

A Study of the Concept of Biblical Households

Including a Study of the Words
οἰκονομία, οἰκονομός and οἰκονομέω
in the Greek New Testament

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Preface

What is a biblical household? What do the words “steward” and “dispensation” actually mean, and how are they used by the biblical writers? What is biblical dispensationalism? How does it compare to what is often presented as dispensationalism? Can biblical dispensationalism actually be represented by a chart showing periods of time linked from Adam through the millennium? This position paper attempts to answer the above questions as well as others that are often raised concerning this interesting topic.

A professor of the author’s, Dr. H. Laverne Schafer, once made the comment in a seminary class that biblical dispensationalism has suffered as much at the hands of its friends as its enemies. It is the sincere hope of the author that this position paper will not fall into the category that could be characterized as a destructive friend.

Most people who attack dispensationalism do not really understand what they are attacking. But this should not be surprising. Many people who call themselves dispensationalists do not understand what they are claiming. This paper will attempt to provide at least some biblical ground work for understanding how the Bible uses the words “dispensation” and “steward” and the implications of those uses.

It is the position of this author that the word “dispensation” in Scripture relates directly to *the method of pleasing God in the Christian life*. The emphasis is not so much on prophecy, or a scheme of dividing Scripture, but on the correct methodology for grace living. If this emphasis is true, and we believe it is, the great issue of dispensationalism vs. covenantalism is the issue of Christian living.

The interpretive approach taken in this paper should be described as “normal.” The author believes the Bible is the Word of God. As such, he believes that God has communicated to man using normal principles of communication that the original recipients of the communication would have understood without relying on any allegorical, or spiritualizing methods.

Finally, a word of appreciation for those men who taught me both the doctrine and the method of determining what biblical grace really is. It is to those men, Dr. H. Laverne Schafer, Dr. Charles A. Hauser, and Dr. Bernard Northrup that this paper is dedicated. It is my sincere hope, gentlemen, that you are neither offended nor embarrassed by my take on what you taught me.

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Introduction

Biblical dispensationalism as a doctrine of Scripture has been, and continues to be, under constant attack. Many who call themselves dispensational do not understand either the words involved, nor the culture from which the doctrine is derived.

Some, perhaps as a result of what they see as excesses at the hands of dispensationalists, have rejected the normal translation of ἡ διακονία as *dispensation* in favor of the less stringent word *stewardship*, or even the weak words *administration* or *management*. However, the translation “dispensation” continues to be the best expression of the Greek word. This translation implies a distribution of goods, which is basic to the understanding not only of the cultural milieu of the word, but also of the Biblical doctrine expressed by it.

Contrary to popular belief, *biblical* dispensationalism is not a system of interpretation. It is, rather, a *doctrine of the Scriptures* understood through normal (literal) interpretation. It is to be categorized as an aspect of the Doctrine of the Bible (Bibliology), as it supplies some the content of revelation. In other words, the revelation of the New Testament grace doctrine was dispensed by Paul, as indicated by Paul in Ephesians 2:1-5. As a theological consideration, therefore, dispensationalism deals with the distribution, or dispensing, of revelation.

However, the word dispensation as used by Paul only refers to the revelation and distribution of a subset of truth, not to the entirety of truth, as found in Scripture. Specifically, the word dispensation refers to the reception of instruction to the household from the householder. Paul uses this metaphorically to show that the new, previously unrevealed household, received some revelation designed to indicate how the household was to relate itself to the householder.

Older dispensationalists referred to this revelation as “the rule of life” for the household. This is an appropriate designation. Truth dispensed to the steward did not refer to all revelation from God directed to the household, or to individuals in the household. It was limited in scope to those truths necessary for the daily life of the individual in the household. Hence, other prophets might receive their own revelation from God, and proclaim it, without fulfilling the technical position of the steward. They might even receive revelation that relates to the dispensational way of life. But they would not have received revelation concerning the fact that a change in the rule of life was taking

place. That was left to the steward, the dispenser, the one who had initial responsibility to present that truth.

Therefore, the doctrine of dispensationalism is a sub-doctrine of revelation. Paul adopted a cultural set of terms to explain the change in applicable revelation from one relationship of God to another. For instance, when God revealed law to Moses, and Moses “dispensed” law to Israel, he was fulfilling the process of what Paul would later call a steward, or dispenser. By this process of revelation/dispensation, God changed His relationship to the Israelites, and gave them a set of standards by which to live their daily lives. *The key is to remember that revelation must precede dispensation.* Revelation is the vertical process by which the dispenser receives the goods that he, through the horizontal process, distributes to the household of which he is a part.

Furthermore, later prophets to Israel also received revelation, but such revelation was not of a dispensational character. It did not add to, nor in any way change the law which was dispensed through Moses. Often the later prophets received revelation from God, including predictive prophecy, that related to the household in its later circumstances. Hence, Isaiah, a prophet who received revelation, proclaimed it to a backslidden nation concerning their then historical circumstance. It included revelation concerning the future Messiah of Israel, the future kingdom glory, and even the future new heaven and earth. But nothing Isaiah, or any later prophet, proclaimed added to or subtracted from the original dispensation of law.

As we shall see, Paul performed the same kind of act as Moses. He received revelation from God (Ephesians 3:2,3; Colossians 1:25-26) and dispensed it to others, the body of Christ, the household to which he belonged, as Moses, who belonged to the household of Israel, dispensed the law to them.

The word *dispensation* (dispensation) is found eight times in the New Testament, *steward* (steward) is found ten times, and *to be a steward* (to be a steward) is found once. The Biblical-based theologian is to discover the meanings of these words through diligent study and application of normal rules of interpretation, and use them accordingly in his exegetical study of the New Testament

In the Bible, *dispensation* (dispensation) is used in both the normal cultural sense, as well as the metaphorical sense of a revelatory dispensation. In its cultural settings the word referred to the activity of the steward within a literal household with a human householder, but when used metaphorically it refers to the function of God’s human receiver of revelation, acting similar to the way a cultural steward when dispensing a specific rule of life for God’s household. As we shall see, this was Paul’s use of the word when referring to “the dispensation of the grace of God” in Ephesians three. Paul recognized not only himself as a metaphorical steward, but that God’s way of dealing with mankind down through time was through a series of households similar to the cultural model of his day.

The student will gain insight from the normal uses of the words given above so as to come to a doctrinal understanding of the words when used in their theological settings. A normal (literal), grammatical, historical methodology will be used, including the correct understanding of metaphorical and figurative language. Contextual considerations will be kept in mind throughout. And finally, other contextual words and concepts will be investigated as they occur in the course of this study.

The Cultural Milieu of Paul's Day

When writing his epistles, the Apostle Paul borrowed a set of words that were rich in cultural meaning. When he used the Greek words translated *dispensation* and *steward*, he was drawing on a cultural phenomenon common to his readers. He did not need to explain himself, or draw out the cultural allusion. His readers understood exactly what he was teaching because they shared Paul's cultural background.

The Lord Jesus Christ Himself used the same cultural situation to teach spiritual truth in the parables. The parable in Luke 16, often called the parable of the unjust steward, is rich in this same cultural setting. Without teaching the meaning of the parable, we will examine the four major cultural elements that are used by the Lord in His teaching.

The Householder

“*A certain rich man* who had a steward...” (Luke 16:1). The first cultural element required was an owner of a household. Sometimes this included a formal business, but often the reference was to the owner's family, including his wife, children, and servants. Normally, only the rich could afford stewards.

The Steward

“A certain rich man who *had a steward...*” (Luke 16:1). The steward was a slave who was responsible to the owner to manage part or all of his estate. If a steward were inept, the householder lost money. But if the steward were wise, he would enrich his owner, who would in turn reward him for his efforts. While a steward was technically a slave, he was treated very well, and was generally salaried. An owner would pay generously for a good steward. Paul Veyne presents a clear picture of the importance of the steward during the Roman Empire:

Many stewards were born free but sold themselves into slavery in order to further their careers. Masters trusted them. Accounting was not yet what it has become in our day. Stewards did not open books for inspection regularly; masters let their accounts run for years. The steward was expected to keep an accurate record of income and expenditures and to be ready to give an accounting whenever necessary....¹

The Goods

“...this man was wasting his *goods*.” In the parable, the steward is accused of not carrying out his responsibility. The word *goods* (NKJV) is a Greek word that refers to the belongings of the owner. The word refers to whatever the steward was given by the owner to manage. It was the responsibility of the steward to *dispense* them carefully.

