IT'S REALLY NOT ODD TO BE A DISPENSATIONALIST

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Many think it is odd, but it really isn't.

The reason is simple: in many areas of life we all follow the dispensational idea.

What is that idea?

The meanings in the word itself tell us, and there are two. According to the dictionary the word dispensation (from a Latin verb meaning to weigh out or dispense) means (1) a particular arrangement or provision and (2) an exemption (something dispensed with or disposed of). A dispensation is an arrangement or an exemption.

The Greek word, used 20 times in the New Testament, 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.

Theologically, the word indicates "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 (Oxford University Press, 1933), III, 481). The concept is not only theological, but one that is common to many aspects of life, and all of us live every day under dispensational arrangements.

So it's really not odd to be a dispensationalist.

It Is a Religious Concept. In the Roman Catholic Church the granting of a dispensation is based 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, sometimes a special dispensation

is granted by the Roman Church in the case of annulment of a marriage so that the person receiving the dispensation may remarry and remain in good standing in the Church. In this usage, the dispensation grants an exemption from normal proceedures.

Protestants also experience the exemption idea of a dispensation on occasion. For example, you have been counselling all week at a church camp. The regulations of the camp provided for lights out at, say, 11 p.m. Now it is 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 go to the camp director and suggest 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 counsellor or camp director, you have probably had a dispnesational experience!

It Is an Economic Concept. Actually if you replace the letters of the Greek word for dispensation with English letters, you will write the word economy. A dispensation is an economy, for an economy is a "system of arrangement or mode of operation of something."

For example, socialism advocates government ownership of production and distribution of goods. In Dallas, Texas our city government has an element of socialism in that the water utility is city owned and operated. By contrast, the electric and gas utilities are privately owned. When a government owns most of the major businesses, we consider it to be a socialistic country. Most countries, however, contain a mixture of various economic practices.

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 saw me, gave me some instructions and a prescription to be filled. I took it to the chemist (drug store) to have it filled. When I started to pay for it, I was told it cost only a shilling (about 20¢ in those days). I couldn't believe my ears, for I had never bought any medicine in the United States for 20¢. Suddenly it dawned on me that I was living in a country that had socialized medicine.

For the sake of the illustration, let's assume we may say that in those days Britain was a socialistic society and the U.S. a capitalistic one. Of course there were capitalistic features in Britain and socialistic features in the U.S., but in the total picture there were sufficient differences to distnguish the two economies. In fact, the differences were quite clear. You may have flown to Britain on the British government owned airline (the U.S. owns none). You travelled within the country on British Railways. You received medical assistance through the National Health Service. There were distinguishable differences.

But there were also some similarities. Both countries had social security. Both 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.

<u>It Is a Social Concept.</u> 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 all the rage in Texas that summer, but in California they were definitely not. 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.

Examples could be multiplied, especially if you think of different customs in various countries of the world. These differences in social arrangements constitute the basic concept of dispensationalism. The odd person is the one who fails to recognize the differences.

It Is a Family Concept. All parents raise their children according to dispensational arrangements. When a child is small, bedtime, for instance, is at 7 o'clock. As the younster grows, bedtime is changed to 8. The teenager is given special privileges, especailly on weekends. To put a teenager under the arrangement that is necessary and appropriate for a child would be disaster, and vice versa.

At the same time, many things are the same for all ages. You teach children and teenagers not to lie. You incorporate a law forbidding stealing at every stage in the development of the family. In other words, some particulars are always the same; some are similar though not exactly the same; and some change completely. You do not allow an infant to eat meat. But the day comes when that prohibition is replaced by its exact opposite, the permission to eat meat.

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

It Is a Theological Concept. Dispensationalists are often accused of foisting a concept on the Bible rather than deriving their idea from the Bible. It is alleged that the word dispensation is never used in the way dispensationalism uses it. But that simply is unture.

To be sure, not all 20 uses of the forms of the word dispensation refer to a specific dispensation. Sometimes the word 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 dispnesational scheme.

For instance, Paul wrote of a dispensation or administrative arrangement of God in which He would make Jews and Gentiles equal members of the same body of Christ, a phenomenon 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 distinguishable within God's program--one in which He dealt mainly with the Jewish people 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 fulness of times, a reference to the new arrangement of the coming millennial kingdom (Eph. 1:10). So at least three dispensations (the one previous to the present arrangement, the present one, and the one yet future) are specifically referred to in Scripture and the word dispensation or administration is used of them.

Are these clearly designated administrations indicative of 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 distinguishable--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 distinguishably different arrangement whereby God centered His attention on one nation and governed it by a theocratic arrangement. Since that is so, then five dispensations are clearly distinguished in Scripture. It only remains to decide if the end of the Noahic flood introduced enough new and different arrangements to make 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.

It 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 defined the scope of their mission as restricted to Jewish people 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 Gentiles (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.

In connection with this same first commissioniong, 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 resolution of 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 which was inaugurated after Christ's death and which offers the grace of God to all people.

Again,our Lord 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 been, I have never ever heard that prayer prayed. Why not? It is commanded by the Lord. Of course the answer is that 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 considerable more difficult, since most public transportation ceases on Sabbath in Israel. If it is in winter and perhaps if there were a snowfall in Jerusalem that day, it would be very difficult. 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. Once God commanded His people as a religious rite to be circumcised (Gen. 17:10). The New Testament plainly declares that "if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you" (Gal. 5:2).

Many meats were forbidden to be eaten by God's people who lived under the administration governed by the Mosaic law (Lev. 11). In a striking way God told Peter that He had under a new arrangement cleansed all those animals that 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 it was to permit our Lord 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. Not only, then, is it not odd to be a dispensationalist, but it is necessary to be one if one is to interpret consistently and faithfully the Scripture as God intended it to be understood.

If one does interpret the Bible that 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. And 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.

It really isn't odd to be a dispensationalist.