

# “Dispensation” Biblically Defined: A Consideration of the NT Usage of the Greek Term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία)

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**T**hroughout church history, Christians have used the term “dispensation” (Gr.: οἰκονομία) to convey a range of ideas pertaining to God’s administration of the earth throughout time. This is no less true today, despite the vast proliferation of the conservative theological movement that arose within fundamentalist Christian circles over the past two centuries, known as “dispensational theology” or “dispensationalism.” Nevertheless, even among those who identify as “dispensationalists,” no singularly accepted definition has been agreed upon which both defines and delimits its theological usage. The purpose of this paper is to draw meaning directly from the biblical text, as compared against Second Temple period and early Christian literature, and to observe how the Greek terms οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία were understood within their cultural-historical framework at the time when they were employed by Jesus and the apostles as compared against Second Temple period and early Christian literature, and how they have come to be understood in contemporary theological usage by evangelicals.

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## “Dispensation” and the Problem of Definition

The problem of definition is not a recent one for those inquiring into the biblical and theological usage of the term “dispensation.” Lewis Sperry Chafer observed this in the opening words of an article published in *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1936:

A controversy among orthodox theologians over dispensational distinctions is not new. Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) wrote: “There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines so much differ as the stating of the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ” (Edwards Works I, 100). But this discussion, as is often the case, has suffered much for want of definition.<sup>3</sup>

Decades later, Charles Ryrie did not regard the risk of overstating the problem of definition when he wrote: “There is no more primary problem in the whole matter of dispensationalism than that of definition. By this is meant not simply arriving at a single sentence definition of the word but also formulating a definition/description of the concept.”<sup>4</sup>

In his book *The Origins of Dispensationalism: the Darby Factor*, Larry Crutchfield added to this observation when he wrote: “While there is no lack of definitions, there is lack of agreement upon those proposed.”<sup>5</sup> The reason for this, he suggested, is that dispensationalism deals with complex theological concepts that are not well suited for a succinct definition, noting: “almost any brief definition is in for a certain amount of criticism.”<sup>6</sup> While this is undeniable, Ryrie’s observation holds true that almost everyone who uses the term has different nuanced ideas that they would prefer to see either

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensationalism” in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 93 no 372 (Oct-Dec 1936): 390.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism, Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: University P of America, 1992), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Crutchfield, *Origens*, 24.

included or excluded, so that it more closely aligns with their theological concept. Dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists are equally guilty of this. For these reasons, no singular agreed upon definition exists to describe the biblical/theological concept of a “dispensation.”

Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 354-430) was by no means among the earliest figures to use the term “dispensation” in its theological sense. However, his usage of the term in the Patristic Era did not differ substantially from those who employed it before him when he wrote:

The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now. For the change suitable to the present age has been enjoined by God, who knows infinitely better than man what is fitting for every age, and who is, whether He give or add, abolish or curtail, increase or diminish, the unchangeable Governor as He is the unchangeable Creator of mutable things, ordering all events in His providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, the component parts of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some ineffably wise master of song, and those pass into the eternal immediate contemplation of God who here, though it is a time of faith, not of sight, are acceptably worshipping Him.

They are mistaken, moreover, who think that God appoints these ordinances for His own advantage or pleasure; and no wonder that, being thus mistaken, they are perplexed, as if it was from a changing mood that He ordered one thing to be offered to Him in a former age, and something else now. But this is not the case. God enjoins nothing for His own advantage, but for the benefit of those to whom the injunction is given.<sup>7</sup>

In so many words, the patristic writer seems to have endeavored to communicate a theological concept that would not

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<sup>7</sup> St. Augustine, “Letter of St. Augustine to Marcellinus (Let. CXXXVIII – A.D. 412)” in *The Works of Aurelius Augustine: Letters*, v. 2, 198.

differ radically from the more succinct definition offered by Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, who wrote nearly fifteen hundred years later: “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.”<sup>8</sup> However, Scofield’s definition follows immediately with the statement: “Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture,”<sup>9</sup> revealing a particular nuance of his definition, differing from many who had gone before as well as come after him. However, that Scofield was by no means the first to divide scriptural history into seven distinct periods is a point beyond any dispute.<sup>10</sup>

Those who identify as Covenantal and Reformed have typically regarded as few as three or four dispensations,<sup>11</sup> along with numerous evangelicals, some of whom have chosen to be identified by the label “progressive dispensationalist.”<sup>12</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, there have been those who have suggested an excess of twelve dispensations, conceiving even of dispensations that exist in eternity.<sup>13</sup> Although seven dispensations have been generally agreed—though not insisted—

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<sup>8</sup> C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1909), 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> The earliest of these can be traced back to the first century, with the Epistle of Barnabas’s scheme of creation week offering a model for all of human history (Barn 15:3-5). A list of other early Christian adherents might include: Papias (AD 60 – 163), Melito of Sardis (died c. 180), Theophilus of Antioch (died 183 – 185), Tertullian (c. 155 – c. 240), Commodianus (c. AD 250), Lactantius (c. 250 – 325), Methodius (died c. 311), Hippolytus of Rome (AD 170 – 235), Victorinus of Pettau (died 303-304), and various Gnostic groups including the Montanists.

<sup>11</sup> Without enumerating the specific number, the Westminster Confession of Faith in 1646 referenced “various dispensations” (VII.VI).

