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Spiritual Blessings



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The What And Why Of Biblical Dispensations

(This article is a summary by the Editor of a study given by John Hutton at the BBFA's conference last September. An understanding of Biblical Dispensations is vital to a correct understanding of Scripture, and the BBFA is keen to give John's study the widest possible exposure. The complete study is large enough to fill 3 issues of this magazine, but that is not the best way to go for several reasons. After some prayerful discussion, it was decided to present a shorter summary to introduce the subject, and we hope thereby to whet your appetite for the later publication of the fuller study in booklet form. We urge readers to give this article their earnest consideration.)

Dispensations – What Are They?

In Ephesians 3:2, Paul says that he had been given a dispensation. The NIV uses the word 'administration' instead of 'dispensation'. The purpose of this article is to find out what dispensations are, and the purpose behind them.

The word 'dispensation' is not in common use today, but it is an important word in the Bible. It translates the Greek word 'oikonomia', which is made up of 'oikos' – a house, and 'nemo' – to administer, to deal out or to distribute. So, 'oikonomia' means the rule or administration of a house. Here are a few occurrences of the word and its variants in the New Testament:

Oikonomia – dispensation, stewardship.

"Give an account of thy stewardship." Luke 16:2. The NIV has the word 'management'.

"Taketh away from me the stewardship." Luke 16:3. NIV has 'my job'.

"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times ..." Eph. 1:10. NIV has no word here.

Oikonomos – the person in charge of the house rule, i.e. the steward.

"That faithful and wise steward." Luke 12:42. NIV – 'manager'.

"Which had a steward." Luke 16:1. NIV – 'manager'.

"Erastus the chamberlain of the city." Rom. 16:23. NIV – 'director'.

"Stewards of the mysteries of God. 1 Cor. 4:1. NIV – 'servants'

"It is required in stewards that they be found faithful." 1 Cor. 4:2. NIV – 'those who have been given a trust'.

The opening verses of Ephesians 3 are, of course, a continuation of what Paul has been saying in the previous two chapters, so to help us discover what a dispensation is, we will start with what he says in chs. 2 and 3 about the standing of Jewish and Gentile believers. I don't have space to quote the whole passage, so please read Eph. 2:11-12 and 3:1 & 2 before proceeding. I will quote selected parts:

"Wherefore remember ... that ... in times past ... Gentiles in the flesh ... at that time ... without Christ ... aliens ... strangers ... having no hope ... without God . But now ... ye are made nigh by the blood of Christ. He hath made both one ... having abolished ... the enmity ... to make ... one new man. Now ... ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens ... For this cause, I Paul, ... if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given to me to you-ward ..."

Cont. p. 3.

Inside

President's Word.....	2
Editorial.....	8
Wonderful Words of Life.....	9
Book Review.....	11
Information.....	12

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." Eph. 1:3

THE PRESIDENT'S WORD

Greetings once again to all of our readers, and a special welcome to any one joining us for the first time. A number of developments have taken place since our last issue, so here's a bit of what's been going on for us lately.

Sydney (and other) Meetings

Our ministry in Sydney has taken a new direction this year. Peter Ward is starting Bible Study meetings at Breakfast Point, near Concord. These will commence in early March on Sunday afternoons, and everyone is welcome to attend. See PAGE 12 for more details. There may be other meetings planned for Sydney later this year, so keep watching Spiritual Blessings for updates.

Besides our other regular meetings, a few special events are coming up. In Newcastle, a Bible study day will be held at Charlestown Community Hall on Saturday May 31st, where we will focus on some of the basics of the dispensational approach to Scripture. It will be a good opportunity to ask questions. In Brisbane, there is a weekend of Bible study meetings at Boronia Hts on the Queen's Birthday Long Weekend, June 7th-9th. All of these meetings are free of charge, so why not plan to be there (and bring along a friend, too)? See the bottom of this page for more details.

Magazine Layout & Printing

Since 2004, Athol Walter has been editor of Spiritual Blessings, during which time his daughter, Sue Hall, has been very involved also - laying out the articles, putting it into a format suitable for printing, preparing the magazine for our web site, sending out the version which many of our readers receive via email, etc. Most of Sue's duties have been taken over by others, but it is fitting that we should say a big "thank you" to Sue for her hard work over the past three or four years.

Spiritual Blessings is now being printed, folded and posted by folk from our Brisbane group. It takes several hours, and a few logistical hurdles need to be overcome to prepare the magazine for posting, so we appreciate Rom Harper and Frank Haegler overseeing this aspect.

Thousands Look At Website

Frank Haegler is also our "webmaster", or web site technical administrator, and he does a terrific job of keeping it up-to-date and packed full of great Christian articles. Last year, the BBFA's web site received over 15,000 hits (or visits), so Frank's efforts are being put to good use. He informed us recently that the most popular items viewed on the site were the articles, charts and books, with our article on "Right Division" heading the list. There was also a high demand to view back issues of Spiritual Blessings Magazine online.

Numbers and statistics don't mean everything, but it is a fact that the BBFA's web site has rapidly become a major part of our activities over the last few years. It has helped us to disseminate our Bible study material to many more people than was previously even thought possible, so please keep our use of this resource in your prayers.



Perhaps you've never looked at the BBFA's web site. Maybe you don't even own a computer, but you certainly know someone who does. Drop in, or pass on our web site address (www.spiritualblessings.org) to a friend, and see why thousands of people look at what we have to offer on the internet.

A Name Change?

