

A Basic Idea with a Big Name

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In our chaotic world, changes bombard us almost constantly. Governments fall and rise with disturbing regularity. With each new administration comes new ways of doing things, although the basics of the society unusually remain unchanged.

Iran provides us with a recent, dramatic illustration. It has been painfully obvious that those now in power are very different from the old order, even though the country's dominant religion is still Islam.

On a personal level, prices change at the gas station or supermarket almost weekly. Just recently, I and other property owners in Dallas received the jolting news of a 100 percent property tax assessment--a new era for my tax bill! These changes help us to understand more fully a very common principle of life--dispensationalism.

In the New Testament, dispensation means to manage or administer the affairs of a household, as, for example, in the Lord's story of the unfaithful steward in Luke 16:1-13 (Bauer, Arndt, & Gingrich, Greek Lexicon).

In theology, 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" (The Oxford English Dictionary). But the concept is not only theological, it is also common to many aspects of life.

First, it is a religious concept. The Roman Catholic Church bases the granting of dispensation on the Code of Canon Law. That Code defines it as "a relaxation of the law in a particular case: it can be granted by the legislator, by his successor in office, by a superior legislator and by a person delegated by the foregoing" (Canon 80). For example, the Church sometimes grants a special dispensation in the annulment of a marriage. The person receiving the dispensation may then remarry and remain in good standing in the Catholic Church. In this usage, the dispensation grants an exemption from normal procedures.

Other more common occasions also illustrate the exemption idea of a dispensation. For example, you have been counseling all week at a church camp whose regulations provide for lights out at, say, 11:00 p.m. Now it's Friday, and your campers will return home tomorrow. Tonight will be filled with many "last" things--the last service, the last snacks, the last talks with new and old friends, and the last lights out. Realizing all that is involved in a last night, you suggest to the camp director that he make lights out later. He agrees, and says, "I'll give you a special dispensation tonight. Lights out will be at midnight."

So as a camp counselor or director, you have probably had a dispensational experience!

Second, it is an economic concept. The New Testament Greek word translated "dispensation" actually spells out "economy" in English. A dispensation is an economy, a "system of arrangement or mode of operation of something."

When I studied in Great Britain I had an experience that alerted me to these economic differences between countries. I became ill, and since I was a student at a university, I went to the health service. The doctor gave me some instructions and a prescription to be filled. I took it to the chemist (drug

store), and when I started to pay for it I discovered it cost only a shilling (about twenty cents in those days). I couldn't believe my ears, for I had never bought any medicine in the United States for twenty cents. Suddenly it dawned on me that I was living in a country that had socialized medicine.

For the sake of illustration, let's assume that in those days Britain was a socialistic society and the United States a capitalistic one. Of course, there were capitalistic features in Britain and socialistic features in the United States, but in the total picture there were enough differences to distinguish the two economies. You may have flown to Britain on a British government-owned airline (the United States owns none). You traveled within the country on British Railways. You received medical assistance through the National Health Service. There were obvious differences.

But there were also some similarities. Both countries had social security. Each had some government-owned utilities. Both capitalism and socialism use money, both have private and public ownership, both have laws (some of them exactly the same), but each economy is distinct. And when you move from one to the other you are aware of the economic or dispensational differences.

Third, it is a social concept. White shoes for men in summer go in and out of style. But sometimes even in the same summer it is fashionable to wear them in certain parts of the country and not in others.

I learned this dispensational distinction the hard way. White shoes were the rage in Texas that summer, but not in California. So there I was speaking to hundreds of preachers in California, wearing my white shoes. I think only one other person in the entire audience also had on a pair. These differences in social arrangements make up the basic concept of dispensationalism. The person who fails to recognize the differences just isn't being realistic.

Dispensationalism is a family concept. All parents raise their children according to dispensational arrangements. When a child is small, bedtime, for instance, is at seven o'clock. As the youngster grows, bedtime is changed to eight. The teenager receives special privileges, especially on weekends. To put a teenager under the rules that are necessary and appropriate for a child would be a disaster, and vice versa.

At the same time, many things are the same for all ages. We teach children and teenagers not to lie. We incorporate a law forbidding stealing at every stage in child development. In other words, some particulars are always the same; some are similar though not exactly the same; and some change completely.

Families are reared this way, and God has governed His world differently at different times. Those different arrangements throughout the progress of history are the dispensations.

Fifth, it is a theological concept. Dispensationalists are often accused of foisting a concept on the Bible rather than deriving it from the Bible. It is alleged that dispensation is never used in the way dispensationalism uses it. But that simply is not true.

To be sure, not all the New Testament uses of dispensation (there are twenty) refer to a specific dispensation. Sometimes it refers to the steward who manages a household (Luke 16:1, 3, 8; 1 Cor. 4:1, 2). In Romans 16:23 Erastus is called the city treasurer ("dispenser"). Sometimes the word is translated stewardship, administration, or dispensation, and in some of those instances it does refer to a specific dispensation of the dispensational scheme.

