Dispensation (3622) oikonomia

Greek Word Studies:

Administration (3622) (oikonomia from oικος = house + νικαμo = manage, distribute) (Click study of related word oikonomos) in secular Greek referred literally to the management of a household by the oikonomos, the steward manages a house and is accountable to the owner (which even involved a presentation and examination of records, receipts, disbursements, cash on hand and the settlement of accounts - our English words “economy”, “economic” are derived from oikonomia and this background helps one see some association). Oikonomia indicates the task given to responsible and faithful servants who were appointed over the economy or an area of responsibility in the household. Thus oikonomia stresses obligation, responsibility, and faithfulness of the servant to his master in carry out the entrusted task.

In the present context oikonomia is used to refer to the administration or "management" by God of a certain period of human history which Paul designates as αυτoς the fulness of timesας- when God gathers everything to Himself and sums it up in His Son, Christ Jesus.

Oikonomia is used 9 times in the NAS -Luke 16:2, 16:3, 16:4; 1Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10, 3:2, 3:9; Colossians 1:25; 1Timothy 1:4. NAS = administration, 3; management, 3; stewardship, 3. In the KJV it is also translated 4 times as dispensation.

That oikonomia relates to household management is shown especially in the use in Luke 16...

Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and this steward was reported to him as squandering his possessions. 2 "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship (oikonomia), for you can no longer be steward (oikonomos).' 3 "And the steward (oikonomia) said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the stewardship (oikonomia) away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. 4 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the stewardship (oikonomia), they will receive me into their homes.' (Luke 16:2-4)

Paul uses oikonomia in a figurative sense (figurative because he is not managing a literal household) in Colossians 1:25 to describe his office as an apostle, who has been entrusted with a commission (see similar meaning in Ephesians 3:2 - note). Oikonomia thus referred to those who managed spiritual truths on God’s behalf. In Titus Paul uses oikonomia with this meaning writing that...

the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward (oikonomia) not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain (see note Titus 1:7)

Detzler adds that...

Greek writers about the time of the New Testament used oikonomia to describe the job of a household manager. In practice Greek slaves often managed the homes of wealthy landowners. Later this term came to describe the general work of administration. In the New Testament, and later, under the church father Ignatius, the word took on a theological twist. It came to mean the plan of God for redeeming people (Ed note: See discussion of this nuance below). (Detzler, Wayne: New Testament Words in Today's Language)

Oikonomia also relates to general provision or arrangement. Here Paul uses oikonomia to suggest the administration or putting into effect of God’s far-reaching redemptive plan

and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things ( Eph 3:9)

Paul uses oikonomia to describe God’s sovereign order of salvation. Salvation is not a divine afterthought but on the contrary, salvation history derives from God’s eternal αγωνας planis αγωνας or oikonomia of salvation αγωνας to unite all things αγωνας in Christ.

Oikonomia is also used in the NT to refer to the state of being arranged (an arrangement) and speaks of order (arrangement or disposition of people or things according to a particular sequence or method) or plan. Stated another way oikonomia refers to a plan which involves a set of arrangements. In Scripture this use of oikonomia refers to God’s unique plan of salvation, His arrangement for redemption of sinful men. Specifically Paul uses oikonomia with this meaning to refer to the administration by God of a certain period of human history designated as αυτo the fulness of timesας- when God gathers everything to Himself.
NIDNTT writes that in classic Greek oikonomia was attested from Xenophon and Plato on, denoted primarily the management of a household, but was soon extended to the administration of the state (the title of one of Xenophon’s books), and finally was used for every kind of activity which results from the holding of an office.

TDNT has this note on oikonomia writing that

In Greek, applying to household administration, this word has the sense of ἀρματοδιάθεσις, ἀρματοπροσερχόμενος, ἀρματοδιαχείρισις. In the NT it means 1. the office of household administration, and discharge of this office (Lk. 16:2ff.). Paul applies the thought to the apostolic office (1 Cor. 9:17; Col. 1:25; Eph. 3:2), which he holds by divine commission and in service to the churches. A second NT use is for the ἀποστολικόν πράγματα of salvation, its order and administration. This is the point in Eph. 1:10 and 3:9, and there is a hint of it in 3:2 and Col. 1:25.

William Barclay summarizes Paul’s thought this way...

Now Paul, in one sentence, drops his great thought. Up till now men had been living in a divided world. There was division between the beasts and men. There was division between the Jew and the Gentile, the Greek and the barbarian. All over the world there was strife and tension. Jesus came into the world to wipe out the divisions. That for Paul was the secret of God. It was God’s purpose that all the many different strands and all the warring elements in this world should be gathered into one in Jesus Christ. Here we have another tremendous thought. Paul says that all history has been a working out of this process. He says that through all the ages there has been an arranging and an administering of things (Ed note: this description of God’s arranging and administering is the essence of what oikonomia means) that this day of unity should come.


Fullness (4138) (pleroma) means a full measure with emphasis upon completeness. When is this time of completeness? Although note everyone would agree, it probably begins with Christ’s Millennial reign when God fulfills His promises to Israel and is completed with the institution of New Earth described in Revelation 21:1 when He makes all things new.

Paul used pleroma in reference to Christ in Colossians writing that...

For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fulness (pleroma) to dwell in Him (Christ), (Col 1:19-note)

For in Him (Christ) all the fulness (pleroma) of Deity dwells in bodily form, (Col 2:9 -note)

The Gnostics taught that Christ was kind of a halfway house to God, a link in the chain with other better links on ahead. As Paul teaches the complete embodiment of God dwells permanently in Christ and will one day "come to a head".