

A HISTORY OF DISPENSATIONALISM

by Thomas Ice

It is doubtful if there has been any other circle of men [dispensationalists] who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching, and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism, and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity.¹

—**Dispensational Critic, George E. Ladd**

Certainly we will all agree that many men of outstanding piety and zeal have espoused dispensational beliefs. . . . the issues which are raised by dispensationalism are crucial for the life of the Church and the understanding of the Scriptures.²

—**Antidispensationalist, C. Norman Kraus**

Probably no Christian thinker in the last two hundred years has so affected the way in which English-speaking Christians view the faith, and yet has received so little recognition of his contribution, as John Nelson Darby.³

—**Antidispensationalist, J. Gordon Melton**

Dispensationalism⁴ is a **system of theology** (not a hermeneutical approach) that believes the Bible teaches God's single plan for history is accomplished through Israel and the church for the purpose of His glorification. This theology arises from a consistent use of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic, also known as literal interpretation. While salvation of mankind is of extreme importance, it is accomplished within the broader purpose of the glorification of God, which is demonstrated through the various administrations of dispensational arrangements of history and also encompasses the angelic realm. Jesus Christ is the hero of history by leaving heaven and humbling Himself as a Man, winning the victory at the cross, rising from the dead, ascending to heaven, taking His bride at the Rapture, returning triumphantly at the Second Coming, and reigning for a thousand years from Jerusalem. Traditional dispensationalism attempts to systematize biblical teaching for the purpose of glorifying God through Jesus Christ. History is seen as a progression of ages in which God tests mankind, man always fails, and God judges humanity, but always provides a grace to the elect.⁵

ELEMENTS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

No single element of dispensational thought can be said to be the unique domain of dispensationalism alone. It is true that some hold to the Pre-Trib position that do not want to be called dispensationalists, but it is equally true that it was dispensational thought which provided the theological rationale for the Pre-Trib viewpoint. Even the important "Israel-church" distinction has been held by non-dispensationalists like Nathaniel West and George N. H. Peters. Dispensationalists are not just characterized by the elements of their theology, but also, their arrangement in relationship to one

¹ George E. Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 49.

² C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1958), 131.

³ Cannot find source of the quote.

⁴ "Dispensationalism" is used by this author as a synonym for "traditional" dispensationalism.

⁵ God always provides some form of "common grace" to all humanity.

another.

In order to be a dispensationalist, one has to hold to a consistent, literal approach of interpreting the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. When compared to other interpretative approaches, dispensationalists take the text more consistently literal. For example, belief in literal days and years in Genesis as well as literal days, months, and years in Revelation are maintained. This means that we see Bible prophecy from a futurist, as opposed to an idealist, preterist, or historicist perspective. A dispensationalist holds to the above mentioned "Israel—church" distinction as well as the Pre-Trib rapture. This means that current church-age believers are of the spiritual seed of Abraham, but are not spiritual Israel. Dispensationalists believe that God has a distinctive plan for ethnic and national Israel that includes their spiritual restoration and conversion, as well as a specific geographic destiny. On the other hand, the church began on the day of Pentecost and will end with the rapture. Her mission is to preach the gospel, disciple, and nurture believers, and to separate from evil by living a holy life in this current dark age. While the church age will be characterized by worldwide growth, at the same time the age ends in doctrinal and moral ruin and apostasy. Based on their consistently literal interpretation of Scripture, dispensationalists believe that God has administered history in successive stages, during each of which man is tested, fails, and suffers judgment. This linear progress of history began in innocence, continued with man's fall, was punctuated by the cross of Christ, and moves toward the second coming and the millennium.

A Cluster of Items

Actually dispensationalism is a cluster of items joined together to form a system of theological thought. Just as terms like Calvinism, Arminianism, Anglicanism, Catholicism, or Lutheranism are historical labels that represent, not a single idea, but a group of items joined together to form a multifaceted scheme, so is dispensationalism. Dispensationalism is a term that arose in church history⁶ to label certain Evangelicals who believe a certain group of items that are taught in the Bible.

Dispensationalists are those who believe the following things:

- The Bible is God's inspired, inerrant (i.e., without any errors) revelation to man. Scripture provides the framework through which to interpret history (past, present, and future). God's written Word tells us of His plan for His creation and this will surely come to past.
- Since the Bible is God's literal revelation of His plan for history, it should be interpreted literally and historically (past and future).
- Since the Bible reveals God's plan for history, then it follows that there is an ebb and flow to His plan. Therefore, God's plan includes different dispensations, periods, ages, or epochs of history through which His creatures (man and angels) are tested. Therefore, God is instructing His creatures through the progress of history, as His creation progresses from a garden to a city.

⁶ Probably in the early 1900s.

- Since all humanity fell into sin, each person must individually receive God's provision of salvation through the death of Christ by believing the gospel. Thus, Jesus Christ is the only way to a relationship with God.
- Because of mankind's fall into sin, Scripture teaches that all humanity is naturally rebellious to God and the things of God. This is why only genuine believers in Christ are open to the teachings of the Bible. Thus, salvation through Christ is a prerequisite to properly understanding the Scriptures.
- God's plan for history includes a purpose for the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—that is Israel. This plan for Israel includes promises that they will have the land of Israel, will have a seed, and will be a worldwide blessing to the nations. Many of the promises to national Israel are yet future, therefore, God is not finished with the people and nation of Israel.
- God's plan from all eternity also includes a purpose for the church, however, this is a temporary phase that will end with rapture. After the rapture, God will complete His plan for Israel and the Gentiles.
- The main purpose in God's master plan for history is to glorify Himself through Jesus Christ. Therefore, Jesus Christ is the goal and hero of history.⁷

In a nutshell, Christians who believe like this are known throughout Christendom as dispensationalists. I am a dispensationalist! We believe that it is the same as saying that I believe what the Bible teaches. Millions of Christians throughout the world are dispensationalists. In fact, the word "dispensation" occurs four times in the King James Version of the Bible (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2; Col. 1:25).

A Definition of Dispensationalism

Most likely, the leading spokesman for dispensationalism is retired Dallas Theological Seminary professor, Dr. Charles Ryrie. According to Ryrie, "*a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose.*"⁸ In addition to a definition of a dispensation, Ryrie notes that if "one were *describing* a dispensation, he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment."⁹ Finally, he notes concerning a dispensation that, "the distinguishing features are introduced by God; the similar features are retained by God; and the overall combined purpose of the whole program is the glory of God."¹⁰ Eric Sauer states it this way: "A new period always begins only when from the side of God a change is introduced in the composition of the principles valid up to that time; that is, when from the side of God three things concur: 1. A continuance of certain ordinances valid until

⁷ Dale S. DeWitt provides a list of seven items that makes up dispensational theology. See Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During the 20th Century: Theological Development & Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College Publications, 2002), 14.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, [1966], 1995), 33–34 (emphasis original).

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 34.

¹⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 34.

then; 2. An annulment of other regulations until then valid; 3. A fresh introduction of new principles not before valid."¹¹

Ryrie gives the following extensive definition of Dispensationalism:

Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In this household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the process of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations. The understanding of God's differing economies is essential to a proper interpretation of His revelation within those various economies.¹²

Dispensationalist Renald Showers, emphasizing a dispensational view of history, gives the following definition:

Dispensational Theology can be defined very simply as a system of theology which attempts to develop the Bible's philosophy of history on the basis of the sovereign rule of God. It represents the whole of Scripture and history as being covered by several dispensations of God's rule. . . . the term *dispensation* as it relates to Dispensational Theology could be defined as *a particular way of God's administering His rule over the world as He progressively works out His purpose for world history.*"¹³

ESSENTIALS OF DISPENSATIONALISM

Who is a dispensationalist? Essentials are needed by which to can gauge a theology. What are the essentials that characterize a dispensationalist? Ryrie has stated what he calls the three essentials or *sine qua non* (Latin, "that without which") of dispensationalism.

The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the Church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purpose of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well.¹⁴

The three essentials are not a definition or description of dispensationalism, instead they are basic theological tests which can be applied to an individual to see whether or not he is a dispensationalist.

DEVELOPMENT

Friend and foe alike trace the systemization of dispensationalism to John Nelson Darby and his Brethren colleagues during the first half of the nineteenth century in

¹¹ Erich Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 194.

¹² Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 34-35.

¹³ Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference! A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 1990), 27, 30 (emphasis original).

¹⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 48.

Great Britain.¹⁵ British historian Paul Wilkinson admits, “As a recognized and distinct *system* of theology, dispensationalism is properly traced back to Darby.”¹⁶ John Walvoord notes that Darby’s theology first began to develop in relation to “his doctrine of the church as the body of Christ.” He adds that, “Darby’s views undoubtedly were gradually formed, but they were theologically and biblically based.”¹⁷ Brethren researcher Roy A. Huebner argues that Darby first began to develop his dispensational thinking while convalescing from a riding accident during December 1826 and January 1827 (more likely December 1827 and January 1828).¹⁸ Huebner demonstrates that Darby’s generation of his dispensational theology was the product of his personal interactive thought with the text of Scripture as he, his friends, and dispensationalists have long contended.

Darby’s dispensational thoughts, claims Huebner, were developed from the following five factors: (1) “he saw from Isaiah 32 that there was a different dispensation coming . . . that *Israel and the Church were distinct*”;¹⁹ (2) “during his convalescence JND learned that *he ought daily to expect his Lord’s return*”;²⁰ (3) “In 1827 JND understood the fall of the church . . . ‘the ruin of the Church’”;²¹ (4) By 1827 Darby also was beginning to see a gap of time between the rapture and the second coming;²² (5) Darby said in 1857 that he first started understanding things relation to the pretribulation Rapture “thirty years ago.” “With that fixed point of reference, Jan. 31, 1827,” declares Huebner, one can see that Darby “had already understood those truths upon which the pretribulation rapture hinges.”²³ Darby’s belief in pretribulationism stems from the development of his overall theological system.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Although Darby was the first to systematize dispensationalism, I believe that rudimentary features can be found prior to the nineteenth century, especially in the early church and the three hundred years prior to Darby. Opponents often debate a pre-Darby heritage, but I think the evidence does support our claim that there are historical and theological antecedents to the modern system.

During the first two hundred years of the early church two competing schools of interpretation arose. One was the Syrian School of Antioch that championed literal and historical interpretation and the other was in North Africa at Alexandria, Egypt, which advocated an allegorical or spiritual hermeneutic. Bernard Ramm says, “The Syrian school fought Origen in particular as the inventor of the allegorical method, and

¹⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 77; Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 13, 19-20.

¹⁶ Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion’s Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 98 (emphasis original).

¹⁷ John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 47.

¹⁸ Roy A. Huebner, *Precious Truths Revised and Defended through J. N. Darby*, vol. 1 (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 1991). More recent research supports an adjusted date for Darby’s convalescence as more likely during December 1827 and January 1828. See Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815-35* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 71.

¹⁹ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, 17 (emphasis original).

²⁰ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, 19 (emphasis original).

²¹ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, 18.

²² Huebner, *Precious Truths*, 23

²³ Huebner, *Precious Truths*, 24.

maintained the primacy of the literal and historical interpretation."²⁴ Clement of Alexandria (150–215) and his disciple Origen (185–254) developed the allegorical approach to biblical interpretation in the early third century. Manlio Simonetti says as follows:

[T]he cultural initiative of the so-called Alexandrian School tended towards a greater openness to the values of the Greek 'paideia', with the particular intention of deepening the interpretation of Scripture . . . The initiative was thus parallel to that undertaken much earlier by Philo and other Hellenised Jews. . . . the favoured hermeneutical approach was allegorical.²⁵

"The fundamental criticism of Origen, beginning during his own lifetime," notes Joseph Trigg, "was that he used allegorical interpretation to provide a specious justification for reinterpreting Christian doctrine in terms of Platonic philosophy."²⁶ Origen believed that "Proverbs 22:20 authorizes interpreters to seek a three-fold meaning in each passage of Scripture: fleshly, psychic and spiritual." Since Origen believed that "the spiritual meaning belongs to a higher order of ideas than the literal,"²⁷ he was attracted to the spiritual or allegorical meaning of the text. Ronald Diprose explains the implications of an allegorical interpretation as follows:

He motivated this view by appealing to the principle of divine inspiration and by affirming that often statements made by the biblical writers are not literally true and that many events, presented as historical, are inherently impossible. Thus only simple believers will limit themselves to the literal meaning of the text.²⁸

The bottom line of interpretation for the Syrian School at Antioch is their assertion that "the literal was plain-literal and figurative literal." By this, they meant that "a plain-literal sentence is a straightforward prose sentence with no figures of speech in it. 'The eye of the Lord is upon thee,' would be a figurative literal sentence."²⁹ Such an approach had a tremendous impact on Bible prophecy as R. H. Charles notes: "the Alexandrians, who, under the influence of Hellenism and the traditional allegorical

²⁴ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics*, 3rd edition, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 49.

