

THE APOSTASY OF THE SUCCESSIVE DISPENSATIONS

by John Nelson Darby

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Communion with God — communion with God in a new nature, being made, as the apostle teaches us, partakers of a divine nature, is both that in which eternal blessedness must have its spring, and the source of all true knowledge. Here God, through grace, can communicate with us in the intelligence of the same delights, and the communication of the same interests. The ultimate provision made for this is the incarnation; and the Lord instructs in *grace* (renewed in knowledge after the image of Him who created us) in all those elements of the knowledge of good and evil, by which the value and excellence and the divine provision of the Lord Jesus are apprehended and adequately esteemed, at least in principle and desire. We learn it humbly by the necessity of evil in us: but we learn it holily, because we know the extent of the evil only by the infiniteness of the good: so only indeed can it be known; so has God blessedly provided for the knowledge of it for good. Thus He knows it. Thus those that are made partakers of the divine nature know it in their measure. This, however, we have to learn in its details, in the various dispensations which led to or have followed the revelation of the incarnate Son in whom all the fulness was pleased to dwell — the obedient man, God manifested, the suffering Saviour, the exalted Righteous One; many, many principles brought out in the exhibition of weakness and apparent exhibitions of divine power, having no settled rule, but all finding their solution in the sufferings and revelation of God in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The detail of the history connected with these **dispensations** brings out many most interesting displays, both of the principles and patience of God's dealings with the evil and failure of man; and of the workings by which He formed faith on His own thus developed perfections.

But the dispensations themselves all declare some leading principle or interference of God, some condition in which He has placed man, principles which in themselves are everlastingly sanctioned of God, but in the course of those dispensations placed responsibly in the hands of man for the display and discovery of what he was, and the bringing in their infallible establishment in Him to whom the glory of them all rightly belonged.

It is not my intention to enter into any great detail, but to shew simply how, **in every instance, there was total and immediate failure as regarded man**, however the patience of God might tolerate and carry on by grace the dispensation in which man has thus failed in the outset; and further, that there is no instance of the restoration of a dispensation afforded us, though there might be partial revivals of it through faith.

The paradisaical state cannot properly perhaps be called a dispensation in this sense of the word; but as regards the universal failure of man, it is a most important instance. It is too plain, too sadly known, to require much proof in detail, important as shewing that no condition of man set him free from the prevailing art of the great adversary. When he was innocent and untainted, surrounded by every mercy, and at the head of all blessing, he fell immediately. The man not deceived but led astray, the woman deceived and in the transgression, and, though this has doubtless a higher reference, yet, describes the fact and the double character of error. As it was to be shewn here in principle, that man in nature could not stand, the first thing we read is of his fall, the first act consequent upon the responsibility in which he was placed, after his being set at the head of creation, and his wife given to him; in a word, after responsibilities were established, and his glory and blessing full. Corruption, disorder, violence, were the consequences of this, until the Lord destroyed the first world created (during the time of His patience an elect seed having been preserved in testimony and patience).

Here dispensations, properly speaking, begin. On the first, **Noah**, I shall be very brief: restraint and godliness should have characterised it — the government which would have repressed corruption and violence. But the first thing here found is the saved patriarch drunk, and his son shamefully mocking him, for which the curse justly descends upon him. This issued in idolatry; Joshua 24.

The first account after his call we have of faithful **Abraham**, which as a minuter circumstance I also pass briefly over, is Genesis 12: 13, "Say, I pray thee: thou art my sister, that it may be well with me for thy sake, and my soul shall live because of *thee*"; and plagues because of him in whom the families of the earth were to be blessed. As regards man, under the calling of grace, we find shameful failure.

The history of the children of Israel is one scene of "a stiffnecked and rebellious people." But to take up the point of the dispensation — obedience under the law by which life was to be: this obedience they undertook; and Moses returned to receive the various orderings of divine appointment as under it, and the two tables of testimony. But this dispensation, which met the failure of the world, which had gods many and lords many, and in form was to bring righteousness in the flesh, came to nothing in man's hand, before the order of it was brought down from the mount, or they had received in detail the record of what they had undertaken. They made, while Moses was in the mount, a golden calf, and said, "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of Egypt." The spring and foundation-stone of all the commandments and ordinances was gone. They had turned their glory into the similitude of a calf which eateth hay.

