

Dispensationalism

What is a Dispensation According to Scripture?

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This is part two of a series on Dispensationalism. Read [part one](#).

The definition of any theological term must agree with Scripture, and therefore it must be derived from Scripture. The Dispensationalists' definition of a dispensation fails this test.

In the first article in this series, we began examining Dispensationalism's definition of a dispensation. The classic statement of it appears at the beginning of each of the four editions of the Scofield Reference Bible: "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."

We set out to test the validity of this definition on two critical points. In our last article we dealt with the fact that the validity of the definition of any term, in any field, must be tested through application. When we are dealing with theological terms, that means application to Scripture. As we demonstrated, this is where the inherent problem of the Dispensationalists' definition of their foundational term first becomes apparent.

But even more critical is a second point: When we are dealing with the definition of theological terms, our definition must *agree* with Scripture and therefore it must be *derived from* Scripture. As we shall see in this article, the Dispensationalists' definition of a dispensation also fails this test.

***Oikonomia* Defined**

The word that is translated "dispensation" or "stewardship" at various places in both the Old and New King James Bibles is the Greek word *oikonomia*. It is the word from which we get our English word "economy".

It can have two different meanings, and the meaning depends on the point of view that the text has in mind. Those two points of view are that of the person who is *in* authority, and that of the person who is *under* authority. When the Bible is speaking from the viewpoint of the one who is in authority, *oikonomia* or dispensation is properly translated as "a plan" or "a plan of management." But when the word is used from the viewpoint of the one under authority, the one who is given responsibility for carrying out the plan, the word is properly translated "task" or "responsibility".

***Oikonomia* Used**

Oikonomia is used eight times in the New Testament:

- In Luke 16:1-4, it appears three times in the parable of the unjust steward, and is translated "stewardship" in each case.
- In 1 Corinthians 9:17, Paul uses *oikonomia* when he says that "a dispensation (NKJV "stewardship") of the Gospel is committed to me."
- In Ephesians 1:10 he speaks of "the dispensation of the fullness of the times."
- In Ephesians 3:2 he speaks of "the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you," that is, for the Gentiles. In a parallel passage in Colossians 1:25, Paul speaks of "the dispensation of God (NKJV, "stewardship from God") which was given to me for you (the church) to fulfill the Word of God."
- In 1 Timothy 1:4, Paul warns Timothy, "Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith." The last phrase of that verse, "godly edification which is in faith," contains the

work *oikonomia*, and would be literally translated, "God's plan or administration which is in faith."

Two Examples

In Ephesians 1:10 Scripture speaks of *oikonomia* from the viewpoint of God as the one who is in authority when it speaks of the "dispensation of the fullness of the times." Paul states in that passage that at the decisive moment in God's all-wise and eternal plan — "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times" — Christ will come again and bring the glorious plan of redemption to its final consummation. (For more detail on the use of "dispensation" in this passage, see our series, [What is "The Dispensation of the Fullness of the Times" in Ephesians 1:10?](#))

In contrast, in Colossians 1:25, Paul uses *oikonomia* or dispensation not from the viewpoint of the one who is in authority, but from the viewpoint of the one who is under authority — in this case, Paul himself. He says that God made him a minister of the church "according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you" — or as the New King James Bible more accurately translates it, "according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you." In other words, Paul has been given responsibility for the carrying out of a part of God's plan.

And what is that plan? Paul tells us what it is, in the next phrase of verse 25. He says it is "to fulfill the Word of God." In the original language, the word that is translated "fulfill" here can have a number of meanings. It can mean "to fill up to the brim." It can mean, "to consummate." It can mean, "to supply liberally." But in the context of this passage, in the context of Paul's function as a minister of Christ, as a man who has been given a responsibility from God to carry out part of His plan, the word "fulfill" has a more specific meaning. It means, "to carry into effect the Word of God" — "to carry the Word of God through to accomplishment" — or "to execute my duty as it pertains to the Word of God."

And what is Paul's duty as it pertains to the Word of God? He tells us in the next verses, beginning at verse 26. Paul says, "I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God; even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

A Companion Question: What is the "Mystery"?

We need to look at another key word in this passage, and that is the word "mystery." The Greek word is *musterion*, from which we obviously get our English word "mystery." Paul speaks of "the mystery that was hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints."

What is a "mystery" in Scripture? A mystery, according to the Word of God, is some aspect of God's plan that was hidden at one point in time, but is later revealed. And what is the mystery of which Paul is speaking here? Some commentators try to say that the mystery is that the Gentiles would partake of salvation along with Israel. But that was no mystery. That was never anything hidden. God told Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 that in the Messiah who would come through Abraham's descendants, "all the nations of the earth will be blessed" – not just Israel. And in Isaiah 49 verse 6, God says of the coming Messiah, through Him I will restore the preserved ones of Israel, and, "I will also give Messiah as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth." And although most of God's Old Testament saints were Jews, we read in the Old Testament record of many occasions of individual Gentiles, and even whole Gentile cities, like Nineveh, repenting and turning to the Redeemer.

So the salvation of the Gentiles itself is not the mystery spoken of here. What, then, is the mystery? We have the answer at the end of verse 27: "Christ in you, the hope of

glory." The mystery of God's plan that has now been revealed is that the Messiah not only would come to earth, not only would die, not only would be buried, not only would rise from the dead – the Messiah would actually live in each member of His redeemed people under the New Covenant. "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

We find this confirmed in other passages. In John 14:23 Jesus says, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My Word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him." In Galatians 2:20 Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ; yet it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

"Christ in you, the hope of glory" — or to translate it more directly, "Christ in you, the guaranteed expectation of glory." That is the mystery that was hidden and is now revealed. In times past, under the Old Covenant, Christ did not dwell within believers. The Holy Spirit did not dwell within believers in the Old Testament, except in specific cases for specific purposes. That is why David prayed in Psalm 51, after his great sin, "Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me." That is a prayer that no believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, Jew or Gentile, needs to pray under the New Covenant. Paul says in Ephesians chapter one that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the down-payment, or guarantee, of our final redemption — when we will not only have Christ living within these mortal, sinful bodies, but we will be like Christ forever, when we will have glorified bodies like His for eternity. That is the "hope of glory."

What's Missing?

Now that we have examined the meaning of *oikonomia*, or dispensation or stewardship, in the pages of the Word of God, let's return to the Dispensationalists' definition of a dispensation that we cited in our last article: "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."

As we stated earlier, the definition of a theological term must agree with Scripture, and therefore it must be derived from Scripture. Therefore, we must now put the Dispensationalists' definition of a dispensation to the test by asking these questions: Is there any indication, in the usages of *oikonomia* in Scripture, of "periods of time"? Is there any indication of differing tests of "obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God" during different periods of time? The answer, quite clearly, is no. Exhaustively search the eight uses of *oikonomia* in their context, and you will not find any support for the definition of a dispensation that is the foundation of the Dispensationalist system.

How, then, did Dispensationalists come to divide the Word of God into three, four, six, seven, eight, or nine time periods "during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God?" We find the answer in the Dispensationalist view of another passage, 2 Timothy 2:15 — "Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that need not be ashamed, *rightly dividing the Word of truth.*" We'll take that up in our next article in this series.

[Next: What Does It Mean to Rightly Divide the Word of Truth?](#)

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In the original Greek, this passage tells us that God will "re-gather together in one all things in Christ."

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