

The Three Dispensations

by Daniel Steele

The sermon explores the three dispensations of spiritual life: the dispensation of the Father, the dispensation of the Son, and the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, and how people experience God in each dispensation.

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches about the three great eras of spiritual life as outlined by John Fletcher, emphasizing the importance of understanding and experiencing the dispensations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those in the dispensation of the Father are characterized by fear of God, righteousness, and a lack of assurance in God's love. Believers in the dispensation of the Son experience a dissipation of doubts and a clearer understanding of Gospel truths, yet still lack full assurance and long for deeper spiritual experiences. Finally, those in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit are filled with the Spirit, walk in constant light, are cleansed from sin, and have joy unspeakable, experiencing the fullness of Christ's love and assurance of sonship.

Transcript

In John Fletcher's portrait of St. Paul as a model evangelical preacher, he very emphatically insists upon a thorough knowledge of the three great eras of spiritual life. These he denominates the dispensation of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. He who is unacquainted with the peculiarities of experience under these different dispensations cannot successfully apply Gospel truth, and give full proof of his ministry. For these dispensations, though in the order of development they were successive, are now coexistent.

Of those accepted of God, now dwelling on the earth, some are in the dispensation of the Father, some in that of the Son, and others in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. The first are characterized by the fear of God, servile fear, with little love. This fear influences conduct and shapes character. They fear God and work righteousness. They are kept from sinning, and are incited to purity and well-doing. They have no joy of the Holy Ghost, but only that which flows in the channels of nature, the approval of conscience for their right actions.

Not having God's love shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, they are in doubt of their acceptance with God, and are often distressed when the written or unwritten law thunders its threatenings in their ears, "though visited at times with a few scattered rays of hope." They exist in all lands, but chiefly in non-evangelical countries, papal, pagan, and Mohammedan. Now and then an honest Deist, a devout

Unitarian, with the head warped by early implanted error, but a sincere heart, may be found amid the full blaze of Gospel truth, still serving God in the same dispensation with uncircumcised Abram in Mesopotamia.

In this view we find ground for charity toward the less enlightened subjects of God's kingdom, and strong motives for the abatement of bigotry. We learn to deal tenderly with those Cornelian souls whose prayers and alms go up for a memorial before God. We approach them, not with denunciations, but with invitations, while we magnify Christ, and from our own experience assure them of the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe. By indiscriminately lumping them together with avowed Atheists and willful sinners, the incautious preacher gives them needless offence, and hedges up the path of advanced truth into their minds.

In Christian lands these worshippers of the Father must be distinguished from those who reject the Son because of the strictness of his requirements, the inflexible terms of discipleship, and the spiritual interpretation of the moral law planting a thornhedge across the path of even the sinful thought, and kindling a fire in the house of their idols. Such are wickedly rejecting Jesus Christ, and are to be addressed as sinners, whether they assume the name of Evangelicals, Universalists, Socinians, or Free Religionists.

"These go on without any symptom of fear toward the gulf of perdition; whether it be by the high road of vice, with the notoriously abandoned, or through the bypath of hypocrisy, with pharisaical professors."

Under the dispensation of the Son the doubts of believers are dissipated, like those of the two disciples who journeyed to Emmaus, while they discover more clearly, and experience more powerfully, the truths of the Gospel." Still they know Christ after the flesh. They are not fully impressed with his divinity. The robe of humanity has not been made transparent for the dazzling radiance of the Godhead to shine through. Jesus is not yet glorified to their hearts, because the Spirit, the Glorifier, has not taken up his abode in them. Hence they are but children; their strength is small; they are weak and unsteady; they have not full assurance. After brief periods of joyful trust, doubts return to shake their confidence. Yet they testify of their love to God gaining ascendancy over fear. They no longer utter the sad exclamation at the end of the seventh chapter of Romans, "O wretched man that I am!" With grateful hearts and streaming eyes in view of their deliverance, they exultingly say, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Joyful as is their state of freedom when contrasted with the bondage to fear under which they once groaned, they are conscious of an inward vacuity and longing for some object not at first clearly defined. The study of the words of Jesus discloses to them the living water promised by him in the last great day of the feast. "But this he spake of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive; for the Holy Ghost was not yet given." "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever." After the object of their desire has been pointed out to them, they begin to hunger and thirst after righteousness, after the Holy Spirit, who is the author of all inward purity. Then they emerge into the "kingdom of the Holy Ghost," as Fletcher styles it. They are filled with the Spirit. They now walk in the light constantly, are consciously cleansed from all sin, and have joy unspeakable. The Spirit of adoption, formerly indirect and intermittent, has now become the abiding Comforter; and to his direct assurance of sonship he adds that of entire sanctification and the fullness of Christ's love, "that we may know the things freely given to us of God." I Cor. 2:12. Fear, which had a painful predominance in the dispensation of the Father, and shadowed the brightness of that of Jesus Christ, is now completely banished. No tormenting emotion can abide the presence of the Comforter.