For instance, Paul wrote of a dispensation in which God would make Jews and Gentiles equal members of the same body of Christ, an idea unknown in Old Testament times (Eph. 3:6). That arrangement, which exists now, stands in sharp contrast to the former arrangement He had with Israel. Thus, two different dispensations are visible within God's program--one in which He dealt mainly with the Jews, and one in which believing Jews and Gentiles have equal standing in the body of Christ.

In the same epistle Paul also wrote of an administration suitable to the fullness of times, a reference to the new arrangement of the coming millennial kingdom (Eph. 1:10). So at least three dispensations are specifically referred to in Scripture, and the word itself is used of them.

Do these clearly marked administrations point to a procedure by which God has been governing the household of His world throughout time? Apparently so. Certainly there were different arrangements before and after the fall of man in Genesis 3. If so, then four administrations are clearly evident--that before the Fall, that after the Fall until the time of Christ, the Christian, and the coming millennial kingdom.

But the giving of the Mosaic law introduced a different arrangement whereby God centered his attention on one nation and governed it by His special direction. Since that is so, then five dispensations are clearly distinguished in Scripture. It only remains to decide if God's directions to Noah after the Flood introduced enough new arrangements to mark out a new administration, and if the call of Abraham did also. Five administrations appear to be the minimum number that can be seen in the progress of revelation, and seven the maximum.

Dispensationalism is an interpretive necessity. Without this recognition of the different ways God has governed the world, consistent interpretation of the Bible becomes impossible. Let me cite a few examples.

When the Lord commissioned His disciples the first time, He restricted the scope of their mission to the Jews only. His instructions were clear: "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5-6).^{*} Later, the same Lord recommissioned the same group (minus Judas) as recorded in the same Gospel and changed the scope of their mission to include all nations (Matt. 28:19). Everyone knows this Great Commission; we use it in every missionary conference. Why do we not use the other Great Commission? Can you imagine a banner over the front of a church during its annual missionary conference boldly declaring, "Do NOT Go To the Gentiles"?! Why not? It's biblical. These are even the words of Christ.

At this same first commissioning, Luke records that the Lord instructed the disciples not to take any money (Luke 9:3). But just before His death He reminded them of those previous instructions and then changed them to include taking money and even a sword (Luke 22:36).

Of course the answer to these opposite commands is simply that the earlier commission was given during an administration which focused on the Jewish nation only, while the later one was for that new dispensation inaugurated after Christ's death which offers the grace of God to all people.

Our Lord once gave a command I do not believe I have ever seen obeyed. He told His followers to pray that "your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath" (Matt. 24:20). In the hundreds of prayer meetings I have attended, I have never heard that prayer prayed. Why not? It is commanded by the Lord. Of course, we instinctively sense that it pertains to a different arrangement of things than exists today. And it does. It relates to the tribulation days when the people of Jerusalem will need to flee that city as quickly as possible in order not to lose their lives in the persecution of Antichrist. If their flight has to be on a Sabbath it will be considerably more difficult, since most public transportation ceases on the Sabbath in Israel. In that yet future day, that prayer will be a very important one to pray. Today it is totally unnecessary.

Other illustrations, especially those that distinguish aspects of the Old Testament law from standards today, abound. God forbade His people under the administration of the Mosaic law to eat many meats (Lev. 11). In a striking way God told Peter that He had under the new arrangement cleansed all those animals

which were formerly forbidden, and that he should eat their meat (Acts 10:13, 15). Paul also wrote that no food "is to be rejected" (1 Tim. 4:4).

People under the Mosaic law had to use Levitical priests in their worship of God. Today we have a priest who was unqualified under that law since our Lord was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi. To have Christ as high priest requires a change of the law under which He serves as our priest. The writer to the Hebrews makes that quite clear: "For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also" (Heb. 7:12). The old dispensation would not allow Christ to be a ministering priest; the new dispensation had to replace the old if our Lord was to serve as our priest.

No interpreter can consistently and plainly interpret these opposites unless he recognizes administrative changes in God's government of the world. So, it is not odd to be a dispensationalist--it is necessary if one is to interpret consistently and faithfully Scripture as God intended it to be understood.

If one does interpret the Bible this way, will it mean that he cuts out some of its parts? Not at all. Actually, the Bible comes alive as never before. There is no need to dodge the plain meaning of a passage or to reinterpret or spiritualize it in order to resolve conflicts with other passages. God's commands and standards for me today become even more distinct, and His program with its unfolding splendor falls into a harmonious pattern. The history of dispensationalism is replete with men and women who love the Word of God and promote its study, and who have a burden for spreading the gospel to all the world.

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