

# THE RISE OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY IN AMERICA

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## HISTORY

### *History in a Nutshell: Beginning in Europe*

The Brethren movement, in general, is a strongly separatist movement. That is, brethren place strong emphasis on a higher-than-average level of piety and devotion. They see the development of this in prayer, daily study of the Word, and community (hence, brethren). Rather than gathering around doctrinal distinctives, they gather in a community intrinsically separate from the world. As an aside, Brethren teaching fostered not just a deep love for their church community, but also and astounding love of their neighbors. Brethren were very influenced by German Pietism (largely disenfranchised Lutherans) and Anabaptists.

Brethren typically exercise a strong doctrine as to the method of baptism. The first organization of Brethren (Schwarzenau, Germany, 1708) were known as “dunkers” (or Täufern) for their practice of immersing the convert three times as a sign of the Trinity. Also, Brethren have historically celebrated a Love Feast of communion, preceded by the washing of feet and a fellowship meal.<sup>1</sup> Undeniably, their boast is their strictly literal interpretation of biblical imperatives; they take very seriously the issues of war, oaths, lawsuits, worldliness, etc.

### *British Beginnings*

Dispensational theology arose out of the English Brethren movement in the 1870s under John Nelson Darby. The Ebrington Street assembly in Plymouth, England began meeting sometime in the 1820s, becoming the largest Brethren congregation.<sup>2</sup> In 1825, two Edwards (Cronin and Wilson) founded a Brethren church Dublin, Ireland as well. John Nelson Darby, an Anglican priest (and brilliant classicist) in Dublin, had a spiritual revival during a time of healing for an injured leg. In this spiritual revival, he notes many negative aspects of the modern Church. Put simply, he sees a decline of morals in England, including in the church. Therefore, the church is *heavenly* and not earthly (Eph. 2.6). The heavenly church on earth is evident only in those who properly meet “in Christ’s name.” Leaving

#### C. I. SCOFIELD’S SEVEN DISPENSATIONS:

- Innocency (Eden: Gen. 1.28)
- Conscience (Fall to Flood; Gen. 3.23)
- Human Government (Noah to Babel; Gen. 8.21)
- Promise (Abraham to Egypt; Gen. 12.1)
- Law (Moses to John the Baptist; Ex. 19.8)
- Grace (church age in which Israel is ignored until after the rapture; John 1.17)
- Kingdom (tribulation and millennium, which applies to Israel only; Eph. 1.10)

<sup>1</sup> These events were weekly, usually Saturday evening, and often called Remembrance Meetings (belying the fact that they saw the meal in a Zwinglian manner).

<sup>2</sup> Brethren do not use the name, *Plymouth Brethren*, officially, being somewhat opposed to denominational titles (cf. 1 Cor. 3.4). However, sometimes outsiders do so to delineate the historic form of Brethren life developed in England, which is *open* Brethren.

the Church of England in 1830, Darby begins to proclaim a new message to believers in England and Ireland. In 1832, B. W. Newton of the large Plymouth Brethren congregation invited him to come. Ministering within the Brethren movement from 1832 to 1845, he decided these were the only ones to do it right. As such, Darby traveled all over the world, not only teaching, but investing himself in extraordinary acts of kindness and compassion.

Being such an influential figure, it turned out that many Brethren who disagreed with him were summarily excommunicated from the Brethren church. Ironically, B. W. Newton, the organizing pastor of the Ebrington Street assembly in Plymouth, confessed his discomfort with Darby (and that he was devoted to postmillennialism). Darby, full of hot authority, excommunicated the entire assembly! In 1845, when Brethren John Muller of Bethesda Chapel in Bristol, England tried to admit some former Ebrington Street worshippers, Darby demanded that they be forbidden until their *entire* congregation renounce their errors. Since this time, there exist in Brethren circles *open* Brethren (Mullerites, Newtonites, etc.) and *closed*, or *exclusive*, Brethren (Darbyites, Grantites, etc.).<sup>3</sup>