<sup>12</sup> Blaising and Bock suggest a moderate dispensational scheme that includes “four primary dispensations in biblical history,” which include Patriarchal, Mosaic, Ecclesial, and Zionic (Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* [Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993], 123).

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Cone has expressed, “12 divisions most suitably represent the Biblical narrative” (Christopher Cone, “Dispensational Definition & Division Revisited” in *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond: A Theological Collection in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie*, ed. Christopher Cone (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary P, 2008), 150).

upon, by most traditional dispensationalists, identifying those several dispensations has been a topic of much disputation. Scofield presented the most broadly accepted division in his 1909 study Bible consisting of innocence, conscience, human government, promise, law, grace, and the kingdom.<sup>14</sup> Dallas Theological Seminary founder Lewis Sperry Chafer followed by Ryrie, Walvoord, and their Dallas Seminary colleagues followed this popular pattern during the mid-to-late twentieth century. The division of these dispensations bore subtle differences from those conceived in the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup>

Suffice it to say, the term “dispensation” has meant different things to different people over the course of church history. While the term has carried different shades of meaning depending on the theologian, virtually all of them share the same general sense of seeking to distinguish various dealings of God with mankind throughout the progress of history. For the purposes of this article, several of these nuances will be set aside, as the chief concern before us is to ascertain how the Greek terms οἰκονομία and οἰκονόμος were understood within their cultural-historical framework at the time they were employed by Jesus and the apostles.

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<sup>14</sup> See *Scofield Reference Bible*, 5, 10, 16, 20, etc.

<sup>15</sup> John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and James Brooks (1830-1897) both regarded seven distinct periods, though their divisions of biblical history differed slightly from Scofield’s, as well as from each other’s. Darby regarded the dispensation beginning with Noah as the first, leaving the antediluvian age aside, effectively dismissing what others have regarded as the first two dispensations. He made up for this by conceiving of two distinct dispensations within what has commonly been regarded as the dispensation of grace—one Jewish and the other Gentile. This division has been recognized by a number of dispensationalists who identify with the label “hyper-“ or “ultra-dispensationalists” such as E. W. Bullinger, Cornelius Stam, et al. James Brooks also maintained Darby’s distinction of a “Messianic” and “Holy Ghost” dispensation within the Christian era, though by not distinguishing between the Noahic (human government) and Abrahamic (promise) eras, he still arrived at seven dispensations.

## “Dispensation” According to Jesus

The Greek word translated “dispensation” in many English Bibles is *οἰκονομία*. It has also been translated in our English Bibles as “administration,” or “stewardship”—all of which convey the same basic idea of the management of an economy.<sup>16</sup> It is in the most fundamental sense of the word that Jesus first employed this term while teaching in Judea. In Luke’s record, Jesus admonishes his disciples to be watchful and ready for his coming, saying: “Blessed are those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down and eat, and will come and serve them . . . . Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect” (Luke 12:37, 40). Following this, Jesus added: “Who then is that faithful and wise steward [*οἰκονόμος*], whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season?” (Luke 12:42), which is the first recorded usage of the term *οἰκονόμος* in the Greek NT.

Several observations can be made from the immediate context of Jesus’ usage of the word *οἰκονόμος*: First, it occurs within the context of the management of a household. This is the most fundamental sense of the word, since the etymology of the word *οἰκονόμος* reveals it to be a compound of two nouns *οἶκος* meaning “home” or “household” and *νόμος* meaning “law” or “rule.” Therefore, *οἰκονόμος* could be literally translated as “house-governor” or “house-administrator”<sup>17</sup>—although “manager” or “steward” are equally sufficient. In this parable of Jesus, the steward is appointed as overseer of a household.

The second observation from the immediate context is the steward was appointed by the master of the household. Extending

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<sup>16</sup> The English word “economy” is etymologically derived from the Latin *oeconomia*, which is transferred almost directly from this Greek term which appears in the Greek NT seven times as *οἰκονομία*.

<sup>17</sup> Strong’s entry 3623 *οἰκονόμος* offers the term “house-distributor” as a possible alternative (James Strong, , *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).

the theme of the term's most basic usage, the master is not only implied, he is identified in the parable as the one to whom the household belongs. This relationship of the steward to both the owner and the household further emphasizes the traditional historical-cultural usage of the word. In a sense, the steward is under the master and yet over the household. The household is not the possession of the steward; rather, the steward serves in a supervisory role as appointed by the master, and that for only a season.

This brings a third observation: the steward dispenses the master's goods. The steward does not dispense that which is his own, but rather he apportions to the household the goods which belong to the master of the house. Thus, there is a specific portion out from the greater measure of the master's possessions that are distributed to the household through the hands of the designated steward or household servant.

The fourth observation that can be made is the stewardship is temporary. The stewardship is not perpetual; it had a beginning and will have an end. Whereas stewards may come or go, the household seems to retain a direct relationship to the master that is not dependent on the relationship of the steward.

A fifth observation is: that the faithfulness of a steward must be judged. This builds upon the previous point of the temporary nature of a stewardship but adds a finer tip that emphasizes the aspect of judgment. In other words, a steward will have to give an account for his stewardship to the master, and will be judged accordingly, based on his faithfulness or lack thereof.

