THE “SEVEN DISPENSATIONS” VIEWED IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE – Chapter 2

THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM – With an Examination of DISPENSATIONALISM and the “Scofield Bible”

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THE “SEVEN DISPENSATIONS” VIEWED IN THE LIGHT OF SCRIPTURE

Let us at this point inquire what, if any, support the Bible lends to the basic idea of modern dispensationalism, namely, that God has divided all time (past and future) into seven distinct and clearly distinguishable “dispensations;” and that in each of those “dispensations” He deals with mankind upon a special plan and upon peculiar principles that differ from those of all the others.WHAT IS A “DISPENSATION”?

And first, as regards the meaning of the word itself, it is easily to be seen, that the Biblical meaning thereof is radically different from that assigned to it by the “Scofield Bible,” where it is stated that:–

“A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect to some specific revelation of the Will of God” (note to Gen. 1:28).

But in our English Version of the Scriptures the word “dispensation” is not in a single instance used to designate a period of time. Paul says, “a dispensation of the gospel is committed to me” (I Cor. 9:17); that is to say, the gospel had been entrusted to him to be dispensed by him. And the word has a like signification in other passages, all its occurrences being in the writings of the apostle Paul. Thus in Ephesians 1:10 is a reference to “the dispensation of the

fulness of the times"; and the apostle is there speaking of that which God had purposed to administer or dispense in these last days. ("The fulness of the time," according to Galatians 4:4, is the era when "God sent forth His Son.").

Again in Ephesians 3:2 Paul speaks of "the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward"; the meaning being that the ministry given him was to dispense the grace of God to the Gentiles.

And lastly, in Colossians 1:25 he refers to "the dispensation of God," that had been given him, "to fulfill the word of God"; the reference being to that which God had made him responsible to administer or dispense, in fulfilment of the word of God concerning His previously concealed purpose as to the salvation of the Gentiles. These are all the occurrences of the word.

In the English Version of the Bible, therefore, the word "dispensation" means always administration or stewardship. Our English word "economy", comes directly from the Greek word rendered, "dispensation" in the four passages above referred to. It is to be deplored that a biblical word of definite signification should have been chosen for the purpose of this new system of doctrine, and a radically different meaning assigned to it.

Then further we are told, in the words of a prominent dispensationalist, that each of these seven distinct periods of time has "a character exclusively its own," being "wholly complete and sufficient in itself," that it "is in no wise exchangeable for the others, and cannot be commingled." That is to say, each "dispensation" has its own peculiar and distinguishing characteristics, insomuch that, when one succeeds another, there is a complete and radical change in the character and principles of God's dealings with the world. So say the dispensationalists; but I find in the Scriptures no evidence to support the statement. On the contrary, I find

that, in every age and era, God has accepted those who believed Him and refused those who disbelieved Him. Salvation has always been “by grace, through faith,” and upon the ground of the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Adam and Eve and Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham and David were one and all saved precisely as we are.WHY SEVEN DISPENSATIONS?

And now, what warrant is there for the statement that “seven such dispensations are distinguished in the Scripture” (Scofield Bible, note to Gen. (1:28)? And how does the Scripture distinguish them?

The correct answer is that there are no “such dispensations distinguished in the Scripture.” The method by which they have been arrived at is purely arbitrary, fanciful, and destitute of scriptural support; the method being to select arbitrarily some epoch, such as the Exodus, and say “here began a new dispensation.” But obviously the number seven is entirely arbitrary; for it is possible, by the method described, to divide human history as recorded in the Scriptures into any desired number of “dispensations.” One is at liberty to take any and every important era as the beginning of the era of the Judges, of that of the Israelitish kingdom, that of its division into two parts, the Assyrian captivity, the return from Babylon, the destruction of Jerusalem, the preaching of Christ to the Gentiles (Acts X) , and say, “Here began a new dispensation”; and he would have for his dispensational scheme all the warrant that our dispensationalists have for their’s — that is to say, none at all.

And if one who searched the Scriptures for indications of dispensational divisions were to assert that there was one dispensation that extended from Abraham to David, another from David to the Babylonian captivity, and another from the Babylonian captivity to Christ, he might refer to Matthew 1:17 as lending support to his scheme; whereas for the dispensational system set forth in the Scofield Bible there is

no semblance of any scriptural proof.

In laying out its scheme of the seven dispensations the Scofield Bible makes the first to be the dispensation of "Innocence," and has not much to say about that. The second we are told, is that of "Conscience," which began, our authority asserts, at the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. But where is there a scrap of evidence to support the idea that this period was distinguished in any special way as regards God's dealings with men, from later times? or that "conscience figured in it any more conspicuously than in other periods? To fulfil the definitions given by the dispensationalists themselves, it is necessary that "conscience" should characterize this period exclusively; for there must be "no commingling." But the fact is that nothing is said in the Scriptures, either directly or by implication concerning the human conscience during that period of history, or concerning man's being left in those remote times to the voice of his conscience; whereas, on the other hand, much is said in the New Testament about the part conscience is to have in shaping our conduct in this gospel era and as to the importance of having a "good conscience," a "pure conscience," a "conscience void of offense"; and about what we are to do "for conscience' sake."

