



INTRODUCTION TO THE DISPENSATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Determining the number and placement of the dispensations can become an exercise in "hair-splitting," which really ends up helping no one. The number of dispensations a person finds will be based, primarily, on how he defines a dispensation. In his system, Scofield (and, later, Chafer) required new revelation, human responsibility, failure, and judgment, seeing each dispensation as a self-contained unit. This led to the "traditional" seven dispensation system.

A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture.ⁱ

Each dispensation, therefore, begins with man being divinely placed in a new position of privilege and responsibility, and each closes with the failure of man resulting in righteous judgment from God.ⁱⁱ

On the other hand, Cone defines a dispensation as how God works simply to glorify Himself.

A dispensation is a particularly distinctive economy or administration in and by which God demonstrates or expresses His own glory.ⁱⁱⁱ

Without disavowing the doxological center of all things, this seems to be too broad as the Scofield/Chafer definition is too narrow. Based on his own definition, Cone concludes that "a synthetic overview accounting for God's doxological purpose seems to unveil no less [*sic*] than 12 dispensational divisions," which extend into eternity past and future.^{iv}

A more simple way to define "dispensation" is to use the base meaning of the Greek word οἰκονομία, *oikonomia*, which is the "administration of a household." On this basis, Ryrie sees a dispensation simply as how God rules this world in different ways throughout history. "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose."^v Based on this understanding, we see that a new dispensation begins whenever God adjusts His dealings with mankind, often by way of providing new revelation (similar to the Scofield/Chafer system). This is the position taken in this article.

To summarize: Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations.^{vi}

Surprisingly, the Scriptures explicitly name only two dispensations and imply a third:

1. *"I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship from God"* (Colossians 1:25). "Stewardship" is οἰκονομία. Thus, "the church" is one of God's distinct administrations in this world.
2. *"toward the administration of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ – the things in heaven and the things on earth"* (Ephesians 1:10). "Administration" here is οἰκονομία. Thus, "the fullness of the times" is a distinct dispensation, yet future after the church.
3. *"to enlighten everyone about God's secret plan – a secret that has been hidden for ages in God"* (Ephesians 3:9). This "secret plan" (literally, "the dispensation of the mystery") called "the church" had a distinct beginning, meaning that there was at least one dispensation that preceded it.

The question, then, is, "How many *other* dispensations can we legitimately infer from Scripture based on our definition?" Including these three, this article proposes a total of nine (including the three just mentioned) that fulfill the definition that "a dispensation is a distinct way that God administrates this world." Working backward from the Church, we can logically infer five administrations. These line up with the first five of the Scofield/Chafer seven.

Five Dispensations Before the Church

DISPENSATION #5: THE MOSAIC LAW (OR "LAW")

The dispensation of Law can be distinguished in three ways. First, as with all dispensations, it had a distinct beginning point. Second, unlike some other dispensations, it did not continue into or overlap with other dispensations. Third, it was administered to a subset of humanity, e.g., it applied only to the ethnic nation of Israel.

The dispensation of Law started in Exodus 20, when God began to itemize a specific set of laws that were to govern Israel. That only Israel was under this law code is stated clearly in Exodus 20:2, when God described them as those whom he *"brought...from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery."* Their sole inclusion is also emphasized repeatedly, noting that this law was to separate them from the other nations (see Leviticus 18:24; Numbers 23:9; Deuteronomy 26:19; 28:1).

As will be shown, some dispensations overlap with those that follow them. This is not the case with the Mosaic Law. According to Jesus, He came to fulfill the law or bring it to

completion (Matthew 5:20). Three decades later, Paul wrote that Jesus did just that; He was *"the end of the law"* (Romans 10:4), because the law, with all its decrees, was nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14). Thus, the Law had a clear beginning and end and governed only the ethnic nation of Israel during that time (approximately 1445 B.C. to A.D. 33).

DISPENSATION #4: THE ABRAHAMIC PROMISES (OR "PROMISE")

Going backward from Exodus 20, the next point at which God gave new revelation about how he would govern is found in Genesis 12:1-3. In this passage, God made two key promises to Abraham, each one unfolding into a series of additional promises and covenants.

God told Abraham, *"I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."* (Genesis 12:2-3, NASB)

Without getting into the Abrahamic Covenant itself,^{vii} this passage reveals that God would govern this world differently than before. This administration has two parts. First, Abraham and his descendants would have special status under God's rule. Later in Genesis 17:19, God clarified that these promises (which would be codified in the Covenants) would apply only to Abraham's descendants through Isaac and, later, through Jacob (Genesis 25:23; 28:4, 13-15).