A matter to be considered later this year is a possible name change for our Fellowship. The name "Berean" is taken from Acts 17, where the people of Berea were called "noble" because they searched the Scriptures to see if what Paul was saying was true or not. The BBFA heartily endorses this principle, and will continue to do so, no matter what our name may be in the future.

We are, however, becoming increasingly aware of other groups, mostly with no association to our own Fellowship, who also use the name "Berean". This has caused some confusion, and it may be time to consider taking on a different name. From my initial conversations with members, about half would like to change the name, and about half would prefer to keep it as is - so a change is certainly not a foregone conclusion. Members will probably be asked to vote on whether the name should be changed at the next Annual General Meeting at Camp Toukley in September 2008.

Depending on what the result of that initial vote is, there may be a subsequent vote on what the BBFA would change its name to. So far, the BBFA Committee has gathered a list of about 75 suggestions from various people (thank you especially to Ron Hodge and John Hutton for your many contributions), and developed a shortlist of about 10. These proposed names will be distributed in due course amongst the members and the various study groups for feedback.

Committee Meeting

The affairs of the BBFA are administered by a seven member committee, and your input is invited. If you'd like to have your say about the possible change of name, or any other issue relating to our ministry, please contact us by using one of the addresses on PAGE 12 of this issue.

Until next time, may the Lord be glorified by our witness, our walk, and the study of His Word.

David Tavender.

Special Events For Your Diary

Newcastle Study Day, Sat. May 31st, 2008, 10.00 am - 3.00 pm

Charlestown Community Hall. Free of charge. Co-ordinator : John Hutton (02) 4943-5694

Brisbane Study Weekend. Sat 8th, Sun 9th, Mon 10th, June 2008,

Queen's Birthday Weekend. Boronia Hts State School Hall, 194 Middle Rd., Boronia Heights.

Free of charge. Co-ordinator : Frank Haegler (07) 3297-1981

2008 Annual Conference, September 20-22, 2008

Plan now to join us at Camp Toukley for the BBFA's Annual Conference, a time of great studies and Christian fellowship. More details in future issues of Spiritual Blessings.

What Paul is saying in these passages is not all that dramatic to believers today. Many seem not to have noticed it at all. But when Paul wrote, in about 62 AD, that there was a new and complete equality between Jewish and Gentile believers, it would have blown his readers away.

The Ephesian church had a Jewish beginning, which later included Gentiles, and everyone in that church knew that the Jews had a very different position with God than did Gentiles. The last letter that Paul wrote before writing to the Ephesians, was Romans in which he had stressed the great difference between Jewish and Gentile believers.

It seems as if Paul realised that the new revelation he had been given would be hard for many to accept, so in Eph. 3:1 & 2, he reminds them that they had heard about this dispensation of the grace of God given to him.

So what is a dispensation?

Did you notice that in the references given earlier, the words 'steward' and 'stewardship' were often used? These words are good translations, but unfortunately, their meaning has changed to some extent over the last 400 years.

'Steward' comes from an old English word 'styward', which is derived from 'sty' and 'ward'. Today, sty means a pigpen, but in olden times, the sty was the estate, the owner's property. The 'ward' or 'ward' was the keeper of the estate, the steward. The owner of the estate set the rules for the house management, and the steward had to administer everything according to those rules. 'Ward' has become 'warden', and a good example is the Warden of a prison. He is in charge of administering the prison, but he has to keep to the rules set by his superiors.

The word 'oikonomia' has come into English practically unchanged as 'economy'. When a new government is elected, some laws get changed, particularly in the fiscal area, and whether we like it or not, we have to obey the new rules. These points illustrate what happens when God introduces a new dispensation, and should be kept in mind.

In the parable of the unjust steward in Luke 16, the steward's lord said to him, "Give an account of your stewardship." (V. 2.) That thought is behind Paul's statement in Romans 14:12: "So then everyone of us shall give account of himself to God".

Some things in Scripture, such as basic doctrine, never change. For example, redemption by the blood applied in the Garden of Eden and it applies today. Justification by faith applied to Abel and it applies today. The same is true of other fundamentals of our faith. The important

question at the moment, however, is this. Do the rules by which someone can please God in their walk ever change? Let's begin our search for an answer at the beginning.

Adam.

The Bible tells of only three instructions given to Adam and Eve in the Garden. Two were things they had to do, the third was something they were not to do. We'll look at the negative one first.

'But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.'" Gen. 2:17

The positive instructions are in v. 15. "And the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden (1.) to dress it and (2.) to keep it.' The word 'keep' comes again in the next chapter.

'So He (God) drove out the man; and He placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubim and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way

of the tree of life. Gen. 3:24.

In both the above references, the meaning of the word keep is to guard. The flaming sword guarded the way to the tree of life, preventing access, and, similarly, Adam was to guard the Garden. But he obviously did not succeed. The enemy, Satan, got in and inexperienced Adam and Eve were no match for him. Could they have kept Satan out? Yes, I think so, because God does not ask of us what is impossible. So God set the rules and their job was to be good stewards and keep them

I suggest that the time before the Fall is the first Dispensation in Scripture, and I will call it the Dispensation of Innocence. That dispensation finished when they were cast out of Eden. We can certainly say that the first dispensation ended in failure, because it depended on the actions of man and the flesh is weak. Even without the fallen nature, Adam and Eve failed to serve God properly.