The scriptural proofs of these dispensations are abundant. Listen to Peter, preaching to Cornelius and his staff of officers. "God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted of him."

From the summit of Mars Hill, the Athenian, passing through the Agora, hears an earnest voice proclaiming to the high caste Autochthones, who boasted of their birth from the soil of Attica, a truth humiliating to the pride of race -- "God . . . hath made of one blood all nations of men, and hath determined the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us." The publicans (Roman officials) asked of John, "What shall we do?" He, seeing that they had no preparation for the dispensation of the Son, and that all that they could then appreciate was the obligation of the moral law, answered, "Exact no more than that which is appointed you." A band of Roman soldiers, utterly ignorant of the prophecies relating to Christ, approach the same great preacher, and demand, "What shall we do?" John, aiming to make them perfect in the dispensation of Gentilism, which consists in doing right so far as known, immediately replies, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse falsely, and be content with your wages." But when John's audience is made up of Jews, he preaches always from one text of Isaiah's prophetic evangel, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Here is the dispensation of the Son -- "One cometh after me whose shoes' latchet I am not worthy to unloose." Glorious foregleams of the ministration of the Spirit also burst upon John's vision, and he exclaims, "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire."

The official presence and manifest work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of believers after Jesus was glorified, as totally distinct from his essential presence and secret work in the hearts of just pagans and Jews under the drawings of the Father or the teachings of the Son, is most conclusively announced by Peter on the day of Pentecost. "Jesus, being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, hath shed forth this (plenitude of grace, the effects of) which ye now see and hear." Since these Jerusalem' sinners had insulted the person of Jesus, the genuineness of their repentance must now be tested by public baptism in his hated name, before they could be assured of pardon, a test never required of penitent sinners afterward. "Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Thus these souls were led rapidly through the dispensation of the Son to that of the Spirit. The ministry of Jesus was very brief, possibly typifying the short interval in the scheme of salvation between the drawings of the Father unto Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost upon the young believer in Jesus. Thus the compassionate Father draws the willing soul to the redeeming Son, who passes it over to the quickening and purifying energies of the blessed Sanctifier. The second dispensation was evidently designed to be a transition point only, and not a stage in the spiritual development. But contrary to the Divine purpose, multitudes linger all their lives at this point, instead of passing on to the higher and richer experience of the fullness of the Spirit: while other multitudes are so "slow of heart to believe," that they linger for years and decades in that inferior dispensation of the law, the childleader, before their tardy feet tread the threshold of the Great Teacher. To quote all the Scriptures descriptive of the distinct office and work of the third person of the Trinity would be impossible in this essay. Let these suffice: "Your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost." "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption." "Be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs, making melody in your hearts unto the Lord." "Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks."

Says Mr. Fletcher,

Without an experimental knowledge of these several states, a minister can no more lead sinners to evangelical perfection than an illiterate peasant can communicate sufficient intelligence to his rustic companions to pass an examination for the highest degree in a university.

As the prudent physician proportions his medicines to the different ages and habits of his patients, so the enlightened pastor, who feels himself concerned for the spiritual health of his flock, sees it necessary to act with equal care and discretion. He preaches the dispensation of the Son to those who, like Socrates and Plato, are longing for a Divine instructor. He leads them either from the law of Moses or from the law of nature to the Gospel of Christ. Lastly, to such as have devoutly embraced this part of the Gospel, he publishes the glorious economy of the Holy Spirit, which was not fully opened till after the bodily appearance of the Redeemer was withdrawn from the world.