²⁵ Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh, Scotland: 1994), 34–35.

²⁶ Joseph W. Trigg, "Introduction," in R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory & Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), vi.

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²⁸ Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origins and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004), p. 82. Frederic W. Farrar tells explains further: "The Bible, he [Origen] argued, is meant for the salvation of man; but man, as Plato tells us, consists of three parts—body, soul, and spirit. Scripture therefore must have a threefold sense corresponding to this trichotomy. It has a literal, a moral, and a mystic meaning analogous to the body, to the soul, to the spirit. . . . But of two of these three supposed senses Origen makes very little use. To the moral sense he refers but seldom; to the literal sense scarcely at all." Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, [1886] 1961), pp. 196–97.

²⁹ Diprose, *Israel and the Church*, 82–83.

³⁰ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 49.

school of interpretation which came to a head in Philo, rejected the literal sense of the Apocalypse, and attached to it a spiritual significance only."³⁰

For example, the downgrade of the modern state of Israel as prophetically significant also has roots in Origen and an allegorical hermeneutic. Diprose notes as follows:

An attitude of contempt towards Israel had become the rule by Origen's time. The new element in his own view of Israel is his perception of them as "manifesting no elevation [of thought]". It follows that the interpreter must always posit a deeper or higher meaning for prophecies relating to Judea, Jerusalem, Israel, Judah and Jacob which, he affirms, are "not being understood by us in a 'carnal' sense." In Origen's understanding, the only positive function of physical Israel was that of being a type of spiritual Israel. The promises were not made to physical Israel because she was unworthy of them and incapable of understanding them. Thus Origen effectively disinherits physical Israel.³¹

Although the Syrian school had great influence the first few centuries of church history, the Alexandrian school eventually won out, as Jerome and Augustine were advocates of the allegorical approach in the area of Bible prophecy. Henry Preserved Smith concludes concerning Augustine that, "with his endorsement allegory may fairly be said to have triumphed."³² Their influence paved the way for the dominance of allegorical interpretation during much of the Middle Ages, especially when it came to Bible prophecy. Augustine developed a dual hermeneutic. On the one hand, he tended to interpret the Bible somewhat literally, but when it came to eschatology he interpreted those passages spiritually or allegorically.

DISPENSATIONS

Crude, but clear, schemes of ages and dispensations are found in ante-Nicene fathers such as Justin Martyr (110-165), Irenaeus (130-200), Tertullian (c. 160-220), Methodius (d. 311), and Victorinus of Petau (d. 304). Dispensational historian, Larry Crutchfield concluded that:

Regardless of the number of economies to which the Fathers held, the fact remains that they set forth what can only be considered a doctrine of ages and dispensations which foreshadows dispensationalism as it is held today. Their views were certainly less well defined and less sophisticated. But it is evident that the early Fathers viewed God's dealings with His people in dispensational terms. . . . In every major area of importance in the early church one finds rudimentary features of dispensationalism that bear a striking resemblance to their contemporary offspring.³³

³⁰ R. H. Charles, *Studies in the Apocalypse* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913), 11.

³¹ Diprose, *Israel and the Church*, 84.

³² Henry Preserved Smith, *Essays in Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1921), 58.

³³ Larry Crutchfield, "Ages and Dispensations in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 144 (Oct.–Dec., 1987), 398.

Crutchfield charted these Fathers' schemes in the following chart which I have reproduced in an abbreviated form.³⁴

Justin Martyr	Enoch/ Noah	Abraham	Moses	Christ	Millennium	
Irenaeus	Adam to Noah	Noah to Moses	Moses to Christ	Christ to Eternity	Millennium	
Tertullian	Adam	Noah	Abraham	Moses	Christ	Millennium

Crutchfield outlined the early Fathers' views on Israel and the church, which is another feature important to dispensationalism.

The Fathers (1) distinguished between the church and national Israel, (2) recognized distinctions among the differing peoples of God throughout biblical history, and (3) believed in the literal fulfillment of covenant promises in the earthly kingdom. . . . The contemporary dispensational position on Israel and the church is primarily a refinement and not a contradiction of the position of the ante-Nicene church.³⁵

Crutchfield notes:

There is no doubt that the position of the Fathers on the relationship between Israel and the church has problems. But certain elements in their thought place them close to, though not altogether within, the dispensational camp. That the church is never called national Israel nor national Israel the church is certain. The church is called the "new Israel" only in the sense that believers follow the analogy of Abraham's faith and are his spiritual offspring, and therefore are the people of God in the new dispensation. That these Fathers maintained distinctions among the peoples of God in various ages is also evident in their treatment of Abraham's seed and the recipients of the inheritance in the millennial kingdom. That these Fathers also held to the literal fulfillment of covenant promises in this coming kingdom, contrary to the covenant amillennial position, is beyond dispute.³⁶

Crutchfield sees similarities in the early church and modern dispensationalism. He concludes, "The contemporary dispensational position on Israel and the church is primarily a refinement and not a contradiction of the position of the anti-Nicene church."³⁷ The early church was on the right track in the first three centuries of Christianity, but development was stunted by the invasion and eventual victory of replacement theology ideas and non-literal hermeneutics that arose through Origen, Jerome, and Augustine.

FUTURISM AND THE SEVENTY WEEKS OF DANIEL

³⁴ Crutchfield, "Ages and Dispensations," 400.

³⁵ Larry Crutchfield, "Israel and the Church in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 144 (Jul.-Sep., 1987), 271.

³⁶ Crutchfield, "Israel and the Church," 270.

³⁷ Crutchfield, "Israel and the Church," 271.

Not only was the early church premillennial, it was also futuristic in its premillennialism, as is dispensationalism. In fact, writers like Irenaeus (130–200) have a fairly detailed statement of futurist premillennialism broadly similar to modern dispensationalism. Irenaeus and Hippolytus (170–236) see a future seven-year tribulation, including a gap of time between the first 69 weeks of years and the 70th week.

Louis Knowles in *The Westminster Theological Journal* wrote about the early church's view of the seventy weeks prophecy in Daniel. He describes the views Irenaeus and Hippolytus as "undoubtedly the forerunners of the modern dispensational interpreters of the Seventy Weeks."³⁸ Knowles draws the following conclusion about Irenaeus and Hippolytus:

. . . we may say that Irenaeus presented the seed of an idea that found its full growth in the writings of Hippolytus. In the works of these fathers, we can find most of the basic concepts of the modern futuristic view of the seventieth week of Daniel ix. That they were dependent to some extent upon earlier material is no doubt true. Certainly we can see the influence of pre-Christian Jewish exegesis at times, but, by and large, we must regard them as the founders of a school of interpretation, and in this lies their significance for the history of exegesis.³⁹

Thus, it is clear "that in Irenaeus and Hippolytus we have the originators of that method of interpretation that places the seventieth week of Daniel at the time of the consummation."⁴⁰

Hippolytus is the first known person in the history of the church to write a commentary on any book of the Bible, and he wrote on Daniel.⁴¹ "Hippolytus give us the first attempt at detailed interpretation of the Seventy Weeks," observes Knowles. "He is dependent, no doubt, upon Irenaeus for the foundational proposition that the last half-week of the seventy is to be connected with the Antichrist, but the detailed development is not found in Irenaeus."⁴² In fact, Hippolytus refers to a gap or, in his words "division," multiple times.⁴³ Hippolytus says,

For when the threescore and two weeks are fulfilled, and Christ is come, and the Gospel is preached in every place, the times being then accomplished, there will remain only one week, the last, in which Elias will appear, and Enoch, and in the midst of it the abomination of desolation will be manifested, viz., Antichrist, announcing desolation to the world.⁴⁴

³⁸ Louis E. Knowles, "The Interpretation of the Seventy Weeks of Daniel in the Early Fathers," *The Westminster Theological Journal* (May 1945: Vol. VII), 136.

³⁹ Knowles, "Seventy Weeks," 138-39.

⁴⁰ Knowles, "Seventy Weeks," 139.

⁴¹ Michael Kalafian, *The Prophecy of the Seventy Weeks of the Book of Daniel*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 83.

⁴² Knowles, "Seventy Weeks," 142.

⁴³ Hippolytus, *Fragments from Commentaries, Daniel*, Paragraph 22; *Treaties on Christ and Antichrist*, Paragraphs 61-65; *Appendix to the Works of Hippolytus*, Paragraphs 21, 25, 36.

⁴⁴ Hippolytus, *Fragments from Commentaries, Daniel*, Paragraph 22.

“Certainly Hippolytus’ interpretation does not have the refinements of the later development, but it is the direct ancestor of it,”⁴⁵ concludes Knowles.

It is clear that the earliest views of Bible prophecy found in the Ante-Nicene Fathers (till A.D. 325) are primarily in line with the futurist interpretative approach. There were inconsistencies scattered throughout writings of the fathers, but it is clear that an undeveloped system of futurism was their basic approach to Revelation and Bible prophecy in general. Grant Osborne summarizes the views of the early church’s futurism as follows:

This was the method employed by some of the earliest fathers (e.g., Justin, Irenaeus, Hippolytus), but with the triumph of the allegorical method (taking a spiritual approach to the book) after Origen and of the amillennial view after Augustine and Ticonius, the futurist method (and chiliasm) was not seen again for over a thousand years. The first to develop once more a literal view of the book was Franciscus Ribeira, a Spanish Jesuit who wrote in the late sixteenth century to counter the Reformation antipapal interpretation. While he was not truly a futurist, he turned the attention back to the early fathers, and after him that view returned to prominence and stands alongside the others as equally valid.⁴⁶

It is obvious that our futurist view was found early and often throughout the early church, and only became scarce when premillennialism was banded from the medieval church as a result of the influence of Augustine and Jerome. “But the saints shall never possess an earthly kingdom,” declares Jerome, “but only a heavenly. Away, then, with the fable about a millennium!”⁴⁷ With Jerome’s banishment of early premillennialism went the literal interpretation of prophecy. History would have to wait more than a thousand years for the revival of a more literal interpretation of Bible prophecy and the literal approach to the seventieth week of Daniel and other prophetic details.

PREMILLENNIALISM AND THE EARLY CHURCH

Premillennialism or chiliasm as it was called in the early church, was the pervasive view of the earliest orthodox fathers. This is the consensus of both liberal and conservative scholars in historical theology. J. N. D. Kelly, acknowledged internationally as an authority on patristic Christian thought, is typical of the scholarly opinion on this question and notes that the early Church was chiliastic in her eschatology. Speaking of the eschatology of the second century he observes:

The clash with Judaism and paganism made it imperative to set out the bases of the revealed dogmas more thoroughly. The Gnostic tendency to dissolve Christian eschatology into the myth of the soul’s upward ascent and return to God had to be resisted. On the other hand millenarianism, or the theory that the returned Christ would reign on earth for a thousand years,

⁴⁵ Knowles, “Seventy Weeks,” 141.

⁴⁶ Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 20.

