Joseph Smith’s first vision, and all revelations and divine gifts of former dispensations continually flow into it. Concerning this, Joseph Smith wrote on September 6, 1842: “It is necessary in the ushering in of the dispensation of the fulness of times, which dispensation is now beginning to usher in, that a whole and complete and perfect union, and welding together of dispensations, and keys, and powers, and glories should take place, and be revealed from the days of Adam even to the present time” (D&C 128:18).

David W. Patten, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, said in 1838: “The dispensation of the fulness of times is made up of all the dispensations that ever have been since the world began, until this time. . . . All [the prophets] received in their time a dispensation by revelation from God, to accomplish the great scheme of restoration, . . . the end of which is the dispensation of the fulness of times, in which all things shall be fulfilled that have been spoken of since the earth was made” (HC 3:51).

Revelation and restoration characterize the fulness of times. Priesthood, keys (authorization to act), ordinances, covenants, and teachings of past dispensations have been, or will yet be, restored, and this can occur only by revelation. Heavenlymessengers ministered to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, giving them authority, keys, doctrines, and ordinances of past dispensations that had been lost to the world because of fragmentation, abuse, and apostasy. The Doctrine and Covenants records several instances in which these two men saw, talked with, and received authority from resurrected ancient prophets. On May 15, 1829, John the Baptist ordained them to the Aaronic Priesthood (D&C 13). Shortly thereafter, Peter, James, and John, three of Christ’s original apostles, conferred the Melchizedek Priesthood on them (D&C 27:12). On April 3, 1836, in the Kirtland Temple, Moses gave them “the keys of the gathering of Israel from the four parts of the earth, and the leading of the ten tribes from the land of the north” (D&C 110:11); Elias committed the keys of the dispensation of the Gospel of Abraham (D&C 110:12); and Elijah fulfilled the promise of Malachi 4:5–6 by bestowing on them the sealing power to “turn the hearts of the . . . children to the fathers” and make available the saving gospel ordinances to all who have lived on earth (D&C 110:13–15). As part of the restoration, the Book of Mormon, a scriptural witness of Jesus Christ and his dealings with ancient people of the Western Hemisphere, was translated by Joseph Smith by divine power. These events were part of the gathering “together in one all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:10; D&C 27:7–13; see also Restoration of All Things). The priesthood has been revealed “for the last time,” and those who now hold the keys do so “in connection with all those who have received a dispensation at any time from the beginning of the creation” (D&C 112:30–31).

Of things unique to the Dispensation of the Fulness of Times, the Prophet Joseph Smith wrote, “Those things which never have been revealed from the foundation of the world, but have been kept hid from the wise and prudent, shall be revealed unto babes and sucklings in this, the dispensation of the fulness of times” (D&C 128:18).

Although the plan of salvation is the same in every dispensation, the fulness of times will see the accomplishment of specific and unique events, including the rebuilding of the old Jerusalem; building the New Jerusalem; preaching the gospel to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people; the gathering of Israel; and the second coming of Jesus Christ. Everything necessary to usher in the millennium comes under the purview of the dispensation of the fulness of times, which will continue until Christ has subdued all his enemies and has perfected his work (D&C 76:106; TPJS, pp. 231–32).

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Rand H. Packer

DISPENSATIONS OF THE GOSPEL

The term “dispensation” is translated in the New Testament from the Greek aikonomía, denoting an idea of stewardship and of ordering affairs of a household. “Dispensations” are also time periods in which the Lord placed on the earth the necessary knowledge, priesthood, and keys of authority to implement his plan of salvation for his children. This plan, along with priesthood, was first given to Adam (Moses 5:4–12; 6:62–68; D&C 84:16–18; TPJS, pp. 157, 167), but as a conse-
quence of later apostasy and fragmentation among his descendants, it did not remain constant upon the earth. Hence, from time to time the Lord called new prophets and again revealed the plan and bestowed the necessary priesthood authority, creating a new dispensation.

Each new dispensation, or period of restored truth, presents men and women with a divine stewardship in performing the Lord’s work on earth. The recipients become custodians and co-workers with God in bringing to pass his purposes. They work according to his orderly and revealed design. His plan takes into account human weaknesses and provides for times of renewal following apostasy, just as it provides for a redemption from individual failings through repentance and obedience (D&C 121:31–32). The concepts of stewardship and orderliness are important themes in LDS theology.

Prophets are stewards who preach and organize the work of redemption in each dispensation. It has become traditional in some unofficial LDS commentaries to refer to seven major dispensations named after the principal prophet of each: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus Christ (who led the dispensation of the meridian of time), and Joseph Smith (who introduced the dispensation of the fulness of times; see Acts 3:21.) However, this list does not take into account other dispensations, such as those among the Jaredites, the Nephites, and the ten lost tribes of Israel.

Rarely have gospel dispensations been universal, reaching all nations, although that is the ideal (e.g., Abr. 2:11). More often, one people has been responsive, while other nations have languished in ignorance and unbelief. However, the Adamic dispensation would at first have been communicated to the entire family of Adam early in his time (see Moses 5:12), and again in the final dispensation, the fulness of times, the gospel “shall be preached unto every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” (see D&C 133:37; cf. 90:9–11). The meridian of time was given the same mandate (Matt. 28:19–20), but we have no record that the gospel reached every nation in that period.