From Adam to Noah

There were about 1500 years between that 'casting out' from the Garden and Noah's flood. How was man to walk worthily before God during that time? Without doubt, it was different to the way Adam had been required to walk before his fall. Romans 2:14-15 shows that during that time, God allowed people to live by their consciences

By the time of Noah, sin was rampant and only Noah and his family had kept themselves from the

degradation around them. Things were so bad that God decided to destroy all the human race, with the exception of Noah and his family. I will call this the Dispensation of Conscience. Did this dispensation end in success? Obviously not, otherwise the Flood would not have been necessary.

From the Flood to the Law of Moses

During the time from the flood to the giving of the Law, God rewarded those who did the right thing, and punished those who did not. The Book of Job provides us with an insight into that time. In Job, there is no mention of Israel, Jew or Gentile – it is simply the relationship between a man and God.

The book opens with a wonderful testimony to Job, and the Lord repeats this to Satan. Because of Job's goodness, God had greatly blessed him. But Satan is allowed to persecute Job, who could not understand why terrible things were happening to him, for he knew that he was a good man. We can see the way things were at that time from the reactions of Job's friends. They said in different ways, "You are suffering troubles, Job, so that means you must be a sinner." In other words, rewards or otherwise were according to works. So I will call that dispensation the Dispensation of Good Works.

Once again, we can see that it was a failure, otherwise there would have been no need for –

The Law of Moses

The next great turning point between God and man was the Law given through Moses. Israel had now been chosen by God as His special people, and the Law reached into every aspect of their lives. The rules changed dramatically with the giving of the Law. An important reason for the Law was to make Israel different from the other nations, and if the Israelites wanted to please God, then they had to walk according to God's Law – the new rules.

In Romans 7:12 & 14, Paul says that the Law was holy and spiritual. So what was the problem? The answer is in Rom. 8:3. The Law was weak 'through the flesh'. When the Lord came, Israel had largely moved away from the spirit of the Law, and they were called to repentance. This would have been unnecessary if Israel had successfully kept the Law. I will call this period the Dispensation of the Law, and just like the ones before it, it ended in failure because of the weakness of the flesh.

The Acts Period

Following the earthly ministry of the Lord which concluded with His death, resurrection and ascension,

we have another change. No longer was the requirement obedience to the Law, but simply to believe the Gospel concerning Jesus the Messiah. As Paul said to the Philippian jailer, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.' Acts 16:31. God had changed the rules again, and many of them were big changes. I want to consider five conditions that existed in this new Dispensation.

1. The Jew had advantages over the Gentile.

Paul outlines the Jews' advantages in Romans 3:1 & 2 and 9:1-5. 'What advantage then hath the Jew? Much every way ... unto them were committed the oracles of God ...to them pertaineth the adoption ... the covenants ... the law ... the service of God and the promises ...of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came.'

Romans 9, 10, and 11 make the position of the Gentile believers plain during the Acts period – they were like wild olive branches grafted into Israel's olive tree to stimulate the Jews to accept God's offer, even through a spirit of jealousy.

An example, not only of the superior position Jews had at that time, but also of the difference between unchanging doctrines and practical rules that do change, is found in Romans 1:16. 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.' That is a marvelous statement, and I'm sure we all say 'Amen' to it. But the verse goes on to say: 'to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.' Can we say 'Amen' to that part today? I don't think so. It was true when Paul wrote Romans that the Gospel had to be preached to Jews first, but it is not true now.

2. Every believer was given at least one gift by the Holy Spirit.

Paul speaks at some length about these gifts in 1 Cor. 12 & 13, and several points need to be made. The gifts were exercised without failure. The healings and miracles were instantaneous and complete. Then, there was a diversity of gifts. Not all had the same gift, and Paul talks about the more important gifts. Also, the gifts given to the believers were proof that a remarkable change had taken place in their lives and that God was working through them.

3. The Acts believers had a new hope – the New Jerusalem. See Gal. 4:26 and Heb. 12:22.

What was the hope of the faithful through the Gospel years and up to the beginning of Acts? It was the Kingdom of God to be set up by the Messiah. In Hebrews, the New Jerusalem is called a 'better country'. Better than what? Better, surely, than the Millennial Kingdom.

4. There were miracles of judgment in the Acts period.

Ananias, Sapphira and Herod were examples of these. See Acts 5:1-11; 12:21-23; 13:6-12.

5. There were several baptisms in the Acts period.

First was water baptism, then the baptism in or by the Holy Spirit, and thirdly, there was also a baptism into Christ's suffering and death, which could be called a spiritual baptism. The Lord speaks of His impending death as a baptism (Luke 12:50), and in Romans 6, Paul speaks about the believer having died and then lived with Christ in His death and resurrection. These are the three baptisms in the Acts period.

Here is a summary of those five points:

1. The Jew had many advantages.
2. Miraculous gifts were in operation – instantaneous and complete.
3. The Hope was the New Jerusalem – a better country.
4. Miracles of Judgment were in operation.
5. There were multiple baptisms.

Not only do we find these conditions in Acts itself, but they are also in the epistles written during the Acts period. This is an important point. Those epistles are: Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, Galatians, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2 & 3 John, Jude and, arguably, Revelation. We must be careful, when reading these epistles, about what we take from them and apply to ourselves and our Christian walk today. Remember, basic doctrine does not change when there is a change of dispensation, but many rules dealing with the believer's walk do.

I will call this Acts dispensation the Dispensation of the Holy Spirit. Again we must ask, did it end in failure? Yes indeed! It was a time when God graciously gave Israel a second chance to accept Jesus as their Messiah, but we find, as we follow the account in Acts, that the Jews everywhere hardened their hearts and effectively said for the second time, 'We will not have this man to rule over us'.