Finally, a sixth point that can be discerned from the immediate context is the setting for the illustration involves a transition in the master's administration. Specifically, Jesus is offering the parable to illustrate the occasion of the future return of the Son of Man, which will result in a judgment and, presumably, a turn-over in administrations at the end of the present age. For this reason, Jesus told his disciples: "Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (Luke 12:40).

Although each of the six points provided above are evident from the context of the twelfth chapter of Luke, the reader of the New Testament is not limited to this single discourse in seeking

to discern features of Jesus' usage of the term "dispensation." Luke observed Jesus' tendency to incorporate the topic of "dispensations" into his teaching on more than one occasion, with remarkable similarity between each usage. Case in point: Jesus' second occasion for the word is not unlike his first.

During his Perea ministry, Jesus addressed his disciples saying: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward [οἰκονόμος], and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship [οἰκονομία], for you can no longer be steward [οἰκονομέω]'" (Luke 16:1-2). These introductory verses set the context for Jesus' usage of "dispensation," though he continues to build upon the illustration throughout his discourse to the disciples. Jesus' usage of the term here, in Luke 16, while teaching in Perea, is in every point consistent with his previous usage of the term in Judea, as recorded in Luke 12.

Several observations are evident from the context of Luke 16: (1) it occurs within the context of the management of a household; (2) the steward was appointed by the master of the household; (3) the steward dispenses the master's goods; (4) the stewardship is temporary; (5) the faithfulness of a steward will be judged; and (6) the setting for the illustration involves a transition in the master's administration. This sixth point is no less prominent here than it was in Luke 12. It is within the context of this discourse that Jesus offers the famous statement: "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10), to which he adds: "Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to you the truest riches" (Luke 16:11).

With the addition of this clause, Jesus implies that there will be a dispensation following the present one, in which a truer "goods" will be dispensed to the master's household. However, this statement is not merely a continuation of the parabolic illustration, but an application which Jesus draws directly into the disciples' earthly ministry. The question of whether this application can be drawn beyond the immediate audience of Jesus' disciples is answered in Jesus' reply to Peter's previous

query: “Lord, do You speak this parable only to us, or to all people?” To this, Jesus responded: “Who then is that faithful and wise steward [οἰκονόμος], whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has” (Luke 12:42-44).

### **Socio-Historical Context and Early Christian Usage of “Dispensation”**

Jesus’ usage of “dispensation” was in no way a departure from the normal socio-historical context of his day. The Greek terms οἰκονόμος and οἰκονομία were common to the Hellenistic world and would have been well understood by the Jewish people in first-century Judea and the surrounding regions.<sup>18</sup> The concept, however, is not original to Hellenistic culture. It can be seen to stretch back at least as far as the Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt (c. 2000-1700 B.C.)<sup>19</sup> as evidenced by the Genesis account of Joseph as the appointed steward over Potiphar’s house:

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. And Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him down there. The Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord *was* with him and that the Lord made all he did to prosper in his hand. So Joseph found favor in his sight, and served him. Then he made

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<sup>18</sup> Kittel notes that the Greek word οἰκονόμος is “used like οἰκοδεσπότης for the ‘steward’ attested from Asech[ylus]. Xenoph[on]. Oec[onomica (Aristotle)] .... οἰκονόμος can thus be the one in charge of separate branches of a household, ‘steward,’ ‘inspector of goods,’ ‘chief cook,’ etc.” (*TDNT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 5:149).

<sup>19</sup> If *ISBE* is to be relied upon, it reads: “At present, the total available evidence favors dating the patriarchs in the early part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C. –ca. 1900-1700 B.C.” (“Joseph” in *ISBE*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982], 2: 1130).

him overseer of his house, and all that he had he put under his authority. (Gen 29:1-4)

Though Joseph would later cross paths with Potiphar's wife and suffer unjustly, God would no less reward his faithfulness by appointing him to be faithful over much in the house of none other than Pharaoh, himself:

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." (Gen 41:39-41)

In this way, the task of the distribution of food from Pharaoh's granaries was delegated to Joseph as the steward over all of Egypt. The biblical narrative portrays Joseph as the quintessential steward who is justly rewarded for his faithfulness over the master's household. Kittel is therefore quite correct to observe: "Close study of both the Gk. And Heb. Is needed to fix the precise sense,"<sup>20</sup> since the illocutionary force of the term "dispensation," throughout all of Scripture points to God as the true master, and mankind as his household. "Thus God is a householder, for the whole world is His, v. Ps. 24:1; and Moses is His steward, v. Nu. 12:7: He is trustworthy in all my house (cf. Hb. 3:1-6)."<sup>21</sup>

While the socio-historical context of a steward or household manager stretches as far back as Genesis and cuts across cultures and languages throughout the ancient world, the concept seems to have largely retained its meaning in the Hellenistic era as evidenced by the Second Temple literature.<sup>22</sup> Senior Lecturer Dotan Leshem from the School of Political Science at the

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<sup>20</sup> *TDNT*, 5:149.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Kittel notes that "the word is used in the LXX, for אֲשֶׁר עַל-הַבַּיִת in (3 βασιλ. 4:6; 16:9; 18:3; 4 βασιλ. 18:18, 37; 19:2; Is 36:3, 22; 37, 2), for רַב בַּיִת (Est. 1:8), or פְּקֻדָּה (Est. 8:9)" (*TDNT*, 5:149).

