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A SHORT 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.

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

The first systematic expression of dispensationalism was formulated by J. N. Darby sometime during the late 1820s and 1830s in the British Isles. I believe that Darby's development was the culmination of various influences which produced within his thought one of the most literal approaches to Bible interpretation in history and a theology which distinguishes God's plan for Israel from God's plan for the church. The most well known feature of dispensational theology is the much-debated pretribulational rapture doctrine.

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 Peters. Dispensationalists are not just characterized by the elements of their theology, but also, their arrangement in relationship to one another.

In order to be a dispensationalist, one has to hold to a literal approach of interpreting the Bible. When compared to other interpretative approaches, dispensationalists take the text more literally. 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 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.

DEVELOPING DISPENSATIONALISM

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.

The Early Church

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). Dispensationalist, 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 (*“Ages and Dispensations,”* 398).

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

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(*“Israel and the Church,”* 271).

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.

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.

The Reformation

The Reformation and post-Reformation periods 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 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 that is 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.

Dispensationalist, Charles Ryrie, has shown that for about 150 years prior to Darby, an increasing number of theologians were articulating dispensational schemes of Biblical history (*Dispensationalism Today*, 71-74). 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 millennium (*Disp. Today*, p. 71)

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

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 Dispensation (*Disp. Today*, p. 73).

J. N. DARBY—THE MAN

Darby's Life

Irishman, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) is unquestionably the father of modern dispensationalism. Darby came from a highly honorable family and received an excellent education. He entered Trinity College, Dublin, at the age of fifteen and graduated with highest honors as a Classical Gold Medalist at age eighteen.

Upon graduation he entered the legal profession and was called to the Irish Chancery Bar at age 21. Shortly after entering the legal field, he was converted to Christ. In 1825 he entered the ministry within the Church of England and was given an Irish parish. Darby engaged in a tireless and successful parish ministry that saw the conversion of hundreds of Roman Catholics to Protestantism. Within a year he was ordained as a minister in the Church of England.

Soon after ordination he was disillusioned by a decree from his bishop that all converts to Anglicanism would have to swear allegiance to the King of England. Darby saw this as a compromise with the Lordship of Christ and the decree greatly reduced his success with Catholics. For a number of years he tried to reform the church, but met with little success. 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.

Even though once engaged to the beautiful and wealthy Lady Powerscourt, Darby never married and lived an austere life, ignoring the things of this world, by blending piety with biblical scholarship. His only personal indulgence was the purchase of books for study, after that he gave most of his money to the poor.

Educational Influences Upon Darby

Many of the major tenets of Darby's dispensationalism can be seen as influences of the faculty of Trinity College, Dublin where Darby was a student. His primary educational influence came from Professor Richard Graves. Graves, a futurist postmillennialist, believed that prophecy must be interpreted literally. Elmore notes, "As odd as it may seem to modern dispensational premillennial literalists, postmillennialists in Graves' day were known for their literalism with respect to prophecy" (*"A Critical Examination,"* 66). Graves argued, as do dispensationalists, that "unfulfilled prophecy was to be literally interpreted, and the Abrahamic covenant treated as unconditional" (68). He also believed and defended a literal, future national conversion and restoration of Israel to their land. He believed that the "conversion of Israel was imminent. Then a new dispensation would be inaugurated on planet earth" (71). Graves called the new era "a grand era in the Divine dispensations" (72). "Graves distinguished between 'the Jewish scheme' (a phrase Darby would nearly wear out in years to come!) or dispensations and the Gentile or Christian dispensation" (72). This distinction was common among Anglicans in Darby's early years (73).

Elmore concluded that many of the theological themes and vocabulary in Darby can be traced to Graves and the Dublin faculty.

The theological grist for Darby's later synthesis was certainly present at Trinity College in his student days. Darby was trained in an atmosphere in which it was commonplace to refer to 'the Church of Christ' and 'the Jewish Nation' fulfilling different but related future roles. He was primed to anticipate a future dispensation in which Israel would play a distinctive part among the nations of the world, living in prosperity in their ancient land. (73-74)

While Darby supplied other ingredients to form dispensationalism, there is no question that like all people, he was influenced to a large extent by others in the formulation and development of his thought.

DARBY'S THOUGHT

Literal Interpretation

No one questions whether Darby believed and practiced a literal method of interpretation. However, his hermeneutic is more sophisticated than many casual observers recognize. Darby believed in literal interpretation in the sense that the 1290 days of Daniel 12 were really days, in contrast to the host of historicists in his day who saw them as years. Darby thought that this kind of "spiritualization" of the text could only be used to support human ideas.

