

WHAT IS A DISPENSATION?

by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

There is no more primary problem in the whole matter of dispensationalism than that of definition. By this is meant not simply arriving at a single sentence definition of the word but also formulating a definition/description of the concept. This will require an examination of the scriptural use of the word, a comparison of the word *dispensation* with related words such as *age*, a study of the use of the word in church history; and some observations concerning the characteristics and number of the dispensations.

To say that there is a great lack of clear thinking on this matter of definition is an understatement. Both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists are often guilty of lack of clarity. Many from both groups are satisfied to use the well-known definition that appears in the notes of the original *Scotfield 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. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture."^{1[1]} Dispensationalists use this definition without thinking further of its implications in relation to *age*, for instance, and without ever examining its basis or lack of basis in the scriptural revelation itself. Nondispensationalists use it as a convenient and useful scapegoat simply because it does not (and could not in two sentences) convey all that is involved in the concept of a dispensation. If this concise definition were all that Scotfield had to say about dispensations, then it would be fair to concentrate an attack on it, but if he has more to say (which he does) then it is not.

The *New Scotfield Bible*, though beginning the note on dispensations with the same sentence as the original *Scotfield*; continues with four paragraphs of elaboration. Among other matters those added paragraphs focus on the concepts of (1) a deposit of divine revelation, (2) man's stewardship responsibility to that revelation, and (3) the time period during which a dispensation operates. Also it is made quite clear that dispensations are not separate ways of salvation; rather, there is only one way of salvation – "by God's grace through the work of Christ... on the cross."^{2[2]} More recent nondispensationalists seem to prefer not to interact with this expanded definition/description in their discussions about dispensationalism.^{3[3]}

To draw an analogy in another doctrinal area, a conservative, when pressed for a concise statement of his theory of the Atonement, will answer, "I believe in substitutionary atonement." This is entirely accurate and probably the best concise answer that could be given. But liberals are well known for using this simple statement as a means of ridicule, for they point out that the work of Christ cannot be confined to a single aspect like substitution. That is true, and the conservative recognizes that the entire work of Christ cannot be fully expressed by the single word *substitution*. Nevertheless, all the work of Christ is based on His vicarious sacrifice.

In like manner, the nondispensationalist points out some lack in the old *Scotfield* definition and with a wave of the hand dismisses dispensationalism on the basis of the weakness of the definition! Perhaps the earlier definition does not distinguish *dispensation* from *age*, but such failure does not mean that they cannot be distinguished or that they have not been distinguished by others. And it certainly does not mean that the entire system is condemned. John Wick

^{1[1]} *Scotfield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), 5.

^{2[2]} *New Scotfield Reference Bible* (N.Y.: Oxford, 1976), 3.

^{3[3]} E.g., John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 152, 270.

Bowman resorts to this stratagem when he declares, "The word translated 'dispensation' in the Greek Bible... never means nor does it ever have any reference to a period of time as such, as Scofield's definition demands."^{4[4]} Though the accuracy of Bowman's statement may be questioned by the references in Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9, in making such a charge against Scofield's definition, Bowman attempts to discredit the entire system.

The popularity of the *Scofield Reference Bible* has focused considerable attention on the definition in its notes and has made it a prime target for attack by nondispensationalists. However, scholars who are critical of dispensationalism should recognize that Scofield is not the only one who has defined the word, and, if there are lacks in his definition, they ought to recognize that his revisers and others have offered definitions that are more expanded. At any rate, any scholarly critique should certainly take into account several definitions if the system is to be represented fairly. For instance, L. S. Chafer did not emphasize the time aspect of a dispensation in his concept,^{5[5]} and long ago the present writer defined a dispensation entirely in terms of economy rather than age.^{6[6]} Any critique ought to take into account such definitions as well as Scofield's.

