

# What is Dispensationalism?

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## Introduction

Since the mid-1800s, the system of theology known as dispensationalism has exerted great influence on how many Christians view the doctrines of ecclesiology and eschatology. In this article, we will survey the history of dispensationalism and look at the key beliefs associated with the system.

## History of Dispensationalism

Theologians continue to argue over the historicity of dispensationalism. Those who are dispensationalists argue that the basic beliefs of dispensationalism were held by the apostles and the first generation church. Those who are not dispensationalists often argue that dispensationalism is a new theology that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whether the ideas associated with dispensationalism are found in the New Testament or not is heavily debated. What is clear, though, is that dispensationalism, as a system, began to take shape in the mid-1800s.

1. **John Nelson Darby** The beginning of systematized dispensationalism is usually linked with John Nelson Darby (1800—1882), a Plymouth Brethren minister. While at Trinity College in Dublin (1819), Darby came to believe in a future salvation and restoration of national Israel. Based on his study of Isaiah 32, Darby concluded that Israel, in a future dispensation, would enjoy earthly blessings that were different from the heavenly blessings experienced by the church. He thus saw a clear distinction between Israel and the church. Darby also came to believe in an “any moment” rapture of the church that was followed by Daniel’s Seventieth Week in which Israel would once again take center stage in God’s plan. After this period, Darby believed there would be a millennial kingdom in which God would fulfill His unconditional promises with Israel.<sup>1</sup> According to Paul Enns, “Darby advanced the scheme of dispensationalism by noting that each dispensation places man under some condition; man has some responsibility before God. Darby also noted that each dispensation culminates in failure.”<sup>2</sup> Darby saw seven dispensations: (1) Paradisaical state to the Flood; (2) Noah; (3) Abraham; (4) Israel; (5) Gentiles; (6) The Spirit; and (7) The

Millennium. By his own testimony, Darby says his dispensational theology was fully formed by 1833.

2. ***The Brethren Movement*** Dispensationalism first took shape in the Brethren Movement in early nineteenth century Britain. Those within the Brethren Movement rejected a special role for ordained clergy and stressed the spiritual giftedness of ordinary believers and their freedom, under the Spirit's guidance, to teach and admonish each other from Scripture. The writings of the Brethren had a broad impact on evangelical Protestantism and influenced ministers in the United States such as D. L. Moody, James Brookes, J. R. Graves, A. J. Gordon, and C. I. Scofield.<sup>3</sup>

3. ***The Bible Conference Movement*** Beginning in the 1870s, various Bible conferences began to spring up in various parts of the United States. These conferences helped spread Dispensationalism. The Niagara conferences (1870—early 1900s) were not started to promote dispensationalism but dispensational ideas were often promoted at these conferences. The American Bible and Prophetic Conferences from 1878—1914 promoted a dispensational theology.

4. ***The Bible Institute Movement*** In the late 1800s, several Bible institutes were founded that taught dispensational theology including The Nyack Bible Institute (1882), The Boston Missionary Training School (1889), and The Moody Bible Institute (1889).

5. ***The Scofield Reference Bible*** C. I. Scofield, a participant in the Niagara conferences, formed a board of Bible conference teachers in 1909 and produced what came to be known as, the *Scofield Reference Bible*. This work became famous in the United States with its theological annotations right next to the Scripture. This reference Bible became the greatest influence in the spread of dispensationalism.

6. ***Dallas Theological Seminary*** After World War I, many dispensational Bible schools were formed. Led by Dallas Theological Seminary (1924), dispensationalism began to be promoted in formal, academic settings. Under Scofield, dispensationalism entered a scholastic period that was later carried on

by his successor, Lewis Sperry Chafer. Further promotion of dispensationalism took place with the writing of Chafer's eight-volume *Systematic Theology*.