On the personal level, we also see from what Paul has to say to the Corinthian believers for example, that their standard of conduct was not honouring to the Lord. In spite of the gifts of the Spirit, they served God no more successfully than others had in previous dispensations.

After Acts 28:25-28

I started this study by referring to Paul's claim in Eph. 3:1 & 2 that he had been given a special dispensation (or stewardship) by God. This change of dispensation came after Paul had pronounced God's sentence on Israel at Acts 28:25. Have you ever wondered why Acts finishes so abruptly with so many

things left up in the air? It is simply that God's offer to Israel had run out. Both the Jews living in Palestine, and those living in the wider Mediterranean world, made their rejection of God's second offer very plain. And with Paul's quote from Isa. 6 in Acts 28:25 & 26, Israel's special place and privileges in the plan of God were suspended temporarily. Please note that I said temporarily. When the right time comes, all of Israel's promises will be fulfilled.

I don't have to think of a name for the new dispensation given to Paul, because the Bible names it for us - the Dispensation of the Grace of God. (Eph. 3:2)

The changes to the rules in this dispensation are significant. We find them in the epistles of Paul written after the Acts period finished. They are: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon. We will examine some of these epistles with the five points in mind that we considered in the Dispensation of the Holy Spirit.

1. The Place of the Gentile.

No longer does the Jew have many advantages, for things have changed dramatically. Look at Eph. 2:12-15.

"... at that time (i.e. before Ephesians was written and the middle wall of partition broken down) ye were without Christ ... aliens ... strangers ... having no hope ... without God... But now in Christ Jesus ye ...are made nigh. For he ... hath made both one (who are the both? Jew and Gentile!) and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us ... to make in himself of (the) twain one new man ... that he might reconcile (the) both unto God ... having slain the enmity ..."

Since the call of Abraham in Genesis 11 & 12, this is the first time in the Bible that the Jew and the Gentile have been equal. Prior to Paul writing Ephesians, Gentiles were to be blessed through Israel. I said earlier that Eph. 3 continues Paul's line of thought from chs. 1 & 2, and I hope you read them through. But now, look at verse 9.

'And to make all men see what is the fellowship (NIV administration) of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ.'

If this dispensation of the mystery has been hid in God from the beginning of the world, it means that you won't find anything about it in the Scriptures from Genesis up to the time when Paul was commissioned to reveal it after Acts 28:28.

In the new dispensation, there is no longer any need to preach the Gospel to Jews first. The privileges of the Jew on the one hand, and the disadvantages of the Gentile on the other, have now been abolished. God

deals now with all people simply on the basis that they are fallen children of Adam.

2. The evidential gifts of the Spirit, so prominent in the Acts period, have disappeared.

For example, during Acts Paul had raised Eutychus from the dead. (Acts 20:9 & 10). But in Phil. 2:25-27 (after Acts ended), we read that Epaphroditus nearly died, but Paul couldn't heal him. He had to wait to see if God would spare him. In the early part of Acts 28, Paul healed many diseases on Melita, but he later had to leave Trophimus behind sick. (2 Tim.4:20).

I know that some believers today believe that healings and miracles still take place, but I have talked to many of them and they all agree that they have never seen anything like the miracles in Acts. There are, however, gifts in the Dispensation of the Grace of God. We have them listed in Eph. 4:11 & 12.

'And he gave some, apostles; and some prophets ...' The offices of apostles and prophets are now finished, because the Scriptures have been fully given.

'Whereof I am made a minister ... to fulfil (i.e. to complete) the word of God.' (Col. 1:25).

But look again at Eph. 4:11 & 12, for there are more gifts: '... and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ'. Sounds like the same conditions that are operating today, doesn't it?

3. The Church of this new Dispensation has a new hope and a new name.

Eph. 1:20-23: '...And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over **the church, which is his body**, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.'

Christ is also given a new title. He is now Head of the Body. And not only that! The believers were given a new hope. Eph. 2:5 & 6, '...God ... hath raised us up together with Christ ... and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus.'

Where are these heavenly places? 'Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come.' (Eph. 1:210).

In the Dispensation of Law, Israel were looking for the Kingdom on earth. In the Acts Dispensation, the believers were looking for the New Jerusalem, and were told it was a 'better country'. If the place where Christ is seated is 'far above all', then it must be above even the New Jerusalem.

4. In this Dispensation of the Grace of God, there are no miracles of judgment.

We saw earlier that both Peter and Paul exercised judgments on those who sinned. Reader, have you ever seen anyone struck blind or dumb, or slain on the spot as a direct punishment from God (like Ananias and Sapphira)? We should be very grateful that we are not living in the Acts Dispensation!

5. There is only ONE baptism, not several.

We have an astonishing statement in Ephesians 4:5, 'There is ... one baptism ...' We could spend much time discussing the meaning of baptism, but do I need to explain the meaning of 'one' to any reader? One cannot mean two or three.

Try to imagine the problem that statement caused the believers in Ephesus. They had all been baptized in water and had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit with some evidential gift. They would also claim to have been baptized into the death and resurrection of Christ, the spiritual baptism. But, suddenly, Paul is saying that now there is only one baptism. Which one? Surely the spiritual one which, after all, is the real one.

Here is a summary of the five points in the new Dispensation.

1. The Jew has no advantages – absolute equality between Jew and Gentile.
2. No miraculous gifts. Gifts now are evangelists, pastors and teachers.
3. The Hope is now the Heavenly Places – co-seated in Christ, far above all.
4. Grace rules – no public judgments.
5. One Baptism – spiritual.