University of Haifa, Israel, has written a few articles on this subject. In an article titled “What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by *οἰκονομία*?” he noted that the first occurrence of the root word for *οἰκονομία* traces back to a poem by Phocylides in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere, he had previously observed that it was the classical Greek historian-philosopher Xenophon (c. 435-354 BC) who was the first to propose a definition, identifying it as “the management and dispensation of a household.”<sup>24</sup> Xenophon identified several features which bear significance on how the term is employed in the Greek NT: (1) he regarded “the *oikos* as the totality of one’s property”<sup>25</sup>—this is entirely consistent with the biblical usage; and (2) “Xenophon conceptualized *οἰκονομία* as the knowledge (both theoretical and practical) or prudently conducting people and things so as to generate wealth” and specifically “the generation of surplus.”<sup>26</sup>

With this feature in mind, it may be seen that Jesus’ famous “Parable of the Talents” recorded in Matthew (25:14-30) as well as the corresponding “Parable of the Minas” found in Luke’s account (19:11-27), both carry strong socio-historical features that correlate directly to Jesus’ teachings on the theme of *οἰκονομία*. Though the term does not appear in either of those passages, the context and content of those parables make the connection unmistakable. In both parables the kingdom is likened to a rich man who gathers his servants and disperses his goods to them, with the intention that they would invest their master’s goods and yield an increase. Between the two parables different numbers of servants are called and different amounts are distributed; however, all of the servants are similarly judged based on their management of their master’s goods, upon his return. Subsequently, each one received his due recompense

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<sup>23</sup> Dotan Leshem, “What Did the Ancient Greeks Mean by *Oikonomia*” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 30, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 227.

<sup>24</sup> Dotan Leshem, “*Oikonomia* Redefined” in *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 35, no. 1 (March 2013): 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

based on the surplus he had generated—or failed to generate—for the master during the period of his absence.

Despite the absence of the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) in the two parables found in Matthew 25 and Luke 19, each of the six features mentioned above are clearly present: (1) They occur within the context of the management of a household; (2) The stewards were appointed by the master of the household; (3) The stewards managed the master’s goods; (4) Their stewardship was temporary; (5) The faithfulness of each of the stewards was judged; and (6) Both parables were set against a backdrop involving a transition in economies with the present dispensation giving way to a subsequent kingdom dispensation.

That a subsequent dispensation is in mind is evidenced by the fact that the master, having received his kingdom said to the faithful steward, “Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities” (Luke 19:17). Thus, as opposed to simply being rewarded with ease and comfort, the faithful steward is rewarded with an even greater stewardship.

That the meanings of οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) remained relatively fixed throughout the Second Temple period is evidenced by its usage throughout the LXX, where in the days of King Solomon, Achisar and Eliac were named as “stewards” in the king’s household, among others who were appointed over the family and over the tribute (3 Bas 4:6), just as in the days when Bassa was King over the ten tribes of Israel, Oso was identified as “steward” at Thersa (3 Bas 16:9). In total, the word οἰκονόμος appears more than a half dozen times between the Books of Kings and another half dozen in Isaiah and Esther—all in agreement with the usage that has been identified above. However, the most noteworthy comparison to draw from the LXX usage of *oikonom(-os/-ia)* is found in Isaiah, with the pronouncement of the judgment of Shebna (Isa 22:15-25):

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Go into the chamber, to Somnas the treasurer, and say to him, Why art thou here? And what hast thou to do here, that thou hast here hewn thyself a sepulcher, and madest thyself a sepulcher on high, and hast graven for thyself a dwelling

in the rock? Behold now, the Lord of hosts casts forth and will utterly destroy *such* a man, and will take away thy robe and thy glorious crown, and will cast thee into a great and unmeasured land, and there thou shalt die: and he will bring thy fair chariot to shame, and the house of thy prince to be trodden down. And thou shalt be removed from thy stewardship [τῆς οἰκονομίας], and from thy place. And it shall come to pass in that day, that I will call my servant Eliakim the son of Chelcias: and I will put on him thy robe, and I will grant him thy crown with power, and I will give thy stewardship [τὴν οἰκονομίαν] into his hands: and he shall be as a father to them that dwell in Jerusalem, and to them that dwell in Juda. And I will give him the glory of David; and he shall rule, and there shall be none to speak against him: and I will give him the key of the house of David *upon* his shoulder; and he shall open, and there shall be none to shut; and he shall shut, and there shall be none to open. And I will make him a ruler in a sure place, and he shall be for a glorious throne of his father's house. And every one that is glorious in the house of his father shall trust in him, from the least to the greatest; and they shall depend upon him in that day. Thus saith the Lord of hosts, The man that is fastened in the sure place shall be removed and be taken away, and shall fall; and the glory that is upon him shall be utterly destroyed: for the Lord has spoken it.<sup>27</sup>

What is remarkable about this passage is how closely it parallels the contexts of Jesus' usage of οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία). Somnas the treasurer has proven himself to be an unfaithful steward who has "buried" his proverbial talent in a hewn rock. Thus, his stewardship is being stripped from him and given to another.<sup>28</sup> The other parallels between this prophecy and Jesus' parables are unmistakable (Cf. Luke 16:1-12; 19:11-27; Matt 8:10-12; Matt 25:14ff). Therefore, it can be concluded that the

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<sup>27</sup> Isaiah 22:15-25, LXX in *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English*, ed. Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 856.