### *At Home in America*

The Brethren movement in America is rather sketchy. It would seem that Darby visited America twice in 1864 (or 1865). Strangely enough, he had a monumental impact on a Presbyterian minister named James Brooks of 16<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Avenue Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. Brooks has been called the American voice of Dispensationalism. To be fair, we should give Brooks credit for seeing his cultural setting properly. He foresaw the infusion of liberal theology into the mainline churches through High Criticism long before liberal J. Ross Stevenson became president of Princeton Seminary and conservative J. Gresham Machen ditched the mainline Presbyterian church in 1923. The same may be attributed to Dwight Moody. Brooks, you see, wanted to stem the growth of liberalism through a more devoted spiritual life of his congregation. It may be that the systematic theologians of the time did not do an accurate job addressing the historic nature of the Bible, opening the door to something new that did address this.<sup>4</sup> Handily, Darby brought this. By the way, in Brooks' church was a young student unfortunately named Cyrus Ingersoll Scofield. As the mainline American church descended into the depths of liberalism, C. I. Scofield preached Dispensationalism to shift the tide.<sup>5</sup> And as Scofield fought against the liberals, so too did he alter traditional orthodox theology, disregarding not just historical Calvinism, but also confessionalism, Federal (i.e. Covenant) Theology, and traditional views of the sacraments.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There are almost three times as many *open* assemblies in America than *closed* assemblies.

<sup>4</sup> Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1994), 13-14.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the Fundamentalist Movement was based upon five tenets: the inspiration of Scripture, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the miracles of Christ, and substitutionary atonement. On all counts, both Dispensationalism and classical Reformed theology overlapped.

<sup>6</sup> Dispensational theologians are rather delicate as to the Calvinism/Arminianism distinction. Some call themselves Calvinists, and some Arminian. To be sure, there are some Calvinists on the faculty of DTS, but the school still has difficulties stomaching Calvinism.

Brethren influences are seen in many American Evangelical corners.<sup>7</sup> Not least of which in America is the influence of Dallas Theological Seminary. Founded in 1924, its first president was Lewis Sperry Chafer, a former student of C. I. Scofield. The school's journal *Bibliotheca Sacra*, has spread Dispensational theology through the American academic world. This might be at least a part of Dispensational influences in Presbyterian and Baptist circles. Not a single Presbyterian or Baptist college or seminary were Dispensational in their theology, but many ministers of these bodies were independently influenced by Dispensationalism. For similar reasons, ministers in the Bible Church movement were also Dispensational, even without attending DTS.

## THEOLOGY

### *We Ain't in Geneva Anymore, Toto*

I don't think that you can be a Dispensational theologian and a Calvinist. There are certainly some progressive Dispensationalists who make this claim, but they have to be so progressive as to no longer qualify as Dispensational. The 'point' that always keeps them from being Calvinistic is definite atonement. This doctrine demands that there is only one doorway for salvation, the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ. If this work is sufficient only for the elect, a natural question might be, what is the destiny of the non-Church body of Israel?

A Covenant theologian is, by definition, Calvinistic.<sup>8</sup> A Dispensational theologian is, by definition, a non-Calvinist (i.e. Arminians). So, it would seem that there are only two choices here: Calvinistic Covenant theologians or Arminian Dispensational theologians. Who cares? Well, we have to understand that modern baptistic theology is conveniently noncommittal. Some Baptists are Calvinistic and, therefore, Covenantal in disposition, while some are Arminian and, it would seem by default, Dispensational. However, not all modern Baptists are Dispensational, and neither would they call themselves Calvinists (i.e. Covenantal). So, what are they? Beats me.

### *A Dispensational Variety*

Before looking at some of the theological distinctives between Dispensational theology and the Covenant theology that precedes it, we should note that there are different flavors of Dispensationalism. There is *historic* or *classical* Dispensationalism, which is what this paper has assumed from the beginning. But there is also a *revised* or *modified* Dispensationalism. In essence, I think that these folks are basically classical dispensationalists with the exception that they re-order or count differently the number of dispensations from the standard seven outlined by Scofield. Finally, there is *progressive*

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<sup>7</sup> Not only is Brian McLaren, founder of the Emerging Church movement, Brethren, but so was Harry Ironside, British scholar F. F. Bruce, and Alexander Strauch (author of *Biblical Eldership*).

<sup>8</sup> Look, I'm quoting here the assertion of someone much smarter than me, J. Ligon Duncan.

Dispensationalism, which, as far as I can gather, can mean anything you want; I am not totally convinced that these folks even agree with themselves.<sup>9</sup> Regardless, below you will find four distinctives of Dispensational thought that radically diverge from Reformational (i.e. Protestant) theology.

#### *A. Israel is Really and Always Israel*

In order for everything to make sense in dispensational circles, one fundamental fact must be observed. Indeed, everything distinctively dispensational flows from this one assertion. That is, when the Bible says, “Israel,” it always means the literal, geographical, ethnic, physical, Hebrew, descendants of Abraham. Hence, the bulk of prophetic literature in the Old Testament will be fulfilled in the people of a literal Israel. The prophecies about Israel and Judah are not fulfilled in the life of the Church, but in the life of the political and ethnic Israel. Again, when the Bible mentions Israel (whether Old Testament or New Testament), it is always about an ethnic, cultural, *literal* people called, Israel.

