the doctrines of Scripture, God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, angels, man, sin, salvation, church, and the end times). How do these contribute to a more ultimate biblical theme? Fourth, there is also the monumental difficulty of constructing a method for finding a unifying center. What criteria should be used that are not arbitrary and selective? Which of the recurring themes of Scripture does one include or exclude? Should the methodology be based on the total number of verses on a topic or on the major peoples involved? Is the secret in comparing Israel's beliefs with those of other religions in the Ancient Near East or the Roman Empire? Is there a theme to be found in one Testament over the other (e.g., perhaps the New

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<sup>66</sup> Much of the structure of the millennial kingdom seems to be carried over into the eternal state, which is the final and eternal phase of the kingdom of God (Rev 22:1, 3, 5). The eternal state will be a monarchical government, complete with a throne and subjects. In fact, the mention of nations and kings (Rev 21:24) suggests this future, eternal era will also have various gradations of society, ethnic distinctions, and geographical boundaries.

Testament should be more authoritative and productive because it is later and has further revelation)?

Pertinent criteria for constructing such a methodology would seem to necessarily include, at the least, the following ideas: (1) patterns of God's stated purpose, such as "I will be their God and they will be My people"; (2) theological importance, that is, those ideas having to do with God and His dealings as over and against isolated events and personalities; (3) historical epochs such as creation, the Flood, the call of Abram, the Exodus from Egypt, the advents of Christ, et al.; (4) major revelation at these epochs such as covenants and other blocks of revelatory information; and (5) comprehensibility, that is, the ability to comprehend *all* of God's activity and revelation. For example a unifying center will need to have its starting point at creation, not at Genesis 3:15, the Flood or the call of Abram. It will also need to explain God's activity up to and including the eschaton.

### *A Proposed Unifying Principle/Center*

God's ultimate purpose of getting glory to Himself would seem to entail a *goal* to His activity. This goal is that which unifies His activity or becomes the fundamental rationale for what He does in glorifying Himself. The most primitive purpose of God is His activity to glorify Himself, but that purpose should be connected to some less remote, penultimate end on the historical level.

This goal, or unifying center, should also carry the *means* of attaining it. This involves the expending of God's power and influences in order to accomplish this goal on the historical level. In other words, this goal, which becomes the principle of unification, entails a plan of achievement. This plan structures God's activities in accomplishing the goal within earth-history. This plan of achievement is the *dispensational program* of God, the progressive unfolding of divine revelation and the resultant stewardship responsibilities that devolve on mankind.

This goal or principle of unification, with its means of accomplishment, will also be the central theme of Scripture. The Bible is the embodiment or the objective truth-deposit of the propositional, verbal revelation on this or any other subject of divine attitude and activity.

God's ultimate purpose and the unifying principle of His activity is *to glorify Himself by establishing a rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship with human beings in His image and dwelling with them forever*. This principle involves a two-fold relationship.

The first aspect is "I will be their God and they will be My people." This relationship began with the creation of man in/as the image of God (Gen 1:26-27; 1 Cor 11:7). Eventually it was expressed in terms of the covenant (cf. Gen 17:7; Lev 11:45; 22:31-33; 25:28; 26:44-45; Num 15:41; Deut 29:12-13; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:28; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; Zech 8:8; 13:9).

The second aspect is "I will dwell among them." This relationship began when God walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, apparently on a daily basis (Gen 3:8). This must have been in the form of a Christophany (a temporary, pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son in human appearance). God's "dwelling" with man after the fall into sin was probably in sporadic Christophanies, such as possibly to Cain (Gen 4:9-15), Noah (Gen 6:13ff; 7:16), and others. There was no permanent, visible abode of God until the Glory Cloud and the eventual

construction of God's "house" and "dwelling" (Deut 12:5, 11; Ps 74:7; cf. Exod 25:8; 34:26; Lev 26:11–12; Ezek 37:27; 43:9; Zech 2:5, 10–11; 8:3; Rev 21:3).<sup>67</sup>

This principle or center accounts for all the activities of God external to Himself, such as:

1. **Creation.** The creation of the heavens and the earth was ultimately designed for mankind and culminated in the creation of the man and the woman in the image of God. The image of God enables human beings to enjoy the creation, fulfill God's mandate to rule the earth, participate in loving fellowship with God and, thus, to glorify Him.
2. **The dispensational program.** This program of stewardship responsibility began with the Dominion Mandate of Genesis 1:26–27 and is forwarded by the progressive, unfolding of God's revelational light in succeeding dispensations. The dispensational program is the means or structure by which God achieves His goal of a rule of loving sovereignty and fellowship. This program culminates in the messianic kingdom of God on earth, which then leads to a transition to the eternal, universal kingdom.
3. **The Fall and redemption.** In the inscrutable wisdom and sovereignty of God, He both permitted sin to enter the universe and provided a means of reconciliation so that He could have fellowship with His image-bearers and be glorified in it all.
4. **The final consummation.** The consummation will be in the eschaton, in the messianic, millennial kingdom and its transition to the eternal kingdom. God and His creation will finally again be in perfect harmony as He rules in loving sovereignty. Each facet of the universe will glorify God to its fullest capacity.

## *The Implementation of the Unifying Principle: The Dispensations*

### The Dispensation of Innocence: From Creation to the Fall

#### *The Creation of the Universe and Man (Gen 1–2)*

The creation account comprehends especially the earth and its features; it has a general geocentric perspective. However, the creation of man was the crowning glory of God's creative activity. Thus the creation narrative is not only geocentric but anthropocentric, in that man is the apex of creation. It is fairly evident that the rest of creation is designed to serve man and his activity for his Creator. The supplemental account of creation (Gen 2) emphasizes Day 6, especially the creation and original activity of man. Genesis 1 is somewhat universal and cosmic in scope; Genesis 2 narrows down to human, personal matters.

#### *Man as the Image of God (Gen 1:26–27; 1 Cor 11:7)*

Man replicates his Creator on a finite level. Theologians speak of the two aspects of the image of God. There is the formal (or public) and broad aspect which made man a personal, rational and spiritual being. There is also the material (or private) and narrow aspect, which for Adam and Eve included a true knowledge of God and an original righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

#### *The Dominion Mandate (Gen 1:26–28)*

As a result of the image of God, man was given dominion over the earth. Adam especially was to exercise God-given lordship over the rest of the creation, including the woman. He was

<sup>67</sup> The Hebrew word for *tabernacle* (*mishkan*) means *dwelling*.

truly the “king of the earth.” Adam was to (1) name the animals (Gen 2:19–20) and Eve (Gen 2:23), who was the only member of creation suitable to or complementing him<sup>68</sup> and (2) care for the Garden (Gen 2:5, 7, 15) and, by implication, the rest of creation, in a husband-led family unit.

### *The Original Fellowship with God (Gen 3:8)*

God walked in the Garden apparently on a daily basis because Adam and Eve expected Him to arrive at a particular time. God was ruling in a sovereign relationship of love and fellowship with the creatures created in His image. How long this lasted is difficult to know. It would appear that Day 8 would be the earliest day in which the Fall could have taken place since Day 7 is still a divinely-hallowed day (Gen 2:3). But, more probably, God walked with His image-bearers for several days, if not a little longer. During this time He was receiving the maximum self-glory possible from His young universe. The infinite, uncreated, self-existent, and eternal One walked with the finite, created, dependent, and temporal ones for a while at the very dawn of all time-space-mass relationships.

## The Dispensation of Conscience: From the Fall to the Flood

### *The New Revelation from God (Gen 3:15)*

The new revelation was a three-fold promise: (1) God would unilaterally impose an enmity between Eve and Satan; (2) God would also unilaterally place an enmity between believers (the seed of the woman) and unbelievers (the seed of the serpent); and (3) God promised the success and final triumph of the personified seed of the woman. This new revelation was *redemptive* in thrust. This promise eventually looks ahead to the God-man of later revelation and history who would redeem fallen humanity, become head of a new humanity and one day rule the earth as a member of the human race. In all of this the original Dominion Mandate remains in force. Many revelational principles are carried forward into succeeding dispensations either intact or adjusted.

### *The Goal of the Dispensation*

The purpose of this section or “goal” here and in the following dispensations is to demonstrate how the unifying principle of God’s activity is worked out. And this is done by addressing two questions: (1) Of what did the walk of loving fellowship between God and His human image-bearers consist? And (2) how was His rule of sovereignty and thus His ultimate goal effected (i.e., how is the unifying center being implemented or fulfilled)?

## FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

God’s provision of reconciliation and fellowship was in the promises of Genesis 3:15. Man was to respond to this provision in faith expressed in an animal sacrifice (Gen 3:21; 4:3–4). The sacrifice carried the theological ideas of *satisfaction* and *substitution*. Thus man could in fact have a loving relationship with his Sovereign although not quite in the same sense as before the Fall. Sin was still present.

## THE RULE OF GOD

God’s rule at this time was internal, through the promptings of the Holy Spirit in the conscience. Genesis 6:3 signifies this internal rule: “My Spirit will not rule/govern [Heb: *din*] in

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<sup>68</sup> It should also be noted that to name something or someone showed lordship or dominion over the object or person named (cf. Gen 17:5; 32:8).

man indefinitely [Heb: *'olam*].” In this context the divine warning is announcing that the end of the dispensation and this internal rule will be in 120 years. Led by his conscience, each person was to fulfill the Dominion Mandate as God’s vice-regent on earth and, thus, to glorify Him. This still appears to be through a husband-led and wife-subordinate-but-complementary family unit.

## The Dispensation of Human Government: From the Flood to Abraham

### *The New Revelation from God: The Noahic Covenant (Gen 9:1–17)*

The new revelation consisted of (1) the fear of man put within animals (v. 2); (2) the official permission to have a meat diet (vv. 3–4); (3) the imposition of capital punishment (vv. 5–6); and (4) the promise of no more Noahic-type floods (vv. 8–17). The command to fill the earth with rational beings who are God’s image-bearers is reiterated (vv. 1, 7).

### *The Goal of the Dispensation*

#### FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Loving fellowship with God was achieved as before, that is, through faith in God’s provision accompanied by an animal sacrifice. There was no new *redemptive* revelation in this economy.

#### THE RULE OF GOD

After the Flood God introduced the external restraints of human government, including the ultimate restraint of capital punishment. Collective man—man in the governmental sense—was now the vice-regent of God in fulfilling the Dominion Mandate. This more or less replaces the family unit as the main instrumentation of God’s rule over planet earth. This external rule presupposed what may be called the rights of due process.

Noah and his sons were sort of a new beginning whereby God could have fellowship with man and rule in loving sovereignty. Noah and his family were to multiply and fill the earth with God’s image-bearers (Gen 9:1, 7). God put a protective hedge around them so the animals would not consume them in their task of carrying out the Mandate (Gen 9:2). God also introduced the restraints of civil government to prevent man from destroying himself through a wanton disregard for human life (Gen 9:5–6). All of this was so that human beings could glorify God by fulfilling the Dominion Mandate in fellowship with their maker and ruler.

## The Dispensation of Promise: From Abraham to Sinai

### *The New Revelation From God: The Abrahamic Covenant*

The covenant of promise consisted of (1) a seed or posterity (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:13; 17:2, 6); (2) a land with defined boundaries (Gen 12:1; 13:14, 15, 17; 15:18–21); and (3) great blessing (Gen 12:2, 3).

### *The Goal of the Dispensation*

#### FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

God was to be approached via animal sacrifices at designated places, especially places made sacred by His special appearing (theophanies). The principal text is Genesis 12:7 which concerns Abraham’s sacrifice: “The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your descendents I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the Lord who appeared to him.” Isaac did the same at

Beersheba (Gen 26:24–25), as did Jacob at Bethel (Gen 28:17–18; 31:13; 35:1, 7). Other sites for sacrifice were used although the rationale is more difficult to find.

The content of faith took on an extension of the seed of the woman, that is, extending now to Abraham and his posterity. Blessing was through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons. All this was via the covenant in its various reiterations and reaffirmations. This blessing would eventually extend to "all the families of the earth" (Gen 12:3). The seed of the woman went from Abel to Seth (Gen 4:25–26), from Seth to Shem (Gen 5), and from Shem to Abram (Gen 10–11). The faith that brought reconciliation and fellowship with God had to comprehend the fact that the personified seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) will be genetically and ethnically tied to Abraham and his seed. Abraham believed this and was justified (Gen 15:6).

## THE RULE OF GOD

Through Abraham and his seed would come the personified seed of the woman. The covenant provided for the ultimate fulfillment of the Dominion Mandate by Abraham and his seed and all the families of the earth. The "birthright" in the patriarchal clans seems to concern the heir who would further the promised seed and its attendant heritage. With the birthright was the "blessing," at least in the case of Jacob and Esau (Gen 27:36). This was tied to the privileges of the covenant and the eventual coming, accomplishments, and rule of the personified seed of the woman and the ideal Seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16).

