

Sunday, May 11, 2014—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 138  
The 1990s: The Dispensations According to Progressive Dispensationalism

### **Introduction**

- In Lesson 137 we finished our comparison study of Classical Dispensationalism (CD), Revised Dispensationalism (RD), and Progressive Dispensationalism (PD) by survey the distinguishing features of PD.
- In this lesson I want to consider the number of dispensations and the manner in which they are determined according to PD.

### **The Dispensations According to PD**

- As we have seen in the course of study, the history of dispensational Bible study is littered with all different conceptualizing regarding the number of dispensations and how they should be reckoned. The seven dispensations scheme advocated by Scofield is the most popular due largely to the influence of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Blaising and Bock, authors of *Progressive Dispensationalism*, advocate for a very exacting method for determining the number of dispensations by following three basic principles:
  - “1) Begin with the structure of the New Testament dispensationalism; 2) keep the basic dispensational scheme as simple as possible; and 3) be flexible with the notion of a dispensation so as to be able to see great simplicity or greater differentiation than the working dispensational scheme allows.” (Blaising and Bock, 120)
- Surprisingly enough, Blaising and Bock actually advocate for what they call Pauline dispensationalism as a starting point for determining the number and scope of the dispensations. Using this method, they argue for three main dispensations: Mosaic, Ecclesial, and Zionic (which they break into Millennial and Eternal parts).
  - “We begin first of all with Pauline dispensationalism, which uses explicit terminology and structure foundational for dispensational thought. As noted above, this yields us at least two dispensations of the past and present, and possibly a third of the future as well. If we stick with Paul’s terminology we would label these 1) the dispensation of the law, 2) the dispensation of the fullness of times, and 3) the dispensation of the mystery.

The first, “dispensation of the law,” comes from Paul’s illustration of the law as an *oikonomos* (Gal. 4). . .

Whether or not it is proper to understand the “dispensation of the fullness of times” in Ephesians 1:10 as future (a point which, as noted above, is debatable), there is no doubt that Paul expects future changes in the relationship between God and human beings at Christ’s return. . . As a result, we anticipate in Biblical theology a future dispensation

which can be subdivided into two recognizable arrangements: the millennial kingdom of the returned Jesus Christ, and the eternal order of resurrection life on the redeemed earth. Some may wish to simply designate these as two future dispensations: the Millennium and the new earth. . .

The mystery referred to in the “dispensation of the mystery” (Eph. 3:9) is the relationship of Jews and Gentiles to Christ and to one another. This relationship is the distinguishing characteristic of the church. Consequently, one might just as well call this dispensation the “dispensation of the church” or the “ecclesial dispensation” . . .

From this analysis of Pauline dispensationalism, it may be suggested that we see three dispensations: the Mosaic or theocratic dispensation, the ecclesial dispensation, and the Zionic or final dispensation which includes both the millennial and eternal kingdoms.” (Blaising and Bock, 120)

- The time before Moses, Blaising and Bock argue, should be viewed as one patriarchal dispensation, not a variety of smaller ones that Scofield argued/taught.
  - “With regard to dispensations prior to the theocratic dispensation, we should follow the principles of simplicity and flexibility. In Galatians 3, Paul speaks of the time before the Law (before the Mosaic covenant) during which the Promise (Abrahamic promise) had been given. But he never speaks of the dispensation of promise as Scofield does. In Romans 5:13, Paul speaks of the time before the Law from the standpoint of sin’s existence in the world. Sin was in the world before the Law, but it was counted as transgression after the giving of the Law. In this discussion of sin as transgression, the Mosaic dispensation is compared to the situation from Adam to Moses, implying that we see that whole period under a common arrangement or dispensation. Paul then goes on to speak of the new situation since the coming of the Spirit (Rom. 7-8). The contrast of Law and Spirit is essentially the same as that given in Galatians 3-5, where Paul distinguishes these situations as two different dispensations: the Mosaic and the ecclesial. This leads us to see the structure with respect to sin in Romans in closer harmony with Paul’s dispensational division than his introduction of the notion of promise in Galatians 3.

As a result, we should suggest seeing the situation before the time of the Mosaic covenant as a unified, patriarchal dispensation. Patriarchs seems best suited as a title. This patriarchal dispensation includes God’s relationships of blessing, judging, and covenant with the various families of the earth including notable individuals such as Abel, Cain, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Noah’s children, and Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants: Isaac, Jacob, and his twelve sons. A next major dispensation begins when God makes the covenant at Sinai with the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Blaising and Bock, 122)

- In the end, PD as set forth by Blaising and Bock in *Progressive Dispensationalism* consists of four primary dispensations in Biblical history: Patriarchal, Mosaic, Ecclesial, and Zionic.

