

Defining the Word of Truth (16-Dec-16)



"A large part of the discussions of disputants come from the want of accurate definitions."

—Tryon Edwards

16-Dec-16

Rightly *Defining* the Word of Truth

One of the ways the "unlearned and unstable wrest" Scripture ([II Peter 3:16](#)) is to misapply the meaning of a word they find there. Wrongly understanding some word's denotation and connotations, they cannot help but miss the mark in their attempts to explain God's Word. The consequence is wrong teaching on their part, the promulgation of incorrect doctrine.

The word *dispensation* makes a good case study. Historians ascribe the theological construct of dispensationalism to an English clergyman, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). He advocated what theologians have come to call Dispensationalism. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the theological use of *dispensation* as a "divinely ordained order prevailing at a particular period of history." To theologians, a dispensation is a period of time, an epoch that delineates a particular—that is, a peculiar and discrete—way in which [God](#) deals with mankind.

Does the word "dispensation" appear in the Bible? Yes, in the King James Version (KJV), it appears four times. Does *dispensation*, wherever it appears in God's Word, mean "a period of time"? No, it does not. Not ever. Not once.

Nor can we claim that the Greek word behind dispensation carries the notion of a segment of time. Let us take a walk through the Scriptures.

The Greek noun behind "dispensation," as it appears in the KJV, is *oikonomia*, from which English gets its word "economics." *Oikonomia* (#3622 in *Strong's Greek Lexicon*) most specifically refers to the management of an estate, but by extension can denote the administration of anything. (Likewise, Latin *dispenstio*, the source of English "dispensation," means "distribution, administration, management.") This Greek word appears seven times in the New Testament, the King James translators rendering it as "[stewardship](#)" three times, as "dispensation" four.

The use of "stewardship" clusters around [Luke 16:2-4](#), where it appears once in each of three successive verses. [Luke 16:2](#) is the first occurrence of the noun *oikonomia*, where *the context is the Parable of the Shrewd Manager*: "And he called him and said to him, 'How is it that I hear this of you? Give an account of your stewardship; for you may be no longer steward'" (KJV).

Obviously, here, the word *oikonomia* (or *stewardship*) clearly does not mean a "divinely ordained period of time." In fact, it has no meaningful connection with time at all, referring instead, in context, to the management of the master's estate. The *English Standard Version* translates it this way: "Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager." These same comments apply to the use of *oikonomia* in [Luke 16:3-4](#) as well.

We are left to review the four occasions where the King James translators rendered *oikonomia* as "dispensation":

1. [I Corinthians 9:17](#) (KJV): "For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of [the gospel](#) is committed unto me." The translators of the *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (HCSB) more adequately handle the verse: "For if I do this willingly, I have a reward, but if unwillingly, I am entrusted with a stewardship." The meaning, in context, has nothing to do with a "divinely ordered period of time." Rather, Paul is using *oikonomia* to refer to the management of his resources (for example, his time, money, strength, and coworkers) in preaching the gospel of the [Kingdom of God](#). He makes clear his understanding that God gave him that job.

2. [Ephesians 3:2](#) (KJV): "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward. . . ." The *Modern English Version* does a far better job: "You may have heard of the administration of the grace of God which was given me for you." Several other translations say that Paul had a work to do. There is no connotation of a "divinely ordained period of time" here. Paul is simply saying that God *gave* him a responsibility to carry out.
3. [Colossians 1:25](#) (KJV): "Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God." The *HCSB* puts it, "I have become its servant, according to God's administration that was given to me for you." Instead of "administration," other translations use the nouns "responsibility" or "commission." Paul's task was the God-given mission of managing the preaching of the gospel. As in the others, the idea of a "divinely ordained period of time" is also absent in this verse.
4. [Ephesians 1:9-10](#) (KJV) alone is slightly different:

He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure that He planned in Him for the administration of the days of fulfillment—to bring everything together in the Messiah, both things in heaven and things on earth in Him.

It is perhaps this passage that led some theologians to think of *oikonomia* as a period of time. The *New English Translation* does a good job with this difficult Greek thought. God, Paul writes,

did this when He revealed to us the secret of His will, according to His good pleasure that He set forth in Christ, toward the administration of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ—the things in heaven and the things on earth.

God has a plan, the apostle is teaching, complete with target dates, and He manages this plan. The translators of the *World English*

New Testament convey this notion quite well: "When the right time came, God planned to bring together everything in heaven and on earth, and make Christ head of them all." True, the concept of time is present, but the thrust of *oikonomia* here is plainly God's *management* of a comprehensive plan within a specific timeframe, rather than a segmented plan involving different means of salvation, as Dispensationalists imagine.

Our conclusion can be only this: The Greek noun *oikonomia* does not carry the meaning of "a period of time." Darby, who translated his own version of the Bible into English, was aware of this. Furthermore, neither today, nor in Darby's time, did the word "dispensation" refer to a period of time. We are left to presume that Darby defined the word "dispensation" to suit himself.

The theological concept of Dispensationalism has a lot of nails in its coffin. This, the semantic nail, is just one of them.

- Charles Whitaker

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