### **Foundational Features of Dispensationalism<sup>4</sup>**

1. ***Hermeneutical approach that stresses a literal fulfillment of Old Testament promises to Israel*** Though the issue of "literal interpretation" is heavily debated today, many dispensationalists claim that consistent literal interpretation applied to all areas of the Bible, including Old Testament promises to Israel, is a distinguishing mark of dispensationalism. Dispensationalists usually argue that the progress of revelation, including New Testament revelation, does not cancel Old Testament promises made with national Israel. Although there is internal debate concerning how much the church is related to the Old Testament covenants and promises, dispensationalists believe national Israel will see the literal fulfillment of the promises made with her in the Old Testament.

2. ***Belief that the unconditional, eternal covenants made with national Israel (Abrahamic, Davidic, and New) must be fulfilled literally with national Israel*** Although the church may participate in or partially fulfill the biblical covenants, they do not take over the covenants to the exclusion of national Israel. Physical and spiritual promises to Israel must be fulfilled with Israel.

3. ***Distinct future for national Israel*** "Only Dispensationalism clearly sees a distinctive future for ethnic Israel as a nation."<sup>5</sup> This future includes a restoration of the nation with a distinct identity and function.

4. ***The church is distinct from Israel*** The church does not replace or continue Israel, and is never referred to as Israel. According to dispensationalists, the church did not exist in the Old Testament and did not begin until the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Old Testament promises to Israel, then, cannot be entirely fulfilled with the church. Evidences often used by dispensationalists to show that the church is distinct from Israel include: (a) Jesus viewed the church as future in Matthew 16:18; (b) an essential element of the church—Spirit baptism—did not begin until the Day of Pentecost (compare 1 Cor. 12:13 with Acts 2); (c) Christ became Head of the church as a result of His resurrection (compare Eph. 4:15; Col. 1:18 with Eph. 1:19-23); (d) the spiritual gifts associated with the church (cf.

Eph. 4:7-12; 1 Cor. 12:11-13) were not given until the ascension of Christ; (e) the "new man" nature of the church (cf. Eph. 2:15) shows that the church is a NT organism and not something incorporated into Israel; (f) the foundation of the church is Jesus Christ and the *New Testament* apostles and prophets (cf. Eph. 2:20); (g) the author, Luke, keeps Israel and the church distinct. On this last point, Fruchtenbaum states, "In the book of Acts, both Israel and the church exist simultaneously. The term *Israel* is used twenty times and *ekklesia* (church) nineteen times, yet the two groups are always kept distinct."<sup>6</sup>

**5. Multiple senses of "seed of Abraham"** According to Feinberg, the designation "seed of Abraham" is used in different ways in Scripture. First it is used in reference to ethnic, biological Jews (cf. Romans 9—11). Second, it is used in a political sense. Third, it is used in a spiritual sense to refer to people, whether Jew or Gentile, who are spiritually related to God by faith (cf. Romans 4:11-12; Galatians 3:7). Feinberg argues that the spiritual sense of the title does not take over the physical sense to such an extent that the physical seed of Abraham is no longer related to the biblical covenants.

**6. Philosophy of history that emphasizes both the spiritual and physical aspects of God's covenants** According to John Feinberg, "nondispensational treatments of the nature of the covenants and of Israel's future invariably emphasize soteriological and spiritual issues, whereas dispensational treatments emphasize both the spiritual/soteriological and the social, economic, and political aspects of things."<sup>7</sup>

Other significant, although not necessarily exclusive features of dispensationalism, include: (1) the authority of Scripture; (2) belief in dispensations; (3) emphasis on Bible prophecy; (4) futuristic premillennialism; (5) pretribulationism; and (6) a view of imminency that sees Christ's return as an "any-moment" possibility.