⁴⁷ Jerome, *Commentary on Daniel*, translated by Gleason L. Archer, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1958), 81.

came to find increasing support among Christian teachers. . . . This millenarian, or 'chiliastic', doctrine was widely popular at this time.⁴⁸

Kelly asserts further that premillennialism is dominate through the middle of the third century by observing the following: "The great theologians who followed the Apologists, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus, were primarily concerned to defend the traditional eschatological scheme against Gnosticism. . . . They are all exponents of millenarianism."⁴⁹

Still another historian says,

Primitive Christianity was marked by great chiliastic enthusiasm, . . . By chiliasm, strictly speaking, is meant the belief that Christ was to return to earth and reign visibly for one thousand years. That return was commonly placed in the immediate future.⁵⁰

Further insight into the eschatology of the early church is noted by Kelly:

Irenaeus, for example, treats the hope of a resplendent earthly Jerusalem as traditional orthodoxy, and protests against attempts to allegorize away the great texts of the Old Testament and Revelation which appear to look forward to it. Tertullian likewise, after establishing the reality of Christ's heavenly kingdom, adds that this by no means excludes an earthly kingdom also. In fact, the latter is due to come before the former, and it will last for a thousand years.⁵¹

Premillennialism was not contradicted by a single orthodox church father until the beginning of the third century, when Gaius (Caius) first launched an attack. Gaius is the first one in recorded church history who interpreted the millennial kingdom symbolically. But even with Gaius' appearance, premillennialism was still very much the eschatology of the day.

THE RAPTURE AND THE EARLY CHURCH

The post-apostolic writing known as *The Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. A.D. 140) speaks of a possible pretribulational concept of escaping the tribulation. In order to get the context, the passage will be cited at length.

1. The Fourth vision which I saw, brethren, twenty days after the former vision which came unto me, *for a type of the impending tribulation* (εἰς τύπον τῆς θλίψεως τῆς ἐπερχομένης). I was going into the country by the Campanian Way. From the high road, it is about ten stades; and the place is easy for traveling. While then I am walking alone, I entreat the Lord that He will accomplish the revelations and the visions which He showed me through His holy Church, that He may strengthen me and may give repentance to His

⁴⁸ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 465.

⁴⁹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 467, 469.

⁵⁰ Joseph Cullen Ayer, *A Source Book for Ancient Church History: From the Apostolic Age to the Close of the Conciliar Period* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 25.

⁵¹ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 469.

servants which have stumbled, that His great and glorious Name may be glorified, for that He held me worthy that He should show me His marvels. And as I gave glory and thanksgiving to Him, there answered me as it were the sound of a voice, 'Be not of doubtful mind, Hermas.' I began to question in myself and to say, 'How can I be of doubtful mind, seeing that I am so firmly founded by the Lord, and have seen glorious things?' And I went on a little, brethren, and behold I see a cloud of dust rising as it were to heaven, and I began to say within myself, 'Can it be that cattle are coming, and raising a cloud of dust?' for it was just about a stade from me. As the cloud of dust waxed greater and greater, I suspected that it was something supernatural. Then the sun shone out a little, and behold, I see a huge beast like a sea-monster, and from its mouth fiery locusts issued forth. And the beast was about a hundred feet in length, and its head was as it were of pottery. And I began to weep, and to entreat the Lord *that He would rescue me from it* (ἵνα με λυτρώσῃται ἐξ αὐτοῦ.). And I remembered the word which I had heard, 'Be not of doubtful mind, Hermas.' Having therefore, brethren, put on the faith of the Lord and called to mind the mighty works that He had taught me, I took courage and gave myself up to the beast. Now the beast was coming on with such a rush, that it might have ruined a city. I come near it, and, huge monster as it was, it stretcheth itself on the ground, and merely put forth its tongue, and stirred not at all until I had passed by it. And the beast had on its head four colours; black, then fire and blood colour, then gold, then white.

2. Now after I had passed the beast, and had gone forward about thirty feet, behold, there meeteth me a virgin arrayed as if she were going forth from a bride-chamber, all in white and with white sandals, veiled up to her forehead, and here head-covering consisted of a turban, and here hair was white. I knew from the former visions that it was the Church, and I became more cheerful. She saluteth me, saying, 'Good morrow, my good man'; and I saluted her in turn, 'Lady, good morrow.' She answered and said unto me, 'Did nothing meet the?' I say unto her, 'Lady, such a huge beast, that could have destroyed whole peoples: but, by the power of the Lord and by His great mercy, *I escaped it* (αὐτοῦ ἐξέφυγον αὐτό).' *'Thou did escape it well* (Καλῶς ἐξέφυγες),' saith she, 'because thou didst cast thy care upon God, and didst open thy heart to the Lord, believing that thou canst be saved by nothing else but by His great and glorious Name. Therefore the Lord sent His angel, which is over the beasts, whose name is Segri, and *shut its mouth, that it might not hurt thee.*⁵² Thou hast escaped a great tribulation by reason of thy faith, and because, though thou sawest so huge a beast, thou didst not doubt in thy mind. Go therefore, and declare to the elect of the Lord His mighty works, and tell them that this beast is a type of the great tribulation which is to come. If therefore ye prepare yourselves beforehand, and repent (and turn) unto the Lord with you whole heart, ye shall be able to escape it, if your heart be made pure and without blemish, and if for the remaining days of your life ye serve the Lord blamelessly. Cast your cares upon the Lord and He will set them straight. Trust ye in the Lord, ye men of doubtful mind, for He can do all things, yea, He both turneth away His wrath from you, and

⁵² Italics original.

again He sendeth forth His plagues upon you that are of doubtful mind. Woe to them that hear these words and are disobedient; it were better for them that they had not been born.'

3. I asked her concerning the four colours, which the beast had upon its head. Then she answered me and said, 'Again thou are curious about such matters.' 'Yes, lady,' said I, 'make known unto me what these things are.' 'Listen,' said she; 'the black is this world in which ye dwell; and the fire and blood colour showeth that this world must perish by blood and fire; *and the golden part are ye that have escaped from this world* (τὸς δὲ χρυσοῦν μέρος ὑμεῖς ἐστέ οἱ ἐκφυγότες τὸν κόσμον τοῦτον.). For as the gold is tested by fire and is made useful, so ye also [that dwell in it] are being tested in yourselves. Ye then that abide and pass through the fire will be purified by it. For as the gold loses its dross, so ye also shall cast away all sorrow and tribulation, and shall be purified, and shall be useful for building of the tower. But the white portion is the coming age, in which the elect of God shall dwell; because the elect of God shall be without spot and pure unto life eternal. Wherefore cease not thou to speak in the ears of the saints. *Ye have now the symbolism also of the tribulation which is coming in power* (ἔχετε καὶ τὸν τύπον τῆς θλίψεως τῆς ἐρχομένης μεγάλης.). *But if ye be willing, it shall be nought* (εἰάν δὲ ὑμεῖς θελήσητε, οὐδὲν ἔσται.). Remember ye the things that are written beforehand.' With these words she departed, and I saw not in what direction she departed; for a noise was made; and I turned back in fear, thinking that the beast was coming.⁵³

While Hermas clearly speaks of escaping the tribulation, pretribulationists and non-pretribulationists tend to agree that he does not articulate a clear message similar to modern pretribulationism. However, there is the clear idea of escaping the tribulation, a pretribulational notion, which could have been a lingering teaching from the Apostles that only needs clarification in Hermas. Pre-trib scholar, John Walvoord argues that the central feature of pretribulationism is the doctrine of imminency and that is "a prominent feature of the doctrine of the early church."⁵⁴

Some have thought that Irenaeus (c. 180) could have made a pre-trib rapture statement since he actually speaks of the rapture: "the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this [the tribulation]," as noted below:

And therefore, when in the end the Church shall be suddenly caught up from this, it is said, "There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be." For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome they are crowned with incorruption.⁵⁵

⁵³ *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 1.4.1–3, cited from J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, editors, *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1891; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), Greek text, 314–6, English text, 419–21. (Italics added, unless otherwise indicated.)

⁵⁴ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 51.

⁵⁵ Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 558.

However, the very next statement speaks of believers in the tribulation. When taken within the context of all of Irenaeus' writings on these subjects, it appears that he was not teaching pretribulationism.

IMMINENCY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Pretribulationists, such as Charles Ryrie define imminency as an event that is "impending, hanging over one's head, ready to take place." An imminent event is one that is always ready to take place.⁵⁶ Some have recognized that it is common for ante-Nicene writers to speak of an imminent return of Christ, especially during the first century after the Apostles.⁵⁷ Patristic scholar Larry Crutchfield argues that the early church fathers believed in what he calls "imminent intratribulationism." He summarizes the views of pretribulationist scholars on this issue as follows:

In sum, with few exceptions, the premillennial fathers of the early church believed that they were living in the last times. Thus they looked daily for the Lord's return. Even most of those who looked for Antichrist's appearance prior to the second advent, saw that event as occurring suddenly and just as suddenly being followed by the rescue and rapture of the saints by Christ. . . . This belief in the imminent return of Christ within the context of ongoing persecution has prompted us to broadly label the views of the earliest fathers, imminent intratribulationism. . . .

It should be noted that dispensationalists have neither said that the early church was clearly pretribulationist nor that there are even clear individual statements of pretribulationism in the fathers. As Walvoord says, "the historical fact is that the early church fathers' view on prophecy did not correspond to what is advanced by pretribulationists today except for the one important point that both subscribe to the imminency of the rapture." This view of the fathers on imminency and in some the references to escaping the time of the tribulation constitute what may be termed, to borrow a phrase from Erickson, "seeds from which the doctrine of the pretribulationist rapture could be developed . . ." Had it not been for the drought brought by Alexandrian allegorism and later by Augustine, one wonders what kind of

⁵⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus: What You Need to Know about the Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 21–2.

⁵⁷ Larry Crutchfield says, "Many of them, especially in the first century, did indeed make explicit statements which indicated a belief in the imminent return of Christ. The doctrine of imminency is especially prominent in the writings of the apostolic fathers. It is on the basis of Christ's impending return (e.g., *Didache*) and on the strength of the literal fulfillment of past prophecy (e.g., *Barnabas*), that they exhorted the Christian to live a life of purity and faithfulness." Crutchfield supports this statement with the following: "See for example Clement of Rome (*I Clement* XXIII; XXXIV-XXXV); Ignatius (*Epist. to Polycarp* I and III); *Didache* (XVI, 1); Hermas (*Shepherd: Similitudes* IX, Chaps. V, VII and XXVI); *Barnabas* (XXI). For fathers of the second century see Tertullian (*Apology* XXI); and Cyprian (*Treatises* I, 27). There are expressions of imminency even in those who expected certain events to occur before the end, as in Hippolytus (*Treat. On Christ and Antichrist* 5); and Lactantius (*Div. Instit.* XXV)." Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism: Part VI—The Conclusion: Evaluating the Content of Early Dispensational Concepts" *The Conservative Theological Journal* (vol. 3, no. 9; August 1999), 194.

crop those seeds might have yielded—before Darby and the nineteenth century.⁸⁸

Historian Kurt Aland also sees the early church imminent expectation of the Lord's return.

Up until the middle of the second century, and even later, Christians did not live in and for the present, but they lived in and for the future; and this was in such a way that the future flowed into the present, that future and present became one—a future which obviously stood under the Lord's presence. It was the confident expectation of the first generations that the end of the world was not only near, but that it had really already come. It was the definite conviction not only of Paul, but of all Christian of that time, that they themselves would experience the return of the Lord.⁸⁹

Aland sees the decline of a true imminence that began around A.D. 150.