<sup>28</sup> Compare Esther 8, where Haman's stewardship is stripped from him and given to faithful Mordecai. Within this context (Esth 8:9) we find one of the LXX usages of "steward" [τοῖς οἰκονόμοις].

usage of the terms οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) were maintained throughout the Second Temple period. That it continued into the early Christian era is corroborated by a host of extra-biblical sources, as evidenced by the *Tebtunis Papyri* (AD 172).<sup>29</sup> Thus, the word translated into our English Bibles as “steward,” “stewardship,” “administration,” and “dispensation,” have a generally fixed meaning that is not difficult to discern. A survey of the Second Temple literature before, and the early Christian literature afterward, both confirm that Jesus’ usage of the terms in question did not vary from the meanings that were common to the Judeo-Roman world in the first century.

### “Dispensation” According to the Apostles

Up to this point there is little cause for debate, and one may be left wondering why there is any strife among biblical interpreters concerning this topic. However, a consideration of the Apostle Paul’s usage of the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία) may emerge as a point of contention among Christians of diverse theological orientations. This is because of the metaphorical sense in which the Apostle to the Gentiles used the term οἰκονόμος to uniquely identify himself as a steward appointed by God over the household of the church, which he termed τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ “the dispensation of the grace of God” (Eph 3:2). This usage occurs within the context of his epistle to the Gentile believers residing in Ephesus:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles—if indeed you have heard of the dispensation [τὴν οἰκονομίαν] of the grace of God which was given to me for you,

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<sup>29</sup> Moulton and Milligan note, “In its literal sense of ‘steward,’ ‘manager of an estate’ (as in Luke 12:42, 1 Cor 4:2) is found in P Tebt II. 402:1 (A.D. 172) Μαρτι [...] οἰκονόμῳ φλανίας Ἐπιμάχης κα[ὶ] τῶν πρότερον Ἰουλίας Καλλινίδος παρὰ Διδύμου οἰκοδόμου, ‘to Mart ..., steward of Flavia Epimache and of the property formerly belonging to Julia Kallinis, from Didymus, builder.’” (“οἰκονόμος” in *Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*, ed. J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 442-43.

how that by revelation He made known to me the mystery (as I have briefly written already, by which, when you read, you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ), which in other ages was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to His holy apostles and prophets: that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power.

To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all see what is the fellowship [ἡ οἰκονομία] of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages has been hidden in God who created all things through Jesus Christ; to the intent that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places, according to the eternal purpose which He accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph 3:1-11)

In this passage the Apostle uses the familiar term “dispensation” to distinguish the context of his ministry toward the Gentiles in the current age, as contrasted against previous ages. This contrast is important because Paul is clear that the present working of God’s Spirit among the Gentiles was an altogether foreign thing and imperceptible, even to the prophets of old. This would not have been the first time Paul used this kind of language. Prior to this, he identified himself to the Gentile believers in Corinth as one compelled to serve as a steward by Divine appointment, saying, “For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship” (1 Cor 9:16-17). Knowing what is revealed by the Lukan portrayal of Saul’s/Paul’s conversion, in the Acts of the Apostles, it is not hard to conceive of what the Apostle may have had in mind when making this statement.

Across the Pauline corpus, it can be observed that Paul employed the word “dispensation” in a metaphorical or

theological sense, with a view to God's governance over the earth.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, he repeatedly used the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), with specific reference to himself serving in a unique capacity. In addition to the passage referenced above (Eph 3:1-11), Paul wrote in his epistle to the Gentile believers living in Colossae:

I became a minister, according to the stewardship 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. To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles (Col 1:25-27).

Thus, it may be seen that the Apostle regarded himself as serving in a unique role as a divinely appointed steward over God's household in the present dispensation. The Master's goods which he seemed to regard himself as uniquely appointed to dispense is described here as "the grace of God." The household seemed also to have clear demarcations in the mind of the Apostle as indicated by his usage of the term "Gentiles." Finally, the duration of the dispensation seemed to exclude the ages past, during which time the manifold wisdom of God was previously hidden, as it has now been made manifest to the church.

If this understanding of the Apostle's usage of "dispensation" is correct, and it is rightly perceived that he uniquely regarded himself as the steward of the mysteries of God communicated to the Gentiles in the present age, this could shed light on how he regarded his role concerning God's judgment of his household in the transition from the present dispensation to the next when he wrote: "the day [is coming] when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel" (Rom 2:16). Again,

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<sup>30</sup> Kittel notes: "Paul, too, adopts οἰκονόμος and likes to use it metaphorically... . Paul also used the word οἰκονόμος as a figure for apostolic authority and knowledge in 1 C. 4:1 f. Neither here nor in Gl. 4:2 is there any concern as to the social position of the οἰκονόμος" (*TDNT*, 5:150).

he emphasized in the benediction of this same epistle to the Gentile believers in Rome:

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, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen. (Rom 16:25-27)

The similarity in language between Romans 16 and Ephesians 3 is undeniable. The content of Paul's message to the Gentiles was altogether unknown in previous ages but had now been made plain through the preaching of the gospel. Moreover, the household to whom the Apostle distributed the master's goods would one day be called upon to give an account for that which they received through him, as he indicated: "the day [is coming] when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel" (Rom 2:16). Some have deduced that this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote "in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (Eph 1:10).<sup>31</sup> If this be the case, then it would bring even greater parity to how Jesus and the Apostle used the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), as Jesus' parables saw the faithful stewards rewarded with an even greater stewardship in the master's kingdom, upon his return (Luke 19:11-27). It is therefore likely that Paul identified two distinct dispensations in his Epistle to the Ephesian church: one over which he was appointed as a steward, and another which presumably will be administered from the throne of David, in the coming kingdom age.

