

Dispensationalism – Darby and Scofield

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Any student of modern evangelical theology feels overwhelmed at times. So many new trends are arising. It is hard just to keep up with the rapid developments in evangelical thinking.

There are new winds blowing in the sometimes stuffy North American churches. A real awareness by young intellectuals is shown for the all-embracing nature of Biblical Christianity. Thousands are turning away from anti-intellectualism and are searching for in-depth answers to the complex problems of our world.

Besides the burgeoning new Reformational movements,¹ there is also a real popularization of traditional Dispensational theology. Even in our Reformed circles this influence is being felt through the Back To The Bible Broadcast and its magazine *Good News Broadcaster*, Hal Lindsey's phenomenal bestsellers, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and its sequel *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth*. In these popular studies Lindsey presents a popularization of traditional Dispensational theology. Lindsey, a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, now lives in fashionable Pacific Palisades, California and "has recently moved his office to the equally prestigious Century City district of Los Angeles,"² as the result of the success of his books.

Scores of Bible institutes, especially in Canada, stress dispensational theology. The best known intellectual centers of dispensationalism include Moody Bible Institute, Chicago, Illinois and Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas. The latter seminary seeks to maintain high academic standards and a respectability through its scholarly journal *Bibliotheca Sacra*.

Dispensationalism is peculiarly North American though it has adherents all over the world and originated in England. In Holland, dispensationalism became known specially through the writings of J. N. and H. C. Voorhoeve, but it never made a real impact.

Definition

Dispensationalism is a complex theological system and there are numerous shades of interpretation. The simplest definition of this view is given by Dr. George W. Dollar, chairman of the department of church history at Bob Jones University, Greenville, South Carolina:

"Dispensationalism - A system of Biblical interpretation adhering to literalism in interpretation and distinguishing a series of periods in God's dealings with man in which God introduced a succession of tests of responsibilities. In each of these tests of responsibilities man has proved an utter failure when left to himself and so has been thrust upon the grace of God for salvation. The commonly taught dividing points of the

dispensations are the Fall, the flood, the call of Abraham, the giving of the Law at Sinai, the Cross, the rapture of the Church, and the return of Christ."³ Most dispensationalists hold to seven dispensations. Not all agree on the number of dispensations. Some have only four. Others have as many as eight, but most hold to seven.⁴

The watchword of the dispensationalists is *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*. They consider themselves to be the only true champions of orthodoxy. Departure from dispensationalism will result in the loss of the evangelical faith.⁵

Why is this influence of dispensational theology so great? In view of the fact that we are living in dramatic, apocalyptic, pessimistic and uncertain times, dispensational theology becomes very attractive to those Christians who see no way out of a seemingly hopeless situation apart from God's direct intervention in history to take away (rapture) His true church out of this wicked and very perverse world.

Dispensationalism is a comparatively recent development. Its distinctive views cannot be understood unless we consider John Darby and the Plymouth Brethren.

John Nelson Darby (1800-1892)

John Nelson Darby was born in London, though he grew up and spent much of his life in Ireland. He was of a noble English family and was independently wealthy. His godfather was Admiral Lord Nelson. Darby first studied the classics and later switched to law and practiced for a short time in Ireland. After his conversion he felt led to go into the ministry. He gave up his law practice and was ordained in 1825.

He served for two years and three months as curate in the Anglican Church. He broke with his church and joined a small fellowship of believers that would grow later into the worldwide Brethren movement. By this time he had come to distrust all organized churches.

In breaking away from the organized church, Darby tried the experiment of throwing away the accumulated tradition of eighteen centuries and began to "organize" anew from scratch by forming fellowships built on his interpretation of Scriptures.⁶ Though he left the established church, he did not repudiate infant baptism. He taught a Pelagian view of infant baptism, considering it as introducing the one baptized into a circle where he was capable of receiving the grace of God.⁷

Darby became a voluminous writer, though his writings were not always lucid. His best known work is the *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (5 vols.). His *Collected Writings* (32 vols.) deal with a wide range of subjects. Several volumes of his letters have also been published. He made a new translation of the Bible and also wrote a number of hymns.