The land promise provided the geographical arena for the descendants of Abraham to enjoy the loving fellowship of God. The land became the "headquarters" for the Dominion Mandate to be fulfilled, and it became the locus for the distribution of the blessings of Abraham and his seed to all the families of the earth.

God's dominion in the economy of Promise was chiefly through the patriarchal clans where the patriarch was God's specially designated mediator. Abraham, Job, and others were sort of kings and priests in their families (Gen 14, 21, 22; Job 1:5). These miniature theocracies paved the way historically and theologically for the formal establishment of God's theocratic rule in Israel and, through Israel, to the other nations of the world (Exod 19:5–6).

In fulfilling the Dominion Mandate the descendants of Abraham in this economy were to stay ethnically separated from the other nations (Gen 24:4; 26:34, 35; 27:46; 28:1, 4) and to remain in the land of promise (Gen 26:1–5). As a token of their fidelity to God in this regard, they were to receive the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant (Gen 17:10–14, 23).

Thus far, in summary, God's rule of loving sovereignty began in a face-to-face, daily fellowship with His created image-bearers during the dispensation of innocence. God ruled the earth through a husband-led and wife-subordinate-though-complementary relationship in fulfilling the Dominion Mandate. With the entrance of sin and the subsequent revelation for the dispensation of Conscience, fellowship with God was predicated on the faith-commitment of the sinner to the divine promise of reconciliation—faith that was expressed in an atoning sacrifice. God's rule in the dispensation of Conscience was internal but evidently still in the husband-led configuration of the original Dominion Mandate.

In the third administration of God's unfolding revelation—the dispensation of Human Government—the structure for spiritual fellowship with Himself remained unchanged. The Dominion Mandate, however, was carried out by mankind in the collective, governmental sense via the God-ordained restraints of civil rule. In the fourth dispensation, Promise, God narrowed His dealings to one man, Abram, a descendant of the seed of the woman through Seth, Noah, and Shem. Fellowship between God and His reconciled-though-sinful image-bearers was on the basis of atoning sacrifice and trust in His promised blessings through Abraham and his seed. God's

rule took on a more visible, concrete, theocratic, king-priest, and civil-spiritual form within the patriarchal clans.

Thus, momentum was growing toward the day when man's stewardship of God's truth in ruling earth as His vice-regent would result in the Sovereign of the universe taking up royal, theocratic residence with the human race and localizing His dwelling among the descendants of Abraham.

## The Dispensation of Law: From Sinai to Pentecost

### *The New Revelation from God: The Mosaic Covenant*

The Mosaic covenant was an indivisible law with three general aspects: civil, ceremonial and moral. There was other revelation given during this dispensation but not of the quality that introduced a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.

### *The Goal of the Dispensation*

#### FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

There was no continuous dwelling of God on earth from Eden onward, only sporadic appearings to various people. However, during the administration of Law, God did come down in the symbolized form of the Glory Cloud and live with Israel (Jer 14:9). This Cloud, sometimes called the Shekinah (the "dwelling"), was the visible symbol of God's theocratic presence and rule among the tribes. It began with the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel out of Egypt and guided them during the wilderness sojourn. Apparently a portion of this Cloud dwelled in the Holy of Holies over the ark of the covenant in the central sanctuary (Exod 40:34; Lev 16:2). The central shrine had various designations that depicted this living of God among the covenant people, some of which are: (1) the tabernacle and temple (Exod 29:45–46; Num 35:34; 1 Kgs 6:13 [cf. 8:13; 2 Chron 6:1–2]; Pss 26:8; 74:2; 135:21)—the *mishkan* ("dwelling") is the common Hebrew word for tabernacle; (2) the "dwelling of God's name" (Deut 12:5, 11 [cf. vv. 14–21; 14:23; 16:2, 6, 11; 26:2]; Neh 1:9; Ps 74:7); and (3) the "house of [Yahweh]" (Exod 34:26); and (4) the "tent of meeting" (Exod 29:42–43).