As an illustration, suppose that the owner had given the steward a certain amount of money to run the household. The steward was responsible to *dispense* this money as needs arose. If the cook required a certain food item, it was the steward's responsibility to dole out the money to purchase that item. If the steward decided that the cook needed to use what was on hand, he would provide the cook with no more food. It was the steward's responsibility to see that nothing was wasted. For this reason, it is clearly seen that the steward was actually a dispenser of the master's goods. Granted that this illustration is somewhat over simplified, but it does point out the basic responsibility of the dispenser (steward) to his master (the householder) with reference to the dispensation (the goods to be dispensed). It is in this simplified sense that Paul used the dispensational metaphor.

¹ Aries, Philippe, and Georges Duby, Eds. *A History of Private Life, From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*. trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 145.

Paul, Moses, Abraham, and others, received a revelation from God dealing with how the household of their day was to live. In the metaphor of the dispensational household, they dispensed (distributed) that revelation to their contemporaries. The information necessary for the change of relationship was written down, so that the household (see next section) could continue to operate after the dispenser (steward) was no longer available. As we shall see, the act of dispensation took a relatively short time. But the goods dispensed continued until new goods were dispensed for the household, or until the household came to an end and another household began. It is not to be inferred from this that just because a new household began, that the previous household automatically came to an end, or that the new household immediately received a steward with the new rule of life. Such a cut-and-dried approach, while generally held by dispensationalists, and quite appealing, is simply not the case.

Again we repeat that not everything revealed to the household is part of the dispensational metaphor. As previously stated, later prophets in Israel also received revelation and proclaimed it. But the revelation was not the relationship to God given to the steward and which he dispensed. None of the later prophets added to or changed the Mosaic code. Dispensational goods, then, are a revelation of limited facts. They only consist of the specific “rule of life” necessary for the household to relate its behavior to the owner, God Himself.

The Household

The final element in the cultural situation of the dispensation is the household. In the simplest terms, this may simply have been the owner’s family and servants. It was they to whom the steward dispensed the goods. In the broader sense, the household may have included some or all of the owner’s business interests. In the parable before us the household is not strictly mentioned, but it is implied. Whatever business the steward was managing for the owner was the household.

Each household was and is distinct. A steward was a steward over only one household, and the goods that he dispensed were only for that household. It is this cultural truth that makes the distinct nature of biblical dispensationalism understandable. If one confuses households, or tries to adopt the goods from another household, then the meaning of this process of dispensation is lost. Members of a household are limited in their use of the goods given to that household. Thus, today believers are not allowed to attempt to place themselves under law. Those legal requirements are for a different household, and may not be appropriated for the current household. “You are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

The Implications of the Cultural Situation

It can easily be seen that certain things are endemic to the cultural situation of a dispensation. There are four main cultural elements: 1) the owner, 2) the steward, 3) the goods, and 4) the household. In order for the system to work, there was required a certain loyalty on the part of the steward. For instance, he was not to dispense his goods to another owner’s household. Again we say, the households were distinct, the goods were distinct, the owners were distinct, and the stewards were distinct. It would have been quite impossible for a steward to have been loyal to two masters, whose interests may have differed, and he certainly could not have been responsible to two different households at the same time.

Paul’s Use of the Word *Dispensation*

The word *dispensation* (⚡ • ☺ ☺ ⚡ • ⚡ • ⚡) is used five times by Paul in his writings. Each time the word is used by Paul, it carries with it the richness of the cultural situation just described. In fact, in Ephesians three the four elements described above are clearly evident.

Ephesians 3:1-2

“For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles -- if indeed you have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which was given to me for you...”

It is perhaps easiest to identify *the goods* in the above statement. Paul calls the thing being dispensed the *grace of God*. That is, the goods being dispensed consist of the God’s grace. Also in this statement we can clearly see the owner, *God*. It is, after all, His grace that is being dispensed. A careful examination also reveals who the *steward* is. Paul says that the dispensation of the grace of God was given *to me*. The word *me* refers to Paul. He was the steward, or dispenser of God’s grace. The *household* is identified by the words *for you*. Paul is referring to the Gentiles who were Christians, whom he has previously identified in verse one. As we shall see below, in the first chapter of Colossians, Paul identifies the household as “His Body, which is the church.”

Paul carefully borrows the cultural milieu with each of its significant elements in order to teach a spiritual truth. According to this passage, there is a special dispensation of God’s grace for a particular household (the church) through a specific steward (Paul) which is distinct from any other dispensation or household (for instance, the household of Israel, under the dispensation of law, given through the steward Moses.)

Colossians 1:24-26

“I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church, of which I became a minister according to the stewardship (dispensation) from God which was given to me for you, to fulfill the word of God, the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints” (NKJV).

It is perhaps unfortunate that the translators of the New King James Version did not retain the translation *dispensation*, which I have inserted after the word *stewardship*. Here Paul is again stating his relationship to the dispensation “from God (the owner) which was given to me (the steward) for you (the household).” In this passage, more specifically, the household is identified as “His body, which is the church.”

From these two passages it can be seen that Paul had a specific theological meaning when he used the word *dispensation*. And that meaning must be culturally based, or the words involved lose significance in their theological contexts. A dispensation cannot be considered simply a “period of time” in God’s program. Exegetically and historically, a distinct steward, household and goods must be identified.

It is the weakness of non-dispensationalists that they do not account for these straightforward statements in Paul’s writings. Paul mentions two specific dispensations directly, and a third is implied. He refers to the “dispensation of the fullness of times” in Ephesians 1:10 and the “dispensation of the grace of God” in Ephesians 3:2. Even if one rejects the “seven-fold” dispensation scheme presented by Scofield and others, it is clear that the word “dispensation” is used in the Bible in the same way that many dispensationalists use the word. (See Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Dispensationalism Today*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) page 27, for a fuller discussion of this important point.)

Often one sees charts showing the dispensations. Such charts give a warped view of the doctrine, in as much as, by their very existence, such charts imply that a dispensation is a period of time. As such, they encroach on the word “age” as it is used in Scripture, and confuse the concepts of age and dispensation.

Part of results of this confusion, and the inability to distinguish between the act of dispensation and the household, is that these elements are usually identified as beginning at the same time. For example, many believe the dispensation of grace began in Acts 2. The reason they give is that the church, the body of Christ, began there, and since they identify the existence of the household with the existence of the dispensation, the dispensation of grace must have begun when the household came into being.

In fact, Paul, the dispenser, was not a believer at the time of the events of Acts 2. He did not become a believer until he met Christ on the road to Damascus. And he did not receive the revelation that he eventually dispensed until sometime later. The process of dispensing grace took many years, it is true. But the act of dispensation began and ended with Paul. It is incorrect to say that today we are “in the dispensation of grace.”

Today the act of dispensing has ended, but the thing dispensed, the grace program, continues. Likewise, the household, to whom the grace was originally distributed, continues. And of course God, as the householder, continues. But the process of dispensation ended almost two thousand years ago.

A Description of the Dispensation of the Grace of God

Through Paul (the steward) God (the householder or owner), dispensed grace to the church, the body of Christ (the household). Both positive and negative elements can be provided that describe a Biblical dispensation.

A Dispensation is Not a Way of Salvation

An individual is part of a household because God has placed limits on those to whom He is dispensing a particular item. Under law, the household was Israel. A person entered Israel through birth and the rite of circumcision. A person did not enter the household of Israel through faith. Therefore, the household of Israel contained both justified and unjustified individuals. *Nor was it necessary to be an Israelite to be justified. It was possible to be justified, and never become part of the nation, and therefore not be required to keep the law.* Consequently, the household of Israel did not contain every justified individual living during the time of its existence. Not all believers in the Old Testament were under law. A good illustration of this is the story in II Kings 5 about Naaman the leper, who, although never becoming an Israelite, believed that the God of the Israelites was the only true God. While not entering into the household of Israel, he was nevertheless a justified individual.

The household of the church, on the other hand, consists only of true believers. One enters God’s household today through faith, and no one can actually be part of the household of the Body of Christ apart from having believed. But we dare not read this requirement back into other households. Some households, such as the household of Israel, consisted of both believers and non-believers, while in the current program only believers make up the household.