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<sup>31</sup> While there is not unanimous agreement on which dispensation Paul had in view, dispensationalists are in consensus that the next age, otherwise known as the millennial kingdom, is the dispensation in which God will bring the fulfillment of all previous ages to pass.

Based on previous observations concerning the dispensational feature of judgment, what may be regarded as surprising about Paul's claim in Romans 16 is that he suggested that in the coming day of judgment, it will presumably be all men<sup>32</sup> who will be judged against Paul's gospel. However, there is no incongruity here with the distinctive dispensational features which have been presented above, which indicated that the steward is the one who must give an account for his administration of the master's goods. Paul clarified this point in his epistle to the Corinthians when he wrote:

Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. (1 Cor 3:5-13)

Besides Paul, the only other apostle who used the term "dispensation" was Peter. It can be seen from Peter's usage of the term that he applied it not to himself, but to all believers, thereby expressing a similar sense as seen above. That is to say, Peter used the word οἰκονόμος with respect to the general stewardship that is common to all Christian believers when he

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<sup>32</sup> Based on parallel passages found in the Pauline corpus (cf. Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:9-15; 2 Cor 5:10; etc.) one could well argue that Paul has in mind the household of faith and not the whole world.

wrote, “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Pet 4:10). It is evident from the context that Peter was not regarding believers as “stewards” in quite the same capacity as Paul, who had used the word with reference to himself in his apostolic capacity (Eph 3:1-11; Col 1:25-27; etc.). In the very next verse, Peter went on to write, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet 4:11). Thus, Peter was no more likening every Christian’s stewardship to that of Paul’s than he was equating every Christian’s words to the apostle’s. Nevertheless, the writings of the apostles agree with the Lukan portrayal of Jesus’ teachings, that every believer will undergo judgment upon the Master’s return at the end of the present age.

Based on the apostles’ usage of the term “dispensation,” three distinct administrations may be seen to emerge from the pages of Scripture: the first being the household of Israel, over which Moses was appointed as a steward, referenced in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Heb 3:1-6); the second being the household of the church, over which Paul was uniquely appointed, referenced in the Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph 3:1-9); and the third being the household of Israel and the nations, over which the seat of David will preside, also referenced in the Epistle to the Ephesians (Eph 1:10; cf. Ezek 37:23-25). This understanding does not reflect any great variance from how Augustine used the term in the fifth century when he wrote, “The divine institution of sacrifice was suitable in the former dispensation, but is not suitable now.”<sup>33</sup> This expression seems to take into account the rules which governed God’s household under a previous administration and sets them at variance from those which are now suitable under the present economy.

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<sup>33</sup> St. Augustine, “Letter of St. Augustine to Marcellinus,” 198.

## Observations from Early and Modern Usage of “Dispensation”

One question which almost universally arises from discussing “dispensations” is the impact of the nineteenth century Anglo-Irish churchman, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882), who has been popularly regarded as the founder of the theological system known as “dispensationalism.” It is therefore relevant to consider his usage of the term and how it has subsequently come to be used in modern theological vernacular. A frequent charge that opponents have leveled against dispensationalism is that it is a recent development which emerged in the early nineteenth century with John Nelson Darby.<sup>34</sup> While this point has been rightly refuted,<sup>35</sup> it is not entirely without warrant. While by no means was he the first to develop a dispensational understanding of biblical history, Darby served a unique role in the history of dispensational thought.

Darby was a brilliant, if not a bit eccentric, theologian whose educational pedigree matched his upbringing as a member of the gentry class in England, and afterward Ireland, where he emerged at the top of his class at Trinity College Dublin.<sup>36</sup> His program of study consisted of translating from the classical languages entire passages of Latin and Greek into English. A history of Trinity College Dublin notes that “St. Luke’s Gospel” in addition to the “first four books of Xenophon’s *Cryopedia*” were numbered among the recommended source materials for the university

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<sup>34</sup> William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1963), 3. Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 11.

<sup>35</sup> See William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton, OR: Lampion P, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> James I. Fazio, “John Nelson Darby: The Unknown and Well Known Nineteenth Century Irish Reformer” in *Forged from Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (San Diego, CA: SCS P, 2017), 84.

examinations.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere it is reported that Trinity College examinations included “the Gospels and the Acts in Greek.”<sup>38</sup> Darby’s mastery of the classical languages was evidenced by his quarterly test scores, culminating in his being awarded the Gold Medal in Classics upon completing his bachelor’s degree in 1819, for exemplary performance throughout all of his examinations.<sup>39</sup> Later in life, Darby’s mastery of the Greek language was demonstrated by his translation of the Greek Testament into multiple languages, including English, German, and French.