We must ask the same question of this Dispensation as of the previous ones. Is it being successful or not? To help us answer, we could also ask this. Is God being honoured by the witness of the Church today? Is the world being saved or getting worse? I think we have to say, that like all the others, this Dispensation is also a failure. But there is one more Dispensation that must be mentioned.

The Kingdom of Heaven (or of God)

When Christ returns to this earth and takes up His purposes with Israel again, He will set up a Kingdom that will last for 1,000 years. Satan will be bound and will be unable to deceive the nations during that time. The Lord will rule with a rod of iron, and sin will be dealt with every day.

Psalm 101 is about that Kingdom, and verse 8 says, 'I will early destroy all the wicked of the land; that I may cut off all wicked doers from the city of the Lord.'

The NIV has, 'Every morning I will put to silence all the wicked in the land; I will cut off every evildoer from the city of the Lord.' The judgments on Ananias, Sapphira and Herod were foretastes of the judgments that will take place every day in the Kingdom on earth. At the end of the thousand years, Satan will be loosed

and most of the world will follow him once again. Obviously, it ends in failure.

I know that the Kingdom is often referred to as the Millenium, but I prefer to call it the Dispensation of Direct Rule.

Why All These Dispensations?

We must now ask why God instituted these different dispensations if they were all to fail? It may help to think about it like this. The Bible is clear that all humanity will be resurrected to stand before God and be judged. The verdict on the believers will be 'in Christ', and they will pass into life. The unbeliever, however, will be found guilty and the sentence will be death.

But let us suppose that, at the Judgement, an unbeliever brings a defence something like this.

"God, I didn't ask to be born a sinner. I got that from Adam, and I don't think I deserve to pay for someone else's sin. If you had made me without the fallen nature, my inherent innocence and goodness would have triumphed and I would have obeyed you."

What might God's answer be?

"In the Dispensation of Innocence, I created Adam and Eve just like that. They failed and so would have you."

The next defence might go like this. "God, I failed because you asked things of me that were too hard. So many laws to keep and unbelievable things to believe in! If you had just let my conscience guide me, I'm sure I would have obeyed you."

What might God's answer be?

"In the Dispensation of Conscience from Adam to Noah, I let conscience rule mankind, but they failed so badly I had to wipe them all out except for one family. You would have failed too."

The next defendant steps up.

"God, it is alright to judge me for failing, but if you had offered worthwhile material rewards for being good and took them away if I was bad, then I certainly would have obeyed you."

How might God answer this?

"In the Dispensation of Good Works from Noah to the giving of the Law, I ruled exactly like that, but everyone failed and so would have you."

Yet another defence.

"God, I know I am basically good, and I've tried hard to obey you, but somehow I keep making wrong choices. So if you wrote down your laws and punished me when I broke them, then I would have done what was right."

And God could well answer like this.

"In the Dispensation of Law, from Moses to My Son's death, I gave many laws in writing, but man failed to obey them, and so would have you."

Another possible defence.

"God, my conscience is not so reliable, and though I've tried to keep your laws, they are so hard. If you made the way easier, and gave us something simple to believe with something tangible to show we were your people, then I would have believed and been obedient to you."

How might God answer this one?

"In the Dispensation of the Holy Spirit, all I asked was that people believe on my Son, and when they did, I gave them special gifts of the Holy Spirit. But people did not believe, and neither would have you."

Then there was this defence.

"God, if all I had to do was believe in your Son, not having to fear your immediate judgment if I came short, and just let the new nature and your completed Word guide me, I would have believed and followed you then."

God's answer?

"In the Dispensation of Grace, from the setting aside of Israel to the Kingdom being set up on earth, I did exactly that, but once again man failed, and so would have you."

Now the last defence.

"God, if you were to come and rule personally with a rod of iron, then if nothing else, my fear of death and reprisal would ensure that I obeyed you."

And God could answer that like this.

"In the Dispensation of Direct Rule, when My Son ruled directly for 1,000 years in just the way you suggested – I even took Satan out of the way for that whole time – yet once again man failed, and so would have you."

Throughout the ages, God has given mankind every conceivable opportunity to obey Him, and mankind has failed every time. This not only leaves the unrepentant sinner without any excuse, it also shows clearly, that God's judgement on sin was justified and that He is just in punishing sin.

The Believer Today

So how does this affect us now? Once we recognise that God has dealt - and indeed, still is dealing - with mankind under various dispensations, then we will see why there are differences in the various parts of the Bible. But most importantly, if we think it through properly, we will understand that we

must focus on the way God has decided to deal with us.

In 2 Tim. 2:15, Paul gives a very important instruction, which, unfortunately, seems to have been missed by many believers.

‘Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.’

The New King James Version translates the first part of the verse like this, ‘Be diligent to present yourself approved unto God ...’ This is more understandable. Paul is exhorting us to put our best effort into gaining God’s approval. The phrase ‘rightly dividing’ in the AV may be puzzling, and the NIV’s ‘correctly handling’ is not really what Paul said. The phrase ‘correctly apportioning’ is accurate. It means that we must identify those parts of the Bible that tell us how God wants us to walk before Him, and not try to put into practice things that belong to other dispensations.

Paul makes another important statement about the Scriptures in 2 Tim. 3:16 & 17.

‘All Scripture is given by inspiration, and is profitable for doctrine (teaching), for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: (so) that the man of God may be perfect (i.e. mature) throughly furnished unto every good work.’