Fellowship with God who dwelled in Israel's midst was through the Levitical forms at the central altar. God could be approached and met at His "house" where He lived and manifested His localized presence. Faith at this juncture incorporated the distinct provisions and injunctions of the Mosaic Law regarding the sacrificial-festal system.<sup>69</sup>

#### THE RULE OF GOD

The Theocratic Kingdom established at Sinai had a unique civil-spiritual or civil-ecclesiastical relationship. The kingdom had an internal political system headed by a divinely-chosen mediator (Moses), along with elders, judges, and officers. Immediate access to God was available should the written code not be sufficiently understood (Num 5:11–31; 15:32–35). Moses, as head of the civil government, appointed the ecclesiastical personnel, such as priests and the high priest (Num 3:10). The established religion had the support of the state through the tithing system. Worship of any god other than Yahweh was strictly forbidden, carrying the sanction of death (Exod 20:3; Deut 6:4–5; 13:1–18). With the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:16) the monarchy became the permanent form of the Theocratic Kingdom, and the dynastic rights to the kingdom were given to David and his seed in perpetuity.

<sup>69</sup> The Glory Cloud departed in 592 B.C. (Ezek 11), signifying the withdrawal of God's dwelling with Israel due to her apostasy.

The external politics or the foreign policy of the theocracy carried a divinely guaranteed supremacy over the other nations, both economically and politically (Deut 15:6). Israel was not therefore to make foreign alliances; in fact, the foreign policy mandated the extermination of the Canaanite city-state system and the enslavement of nations distant from Palestine (Deut 10:11–15, 16–18).

When the Law was adhered to, that is, when the civil, ceremonial and moral aspects of God's revelation were kept, the Israelites enjoyed the blessing of God who ruled in their midst and who was glorified in their obedience. God's rule through Israel also touched other (pagan) nations who, in isolation from their apostate presuppositions, paid tribute to Israel's God (Exod 15:15–16; Josh 2:9–11; 4:24; 1 Kgs 8:43, 60; Ps 59:13; cf. Deut 2:25).

God's rule has thus dispensationally-progressed from the family unit (Innocence and Conscience), to man in governmental capacity (Civil Government), to the mediatorial headship of the patriarchs in their clans (Promise), and to the tribes of Israel who were forged into a mediatorial kingdom of God on earth at Sinai (Law).

## The Dispensation of Grace: From Pentecost to the Second Coming of Christ

### *The New Revelation from God*

The new revelation from God was the grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Jesus of Nazareth was Immanuel, God with us (Matt 1:23; Isa 7:14). He was God in the flesh (John 1:14), a one-for-one revelation of the Father (John 14:9), the very embodiment of the Godhead (Col 2:9). The new revelation that came at this juncture entailed all the accomplishments, commands, injunctions, and mandates that came with the life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, present session, and future return of Jesus Christ. Included in this is the broad area of truth concerning the New Testament church, both its universal and local aspects.

### *The Goal of the Dispensation*

#### FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

To walk with the sovereign God in loving fellowship in this economy is predicated on personal faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). Saving faith now comprehends Jesus of Nazareth as the only way to the Father and salvation (Acts 4:12), that is, saving faith comprehends His cross work and its divine validation by His resurrection from the dead (Rom 10:9). Christ is the “new and living way” to the Father (Heb 10:20); there is no other way. He is the personified Seed of the woman, who crushed the serpent's head and made full and final provision for God and man to be in fellowship (John 12:31; 16:11; Heb 2:14).

#### THE RULE OF GOD

The rule of God over the earth in the present dispensation of Grace is being mediated principally through the institution of the New Testament church. The era of the Gospels, the closing years of the dispensation of Law, saw the coming of Jesus Christ, the messianic king on whose shoulders the government of the world would eventually rest (Isa 9:6). He offered Himself to Israel as her promised king and in so doing offered the nation the prophesied messianic kingdom (Matt 12:28; Mark 1:14–15; Luke 17:21). His kingdom was rejected and postponed/delayed to the end times (Matt 21:43; John 19:15). The chief instrumentality of God's work and witness in the ensuing dispensation of Grace (i.e., during the interregnum of the king's absence) is, then, the local New Testament church; it is the “pillar and support of the truth” (1

Tim 3:15). That is, the fate of divinely revealed truth has been committed by God to this body during this particular economy.