### Variations Within Dispensationalism

The above features characterize the beliefs of those within the dispensational tradition. However, as Blaising writes, "Dispensationalism has not been a static

tradition.”<sup>8</sup> There is no standard creed that freezes its theological development at any given point in history. Blaising offers three forms of dispensational thought:

1. **Classical Dispensationalism (ca. 1850—1940s)** Classical dispensationalism refers to the views of British and American dispensationalists between the writings of Darby and Chafer’s eight-volume *Systematic Theology*. The interpretive notes of the Scofield Reference Bible are often seen as the key representation of the classical dispensational tradition.<sup>9</sup>

One important feature of classical dispensationalism was its dualistic idea of redemption. In this tradition, God is seen as pursuing two different purposes. One is related to heaven and the other to the earth. The “heavenly humanity was to be made up of all the redeemed from all dispensations who would be resurrected from the dead. Whereas the earthly humanity concerned people who had not died but who were preserved by God from death, the heavenly humanity was made up of all the saved who had died, whom God would resurrect from the dead.”<sup>10</sup>

Blaising notes that the heavenly, spiritual, and individualistic nature of the church in classical dispensationalism underscored the well-known view that the church is a *parenthesis* in the history of redemption.<sup>11</sup> In this tradition, there was little emphasis on social or political activity for the church.

Key theologians : John Nelson Darby, C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer

2. **Revised or Modified Dispensationalism (ca. 1950—1985)** Revised dispensationalists abandoned the eternal dualism of heavenly and earthly peoples. The emphasis in this strand of the dispensational tradition was on two peoples of God—Israel and the church. These two groups are structured differently with different dispensational roles and responsibilities, but the salvation they each receive is the same. The distinction between Israel and the church, as different anthropological groups, will continue throughout eternity.

Key theologians : John Walvoord, Dwight Pentecost, Charles Ryrie, Charles Feinberg, Alva J. McClain.

**3. Progressive Dispensationalism (1986—present)** What does “progressive” mean? The title “progressive dispensationalism” refers to the “progressive” relationship of the successive dispensations to one another.<sup>12</sup> Charles Ryrie notes that, “The adjective ‘progressive’ refers to a central tenet that the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants are being progressively fulfilled today (as well as having fulfillments in the millennial kingdom).”<sup>13</sup>

“One of the striking differences between progressive and earlier dispensationalists, is that progressives do not view the church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel, Gentile Nations, Jews, and Gentile people. The church is neither a separate race of humanity (in contrast to Jews and Gentiles) nor a competing nation alongside Israel and Gentile nations. . . . The church is precisely redeemed humanity itself (both Jews and Gentiles) as it exists in this dispensation prior to the coming of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

Progressive dispensationalists see more continuity between Israel and the church than the other two variations within dispensationalism. They stress that both Israel and the church compose the “people of God” and both are related to the blessings of the New Covenant. This spiritual equality, however, does not mean that there are not functional distinctions between the groups. Progressive dispensationalists do not equate the church as Israel in this age and they still see a future distinct identity and function for ethnic Israel in the coming millennial kingdom.

Key theologians : Craig A. Blaising, Darrell L. Bock, and Robert L. Saucy

<sup>1</sup> See Floyd Elmore, “Darby, John Nelson,” *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Mal Couch, ed., (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) 83-84.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989) 516.

<sup>3</sup> See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: Victor, 1993) 10.

<sup>4</sup> These essentials of Dispensationalism are taken from John S. Feinberg's, “Systems of Discontinuity,” *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988) 67-85. At this point we acknowledge the well-known

sine qua non of Dispensationalism as put forth by Charles C. Ryrie. According to Ryrie, Dispensationalism is based on the three following characteristics: (1) a distinction between Israel and the church; (2) literal hermeneutics; and (3) A view which sees the glory of God as the underlying purpose of God in the world. See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 38-40.

<sup>5</sup> Feinberg, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*. Tustin: Ariel, 1994) 118.

<sup>7</sup> Feinberg, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Blaising and Bock, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Blaising and Bock, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Blaising and Bock, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Blaising and Bock, 27.

<sup>12</sup> Blaising and Bock, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, "Update on Dispensationalism," *Issues in Dispensationalism*, John R. Master and Wesley R. Willis, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 20.

<sup>14</sup> Blaising and Bock, 49.