THE ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD *DISPENSATION*

The English word *dispensation* is an Anglicized form of the Latin *dipensatio*, which the Vulgate uses to translate the Greek word. The Latin verb is a compound, meaning "to weigh out or dispense."^{7[7]} Three principal ideas are connected to the meaning of the English word: (1) "The action of dealing out or distributing"; (2) "the action of administering, ordering, or managing; the system by which things are administered"; and (3) "the action of dispensing with some requirement."^{8[8]} In further defining the use of the word theologically, the same dictionary says that a dispensation is "a stage in a progressive revelation, expressly adapted to the needs of a particular nation or period of time.... Also, the age or period during which a system has prevailed."^{9[9]} It is interesting to notice, in view of the usual criticism of Scofield's definition, that in this dictionary definition *dispensation* and *age* are closely related.

The Greek word *oikonomia* comes from the verb that means to manage, regulate, administer, and plan.^{10[10]} The word itself is a compound whose parts mean literally "to divide, apportion, administer or manage the affairs of an inhabited house." In the papyri the officer (*oikonomos*) who administered a dispensation was referred to as a steward or manager of an estate, or as a treasurer.^{11[11]} Thus, the central idea in the word *dispensation* is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household.

^{4[4]} John Wick Bowman, "The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism," *Interpretation* 10 (April 1956): 174.

^{5[5]} L. S. Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936), 8-9.

^{6[6]} Charles C. Ryrie, "The Necessity of Dispensation-alism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (July 1957), 251.

^{7[7]} W. W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1946), 174.

^{8[8]} *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1933), 3:481.

^{9[9]} Ibid.

^{10[10]} W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957), 562.

^{11[11]} J. H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 442-43.

SCRIPTURAL USE OF THE WORD *DISPENSATION*

The Usage of the Word

The various forms of the word *dispensation* appear in the New Testament twenty times. The verb *oikonomēō* is used once in Luke 16:2, where it is translated "to be a steward." The noun *oikonomos* appears ten times (Luke 12:42; 16:1, 3, 8; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 4:10) and is usually translated "steward" or "manager" (but "treasurer" in Rom. 16:23). The noun *oikonomia* is used nine times (Luke 16:2,3, 4; 1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2,9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4). In these instances it is translated variously ("stewardship," "dispensation," "administration," "job," "commission").

The Features Displayed

Before attempting any formal definition, it might be useful to note some of the features connected with the word itself as it appears in the New Testament. These are not necessarily features of the dispensational scheme but are simply observable connections in which the word is used. In Christ's teaching the word is confined to two parables recorded in Luke (12:42; 16:1, 3, 8). In both cases the parables concern the management of a household by a steward or manager, but the parable recorded in Luke 16 gives some important characteristics of a stewardship, or dispensational, arrangement. These characteristics include the following:

- 1** Basically there are two parties: the one whose authority it is to delegate duties, and the one whose responsibility it is to carry out these charges. The rich man and the steward (or manager) play these roles in the parable of Luke 16 (v. 1).
- 2** There are specific responsibilities. In the parable the steward failed in his known duties when he wasted the goods of his lord (v. 1).
- 3** Accountability, as well as responsibility, is part of the arrangement. A steward may be called to account for the discharge of his stewardship at any time, for it is the owner's or master's prerogative to expect faithful obedience to the duties entrusted to the steward (v. 2).
- 4** A change may be made at any time unfaithfulness is found in the existing administration ("can no longer be steward").

These four features give some idea of what was involved in the concept of a dispensational arrangement as the word was used in the time of Christ.

The other occurrences of the word are all in the writings of Paul except for the reference in 1 Peter 4:10. Certain features of the concept are evident from these usages.

- 1** God is the one to whom men are responsible in the discharge of their stewardship obligations. In three instances this relationship to God is mentioned by Paul (1 Cor. 4:1-2; Titus 1:7).
- 2** Faithfulness is required of those to whom a dispensational responsibility is committed (1 Cor. 4:2). This is illustrated by Erastus, who held the important position of treasurer (steward) of the city (Rom. 16:23).

3 A stewardship may end at an appointed time (Gal. 4:2). In this reference the end of the stewardship came because of a different purpose being introduced. This reference also shows that a dispensation is connected with time.

4 Dispensations are connected with the mysteries of God, that is, with specific revelation from God (1 Cor. 4:1; Eph. 3:2; Col. 1:25).