The accusation that dispensationalists teach different ways of salvation under different dispensations is a recurrent theme among anti-dispensationalists. No Biblical dispensationalist ever taught that people were justified differently under the various dispensations, not even C. I. Scofield, who is often quoted to prove that this is what dispensationalists believe. In his note on John 1:17 he says concerning the dispensation of grace “The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ...” This has led many to believe that Scofield taught that dispensational law was a means of salvation. However, in his note on page 1245 Scofield clearly states, “Law neither justifies a sinner nor sanctifies a believer.” And earlier, on page 93, the same author says, “. . . the law is not proposed as a means of life, but as a means by which Israel might become ‘a peculiar treasure’ and a ‘kingdom of priests’”. Clearly, Scofield did not teach

that the law was a means of salvation, no matter how unguarded his statement in the note on John 1:17!

However, even if a person who calls himself a dispensationalist should teach such error, it does not invalidate what the Bible teaches about God's dispensational program. We would not hold every covenantalist up to contempt because someone who calls himself covenantal might hold to works salvation. The Word of God as preserved in Scripture is the final court of appeal in these matters, not what any person, or any group of people might teach.

A Dispensation is Not a Period of Time

Although a dispensation takes place during relatively short period of time, the time element is relatively unimportant. What is important, and what makes each dispensation distinct, is that which is being distributed, the goods. Under the current dispensation the goods previously distributed by Paul consist of grace. Under the immediately previous dispensation the goods distributed by Moses consisted of law. It is from the goods being distributed that the dispensation gets its distinctive character.

The Biblical word for a period of time is *age* (Greek = αἰών). That an age is different than a dispensation can be easily seen. Galatians 1:4 enjoins that God deliver us from the present *evil age*. 1 Corinthians 2:6-8 tells us that *this age* has princes who were responsible for the crucifixion of Christ. Ephesians 6:12 speaks of the darkness of *this age*. Romans 12:2 encourages us not to be conformed to *this age*. Many other passages could be examined that would also show the evil nature of the present age.

Unless one is willing to say that grace is evil, one should never refer to this present age as “the age of grace.” Nor is it correct to say that we are living during the dispensation of grace. The word dispensation, as previously shown, refers biblically only to the distribution of the spiritual goods revealed to the steward or dispenser. The correct terminology is that we live “under grace” rather than “under law.”

While it is true that some dispensationalists have confused an age and a dispensation, this is by no means universally true. According to Ryrie, “Perhaps Scofield’s definition does not distinguish dispensation from age, but such failure does not mean that they cannot be distinguished or that they have not been by others.” (*Dispensationalism Today*, 23)

Dispensationalism is Not Antinomianism

Many have been taught that dispensationalists teach that Christians have no requirements to live right. This misrepresentation may be an honest misunderstanding by some who make this claim, but if so, it is made in ignorance. Grace believers have a high code of morality, and teach that the individual Christian is required to maintain a high biblical moral and ethical lifestyle.

The consistent dispensationalist understands that the requirements of the New Testament are grace requirements, and as such carry with them grace provision for performing the requirement. Old Testament requirements, they understand, were not accompanied by grace provision, but by legal penalty. Their motivating factor was fear, not the provisions of grace.

For a further discussion of this issue, see “The Charge of Antinomianism” below.

The Dispensation of Grace is Totally Distinct from the Dispensation of Law

Under law the householder was God, the same householder as under grace. But the householder is the only identical element between the two programs. The households are different, the stewards are different, and the goods being dispensed are different.

Under law, Moses dispensed law, not as a means of justification, but as a means of meeting God's requirements for daily living in the nation of Israel.² Likewise, Paul dispensed grace, not as a means of justification, but as a means of meeting God's requirements for daily living for those in the Body of Christ. And here lies the basic inability of the non-dispensationalist to understand the clear presentation of Scripture.

The non-dispensationalist sees grace from a monolithic point of view. Statements are made by them that God is either gracious or He is not. This view is espoused by Daniel Fuller in his Th.D. dissertation "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism." Such a statement fails to understand the correct meaning of both law and grace as well as the nature of God.

Grace means a provision to meet God's requirements. God is not required to be equally gracious to all people all the time. If that were true, Adam and Eve could not have fallen, because God would have provided grace to keep them from succumbing to temptation.

By nature, God is free to act without constraint. He may freely hold or withhold grace. To require God to be gracious precisely the same way at all times is to rob God of His sovereign will. God may be more or less gracious depending on the program that He has determined to use with any particular household.

The Bible states that the believer today is not under law. Galatians 5:18 reads "But since you are being led by the Spirit you are not under law." (Translation author's.) A careful exegesis of this passage reveals that the believer *is not under any quality* of law. The word *law* here is not a reference to the Mosaic law or to any specific, in which case the word would have the Greek article, but is a reference to any kind or quality of law, which includes, but is not limited to the Mosaic law.

One key to understanding the phrase "not under law" is to realize that it is not referring to a political or national situation. With reference to the government of the United States those who live in that land are indeed "under law" since they are regulated by it. The laws of the United States carry with them penalty if broken. Residents of the United States *are* under the laws of the United States. The statement in the Bible "not under law" refers only to a believer's spiritual relationship to God. In the household of Israel, a resident was under the law of Moses, that is, its regulations as well as its penalties, because God related Himself to individuals in that household through the Mosaic code. Today, in the body of Christ, a believer is under no law.³

Law is a method of producing an awareness of man's sin (Ro. 7:7-13). While no law produces life, law does make man conscious of his condition. Without requirements stated by law there would be no awareness of the acts of sin which individuals commit. Paul refers specifically to the ten commandments as being "the ministry of death," because the only way the law could control was through the ultimate threat of capital punishment (2 Corinthians 3:3-8).

Therefore the law was eliminated with reference to the body of Christ. L. S. Chafer, on page 215 of his wonderful volume entitled simply *Grace*, states "This present nullification of the law applies not only to the legal code of the Mosaic system and the law of the kingdom, but *to every*

² Many older dispensationalists refer to the thing dispensed as "the rule of life," for a particular household. They correctly understood that dispensational distinctions did not apply to the means of justification, so that Old Testament individuals did not get saved by keeping the law.. Furthermore, they understood that the revelation which was dispensed by the steward was limited, and that other revelation of a non-dispensational character was also given to others and distributed to the household. Such other revelation, however, did not, could not, encroach on the rule of life by either adding to it, or subtracting from it.

³ This is not to say that the believer has no requirement today. Grace requirement is alive and well, thank you! See below in the section entitled "The Charge of Antinomianism" for further clarification of this vital distinction.

possible application of the principle of law” (emphasis mine). Such is the meaning of the phrase “you are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14).

The Different Contents of the Word *Grace*

The uniformitarianism of the non-dispensationalist makes it impossible for him to appreciate the distinctions between the various uses of the word *grace*. The interested student would do well to read the book *Grace*, by Lewis Sperry Chafer, in which the author explains the vital distinctions in the use of the word grace.

Two ways the word *grace* are used today will help us understand that dispensational grace is different than saving grace. As seen in the previous discussion, the word *grace* carries with it the connotation of provision. When we say someone is saved by grace (Ephesians 2:8,9) we mean that God has *provided* all that is necessary for the individual’s salvation. Faith applies that which God has graciously provided. As far as salvation is concerned, God required a death and resurrection for salvation. Therefore, He graciously provided His Son to die and rise from the dead. God’s gracious provision of His Son is the basis for the individual’s salvation. Under the Old Testament system, God still graciously provided for the justification of individuals by grace. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness (Genesis 15; Romans 4). All people throughout all time have had available God’s gracious provision for justification. But only for the household of the church has dispensational grace as a provision for daily living been made available.⁴

Dispensational grace is a provision meeting God’s requirements for daily living after one is saved. Consider the difference between Moses and the believer today. Moses became a believer through faith in God’s gracious provision (not yet the death and resurrection of Christ, but we must save that for another paper). However, Moses did not live a life of grace; he lived under the dispensation of law. Under the Mosaic system of law there was no gracious provision for keeping the law, only condemnation if one did not keep it. If Moses had committed adultery, under the law he would have been executed. But the law did not provide a means of keeping the requirement. The motivation for keeping the law was fear of penalty. The believer under the dispensation of grace is in a totally different situation. Not only was he justified by God’s gracious provision, as was Moses, he now has a gracious provision to meet all God’s requirements, which Moses did not have.