The ordinance or dispensation of priesthood failed in like manner. Before Aaron and his sons had gone out from the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, because the anointing oil of

the Lord was upon them, Nadab and Abihu had already offered strange fire and been consumed before the Lord. The sons had not eaten the sin offering in the holy place, and the blood of it was not brought in within the holy place, as was commanded. The Lord spared them, but the service had failed in its very outset. And the Lord also spake unto Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they offered before the Lord and died; and the Lord said unto Moses, speak unto Aaron, thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil. The consequence was, that the garments of glory and beauty were never worn by the high priest save at his consecration. For he was to wear them only on going into the holy place within the veil, and his going in being now only on the day of atonement, he was desired withal on that day to come in other though holy garments. **Thus failed the law—thus failed the priesthood, as all else,** however God might carry it on in patience and mercy for a time, "till there was no remedy."¹

The kingly dispensation failed in the same way as did the nation under the previous ordering which made way for the king (see Judges 2), the Lord having failed in nothing; Joshua 23: 14. David and Solomon having exhibited the royalty in victory and peace, Rehoboam and Jeroboam are but the witnesses of its utter failure, patience and mercy still going on, till the provocations of Manasseh set aside all hope of recovery or way of mercy in that dispensation. The same is true of universal rule transferred to the Gentiles: Nebuchadnezzar, the golden head, sets up the golden image, persecutes the faithful, and is turned into the image of a beast for his pride.

The rejection of our blessed Lord proved that no present mercy and grace, no present interference of God in goodness here, would meet the wilful and persevering enmity of the human heart, but only shewed it in its true light. But this, never being set up as a dispensation, but only the manifestation of His Person (to faith), I pass by. The last we have to notice, in a humbled sense of sin in us, is the present, where we are apt to take our ease in the world, as necessarily secure, but which, and the sin of which, the Lord sees and recognises, takes as much notice of, though not openly, as of others — **the dispensation of the Spirit.**

Much has been said, with strong objection to it, as to the apostasy or failure of this dispensation.

The results are but too plain. If we believe that the exhibitions of the Spirit's power and presence, in the second and fourth chapters of Acts, were gladsome and well-pleasing to the Lord, if the blessed Spirit was right in these effects — and who blasphemingly and in the darkness of his own soul dare to say He was not? — then is the present picture of Christendom just as opposite as one thing well can be from another. They have not kept their first estate. The patience and mercy, and sure grace of God has still kept up a witness to Himself through the mediation of Christ, it is true. So it was in every dispensation; but this did not alter or prevent the result of the apostasy. And **the facts shew us that it was ever at the outset the failure or apostasy took place;** and that it was patience and grace, which bore with and carried it on, but never undid the result of the first failure.

So to our shame has it been in Christianity. The state of the seven churches, I think, would shew this sufficiently to have been the case, and the way in which John was left at the close, to awaken the threats of judgment against a declining church. Where was Paul to hold all in vigour and beauty for the coming of the Lord, presenting every man perfect in Christ Jesus? He had to confess at the close of his career, "I have none likeminded who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's."

Such was the result of apostolic labour; and the history of the book of Revelation, the testimonies of Peter and Jude, as well as the warnings of John and Paul, also shew that this would be the result of Christianity, according to the solemn sentence of the apostle,

"Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; on thee goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off."

But we may trace the immediateness of this failure more actually and definitely in circumstances to which the attention of the church seems little directed. When the Lord was parting from the disciples, He gives them the commandment, "Go ye and disciple all nations." Where is the fulfilment of this by the apostles whom He had chosen? This was their special commission from Him, as risen and having all power in heaven and earth. The principle and value of the dispensation could not be altered. But where is the fulfilment by the twelve apostles? Scripture affords it not. There is no account of the twelve in Scripture going into all the world and preaching the gospel to every creature: nothing which Scripture recognises as the accomplishment of this command. This in itself would be sufficient to show that the command on which the dispensation hung was, in the revealed testimony of God, unfulfilled by those to whom it was committed.

