

The Secret of the Dispensation

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The word dispensation occurs twice in our authorized version of the epistle to the Ephesians, — viz., Eph. 1: 10 and Eph. 3: 2. In both cases the Greek word so translated is one which means the law or arrangement of a house. Being closely allied with the word for steward it is sometimes translated stewardship. Speaking in general terms we may say that a dispensation is that regime or ordering of affairs which God is pleased to institute at any given time.

Ephesians 1: 10 looks on to the glorious regime to be established in the coming age, which will have as its crowning characteristic the gathering together in one and heading up of all things in heaven and earth in Christ. In connection with this there has been a secret, "the mystery of His will," as verse 9 shows; though the secret is now an open one to "us," i.e. His saints of this dispensation. This coming age is the theme of many a glowing Old Testament Scripture which must have warmed the heart of saints living in pre-Christian times, and which still fire and animate our hearts today; still it will be found that such Scriptures view the age as being that of Messiah's glory, with Israel gathered under Him as the head of the nations, and the Gentiles ordered and blessed subordinately to Israel. Only in very rare instances — as Hosea 2: 21 — is the heavenly sphere alluded to. God's will as to it however embraced more than earthly things. He purposed in Himself according to His good pleasure a wider and more wonderful unity of glory. Not only all things on earth — including Israel and the nations, but all things in heaven, — including the church and angelic hosts, are to find their unifying Head in Christ. No Old Testament saints would have divined that secret, though it is fully made known to us.

That dispensation is future, but in Eph. 3: 2, we have a present dispensation, and one far more limited in its scope though far more intimate as to its character. The apostle speaks of it as "given to me to you-ward" — that is, he was the steward of it as far as the Gentiles, such as the Ephesians, were concerned. This being so, and bearing in mind how utterly lost and hopeless the Gentiles had been, as stated in Eph. 2: 12, it is easy to see that it is indeed a dispensation of the *grace* of God; the coming age will be rather the dispensation of His *glory*.

This dispensation, too, has a "mystery" or "secret" connected with it — a secret, that is, from the standpoint of all who lived previous to the death and resurrection of Christ, the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, and the subsequent passing of the period of transition and the revelation of God's first thought in connection with the church. At the time of writing the Ephesian epistle the secret had been divulged by the Spirit to apostles and prophets (verse 5), though it was revealed independently to Paul (verse 3), and he alone was the steward of it as regards the Gentile saints (verse 2).

What is this special secret of the dispensation now revealed to us? Only three passages furnish us with its details, though others allude to it. The three are Ephesians 2: 9-22; Eph. 3: 6; and Colossians 1: 27. That the first of these three Scriptures is an unfolding of the mystery is proved by Eph. 3: 3-4 where the apostle appeals to that written previously as showing his knowledge of the subject. It is worthy of note, by the way, that he calls this passage previously written "a few words" though it is the longest and fullest passage of the three. This shows us that it is a condensed summary of the matter, and we may expect to find in it great fulness and depth.

The secret of the dispensation has then to do with God's work among the Gentiles by which an election from amongst them is brought, equally with an election from amongst Israel, into the fulness of blessing in Christ. Both come in on equal and identical terms, and not only so but also upon a footing and into relationships which are altogether new.

These things being of the very essence of the matter we first point out how they are stated in this Scripture.

(1). *Both Jew and Gentile are made one*, "the middle wall of partition" and "enmity" being abolished "in His flesh" *i.e.* by the death of Christ (verses 9 and 15). *Both* are reconciled "in *one body*" (verse 16). *Both* have access to the Father by *one Spirit* (verse 18). This warrants us in saying that both come in on equal and identical terms.

(2). They do not, however, come in upon the old footing as propounded in the law given to Israel. It is not that Gentiles are now to be admitted to share in Israel's standing before God. The blood of Christ has made them nigh *in Christ Jesus* (verse 13). His death is indeed the efficacious ground of it, but thus He has created "*in Himself* of twain one new man" (verse 15). The word used here is really "to create" though translated "to make." Both are brought to God in one body, but it is as *reconciled by the cross* (verse 16), both have access to the Father but it is by *one Spirit* (verse 18) and not by ordinances as of old. It is evident then that both are brought in on a new footing. The old fleshly Adam standing in which both shared is set aside, the national standing as the people of Jehovah which belonged exclusively to the Jew is also set aside, and the election front both comes in "reconciled by the cross," "one new man," "in Christ Jesus."

(3). The relationships into which they come are far beyond any in which Adam stood even in innocence, and equally beyond Israel's national relationship with Jehovah. They are not one nation but one *body* (verse 16), approaching *the Father* (verse 18), rather than Jehovah. Further, such are "of the household of God;" built into that which is destined to be "an holy temple in the Lord," and "builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" as a present thing (verses 19-22).