As soon as the thought of a postponement of the Parousia was uttered once—and indeed not only incidentally, but thoroughly presented in an entire writing—it developed its own life and power. At first, people looked at it as only a brief postponement, as the Shepherd of Hermas clearly expresses. But soon, as the end of the world did not occur, it was conceived of as a longer and longer period, until finally—his is today's situation nothing but the thought of a postponement exists in people's consciousness. Hardly any longer is there the thought of the possibility of an imminent Parousia. Today we live with the presumption—I would almost say *from* the presumption—that this world is going to continue; it dominates our consciousness. Practically, we no longer speak about a postponement, but only seldom does the idea of the end of the world and the Lord's return for judgment even occur to us; rather, it is pushed aside as annoying and disturbing—in contrast to the times when faith was alive. It is very characteristic that in ages when the church flourishes, the expectation of the end revives—we think of Luther; we think of Pietism. If we judge our present time by its expectation of the

⁸⁸ Crutchfield, "Early Church Fathers—Part VI," 195–6. Crutchfield adds: "Some of the fathers like Hippolytus, Tertullian, Lactantius, and others, clearly had posttribulational elements in their views concerning the end times. But we have been unable to find an instance of the unequivocal classic posttribulationism taught today. Walvoord's assessment of the fathers' views on the tribulation is essentially correct. He says, "The preponderance of evidence seems to support the concept that the early church did not clearly hold to a rapture as preceding the end time tribulation period. Most of the early church fathers who wrote on the subject at all considered themselves already in the great tribulation. Accordingly Payne, as well as most other posttribulationists, takes the position that it is self-evident that pretribulationism as it is taught today was unheard of in the early centuries of the church. Consequently the viewpoint of the early church fathers is regarded by practically all posttribulationists, whether adherents of the classic view or not, as a major argument in favor of posttribulationism. However, the fact that most posttribulationists today do not accept the doctrine of imminency as the early church held it diminishes the force of their argument against pretribulationism" [see John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 24.], 196.

⁸⁹ Kurt Aland, *A History of Christianity: From the Beginnings to the Threshold of the Reformation*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), I, 87.

future.⁶⁰

Posttribulationists like J. Barton Payne also admit that the early fathers held to an imminency viewpoint. He surmises:

It must therefore be concluded that the denial of the imminence of the Lord's coming on the part of post-tribulationists who have reacted against dispensationalism is not legitimate. . . .

Belief in the imminency of the return of Jesus was the uniform hope of the early church; and it was only with the rise of a detailed application of Bible prophecy, at the close of the second century, to yet future history that its truth was questioned.⁶¹

THE MIDDLE AGES

The Middle Ages were a time in which premillennialism, literal interpretation, dispensations, and an Israel–church distinction were largely absent from theological discussion or went underground and barely left a trace. Hermeneutically it was a time that was primarily dominated by allegorical methods of interpretation. Since Origen taught that the spiritual is the deeper or real meaning of a text, why deal with the inferior literal meaning of a passage when one can see so much more in the spiritual realm.

One of the beliefs that became dominant, especially in late-Medieval times, was the notion that every sentence in the pages of Scripture has to be understood as referring to Christ. This erroneous interpretive dictum was based upon a misapplication of Luke 24:44, which says, "Now He said to them, 'These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'" This passage does not say that every word or sentence in the Old Testament has to refer to Jesus, the Messiah, but instead it says Jesus is the one being referenced in the Old Testament when it speaks of the Messiah. This would mean that a clearly historical passage like 1 Chronicles 26:18, which says, "At the Parbar on the west there were four at the highway and two at the Parbar," would have to be interpreted as referring to Christ. This sentence is not speaking about Christ, but through allegorical alchemy it was explained in some kind of Christological way. "During these nine centuries we find very little except the 'glimmerings and decays' of patristic exposition," notes Farrar. "Much of the learning which still continued to exist was devoted to something which was meant for exegesis, yet not one writer in hundreds showed any true conception of what exegesis really implies."⁶²

When one studies the interpretive trends of the Middle Ages, we need to realize what that meant for Christianity at that time. Beryl Smalley, a Medieval scholar who specializes in their views of biblical interpretation tells us that "they subordinated scholarship meanwhile to mysticism and to propaganda."⁶³ "Again the crisis was reflected in biblical studies. The speculation of Joachim signified a new wave of

⁶⁰ Aland, *History of Christianity*, I, 92.

⁶¹ J. Barton Payne, *The Imminent Appearing of Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962), 102.

⁶² Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 245–46.

⁶³ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, [1964], 1982), 358.

mysticism.”⁶⁴ “Revolution and uncertainty have discouraged biblical scholarship in the past and stimulated more subjective modes of interpretation,” she contends. “Conditions today are giving rise to a certain sympathy with the allegorists. We have a spate of studies on medieval ‘spirituality’.”⁶⁵ As Evangelicals today react to dispensationalism and literal interpretation, they are moving in the direction they can go, to allegorical hermeneutics.

Walt Kaiser suggested about twenty-five years ago that the church is “now going through a hermeneutical crisis, perhaps as significant in its importance and outcome as that of the Reformation.”⁶⁶ He notes, “the meaning of the text lies in its subject matter, rather than in what an author meant by that text.”⁶⁷ Kaiser explains further:

The process of exegesis of a text is no longer linear but circular—one in which the interpreter affects his text as much as the text (in its subject matter) somehow affects the interpreter as well. Clearly, there is a confusion of ontology with epistemology, the subject with the object, the “thereness” of the propositions of the text with the total cultural and interpretive “baggage” of the interpreter.⁶⁸

THE REFORMATION

The Reformation could not have occurred if the reformers did not have the confidence that they knew what God’s Word was saying. “The tradition of the Syrian school...became the essential hermeneutical theory of the Reformers.”⁶⁹ Ramm points out that in Europe “there was a hermeneutical Reformation which preceded the ecclesiastical Reformation.”⁷⁰ Thus one’s interpretative method precedes and produces one’s exegesis; and then their theological beliefs follow. Luther and Calvin generally returned the church to literal interpretation. Had they not done this, Protestantism would have never been born and the Reformation would not have taken place. Luther said, “The literal sense of Scripture alone is the whole essence of faith and of Christian theology.”⁷¹ Calvin wrote, “It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”⁷² Though Luther and Calvin did not always follow their own theory, they and like-minded Reformers did turn the hermeneutical tide in the right direction.

By and large, the Reformation witnessed the rebirth of inductive exegesis through scholars such as John Calvin. “With the rise of humanism in the Renaissance,” notes David Puckett, “the need for careful literary and historical interpretation of ancient

⁶⁴ Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 359.

⁶⁵ Smalley, *The Study*, p. 360.

⁶⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Evangelical Hermeneutics: Restatement, Advance or Retreat from the Reformation?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 46 (1982), p. 167. Kaiser believes that the present-day crisis finds its historical roots in the writings of liberal existentialists like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976), and Hans Georg Gadamer (b. 1900). Kaiser, “Evangelical Hermeneutics,” 167.

⁶⁷ Kaiser, “Evangelical Hermeneutics,” p. 167.

⁶⁸ Kaiser, “Evangelical Hermeneutics,” p. 167.

⁶⁹ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 51.

⁷⁰ Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 52.

⁷¹ Martin Luther, cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 54.

⁷² John Calvin, cited in Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 58.

literature was widely recognized.”⁷³ While Calvin did little to contribute directly to issues related to the development of dispensationalism, he did place the Reformed community on the right road as he transitioned Medieval Christianity from an allegorical hermeneutic to the grammatico-historical approach. Calvin is said to be “the first scientific interpreter in the history of the Christian church.”⁷⁴ Puckett notes, “that Calvin, like Luther, enunciates the ‘exegetical principle of the grammatico-historical sense,’ but unlike Luther, actually follows through in his exegetical practice.”⁷⁵

The Reformation did much to restore a more intensive study of the Bible to the church. For the first time ever, printing made literature accessible to most anyone. A developing middle class was rising throughout Europe, especially in England and Germany that could afford books, tracts, and most importantly their own Bible in their language. There was an explosion in Luther and Calvin’s day of the study of Greek and Hebrew.⁷⁶ In one sense, biblical exegesis began for the first time in the 1500s. Within Protestant areas a new and unquenchable thirst developed for the study of the Bible in the academy and laity alike. Literacy exploded within Protestantism since the top priority was to know God through His written revelation, the Bible. This paradigm shift set the stage for the move from a static Medieval Catholicism to modern dispensational development.

POST-REFORMATION DEVELOPMENT

During the post-reformation period many Protestants began to cast off a thousand years of allegorical interpretation of the Bible, especially in the area of Bible prophecy. The Reformers applied literal interpretation first in issues relating to the doctrine of salvation and then their heirs began to apply it increasingly to the entire Bible, especially in relation to Israel and her future.

In the early 1600s there was a significant movement, especially among the Puritans, to return to premillennialism because some began to apply a literal hermeneutic to Revelation 20. Jeffrey K. Jue, church history prof at Westminster Seminary, documents how Joseph Mede (1586–1638) and a host of many others among the English began adopting a millennialist view of eschatology. He says, “By the mid-seventeenth century the most popular eschatological position in England was millenarianism.”⁷⁷ At the same time many Protestants began to see that there was a literal future for national Israel. Jue notes that, “the majority of New England puritans held to the doctrine of a future national conversion of ethnic Jews.”⁷⁸ He further notes, “The doctrine of the national conversion of the Jews was an integral part of the eschatology of the New England settlers.”⁷⁹ Reiner Smolinski notes the near unanimity of such a belief within the English-speaking Reformed community: “Virtually all seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century millennialists on both sides of the Atlantic agreed that even though

⁷³ David Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 4.

⁷⁴ Kemper Fullerton, *Prophecy and Authority: A Study in the History of the Doctrine and Interpretation of Scripture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), 104. Cited in Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 10.

⁷⁵ Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 10.

⁷⁶ Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 56–59.

⁷⁷ Jeffrey K. Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth: Joseph Mede (1586–1638) and the Legacy of Millenarianism* (Dordrecht, Holland: Springer, 2006), 4.

⁷⁸ Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth*, 191.

⁷⁹ Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth*, 193.

the Jews were still languishing in their Diaspora, Jehovah had not forgotten his chosen people and would, in due time, restore them to their once-elevated position among the nations."⁸⁰

It is my judgment that when Israel begins to be recognized as distinct from the church that one will eventually start to wonder if there is a distinction between these two peoples of God. How this juxtaposition is reconciled often leads to a dispensational viewpoint on the matter. One must either blur the distinctions or embrace the dispensational solution. The process, however, must begin with one beginning to see ethnic Israel as distinct and with a future still to come in God's plan for history.

Wilber Wallis observes that during the post-Reformation era in the English-speaking world a revival of premillennialism was spearheaded by two influences. First, reading the premillennialism of the early church fathers, and, second, a note in *The Geneva Bible*. Wallis tells us:

The rediscovery of the last five chapters of Irenaeus about 1570 may have contributed to Alsted's formulation of premillennialism, since he and others used the writers of the ancient church. We may feel that the intensive Bible study of the Reformation, combined with the knowledge of antiquity, was beginning to swing the pendulum back to the primitive premillennialism of Irenaeus which had been rejected by Augustine.⁸¹

Early Puritan Joseph Mede observed a similarity between Patristic chiliasm and his own millenarianism especially the writings of the Ante-Nicene Fathers. However, in the early sixteenth century any appeal to the Ante-Nicene Fathers' views on the Apocalypse was discouraged for fear of encouraging their chiliasm."⁸²

In a note on Romans 11:25, *The Geneva Bible* says, "The blindness of the Jews is neither so universal that the Lord hath no elect in that nation, neither shall it be continual for there shall be a time wherein they also (as the Prophets have forewarned) shall effectually embrace that which they do now so stubbornly for the most part reject and refuse."⁸³ It appears this note believes the Old Testament Prophets also taught a future for Israel as well. Many scholars think the note was written by Calvin's successor Theodore Beza.

Even though literal interpretation was being restored during the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, it still took a while for biblical interpreters to more consistently rid themselves of the Medieval allegorical influences. For the influential Puritan theologian William Perkins, "the medieval four-fold sense was reduced to a two-fold or double-literal sense."⁸⁴ This would be similar to Augustine's dual hermeneutic. However, most Protestant Bible interpreters were increasingly moving

⁸⁰ Reiner Smolinski, *The Threefold Paradise of Cotton Mather: An Edition of "Triparadisus,"* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 21.

⁸¹ Wilber B. Wallis, "Reflections on the History of Premillennial Thought," in R. Laird Harris, Swee-Hwa Quek, & J. Robert Vannoy, editors, *Interpretation & History: Essays in honour of Allen A. MacRae* (Singapore: Christian Life Publishers, 1986), 229.

⁸² Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth*, 110.

⁸³ *The 1599 Geneva Bible* (White Hall, WV: Tolle Lege Press, 2006), 1155. The same note also appeared, unchanged, in the original 1559 edition of *The Geneva Bible*.