But I further find (contrary to the word, "when they persecute you in one city, flee ye to the next") that on the persecution which arose about the matter of Stephen, they were all scattered abroad *except the apostles*. But the testimony is not merely negative, for I find, in extraordinary grace, a new arrangement entirely made—an apostle *of the Gentiles* raised up, entirely distinct: "one born out of due time"; "not of man, nor by man"; who was neither apostle with them, nor from them, but asserts, as he proved, his own independent qualifications. And the Acts of the Apostles, as to ministry, are the acts of Peter, as one in whom God was mighty to the circumcision, and it was agreed that he should go to the circumcision, and Paul and Barnabas to the Gentiles; and so the acts of Paul, as one in whom the same God was mighty towards the uncircumcision. That is, we find an express special office of apostle to the Gentiles, and whatever work was done of the commission, "Go ye into all nations" (Gentiles) was done, as presented to us in Scripture, actually by somebody else specially and extraordinarily raised up for the purpose. Thus, whatever grace and power from Him that was glorified might effect, this dispensation as well as any other failed and broke off in the very outset; and in point of fact the gospel has never been preached in all the world, nor all nations disciplined to this day, but the church which was gathered has departed from the faith of the gospel, and gone away backward, so as to be as bad or worse than the heathen.

But the point which is proved in this is not merely that it is in a bad state now, but that like all others it broke down in the commencement — no sooner fully established than it proved a failure. This does not touch upon the faithfulness of God, but exalts it, as in the case of the Jews, where their lie abounded to the glory of God. The remnant have been preserved all through, and according to the measure of grace and faith have prospered, or have been raised up from depression according to the counsels of God; but the dispensation was gone. We belong to a better glory. Nor, this being brought in as the object of desire, can the believer seek other or old things and earthly arrangements. And as he cannot desire, so **neither does Scripture present the restoration of a dispensation**; it never justifies its actual condition; and though grace and faith may, as I have said, effect revivals during the long - suffering of God, the dispensation, as such, is actually gone, that the glory of the principle contained in it may shine forth in the hands of Messiah. The attempt to set this dispensation on another footing, as to its continuance, than those dispensations which have failed already, not only shews ignorance of the principles of God's dealings, for the calling of God was always by grace true (and if it were it never could make way for that which is to come under Messiah), but it is actually negated by the assertion, that it stands on the same ground as to this with the Jewish — "if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise, thou *also* shalt be cut off." (Romans 11).

When He is come who can bind Satan himself, so that his power in the world shall be set aside, and not merely the testimony of the Lord's power maintained there, then shall there be continuance, until, for the accomplishment of the purposes of God, and the final separation of evil and good, he be let loose again for a little season. And the close of all dispensation, and the end of all question and title of authority shall come, and, all being finished, God shall be all in all without question and without failure. How the glory of God and our consequent blessing in these things is increased and enhanced might be very plainly shewn, as it is indeed just declared by the apostle; but if the fact be recognised and its truth established as before the Lord, it may suffice now.

Reference to the second chapter of Galatians will confirm and establish the point historically as to the present dispensation, where not only is the fact stated of Paul having the ministry of the Gentiles, as Peter of the circumcision; but it was actually agreed on their conference, consequent upon the grace given, that Paul and Barnabas should go to the uncircumcision; and James, and Cephas, and John should go to the circumcision. And so far was the apostle's mind under Judaising influence, that it required a positive fresh revelation to induce him to go into company with a Gentile at all, and even after this he would not eat when certain came from James. In fact the Gentile dispensation, as a distinct thing, took its rise on the death of Stephen, the witness that the Jews resisted the Holy Ghost: as their fathers did, so did they.

^[1] Prophecy was in fact evidence of the failure of the dispensation as well as of God's patience

under it. Blessed to a remnant, it recalled to Moses and prophesied of Messiah. (See the last verses of Malachi.)

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