Accepting that all Scripture is inspired of God and is profitable is one thing, but if we are to walk faithfully, it must also be recognized that not all Scripture is about us in particular. We will only introduce confusion and fail to please our Master if we do not focus on the Scriptures written especially to us. These are the epistles of Paul written after the end of Acts that were listed earlier.

Two simple ways of applying the principle of right division to the Bible are firstly, to decide if the passage you are reading is dealing with doctrine or practice. Basic doctrines such as redemption by blood, justification, etc. apply to us all in every dispensation.

Secondly, if the passage is speaking about practice, i.e. how we are to walk as believers, then it may not apply to ourselves. This is where we must ‘rightly divide’ the Scriptures, or as Paul says in Phil. 1:10, we must ‘test the things that are different and approve the more excellent thing (margin).’

What makes the principle of rightly dividing the Word of Truth so important? Simply this. It is the rule that God will use in deciding whether we stand before Him as unashamed workers or not. ❖



Editorial

The article that takes up the bulk of this issue, “The What And Why Of Biblical Dispensations”, deals with a subject that is vital to a correct understanding of the Bible. I know in my own experience, that once I started to see the different dispensations that God had instituted throughout the ages, the Bible made a lot more sense, and things that were once puzzling or downright difficult, fell into place.

As the introductory paragraph to the article states, John Hutton gave this study at the BBFA conference last September, and believing that it was such an important study, I prevailed on him to transform it from a talk into a written article. It turned out to be too long not only for one issue, but also two, and because the subject matter needed to be kept in context and without breaks, I arranged with John to publish a summarized version for our readers.

The BBFA committee is planning to publish the full study as a booklet, and I hope that this short version will make readers keen to read the fuller study when it becomes available. I urge you all to give this study your earnest consideration, as any effort and time put into it will be well repaid.

It may well be that you may have questions or comments to make about the article. If so, we would love to hear from you, and rest assured that we will respond as adequately as we can.

I would also draw your attention to the booklet by W. M. Henry, “The Speeches In Acts”, that we are promoting in this issue. I read this again recently after some little while, and was impressed with the points the author makes. A comparison of the Acts speeches by the likes of Stephen, Peter and Paul shows very clearly what the Lord was doing during those crucial years, and how the witness to Israel developed, coming to its climax in the last chapter of the book. Details of how to order it and the cost are given on page 11.

It is very heart-warming to have received best wishes and assurances of prayer for my well-being from various readers. I am happy to be able to report that, under the hand of the Lord and the loving care of my wife, Eveline, I am recovering strongly. I have more energy and feel better than I did for many months before my heart attack. To say that I am deeply grateful is something of an understatement, and words simply cannot express the depths of my feelings. Believe me, it is great to feel so well and alive.

Yours in His love and grace,

Athol Walter.

Wonderful Words Of Life (5)

By Athol Walter

The word I want to consider in this study is not a word at all, but a phrase – the forgiveness of sins.

I hope that no reader who has studied the earlier articles in this series will think that, at last, we have arrived at the important subject. It is certainly true that for us, especially when we first came to the Lord Jesus, our sins loomed largest in our thoughts. What a relief, what peace came, when we had the witness within that indeed our sins had been forgiven by God! I know that at that stage in my spiritual pilgrimage, I knew so little of God's plan of salvation. My understanding of what God had done for me in Christ Jesus went no further than believing that because God had sent His Son, who had died on the Cross for the world, my sins had been washed away by His shed blood. That knowledge is undoubtedly life-changing, but, as I tried to show in the first article of this series on the Atonement, from God's point of view, the forgiveness of our sins was not the first thing procured by the Lord's death. It could not be, because before God could make the slightest move towards any sinner, apart from moving to judge and condemn that sinner, full satisfaction for God's Holiness had to be provided.

So Atonement came first in what Christ did, and it should have first place in our understanding of what Christ has done. I think also that Reconciliation is the first result coming from the Atonement, for as 2 Corinthians 5 tells us, God was first reconciled to the world, and consequently is able to call the world to reconciliation with Him. To this extent then, there is some priority of subjects, but when we get to subjects like redemption and forgiveness, the order in which we consider them is not so important.

The other point to be made, and it is one I've made before, is that it is difficult to keep the different subjects separate. As one thinks about redemption, for instance, it is hard not to think also about the forgiveness of sins, but I know it has helped me to understand better God's wonderful work of Salvation by thinking of these different aspects of that work separately. With these thoughts in mind then, let's consider the forgiveness of sins by God.

There are several Hebrew words used in the Old Testament that are translated 'forgiveness'.

One, 'kaphar', gives us the word 'atonement', and the first time it is used in the Bible is in the account of the building of Noah's Ark, where it is translated 'pitch'. There are certainly some interesting thoughts behind that, but I want to concentrate on another word which speaks volumes to us. That is the word 'nasa' which means basically 'to bear'. There are three meanings in this word viz., 1. to lift up; 2. to carry; and 3. to take away.

This word, of course, is used in a non-doctrinal sense in Scripture. Examples are the carrying of the ark during the wilderness wanderings, and also the bearing of armour. Even so, there is still the thoughts in those usages of lifting up, carrying and taking away.

What peace came when we had the witness within that our sins had been forgiven by God!

More importantly, however, right from the earliest days, just after the expulsion from Eden, the word was used with the two ideas of bearing sin

and forgiving sin.

Turn to Genesis 4:13: "And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear." Now look at the marginal reference if your Bible has them. The Companion Bible margin has this. "Mine iniquity is greater than may be forgiven." It can refer either to iniquity or the punishment for the iniquity.