⁸⁴ Jue, *Heaven Upon Earth*, 199.

toward the literal hermeneutic and functioning within that framework so that the historical, grammatical, contextual method is labeled the Protestant hermeneutic.⁸⁵

While biblical interpretation by the 1600s tended to agree in theory that literal interpretation is the right way to handle Scripture, it still took a couple hundred years to work that out into most areas of Bible interpretation, especially when it came to dealing with Bible prophecy. Even though premillennialism had been restored, it was still dominated to a large extent by the blend of literal and allegorical interpretation that is known as historicism, which calculated time within a contrived day/year theory. Thus, 1260 days from Daniel and Revelation really referred to 1260 years. This is not consistent literal interpretation!

It was not until the late 1700s and early 1800s that some biblical interpreters began to become consistent in applying a literal hermeneutic. Wallis tells us that, "a consistent futurism, which completely removes the necessity for calculating the times, did not emerge until the early nineteenth century."⁸⁶ In general, the Evangelical church, especially in the English-speaking world, began to return to the premillennial futurism of the early church. Now they would apply the literal method and develop it beyond the beginning stage of the early church. As Wallis notes, the views of Irenaeus (c. 185) contained the basics of the literal and futurist understanding of Bible prophecy as seen in modern dispensationalism.⁸⁷ The important point to note here is that as interpreters became more consistent in applying a literal hermeneutic to the entire Bible, especially to biblical prophecy, it undoubtedly yielded a futurist view of prophecy. "We have returned to Irenaeus' conception of the futurity of Daniel's seventieth week,"⁸⁸ declares Wallis.

BRITISH EVANGELICALISM

In the early 1800s a wide acceptance of literal interpretation arose in British evangelicalism. "A body of Evangelical opinion, however, began to insist from the 1820s onwards on inerrancy, verbal inspiration, and the need for literal interpretation of the Bible."⁸⁹ Within the context of the rise of a newfound acceptance of literal hermeneutics, "Historicists found it hard to be thoroughgoing advocates of literal interpretation," while on the other hand, "futurists did not suffer from this handicap."⁹⁰ John Nelson Darby, who had shifted from historicism to futurism by 1829, was contending, "that prophecy relating to the Jews would be fulfilled literally."⁹¹ Thus if prophecy was to be literally fulfilled for Israel, what does that mean for the church? Should passages relating to the church also be taken literally? For Darby the answer was a resounding "yes", thus rejecting the traditional view that the church had forever replaced Israel. "Evangelical commentators had customarily argued that the prophecies of the Old Testament should be read spiritually, not literally: they should be applied to

⁸⁵ Bernard Ramm has entitled his presentation of literal interpretation or the grammatical, historical, and contextual method as Protestant Biblical Interpretation in his book with that title. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*.

⁸⁶ Wallis, "Reflections," 229.

⁸⁷ Wallis, "Reflections," 232–34.

⁸⁸ Wallis, "Reflections," 234.

⁸⁹ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 14.

⁹⁰ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 89.

⁹¹ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 89.

the Christian church."⁹² Instead of opting for an either/or approach in which the church replaces Israel, Darby applied a both/and paradigm, producing two people-groups—Israel and the church. Darby said,

In the first place, we are not Jews but Christians. Judaism was an elect nation; there could be no such thing as leaving it: Christianity is not, but a gathering of saints. God has not recorded His name in the English nation; but wherever two or three are gathered together in His name, there is Jesus in the midst of them. What the temple was to a Jew, the gathering of the saints is to me. My complaint of the Establishment is that it is not, and never was, a gathering of saints."⁹³

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DISPENSATIONS

A greater effort was also put forth to systemize the Bible within the light of Protestant theology. About 250 years before Darby, Reformed scholars developed a school of theology known as "Covenant Theology." With it, a precedent was established for viewing theology from the perspective of an important concept like "covenant." While others, like Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), wrote his "History of the Work of Redemption," which viewed God's salvation of man progressively in history. Such developments were preparing the way for the birth of modern dispensationalism.

Charles Ryrie has shown that for about 150 years prior to Darby an increasing number of theologians were articulating dispensational schemes of Biblical history.⁹⁴ Pierre Poiret's scheme is seen in his six-volume work, *The Divine Economy* (1687) as follows:

- I. Infancy—to the Deluge
- II. Childhood—to Moses
- III. Adolescence—to the prophets
- IV. Youth—to the coming of Christ
- V. Manhood—"some time after that"
- VI. Old Age—"the time of man's decay"
(V & VI are the church age)
- VII. Renovation of all things—the millennium⁹⁵

Note that Poiret stressed the ruin or decay of the church, a major theme in Darby's thinking.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the famous theologian and hymn writer, also wrote about dispensations in a forty-page essay entitled "The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all his Dispensations towards them." His definition of dispensations is very close to modern statements.

The public *dispensations* of God towards men, are those wise and holy constitutions of his will and government, revealed or some way manifested to

⁹² Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 88.

⁹³ John Nelson Darby, "The Claims of the Church of England Considered" in William Kelly, ed., *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby* (reprint, Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, 1971), 14:197.

⁹⁴ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 74-77.

⁹⁵ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 74.

them, in the several successive periods or *ages* of the world, where in are contained the duties which he expects from men, and the blessings which he promises, or encourages them to expect from him, here and hereafter; together with the sins which he forbids, and the punishments which he threatens to inflict on such sinners, or the *dispensations* of God may be described more briefly, as the appointed moral rules of God's dealing with mankind, considered as reasonable creatures, and as accountable to him for their behavior, both in this world and in that which is to come. Each of these dispensations of God, may be represented as different religions, or at least, as different forms of religion, appointed for men in the several *successive ages* of the world.

Watts' dispensational scheme is as follows:

- I. The Dispensation of Innocency
- II. Adam after the Fall
- III. The Noahic Dispensation
- IV. The Abrahamic Dispensation
- V. The Mosaic Dispensation
- VI. The Christian Dispensation⁹⁶

Since Darby's dispensationalism was built on a consistent literal interpretation of God's plan for Israel and the church, which gives both peoples of God their due in God's plan, instead of replacing one with the other. This approach combined with other aspects, like periodization of the dispensations,⁹⁷ converged to produce the modern theology known as dispensationalism. Crutchfield contends that Darby "was indeed the first to give systematic form to the doctrine of ages and dispensations. But he was by no means the first to set forth the principles from which it is derived. . . . this doctrine has a history almost as old as the church itself. In every major area of importance, one finds in the early church, rudimentary elements of dispensationalism that bear a striking resemblance to their contemporary offspring."⁹⁸

JOHN NELSON DARBY

John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) was born in his parent's London house in Westminster, November 18, 1800. "He was the youngest son of John Darby, of Markley, Sussex, and of Leap Castle, King's County, Ireland,"⁹⁹ the eighth of nine children, six boys and three girls.¹⁰⁰ Darby's father was a wealthy merchant who had married the

⁹⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 76.

⁹⁷ For a survey of the early church's use of dispensations as periods or stages in history see Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism," *Conservative Theological Journal* 2:19-31; 2:123-41; 2:247-71; 2:375-404; 3:26-52; 3:182-203. For an overall view of periodization throughout church history see Arnold D. Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965).

⁹⁸ Larry V. Crutchfield, "The Early Church Fathers and the Foundations of Dispensationalism," *Conservative Theological Journal*, 3:197.

⁹⁹ W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (London: C. A. Hammond, 1926), 14.

¹⁰⁰ Max S. Weremchuk, *John Nelson Darby: A Biography* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), 199. Weremchuk has written the most comprehensive biography on Darby and has been relied greatly in the subsequent section.

daughter of an even wealthier merchant, Anne Vaughan in 1784.¹⁰¹ In Darby's lineage there is a mixture of service to the Crown, landed aristocracy, and business. Thus, Stunt correctly observes, "Darby was descended from gentry."¹⁰²

Fifteen weeks after his birth, J. N. Darby was baptized on March 3, 1801, at St. Margaret's Anglican Church. His godfather was Lord Nelson, who was not present at the event. J. N. Darby clearly received his first name from his father and his middle name from his godfather, Lord Nelson.

On February 17, 1812, J. N. Darby entered The Royal College of St. Peter in Westminster, more commonly known as Westminster School in London. Even though young John lived only a few blocks from the school, he was a boarder there. All of J. N. Darby's brothers had attended this school since it was considered one of the finest public schools in London. It was a school attended mainly sons of the wealthy since its fees were too high for the poor. "The instruction was given by clergymen, and the subject matter consisted almost exclusively of Latin and Greek, with some English composition."¹⁰³ Records do not show Darby's academic status, but in 1815 he graduated from Westminster and was sent by his father to Ireland for the first time in his life to attend Trinity College, where he commenced studies on July 3, 1815.¹⁰⁴

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Trinity College Dublin was an Anglican college founded in 1592 as a divinity school. Trinity was the leading academic institution in Ireland and on par with England's premier universities, Oxford and Cambridge.¹⁰⁵ Darby took many classes in science and classics and graduated on July 10, 1819 as a gold medal winner in classics.¹⁰⁶ At that time, such an award at Trinity meant that a student was the top student in his class in that academic field.

Darby did not take courses in theology, but was required to study Bible. In 1808, "Richard Graves (1763–1829) moved the college to include instruction in Bible for all students as part of the academic education." Bible lectures were held on Saturdays, often given by Graves.¹⁰⁷ Further, Graves was a popular tutor in classics and Darby studied under his oversight. Elmore argues that Graves likely influenced Darby in the realm of interpretation as a futuristic postmillennialist, who "expected a future literal kingdom of Christ universally extended over the earth."¹⁰⁸ Darby also adopted Graves' philo-Semitic view of the Jews, their future conversion and reestablishment in their homeland.¹⁰⁹ However, Darby did not adopt Graves' Arminianism, even though Darby may have been a postmillennialist while in college. Floyd Elmore observes: "The atmosphere of millennial expectancy in which he was trained certainly had its effect on his eschatology. The postmillennialism of Graves dealt very literally with unfulfilled

¹⁰¹ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 19.

¹⁰² Timothy C. F. Stunt, "Influences in the Early Development of J. N. Darby" in Crawford Gribben and Timothy C. F. Stunt, eds., *Prisoners of Hope? Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880* (Carlisle, UK: 2004), 49.

¹⁰³ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 29.

¹⁰⁴ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 30.

¹⁰⁵ Floyd Sanders Elmore, "A Critical Examination of the Doctrine of the Two Peoples of God in John Nelson Darby," (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1990), 52–4.

¹⁰⁶ Elmore provides a copy of Darby's academic record broken down by semester in Appendix A, "Two Peoples of God," 318.

¹⁰⁷ Elmore, "Two Peoples of God," 53.

¹⁰⁸ Elmore, "Two Peoples of God," 66.

¹⁰⁹ Elmore, "Two Peoples of God," 57–8.

prophecy, and spawned an attitude of anticipation for an imminent change in dispensation."¹¹⁰ The influence of Graves upon Darby was significant and inculcated in him ideas and subject that would later become central in Darby's thought and writings. Gary Nebeker notes: "A key element of Graves's eschatology was the literal interpretation of prophetic Scripture."¹¹¹

"Graduates of Trinity College, Dublin," notes Ernest Sandeen, "were among the earliest and most able defenders of futurism."¹¹² This appears to be the case because of a more literal hermeneutic taught by the faculty of the college. The more literal one's interpretation of Scripture, the more likely they would be to arrive at futurist conclusions in the area of biblical prophecy. "The theological grist for Darby's later synthesis was certainly present at Trinity College in his student days."¹¹³ His education at Trinity appears to have been an influence upon him leading to his contribution in the development of dispensationalism.

