

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #98:

RIGHTLY DIVIDING THE BIBLE: DISPENSATIONS

By John Temples

Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15 to “be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, **rightly dividing the word of truth.**” The phrase “rightly dividing” comes from a Greek word, *orthotomeo*, which means literally “to cut straight.” To many people, “rightly dividing” the Bible is a strange concept. They have never thought of the need to “break up” or apportion different parts of the Bible based on time periods, covenants, or application to different groups of people. Yet rightly dividing God’s word is essential for a correct understanding of both the Bible and our obligations to God as people living in the 21st century.

There are several ways to arrange, divide, or break down the Scriptures, including:

- By testament. It is immediately obvious to a Bible reader that there are two grand divisions, the Old Testament and the New Testament. (A testament is a covenant, contract, or will.) One testament or covenant might be applicable to one segment of mankind but not another.
- By classification of books. As long as the text of the Bible is not changed, grouping of Bible books can be done in various ways. In the vast majority of modern Bibles, books are grouped according to their subject matter or style. Some Bible books are historical, some are poetic, some are prophetic. For instance, the New Testament consists of four gospels (narratives of the life of Christ), one book of history (Acts), 21 epistles or letters of instructions for Christians, and one book of prophecy (Revelation).
- By paragraphs, chapters, and verses. This is also a standard feature of the vast majority of Bible versions. Such divisions of text were made centuries ago, mainly for convenience in referencing different texts.

There is another way of “rightly dividing” the Bible that we don’t hear much about anymore, but it is one that greatly facilitated the restoration of New Testament Christianity some two centuries ago. It really helps us to see the “big picture” of how God has dealt with mankind over the span of human existence. That way is to divide the Bible *dispensationally*--that is, by dispensations. The word *dispensation* is related to the word *dispense*, which means “to deal or mete out in parts and portions; to distribute according to a plan or arrangement.” So a “dispensation” is a dispensing or distributing of God’s blessings and/or instructions to a certain group of people living in a certain period of time or place.

You hear people say that the entire Bible is written to us and applies to us. But that is not technically correct. The whole Bible is written **FOR US**, but not all of it is addressed **TO US**. For example: when God gave the law to the people of Israel through Moses ca¹ 1500 BC, one of the laws forbade work on the Sabbath. (The Sabbath lasted from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.) When a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath, God commanded the people to stone him to death (Numbers 15:32-36). Does this mean that if we see our neighbor mowing his grass on Saturday morning, we should round up the whole neighborhood and kill him? Of course not. We realize that we are not under the law of Moses like they were. Even people who say “the whole Bible applies to us” are forced to admit that the multiple Old Testament commands to sacrifice animals are not in force now. There has been a change of law or dispensation.

GOD HAS HAD DIFFERENT RULES FOR DIFFERENT GROUPS OF PEOPLE DURING DIFFERENT TIME PERIODS

This seems simple and obvious, but most of the religious world has no understanding of it. That is why somebody is just as likely to take you to Genesis or Psalms for the way to worship God today as to the book of Acts.

How many different dispensations (age or arrangements) has God had in His dealings with man? Three can be readily discerned or identified. We call them the Patriarchal dispensation, the Mosaic dispensation, and the Christian dispensation.

¹ “Ca” is an abbreviation for *circa*, a Latin word meaning “approximately.” The term is widely used in technical or scholarly publications when an exact date is not known.

It is imperative that we as Bible students realize that God has dealt with man under these three different arrangements, and that all people alive today are under the third one, the Christian age or dispensation.

THE PATRIARCHAL DISPENSATION

This first system gets its name from the term *patriarch*. This comes from *pater* (“father”) and *arche* (“ruler”); hence, a “father/ruler.” The patriarch was the male head of a family, tribe, or clan. Abraham was a patriarch (Hebrews 7:4). Other patriarchs were Noah, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob (who became the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel).

The patriarchal system was an individual or family arrangement. Each family received instructions from God through its patriarch. A command to one patriarch may not have been a command to any other patriarch. For instance, God commanded Noah to build an ark. That command was applicable only to Noah, not to anyone else. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Thankfully, that command did not and does not apply to anyone else.

WHEN DID THE PATRIARCHAL AGE END?