It must be borne in mind that the Son and Spirit have always been occupied in secretly influencing the hearts of men. But there was a time when the Son became manifest, making a visible exhibition of his wonderful works. Also, at a certain point in the world's history, the Holy Ghost began to work in a more sensible manner in the consciousness of believers. The mysterious triune personality of God was disclosed to our faith because the advanced stages of spiritual development under the Son and the Spirit could not be realized except through faith in the distinct offices of these persons. To keep these in the faith of the Church in all ages, the names of the three stand in the formula of baptism, and distinct blessings are ascribed to each in the apostolic benediction.

It may be objected that this view of the successive gradations of privilege under the three persons of the Godhead has a tendency to degrade the Father before the brighter glories of the Son's kingdom, and to belittle the Son in the presence of the full splendors of the ministrations of the Spirit. But a little examination of experience, Church history, and the Scriptures, will obviate this objection. They who are brought to the cross of Christ testify to a new and profound appreciation of the work of the Father; while all who enter into the dispensation of the Spirit bear witness that Christ is in an astonishing manner exalted in their estimation. In all ages of the Church we look for the highest spirituality and purity, and the most devout reverence toward the Father, where Jesus has been exalted; and the most ardent love to Christ where this item of the creed has been emphasized and explained. "I believe in the Holy Ghost." Turning to the Scriptures, we find that the highest honor accruing to the Father is when men honor his Son. To him shall every knee bow, to the glory of God the Father. But Jesus is not fully known till the Spirit shows him to our hearts and glorifies him. No man can call Jesus Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. Thus each brightening dispensation reflects honor upon the Divine person of the preceding, demonstrating that the Divine Persons are not independent and rival deities, but one in nature and essence, whose different perfections are more clearly manifested to a world of sinners by this threefold development.

The superiority of the ministrations of the Spirit, and its immeasurable wealth of privilege when contrasted with the dispensation of the Son of God in his bodily presence, is expressed by Jesus when he asserts that among them that are born of women there hath not arisen a greater than John the Baptist. Here the wilderness preacher is lifted to a pedestal higher than that of David the king, Moses the lawgiver, or Abraham the founder of the Hebrew nation. Yet he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. We are to understand the kingdom of heaven as St. Paul expounds it, consisting of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. It did not consist in seeing the incarnate Lord, for John saw him; nor in gazing on his miraculous works and listening to his Divine utterances, as did many unbelieving Jews; nor in being numbered among his disciples, as were many who went away and walked no more with him; nor in being enrolled among the twelve apostles, as was Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. Jesus must have

referred to that fullness of spiritual grace and power brought in on the day of Pentecost, to be the permanent inheritance of all who fully believe the promise of the Father.

Every soul, however ignorant and uncultured, which is a habitation of God through the Spirit -- every human body which is made a temple of the Holy Ghost, however weak and deformed, is greater than he whom the infallible Messiah pronounced superior to all his predecessors. Such a person may the reader be if he will by faith enter into the dispensation of the blessed Comforter, far more glorious than the days when the visible form of Jesus shed its radiance on the earth. "It is expedient -- better -- for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come." "Of which salvation the prophets have inquired, testifying beforehand of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow." Reader, is that glory enrobing your spirit with a vesture of light, so that you are walking in the light toward the inheritance of the saints in light? A dispensation laden with such wealth of privilege carries with it a corresponding burden of responsibility. Light is the measure of accountability. Who of the modern Church, illumined by the sevenfold splendors of the Spirit of truth, will be able to abide the fires of the judgment? Would that these solemn words of Fletcher were sounded from every pulpit in Christendom: "To reject the Son of God, manifested in the Spirit, as worldly Christians are universally observed to do, is a crime of equal magnitude with that of the Jews, who rejected Christ manifested in the flesh."