Elmore notes that "when it comes to evaluating any interpretation of Scripture or theological formulation," Darby "seems to admit two levels of evidence: (1) direct statements of Scripture, and (2) deductions from direct statements of Scripture" (131). Like most literalists, Darby did not believe in "wooden literalism" that disallows figures of speech, typology, and the theology of the Bible to guide exegesis. Rather, he followed "a literal, face-value approach to the text," while maintaining "a balance between detailed exegesis and biblical theology of books and writers, always having the

progressive nature of revelation in mind” (198-99). “Darby believed that the language of the Old Testament allowed for additional theological content to be revealed later, but no redefinition of its theological content” (198) as do many covenant theologians.

Dispensations, Israel, and the Church

From his earliest days, Darby, like Graves, believed not only in the future conversion of the Jews, but also restoration to their homeland. By taking promises to both Israel and the church literally, Darby thought that God’s single plan of salvation is harmonized for God’s two peoples—Israel and the church. Israel, God’s earthly people, are destined to rule over the Nations with Christ before their resurrection. The Church, God’s heavenly people, will reign with Christ in the same kingdom, but in resurrection bodies.

Darby’s distinction between God’s plan for Israel and the Church formed the basis for his most controversial contribution to Evangelical Christianity—the pretribulation rapture of the Church. Even strong opponents to this doctrine admit that it is logical if God is going to literally fulfill His ancient promises to Israel. The Church must be removed before God resumes His work with Israel, enabling the two programs to fully participate in the millennial kingdom.

Like many before him, Darby saw God’s progressive revelation of His plan in terms of dispensations. Unlike C. I. Scofield, Darby did not begin his first dispensation until after Noah’s flood.

Darby’s view of the church was crucial to his development of dispensationalism, especially his view (shared by many in his day) of the present ruin of the church. Elmore observed:

By separating any earthly governmental concepts from the Anglican doctrine of the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, Darby maintained a high view of the gathered church without aligning it with any race or national government fashioned after Old Testament Israel. By emphasizing Pauline uniqueness, he separated the Church unto its heavenly destiny. (312-13)

DARBY’S CONTRIBUTION

Darby is the father of dispensationalism. “Although he was not a systematic theologian, he was an expositor of ‘dispensational truth.’ He synthesized exegetical truths to show the full story-line of the Bible, God’s activity in human history” (Elmore, 312). 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. (Crutchfield, 341)

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

DARBY VISITS NORTH AMERICA

Darby made seven trips to the U.S. 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 chaired the Niagara Bible Conference, both of which played critical roles in spreading dispensational beliefs among Christian 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 is 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 lead D. L. Moody to accept dispensationalism.

PERIOD OF EXPANSION

Arno C. Gaebelein

Arno Gaebelein (1861-1945) migrated to the U.S. from Germany in his youth. 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." (*Living in the Shadow*, 144)

Gaebelein did much to spread dispensationalism through his speaking, books, and

magazine *Our Hope*.

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* (1878). Blackstone, even though a Christian, is also viewed as one of the fathers of the Zionist movement. 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.’” (Weber, 140) 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” (141).

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 disciples 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 anything else. 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 (The Evangelical Theological College) in 1924. Dallas has been the center of dispensationalism for seventy years and has many well-known faculty, among them: E.F. Harrison, A.T. Pierson, H.A. Ironside, Henry Thiessen, J. Vernon McGee, Merrill Unger, Charles Feinberg, Lewis Johnson, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Dwight Pentecost, Howard Hendricks, and Norman Geisler. Well-known graduates include Hal Lindsey and Charles Swindoll. 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 dominant historicist premillennialism, with its date-setting and current events speculation, fell 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. The premillennial view of the Church Age ending in apostasy appeared to be coming to pass in the rise of liberalism and was very appealing.

Fourth, dispensationalism fit nicely with 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."

(Dispensationalism in America, 60).

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." (59)

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.

CURRENT STATUS

Dispensationalism has always been a growing and developing theology. However, since World War II, there has been some decline. Some causes include: the revival of posttribulationism, attacks from covenant theology, the rise of dominion theology and postmillennialism, the philosophical shift toward 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. Yet, all is not gloom and doom and dispensationalism is not dying. It is has experienced a resurgence of interest within the evangelical academic community and it continues to be a popular theology with great influence upon the Christian world.