So, long before the Law, with all its many commands and prohibitions, and the measures needed for forgiveness and acceptance, the connection between the bearing of sins and the forgiveness of sins was understood.

Moving forward to the history of Joseph, we have in Gen. 50:17 his brothers' request for forgiveness, and they used our word 'nasa'. When they asked Joseph to forgive their trespass and sin, they literally asked him to bear it. Now they certainly did not mean something like "Put up with it", or "Get over it" when they asked Joseph to bear their sin. They were asking him to lift it off them, to take it away and not hold it against them. It is worthy of note that the verse finishes by saying that Joseph was weeping as his brothers asked for his forgiveness. He had been longing with all his heart to hear them say those words.

Now, if you are applying these thoughts to the Lord's forgiveness of us, even to the point of Him weeping as we come in contrition and ask for forgiveness, you are certainly right, for Joseph is a wonderful picture of the Lord Jesus. But that is the wider application of the account of Joseph and his brothers. I would remind you that there is a primary interpretation of the passage that we must understand before we go to the wider application. Stephen paints the picture for us in his address to the Sanhedrin in

Acts 7. Stephen deals with the events leading up to Joseph in vv. 6 to 19, and the climax for us comes in v. 13. "And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers ..." The result of this revelation was the 'salvation' of Jacob and his family from the famine which had descended upon the 'whole world'.

We must take some care here. It would be natural to apply the picture of Joseph forgiving his brothers to Christ's forgiveness of ourselves, but before we do that, we must realise that it is a prophetic picture of the Lord being recognized by his brothers, i.e. the nation of Israel, when He comes to them 'the second time'. Then 'they will look on Him whom they pierced and mourn ...' and He will forgive them. When we have that clear in our understanding, then we can make the wider application of parts of the account to ourselves. I would hope that, by doing it like that, we will not appropriate any of Israel's promised blessings to ourselves.

The next occurrence of 'nasa' that I want you to notice is in Leviticus 22:9. "They shall therefore keep my ordinance, lest they bear sin for it, and die thereof, if they profane it." Obviously, to bear your sin meant that you could die for it.

Now keep what we have learnt in mind as we read the following verses.

Isa. 53:12. "... and He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bare the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors."

John 1:29. "The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him, and said, Behold the Lamb of God which **takes away** the sin of the world." John used a form of the verb 'airo', which can mean: lift up, take up or away, carry off, remove. These are the same meanings as in the Hebrew word 'nasa'. And while the Greek word may not have the thought of the death of the one who does the taking away, we know full well that the way in which the Lamb of God took away the sins of the world was by dying.

Another NT verse that speaks of the forgiveness of sins is Ephesians 1:7. "In Him (i.e. Jesus Christ) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." Colossians 1:14 is a parallel verse. Notice the close connection between redemption through the blood of Christ and the forgiveness of sins. But Paul uses a different word for forgiveness than John. It is 'aphesis', which means to loose or release. It is translated by four different words in our English Bibles: deliverance, forgiveness, liberty and remission. Luke 4:18 uses two of these words. "... He has sent Me ... to heal the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed ..." Your Greek Interlinear Testament will show you that 'deliverance' and 'liberty' are both aphaesis. This word belongs to the slave market and the prison, and speaks volumes about the deliverance and liberty that is ours in Christ Jesus.

In Acts 2:38, we have 'aphesis' translated as 'remission'. "Then Peter said to them, Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins;" The word 'remit', like 'redeem', is a financial term that has legal overtones. My Shorter Oxford Dictionary gives such meanings as pardon sins; refrain from inflicting or exacting punishment; to abate or slacken one's anger; send a matter back to a lower court, and almost at the bottom of the list, we have to transfer or send money.

Another occurrence of 'aphesis', but as a verb this time, is in a very well known passage found in Matthew 6:12. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." When you are forgiven a debt, you are released or loosed from it, and to slip back in the OT usage, the debt is borne for you, lifted up from you, carried by someone for you and taken away.

That is a wonderful picture of what the Lord Jesus has done for us in 'bearing our sin'. He lifted it up from us, He carried it to the cross, He took it away from us and, what is not in the forgiving of debts illustration, is that, to bear our sin, He had to die for it.

One last reference as we conclude. Eph. 4:32. "And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you." The words translated 'forgiving' and 'forgave' are not anything we have looked at so far. They are forms of 'charizomai', a word which means to give as an act of grace. Also, the word translated as 'kind' is 'chrestos', which is not linked with "Christ" it might appear to be, but 'charizomai'.

We could translate the verse this way:-

"And be gracious to each other, full of compassion, gracing each other, even as God for Christ's sake, has graced you."

It is not easy to do, but to the extent that we can put this verse consistently into practice in our lives, we will be well on the way to walking worthily of our high calling in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 4:1) ❖

Think on this!

"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done'."

From "The Great Divorce", p. 72, by C. S. Lewis.

The Speeches in Acts

by W. M. Henry

Review by Athol Walter.

It is quite some time since I first read this booklet, and after re-reading it recently, I want to say that it is certainly worth reading and considering.

The author begins with these words: "The speeches (in Acts) are the meat and bones of the historical narrative and serve to explain the message which was being proclaimed immediately after the Lord's resurrection and ascension.

To help us decide what that message was, I propose to isolate the speeches of each apostle, identify common themes in his words and build up a picture of his teaching. The addresses of the different speakers can then be compared, and common and contrasting features picked out. It should thereby be possible to arrive at the burden of the book of the Acts as a whole and see which aspects developed through time and which aspects remained unchanged."