5 Dispensation and age are connected ideas, but the words are not exactly interchangeable. For instance, Paul declares that the revelation of the present dispensation was hidden "for ages," meaning simply a long period of time (Eph. 3:9). The same thing is said in Colossians 1:26. However, since a dispensation operates within a time period, the concepts are related.

6 At least three dispensations (as commonly understood in dispensational teaching) are mentioned by Paul. In Ephesians 1:10 he writes of "an administration [dispensation, KJV] suitable to the fullness of the times," which is a future period. In Ephesians 3:2 he designates the "stewardship [dispensation, KJV] of God's grace," which was the emphasis of the content of his preaching at that time. In Colossians 1:25-26 it is implied that another dispensation preceded the present one, in which the mystery of Christ in the believer is revealed.

It is important to notice that in the first two of these instances *there can be no question that the Bible uses the word dispensation in exactly the same way the dispensationalist does*. Even Bowman admits that: "Actually, of all seven dispensations accepted by Scofield and his colleagues, there are but two (Grace and the Fullness of Time) in connection with which the word 'dispensation' is ever used at all."^{12[12]} The negative cast of Bowman's statement must not obscure the importance of this point. The Bible does name two dispensations in the same way that dispensationalists do (and implies a third). Granted, it does not name seven, but, since it does name two, perhaps there is something to this teaching called dispensationalism.

Almost all opponents of dispensationalism try to make much of their claim that the Scriptures do not use the word *dispensation* in the same theological and technical sense that the dispensational scheme of teaching does. Two facts should be pointed out in answer to this charge. The first has already been stated in the preceding paragraph: Scripture on at least two occasions does use the word in the same way the dispensationalist does. Thus, the charge is simply not true.

Second, it is perfectly valid to take a biblical word and use it in a theological sense *as long as the theological use is not unbiblical*. All conservatives do this with the word *atonement*. It is a word that is never used in the New Testament, yet theologians all use it to stand for what is involved in the death of Christ. Biblically, the word *atonement* is not used in connection with the death of Christ, but, since it is used of the covering for sin in the Old Testament, it is not unbiblical to give it a theological meaning that is in reality more inclusive than its strict biblical usage. The dispensationalist does a similar thing with the word *dispensation*. The usage of the word and the features of the word, as outlined above, prove conclusively that the dispensationalist has in no way used the word in an unbiblical sense when he uses it as a designation for his system of teaching. Even Daniel Fuller admits this: "It is this latter sense which gives rise to the perfectly valid theological usage of the word 'dispensation' to denote a period of time during which God deals with man in a certain way."^{13[13]}

^{12[12]} Bowman, *The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism*, 175.

^{13[13]} Daniel P. Fuller, *The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism* (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist

Definitions

As far as the use of the word in Scripture is concerned, a *dispensation* may be defined as a stewardship, administration, oversight, or management of others' property. As we have seen, this involves responsibility, accountability, and faithfulness on the part of the steward.

The theological definition of the word is based on the biblical usage and characteristics. Scofield's definition has been quoted: "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 has been seen, the usual criticism leveled against this definition is that it is not true to the meaning of *oikonomia* since it says nothing about a stewardship but emphasizes the period of time aspect. Yet note that Fuller admits the validity of practically the same definition, namely, that the word may be used "to denote a period of time during which God deals with man in a certain way."¹⁴^[14] However, there is a certain justification to the criticism, for a dispensation is primarily a stewardship arrangement and not a period of time (though obviously the arrangement will exist during a period of time). *Age* and *dispensation* are not synonymous in meaning, even though they may exactly coincide in the historical outworking. A dispensation is basically the arrangement involved, not the time involved; and a proper definition will take this into account. However, there is no reason for great alarm if a definition does ascribe time to a dispensation.

A concise definition of a dispensation is this: *A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of Gods purpose.* If one were *describing* a dispensation, he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, responsibility, testing, failure, and judgment. But at this point we are seeking a definition, not a description. In using the word *economy* as the core of the definition, the emphasis is put on the biblical meaning of the word itself. *Economy* also suggests that certain features of different dispensations might be the same or similar. Differing political and economic economies are not completely different, yet they are distinguishably different. Communistic and capitalistic economies are basically different, and yet there are functions, features, and items in these opposing economies that are the same. Likewise, in the different economies of God's running the affairs of this world certain features are similar. However, the word *distinguishable* in the definition points out that some features are distinctive to each dispensation and mark them off from each other as different dispensations. These are contained in the particular revelation distinctive to each dispensation.