The second part of this administration, then, has to do with the rest of humanity. God promised that He would deal with the other "families of the earth" on the basis of how they dealt with Abraham and his family. The meaning of "bless" here is best understood within the meaning of "curse." Though He used the same word for "bless" ("I will bless those who bless you"), God used two different words that the NASB translates "curse." The second word is אָרַר, 'ārar, a word used frequently by Moses to indicate inflicting a curse upon someone.^{viii} What demands such a response from God? The first word translated "curse" is קָלַל, qālal, "be slight, swift, trifling."^{ix} God's promise to Abraham was that Abraham's family would be so special to God that anyone who did not think of them highly enough would bring a curse upon themselves. The NET properly brings across this nuance: *"The one who treats you lightly I must curse."* Thus, God's administration during this dispensation is based on ethnicity and human interaction. Descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have promises not given to the rest of us, and our treatment of them determined God's treatment of us.

Interestingly, nothing in Scripture indicates that this dispensation has been completed. On the contrary, many passages reveal that it is still in force, especially during the Tribulation (Matthew 25:31-46) and the Millennial Kingdom (Isaiah 60:10-14). During the dispensation of the Church, it is true that Jews and Gentiles are both made into a new entity (Ephesians 2:11-22), bringing equality to them both in Christ (Galatians 3:28). However, since Gentile treatment of Israel is not a matter of salvation, since there are many in the current dispensation who will not be saved, and since there is nothing in Scripture that specifically puts this promise on hold, it seems likely that God continues to deal with nations and individuals, even during the Church Age, in direct relation to how those nations and individuals treat Israel and the Jewish people. This dispensation or method of God's governance will not conclude until the Eternal State or "the fullness of the times," meaning that it overlaps with the Law and Church and everything thereafter.

DISPENSATION #3: HUMAN GOVERNMENT

Continuing our backward trek through Genesis, the next change we find in revelation and administration is in Genesis 9. Following the Flood, God gave Noah three commands in verses 1-6. First, Noah and his family were to repopulate the Earth. Second, humans, who were once vegetarian, were now able to eat *"any moving thing that lives"* in addition to *"the green plants"* (9:3). Third, human society was now responsible to govern itself. Unlike before the Flood, God now commanded society to hold human life as sacred and to put to death any animal or person who violated His image by murdering a human being (9:5-6). It must be clarified that this authorization of capital punishment was not for personal revenge-at-will. This was a matter for society, requiring a system of investigation, evidence, and sound judgment. With this the dispensation of Human Government was inaugurated.

As demonstrated with the Abrahamic Promises, unlike the Mosaic Law, the dispensation of Human Government has not yet ended. Even in the current Church Age, believers are commanded to *"be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except by God's appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God"* (Romans 13:1). Further, these governing authorities are still considered to be *"God's servant to administer retribution on the wrongdoer"* (vs. 4). Thus, Human Government is a distinguishable dispensation with a fixed starting point, albeit one that has not yet reached its conclusion.

DISPENSATION #2: MORAL CONSCIENCE (OR "CONSCIENCE")

The point of new revelation before Noah was after the Fall, in Genesis 3:14-19. Adam had eaten from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, in direct rebellion to God's command in Genesis 2:16-17. At that moment, as God had promised, Adam and Eve died spiritually. There were some physical consequences of sin (e.g., increased pain in

childbirth for women, increased work to provide food, and physical death), but the spiritual consequence was much greater.

Spiritual separation from God marked a change in how God had to deal with or govern humanity. Although God promised that a redeemer would someday come to set things right (3:15), humanity entered a new relationship with God based on an infinite number of unspoken and unwritten laws. It is impossible for a human to know every one of God's laws (the hundreds of commands in the Mosaic Law did not include everything), and even the best person is bound to violate God's infinite holiness without knowing it. Because of this, God emblazoned His basic moral law onto the human heart in what we call our "conscience." Paul wrote that, even during the period of the Mosaic Law over Israel, Gentiles were not totally without law.

"For whenever the Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature the things required by the law, these who do not have the law are a law to themselves. They show that the work of the law is written in their hearts, as their conscience bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or defend them." Romans 2:14-15

Because these laws were not officially given to humanity at large, God, in His graciousness, in a sense actually "overlooked" many sins while waiting for the appropriate time to send Jesus.