DARBY'S CONVERSION AND CALL INTO MINISTRY

Upon graduation from Trinity College, Darby began the study of law and was admitted to Lincoln's Inn, Dublin, on November 9, 1819.¹¹⁴ Upon completion of the eight terms in preparation for a legal career, Darby, a newly-minted barrister "was called to the Irish bar on January 21, 1822."¹¹⁵ It was sometime during his law studies that Darby experienced personal conversion to Christ, around 1820 or 1821. Darby said, "I loved Christ, I have no doubt, sincerely and growingly since June or July 1820, or 21, I forgot which."¹¹⁶

Becoming a believer in Christ as his Saviour about age twenty, having finished college and well into law studies, would certainly have been the result of significant intellectual contemplation, as well as spiritual influences. Stunt sees Darby's conversion as a possible result of the "unconscious rejection" of his family's Enlightenment bent. "The attraction of the 'vital' and spiritual Christianity he had encountered at Trinity outweighed the self-confident and manifestly 'human' good works of his family."¹¹⁷ Shortly after his conversion, while training for the law, Darby sensed a call to the ministry.

On January 21, 1822 Darby was called to the Irish bar. There is however no indication that he ever practiced law. Stunt argues that Darby likely engaged in a great deal of theological reading before his ordinations, which would have prepared and qualified him for a rapid ordination within the established church.¹¹⁸ The career shift greatly displeased his father, who disinherited him at that point. However, Darby was

¹¹⁰ Elmore, "Two Peoples of God," 74-5.

¹¹¹ Gary L. Nebeker, "John Nelson Darby and Trinity College, Dublin: A Study in Eschatological Contrasts," *Fides et Historia* (vol. 34, no. 2; Summer 2002), 96.

¹¹² Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 38.

¹¹³ Elmore, "Two Peoples of God," 73.

¹¹⁴ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 32.

¹¹⁵ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 32.

¹¹⁶ "Darby's Marginal Notes, Next to 2 Timothy 3 in His Greek New Testament" in Weremchuk, *Darby*, Appendix C, 204.

¹¹⁷ Stunt, "Influences," 52.

¹¹⁸ Stunt, "Influences," 52.

given a considerable fortune by his uncle,¹¹⁹ as well as some financial resources upon his father's death in 1834.¹²⁰

DARBY'S EARLY PARISH AND PASTORAL MINISTRY

Darby's career in the Church of Ireland began on August 7, 1825 when Bishop William Bissett ordained him as an Anglican deacon in Raphoe Cathedral. The Archbishop of Dublin, William Magee (1766–1831) ordained Darby as a priest on February 19, 1826 and appointed him curate over a large rural parish of Calary in County Wicklow, "one of the most impoverished regions in the Dublin diocese."¹²¹ Of this assignment, Darby said, "As soon as I was ordained, I went amongst the poor Irish mountaineers, in a wild and uncultivated district, where I remained two years and three months, working as best I could."¹²²

Darby was looked upon with great reverence, not unlike that of a saint, by many of the Catholic poor. Archbishop Magee was working hard to generate an "Irish Reformation" to the greater Dublin area and Darby was seen as a key component in achieving this goal.

During Darby's ministry in 1826–27, it is estimated that about 600 to 800 people a week "were converting to Protestantism through the vigorous efforts of the evangelical clergy."¹²³ However, the conversion rate would soon drop to almost zero, as a result of Archbishop Magee's issuance of a petition by "imposing the oaths of allegiance [to the British Crown] and supremacy [acknowledging the King as the Supreme Head of the Church] on all converts from Romanism within his diocese."¹²⁴ This act by Magee retarded the evangelistic momentum and deeply discouraged Darby. It seemed to reinforce all of the negative aspects of the state church that Darby had already developed, and now they were driven home hard by the archbishop's actions.

Darby had been on a search both doctrinally and experientially for the true church, that he believed was not to be found in either Roman Catholicism or in the Church of Ireland. He believed neither could be the true church because their head was not Christ, but, either the state or the Bishop of Rome who, he saw as beholden to the state. "Recalling Jesus' words to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not of this world' (John 18:36), Darby was convinced that Magee's actions compromised the divine calling of the church in a manner not dissimilar to those of Henry VIII, when he asserted civil authority over Rome," observes Paul Wilkinson. "Since spiritual supremacy belonged to Christ, whose dominion was of a *heavenly* rather than earthly nature, Darby argued that Christ's ministers should not concern themselves with civil affairs."¹²⁵ This view of non-involvement in political affairs became a strong social and civil position of Darby's followers and the Brethren movement.

¹¹⁹ Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2007), 68.

¹²⁰ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 38.

¹²¹ Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake*, 68.

¹²² J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby* (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), III, 297.

¹²³ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 45. Stunt notes that this conversion rate was documented in the monthly issues of the *Christian Examiner* from November 1826 to August 1827 in Timothy C. F. Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession: Radical Evangelicals in Switzerland and Britain 1815–35* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), 167.

¹²⁴ Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 169.

¹²⁵ Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake*, 75.

Grayson Carter notes that two events throughout 1826 and early 1827 led to the “rapid development of Darby’s anti-Erastianism” shortly after his ordination.¹²⁶ The first was Archbishop Magee’s staunch words and deeds in defense of a state church under the jurisdiction of the state, including a “petition to the House of Commons for protection against the ‘hostility and calumny with which they and their religion have been, for a length of time, systematically assailed.’”¹²⁷ The second event was Darby’s response and strong objection to “Magee’s decision in 1826, to require all new converts from Roman Catholicism to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy to the English sovereign.”¹²⁸

A PROVIDENTIAL ACCIDENT

At this time, Darby was experiencing a disappointment from a failed spiritual and physical austerity phase in his life, the reality of an Erastian¹²⁹ church that he believed was in ruins and differed little from the unbelieving world, and his search for an assurance of salvation in his conscience. “Darby’s Christian understanding and experience were about to change radically,”¹³⁰ notes Brethren historian Tim Grass. As one who began his ministry as a high churchman, Darby was on the verge of becoming an evangelical dissenter when he experienced a riding accident. Darby describes it as follows:

As soon as I was ordained, I went amongst the poor Irish mountaineers, in a wild and uncultivated district, where I remained two years and three months, working as best I could. I felt, however, that the style of work was not in agreement with what I read in the Bible concerning the church and Christianity; nor did it correspond with the effects of the action of the Spirit of God. These considerations pressed upon me from a scriptural and practical point of view; while seeking assiduously to fulfill the duties of the ministry confided to me, working day and night amongst the people, who were almost as wild as the mountains they inhabited. An accident happened which laid me aside for a time; my horse was frightened and had thrown me against a door-post.¹³¹

This period of Darby’s life is known among Darby scholars as “The Convalescence” during which he experienced “The Deliverance.”¹³² After the accident, Darby was taken

¹²⁶ Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions From The Via Media, c. 1800–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 211.

¹²⁷ Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, 211.

¹²⁸ Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, 212. On Magee and his alienation of clergy within the Church of Ireland due to his views and policies, see, Peter Nockles, “Church or Protestant Sect? The Church of Ireland, High Churchmanship, and the Oxford Movement, 1822-1869” *The Historical Journal* (vol. 41, no. 2; June 1998): 457–93. For information on the Church of Ireland in Darby’s era, see, Alan Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland, 1691-2001*. 2nd ed. (Dublin: Columbia Press, 2003).

¹²⁹ Erastian refers to a proponent of the views of the Swiss theologian Thomas Erastus (1524-1583), who argued that the sins of Christians should be punished by the state and not the Church in the withholding of the sacraments.

¹³⁰ Tim Grass, *Gathering to his Name: The Story of Open Brethren in Britain & Ireland* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2006), 17.

¹³¹ Darby, *Letters*, III, 297–8.

¹³² R. A. Huebner argues that Darby’s convalescence took place December 1826–January 1827, while Timothy Stunt claims it was December 1827–January 1828. Huebner cites a date on a letter between the

to the home of Susannah Pennefather (1785–1862), his older sister, in Dublin in order to recover. Darby's convalescence was a time when "the questions in his mind began to resolve themselves."¹³³ He wrote: "I was troubled in the same way when a clergyman, but never had the smallest shadow of it since." He declared: "I judge it as Satan: but going from cabin to cabin to speak of Christ, and with souls, these thoughts sprang up, and if I sought to quote a text to myself it seemed a shadow and not real. I ought never to have been there, but do not think that this was the cause, but simply that I was not set free according to Romans viii. As I have said, I have never had it at all since."¹³⁴

The three or more months Darby spent recuperating from his accident were undoubtedly the most formative period in his life and remarked upon it. In one account he states:

I am daily more struck with the connection of the great principles on which my mind was exercised by and with God, when I found salvation and peace, and the questions agitated and agitating the world at the present day: the absolute, divine authority and certainty of the Word, as a divine link between us and God, if everything (church and world) went; personal assurance of salvation in a new condition by being in Christ; the church as His body; Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah xxxii. (more particularly the end); all this was when laid aside at E. P.'s in 1827; the house character of the assembly on earth (not the fact of the presence of the Spirit) was subsequently. It was a vague fact which received form in my mind long after, that there must be a wholly new order of things, if God was to have His way, and the craving of the heart after it I had felt long before; but the church and redemption I did not know till the time I have spoken of; but eight years before, universal sorrow and sin pressed upon my spirit. I did not think to say so much of myself; but it is all well. The truth remains the truth, and it is on that we have to go; but the Lord's dealings with the soul, connected with the use of truth, have to be noted.¹³⁵

Further identification of the date and what Darby believed happened to him spiritually during that time is seen in another statement by Darby in a letter in which he wrote, "I believe at my deliverance from bondage in 1827–8, God opened up certain truths

Bellett brothers as his dating source. Huebner, *John Nelson Darby: Precious Truths Revived and Defended, Volume One, Revival of Truth 1826–1845*, 2nd ed., augmented (Jackson, NJ: Present Truth Publishers, 2004), 8–9. However, Stunt's position appears more feasible because of the letter from Darby's friend John Bellett to his brother George at the end of January 1828 in which John said, "I hope on Friday to see John Darby. You will be grieved to hear that he has been laid up for nearly two months from a hurt in his knee. His poor people in Calary miss him sadly." *Recollections of the late J. G. Bellett*, (1895), 27. Stunt says, "The letter was apparently received when George was at Bandon. It is dated 31 Jan. 1827, but Bellett had probably written the previous year's date, as one does, at the end of January. The year must be 1828 for several reasons. First, George moved to Bandon in 1827 and probably after 31 January (D. Bellett), *Memoir of G. Bellett*, 64). Secondly, the evidence for Darby's 1827–8 convalescence is overwhelming. His references to 'two years and three months' after his ordination (*Letters*, iii: 297) and '1827–8' (*Letters*, i: 185) are explicit. Lastly, F. W. Newman saw him on crutches in late 1827 (see below, ch. 8. p. 206)." Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 169.

¹³³ Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 171.

¹³⁴ Darby, *Letters*, III, 453–4.

¹³⁵ Darby, *Letters*, I, 344–5.

needed for the church."¹³⁶ What did Darby claim he realized during his convalescence during December 1827 and January 1828? He enumerates five things.

First, Darby says that he realized "the absolute, divine authority and certainty of the Word, as a divine link between us and God,"¹³⁷ which caused "the scriptures to gain complete ascendancy over me."¹³⁸ Darby confirms an evangelical view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Second, he states: "I came to understand that I was united to Christ in heaven, and that consequently, my place before God was represented by His own."¹³⁹ Again he wrote, "personal assurance of salvation in a new condition by being in Christ; the church as His body."¹⁴⁰

Third, Darby understood more fully his present standing with Christ in heaven. Such a heavenly standing becomes the basis for much of Darby's theology that sees the believer already positioned with Christ in heaven. "I was in Christ, accepted in the Beloved, and sitting in heavenly places in Him. This led me directly to the apprehension of what the true church of God was, those that were united to Christ in heaven."¹⁴¹

Fourth, he says that he realized that he should daily expect the Lord's return. "At the same time, I saw that the Christian, having his place in Christ in heaven, *has nothing to wait for save the coming of the Saviour*, in order to be set, in fact, in the glory which is already his portion 'in Christ.'"¹⁴² Further he says, "I saw in that word the coming of Christ to take the church to Himself in glory."¹⁴³ Darby speaks of "being in Christ; the church as His body; *Christ coming to receive us to Himself*; . . . all this was when laid aside at E. P.'s in 1827."¹⁴⁴ Again Darby says of his convalescence discovery: "The coming of the Lord was the other truth which was brought to my mind from the word, as that which, if sitting in heavenly places *in Christ*, was alone to be waited for, that I might sit in heavenly places *with Him*."¹⁴⁵ Such a cluster of beliefs that were formulated at this time provides the rationale for a pretribulational rapture. Darby had seen the importance of an imminent return of Christ for His bride.

