

Church History (63): Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism can be divided into three eras: classical period (1850-1950); revised period (1950-1990); and progressive period (1990-).¹

I. Dispensationalism

1. *Its origin.* Dispensationalism began with John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). This is agreed upon by most Dispensationalists. "Darby is the father of dispensationalism" (Ice).² "Dispensationalism was first promoted through the study and teachings of John Nelson Darby" (Ryrie).³ Elsewhere, Ryrie confessed: "Dispensationalists recognize that, as a system, dispensationalism was largely formulated by Darby" (Ryrie).⁴ "John Nelson Darby was the founder of traditional Dispensationalism, and his non-Plymouth Brethren followers eventually assumed the leadership of Dispensationalism as a movement during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These leaders included James Hall Brookes (1830-1897), C.I. Scofield (1843-1921), and Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952). They were in turn succeeded by John F. Walvoord (1910-2002), J. Dwight Pentecost (1915-2014), Charles C. Ryrie (1925-2016) and others" (Henzel).⁵ It is a fact beyond dispute, that the major tenets of Dispensationalism (separation of Israel and Church, two returns of Christ, multiple resurrections and judgments), have their origination in John Nelson Darby, and his immediate successors. "The basic elements and hermeneutical pattern of Darby's eschatology persist unchanged in contemporary dispensationalism. Development, yes; change, no" (Bass).⁶

"Darby was born in London of Irish parents, was educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and was ordained in the Church of England in 1823" (Ryrie).⁷ "In 1829 he resigned from Anglicanism and became independent, following the polity of the Brethren, with whom he had already been meeting for a few years" (Ice).⁸ The Plymouth Brethren (who settled in Plymouth, England), were a group of Christians who became disconnected with broader Christianity. Their primary interest was OT prophecy, and Darby quickly became their leader. "By 1840 some eight hundred people were attending the services Darby started in Plymouth. Darby himself spread the movement by his own travels to Germany, Italy, the United States, and New Zealand. His written ministry incorporates some forty volumes of six hundred pages each" (Ryrie).⁹ "Darby made seven trips to the U.S. and Canada between 1862 and 1877. 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" (Ice).¹⁰

"Kansas attorney C.I. Scofield (1843-1921), was converted to Christ at age 36. Later, during the 1880's in St. Louis, James Brookes disciples Scofield teaching him dispensationalism. An ordained Congregationalist, Scofield, pastored both Congregational and Presbyterian churches. He also was active in

¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 190

² Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 6

³ Charles Ryrie, *Update On Dispensationalism*, 16

⁴ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 70

⁵ Ronald Henzel, *Darby, Dualism, and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 48

⁶ Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 128

⁷ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 77

⁸ Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 4

⁹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 77-78

¹⁰ Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 7

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 anything else" (Ice).¹¹ "The parallel between Scofield's notes and Darby's works only too clearly reveals that Scofield was not only a student of Darby's works, but that he copiously borrowed ideas, words, and phrases" (Bass).¹² "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 in 1924 (he served as president until his death in 1952). Dallas has been the center of dispensationalism and has many well-known faculty, among them: A.T. Pierson, H.A. Ironside, J. Vernon McGee, Charles Feinberg, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Dwight Pentecost, Howard Hendricks, and Norman Geisler. Chafer and Dallas Seminary have been the largest single influence for spreading dispensationalism in Christian higher education" (Ice).¹³

2. *Its spread.* Reformed Christians rejected the major tenets of Dispensationalism as serious error. For example, in a sermon preached in 1869, Charles Spurgeon said this about the separation of Israel and the church (a major belief of Dispensationalism): "Distinctions have been drawn by certain exceedingly wise men (measured by their own estimate of themselves), between the people of God who lived before the coming of Christ, and those who lived afterwards. We have even heard it asserted that those who lived before the coming of Christ do not belong to the church of God! We never know what we shall hear next, and perhaps it is a mercy that these absurdities are revealed one at a time, in order that we may be able to endure their stupidity without dying of amazement."¹⁴ And yet, through Scofield's Study Bible, Dallas Seminary, and numerous Prophecy Conferences, Dispensationalism spread all over the British Isles and North America. "Its rapid expansion cut across denominational, educational, and social lines, absorbing clergy, laity, and academics, transforming established institutions and creating new ones" (Henzel).¹⁵ "By the end of the 20th century—less than two centuries after he created it—John Nelson Darby's Dispensationalism had accomplished what few (if any) other theological movements had. It rose from the status of a virtual heresy on the obscure fringes of the Church to a veritable seal of orthodoxy for millions of Christians" (Henzel).¹⁶