The patriarchal age lasted from the time of Adam (ca 4000 BC) to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (ca 1500 BC). Some Bible scholars believe the patriarchal arrangement continued among the Gentile nations until the death of Christ. They reason that the Israelite nation was called by God for a unique purpose (the coming of Christ) and that the law of Moses was a special law given only to them, and it did not annul the patriarchal system. This view is not in conflict with the Bible statement of how God spoke in “times past” (Heb. 1:1-2). However, because the Bible really does not give us a detailed picture of God’s dealings with the Gentile nations after the establishment of Israel, it is reasonable to assume that the patriarchal arrangement ended at Mount Sinai. We can say with certainty that it ended by the time of Pentecost, when the law of Christ went into effect and became binding on all mankind.

THE MOSAIC DISPENSATION

God began to deal with people differently in about 1500 BC, when He gave the Jews the Ten Commandments and the ensuing set of teachings we call the law of Moses. God had dealt with people individually and by word of mouth during the patriarch age; at this time, He began to deal in a special way with a subset or nation of people, leaving the other nations to “walk in their own ways” (Acts 14:16). And He gave them a written law.

Why did God set aside the Jews and give them a special arrangement or law? One important reason was to keep the Jews a separate and distinct race until Christ should come. God had before decreed that the Seed, the Savior, would be a descendant of Abraham (Genesis 22:18). The law served as a “middle wall of partition” (Ephesians 2:14) to keep the Jews separated from other nations. Paul further explained, “It [the law of Moses] was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made” (Galatians 3:19).

Three unique features of the Mosaic system were:

- A separate building or special place where God dwelled when He dealt with the people--first a tabernacle or tent, later a temple in Jerusalem.
- A separate priesthood. Under the patriarchal system, each father/ruler served as priest to offer worship to God for his family. Under Moses' law, only certain men--the descendants of Aaron--were priests, and the Jews were to worship God through them.
- An elaborate system of animal sacrifices that prefigured the once-for-all, all-encompassing sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of mankind.

WHEN DID THE MOSAIC SYSTEM END?

Go back to Galatians 3:19--“It [the law of Moses] was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made.” The expression “till the Seed should come” suggests that the law of Moses (the “Old Testament”) was never intended by God to be His “be-all, end-all” system for dealing with man; it would be replaced at the coming of Christ. God's previous

promise to Abraham said that “all nations” would be blessed by God (Genesis 22:18). The law of Moses, however, applied to only one nation. Furthermore, within the law of Moses itself, God promised to one day establish a new covenant, “not according to the covenant I made with their fathers in the day that I took them out of the land of Egypt” (Jeremiah 31:32). That new, “one more” covenant was...

THE CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION

This third (and last) dispensation was put into place by Jesus. It came into effect upon the death of Christ and the revealing of the gospel on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It is contained in the New Testament. It supersedes all other arrangements or covenants. Whereas the patriarchal system was an individual arrangement, and the Mosaic law was a national arrangement, the Christian dispensation is a *universal* arrangement, applying to all mankind. The Bible makes the universality of the law of Christ very clear:

- At the transfiguration of Christ, God spoke from heaven, saying that the people were no longer to hear (derive religious authority from) Moses and Elijah (the law and the prophets), but were to hear His Son only (Matthew 17:5).
- Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).
- As the Lord gave His apostles the Great Commission, He said, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and in earth” and commanded them to preach the gospel to all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).
- Paul stated in his address to the Athenians that God now commands “all men everywhere” to repent and to be subject to His Son (Acts 17:30-31).
- Heb 1:1-3 declares, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds....”

In plain terms, here is what this means: *The only way men can approach God and be justified by Him today is by the terms of the New Testament, the gospel, the*

law of Christ. Furthermore, this law will not be replaced by another--it is the third and last dispensation. It will end only when the Lord returns.

Does this mean that we are to ignore the Old Testament, or that it is not the inspired word of God? By no means. The Old Testament is just as much the inspired word of God as it was before the New Testament came. It is invaluable for edification and meditation (e.g., the Psalms), for a true historical account of ancient times, and for studying how God has dealt with people over time. Romans 15:4 says, "For whatever things were written before [the Old Testament Scriptures] were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

It does mean, though, that our doctrine, our authority, and our law in all matters relating to God come through the New Testament, not the Old Testament. To find what we must do to go to heaven, we must look to the New Testament, not the Old Testament.

Folks, these are fundamental and basic concepts, but as we stated earlier, they are not understood by the majority of religious people. Let us help others to see these powerful truths and to "rightly divide" the Bible. --John Temples