As such, there are ultimately two people of God; the national Israel under the Old Covenant and the Church of the New Testament under the New Covenant. The former has a future as an earthly land mass with original boundaries as God intended, the latter has a future of heaven (see below). The former finds salvation under the Law, the latter finds salvation under Grace (see below). Some ramifications? The Church was non-existent until Pentecost (Acts 2). Also, none of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, *none of it*, has anything to do with the New Testament Church.

If this is the case, among other things, the Bible must be read in an overtly and fiercely literalistic way (see below). While Covenant theologians (and Paul) see that not all Israel is *true* Israel, that there is a spiritually circumcised Israel that represents the Church under Christ (Gal. 3.29; 6.16; Rom. 2.20-28; 9.6; Phil. 3.3, etc.), Dispensational theologians see Israel as one unified political and ethnic body. In the promises to Abraham, according to Covenant theology, are the ingredients of salvation by grace, if only Israel will see.

#### *B. Salvation is ... Different*

I don't think that any modern Dispensationalists would say that Old Testament believers were saved by works and New Testament believers were saved by faith. But they used to say this. The orthodox, Reformational, Protestant, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist view has always been that *all* (i.e. *all!*) believers are saved in the same way. The only way to be reconciled with God is through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone (*sola fide*).

Modern Dispensationalist, however, still have a difficulty making this assertion. There is still confusion about the *nature* of faith in the Old Testament compared with the *nature* of

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<sup>9</sup> Seriously, I adore Darrel Bock and Craig Blaising, both professors at Dallas Theological Seminary, but I simply do not understand their theological bent; it's my lack of brain power, to be sure.

faith in the New Testament. The orthodox position is that the content of faith for both eras is exactly the same. Old Testament believers are *in Christ* because Jesus Christ is shown through shadows and types, while New Testament believers are in Christ because Jesus Christ is shown more clearly by the events of the Gospel being retrospective.

### *C. Bible Reading is Done in One Way*

On the surface, it would seem that the Dispensationalists are right. Shouldn't we read the Bible literally? Aren't we being more genuine students of the Bible when it is read literally? The answer is, no! It would be better to read the Bible ... biblically. That is, Reformation thought has always asserted what has become to be known as the analogy of faith. Simply put, we have numerous examples of New Testament authors commenting on the Old Testament (skim Matthew for the quotes). These authors often tell us how to read the Old Testament. In this method, we allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. We have no excuse to read the Bible in a solely literalistic way because the inspired word does not, in fact, read itself in this way!

In Luke 24, it was Jesus Himself who taught the disciples how to read the Old Testament. Even prior to His resurrection, Jesus says that Moses, the author the first five books of the Bible, actually wrote about the Son (Jn. 5.46). Indeed, Jesus reminds His disciples that *all* of the Old Testament scriptures testify to Himself (Jn. 5.39). As one scholar reminds us, Amos 9, a very important passage for Dispensationalism,<sup>10</sup> is actually interpreted for us in the mouth of James, the younger brother of Jesus, in Acts 15. Paradoxically, to believe in the Old Testament is the same as believing in Jesus of Nazareth!

So, the hermeneutical dilemma is not between Dispensational literalism and liberalizing metaphoricalism, but between Dispensational literalism and the historic Reformational analogy of faith.

### *D. Hence ... Eschatology is Different*

If there is a hard and fast distinction between Israel and the Church, then there needs to be two distinct futures (alluded to earlier). Classical Dispensationalism is thoroughly premillennial and pretribulation with regard to the rapture. That is, Jesus Christ's second coming occurs prior to His millennial reign (Rev. 20) and the rapture saves Christians prior to the time of tribulation.<sup>11</sup>

Why is this so? Well, it appears in Dispensational theology that the very existence of the Church marks an interruption in God's eternal plan. God sent the Messiah to set up an earthly kingdom, to restore the greatness of Israel and return to her the splendor she lost after Solomon. Alas, the Jews rejected Jesus Christ. The Church, then, is known in

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<sup>10</sup> Amos 9 concerns the destruction of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> There are also midtribulation and posttribulation views, but classical dispensationalists are usually pretribulation.

Dispensational circles as the “Great Parenthesis,” the unplanned-for interruption. At the end of the Great Parenthesis, God will rescue the Church to continue His scolding of Israel through the Tribulation, which is why the rapture and the premillennial schema of eschatology is critical. Jesus comes to spare the Church, those who accepted God’s grace in believing His Son. The Church will be taken up to heaven, and then the millennial reign of Christ begins in which He will force Israel to see His kingship with the Tribulation prophesied in the Old Testament. At some future point, Israel will receive the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31.