The church is composed of both Jews and Gentiles called out by God as a people for His name (Acts 15:14). The church is a unique organism in which Jew and Gentile are on a plane of equality before God, that is, there are no ethnic, social, or gender preferences before God in the composition of the body of Christ (Gal 3:28; Eph 2:6). The church is the bride and wife-to-be of the messianic king himself, destined as such to be co-regent with him on David's throne in the messianic reign (Rev 3:21). Meanwhile, the church mediates the will and rule of God on earth principally in its proclamation of the truth of God and in the salt and light of its individual people in civil society (Matt 5:13–16; 28:18–20; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). As a member of both church and state—in a spiritual and civil capacity—man is to fulfill the Dominion Mandate in exercising lordship over the creation to the glory of God. Every foreign or unchristian thought is to be brought into obedience to Christ (2 Cor 10:5). From the Melchizedekian-right-hand rule on the Father's throne, Jesus dispenses spiritual blessings and power to His people (Ps 110:4; Acts 2:33–35; Heb 6:20; 7:1ff; 8:1ff). These are to be translated into good works which glorify the Father (Matt 5:16) and become a savor of the knowledge of Christ in every place (2 Cor 2:14). Human government also still has the obligation to restrain sin, punish evildoers, and cause righteousness to prevail in an orderly society (Rom 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13–17).

As far as God's visible or symbolic dwelling among men in this economy is concerned, there is none, and there will be none until the consummation when Christ raptures His church and later comes to earth to dwell among mankind during the Millennium. In this present dispensation of Grace, the Holy Spirit, in a sense the alter ego of Jesus Christ during His absence (John 14:16–18), through His personal indwelling of Christians, mediates the things of Christ (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7; Col 1:27). But there are no theophanies, Christophanies or any other visible manifestations or symbols of God's presence on earth.

## The Dispensation of the Kingdom: From the Second Coming to the Dissolution of the Present Earth

### *The New Revelation from God*

The new revelation will consist of all the information that comes from the direct rule and reign of Jesus Christ on earth (Isa 2:3; Joel 2:28). Part of this will be the blessings of the new covenant, which will be instituted with national Israel (Jer 31:33–34).

### *The Goal of the Dispensation*

#### FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Fellowship with God will be on the basis of the new covenant as instituted through the atonement of Jesus Christ. All the elements of salvation will be present during this time, such as repentance, forgiveness, regeneration, justification, and sanctification. Salvation, in all its facets and applications, will be as available and plentiful as drawing water from an inexhaustible well (Isa 12:1–6). The citizens of the kingdom will be clothed with the “garments of salvation” (Isa 61:10). The walls of the international capital of the kingdom will be called “salvation” (Isa 60:18). The messianic king will be known worldwide as “the Lord our righteousness” (Jer 23:6).

#### THE RULE OF GOD

The messianic kingdom is the historical goal and unifying center of God's activity. At that time, the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9). The

messianic king, Jesus of Nazareth, God in the flesh, will take up His royal residence in the millennial Jerusalem. The Glory Cloud, the visible symbol of God's theocratic presence, will return to the millennial temple (Ezek 43:1–6). God will again be dwelling with His image-bearers in near-perfect conditions worldwide.

The Dominion Mandate will be fulfilled by a basically regenerated society. There will be a complete sanctification of human existence and all earthly relationships. Even the most insignificant and lowly utensils will be holy to the Lord (e.g., the bells on the horses' harnesses and common cooking pots, Zech 14:20–21). As Alva J. McClain puts it: "No legitimate aspect of human life will be left without the regal saving activity."<sup>70</sup>

The millennial kingdom merges into the eternal, universal kingdom on the sinless new earth (1 Cor 15:24; Rev 21, 22). Here, then, is the final and eternal consummation of the goal and unifying center of God's activities. God's ultimate purpose of receiving exclusive self-glory throughout the entire universe will be realized. Everything and everyone will be in absolute visible conformity to God's will and design, and all opposition will be incarcerated forever in God's eternal penitentiary, thereby forcing even from these an everlasting confession that "Jesus Christ is Lord, *to the glory of God the Father*" (Phil 2:11). The eternal state is in the form of a kingdom with the "throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev 22:1), where His servants will serve Him and will *reign* forever and ever (Rev 22:3, 5).

The sacred writer summed it all up by saying of that eternal day: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them" (Rev 21:3).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 217.

<sup>1</sup> Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity, Volume 1: Prolegomena and the Doctrines of Scripture, God, and Angels* (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009), 105-54.