"Although God has overlooked such times of ignorance, he now commands all people everywhere to repent." Acts 17:30

"Before the law was given, sin was in the world, but there is no accounting for sin when there is no law." Romans 5:13

"God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat accessible through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because God in his forbearance had passed over the sin previously committed." Romans 3:25

Regarding the Church Age, Paul told Timothy that false teachers would have their consciences "seared" (1 Timothy 4:2) but that Timothy should "hold firmly to faith and a good conscience" (1 Timothy 1:19). Paul also taught that conscience was one of the reasons believers must continue to be subject to human government, demonstrating that both are still in force in some way, even today (Romans 13:5).

DISPENSATION #1: FREE WILL (OR "INNOCENCE")

The first dispensation, chronologically, is found in Genesis 1-2. Often called the dispensation of "Innocence," this short-lived administration describes when there were

few laws over humanity and a seemingly perfect relationship between God and man. Adam and Eve were to populate the planet and were given complete dominion over all of creation (Genesis 1:26; 2:15), although they were to eat from only the plants (Genesis 1:29; 2:9; 9:3).

The name "Innocence" is refers to the fact that man had not yet sinned and had no inherent sin nature (Romans 5:12); thus, humans were innocent before God. A more accurate name may be "Free Will," because this was the only time in human history that man had a completely free ability to choose for or against God. Once Adam sinned, that ability was broken; all people are born naturally sinful, tending to choose sin and self rather than God. Only a Church Age believer, who receives a new nature at salvation (2 Corinthians 5:17) and over whom the power of sin is broken, has a renewed freedom to choose between sin and the Savior (Romans 6:12-23). However, because of the inherent sin nature that resides even in believers, the dispensation of Innocence or Free Will ended with the Fall.

In concluding this first part, an examination of the Scriptures reveals five dispensations through which God has governed this world before the Church. Of these five, three of them are still in effect today, overlapping into the Church Age: Moral Conscience, Human Government, and Abrahamic Promises. The other two, Innocence/Free Will and Mosaic Law, had definitive end-points and did not extend into succeeding dispensations.

Three Dispensations After the Church

In the traditional formulation, there is one dispensation that follows the Church, namely, the Kingdom. Using Ryrie's definition that a dispensation is simply a distinct form of God's administration, often distinguished by new revelation, this section will propose that the Kingdom is just one of three dispensations to follow the Church Age, the others being the Tribulation and the "Fullness of the Times." Again, we will start with the dispensation explicitly named, this time working backward toward the Church.

DISPENSATION #9: THE FULLNESS OF THE TIMES

Returning to Paul's definition of this dispensation, Ephesians 1:9-10 states, *"He did this when he revealed to us the secret of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, toward the administration of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ— the things in heaven and the things on earth."*

The key phrase is in verse ten, "the administration [οἰκονομία] of the fullness of the times." The phrase "the fullness of the times" is τὰ πλήρωμα τῶν καιρῶν, *ta plērōma tōn*

kairōn. Bauer defines πλήρωμα as “that which is brought to fullness or completion; the state of being full.”^x In various contexts, καιρός can mean a fixed period of time, a season, or even an age. Thus, when exploring God’s various methods of governing this world, “the administration of the fullness of the times” must refer to the final governance that brings all other ages to completion.

Supporting this understanding is Paul’s description that this time will be when God will “head up all things in Christ” including everything in Heaven and on Earth. Although the traditional Scofield/Chafer system identifies the Millennial Kingdom as the final dispensation, we must ask whether the Millennium will be when all things are finally completed, including those things in Heaven and on Earth. An examination of Scripture proves that this is not so.

In 1 Corinthians 15:22-26, Paul identified a distinction between the Kingdom, when Christ will reign, and “the end”:

“For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; then when Christ comes, those who belong to him. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he has brought to an end all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be eliminated is death.”

“The end” is a period following “the kingdom” after Jesus has reigned long enough to “put all his enemies under his feet,” including death itself. Revelation 20:7-15 details these events as taking place immediately *after* the Millennial Kingdom, which culminates in the Great White Throne Judgment:

“Now when the thousand years are finished, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to bring them together for the battle. They are as numerous as the grains of sand in the sea. They went up on the broad plain of the earth and encircled the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and devoured them completely. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a large white throne and the one who was seated on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne. Then books were opened, and another book was opened— the book of life. So the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to their deeds. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each one was judged according to his deeds. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.”

This is the second death– the lake of fire. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, that person was thrown into the lake of fire.”

It is finally at this point, not during the Millennial Kingdom, that *“at the name of Jesus every knee will bow– in heaven and on earth and under the earth– and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:10-11).