(1) Liberalism. "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 through Scofield's notes" (Ice).¹⁷ "When the 'Fundamentalists-Modernist' controversy broke out in the first few decades of the twentieth century, dispensational premillennialists were extremely visible and vocal in their defense of the fundamental doctrines of the faith. Thus, to be a dispensationalist was to be a Bible-believing conservative Christian" (Storms).¹⁸ In light of the rise of liberalism, the strong stance that Dispensationalism took on the divine inspiration of Scripture and a literal hermeneutic, was very appealing. (2) Zionism. This equates Dispensationalism with being pro-Israel (politically and religiously). "Dispensationalism's unwavering commitment to Israel also makes for a strong appeal to people in the West. This is especially the case following the horrors of the Holocaust and the collective

¹¹ Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 8

¹² Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*, 18

¹³ Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 8

¹⁴ Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons*, 15:8

¹⁵ Ronald Henzel, *Darby, Dualism, and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 1

¹⁶ Ronald Henzel, *Darby, Dualism, and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 2

¹⁷ Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 9

¹⁸ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 47

guilt that non-Jews around the world have felt for what happened in Nazi Germany during World War II" (Storms).¹⁹ Dispensationalism turns the focus upon Israel and her return to the land of promise. After the war, Dispensationalism became one and the same with American Evangelicalism. To be an American Christian, meant you were Dispensational. (3) Fanaticism. "Dispensational end-times scenarios make for sensational news and readily captivate the interest and imagination of many people. It comes as no surprise, then, that the people writing best-selling fictional novels about the end of history are dispensationalists" (Storms).²⁰ Dispensationalists pride themselves as reading Biblical prophecy alongside the newspaper. "The rise of Russia, the establishment of the Israeli state, the formation of the European Common Market, the development of the World Council of Churches, and the growth of apostasy in the mainline denominations all fit in well with the dispensational end-time scenario. This apparent spectacular modern-day confirmation of the ancient Biblical prophecies is attractive to many sincere Christians because of its apparent apologetic value" (Gunn).²¹ (4) Escapism. As Dispensational teaches things will continue to get worse until the church is raptured away, it maintains the church will escape the tribulation to come. "The horrors of World War I, The Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the tense Middle East situation, can all be explained by the dispensational system. When people are uncertain about the future and afraid of what might come to pass, dispensationalists assure them that when things go from bad to worse, the church will be raptured off the earth and that Christians will not be around to experience the great tribulation nor the wrath of the antichrist. In this way dispensationalists offer comforting answers to painful questions" (Riddlebarger).²²

3. *Its beliefs.* Many Dispensationalists have sought to distill their major beliefs. Charles Ryrie suggested three: the distinction between Israel and the church; the literal interpretation of prophecy; and the belief that God's underlying purpose in the world is His own glory.²³ John Feinberg provided various "essentials of dispensationalism." Among them were: OT prophecies are not to be interpreted in light of the NT; OT promises will be fulfilled with national Israel; a distinctive future for ethnic Israel; and the church is distinct from Israel.²⁴ In 1896, Scofield published his *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, wherein he suggested five components of Dispensationalism: complete separation of the Church and Israel; seven historic dispensations; two Advents of Christ; two bodily resurrections, and five judgments.

(1) Separation of Church and Israel. This is the very heart of Dispensationalism. "Dispensationalism distinctively sees a major contrast between God's past and future dealings with national Israel and His dealings with the church" (MacArthur).²⁵ "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct" (Ryrie).²⁶ "The basic premise of Dispensationalism is two purposes God expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction throughout eternity" (Fuller).²⁷ "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity" (Chafer).²⁸ According to classic Dispensationalism, these two, the church and Israel, will remain separate for all eternity (the

¹⁹ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 45

²⁰ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 45-46

²¹ Curtis Crenshaw and Grover Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*, 404

²² Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism*, 26

²³ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 47-48

²⁴ John Feinberg, *Systems of Discontinuity*, in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, 67-85

²⁵ John MacArthur, *Christ's Prophetic Plans*, 9-10

²⁶ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 46

²⁷ Daniel Fuller, *The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism*, 25

²⁸ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, 8-9

church in heaven as Christ's bride, and Israel on earth as God's people). "Just as distinctly as Israel stands connected with temporal and earthly things, so distinctly does the Church stand connected with spiritual and heavenly things" (Scofield).²⁹ "Darby's employment of the hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation for all of Scripture, including prophecy, naturally led to the distinction between Israel and the Church. This resulted, of course, in the understanding that the hopes of Israel and those of the Church were of a different nature" (Ice).³⁰ Thus, according to Darby (and all classic Dispensationalists), OT prophecy only concerned the earth (not heaven) and Israel (not the church). "I distinguish entirely between the church and prophecy. I do not believe the church is ever the subject of prophecy. Prophecy gives the career of *earthly* events, but the church is not earthly; its heavenly" (Darby).³¹ This is also true of the promised New Covenant. For Darby, the NC did not begin with the church age, but has its start in the millennial kingdom. "We get the blessings of it spiritually, but formally the new covenant, as the old to which it refers as new, is made with Israel, and with no one else (Darby).³² Elsewhere Darby said: "The first covenant was made with Israel; the second must be so likewise, according to the prophecy of Jeremiah."³³