Fifth, Darby saw a change in dispensation. This could mean that it was at this time that shifted in his eschatology from postmillennialism to premillennialism. "Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah xxxii. (more particularly the end); all this was when laid aside at E. P.'s in 1827."¹⁴⁶ He writes of his studies in Isaiah: "Isaiah xxxii. brought me to the earthly consequences of the same truth, though other passages might seem perhaps more striking to me now; but I saw an evident change of dispensation in that chapter, when the Spirit would be poured out on the Jewish nation, and a king reign in righteousness."¹⁴⁷ Isaiah was a very influential part of his studies and change of views during this time. He notes:

¹³⁶ Darby, *Letters*, I, 185.

¹³⁷ Darby, *Letters*, I, 344.

¹³⁸ Darby, *Letters*, III, 298.

¹³⁹ Darby, *Letters*, III, 298.

¹⁴⁰ Darby, *Letters*, I, 344.

¹⁴¹ Darby, *Letters*, I, 515.

¹⁴² (Italics added) Darby, *Letters*, III, 298.

¹⁴³ Darby, *Letters*, III, 299.

¹⁴⁴ (Italics added) Darby, *Letters*, I, 344.

¹⁴⁵ Darby, *Letters*, I, 516.

¹⁴⁶ Darby, *Letters*, I, 344.

¹⁴⁷ Darby, *Letters*, I, 516.

In my retreat, the 32nd chapter of Isaiah taught me clearly, on God's behalf, that there was still an economy to come, of His ordering; a state of things in no way established as yet. The consciousness of my union with Christ had given me the present heavenly portion of the glory, whereas this chapter clearly sets forth the corresponding earthly part. I was not able to put these things in their respective places or arrange them in order, as I can now; but the truths themselves were then revealed of God, through the action of His Spirit, by reading His word.¹⁴⁸

Darby summarized his views that he discovered during his convalescence retreat in Dublin in an issue of *The Bible Treasury* writing:

Isaiah xxxii. it was that taught me about the new dispensation. I saw there would be a David reign, and did not know whether the church might not be removed before forty years' time. At that time I was ill with my knee. It gave me peace to see what the church was. I saw that I, poor, wretched, and sinful J. N. D., knowing too much yet not enough about myself, was left behind, and let go, but I was united to Christ in heaven. Then what was I waiting for? J. G. B. came up and said they were teaching some new thing in England. "I have it!" I said.¹⁴⁹

Francis Newman, who served as a tutor for the Pennefather children for fifteen months during 1827 and 1828, confirms the timing of Darby's textual and doctrinal discoveries. As a tutor in the household daily, he would have been at the Pennefather residence during Darby's convalescence.¹⁵⁰ Newman speaks of Darby's influence upon him while at the Pennefathers, during Darby's three-month convalescence. "Darby's realization in 1827–28 that earthly Jewish promises should not be appropriated by the Christian church is circumstantially corroborated in Frank Newman's letter to B. W. Newton (17 April 1828)," notes Stunt, "written after Darby's deliverance experience, where he makes a similar distinction between the promises made to Israel and those made to the Church."¹⁵¹

It is helpful to have a witness by another party that basically supports the information provided by Darby during such a formative moment in his life. Such a testimony supports Darby's overall credibility in addition to bolstering these specific claims.

Benjamin Wills Newton (1807–99), writes of his Oxford tutor and friend Frank Newman, "While I was at Oxford and we were friends, F. Newman went to Ireland

¹⁴⁸ Darby, *Letters*, III, 298–9.

¹⁴⁹ J. N. Darby, "Thoughts on Revelation XIV., XV., XVI," *The Bible Treasury* (vol. 12, no. 281; October 1879), 352.

¹⁵⁰ ". . . in 1827 I went to Ireland . . . In the Autumn of 1828 I returned to Oxford. . ." F. W. Newman, *Contributions Chiefly to the Early History of the Late Cardinal Newman*, pp. 21 and 24. "In Dublin (1827–8) . . ." *ibid*, p. 62. Cited from Huebner, *John Nelson Darby*, 12, f.n. 60. In *Phases of Faith*, Newman says the following: "After taking my degree, I became a Fellow of Balliol College; and the next year I accepted an invitation to Ireland, and there became private tutor for fifteen months in the house of one now deceased" (p. 17).

¹⁵¹ Stunt, "Influences," 59, f.n. 56.

(1827) and there made the acquaintance of John Darby."¹⁵² Thus, Newton says that Newman returned from his stay in Ireland, having been influenced by Darby in relation to prophecy, and that Newman wanted Darby to share this prophetic information with his friends at Oxford. This is a second source that confirms Darby's doctrinal discoveries occurred during his convalescence during December, 1827 and January, 1828.

A third source, John Gifford Bellett (1795–1864), also had interaction with Darby during his convalescence. He wrote the following about Darby:

In the beginning of 1828 I had occasion to go to London, and then I met in private and heard in public those who were warm and alive on prophetic truth, having had their minds freshly illumined by it.

In my letters to J. N. D. at this time, I told him I had been hearing things that he and I had never yet talked of, and I further told him on my return to Dublin what they were. Full of this subject as I then was, I found him quite prepared for it also, and his mind and soul had traveled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it.¹⁵³

Bellett stated that he discussed "prophetic truth" with Darby. It was noted earlier in a footnote that in addition to a letter J. G. Bellett wrote to Darby, he also penned one to his brother George and spoke of his impending visit with Darby. The Bellett letter was dated January 31, 1828. John wrote to George saying, "I hope on Friday to see John Darby. You will be grieved to hear that he has been laid up for nearly two months from a hurt in his knee. His poor people in Calary miss him sadly."¹⁵⁴ Bellett's statement that Darby was "quite prepared for it also" is a reference to prophetic discussions during his visit with Darby while Darby was recuperating from his injury. Very likely the phrase, "his mind and soul had traveled rapidly in the direction which had thus been given to it" is a reference to the discoveries that Darby learned through his personal Bible study.

DARBY'S NEW THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM

These five biblical discoveries noted above are the basis upon which Darby builds his new theological paradigm that includes dispensationalism and pretribulationism. From the beginning of Darby's dissent from the established church, these items were core essentials upon which he began to build his unique theology. Stunt concludes, "it was in these months that finally the questions in his mind began to resolve themselves. Central to his faith from now on was the belief that he and all Christians were 'united to Christ in heaven', and delivered 'by the power of His resurrection.'"¹⁵⁵ Carter sees "its radical distinction between the Jewish and Gentile dispensations—'the hinge', as Darby

¹⁵² Benjamin Wills Newton, *The Fry Collection*, 61. Newton makes a similar statement about Newman visiting Darby in 1827 on page 235. Timothy Stunt describes *The Fry Collection* as the collection of handwritten "expositions, recollections and conversations" of Newton by one "who greatly valued his teaching," Frederick W. Wyatt. "On Wyatt's death the collection came into the possession of Alfred C. Fry" who assembled the various collections into a single volume and in 1982 Fry "presented his collection to the Christian Brethren Archive (CBA) in the John Rylands University Library in Manchester." Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 313–4. This writer has a photocopy of the manuscript which contains a total of 444 pages. See also *Fry Collection*, 240–1.

¹⁵³ John Gifford Bellett, *Interesting Reminiscences of the Early History of "Brethren:" With Letter from J. G. Bellett to J. N. Darby* (London: Alfred Holness, n.d.), 4.

¹⁵⁴ Bellett, *Recollections*, 27.

¹⁵⁵ Stunt, *From Awakening to Secession*, 171.

referred to it, . . . the distinction between these two dispensations forms the basis for Darby's understanding of both ecclesiology and eschatology."¹⁵⁶ These items are important since pretribulationism is built upon first one's view of ecclesiology that is set within a certain eschatological framework. Darby perceives a clear distinction between Israel and the church. "It is important to notice here that Darby came to the realization of these points alone, without the influence of other men,"¹⁵⁷ surmised Weremchuk. "Darby's views, when fully developed later, would prove to be in many points contrary to the ones normally accepted by the church at large."¹⁵⁸ It was during Darby's convalescence that the original spark of his ideas burst forth from his personal Bible study and fanned into the flames of his theology during the next decade and beyond.

It has been long recognized that pretribulationism is built upon one's view of ecclesiology as much or more than one's eschatology. The greatest pretribulationist scholar of the twentieth century was the late John F. Walvoord of Dallas Theological Seminary, who recognized the central place of ecclesiology in support of pretribulationism. Walvoord writes:

What is essential to premillennialism becomes an indispensable foundation in the study of pretribulationism. It is safe to say that pretribulationism depends on a particular definition of the church, and any consideration of pretribulationism that does not take this major factor into consideration will be largely beside the point.¹⁵⁹

The point that should not be missed regarding Darby's convalescence discoveries is that they centered on ecclesiology. Darby was concerned about what was happening to the church in which he was involved in Ireland and searched the Bible for answers to his concerns. Stunt notes that one of the assurances Darby received "was the assurance that he (together with all Christians as opposed to Christendom) was risen and spiritually united with Christ in heaven."¹⁶⁰ This ecclesiastical realization forms the heart of Darby's theology and spiritual hope that extended throughout the rest of his life.

The first two essays written by Darby were both about ecclesiastical issues, which further demonstrates his focus upon understanding the Church. The first, though not published until much later, was the one expressing his disagreement with Archbishop Magee's petition and the second, from Dublin in 1828, was "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals*, 224.

¹⁵⁷ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 63.

¹⁵⁸ Weremchuk, *Darby*, 63. Weremchuk continues to explain: "Darby, as we noted had been greatly occupied with the early church as described in Acts. What he saw around him he did not like. His views which then developed were 'new'—that is, different from those of his contemporaries. He defended his views as being the 'original' ones that the church very early in her history had lost sight of." Weremchuk, *Darby*, 63-4.

¹⁵⁹ John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question, Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 37.

¹⁶⁰ Stunt, "Influences," 58.

¹⁶¹ Darby, "Considerations Addressed to the Archbishop of Dublin and the Clergy Who signed the Petition to The House of Commons for Protection," *Collected Writings*, I, 1-19 and "Considerations on the Nature and Unity of the Church of Christ," *Collected Writings*, I, 20-35.

Darby did not just develop an ecclesiology that was isolated from interaction with other areas of theology. Rather, he clearly set it against God's plan for Israel. In one of his convalescence statements he said:

Isaiah xxxii. it was that taught me about the new dispensation. I saw there would be a Davidic reign, and did not know whether the church might not be removed before forty years' time. At that time I was ill with my knee. It gave me peace to see what the church was. I saw that I, poor, wretched, and sinful J. N. D., knowing too much yet not enough about myself, was left behind, and let go, but I was united to Christ in heaven.¹⁶²

Thus, Darby sees the church as distinct from Israel, since there would be a Davidic reign for Israel in the millennium, God's earthly people. On the other hand, Darby saw that he was positionally united with Christ in heaven, a heavenly destiny. Dispensationalists today see such a distinction as their *sine qua non*. Leading dispensational spokesman Charles Ryrie says, "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct." Ryrie explains:

This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.¹⁶³

Non-dispensational, covenant theologians recognize this essential about dispensationalists as noted by Michael Williams.

The Darbyist church / Israel distinction constitutes the one great organizing principle of classical dispensationalism. The metaphysical and historical distinction between the church and Israel is the axle upon which the theology of Darby, Scofield, and Chafer rides. It is the one great absolutely necessary or essential element of the system. The Darbyist metaphysical distinction between Israel and the church is the *sine qua non* of classical dispensational theology.¹⁶⁴

Whether dispensationalists or non-dispensationalists, all recognize for dispensationalism the importance of the distinction between God's rule for Israel and His rule for the church.