Following the Millennium and Great White Throne, John *“saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea existed no more”* (Revelation 21:1). In this new time and place, *“God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more– or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist”* (vs. 3-4). Additionally, God Himself describes this time as when, *“I am making all things new!”* (vs. 5). In this new time and place where all things will be new, there will be no temple, no sun, no night, nothing unclean, and no curse (Revelation 21:22, 23, 27; 22:3, 5), a time when *“his servants will worship him...and they will reign forever and ever”* (22:3, 5).

Looking at the overwhelming evidence in Scripture, we must conclude that the dispensation of the Fullness of the Times should be identified with the Eternal State, not the Millennial Kingdom.

DISPENSATION #8: THE MILLENNIAL KINGDOM

Moving toward the Church, the Millennial Kingdom is the next distinct period of God’s governing over this world. Although it was not until Revelation 20 that the timeframe was prophesied to be only 1,000 years, the Hebrew prophets and the Church apostles alike claimed that Messiah’s Kingdom will be characterized by peace and righteousness (Isaiah 9:7; Revelation 20:1-6), when Jesus will sit on the throne of David (Luke 1:31-33), fulfilling the promise of a never-ending Davidic dynasty (2 Samuel 7:8-16). During Messiah’s Kingdom, the curse over creation will be lifted, though people will still sin and rebel, forcing Jesus to rule through both wisdom and force (Isaiah 11:1-9).

This Kingdom dispensation has a specific starting point 75 days following the Second Advent of Jesus (Daniel 12:11-13; cf. Revelation 13:5-6).^{xi} It also has a specific length of time, which John said would be 1,000 years, at which point it must end.

We must admit that, due to the lack of additional revelation, the Hebrew prophetic books contain information that seems to confuse the Millennial Kingdom and the Eternal State. As with many other things, they did not have enough revelation to distinguish between the two. Thus, chapters like Isaiah 65-66, which refer to *“new heavens and a new earth,”* sound much like the environment described in Kingdom passages. Following

Paul's command "*not to go beyond what is written*" (1 Corinthians 4:6), we must be careful to concede our limited knowledge of future events, while submitting to those that clearly differentiate the Millennial Kingdom and the Eternal State.

DISPENSATION #7: THE TRIBULATION

The dispensation that immediately follows the Church is the Tribulation. Like the Millennial Kingdom, Free Will, and Mosaic Law dispensations, the Tribulation will have a fixed beginning and end and will not overlap or extend into other dispensations. The Tribulation will be a period of only seven years (shorter than all the others except Free Will) when God will rule in a way unlike anything He has done before. The primary purpose of the Tribulation is for God to execute his judgment upon Israel for their unbelief and rebellion in previous dispensations (Jeremiah 30:7), bringing them fully back to Himself, and to pour out His wrath upon the unbelieving nations, especially those who abused Israel (Ezekiel 7; Revelation 16). Whereas the Millennial Kingdom is described in much detail throughout the Hebrew prophets, the details of the Tribulation are provided primarily in Daniel (especially regarding the Antichrist) and Revelation 6-19. During this time, God will allow Satan great latitude to rule this world to nearly the full extent of his power (see Revelation 12-13). Even though Satan will be in power, he will rule only as an agent within God's administration.

The Tribulation will culminate when Satan and Antichrist bring their worldwide army to the gates of Jerusalem to permanently destroy it. At that time Jesus will return to Bozrah (Isaiah 63), the valley of Meggido (Armageddon, Revelation 16:16), and the Mount of Olives (Zechariah 14:1-4) in a series of battles to free His people, culminating in the complete overthrow of Antichrist and his rule (Revelation 19:11-21).

DISPENSATION #6: THE CHURCH

The final dispensation in this survey is the Church, the latest administration of God in this world. The Church began 50 days following Jesus' death and resurrection, on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2.^{xiii} Above all others, the distinguishing characteristic of the Church is the baptism of the Holy Spirit by which every believer in the gospel of Christ is joined immediately and permanently to the new Body of Christ, which was first formed on that day. Jesus revealed to Paul that the Church is "*one group*," "*one new man*," and "*one body*" (Ephesians 2:14-16) which was not foreseen by the Hebrew prophets (Ephesians 3:5-6). This new body is comprised of all who believe, no matter their ethnic or social status (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Although the Church itself will never cease to exist, the way God is currently governing – allowing all people the freedom to hear the gospel and believe with no external law code (like the Mosaic Law) and without immediate judgment (like the Tribulation or Millennium) – will come to an end. Both Jesus and Paul prophesied that at an unknown

date in the future, Jesus will return to receive only the Church to Himself. This is called the “Rapture of the Church.” It will be the first meeting of the entire Church; it will take place in the clouds, not on the ground; and it will include the resurrection of all Church-Age believers (John 14:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