- Regarding the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times (DFT) mentioned in Ephesians 1:10, Blaising and Bock present two options for how to understand this dispensation.
  - *Option 1—DFT is another name for the Ecclesial Dispensation*
    - “It is plausible that this dispensation (DFT) is the same one of which he speaks in Ephesians 3:9. As we have already noted, that dispensation (the one which has been in existence since the ascension of Christ) had been the subject of both Paul’s prayer in 1:15-23 and his remarks about Jews and Gentiles in 2:11-22. With the present dispensation receiving so much attention in the rest of the letter, it would be reasonable to interpret Ephesians 1:10 as an introductory reference to it. Also, the union of all things in Christ, mentioned in 1:10, can be related to what Paul says in Ephesians 2:11-22 and 3:6-9 about the present dispensation. Paul says that “it was the Father’s good pleasure . . . through Him to reconcile all things to Himself. . . things in heaven and things on earth.” And in Galatians 4:4, he says that Christ was born in ‘the fullness of time.’ ” (Blaising and Bock, 115)
  - *Option 2—DFT is a Future Dispensation*
    - “Though the language of Ephesians 1:10 may relate to what Paul says elsewhere about the present dispensation, the possibility that Ephesians 1:10 refers to a yet future dispensation cannot be ruled out. The themes presenting blessing and true inheritance are presented in verses 13-14. And it is clear that the present arrangement (dispensation) is a down payment on blessings that will be fully realized in the future. Though existing blessings will differ from those in the future, the difference is one of degree not of kind.
 

It is quite possible that Paul has this future inheritance in mind when he speaks of the dispensation which God has planned for the fullness of times. The present dispensation is an arrangement in which the blessings of that inheritance have been inaugurated. The present arrangement is not the culmination of the divine plan, but it is both the revelation and the guarantee that that plan will be realized.” (Blaising and Bock, 115)
- In the end, it is clear from their four dispensations scheme that Blaising and Bock advocate for Option 1 and see the DFT as another name for what they call the Ecclesial Dispensation, i.e., the current dispensation.

### **The Dispensations According to Richard Jordan Mid Acts Dispensationalism (MAD)**

- It is interesting to compare the teaching of PD in terms of identifying the various dispensations with what Richard Jordan taught in Grace School of the Bible (GSB). I have before me a transcribed copy of the entire Fundamentals of Dispensationalism from GSB. In Term 101 Lesson 4, Jordan teaches the following regarding the number of dispensations. Please note that this lesson was originally taught in 1983.

- We have already studied in past lessons Richard’s method for teaching right division using the three time periods in Ephesians 2: Time Past (v.11); But Now (v.13); and Ages to Come (v.14). In Lesson 101.4 Jordan argues that these three time periods are filled up with five dispensations.
  - “This three-fold division in Paul’s epistles is filled up with five dispensations. Again, a dispensation is a particular set of instructions given by God for man’s obedience. It will cover a period of time because the instructions are given for obedience at different times. However, the time element is not the issue; rather the instructions and the program that God is executing during that time period.” (Jordan, 33)
- Jordan uses Romans 5:12-14 to identify the first dispensation. In similar fashion to PDists, Jordan uses the time periods identified in the Pauline epistles as the primary guide to determining the number and duration of the dispensations.
  - “There is a situation here that starts with Adam and goes to Moses: “From Adam to Moses” as a time period, a particular dispensation. From studying Genesis you move from Adam to Abraham; then God separates Abraham from the world and that begins the middle wall of partition. From there you wind up with Moses. That time or era was a dispensation in Paul’s thinking. Often in Scofield, Larkin and the standard dispensational scheme, you will find three dispensations back there:
    - Conscience—from the fall of man (Adam) to Noah.
    - Human Government—Between Noah and Abraham
    - Promise—From Abraham to Moses

In my teaching, I do not deal with it that way because of Romans 5:14. Paul “lumps” it all together when he said, “death reigned from Adam to Moses.” Paul does not divide it into Conscience and Human Government. Conscience is not identified in Scriptures as a dispensation. Conscience is a mode of revelation; a means of knowing things—not a dispensation. Human government is not a dispensation, but rather one of the four divine establishment institutions. God almighty authored four institutions for the establishment of the human race so that man could operate and function properly. . .So then, Adam to Moses is a dispensation, which was called by Paul the dispensation of Promise. The issue between Adam and Moses, between God and man, was that God had made a promise. (Quotes Galatians 3:17)

What comes in with Moses is the LAW. So the next dispensation we know will be The Law. It comes in with Moses and goes on to Jesus Christ. What was there before the law? The promise. (Quotes Galatians 3:18-19)

Therefore, if you want to put a name on the dispensation between Adam and Moses, the name would be PROMISE and that promise starts in Genesis 3:15 with the promise of the woman: God's first promise of a Redeemer. . ." (Jordan, 33-36)