Providence would have it that at the very same time Darby was studying and translating Greek texts as an emerging classical scholar “the study of the ancient economy made its debut at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the publication of *The Public Economy of Athens* by August Böckh.”<sup>40</sup> The course of Darby’s life would coincide very neatly with a burgeoning study of the Greek οἰκονομία as Leshem notes, “It was only towards the end of the century, however, following the publication of *The Rise of National Economy* by Karl Bücher, that it entered the mainstream of classical scholarship.”<sup>41</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that Darby’s understanding of the biblical usage of the Greek term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), reflected the socio-historical context far more than the way it had come into popular usage by clergyman in the centuries which preceded him. Without a doubt, Darby put a more fine-tipped point on the way he employed the term “dispensation,” which reflected a departure from how it was commonly used in his day. He stated this objection when he wrote from Geneva in 1841: “I do not hold to the word dispensation, although it is generally used to specify a certain state of things, established by the authority of God, during a

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<sup>37</sup> W. Macneile Dixon, *Trinity College, Dublin* (London: F. E. Robinson, 1902), 154.

<sup>38</sup> R. B. McDowell and D. A. Webb, *Trinity College Dublin 1592-1952: An Academic History* (Ireland: Trinity College Dublin P, 2004), 118.

<sup>39</sup> Trinity College Dublin records (1810-1819) have been personally consulted by the author, in making this determination.

<sup>40</sup> Leshem, “*Oikonomia* Redefined,” 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

given period.”<sup>42</sup> This was, in fact, how the term had come to be commonly regarded, as evidenced by writings a century before Darby, as seen in the writings of the Viscount John Shute Barrington who, in 1728, offered a detailed arrangement that would look very familiar to anyone who has carried a *Scofield Reference Bible*.<sup>43</sup>

Darby made it a point to distinguish biblical “dispensations” based on God’s administrative delegations, and was reluctant to identify a period of human history as a dispensation where he did not deem the biblical text gave sufficient warrant to do so.<sup>44</sup> Darby’s reckoning of dispensations centered on God’s administrative responsibilities, and included such critical features as testing, failure, and subsequent judgment.<sup>45</sup> These very elements are also observable in Jesus’ usage of the term “dispensation” where the steward was called by the master to give an account for his stewardship (Luke 12:27-42; 16:1-2). Nevertheless, Darby took special care to refute the claim that

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<sup>42</sup> J. N. Darby, “Some Further Developments on the Principles Set Forth in the Pamphlet, Entitled ‘On the Formation of Churches’ and Reply to Some Objections Made to those Principles” in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby: Ecclesiastical No. 1: Volume 1*, ed. William Kelly (Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.), 169.

<sup>43</sup> Barrington perceived biblical history according to dispensations which he identified from creation to the Fall, the fall to Noah, Noah to Abraham, etc. A distinctive point of his scheme is that he uniquely regarded the biblical terms “generations” and “sons” as textual indicators, which pattern succeeding dispensationalists—such as Darby who began writing 100 years afterward—did not tend to follow (John Shute Barrington, *An Essay on the Several Dispensations of God to Mankind, in the Order, in which they lie in the Bible* [London, 1728]).

<sup>44</sup> Darby expressed this idea in the following way: “I am not aware that the first or Adamic state is ever called a dispensation, or οἰκονομία, or anything like it.” Nevertheless, he acknowledged that it may be referred to as such: “We refer to the period during which Adam was clothed with authority, as head over all things in this lower world. That period formed the dispensation, as it may be called, of the beginning of time; and was, through illapse of sin, precipitated to a close” (J. N. Darby, “The Dispensation of the Fulness of Times” in *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby: Critical No. 1: Volume 13*, ed. William Kelly [Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.], 153).

<sup>45</sup> Darby, “Some Further Developments,” 173-74.

salvation in any dispensation was by any other means than by the shedding of Christ's blood, saying: "salvation through the blood of Christ existed before this dispensation, and, in like manner, as there will be faithful ones under the Antichrist, it is evident that access to the throne of grace will yet be open."<sup>46</sup>

Scofield maintained a similar framework to Darby's, insomuch as it included critical dispensational elements such as testing, failure, and judgment.<sup>47</sup> However, Scofield's scheme reflected the early dispensations beginning with Adam and Eve in the Garden that Barrington had previously regarded. Scofield's regard for these early dispensations may have been influenced by the traditional Reformed view concerning the covenants which included an Adamic and Edenic covenant, both of which are referenced in the Westminster Confession of Faith by the name "covenant of works" and "covenant of grace."<sup>48</sup> Scofield termed these two initial dispensations "innocency" and "conscience," and perceived each of them as ending in failure and subsequent judgment. The former gave way to the latter, while the latter issued in the judgment that befell the earth in the days of Noah, ushering in the dispensation of "human government."<sup>49</sup> While these reflect a subtle departure from Darby's usage, they are not at odds with the way the term was employed by Christ and the apostles, and is entirely consistent with the framework of dispensationalists before him.<sup>50</sup>

Following Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer advanced dispensational theology in the first half of the twentieth century. However, it may be said that Lewis Sperry Chafer painted with

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>47</sup> Scofield wrote, "Each of the Dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure" (Cyrus I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth [2 Tim 2:15]; Ten Outline Studies of the More Important Divisions of Scripture* [Philadelphia: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1921], 20).