Under the law the incentive to keep the requirement was punishment. There was no internal enablement to keep the law. Under grace, however, there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1) but only enablement to keep the requirements. While under both law and grace believers are forbidden to commit adultery, only under grace is there an internal ability (the Holy Spirit, Who did not indwell the Old Testament believer *permanently*) supplied so as not to perform the act. Under the law only fear of punishment kept the sinful individual from committing dreadful sin.

Much more could be said about the distinctions between law and grace, but we must move on to the other differences between the two programs.

The Distinction between the Households

Today the focal point of attack against Biblical dispensationalism is in the area of attempting to blur the distinction between the household of Israel and the household of the Church. In fact, a

⁴ This is not to say that God was not gracious from time to time to individuals in other household relationships. He was. The difference is that the rule of life was not grace, and that those other households received grace on an individual and temporary basis. One cannot say that Israel under the law lived according to grace, or that the law was some kind of grace provision, though there are theologians who seriously try to present such a view. The occasional grace provision under the Mosaic law does not make Israel under the law a receiver of a grace provision for daily living.

relatively new movement, called progressive dispensationalism, is attempting to apply some of the Old Testament provisions for Israel in its eschatological kingdom state to the church. (Someone once said that Christian Science was neither Christian nor science. The same can be said of progressive dispensationalism. It is neither progressive, nor dispensational. It is actually the old regressive non-dispensationalism in new clothing. It has overtaken many fine institutions that once stood for Biblical distinctions.)

Today, under grace, Israel *as a nation and a household* is temporarily set aside. While individual Jews can, and do, become believers, Israel as a nation with all her promises, is not active. Romans 9-11 is Paul's *magnum opus* on Israel's rejection. Romans 11:7-8 states, "What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded. Just as it is written: 'God has given them a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear to this very day.'" Note that elect Jews can believe, but the rest, Israel as a nation, is blinded.

Romans 11:25 "For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." Israel, as a nation, is outside God's program temporarily. The next verse makes it clear that after the fullness of the Gentiles "has come in" "...all Israel will be saved." This will happen after the political ascendancy of the Gentiles has run its course. All Israel will be saved when the future earthly Kingdom of God is established at the second coming of Christ.

Biblical dispensationalism makes strong distinctions between Israel and the church. Perhaps the best way to illustrate the distinction between these two is to list just a few of the elements that believers possess today that no Old Testament believer of any dispensation possessed.

Grace Believers Have a New Way of Worship

John 4:23-24. Jesus taught that believers no longer go to a place to worship, but worship internally. Old Testament believers could only worship in Jerusalem.

1 Corinthians 6:16, 19. The place of worship is the body of the Christian. The Holy Spirit indwells the body as a temple. A temple is a place of worship.

Grace Believers Have a New Position in Christ

1 Cor. 12:27. We are individual members of the Body of Christ.

1 Cor. 12:13. We have all been baptized into one body.

Grace Believers Have a New Covenant Distinct from Israel's New Covenant

One of the great confusions today is in the identity of the two different New Covenants. Many believers mis-interpret the Epistle to the Hebrews and apply the Jeremiah 31 "new covenant" to the church. The Jeremiah 31 covenant which is quoted in Hebrews 8: 8-12 and mentioned again in Hebrews 10:16, 17 is not the "New Covenant by my blood" of which Jesus spoke. Note the following distinctions:

- The Jeremiah 31 new covenant is with Israel exclusively, "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah-- . . . "' (Jeremiah 31:31). "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel . . ." (Jeremiah 31:33).
- The Jeremiah 31 new covenant is established "after those days", i.e. after the captivity of Israel is complete (Jeremiah 31:33; cf. 31:23).

- The Jeremiah 31 new covenant writes laws on the mind and heart. It is an internalized legal covenant. “. . . I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts . . .” (Jeremiah 31:33).
- The “new covenant by my blood” is for the Church. Note that in the following passage the word you refers to Gentiles, namely the Corinthian believers who were never part of Israel, “This cup is the new covenant in (by) My blood. This do, as often as *you* drink it, in remembrance of Me” (1 Corinthians 11:25)
- The Apostle Paul, the steward of the dispensation of grace, is a minister of the ‘new covenant by my blood.’ “. . . who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant . . .” (2 Corinthians 3:6).
- The “new covenant by my blood” requires the death of Christ. We will not quote this lengthy passage (Heb. 9:16-26). Note however, the distinction between the blood of the legal covenant which was insufficient to satisfy the requirements of the new covenant. Christ is distinguished from the Jewish High Priest who entered the Holy Place with another’s blood (vs. 25). He entered heaven itself in order to “put away sins by the sacrifice of Himself” (vs. 26). This act of putting away sins refers not to initial salvation, but to dealing with the sin problem in the daily life of the believer.
- The “new covenant by my blood” is eternal, “Now may the God of peace . . . through the blood of the *eternal covenant* make you complete in every good work to do His will . . .” (Heb. 13:20, 21).

Many other elements could be added to these. This author has personally found over thirty distinctions between what the Old Testament believer possessed and what is new in Christ for the grace believer.

The Christian and the Grace Life

The body of Christ, as a household distinct from Israel, has grace methods for pleasing God. The new elements described above provide the positional and practical basis for daily living.

As obedient children, believers are not to live according to the former strong desires consistent with unsaved mankind, but are to live a holy life (1 Peter 2:13-16). While personal holiness was required in the Old Testament, no grace provision was given to live that life.

The only truly successful Christian life is the grace life. For the sincere believer, the mere appearance of the avoidance of wrongdoing is not sufficient. The inner control of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order for the believer to be successful in overcoming the sin problem. Avoidance of the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-21) can only be accomplished in a God honoring way by walking by the Spirit (Galatians 5:16). Likewise, overcoming Satanic attacks in areas such as lying and stealing (Ephesians 4:25-28) can only be accomplished consistently by applying the grace provision of the “whole armor of God” (Ephesians 6:10-17).

Believers who, after spiritual instruction and admonition in the grace principles of Christian living (1 Thessalonians 5:14), refuse to apply those principles, and persist in unruly conduct, are liable New Testament Church discipline. This discipline is not motivational in nature, though it is the desire of the spiritual believer that such consequences as are applied might be used of God to change the unruly person’s attitude. The purpose for the discipline is to maintain the purity of the local church and maintain the focus in growth as the ministry of the church.

The Christian and Law

The Bible teaches that the Christian is not under any “quality of law.” Paul writes in Galatians 5:16-18, “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.” (NKJV) A closer look at the phrase “you are not under the law” shows that in the original Greek the word “law” does not have the article. According to Greek syntax, the quality of law is being emphasized. Paul is not saying that a believer is not under the Mosaic code; he is saying that the believer is under no legal code at all.

It is the unfortunate tendency of the natural mind to attempt to place oneself under law as a means of living the Christian life. Rather than rely on the Spirit’s ministry, the individual tends to self-effort in fulfilling God’s requirements. As a result, the struggle to do the right thing continues. Sometimes the individual may even appear to be winning the struggle. He may be successful in overcoming the “big ones” such as avoiding sexual immorality, drunkenness, and the like. However, the struggle continues until grace principles are applied.

For this reason Paul writes in Romans 6:14, “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.” Again, the believer is not under any quality or principle of law, but is under the principle of grace. In Romans chapters 6-8 Paul explains in detail the method for overcoming sin in the life of the believer. Romans 6 teaches the application of grace methods. Romans 7 describes the believer who attempts to live under law principles. And Romans 8 presents the successful condition of the believer who applies grace principles to the sin problem.

Paul makes it clear that the law is “weak through the flesh.” (Romans 8:3) The righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in us (not by us) when a person walks according to the Spirit rather than according to the flesh (Romans 8:4).

The Charge of Antinomianism

A common charge against the doctrine of grace for daily living is that it teaches antinomianism. Antinomianism teaches that since Christians are under grace they have no requirements to live right. The accusation has been made that those who teach grace principles believe and teach that Christians may do anything they desire. Such an accusation is false, and made in ignorance of what it means not to be under law, but under grace.