This then is the secret of the present dispensation stated in few words. Ephesians 3: 6, gives us the same in fewer words; and Colossians 1: 27, presents the same great theme in even fewer still, but from a different standpoint, when it says that "the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles," is "Christ in [or among] you [*i.e.* Gentiles] the hope of glory." The prophets had predicted that the Messiah should be amongst His people on the basis of redemption, and that earthly glory should be established in connection with it; but that Christ should be in, or amongst, an election from the Gentile world was an unheard of and amazing thing, awakening the liveliest expectation of His ultimately shining forth in a glory of yet wider dimensions.

Other Scriptures there are, which though not exactly or directly referring to the "mystery" or "secret," yet throw additional light upon it. The whole of 2 Corinthians 3, for example, casts light on Colossians 1: 27.

These other passages we must however pass by, our present object being to reach the practical bearing of all this truth upon the lives of the saints who compose the church.

The whole of Ephesians 3, save verse 1, is in the nature of a digression. About to write instructions as to their behaviour the apostle evidently felt it needful to enforce them by a statement of his peculiar authority in regard to such as themselves. He had not merely *knowledge* of the mystery by direct first-hand revelation from the Lord, but *authority*, since the dispensation or "house-arrangements" in respect to all mentioned in the latter part of chapter 2 was, as far as Gentiles are concerned, given to him (verse 2). Of it he was made a ministering servant (verse 7), his work as such being to preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ and to make all see what the "fellowship" (or "administration" — Darby's New Translation) of the mystery is. He not merely enunciated the newly revealed truth in its terms but saw to it that in practical fellowship or administration the truth was exemplified among and carried out by the saints, so that whether nationally

Jews or Gentiles they were together, altogether above and apart from the racial and religious animosities which characterized them by nature, in the happy recognition and consciousness of the new footing established in Christ, and the new relationship with the Father, with Christ, and with one another, in the power of the Spirit of God. There was then a practical expression upon earth, of that which is the real secret, the great characteristic thought of the present dispensation, and thereby to heavenly powers, the manifold wisdom of God was displayed. The unity thus established in the church between Jew and Gentile still abides before the eyes of the heavenly powers and still shows forth God's wisdom, for there has been no splitting of the church into a Jewish section or a Gentile section. Cleavages there have been, alas! — almost without number — setting forth all too clearly before heavenly eyes the folly of man, but none of them have been along the lines of that original great fissure removed so wonderfully by the wisdom of God. We are speaking, remember, of the administration of the mystery and not of the vital oneness of the body.

Then, is recorded, verses 14 to the end, that wonderful prayer of the Apostle, in which he asks for a mighty work of the Spirit in the inner man of these Gentile saints that Christ might dwell in their hearts by faith, and that with all saints they might enter into the fulness of these things. A mighty work *within* was indeed needful if these erstwhile worshippers of Diana were to be lifted in their own soul's knowledge and enjoyment to the level of these serene and holy things while still they lived in Ephesus and trod its streets. No less a work is needed within ourselves.

Ephesians 4: 1 picks up the thread from Ephesians 3: 1 and the apostle commences his practical instructions in the tenderest tone, yet with all the weight and authority of chapter 3 behind him. The great business of these Ephesian saints and of ourselves is to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called. A superhuman task indeed! which is only possible as the apostle's prayer is fulfilled in us.

The central point of endeavour is to be the *keeping* of "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." The "unity of the Spirit" was and is an actual subsisting fact. We did not make it, nor can we break it, but in the actual wear and tear of daily life and walk, we may *keep* it or we may let it go. The exhortation is that we keep it in the uniting bond of peace. Verse 3 is then the main exhortation of the passage, verses 4 to 6 enforce the exhortation by reminding us how *unity* is the outstanding feature of Christian life and profession in all its departments. Verse 2 gives us the all-important moral features absolutely necessary, if the main exhortation is to be carried out in practice.

A brief consideration of how all this must have appealed to the Ephesian saints may help us. The assembly in that great city was predominantly Gentile (Eph. 2: 2; Eph. 4: 17), though with a Jewish strain in it (Acts 19: 1-7; Acts 20: 21), hence there was ample scope for friction and trouble. Yet *peace* between them had been established in Christ (Eph. 2: 9-15) and the uniting effect of that bond was to be felt in their endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit — so called because the one Spirit is the vital and animating principle of the one body into which they had been called.

The keeping of the unity calls into exercise four great moral characteristics: —

1. Lowliness. That mind which is the exact opposite of the mind of Adam. He would exalt himself; the lowly mind goes down as Philippians 2 shows. This is most essential, and particularly important for the Gentile in his dealings with the Jewish saint. The remembrance, to which the apostle called them in Philippians 2: 11, 12, was calculated to produce it.

2. Meekness. The opposite of the pushful self-assertive spirit. Again very important for the Gentile since there was the divine order even in connection with the gospel, of "to the Jew *first* and also to the Greek."

3. Longsuffering. The patient and long-continued acceptance of personal discomforts or even wrongs, a thing only possible to one of a lowly and meek spirit.

4. Forbearing in love. Intimately connected with the third, and its complement — the love that bears with that which might offend in others, instead of seeking redress by violent methods.