The phrase "the outworking of God's purpose" in the definition reminds us that the viewpoint in distinguishing the dispensations is God's, not man's. The dispensations are economies instituted and brought to their purposeful conclusion by God. The distinguishing features are introduced by God; the similar features are retained by God; and the overall combined purpose of the whole program is the glory of God. Erich Sauer states it this way:

A new period always begins only when *from the side of God* a change is introduced in the composition of the principles valid up to that time; that is, when from the side of God three things concur:

1. A continuance of certain ordinances valid until then;
2. An annulment of other regulations until then valid;

¹⁴[¹⁴]

Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 20.
Ibid.

3. A fresh introduction of new principles not before valid.^{15[15]}

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. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.

Before leaving the subject of definitions, it may be helpful to append several other useful definitions of a dispensation. W. Graham Scroggie, a noted Scottish writer and pastor, gave this helpful definition:

The word *oikonomia* bears one significance, and means "an administration," whether of a house, or property, of a state, or a nation, or as in the present study, *the administration of the human race or any part of it*, at any given time. Just as a parent would govern his household in different ways, according to varying necessity, yet ever for one good end, so God has at different times dealt with men in different ways, according to the necessity of the case, but throughout for one great, grand end.^{16[16]}

Harry Ironside, prince of dispensational preachers, defined it this way: "An economy is an ordered condition of things.... There are various economies running through the Word of God. A dispensation, an economy, then, is that particular order or condition of things prevailing in one special age which does not necessarily prevail in another."^{17[17]}

Clarence E. Mason, Jr., dean for many years at Philadelphia College of Bible, includes descriptive features of dispensations in his definition:

The word *dispensation* means literally a *stewardship or administration or economy*. Therefore, in its Biblical usage, a *dispensation* is a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God's mind and will which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God.

Associated with the revelation, on the one hand, are promises of reward or blessing for those responding to the obedience of faith, while on the other hand there are warnings of judgment upon those who do not respond in the obedience of faith to that particular revelation.

However, though the time period (*age*) ends, certain principles of the revelation (*dispensation* or *stewardship*) are often carried over into succeeding ages, because God's truth does not cease to be truth, and these principles become part of the cumulative body of truth for which man is responsible in the progressive unfolding revelation of God's redemptive purpose.^{18[18]}

^{15[15]} Erich Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 194.

^{16[16]} W. Graham Scroggie, *Ruling Lines of Progressive Revelation* (London: Morgan & Scott, 1918), 62-63.

^{17[17]} H. A. Ironside, *In the Heavens* (New York: Loizeaux Bros., n.d.), 67.

^{18[18]} C. E. Mason, Jr., "Eschatology" (mimeographed notes for course at Philadelphia College of Bible,

Another definition also includes descriptive elements:

A dispensation is God's distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life, or a responsibility for managing God's affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation.^{19[19]}

The differentiation of viewpoints in this definition is a helpful distinction. A dispensation is from God's viewpoint an economy; from man's, a responsibility; and in relation to progressive revelation, a stage in it.

The more recent movement that calls itself progressive dispensationalism includes some important differences from normative dispensationalism. Though its adherents do not wish to be restricted by a *sine qua non*, they acknowledge the straightforward meaning of the word; namely, "The word dispensation refers to a particular arrangement by which God regulates the way human beings relate to Him."^{20[20]} However, they distance themselves from classic dispensationalists by describing themselves as understanding "the dispensations not simply as *different* arrangements between God and humankind, but as *successive* arrangements in the *progressive* revelation and accomplishment of redemption."^{21[21]}

Taken from *Dispensationalism*, chapter 2, by Charles C. Ryrie, Moody Press, copyright 1966, revised 1995.

rev. 1962), 5-6.

^{19[19]} Paul David Nevin, "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation" (unpublished Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963), 97.

^{20[20]} Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 14.

^{21[21]} *Ibid.*, 48.