The phrase “under law” means, in its context, to use law as a means of pleasing God. Likewise, the phrase “under grace” means, in its context, to use grace principles as the means of pleasing God. There are requirements under both law and grace. *The difference is between the methods of meeting those requirements.*

Law, whether Old Testament Mosaic requirements, or requirements indicated by the Lord Jesus Christ in the Gospels, carry no ability or provision to perform them. They carry penalty, to be sure, but that penalty is an external rather than internal force. Its basic motivation is fear.

Grace, on the other hand, has many (though not all) of the same requirements as the Mosaic Law. Indeed, under grace the believer has many requirements that were not present under the law. However, the major difference between the programs is that “under grace” an internal provision is made to meet the requirement, while it was not “under law.” The law was “weak through the flesh.” That is, the law provided no provision for overcoming the flesh. But grace is based on the provision of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which was not true for the Old Testament believer.

Biblical Christians apply *no kind of law to themselves today*. Grace requirements are requirements with provisions to perform them. Under grace, God requires nothing of an individual unless He supplies the ability to perform the requirement. When a believer reverts to the Old Testament legal system, or, for that matter, the legal system taught in the Gospels, which looks forward to the earthly kingdom, he is forsaking grace for law. He is truly “fallen from grace.”⁵

The Function of Law

Law has no power to enable Christian living. Law only promises punishment for wrongdoing. James 2:10 says “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.” It is the nature of law to condemn the transgressor. In the Old Testament, when one committed adultery the punishment was death. Likewise, if a child cursed his father and mother, the penalty was death. There was no distinction between “levels” of wrongdoing. For this reason in 2 Corinthians 3:7 Paul calls the Ten Commandments a “ministry of death.”

Here then we have the basic distinction between law and grace. Law says “do this or die.” Grace says, “do this, and here is the ability.” Law is a ministry of fear and death. Grace is a ministry of the Spirit and life.

The Abolishment of Law

It is often taught that the New Testament quotes the Old Testament law to reinforce the morality that is required for the believer today. While this has the appearance of spirituality, it is actually a misunderstanding of the purpose for such quotations. Paul makes it clear that Christ has “abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances.” (Ephesians 2:15) Law, which was never intended as a spiritual basis for Christian living, has been abolished. But does this mean that requirement, per se, has been abolished?

The answer is an emphatic “no.” Some of the same requirements exist today that existed under the law. Paul quotes some of those requirements, not to place the believer under law, which has been abolished, but to show that grace requirements are in general agreement with law requirements. This we would expect, as the same God provides both sets of requirements, and His moral nature has not changed. However, the law requirements are no longer in force. If they were, once an individual violated one of them, he should be put to death. Thus, when in Ephesians 6:2,3, Paul quotes the “commandment with promise” from the Ten Commandments he is not putting Christian children under law. If he were, the penalty of death would be imposed on those children who did not honor their father and mother. He is simply saying that the law had the same requirements as grace in this area.

The “Laundry List” Approach to Christian Living

It is sometimes urged that a list of things that a Christian should avoid be included in a “code of conduct” of some kind. After all, one cannot obey the spirit of the law unless he has the letter of the law to consult. It appears to be the desire of the human mind to have a “law book” available to guarantee Christian conduct.

Such thinking is specious and clearly contrary to the grace teaching of Scripture. The Bible teaches that rather than attend to the requirement the believer should attend to the grace provision.

⁵ Galatians 5:4. The context of this statement makes it clear that “falling from grace” does not relate to initial justification, which cannot be abandoned nor removed, but for daily justification, which is accomplished by daily faith. The issue before the Galatians was whether or not they should get circumcised (see verse 6). Judaizers were encouraging new Gentile believers to do so, though not giving the full meaning of the act. In fact, circumcision was a sign of entering the household of Israel. If one got circumcised, he became a debtor to keep the whole law (Galatians 5:3). He was fallen from grace.

When one is consulting the “law book” one is not paying attention to the solution. Both Romans 6 and Colossians 3 teach that the believer should place his attention on God rather than the legal requirement. One cannot put to death “the members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry,” unless he has previously set his mind on things above. (Colossians 3:2). The believer is to present himself to God the Father as alive from the dead (Romans 6:13). As a result of this presentation, the believer is said not to be under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).

One cannot have it both ways. One either lives according to law, which is to say by self-effort, or one lives according to grace. If one is walking by the Spirit, grace abilities are being provided to overcome all the enemies. We do not need to check the law book to make sure we are pleasing God.

When the works of the flesh are listed in Scripture, as in Galatians 5:19-21, they are not provided as a legal document that the believer should sign, and therefore agree to keep. These various lists are provided not as a method of overcoming the enemy, but of recognizing the nature of the temptation. These are truly works of the flesh. And the flesh can only be consistently controlled by grace principles.

The basic fallacy of the “laundry list” approach is simple. It lists a few of the “big sins” and implies that if we do not perform these “nasty nine” we must be spiritual. The danger in this approach is obvious. It does not take into account the real nature of the problem as stated above. When the sin nature is not under the control of the Spirit, it will find a way to express itself, no matter how strong the legalistic effort to suppress it.

In addition, in the Galatians 5:19-21 passage seventeen works of the flesh are mentioned. And the final statement in verse 21 indicates that there are many more. In fact Scripture names at least 57 different works of the flesh. Add to this the various satanic attacks and the problem of the world system, and it can be seen that listing a few “big ones” is clearly inadequate. It tends to a false view of spirituality, and a false confidence that one is being successful spiritually.

The Distinction Between Stewards

Paul was the steward of this dispensation. The steward of the dispensation of law was Moses. John 1:17 says “The law through Moses *was given*, grace and truth through Jesus Christ *came to be*.” (Translation mine.) Note the important distinction between Moses’ stewardship and the ownership of Jesus Christ. The law “was given” through Moses. Moses did not originate the law. He was the channel through which the law was given; he was the steward. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, was the originator of grace and truth. Through Him, grace and truth “came to be.” As God, Jesus Christ participates as the householder. Moses was only one member of his household.

This same distinction is maintained in Hebrews 3:1-6, which we quote in full.

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Jesus Christ, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. For this One has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as He who built the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but He who built all things is God. And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward, but Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end.

There can be no clearer exposition of the distinction between the stewardship of Moses who was not over his house, but in it. The Lord Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is the Builder of His house.

Moses was nothing more than a servant, as was Paul, if you recall Ephesians 3:1. This is the lot of stewards. They are part of the household in which they function.

The Dispensation of Grace Distinct from all Other Dispensations

The Bible reveals several different dispensations. It is evident, for instance, that prior to the dispensation of law by Moses there was a different relationship between the various households and God. For example, it is clear that a change in relationship took place between Adam, Eve, and God after the first act of sin. A different rule of life was in evidence before the fall than after it.

Ephesians 1:10 mentions “the dispensation of the fullness of times,” which has not yet occurred. Under this program all things will be “headed up in Christ,” which includes “all things in the heavens” as well as “all things on the earth.” This is not a reference to the Church’s being “in Christ,” as the church does not constitute all things. Therefore, this passage is best taken as a reference to the millennial reign of Christ. When Christ establishes the throne of David on the earth, truly all things will be “headed up in Christ.”

Five household relationships are clearly identifiable. The first was established between God and the first family. The second was established with the same individuals immediately after the fall. A third was established with the giving of the law through Moses. A fourth began with the establishment of the Body of Christ. And a fifth will be established at the future establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Some have identified two other relationships (which they unfortunately call “dispensations” or “administrations”) between the fall and the establishment of the law. Dr. Ryrie makes the following observations:

The very fact that it is difficult to find a suitable name to cover the entire economy from the Fall to Moses ought to make one examine carefully the validity of trying to view that entire period as having only one dispensation. It should be apparent that up to the time of Abraham God’s administration concerned all nations, whereas with Abraham He began to single out one nation. Therefore, the distinguishable characteristic of God’s dealing with Abraham in promise seems sufficient to delineate what is often called the dispensation of promise (or of the Patriarchs). (Ryrie, Charles C. *Dispensationalism*. Chicago: Moody Press, pg. 47.)