"Dispensational theology originally believed that the key to biblical interpretation is 'rightly dividing' the Bible into seven dispensations, defined in the original *Scofield Reference Bible* as specific testing periods in redemptive history" (Sproul).³⁴ This led all early Dispensationalists (Darby, Scofield, and Chafer), to suggest different ways of salvation for different dispensations. Israel was saved by law-keeping and the church is saved by faith. "As a dispensation grace begins with the death and resurrection of Christ. The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as a fruit of salvation" (Scofield).³⁵ "According to the OT men were just because they were true and faithful in keeping the Mosaic Law. Men were just because of their own works for God, whereas NT justification is God's work for man in answer to faith" (Chafer).³⁶

(2) Secret rapture. "The distinction between Israel and the church leads to the belief that the church will be taken from the earth before the beginning of the Tribulation (which in one major sense concerns Israel)" (Ryrie).³⁷ "Pretribulational dispensationalism speaks of a twofold coming of Christ, with a seven-year interval in between. The first phrase of the second Coming is then called the rapture, whereas the second phrase, at which Christ will set up His millennial kingdom, is called His return" (Hoekema).³⁸ This view originated with Edward Irving (1792-1834), who received it in part from Margaret Macdonald. Irving was ordained in the Church of Scotland and pastored a church in London (he was eventually excommunicated on charges of heresy, and started what became known as the Catholic Apostolic Church – a forerunner to the modern Pentecostal movement). In 1830 he began a letter exchange with Margaret Macdonald. "During springtime in 1830, an end-time vision sprang into Margaret Macdonald's mind. Privately she sent hand-written copies of her Scripture-riddled revelation to Irving" (MacPherson).³⁹ Within her vision, Macdonald received special revelation from God of a partial rapture of worthy saints prior to the coming of Antichrist and the great tribulation. This partial rapture

²⁹ C.I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 5-6

³⁰ Thomas Ice, *A Short History of Dispensationalism*, 6

³¹ J. N. Darby, as quoted by Ronald Henzel, in *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 112-113

³² J. N. Darby, as quoted by Ronald Henzel, in *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 133

³³ J. N. Darby, as quoted by Ronald Henzel, in *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 136

³⁴ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology: Understanding the Basics*, 99

³⁵ C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Reference Bible*, comments on John 1:17

³⁶ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:219

³⁷ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 172-173

³⁸ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 174

³⁹ Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot*, 3

would be secret. "I saw the error to be, that men think that it will be something seen by the natural eye; but 'tis spiritual discernment that is needed, the eye of God in His people" (Macdonald).⁴⁰ Throughout the 1830s, Irvin's influence on Darby increased. At first Darby maintained the rapture occurred after the tribulation, but by the 1850s, he clearly believed in a secret rapture of the church prior to the tribulation. "By 1855 Darby and his followers were thoroughly steeped in pretribulation views" (MacPherson).⁴¹ Darby commented on 2Thessalonians 2 in 1854, saying: "The apostle gives two reasons why they should not believe that the day of the Lord was come: first, the rapture of the saints is not yet; and secondly, the object of the judgment is not revealed."⁴² While there has been debate as to the exact timing of the rapture (pre-trib, mid-trib, or post-trib), most Dispensationalists from Darby onward, hold to the pretribulationist view of the rapture. "The pretribulationists hold that the rapture of the church will take place before the entire seven-year tribulation period begins. Then, seven years later, after the conclusion of the tribulation, the Lord will return to earth with His people to set up His millennial kingdom" (Ryrie).⁴³ "It's during this seven-year period, the church celebrates with Christ in heaven the marriage feast of the Lamb, while terrible judgments fall on the inhabitants of the earth, which include the unsaved portion of the professing church. At the end of this seven-year period Christ will return in glory, accompanied by the church, to begin His millennial reign" (Hoekema).⁴⁴

Thus, for the Dispensationalists, the millennium concerns Christ's bodily reign in Jerusalem over physical Israel. "Dispensationalists maintain the separate place and distinct blessings of national Israel restored and regenerated in the millennial kingdom" (Ryrie).⁴⁵ The millennium is the kingdom foretold in OT Scripture. As it was initially rejected by the Jews in the Gospels, it was postponed to the millennial age. Thus, for Dispensationalists, the Church age, is merely a parenthesis (a side-thought), between the rejection and reception of the Davidic kingdom. According to Darby, all OT prophecy "leaps over the present time to the end, and specially does not know the church." "Thus Darby spoke of 'the parenthesis of the church,' since to him the Church was an interruption in the flow of prophetic fulfillment" (Henzel).⁴⁶ "If it wasn't for the Church insertion—which was wholly unforeseen and is wholly unrelated to any divine purpose which precedes it or which follows it—Israel would be expected to pass directly from the crucifixion to her kingdom; for it was not the death of Christ and His resurrection which demanded the postponement, but rather an unforeseen age" (Chafer).⁴⁷