Thus the whole system breaks down at this initial stage; for manifestly it is impossible to confine the operations of the human conscience to the comparatively unknown period that extends from the fall of man to the flood.

Third Dispensation. This is said to embrace the period extending from the flood to the call of Abraham; and we are told that this was the dispensation of HUMAN GOVERNMENT. (Scofield Bible, note to Gen. 8:20). But upon what evidence, I ask, can it be asserted that God was in any special sense (much less in an exclusive sense) dealing with the world, during that era of time, through the medium of "human government"? The fact is that there is no mention at all of

human government during that period. The only recorded event belonging to it is the building of the tower of Babel; and there is no indication of human government in connection with that event. The building of that tower was not begun, continued or ended at the command of a human governor. On the contrary, what we read is that:—

"It came to pass as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick . . . and let us build us a city, and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name" (Gen. 11:1-4).

There is no trace of human government here. But now, in this gospel era we are specially commanded to be in subjection to human governmental authorities,—kings, rulers, and magistrates of lesser degree; and are instructed by the Scriptures that "the powers that be are ordained of God," and the civil magistrate is "the minister of God" (Rom. 13:14; Tit. 3:1; I Pet. 2:13, 14). Is not this quite enough to show that the scheme of seven distinct dispensations is the product of the human imagination, and destitute of biblical support? Are we not justified in concluding without going further into the subject, that the reason why the discerning Bible students of past centuries did not find the seven dispensations in the Scriptures is that they are not there?

But let us nevertheless pursue the interesting subject a little further, and give heed to what is said concerning

The Fourth Dispensation. This, according to the same authority, was the dispensation of "Promise" (S. B. note on Gen. 12:1); and it extended from the call of Abraham to the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. This period embraced the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. In it occurred the multiplication of their seed in Egypt, the afflictions they endured in that land, their miraculous deliverance out of it by the hand of Moses, and the giving to them of the law of God

with the “statutes and judgments,” which prescribed for that people the worship of God and defined their relations and duties to one another. Now I ask, wherein was that period in any special sense the “dispensation of Promise”? There were indeed promises given to the fathers of Israel during that period; but there had been promises given previously, notably that grand, all-embracing, most glorious promise recorded in Genesis 3:15, concerning the Seed of the woman; a promise that includes both “the sufferings of Christ,” the coming Redeemer of the world, and also “the glories that should follow.” There was also the world-embracing promise given to Noah (Gen 9:9-17). And there were also promises in profusion in subsequent times, as for example in the era of “the law and the prophets.” And it is needless to say that the New Testament Scriptures simply abound in “exceeding great and precious promises.” So there is not the slightest warrant for marking off the centuries during which the natural descendants of Jacob were being multiplied into a nation, and making that era a “dispensation” specially characterized by divine promises.

The Fifth Dispensation. This is said to be the dispensation of “Law,” and it is put in the strongest possible contrast to ‘the next succeeding “dispensation,” that of “Grace.” And further we are told that “This dispensation [of Law] extends from Sinai to Calvary; from the Exodus to the Cross; from Ex. 19:8, to Matt. 27:35” (S. B. notes).

Here is where some of the most serious evils of dispensationalism come clearly into view; for the aspersions which the teachers of that system cast upon the holy law of God constitute in their totality a complete and grievous misrepresentation thereof; and in certain extreme instances they assume the character of slanderous vilification. But before glancing at some of these, let it be noted that the much maligned “dispensation of law” is said to have embraced the entire lifetime of our Lord—“from Ex. 19:8 to Matt.

27:35”; for it is one of the points upon which the dispensationalists mainly insist, that the Gospels belong to the era of law, and not to that of grace; which I am bold to say is palpable and pernicious error. For as regards the termination of the era of the law, we have the word of our Lord that “The Law and the prophets were”—not until Calvary, but—“until John; since that time the kingdom o[God is preached” (Lu. 16:16). And in agreement with this it is written: “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

These Scriptures declare in the plainest terms that the life and words and works of our Lord “in the days of His flesh,” including the “Sermon on the Mount” (concerning which we have something special to say) belong, not in the twilight era of the law of Moses, but in the full daylight era of “grace and truth.” They also make it plain that the era of “the Kingdom of God” followed immediately upon that of “the law and the prophets”; and further that the era of “the Kingdom of God,” and that of “grace and truth” are one and the same. And this a matter of special importance because, as I expect to point out in some detail later on, the humanly concocted scheme of the “seven dispensations,” which we are now considering, has had the effect of blotting out, for those who accept it, the illuminating truth which the Scriptures reveal concerning the Two Covenants, “the old covenant,” whereof Moses was the mediator, and “the new covenant” whereof Jesus Christ is the Mediator. For the Bible clearly distinguishes those two covenants and the eras to which they respectively belong; and moreover, upon that difference depends truth of the highest value. Therefore, one object I have in view, in exposing the unfounded character of dispensationalism, is to clear the ground for the presentation of the truth concerning “THE TWO COVENANTS” (Gal. 4:24).