In another place Dr. Ryrie says,

In viewing the usual sevenfold outline, a question arises as to whether one can distinguish what are called the dispensations of Conscience (from the Fall to Noah) and of Government (from Noah to Abraham). It is quite plausible to consider that Noah lived under the basic stewardship responsibilities instituted after the Fall. . . . However, some distinct and new arrangements were instituted with Noah and mankind after the Flood. To be specific, four are recorded in Genesis 9:1—7. (1) A fear of mankind is put in the heart of animals (v. 2). (2) People are permitted to eat the flesh of animals, whereas prior to that time apparently people were vegetarians (v. 3). (3) the Principle of capital punishment is instituted (v. 6). (4) God binds Himself to a promise of never causing another flood on the earth such as occurred in the time of Noah (vv. 8—17). When one views these four arrangements with mankind after the Flood, they seem to mark off a new economy from God’s viewpoint, a new responsibility from man’s, and they certainly

constitute new truth in the progress of revelation. Therefore, they apparently mark off a new dispensation (Ryrie, pg. 48).⁶

The identification of the steward for each of the seven proposed dispensations is generally straightforward. Adam can most easily be identified as the steward of the first two dispensations. Noah is undoubtedly the steward of the post-flood dispensation, and Abraham was surely the steward of the patriarchal period. As previously stated, Moses is the obvious choice as the steward for the dispensation of law, and Paul identifies himself as the steward of the dispensation of grace. Only the future dispensation of the fullness of times is without a stated steward.

The Dispensation of Grace Distinct from the Tribulation Period

Some confusion exists concerning the dispensational nature of the tribulation period. Ryrie writes, “First, Chafer suggested that the period will be akin to the Mosaic Law and will include a revival of the principles of that economy. . . . The second possibility is that the Tribulation is itself a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose. . . . It seems that the Tribulation with its many judgments is from the dispensational viewpoint the end of the economy of Grace.” (Ryrie, pg. 49-50)

Dr. Ryrie, a man for whom this author has great respect, causes serious confusion in presenting the idea that the tribulation is an extension of the dispensation of grace. His argument is that the tribulation “will also be a time of much salvation. Many Jews and multitudes of Gentiles will come to know the Lord (Rev. 7:9—17). It will be a time during which grace will not be absent but rather manifestly present.” (Ryrie, pg. 50) In other words, because many people will be saved by grace during the tribulation, Dr. Ryrie believes that the dispensation of grace continues.

Dr. Ryrie fails to consistently distinguish between saving grace and living grace. In all fairness, many dispensationalists forget this obvious distinction when dealing with specific dispensational issues. Even Dr. Pentecost seems to indicate in one place that individual salvation under the law was based on the Levitical sacrificial system. He says, “It is thus evident that the salvation offered in the Old Testament was an individual salvation, accepted by faith, *based on blood sacrifice*, which sacrifices were the foreshadows of the true sacrifice to come.” (Pentecost, J. Dwight. *Things to Come*. Pg. 265, emphasis mine) In fact, the blood sacrifice upon which the Old Testament believers salvation was based was the future sacrifice of Christ, not the blood sacrifices of the Levitical system.








What then is the problem? It seems to be a lack of consistent distinction between dispensational grace and dispensational law. Dispensational truth, whether law or grace, does not deal with individual salvation. Dispensational grace is distinct from saving grace. The sacrifices of the law are dispensational in character, not soteriological (with the possible exception of the symbolism of the Passover sacrifice, the establishment which predated the giving of the law). They do not provide a basis for individual salvation, but for continued covenant relationships under the Mosaic code. They are analogous to the means of *maintaining* fellowship, rather than *entering* into a salvation relationship through faith.

⁶ Ryrie may or may not be right in identifying two programs from the fall to Noah, and from Noah to Abraham (though the terms “conscience” and “human government” are certainly questionable as the goods distributed). But he is certainly correct in understanding that a new program began with Abraham. Indeed, one of the distinguishable characteristics was the covenant of circumcision given through Abraham. This covenant identified the means by which an individual entered the Abrahamic household (Genesis 17:9-14). Even the phrase “Dispensation of Promise” is not objectable, as long as one realizes that only refers to the dispensing of the various “covenants of promise” to the household of Abraham, and not to the period of time from Abraham to Moses.

During the tribulation individuals will be saved by grace. But this does not speak to the dispensational relationship. Old Testament individuals were saved by grace, but this did not release them from the obligations of keeping the Mosaic code.

The tribulation period will not be an extension of the dispensation of grace. The dispensational household, the church, will be missing. The household under consideration will be the nation Israel. God will either re-institute the Mosaic law, or He will establish a new household and rule of life which includes some of the Mosaic law's specific elements (keeping the Sabbath, for instance).⁷

Paul's Use of the Word *Steward*

The word *steward* (      ) is also used five times by Paul. Four of the times *steward* is used it has a theological rather than cultural meaning. Two times Paul is referring to himself exclusively in his use of the word *steward*.

Before proceeding, it should be pointed out that nowhere in the New Testament does the word *steward* refer to Christians in general. In two places, Titus 1:7 and 1 Pet. 4:10, Christians are said to be *like* stewards in certain ways. The word *like* indicates that these two authors were using a figure of speech called a *simile*. Christians are never directly called stewards. They are like stewards, but only in certain ways. In Titus 1:7 the word is used exclusively of potential elders in the New Testament assembly, and cannot be broadened in its application. 1 Pet. 4:10, likens all Christians to stewards with reference to using their spiritual gift. It is outside the purpose of this paper to completely analyze these two passages, but a careful study of them will reveal that they are very specialized in application. Nowhere does Scripture say that Christians are stewards of "their time, talent, and tithe," as is so often unscripturally asserted.

When Paul used the word *steward* of himself, he was defending his right to claim theological stewardship over God's dispensational program.

1 Corinthians 4:1-4

"Let no man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord."

In this passage Paul is defending himself against the attack of those who are opposing his ministry of grace. Paul probably uses the editorial plural in this passage. He is referring to himself exclusively, as is clear by verse 4. His dispensational stewardship is not open to judgment by men, including himself. The Lord alone, as the owner of the household, has the right to judge Paul, the steward of this dispensation.

In 1 Corinthians 4:1 Paul mentioned being "stewards of the mystery." The word *mystery* has been used repeatedly in the passages with which we have been dealing. Therefore, before undertaking a final definition of the Dispensation of Grace, we will briefly examine the concept of mystery.

⁷ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the various views of the tribulation and kingdom. However, a normal hermeneutic applied consistently allows only for a pre-tribulational, premillennial view of God's prophetic program. Those who hold other positions generally abandon normal interpretive methods at some point, which of course, they are free to do. But the basis for their conclusions then becomes subjective, even whimsical, which, it seems to this author, is no way to handle Scripture.

The Word *Mystery* in the Greek New Testament

Mystery (μυστήριον) occurs 27 times in the Greek New Testament. In the pagan religions of Paul's day the word was very common. It referred to the "mystery religions" which promised special knowledge for the initiated. According to the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, "Integral to the concept of the mysteries is the fact that those who wish to take part in their celebration must undergo initiation; the uninitiated are denied both access to the sacred actions and knowledge of them" (Kittel, Vol. 4, pg. 804). The word eventually gained the idea of that which was revealed through special revelation.

Perhaps the best passage to catch the meaning of the word in Paul's writings is Romans 16:25: "Now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations..." Paul uses the word clearly in the sense of something previously unrevealed, but that has now been "made manifest." It is now revealed so as to be understandable.

The Dispensation of Grace a Mystery

Colossians 1:25-26 connects the dispensation of God given to Paul with "the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints." The dispensation of grace then was a mystery according to Paul. It was previously unrevealed but has now been revealed to the saints.

One cannot go to the Old Testament writers and learn of this mystery. In fact, according to Paul, as the steward of this dispensation, he himself was the dispenser of this information concerning grace. While grace provision can be seen to have begun on the day of Pentecost in Acts two with the establishment of a new household, knowledge of it waited for Paul's process of dispensation. It must be remembered that the availability of grace provision did not coincide with knowledge of that availability. Until it was revealed to Paul who then dispensed it, this knowledge was kept hidden.