It is the author's fervent conviction that the failure to understand what is revealed in Scripture concerning the Great Parenthesis between Messiah's rejection, with the consequent setting aside of Israel nationally, and the regathering of God's earthly people and recognition by the Lord in the last days, is the fundamental cause for many conflicting and unscriptural prophetic teachings. Once this parenthetical period is understood and the present work of God during this age is apprehended, the whole prophetic program unfolds with amazing clearness.⁴⁸

(3) Five Judgments. In addition to two bodily resurrections, "the bodies of believers are raised and caught up to meet the Lord in the air a thousand years before the resurrection of the unbelievers,"⁴⁹

⁴⁰ Margaret Macdonald, as quoted by Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot*, 250

⁴¹ Dave MacPherson, *The Rapture Plot*, 130

⁴² J.N. Darby, as quoted by Ronald Henzel, in *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 57, note 28

⁴³ Charles Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, 169

⁴⁴ Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 165

⁴⁵ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism: Revised and Expanded*, 158

⁴⁶ Ronald Henzel, *Darby, Dualism and the Decline of Dispensationalism*, 122

⁴⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:348-349

⁴⁸ Harry Ironside, *The Great Parenthesis*, 4

⁴⁹ C.I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 28

Dispensationalism believes in five judgments. The first three concern the believer and the latter two non-believers. The first place the believer is judged is at the cross where "their sins have been judged." Secondly, their sins are judged by God as "He lovingly chastens us." Thirdly, "the conduct or works of believers are judged at the rapture (the judgment seat of Christ)." The fourth judgment concerns "the judgment of the nations." This takes place after the seven-year tribulation and prior to the thousand-year reign. "The nations will be judged based upon how they treated those whom Christ calls 'My brethren.' These 'brethren' we believe are the Jewish Remnant who shall turn to Jesus as their Messiah during 'the great tribulation' which follows the taking away of the Church, and is terminated by the glorious appearing of our Lord" (Scofield).⁵⁰

The basis of this judgment and its disposition of each of these groups, who together represent the sum total of that generation of the Gentile nations, will be meritorious to the last degree. The 'sheep' enter the kingdom and the 'goats' the lake of fire on the sole issue of their treatment of a third group whom Christ designates 'my brethren.' The scene is at the close of the great tribulation (Matt. 24:21) after the removal of the Church from the earth, and at a time when nations will be divided over the Semitic question. The issue is one regarding what nations will be chosen to enter Israel's Messianic kingdom on the earth.⁵¹

Thus, for Dispensationalism, the millennium is the fulfilled David kingdom, wherein the temple and sacrificial system will be restored in Jerusalem for a thousand years. "The temple will be rebuilt during the millennium and used for worship with animal sacrifices. What purpose will such sacrifices serve, since Christ will be actually present on the earth? Perhaps the answer to that question escapes us simply because we do not fully understand all that will be involved in the spiritual worship of the kingdom" (Ryrie).⁵² "The Church will be removed and Israel advanced to a position above all the nations of the earth with Jehovah's Law written in their hearts and the Spirit poured out on all flesh. Christ as the glorified Son of David will be reigning on David's throne out from Jerusalem and over the whole earth. The effect of that reign will be that righteousness and peace shall cover the earth as waters cover the face of the deep" (Chafer).⁵³ "The subjects of this earthly kingdom will be the people, Jews and Gentiles, who survive the tribulation period and enter the millennium, in earthly bodies. The end of the millennium, will see the last and final revolt of man and Satan against God and His rule" (Ryrie).⁵⁴ The fifth judgment will be that of "the wicked dead" which takes place after the millennium at "the great white throne." Following this, the church returns to heaven where she eternally dwells, whereas Israel inherits the earth.

Israel's distinction, glory and destiny will always be earthly. They will also be a spiritual people, Jehovah's possession. There is no division, however, between the saved Jew and the saved Gentile of this dispensation, both being in the Church. But after the Church is complete, at the end of this dispensation, there will of necessity be a division. The "holy Jerusalem" of Revelation 21 is the "bride, the Lamb's wife," for whom is the "new heaven," while the "new earth" will be for Israel, the tabernacle of God is to be with them, and "God himself shall be with them, and be their God." The distinctive New Testament spiritual and heavenly blessings are for the Church; those blessings of and on the earth, are for Israel (Scofield, *Question Box*, 70).

⁵⁰ C.I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 32

⁵¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, 87

⁵² Charles Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, 177

⁵³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, 90

⁵⁴ Charles Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, 176, 178