There are multitudes of nominal Christians who confidently assert that it is the highest presumption and folly to expect, in modern times, that full dispensation of the Spirit concerning which so many excellent things are spoken in the Scriptures. They brand as a fanatic the man who proclaims to a slumbering Church the presence of the Holy Ghost, ready to raise the spiritually dead, and to transfigure the spiritually living. It is asserted that the era of miracles and the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit are past; not understanding that the Spirit himself is entirely distinct from his supernatural gifts. The Spirit descended upon Mary, the mother of our Lord, and upon several other believing women in the upper chamber; but there is no proof that they were endowed with the gift of tongues, or any other charisma. St. Paul himself was not always replenished with miraculous power. A man may be full of the Holy Spirit, and be a temple for his abode, and have no supernatural gift. Love supreme, love made perfect, is superior to all the miraculous endowments. Though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. Witness Balaam's supernatural prophecy, followed by his violent death among the enemies of God, and the miracles of Judas, quickly succeeded by treason to his Master and wretched suicide.

Another objection which men at ease in Zion raise against the universal outpouring of the Spirit in these days is the fanaticism which it is supposed to breed. This would exclude all spiritual life from the world; for life is liberty, and all liberty has its perils. The prisoners handcuffed in grated cells, and the dead in silent tombs, are the only two classes of people who are not in peril of the abuse of their physical powers and appetites. That more fanatics and eccentrics start up in a church filled and thrilled with spiritual life than in a Church in a Laodicean stupor, is no more wonderful than that a free country should give birth to more who abuse their freedom, than an autocratic iron despotism, where none dare to stir. Look at the Roman Catholic Church, where not a breath of spiritual life can be drawn unless it is according to the decrees of the hierarchy, and every pulsation is under the jealous surveillance of the priesthood. The fanaticism of ecclesiasticism, of ritualism, of papacy, of Mariolatry, of indulgences, of penances and pilgrimages, may flourish there, but not the fanaticism of unscriptural notions concerning the Holy Spirit. For the Holy Ghost as the witness of pardon, the author of purity, and the guide of life, comes into collision with the claims of the priesthood. So the Holy Ghost must be imprisoned in the apostolic age, and the Bible must be chained in the cloister or burned up, because it promotes independent thought and spiritual freedom. Give us a

spiritual Protestantism, with all its perils of rationalism and fanaticism, in preference to the intellectual stupor and spiritual death of such a system. We must make our election between these two. Though there may be occasionally a weak or unbalanced mind carried away into fantastic extravagances under the copious effusion of the Holy Spirit, as a mighty rushing wind, the average mind has skill to adjust its sails to the heavenly gale, and speed its way, with stable ballast, toward the port of eternal life. Come, O wind! O breath of God! upon myriads of becalmed souls, and sweep them joyfully onward to the haven of rest.

Let us now set up a safeguard against an abuse of the doctrine of this chapter respecting the three dispensations. If men can be saved by attaining perfection in any one of them, it may be inferred that we may take our choice. Not so. God controls this matter. He allots our place of birth, our education, and surroundings. If it be a pagan country, under the starlight of natural religion, the dispensation of the Father, with no distinctive knowledge of Jesus Christ, we shall be required to be perfect according to the low standard of Gentilism. The ground on which the heathen man will be condemned will not be the imperfectness of his life alone, but the fact that his life falls below his creed, poor as that may be. To judge him the Judge will say, "Ye knew your duty, but ye did it not. You had little light, but you shut your eyes, and refused to use what you had." The moralist, living in Christendom, cannot plead the perfection of paganism. This is a standard far below his degree of light. The sunrise of Christ's incarnation is upon him, showing the path of Christian duty-love supreme to God in his Son in addition to a perfect morality. Alas! how many will fail at this point. As Capernaum, blessed with the presence, sermons, and miracles of Christ, all misimproved, sinks down in the judgment day below Sodom and Gomorrah, so will the impenitent of Christian lands, with the Bible in his hands -- that lamp from off God's throne cast down to earth, lighting up their habitations, making the way of Christian rectitude luminous as a path of light before their feet -- sink down under a weight of guilt when the pagan nations shall rise up to condemn them.

Thus the nominal Christian who reads in the Acts of the Apostles of the dispensation of the Spirit more glorious than that of the Son of God, and hears from God's ambassador that it is his privilege and duty to be filled with the Spirit, and hears the attestations of unimpeached witnesses that the blessed Spirit of adoption has certified to their pardon, renewed and purified their natures, cannot innocently reject the ministration of the Holy Spirit, because it will cost him a painful effort of repentance, surrender, consecration and faith to reach this high spiritual altitude. Formalism, ceremonialism, and mere orthodoxy, cannot save him.

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