Several fundamentals are common to all dispensations: priesthood authority, baptism by immersion and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost, the sealing power (D&C 128:9–11), and temple worship. Basic gospel doctrines, including the fall of Adam, faith in Jesus Christ, repentance, and the need for an infinite atonement, were taught in each era from Adam’s day onward whenever there were living prophets selected by the Lord (Moses 5:4–12; D&C 112:29–32).

Some prophets have been given keys and responsibility over specific aspects of God’s plan for this earth. In the sense of dispensation or stewardship, each of these assignments could with propriety be called a special dispensation. Joseph Smith taught that Adam, as “the father of all living,” stands as the head of the patriarchal order of priesthood for this earth under Christ (TPJS, p. 158; D&C 78:16) and holds the keys from generation to generation. Whenever the gospel is revealed anew, it is under the direction of Adam, Noah, the “father of all living” after Adam, is also known as Gabriel and stands next to Adam in priesthood authority (TPJS, pp. 157, 167). Moses holds keys of the gathering of Israel (D&C 110:11); and Elijah, of sealing the generations (D&C 2; 110:13–16; Js—H 1:38–39). John the Baptist had a special role of messianic preparation (JST Matt. 11:13–15; 17:10–14). Peter, James, and John received the keys of the Melchizedek priesthood (TPJS, p. 158) from Jesus, Moses, and Elias (Elijah). Moroni holds responsibility for the Book of Mormon (D&C 27:5). Each of these prophets has received a dispensation of keys for which he holds a stewardship and will give an account to the Lord (D&C 27:5–13). In a future gathering, all who hold keys will give a stewardship report to Adam, and he, to Christ (TPJS, p. 157; cf. JST Luke 3:8–9).

In establishing the final dispensation, the Lord prepared Joseph Smith by sending prophets from previous dispensations to confer their keys upon him (see D&C 110; 112:32; 128:20–21). Thus, in the dispensation of the fulness of times, all things will be “gathered together into one” (Eph. 1:10; D&C 27:13). Since the final dispensation is a culmination of all that has come before, Joseph Smith is revered as a preeminent figure under Jesus Christ (D&C 128:18; 135:3).

Every dispensation, beginning with Adam’s, has been a dispensation of the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. That is, in each dispensation the same plan of redemption through the Savior and the necessary holy priesthood have been revealed by God in a similar and consistent manner.

The general consistency of the plan does not preclude differences in revealed counsel and direction appropriate to the diversity in times and cul-
tures of different dispensations. Circumcision, for example, important in previous dispensations as a sign of a covenant, was not essential in later dispensations. Blood sacrifices required in Old Testament times to anticipate the Atonement were fulfilled in Christ, with new redemptive emblems of bread and wine being prescribed by Jesus. Latter-day Saints have a strong recognition of change and progress in sacred history. Personal growth and its implications for the development of a perfected Zion society are essential in LDS eschatology (see Eternal Progression). This view of progress is evidenced in the concept that the final dispensation builds upon previous ones and achieves the goals of all of them with the celestialization of the earth. The earth then will become a glorious residence for those of all dispensations who have been resurrected and perfected in Christ (D&C 88:17–26).

A definite priesthood line of authority is an essential component of the LDS understanding of dispensations. Thus, Moses and Elijah visited Peter, James, and John at the Mount of Transfiguration to restore certain keys of authority, and as already noted, these and many other ancient prophets visited Joseph Smith to give him the same authority (see Restoration of the Gospel).

Although the Lord’s Church in successive dispensations ceased to function on earth because of apostasy, the work of the Lord in each dispensation is open-ended, leading to the final dispensation. The Lord’s work that was not completed in an earlier dispensation will continue into the final dispensation, which is appropriately called “the fulness of times.” In this last dispensation, some ideals never before reached on the earth will be accomplished (i.e., Gathering of Israel, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the Millennium).

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Courtney J. Lassetter

DISTRIBUTION CENTERS

In order to make standardized administrative and teaching materials available to its members, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has developed a system of distribution centers around the world. These distribute authorized Church literature and curriculum materials to Church units, members, and officers in approximately one hundred languages. Such materials include scriptures, lesson manuals, teaching aids, handbooks, forms, reports, supplies, and video and cassette tapes.

The item in greatest demand is the Book of Mormon, with over four million copies distributed annually. Since 1989 the majority of these copies are in languages other than English. Some centers also coordinate local printing and distribution of Church magazines in their areas. Each center offers services geared to the particular proselytizing, teaching, and administrative needs of Church programs in its area. Some centers are equipped to print many of the materials they distribute, thus reducing the expense of shipping from Salt Lake City. Materials required in large quantities and hardbound books are often produced by commercial vendors. Wherever printed and regardless of language, all materials are uniform in their content.

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John E. Carr

DISTRICT, DISTRICT PRESIDENT

A “district” is an ecclesiastical unit similar in function to a stake. Districts are found within missions in developing areas of the Church mostly outside the United States and Canada. Districts are meant to be transitional. Once membership in a district has grown to an average of 250–300 members per branch, with 10 percent or more of these members holding the Melchizedek Priesthood, the district will normally be made into a stake and the qualifying branches within the district made into wards. Insofar as possible and practical, all