From the time of his convalescence, Darby developed a theology that taught and supported a dispensational, premillennial, pretribulationism. Essentially Darby came to understand that his place or position was the same as Christ, which is in heaven. Thus, the church is a heavenly people, not an earthly people like the established church, in which he was a clergyman. Juxtaposed to the heavenly and spiritual church was Israel, who are composed of a spiritual, ethnic, and national people on earth who have a future in God's plan after the church age.

¹⁶² Darby, "Thoughts on Revelation," 352.

¹⁶³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2007), 46.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Williams, *This World is Not My Home: The Origins and Development of Dispensationalism* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 90.

Darby came to understand that the church could be taken to heaven at any moment without signs preceding that event, in what would later be known as the pretribulation rapture of the church. Darby's realization of a change in dispensations laid the groundwork for the development of dispensationalism, since he saw a distinction between God's plan for the church and His plan for Israel. By this time, Darby also developed a pessimistic view of the visible church, Christendom, and came to believe that it was in utter ruins.

By January 1828, February at the latest, John Nelson Darby had not only come to an understanding of the idea of pretribulationism, but, he had also come to see other components, along with a rationale to support this view. This does not mean that his ideas relating to pretribulationism came out of the womb fully developed along with no internal contradictions.¹⁶⁵ There was still developmental work to be done. Stunt surmises: "In fact for some years after his experience of deliverance there was something decidedly ambivalent about some of the positions adopted by Darby."¹⁶⁶ It would take at least another decade for Darby to develop full confidence in his new views and their implications. The basics were in place by early 1828. This was too early to have received seminal influence from others regarding things Darby strongly contends he came to understand from personal Bible study alone during his Dublin convalescence.

J. N. Darby's pretribulationism appeared as a seminal idea from his own Bible study during a convalescence period of December 1827 through January 1828 while staying at his sister's house in Dublin. Darby was in distress about issues relating to the true nature and purpose of the Church during his convalescence, which led to his ideas of the rapture of the Church, an ecclesiastical and eschatological issue. Stunt concludes: "we must emphasize that Darby was a very complex person whose understanding of scripture and theology was continually evolving."¹⁶⁷ Darby possessed the intellect, education, and capability needed for original thinking, and the discipline to develop ideas into a system. There is nothing in the record that indicates that this is not what he in fact did do. Through Darby's own personal testimony on multiple occasions, he provided the theological rationale to support pretribulationism, something that would be unlikely if it was just an idea stolen from another source.

RISE OF AMERICAN DISPENSATIONALISM

Dispensationalism came to North America through Darby and other Brethren before the Civil War. After the war dispensational teachings captured the minds of a significant number of Christian leaders, and by 1875 its distinctives were disseminated throughout Canada and the United States. Dispensationalism spread through preaching, conferences, the founding of schools, and literature. By the turn of the

¹⁶⁵ Darby's first published article on eschatology (1829) has some items that do contradict a fully systematized view of pretribulationism. Darby, "Reflections Upon The Prophetic Inquiry and the Views Advanced in it," *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 34 vols. (n.d.; repr., Winschoten, Netherlands: H. L. Heijkoop, 1971), II, 1-31. Darby appears to still harbor elements of historicism, but at the same time Darby displays elements of his new discoveries. He speaks of "two comings" and "to be caught up into the air" (16). He spends a couple of pages describing the rapture and key rapture passages like 1 Thess. 4 and 1 Cor. 15 (16-8). He criticizes his opponent for "a confusion of the Jewish and Gentile dispensations" (18). He speaks of how the church is "to look to the coming of Christ as the prominent object of faith" (26). Even though it will take some time to work out the implications of his new views and to gain full confidence in their implications, they are clearly evident in his earliest writings.

¹⁶⁶ Stunt, "Influences," 59.

¹⁶⁷ Stunt, "Influences," 67.

century dispensationalism was well known and quickly became the most popular evangelical system of theology.

Darby made seven trips to the United States and Canada between 1862 and 1877 spending a total of seven of those sixteen years in America. He spent most of that time in Canada and four American cities: New York, Boston, Chicago, and St. Louis, where many early leaders of American dispensationalism lived. Pastors James Hall Brookes (1830-1897) of Walnut Street Presbyterian Church, St. Louis and A.J. Gordon (1836-1895) of Clarendon Street Baptist Church, Boston were patriarchs of American dispensationalism who came under Darby's influence. It was through the ministry of such men, more so than Darby that dispensationalism spread in America.

AMERICAN FOUNDING FATHERS

James Hall Brookes

The father of American dispensationalism was James Brookes. He studied at Miami University and Princeton Seminary, and was one of the first to host Darby at his church. In the 1870's, Brookes wrote *Maranatha*, which was widely distributed and popularized a dispensational view of prophecy. Brookes also edited *The Truth* magazine, and founded and chaired the Niagara Bible Conference, both of which played critical roles in spreading dispensational beliefs among Evangelical leaders. As a result, he became the accepted leader of a large circle of pastors, evangelists and Christian workers. He will perhaps, best be remembered as the man who introduced C. I. Scofield to dispensationalism shortly after his conversion.

Adoniram Judson Gordon

Baptist Pastor A. J. Gordon (1836 -1895), for whom Gordon College and Gordon-Conwell Seminary are named, was another early dispensational leader. He was an important leader in the Prophecy Conferences and edited *The Watchword*. Through personal persuasion and his pen, he affected many on the East coast with dispensational views. Gordon led D. L. Moody to accept dispensationalism.

PERIOD OF EXPANSION

Arno C. Gaebelein

Arno Gaebelein (1861-1945) migrated to America from Germany in his youth in order to avoid the military draft. Although he was initially a pastor, he is best known for his work in Jewish evangelism and as editor of *Our Hope* magazine. Timothy Weber noted of his abilities that Gaebelein "acquired such an expertise in the Talmud and other rabbinic literature and spoke such flawless Yiddish that he often had a difficult time convincing many of his audiences that he was not a Jew trying to 'pass' as a Gentile."¹⁶⁸ Gaebelein did much to spread dispensationalism through his speaking, books, and magazine *Our Hope*. It is said that he had the most influence upon Scofield in the area of prophecy.

William E. Blackstone

Like many early dispensationalists, William Blackstone (1841-1935) was also involved in a ministry of Jewish evangelists. Blackstone lived in the Chicago area and was the "Hal Lindsey" of his day when he wrote the best-selling book *Jesus Is Coming*

¹⁶⁸ Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983), 144.

(1st edition, 1878). In its multiple editions it sold over a million copies. Blackstone, even though a Christian, is also viewed as the first in the modern world to advocate Zionism.¹⁶⁹ He worked constantly for the return of Jews to Israel and lobbied politicians, convened conferences, and raised funds for the cause. "At a 1918 Zionist Conference in Philadelphia, Blackstone was acclaimed a 'Father of Zionism.'"¹⁷⁰ In 1956, Israel dedicated a forest in his honor. Weber says of this unique Jewish-Christian relationship, dispensationalists "were able to stress the evangelization of the Jews while at the same time they supported Jewish nationalistic aspirations."¹⁷¹

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield

Kansas attorney C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), was converted to Christ at age 36. Later, during the 1880's in St. Louis, James Brookes discipled Scofield teaching him dispensationalism. An ordained Congregationalist, Scofield, pastored both Congregational and Presbyterian churches. He also was active in missions and founded the Central American Mission. He is well known as a systematizer and popularizer of dispensationalism through his widely known and controversial *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). His work has done more to spread dispensationalism throughout the English-speaking world than any other influence. However, dispensationalism was already a growing movement before Scofield. His Bible simply made it more popular. Scofield was highly regarded in dispensational circles and his influence remains to this day.

Lewis Sperry Chafer

Presbyterian Bible teacher Lewis Chafer (1871-1952), Scofield's disciple, culminated his ministry with the publication of an eight-volume dispensational systematic theology. Chafer systemized dispensationalism and spread its influence through founding Dallas Seminary (originally called The Evangelical Theological College) in 1924. Dallas has been viewed as the center of dispensationalism for ninety years, even though the school is moving away from its past in our own day. DTS has had many well-known faculty through the years, among them: E. F. Harrison, A. T. Pierson, H. A. Ironside, Henry Thiessen, J. Vernon McGee, Merrill Unger, Charles Feinberg, S. Lewis Johnson, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, Howard Hendricks, Stanley Toussaint, and Norman Geisler. Well-known graduates include Hal Lindsey and Charles Swindoll and many other well know academics and pastors. Chafer and Dallas Seminary have been the largest single influence for spreading dispensationalism in Christian higher education.

REASONS FOR GROWTH

From a human perspective there are many reasons why dispensationalism has grown to become a dominant force in American religious life in less than seventy-five years. First, it grew because many believers were dissatisfied with dominate views of prophecy at the end of the 1800's. Postmillennialism was the popular view of eschatology, but increasingly things did not appear to be following its optimistic script. Premillennialism seemed to provide a more realistic explanation. The dominate historicist premillennialism, with its date-setting and current events speculation, fell

¹⁶⁹ Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Place Among the Nations: Israel and the World* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993), 17.

¹⁷⁰ Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 140.

¹⁷¹ Weber, *Living in the Shadow*, 141.

into disfavor, while dispensationalism's "any-moment" view of the rapture provided a more sensible premillennialism.

Second, dispensationalism had a tailor-made answer to a growing technological society. As life became more complicated, so did explanations of God's plan for history in dispensational charts. This era appreciated complicated and logical explanations.

Third, with the rise of liberalism in denominational churches, dispensationalism provided answers to these attacks. Liberalism denied the historical veracity of Scripture with its literal interpretation and dispensational distinctions. Dispensationalism allowed a layman to answer liberal ministers thru Scofield's notes and other popular writings supported by sound scholarship. The premillennial view of the Church Age ending in apostasy appears to be coming to pass through the rise of liberalism and postmodernism.

Fourth, dispensationalism appears to be the correct theological conclusions in light of the growth of verse-by-verse Bible exposition. This was evidenced by the rise of interdenominational Bible conferences such as Niagara.

Fifth, dispensational theology furnished a reasonable explanation for how God could be sovereign over a world that seemed to be increasingly evil. Americans had difficulty retaining postmillennial optimism in view of the Civil War and World War I, the development of slums, immigration, rising crime, big business, and other social conditions related to industrialization. Dispensationalism made sense to many Calvinists who were pessimistic about individual human nature and it followed that society as a whole was in the same condition. Just as individual salvation requires a miracle from heaven, so would society if it were to be changed. Kraus noted that dispensationalism emerged from within the womb "of orthodox Calvinism."¹⁷²

Taking all this into account, it must still be pointed out that the basic theological affinities of dispensationalism are Calvinistic. The large majority of the men involved in the Bible and prophetic conference movements subscribed to Calvinistic creeds."¹⁷³

Finally, a very important appeal of dispensationalism was its view about the restoration of Jews to Israel in the last days. Dispensationalism's view of the two peoples of God, Israel and the church, appealed to those who placed importance upon God's future plan for Israel.

CONCLUSION

Dispensationalism has always been a growing and developing theology within the framework of its core essentials. However, since World War II, there has been some decline, mainly in the academic world. Some causes include: the revival of posttribulationism, attacks from covenant theology, the rise of dominion theology and postmillennialism, the philosophical shift toward postmodern idealism which negatively impacts literal interpretation, a drive for consensus within Evangelical scholarship, the push for ecumenical unity, the overall decline of interest in doctrine, and finally, attacks launched from some Pentecostals and Charismatics who once were dispensational as well as from certain branches of Reformed Theology.

¹⁷² Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 60.

¹⁷³ Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 59.

John Walvoord was asked a few years ago “what do you predict will be the most significant theological issues over the next ten years?” His answer includes the following: “the hermeneutical problem of not interpreting the Bible literally, especially the prophetic areas. The church today is engulfed in the idea that one cannot interpret prophecy literally.”¹⁷⁴ Yet, all is not gloom and doom, dispensationalism will not die and go away. Sorry about that Gary North and Gary DeMar! Dispensationalism is still greatly valued by many Evangelicals today who are interested in inductive Bible study and exegesis. Maranatha!

¹⁷⁴ “An Interview: Dr. John F. Walvoord Looks at Dallas Seminary,” *Dallas Connection* (Winter 1994, Vol. 1, No. 3), 4.