## 2.2 The Dispensations

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Biblical history is divided by God into dispensations, defined periods or ages to which God has allotted distinctive administrative principles.

J N Darby is sometimes referred to as the ‘father of dispensational theology’.  Although the thought was not new, and it is clear from scripture, there was in his time (and still is) a lot on muddled thinking amongst believers.  Many teach that we are part of a steady continuum, with, for example, the church replacing Israel, that Christ’s kingdom is present and that the interpretation of periods is purely spiritual or figurative – sometimes called ‘covenant theology’.

J N Darby’s teaching, and also that of many servants of the Lord, has been based on the understanding that Biblical history is divided by God into dispensations, defined periods or ages to which God has allotted distinctive administrative principles.  Dispensationalists’ view of history has the glory of God at its centre, whereas traditional teaching focuses on humanity and man’s physical and spiritual needs[[1]](#footnote-1).

### The Word ‘Dispensation’

The word, οἰκονομία /oikonomia /Strong 3622 — (Ephesians 1:10), translated ‘dispensation’ there — is a compound word ‘house’ and ‘law – the rules or administration, of a household, as in our word  ’economy’.  In the phrase, ‘dispensational truth,’ it looks at the world as a great household, in which God is dispensing, or administering, according to the rule of His own establishing, and in whose order, He has from time to time introduced changes, the understanding of which is consequently needful, both

### List of Dispensations - Schofield

There are several lists of dispensations, and to my knowledge, Darby did not produce a formal list, but the classic view lists the following, each associated with a covenant between God and man.

Generally, the list of dispensations is taken from the explanatory notes in the New Schofield Reference Bible. Dr Cyrus I Schofield defined a dispensation as ‘a period of time during which man is tested in respect to his obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God[[2]](#footnote-2)’

Schofield listed the dispensations as follows:

1. ***Innocence***– Adam is under probation before the Fall. This dispensation ends with his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This is designated by the Edenic Covenant (Gen 1:28)
2. ***Conscience***– From the Fall to the Great Flood. It ended with the worldwide deluge when only eight were saved. (Gen 3:7) – The Adamic covenant – conditions in the life of fallen man.
3. ***Human Government***– After the Great Flood, men were to execute the death penalty for murder. This dispensation ends with the dispersion at the Tower of Babel. Some use the term Noahide law about this period. (Gen 8:15)
4. ***Promise***– From Abraham to Moses. Ends with the refusal to enter Canaan and the 40 years of unbelief in the wilderness. Some use the terms Abrahamic law or Abrahamic covenant about this period. (Gen 12:1)
5. ***Law***– From Moses to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Ends with the scattering of Israel in AD70. Some use the term Mosaic law about this period. (Ex 19:1)
6. ***Grace***– lasts from the cross to the Rapture of the church. The Rapture is followed by the wrath of God comprising the Great Tribulation. Some use the term Age of Grace or the Church Age for this dispensation. (Acts 2:1)
7. ***Millennial Kingdom (or Fullness of Times)*** – The 1000-year reign of Christ on earth centred in Jerusalem. It ends with God’s judgment on the final rebellion, Satan having been released ‘*for a short time’*. (Revelation 20:4)

### List of Dispensations – Savage

John Ashton Savage (1818-1900) wrote a very useful book, ‘The Scroll of Time, or Epochs and Dispensations of Scripture’[[3]](#footnote-3). It lays out the events systematically and chronologically. There is no doubt that Savage was greatly influenced by Darby and indeed referred to him extensively.

He lists dispensations and epochs are as follows (mainly chapter titles)

|  |  |
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| **Dispensation/Epoch** | **Period/Event** |
| Epoch 1  | Creation of the World |
| Dispensation A  | Creation to the Deluge |
| Epoch 2 | The Deluge  |
| Dispensation B | The Deluge to the Call of Abraham |
| Epoch 3  | The Call of Abraham  |
| Dispensation C | The Call of Abraham to the Exodus |
| Epoch 4 | The Exodus  |
| Dispensation D  | The Exodus to the Captivity of the Jews |
| Epoch 5 | The Captivity of the Jews  |
| Dispensation E | The Captivity of the Jews to the Birth of Christ |
| Epoch 6  | The Birth of Christ |
|  | Ministry of John the Baptist |
|  | Life and Ministry of Christ |
|  | The Crucifixion and Death of Christ |
| Dispensation F | The Christian and Church Period |
|  | The Coming of the Lord for His Saints (First Stage) |
| Epoch 7 | The Rapture and First Resurrection |
| Dispensation G | The Day of Tribulation |
| Epoch 8 | The Coming of the Lord for His Saints (Second Stage) and Judgment of the Nations  |
| Dispensation H | The Day of Millennium |
| Dispensation I  | Satan released for a little Time |
| Epoch 9 | The last Rebellion and final Battle |
| Epoch 10 | Judgment at the Great White Throne |
| Dispensation K | The new Heaven and new Earth |

The Millennium is often described as ‘*The Day of the Lord*’ (Joel 1:15, Amos 5:8, Zephaniah 1:7,14, 1 Corinthians 1:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:2).

The Eternal State with the New Heavens and Earth is often described as ‘*The Day of God’* (2 Peter 3:12, Revelation 16:14).

1. See ‘Elements of Dispensational Truth Volume 1 by R. A. Huebner, page 3’ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Note 3 to Genesis 1:28. New Schofield Reference Bible page 3. Bible published by Oxford University Press 1970 edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Available from Kingston Bible Trust, Lancing, Sussex [↑](#footnote-ref-3)