- According to Jordan, "the next period is called LAW—Moses to Christ."
  - "Rom. 5:20—Moreover the law entered . . . You start out with Adam to Moses and then the law enters—or as Galatians 3:19 says—it was added. The law was added to the Promise. Notice that this verse says that the law was added till the seed should come. The law was not there to disannul the promise. It is not there to cancel this promise. The promise is still there. The law comes in to make Israel know they need the Redeemer." (Jordan, 36)
- Grace as a dispensation comes with the ministry of the Apostle Paul, according to Jordan. After quoting Romans 3:19-21 Jordan states:
  - "When we move into the BUT NOW section, there is a new way of making righteousness known. Back in Time Past, God's righteousness was made known through the law. But now there is a new way of God's righteousness being made known through this program of Grace.
    - Back there from Adam to Moses, death reigned.
    - Moses to Christ, under the law, sin reigned.
    - With Adam came the entrance of sin.
    - With Moses came the knowledge of sin.
    - With Christ came the forgiveness of sin.

In Romans 5—the law entered (v. 20); grace did much more abound (v. 20) and in verse 21 we see why grace abounded: "That sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord." (Jordan, 37)

- It is precisely this reign of grace that ushers in a new dispensation, i.e., the dispensation of grace that comprises the "but now" time period. This dispensation of grace that comprises the But Now time period is called "the mystery" in Ephesians 3:1-5.
  - "The program of God in the Dispensation of Grace does not cancel the Law Program; it just postpones it. The way it is described in Acts 15 is how they have come to understand that God is currently visiting the Gentiles to call out a people for his name. God is out among the Gentiles forming a new agency, the body of Christ. It is described as a visit. It does not say that God has left home and moved from one place to another and abandoned his former place or done away with the house of Israel. It says God has left the house of Israel to visit the Gentiles to form the body of Christ. When you visit someone, do you not return home? You have left temporarily with the intention of returning. That is what God has done. Then . . . (quotes Acts 15:16).

In other words, in the Ages to Come, Christ is going to come and set up the kingdom.

The preaching of the kingdom is actually in two phases. In the earthly ministry of Christ, the kingdom is preached as being at hand. John the Baptist preached, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”—the opportunity is in front of you, or as close as your hand. In the Ages to Come, Christ will actually return and set it up. So in Acts, what James is saying there is not that the kingdom has been thrown out, but that Christ will come back after the interruption is finished and actually set up that kingdom.” (Jordan, 38)

- After God’s visit among the Gentiles is over and His purpose in forming the body of Christ is completed, the unprophesied “But Now” time period will give way to the Ages to Come during which time the kingdom will finally be established. Just as there was more than one dispensation in “Time Past” (Promise and Law), there will be two dispensations in the Ages to Come: the Dispensation of the Kingdom and the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times (DFT). After quoting Ephesians 1:9-11, Jordan states the following regarding the DFT:
  - “Think about the expression, “fullness of times.” That is when time will be brought to its fullness: when the purpose for which God created time will have been accomplished. That will occur in the Ages to Come. . .

(Quotes Colossians 1:16-20)

God’s purpose is to reconcile all those positions in the government unto himself and that will be accomplished in the fullness of times. What God is doing in Time Past, But Now, and in the Ages to Come is forming two agencies that He will use in the Dispensation of the Fullness of Times to bring all things under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

- He forms the nation of Israel to bring the earth under His authority.
- He forms the body of Christ to bring the heavenly places under His authority.

In the DFT, the eternal purpose that God the Father purposed in His Son will be brought to pass.

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| ▪ Adam to Moses | Dispensation of Promise                         |
| ▪ Moses         | Dispensation of The Law                         |
| ▪ Paul          | Dispensation of Grace                           |
| ▪ After Rapture | Dispensation of the Kingdom                     |
| ▪ After Kingdom | Dispensation of the Fullness of Times—Eternity” |

(Jordan, 39-40)

## Conclusion

- Grace School of the Bible (Richard Jordan) has much in common with PD in terms of the number of dispensations as well as the methodology for how dispensations should be determined. They do however; disagree about the nature of the DFT. Blaising and Bock make allowance that the DFT could lie in the future but ultimately hold that Ephesians 1:10 is a reference to the current dispensation.
- Meanwhile, Richard Jordan holds that the DFT is a yet future dispensation that lies in the Ages to Come that coincides with the establishment of the eternal state. According to Brother Jordan there are five dispensations – two in Time Past (Promise, Law); one during the But Now (Grace); and two in the Ages to Come (Kingdom, DFT).
- The *Grace History Project* agrees with Brother Jordan's view on both the nature of the DFT as well as the total number of dispensations.
- To be clear, we **are not** suggesting that any similarities between PD and GSB in terms of the number of dispensations and how they are determined means that GSB /Richard Jordan is/was promoting PD. Brother Jordan would vehemently disagree with PDs interpretation of the present dispensation which we will spend some time talking about in our next lesson.

## Works Cited

Blaising, Craig A., and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993.

Jordan, Richard. *The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism*. Chicago, IL: Grace School of the Bible, 1983/2007.