Even Peter, who reluctantly allowed the nations (Gentiles) to be part of the church, did not fully understand the nature of the provision of grace. Thus we have Paul withstanding Peter to his face because he had withdrawn himself from association with the Gentiles (Gal. 2:11-21). The justification in this passage is not the initial justification of salvation, but living the justified life. Peter was attempting to live justly as a Jew when he had already accepted Gentiles as true believers. By withdrawing from the Gentiles, Peter was essentially saying that they must become legal Jews in order to be accepted into the Body of Christ. He was, by his action, confusing households, and thereby confusing dispensational rules of life.

Lest we be too hard on poor Peter, we must remember that it was a difficult thing for a Jew who had been raised under the law to "shift gears." Under the law, Gentiles were outcasts, and not to be associated with, especially when eating, as association around the table was a symbol of fellowship and agreement. Even later in life Peter found Paul's teaching "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). This is probably a reference to the grace elements in Paul's teaching that made Jew and Gentile equal in the new household. Or perhaps more accurately, Paul taught that Christians lost their identity as either Jew or Gentile. For Peter this must have been very difficult, having been raised as a strict Jew from his youth.

It was Paul, the steward of the household, who received revelation the mystery of grace (though not of the household itself, which information was made known through "apostles and prophets" [note plurals]). Ephesians 3 is again relevant. No clearer presentation of all the elements of the dispensational elements can be found that in Ephesians 3:1-7. In verse 4, Paul refers to "the

mystery of the Christ.” This cannot refer the person of Christ, but to the body of Christ, which was previously unrevealed. The apostle is very specific in verse 5 concerning the mystery of the Christ, “Which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets.”

Note the word *now*. Paul is referring to the revelation of the mystery of the new household. *Now* it is being made known, but not before. The “apostles and prophets” refers to New Testament spiritually gifted individuals, not to the Old Testament receivers of revelation.

Even in the early part of the book of Acts, when the body was already in existence, it had not yet been revealed. This explains many of the transitional elements in that book. Again, such an exposition is beyond the scope of this paper. But notice that Luke, writing many years after the events of Acts 1-11, never refers to the term “body of Christ” when referring to the church. The church at that time, in its simplest form, was simply considered to be a assembly of believers. Even when it became evident that Jews and Gentiles would both receive the Holy Spirit, as in the case of Cornelius and his house, it was not clear that a new program was beginning. It took opposition to the Apostle Paul’s ministry for Peter to eventually associate the ministry to Cornelius with Paul’s proclamation to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7-11).

Nevertheless, the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit first took place on the day of Pentecost, and according to 1 Corinthians 12:13, believers were then identified with the Body of Christ. But this identification was from God’s point of view. It certainly was not understood from the point of view of the believers at the time of the events.

It is at this point that both Pentecostalists and “ultra-dispensationalists”⁸ err. Neither group understands the transitional nature of the events in Acts 1-11. But they approach the error differently. Pentecostalists, believing that we must experience the same events as the early church, confuse the baptism of the Spirit prophesied in Acts 1 with the filling of the Spirit as seen in Acts 2 (they are not the only ones confused, as are many Christians concerning this vital area). However, when exegeted

⁸ “Ultra-dispensationalist” is an unfortunate term in that it is perjorative. Someone is “ultra” when they don’t agree with me. The reason that term was coined by Acts 2 dispensationalists was because those who begin the household of the church later in Acts see more than one “church” or “body” in the New Testament. In fact, it would be better to refer to non-Acts 2 dispensationalists by their view point rather than simply label them “ultra.”

Some are “mid-Acts” which means that they believe that the current body begins after Acts 2 but before Acts 28. Different chapters in Acts for the beginning of the new household are proposed, such as Acts 11, Acts 15, and even Acts 24. Another non-Acts 2 view is that of Bullinger and his followers, who see the current household as beginning after Acts 28. They are sometimes referred to as “Acts 28 dispensationalists,” or “post-Acts 28 dispensationalists.”

The one consistent problem that all traditional dispensational views hold, whether they be Acts 2, mid-Acts, or Acts 28, is that they do not understand the nature of the cultural elements of a dispensation, and confuse the existence of the household with the content of the revealed and dispensed goods. As they see it, when the household started the dispensation began (because, the dispensation is, after all, a period of time.) Or else, they reverse it. Because the content of Paul’s preaching included some information that was relevant at the time but no longer relevant, especially the proclamation of the kingdom of God, Paul could not have been proclaiming the dispensation of grace mentioned in Ephesians 3. Therefore, the household of the current body of Christ could not yet be in existence. It is the same problem as the Acts 2 dispensationalist has, but in reverse.

The truth of the matter is, the kingdom proclamation was non-dispensational, as it did not relate to the household life requirement at all. The messianic message of Peter, Stephen, Paul, et. al. was part of the transition between programs, and must be understood in that temporary sense. While there were still Jews who were Old Testament justified believers, especially those outside of Judea who had not heard of the messianic presentation of Jesus of Nazareth, this transitional phase was necessary. When Paul went into a new city, he proclaimed the messianic message in the synagogue, but there is no evidence that he did so to the Gentiles. This transitional messianic message is no longer necessary, as no believing Jews live today, as God views all who are not Christians simply as un-believers.

from the original language, the events of Acts two are clearly seen to be transitional. While unknown to the participants, the events which would finally culminate when Paul's ministry had begun.

The ultra-dispensationalists have a similar error. They also do not recognize the transition clearly, but seeing events that are certainly not to be applied to the church today, they undertake a radical dispensational division. According to their view there are two different bodies of Christ. The first one, for Jews only, began on the day of Pentecost and lasted until sometime in Acts 9, 10, or 11, (or even Acts 28 among the extreme ultra-dispensationalists.) A second body of Christ, to which we today belong, started after Acts 2, and therefore ultra-dispensationalists have an extra "dispensation" in the first part of the Book of Acts. (Ultra-dispensationalists ask the right questions, but through exegetical weakness arrive at the wrong answers. Pentecostals do not even ask the right questions.)

The explanation for this problem lies in understanding the mystery. Even though the household relationship with God changed in Acts 2, the revelation of the new spiritual goods and the dispensing of those goods to that household began much later. In fact, this revelation was progressive, and only when Paul revealed the Body of Christ truth as the steward of this household did all the facts come together.

Recall Peter's experience on the rooftop in Joppa. This was a revelatory act preparing believers for the acceptance of Gentiles into the body. But Peter received no revelation concerning the uniqueness of the church. He still thought of it as a Jewish body that was a continuation of Israel. Peter had learned at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ, Whose ministry was exclusively kingdom oriented. Therefore, Peter was not prepared for the unique character that was to be found in the New Testament Church.

It is this distinction between Israel and the Church which Paul brought to light.

The Dispensation of Grace Not Found in the Gospels

Perhaps no question bothers sincere believers more than the dispensational nature of the Gospels. When told that the Gospels, in general, are not intended to be applied to today, many Christians get genuinely upset and refuse to listen further. This is an unfortunate attitude that is the result of the neglect of dispensational teaching in our churches.

Certainly it is easier to be popular and preach that which people want to hear than the difficult truth of dispensational application. Nevertheless, it is a fact that the dispensational grace is not found in the Gospels, and with only slight exception, the Gospels are not to be applied to the church today. The single exception is the "upper room discourse" found in the Gospel of John, chapters 13-16. Here the Lord is looking forward to His ascension, and predicts the coming of the Holy Spirit. However, even in this passage, no mention is made of the church, the Body of Christ, nor of inclusion of Gentiles in that Body. That dispensational teaching was left for the conversion and subsequent ministry of Paul.

Is this distinction really that important? It is vital for two reasons. First, the gospel program contains material that is designed to minister to a believer under the law program. As such, to mix it with the grace program is to place the believer today under law. Second, the gospel program is directly related to the messianic ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. As such the gospels deal to a great extent with the future earthly kingdom. God's program for that kingdom, while not Mosaic in nature, is still law. Yes, it is law to a redeemed nation made up of believers, but it is law, nonetheless. For a believer today to attempt to apply kingdom material to the Christian life will prove ineffective. Christ's teaching concerning kingdom living will prove frustrating to even the most sincere Christian.

Dispensational Distinctions and the Kingdom of God

Several excellent works have been written concerning the kingdom of God. The student is referred to *The Greatness of the Kingdom* by Alva J. McClain for a complete treatment of the subject. We will make only a few remarks at this time.