All these things would be much called for on the part of the Gentile in his dealings with the Jew. By legal training and the hereditary instinct of centuries the latter carried within himself the tendency to take the narrow, self-centred, legal view of things; the matters mentioned in Acts 15 and in Romans 14 show this. Nothing but long-suffering coupled with the love that heareth all things would enable them to abide together in peace.

That the Jew would equally need these things in his relations with his Gentile brethren goes without saying. Indeed, experience shows that the disposition to push things to extremes and let go the unity of the Spirit is more deeply ingrained in the narrow Jewish type of mind than in the broad Gentile type. These four excellent features were indispensable on both sides.

They are not less indispensable for us today but more so, if it were possible. At the present moment difficulties and points of cleavage as between Jew and Gentile do not exist, yet with the lapse of centuries the very fact that the church is a unity established by God is largely lost sight of, whilst the essential character of that unity as set forth in chapter 2: 9-18 is recognized in even less degree. Never did we need in deeper measure the apostolic affirmation that "there is one body and one Spirit" and the exhortation "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Some of our readers who have for long been "gathered on the ground of the one body" may regard such remarks as superfluous as far as they are concerned, but we are persuaded that they are not so. The tendency to overlook the fact of one body and one Spirit reaches our minds in many subtle forms.

Take a case in point: — Certain believers, and therefore members of Christ's body, become awakened by the Spirit of God through the Scriptures to those parts of the circle of truth that concerns the church, its position, privileges, and destiny, together with its responsibilities as the witness on earth for Christ during the period of His rejection and absence; and in order to *practise* what they have learned they withdraw from many religious organizations of purely human origin, and revert to the simplicity of that divinely instituted through the apostles. All this is done in simple fidelity to the Word of God without thinking of themselves at all, but as the years pass and the energy of faith somewhat declines, self-occupation re-appears, and the question of what position they themselves now hold as a result of so acting is raised in many minds. Nothing now will be easier than to assume that by their forsaking a man-made position and occupying the ground of the church according to the Scriptures they have thereby acquired a *renewed corporate status*, which is all their own and in which other Christians do not share.

The subtlety of this idea may be seen in the fact that it is very possible to entertain it whilst strongly insisting on the truth of "one body." This latter may be proclaimed and contended for, and yet people may so idealise it in their minds as to see nothing inconsistent with it in the idea of another "body" — especially when this other "body" lies within the true "one body" which the Spirit originally formed.

Thus very easily we may take for granted in our minds what has no existence in God's mind as revealed to us in His Word. After all there is *one* body and one only. It therefore should go without saying that we should have nothing *corporate* outside the one *corpus*, and even the fact that certain

members of the one *corpus* revert to the truth of that one *corpus*, after centuries of diversion from it, does not *reincorporate* them as a small inner *corpus* within the one *corpus*. ONE body God has made, and never more than *one* will He entertain whatever we may do.

We pursue this no further, but merely remark two things: First; we have not been combating a mere notion, an abstract idea of no practical consequence. This thought, if entertained, leads to consequences in conduct, and especially what we may call assembly conduct, of great gravity. Second; we emphasise the fact that we have been speaking of that which is *corporate* and not that which is *collective*. God does indeed entertain the idea of a collective life and testimony and that in days of failure and ruin, and He clearly sets it before us in such a Scripture as 2 Timothy 2: 22. The gist of the foregoing remarks is that when those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart, are most ardently following righteousness, faith, love, and peace, they acquire no special corporate status by doing so. They have a corporate status truly, but it is that of members of the "one body" originally instituted by God. Having thus briefly considered our present day need of the Apostle's affirmation "there is one body and one Spirit" it only remains to point out the exhortation which the Apostle founded upon it. In religious circles unity is all the rage, yet the "unity of the Spirit" is unthought of, and to come closer home — how shall we keep the unity of the Spirit if we have in our minds this second lesser unity of which we have spoken? To say the least there will be *some* occasion when the claims of the two unities will clash, with the almost certain result that we yield to the claims of the smaller, yet more tangible, "body" of our own creating, as against the claims of the larger and less realisable "body" of God's creating.

And then the spirit and manner in which the unity is to be kept! Here is the mind of Christ, and it is to be exhibited in the members of His body. These are not things to be passed on in a hurry so as to meet some disuniting crisis, but things to be wrought into the fibre of our souls by the Holy Ghost. We need them always. They are as necessary in carrying out a solemn Scripturally ordained act of excommunication, or of departure from the iniquity of a Hymenaeus or Philetus, as in confirming Christian love to a once sinning but now repentant saint.

LOWLINESS, MEEKNESS, LONGSUFFERING, FORBEARANCE IN LOVE.

Surely a marvellous quartet of Christ-like graces! Almost, we might say, a condensed summary of 1 Corinthians 13. Possible for us only as LOVE, the divine nature, is produced in our hearts. We stand convicted. Here has been the failure. Here must be the recovery. May God work it in us by His Spirit.