<sup>48</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith VII, II-III offers Genesis 2:17 as the verse where this first covenant is revealed, and Genesis 3:15 as the place-marker for the second; however, strict Biblicists may take exception to the lack of exegetical support for these covenants.

<sup>49</sup> Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Barrington, *Essay on the Several Dispensations of God*, 8-18.

too broad a brush when he offered the following criteria concerning to whom the term “dispensationalist” might properly apply:

(1) Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice. (2) Any person is a dispensationalist who disclaims any right or title to the land which God covenanted to Israel for an everlasting inheritance. And (3), any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh. To all this it will be replied that every Christian does these things, which is obviously true; and it is equally true that, to a very considerable degree, all Christians are dispensationalists. However, not all Christians, though sincere, are as well instructed in the spiritual content of the Scriptures as others, nor have they seen the necessity of recognizing other and deeper distinctions which do confront the careful student of the Word of God.<sup>51</sup>

Despite that Chafer afterward tempered this statement when he asserted that all Christians are “*partial* dispensationalists,” he risked overstating his case and watering down those quintessential distinctions that uniquely define one who recognizes the various dispensations as they are presented in the biblical text. However, history may prove that even greater harm was done by Charles Caldwell Ryrie, who during the second half of the twentieth century reduced those quintessential elements which distinguish a dispensationalist to three features, which he termed the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism. These three essential elements, defined by Ryrie are (1) perceiving a distinction between Israel and the church; (2) consistently applying a literal grammatical-historical interpretive method to the biblical text, and (3) perceiving God’s doxological purpose throughout all of history.<sup>52</sup>

If Ryrie had intended that these three features could serve to delineate a “*partial* dispensationalist,” then the claim may have been warranted. But, to distill the biblical, historical, and

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<sup>51</sup> Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” 391.

<sup>52</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 45-48.

theological distinctives of dispensational thought down to these three principles is far too reductionistic. If Ryrie is warranted in presenting these three principles as the litmus test for “what marks off a person as a dispensationalist,”<sup>53</sup> then, a broad swath of the evangelical community, including many Covenantal-Reformed theologians who abhor the term “dispensationalist,” would properly be counted among them. Ryrie’s loose definition may well be responsible for opening the door to the subsequent generation of self-identified “progressive dispensationalists” arising from the ranks of Dallas Theological Seminary, within the next quarter-century.<sup>54</sup>

Today, the term(s) οἰκονόμ(-ος/-ία), is employed by churchmen in a way that is not very different from the theologians who preceded Darby. “Dispensation” has been popularly used to describe any age, or period of time that is distinguishable from another. Subsequently, the less theologically discerning biblical readers become, the more tentatively they may hold to the several dispensational distinctions presented throughout Scripture. This is evidenced by the tendency of progressive dispensationalists to reduce the dispensations of Scripture to four. Alternatively, those who have made it a point to make biblical distinctions, without regard for those quintessential elements which constitute a dispensation, may apply the term to multiplied periods extending through eternity. Both of these should be avoided and a more socio-historically, biblically, and theologically precise usage should emerge in its place. It is the recommendation of this author that the preferred usage would be one which duly considers the six criteria presented above: First, with a view to the management of God’s household. Second, taking into account God’s appointed

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>54</sup> Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and Robert Saucy were among the early proponents of progressive dispensationalism in the 1980s-1990s. All three men were graduates of Dallas Theological Seminary, the seminary founded by Lewis Sperry Chafer, and where Charles Ryrie served as professor of systematic theology and dean of doctoral studies. Bock and Blaising were counted among DTS faculty, while Saucy had gone on to accept a faculty position at Talbot Seminary.

steward(s) pertaining to that dispensation. Third, with full consideration of the master's goods which are being dispensed in that administration. Fourth, accounting for the fact that the stewardship is temporary and will give way to another—up to the kingdom age. Fifth, a recognition that the faithfulness of each steward will be judged by God. And sixth, an acknowledgment that the thrust of Jesus and the apostles' message, throughout the New Testament, directs the reader to a future transition of economies, culminating in the Messianic kingdom.

Subsequent to these considerations, and with a view to the acknowledged problem of definition that dispensationalism has suffered up until now, it is incumbent on those who recognize these historical features, as well as the language of Scripture, to seek a solution for this persistent issue. Therefore, the following is humbly proposed in attempt to move toward resolving this long-standing problem. *A dispensation is an administration of a household, whereby a steward is appointed to manage his master's goods in order to yield a surplus, for which he will ultimately be judged according to his faithfulness as a steward.*

### **Conclusion**

This article has called attention to the fact that over the course of church history, Christians have used the term “dispensation” (Gr.: οἰκονομία) in a variety of ways, and to varying degrees of agreement with the biblical record. It is incumbent upon those who identify as “dispensational theologians” to offer a definition that both defines and delimits its theological usage. Moreover, it is necessary that that definition be consistent with the biblical text, giving due credence to the cultural-historical framework at the time when they were employed by Jesus and the apostles, and must therefore be equally applicable to the socio-historical as well as theologically-metaphorical senses in which it occurs. In consideration of these elements, the following definition has been proposed: *a dispensation is an administration of a household, whereby a steward is appointed to manage his master's goods in order to yield a surplus, for which he will ultimately be judged according to his faithfulness as a steward.*