The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven

First, the phrases *Kingdom of God* and *Kingdom of Heaven* have caused great debate among Christians in general. Many see the terms as referring to two different kingdoms, while others see them as referring only to the Davidic kingdom which is yet future. The simplest interpretation seems to be the latter. There is no compelling reason to make the Kingdom of God different than the Kingdom of Heaven. But we will leave this discussion for another time. What is relevant to our current discussion is the application of those passages of Scripture which relate to the Davidic kingdom.

The Sermon on the Mount

Kingdom passages fill many pages of the New Testament. Perhaps no passage better illustrates the problem of application than Matthew 5-7. This passage, commonly called “The Sermon on the Mount,” is taken several different ways. As will be seen below, even dispensationalists have approached this passage in two slightly different ways. We provide a short summary of the major interpretations of this passage:

The Various Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount

1. **The Liberal Interpretation** - This interpretation takes the works-salvation approach. It sees certain moral imperatives as being taught. Classical liberals see the “Sermon on the Mount” as a substitute for salvation by grace through faith.
2. **The Anabaptist-Mennonite Interpretation** - This interpretation takes the Sermon to be addressed to the church to be obeyed as law in this dispensation. It replaces the OT Law at a higher moral level. It governs every area of life. This is a moderately literal interpretation, but has problems with certain parts of the sermon which it must allegorize.
3. **The Reformed Interpretation** - The reformed theologian sees a relationship between the Sermon and the ten commandments. It is an exposition of the implications of the “moral law of God” as it is found in the ten commandments. The reformed view holds that we are under the ten commandments, and it distinguishes between the moral and ceremonial law, which is a totally unfounded distinction. The Sermon is frequently allegorized by reformed theologians.
4. **The Present Spiritual Kingdom Interpretation** - This view is represented originally by Denver Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary. It holds that the Sermon is a pattern for life in God’s present spiritual kingdom. This approach, which was at one time very popular but has lost favor with many conservative theologians, deals with the elements of the Sermon in a way similar to the reformed approach, without the legal ramifications of Covenant theology.
5. **The Literal (Dispensational) Interpretation** - This view may be divided into two related, but somewhat distinct approaches:

The Millennial Interpretation - This position views the Sermon as the standard of life in force during the Millennium. The Sermon refers to the nation Israel, and is viewed as a spiritual constitution of the kingdom. It will come into effect when Christ establishes His millennial reign at the end of the tribulation. Some who hold this position tend to apply the teaching of Jesus to today, as does Dr. Walvoord:

“Interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount have varied from the extreme of holding that it is entirely prophetic and not fulfilled before the Second Coming to the other extreme where it is taken as the Gospel message of the way of salvation for the present age. A careful reading of the Sermon on the Mount supports the conclusion that what Christ was dealing with were the ethical principles of the kingdom which will come into play in the future millennial kingdom but to some extent are applicable now. Accordingly, in the Sermon on the Mount there are frequent references to the present and how the principles He is announcing should be applied.”⁹ Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, page 364.

The Tribulational Interpretation - In recent years another view has arisen which sees Matthew 5-7 as applicable not only during the millennium, but as a preparatory guide for those entering the Kingdom. It is therefore viewed as being applicable during the Tribulation period as well as during the Kingdom. This answers the questions of those like Walvoord who see the Sermon as applicable to today. Christ’s present tense references are then viewed as preparatory for His listeners whose next encounter could be with the tribulation period rather than to today.

The Tribulational Interpretation view asks questions such as:

1. Does the Sermon actually reflect a millennial context exclusively? For instance, what need will there be for peacemakers in the Millennium? - 5:9
2. Will believers be reviled and persecuted during the millennium? - 5:10,11
3. Why will the believer need to be delivered from the evil one (Satan) during the millennium? 6:13

From a dispensational point of view, it is better not to apply the Sermon on the Mount to the church at all. As with all other kingdom passages, an understanding of God’s kingdom on the earth as preceded by the tribulation period makes it impossible to apply this teaching without allegorizing it at least to a certain extent.

Many object when favorite passages, such as the beatitudes, are “taken away from them.” They have gotten so used to the allegorizing of these passages that a careful grammatical historical interpretation is hard to bear. When told that these are applicable to Israel exclusively they tend to object strenuously, even to the point of questioning one’s spirituality. However, consider just two of these epigrams.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Unless one is willing to make the “kingdom of heaven” something different than the Jews of Jesus day understood it, this passage is to be applied only to those preparing to enter it. Many say, “Yes, we agree that the

⁹ Dr. Walvoord is imprecise in detailing exactly what passages indicate that certain elements of Christ’s message are to be applied to the church. In fact, in order to do what Dr. Walvoord suggests, one must either allegorize or spiritualize those passages from the Sermon which one wishes to apply.

interpretation is for those preparing to enter the kingdom, but can we not apply it to today?" This is based on the old notion that a single passage of Scripture may have only one interpretation but many applications. This is an unfounded notion, however, and is not used in any normal approach to communication. As often as not, the idea of multiple applications is simply a ploy to apply the passage *apart from its correct interpretation*. Other than wishful thinking, there is no reason to apply this passage to believers today.

The third beatitude is particularly difficult to interpret correctly and apply to the church. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." To a Jew of Jesus' day, "the earth" referred not to the world as we know it, but to the land of promise. Again, this statement looks forward to the second coming of Christ and the establishment of Israel in the land. It is truly a "kingdom promise," and not to be applied to the church, the members of which will never "inherit the earth."

A Definition of the Word *Dispensation*

Many definitions of the word *dispensation* have been forwarded, some totally inadequate, others considerably better. C. I. Scofield, a great pioneer in the presentation of dispensational truth, provides this definition, "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" (*The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1945), 5). As has been previously noted, this definition tends to confuse an age and a dispensation. Furthermore, it does not provide an adequate understanding of the cultural milieu from which the term *dispensation* arises.

A somewhat better definition is given by Dr. Ryrie, "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose (Ryrie, Charles Caldwell, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965) 29. However, Dr. Ryrie does not present the cultural dynamics of the word, a great weakness in the definition in this author's opinion. In fact, the use of the word "economy" in the definition of the word dispensation is unfortunate, as it is actually a transliteration of the Greek word. A dispensation (*oikonomia*) is not the same thing as an "economy" today.

We define the word dispensation as a process of distribution of a revealed relationship between God (the householder) and part or all of mankind, designated a household, as revealed through an individual, designated a steward. The relationship is the "descriptive element" of the dispensation, and is referred to by words such as "law" or "grace."

Whether one holds to seven households, or fewer or more, does not seem to be the issue. The important element, from the point of view of believers today, is not how many dispensations or households do you hold, but how do you apply material for households other than the household of the church? A biblical dispensationalist believes that information presented to individuals in other households is not to be applied to the church. This is not to say that no information written during the Old Testament period is without application to mankind today, because not every passage has dispensational/household significance. The revealed, dispensed goods, refer to the rule of life that relates the householder to the individuals making up the household. Other revelation does not change that relationship, and is, therefore, "non-dispensational" in character.

Since some passages of Scripture are not specifically dispensational in character, they may be applied more broadly. Passages from the Proverbs, and certain Psalms have a broader application than simply to Israel. However, it is evident from the context of these applicable passages that they are general and not specific. And unless such generality is made clear from the context, it is best not to apply a passage to the church, even from the Psalms or Proverbs. Most of the Old Testament is not intended to be brought forward. The exceptions to this, while numerous, do not give the interpreter of Scripture the right to apply before he has correctly interpreted the material he is considering.

Another aspect of this problem involves the “principle” idea. Some argue that, while we may not interpret a particular passage with reference to the church, the passage teaches a “general principle” which may be applied. The danger in this approach can be clearly seen. The temptation is to search for an “applicable principle” even when none can be easily discerned. As a general rule of thumb, it is best not to apply a principle from a passage *unless it can be shown that it was the intention of the original author, as seen from the immediate context, to lay down a principle to be taken as referring to all men.*

Conclusion

It has been goal of this brief paper to present the student with a simple, straightforward discussion of some of the issues dealing with the words *dispensation* and *steward*. Biblical dispensationalism is basic to a correct application of Scripture. The doctrine will provide many rich hours for study for the serious student of the Word of God.

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