
The Dispensational Origins of Modern Premillennialism

by Jack Van Deventer

The twentieth century has seen a dramatic paradigm shift in prophetic perspectives, first away from and now back toward its historic roots. This shift away from historic Christianity stemmed from a novel approach to Bible interpretation called Dispensationalism which was developed in the 1830s and popularized with the 1909 publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Dispensationalism, with its unique brand of pre-millennialism, has been thoroughly pervasive, being prominent in many churches, in bookstores, and among radio Bible teachers.

The distinguishing features of Dispensationalism are a rigidly applied literalism in the interpretation of Scripture, a compartmentalization of Scripture into "dispensations," and a dichotomy between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalists believe "this present world system . . . is now controlled by Satan" [1] (not by God) and will end in failure and apostasy.

Dispensational pre-millennialists claim that their unique doctrines have been held since the early church, but these claims have been soundly refuted. Far from being the historic position of the church, pre-millennialism was described in 1813 by David Bogue as an oddity of Church history. [2] Postmillennialism was the dominant eschatology from the Reformation until at least 1859. [3]

The doctrine of a secret rapture was first conceived by John Nelson Darby of the Plymouth Brethren in 1827. Darby, known as the father of Dispensationalism, invented the doctrine claiming there were not one, but two "second comings." This teaching was immediately challenged as unbiblical by other members of the Brethren. Samuel P. Tregelles, a noted biblical scholar, rejected Darby's new interpretation as the "height of speculative nonsense." [4] So tenuous was Darby's rapture theory that he had lingering doubts about it as late as 1843, and possibly 1845. [5] Another member of the Plymouth Brethren, B.W. Newton, disputed Darby's new doctrine claiming such a conclusion was only possible if one declared certain passages to be "renounced as not properly ours." Sandeen writes, "this is precisely what Darby was prepared to do. Too traditional to admit that biblical authors might have contradicted each other, and too rational as to admit that the prophetic maze defied penetration, Darby attempted a resolution of his exegetical dilemma by distinguishing between Scripture intended for the Church and Scripture intended for Israel. . . . Darby's difficulty was solved by assuming that the Gospels were addressed partly to Jews and partly to Christians." [6]

Thus, the doctrine of the separation of Israel and the Church, the foundation of Dispensationalism, was born out of Darby's attempt to justify his newly fabricated rapture theory with the Bible. Dispensationalists believed justification for carving up

the Scriptures came from 2 Timothy 2:15 (KJV) "rightly dividing the word of truth." Subsequent dispensationalists divided the Scriptures in terms of categories of people: Jew, Gentile, and Christian. Chafer taught that the only Scriptures addressed specifically to Christians were the gospel of John, Acts, and the Epistles! Pettengill taught that the Great Commission was for the Jews only. Scofield taught that the Lord's Prayer was a Jewish prayer and ought not to be recited by Christians. Along with much of the New Testament, the Old Testament was described as "not for today." Ryrie dismissed the validity of the Old Testament commands to non-Jews because "the law was never given to Gentiles and is expressly done away for the Christian." [7] Christians were even mocked as legalists for believing in the Ten Commandments! [8] As other critics have observed, this segmentation of the Bible makes Dispensationalism a Christianized version of cultural relativism.

Snowden and others traced the rise of modern pre-millennialism to a variety of religious splinter groups: the *Plymouth Brethren* (developed Dispensationalism), the Millerites (became the *Seventh Day Adventists*), *Mormons*, *Jehovah Witnesses*, [9] and [some] *Pentecostals*. [10] Dispensational pre-millennialism was marketed the same way as the cultic groups. First, historic Christianity was discredited by the claim that all the prominent commentaries, all the church fathers, and even the Reformers were deluded by "man-made doctrines." Second, new revelation was claimed. Darby claimed to have received "new truth" or at other times "rediscovered truth" that had been lost since the apostles. Third, enthusiasm was whipped up on the pretence that Christ's coming was imminent. Frequent false predictions did not seem to deter this enthusiasm.

Snowden cited increasing prophetic fervour in the early 1900's rising from (1) a "fresh interest and zeal" in interpreting the "signs of the times," (2) the Great War (WWI) which started a wave of prophetic speculation, and (3) "the fall of Jerusalem out of Mohammedan into Christian hands [which] has whipped the millennialian imagination up to its highest pitch of foresight and prognostication." [11] This background explains the widespread popularity of the Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909, which had a dramatic influence in spreading Dispensationalism. Many well-known scholars warned that the teachings of Dispensationalism were "unscriptural" [12] (Spurgeon), "heterodox" (Dabney), "bizarre doctrine" and "grievous error" [13] (Warfield), but the warnings went largely unheeded.

Today, Dispensationalism is in a theological turmoil, having declined sharply since the 1970's because of mounting criticism. Grenz notes, "Dispensationalism today is in a state of fluidity. No longer are the rigid distinctives of the past held to with unswerving certainty. Many progressive dispensationalists are no longer certain as to exactly what are the defining tenets of the system that commands their allegiance." [14]

Endnotes

1 John A. Witmer, "A Review of 'Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July/September 1992) p. 272.

2 Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1971) p.187.

3 In "History of Opinions Respecting the Millennium," *American Theological Review* 1 (Nov. 1859) p. 642-655.

4 Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,

1960) p. 21.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

6 Ernest R. Sandeen, *British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 66.

7 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1969), p. 88.

8 S. Lewis Johnson, "The Paralysis of Legalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Vol.120 (April/June, 1963), p. 109. He cites Barnhouse, *God's Freedom*, p. 134. Johnson wrote "At the heart of the problem of legalism is pride, a pride that refuses to admit spiritual bankruptcy. That is why the doctrines of grace stir up so much animosity. Donald Grey Barnhouse, a giant of a man in free grace, wrote, 'It was a tragic hour when the Reformation churches wrote the Ten Commandments into their creeds and catechisms and sought to bring Gentile believers into bondage to Jewish law, which was never intended either for the Gentile nations or for the church.' He was right, too."

9 James H. Snowden, *The Coming of the Lord* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), p. 23-24.

10 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture, The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 94. Marsden notes, "Dispensationalism, which fit so well with the Pentecostal and holiness ideas of the 'Age of the Spirit,' easily gained acceptance in the new Pentecostal movement. . . "

11 Snowden, *The Coming of the Lord*, p. 24.

12 Charles Spurgeon, *A Treasury of David / II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1966), p. 466.

13 Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publications, 1989), p. 391. This book reprints B.B. Warfield's 1918 critique of Lewis S. Chafer's book *He That Is Spiritual*, from which these comments were excerpted.

14 Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1992), p. 122.