But apart from the palpable error of placing our Lord’s life and ministry in the era of law as distinguished from that of

grace, the strongest exception is to be taken to the teaching that grace was entirely absent from the era of law, even as law is said to be absent from the era of grace; this being a two-fold error. And in this connection I would particularly like to ask those who hold that view, and who place the ministry of Christ in the dispensation of law, was not His ministry a ministry of grace? and were not His words "words of grace"? I wonder that this grievous teaching does not evoke bursts of indignation from those who love the Lord and who are accustomed to go for their comforts to the Gospels.

This brings us to what the "Scofield Bible" teaches concerning the holy law which God gave at Mount Sinai to the people He had delivered out of the "iron furnace" of Egypt. And first I call attention to these extraordinary statements:

"It is exceedingly important to observe . . . that the Law was not imposed until it had been proposed and voluntarily accepted" (Note on Ex. 19:3). "At Sinai they (Israel) exchanged Grace for Law. They rashly accepted the Law" (Note on Gen. 12:7).

Here we have in brief the teaching (which is amplified in the writings of this new school of theology) that Israel was given an opportunity to choose between Law and Grace, that they were put under the law of God by their own choice; and further that they chose "rashly," and hence made,— not a bad choice merely, but— one that was fatal, if so be that the differences between Law and Grace are what the dispensationalists aver.

As to this I say, first of all, that it is palpable error. For no choice was presented to Israel between Law and Grace, or between Law and any alternative. On the contrary, it was an essential part of God's plan in taking them out of Egypt, which He accomplished by signs and by wonders and by a mighty hand, that He might have a people who should be the custodians of His law. Thus, Psalm 105 recites the fact that the giving of the law was in fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham

(vv. 8-10). And it goes on to recall how He delivered them out of Egypt by the hand of Moses and Aaron, led them by the pillar of cloud and fire, gave them food in the desert and water out of the rock; and all to the end “That they might observe His statutes and keep His laws” (v. 45).

It is quite plain from the account given in Exodus, and also from references to the wondrous event in many later Scriptures, that the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai was God’s act alone; and also that it was an act of grace and goodness. The reason He gave them His “fiery law” was because “He loved the people.” Yet the teaching of the “Scofield Bible” is that the people of Israel made a fatally bad choice in consenting to be under the law of God. The statement that “they rashly accepted the Law” implies that they acted without due consideration, and did not know what they were doing or what would be the consequences of their rash choice. And this necessarily implies that God acted unfairly toward them; that He took advantage of their ignorance concerning what it meant to be “under the law,” that He thus led them into a deadly trap from which it was impossible thereafter for them or their posterity to extricate themselves.

But nothing could he farther from the truth. For the gift of law to Israel was both a distinguished honor, and an unspeakable benefit. It gave them the knowledge of the true God; it gave them a way of access to Him for worship and for obtaining mercies and blessings; it gave them a sanctuary, a priesthood, acceptable sacrifices—including a sin-offering—and promises such that, by meeting the fair and reasonable conditions, they might have been a “peculiar treasure” to God and “a kingdom of priests and an holy nation” forever (Ex. 19:4,5). Therefore, if it be asked, “What advantage then hath the Jew,” over all other nations in the world? the inspired answer is, “Much every way.’ Chiefly because that UNTO THEM WERE COMMITTED THE ORACLES OF GOD” (Rom. 3 :1).

Most certainly the Scripture last quoted could never have been

written if Israel had been put under law by their own choice, and if their choice had been a bad one; for it declares that the Jew, so far from being put at a disadvantage, enjoyed much advantage and in every respect; and that the chief of all their advantages was that unto them had been committed the oracles of God—the law and the prophets.

This subject, however, is too large and too important to receive proper notice at this stage of our inquiry. So we reserve it for further consideration later on.

The Sixth Dispensation. The sixth place in the dispensational scheme we are examining is assigned to Grace. And well may we rejoice that "the grace o[God that bringeth salvation hath appeared" (Tit 2:11). But it is quite another thing to say that God's Grace characterizes this era exclusively; that Law and Grace cannot be commingled; and that "They are as far asunder as Mount Sinai and the place called Calvary, and can no more mingle than the iron and clay of Nebuchadnezzar's dream-statue."

The truth in this regard is that there was grace during the era of the Law, and that there is law during this era of the Gospel; that the New Covenant is the completion of the Old; and that the Gospel of God finishes the work that was begun by the Law of God. It would seem from the language our Lord used in Matthew 5 :17 that He had this very error in view; for His words were "Think not that I am come to destroy the law or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil." And likewise Paul, in the question he asks and answers concerning the Gospel: "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law."

Further consideration of this subject likewise must be deferred to a later chapter: so we will only add that the great difference between the past era and the present in respect to the law is that then the law of God was engraved upon tables of stone, whereas now it is written upon the

hearts of His redeemed people (2 Cor. 3:3: Heb. 8 :10).

The Seventh Dispensation. This, according to the most commonly held dispensational scheme, will be the Millennium; though some give a dispensational place to a supposed “great tribulation,” or “time of Jacob’s trouble,” which they hold to be yet to come. But inasmuch as our present concern is not with any conjectural dispensations yet in the future, we shall pass this part of the general subject by without comment.