Conclusion

Understanding a dispensation to be simply a distinct administration of God over this world and based on the evidence provided in Scripture of the various ways God has and will actively govern this world, it seems appropriate to conclude that there are at least nine distinguishable dispensations, summarized as follows:

1. **Free Will or Innocence**, *Creation – Fall*. Originally, humans were without sin and had the complete freedom to choose for God or against Him.
2. **Moral Conscience**, *Fall – Present*. Humans have at least a portion of God’s law divinely placed in our hearts. Believers and unbelievers alike are accountable before God for violating our consciences.
3. **Human Government**, *Flood – Present*. Human society is responsible for identifying those who do wrong and punishing them, especially those who do harm to fellow human beings. Even in the Church Age, Christians are subject to human governments.
4. **Abrahamic Promises**, *Abraham – Present*. God deals with nations and individuals in relation to how they treat the nation of Israel and the Jewish people. Those who bless Israel live under God’s blessing; those who do not, bring God’s curse upon themselves. This is not a matter of salvation. Additionally, God is still working to build Abraham into a great nation, some details of which have not yet been fulfilled.
5. **Mosaic Law**, *Exodus – Crucifixion*. This was a fixed dispensation characterized by a specific law code over the nation of Israel only. Since this law code did not apply outside of Israel, the rest of the world continued to live under the dispensations of Moral Conscience, Human Government, and the Abrahamic Promises.
6. **Church**, *Acts 2 – Rapture*. The Church is a unique group of people made up of all those who believe in Jesus as Savior, no matter their ethnic or social background. The baptism of the Holy Spirit, placing a new believer immediately and permanently into the Body of Christ, is the defining characteristic of this

dispensation, which will end when Jesus removes the Church from Earth to be with Him forever.

7. **Tribulation**, *7 years; still future*. The Tribulation will be the time when God pours out His wrath and judgment on unbelieving Israel and the rest of the world and brings Israel back to Himself. He will use Satan, demons, holy angels, humans, and inanimate creation as His agents during this administration. It will conclude with Jesus' return to the Earth at the Second Coming.
8. **Millennial Kingdom**, *1,000 years; still future*. The Millennium is the Messianic Kingdom promised throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. During this time, when Jesus is ruling as king from Jerusalem, many ancient prophecies will finally be fulfilled. It will conclude with a final uprising of Satan and unbelieving humans, followed by the judgment of all unbelievers of all time at Great White Throne.
9. **Fullness of the Times** or **The Eternal State**, *Forever; still future*. After the final judgment, the current creation will be done away with and re-created. God will finish fulfilling all His promises from all past ages, completing all things in Christ. All believers and holy angels from all time will enjoy God and His presence forever without end, while all unbelievers and wicked angels from all time will suffer punishment and separation from God in the lake of fire.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ From the original *Scofield Reference Bible*. Quoted in Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 27.

ⁱⁱ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. John F. Walvoord (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 127.

ⁱⁱⁱ Christopher Cone, *Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method*, 2nd edition (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 305.

^{iv} Cone, 308-330.

^v Ryrie, 33.

^{vi} Ryrie, 34.

^{vii} For a much more detailed explanation of the Abrahamic Covenant, see the article "The Nature of the Coming Messianic Kingdom as Found in its Covenants."

^{viii} Moses had already used this word five times before in Genesis 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; and 9:25. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes that it "is used twelve times as an antonym of *bārak* 'to bless'" (Genesis 12:3 being one of those).

^{ix} s.v., קָלַל, *Brown-Driver-Briggs*, Bibleworks 9.0.

^x s.v., πλήρωμα, Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), Bibleworks 9.0.

^{xi} The 42 months that Antichrist will have free reign is the second three-and-a-half years of the Tribulation, also called "1,260 days" and "time, times, and half a time" in both Revelation and Daniel. In Daniel 12:11-13, Gabriel told Daniel that he would not be resurrected and enter the promised rest until 1,335 days, 75 days after the end of the Tribulation, when Jesus returns. We admit that the exact placement of the 75 days is debated, but this interpretation seems to fit the text well.

^{xii} Although some people debate whether Acts 2 is the beginning of the Church, in Acts 11:15 Peter proves this to be true by calling the Acts 2 event "the beginning."