Mr. Henry makes several important observations in the introduction, touching on such subjects as the extent to which Luke reports the actual words of the speakers, and the changing roles of Peter, James and Paul.

The speakers considered are Peter, who made speeches to both Jews and Gentiles; Stephen; Paul, who also spoke to both Jews and Gentiles; and James. It is interesting, and perhaps surprising to some, to see the differences in Paul's speeches to God-fearing Gentiles and pagan Gentiles.

In the last chapter, the author deals with the response of Israel to this witness of the Holy Spirit through the apostles and others in the years of the Acts period.

The speeches of Peter are:

1. To the 120 prior to the choice of Matthias (Acts 1).
2. At Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2).
3. After the healing of the lame man (Acts 3).
4. To the Sanhedrin (Acts 4).
5. To the Sanhedrin with the other apostles (Acts 5).

The next section covers Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin in Acts 7, and brings out the salient points showing that the generation of Israel he was addressing followed closely in the steps of their

forbears in rejecting God's messengers to the nation.

Mr. Henry then deals with Peter's speeches in relation to Gentiles, a section that demands our special attention.

Then comes Paul and the speeches he makes to Jews who had not accepted Jesus as their Messiah, to believers both Jew and Gentile, to Gentiles who were not God-fearers, and to rulers and governors.

The only section not mentioned so far is that dealing with the two speeches of James, recorded in Acts 15 and 21. This James, of course, is not the brother of John but the brother of the Lord Jesus.

In his summary, Mr. Henry states how the witness was first to the Jews alone, forgiveness for them being available only through the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord had come to them to set up the prophesied and promised Kingdom, but as with Joseph and Moses, they had not recognised Him and killed Him. But now, in the Acts period, God was giving them a second opportunity to repent, receive Him and be saved.

The conversion of Cornelius showed that God intended Gentiles to be part of the Seed of Abraham, but throughout Acts it is clear that Israel still held the prime position.

The last section of the book deals with Israel's response. Did the nation repent and receive their Lord and King? We know only too well what their answer was, an answer that brought about directly the situation in which we all find ourselves today.

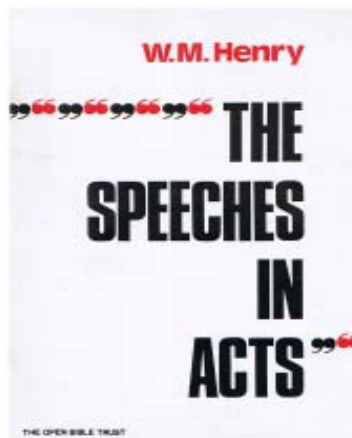
I urge all our readers, if they do not yet have a copy of this booklet, to order one from our Book Agent today.

'The Speeches In Acts', by W. M. Henry, published by The Open Bible Trust. Price \$5 (Au.) incl. postage. Write to The Book Agent, BBFA, PO Box 3141, Glendale, NSW. 2285. ❖

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I Want Justice In Spite Of What I Say!

In their book "I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist", one point the authors Geisler and Turek discuss is whether there is a Moral Law that is instinctively known by all people.

It is common these days for many to say that there is no such thing as absolute morals. The authors contend that those who maintain this position, nevertheless live as if there are absolute morals. To see this, one only has to observe their reactions to unfair treatment. On pp. 173/4, they tell of a US university professor who set his ethics class an essay. They could write on any topic they wished, the only requirements being that they give reasons and documentations.

One student, an atheist, wrote eloquently on the topic of moral relativism, i.e. there are no moral absolutes. I quote directly now:

"The student argued, 'All morals are relative; there is no absolute standard of justice or rightness; it's all a matter of opinion; you like chocolate, I like vanilla,' and so on. His paper provided both his reasons and his documentation. It was the right length, on time, and stylishly presented in a handsome blue folder.

After the professor read the entire paper, he wrote on the front cover, 'F. I don't like blue folders!' ... The student ... stormed into the Professor's office, 'F! I don't like blue folders! That's not fair! That's not right! That's not just! You didn't grade the paper on its merits.'

The Professor calmly retorted, '... Wasn't your paper the one that said there is no such thing as fairness, rightness and justice? ... that it is all a matter of opinion. You like chocolate, I like vanilla?' The student replied, 'Yes, that's my view.' 'Fine then', said the professor. 'I don't like blue. You get an F.' Suddenly the lightbulb went on in the student's head. He realised that he really did believe in moral absolutes. At least he believed in justice. After all, he was charging his professor with injustice for failing him, simply because of the colour of his folder. That simple fact defeated his entire case for relativism. ... So the Moral Law is not always apparent from our actions ... But it is brightly revealed in our reactions - what we do when we are treated unfairly."

"I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist", pp. 173/5. Publ. by Crossway Books.

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Regular Bible study meetings are held in Brisbane, Sydney, Newcastle and Maitland. Most meetings include some singing, prayer, and then a Bible study message, approx. 45-60 mins. in length, followed by refreshments. Questions and comments about the study are encouraged. These meetings are free of charge and everyone is welcome.

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BYO lunch 12:30pm.
Study 1:30pm. Various Venues.
Group Co-ordinators: Athol & Eveline Walter, (02) 4996 4455

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34 Aroona St., Edgeworth.
Group Co-ordinators: David & Janelle Tavender, (02) 4950 6708

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Group Co-ordinator: Susan Hall, (02) 4933 9380

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