Darby was a strong-willed man. "Some have called him a saint, but if he was he belongs to the hermit saints like Saint Anthony. In many ways he resembled John Wesley, though in his condemnation of the established church he stands in stark contrast. But

like Wesley he was an itinerant man of few domestic pleasures, a man with magnetic, electric personal qualities combined with a tyrant's will to lead and intolerance of criticism. Perhaps he should be described as a petty tyrant, for he was most tyrannical about petty things. Unlike Wesley he often demonstrated as much zeal in destroying a work of his own building as he did in its first construction. The will of God seldom blurred before his vision. Also unlike Wesley and most unfortunately for his historical reputation, the clarity with which he perceived the will of God was never matched by his ability to write it down. He left a massive set of Collected Writings which are almost uniformly unintelligible."⁸

Darby found it very difficult to tolerate those differing with him. All who did not agree with his interpretations of the Bible were characterized as "not having the truth," or as "not understanding the divine plan of the ages," and therefore as somewhat "apostate."⁹

Darby's overbearing personality caused much friction. The early history of the Plymouth Brethren movement was dominated by rivalry and strife. Even within Darby's lifetime several divisions within the Brethren movement took place. The first deep cleavage was the result of the bitter tract war between Benjamin W, Newton and John Darby. Newton rejected Darby's doctrine of the "any-moment" return of Christ, and his dispensational interpretation of the Scriptures. Newton characterized this as "grasshopper exegesis."¹⁰ Darby also accused Newton of trying to dominate the Plymouth Brethren and to create a separate sect. A few months later he added the charge of heresy. Newton left Plymouth, the place where the first congregation of the Brethren was established in 1831, and ultimately formed an independent, ultra-Calvinist church in London. Darby's followers formed a closely knit federation of churches and became known as the Exclusive Brethren.

Darby's interest in prophecy did not develop until after his break with the Anglican church. He first wrote on the subject in 1836.¹¹ He never indicated any source of his ideas other than the Bible. Indeed, he consistently affirmed that his only theological task was explaining the text of Scripture. Though Darby did not refer to any sources, dispensationalism in some form or another was known. Joachim of Fiore, abbot of Cosenza in Calabria and later founder of his own monastery at Floris, who lived from about 1130/45-1201/02 taught that there were three dispensations. Of these three dispensations, "the first commenced with Adam, the second with John the Baptist; the preparation for the third began with St. Benedict, its development began with the order of the Cistercians, and about 1260 the final development will take place But there must still take place a last fight against the power of evil, which appears in the person of the last and worst antichrist, in Gog. After this will follow the final judgment and the great Sabbath of the consummation will be ushered in."¹² Pierre Poirret (1646-1719) was a French mystic and philosopher who had an outline of seven dispensations." These are but two examples to demonstrate that Darby's views were not so novel. Darby's greatest influence has been through his unique interpretation of Scripture. He made a clear distinction between the portions of Scripture which should be considered Christian. The prophetic books, indeed most of the Old Testament and also much of

the New has relevance for Israel only. This view must be kept in mind, if we want to understand present popularized dispensationalism.

Darby taught that Israel and the church are separate entities. He rejected the idea that the church inherits the promises God made to Israel. There is no spiritual Israel that can inherit God's promises. God governs his relationship to Israel and the church according to quite distinct principles. Israel and the church belong to different dispensations, that of law and that of grace. God's promise to Israel is to set up a literal kingdom on earth. The church was not in God's original redemptive plan. There wasn't even a church in the lifetime of Jesus. Our Lord preached a gospel of the Kingdom; Paul preached a gospel of grace. The church came because Israel rejected the gospel of the Kingdom. Since every dispensation has been a total failure, this church age won't be any different. Darby taught that, right from the beginning, the church was in ruins. Even in the lifetime of the apostles "apostasy," "departure from the faith," and so forth were already present. The apostles failed when they did not carry out the Lord's Great Commission to go out into all the world to preach the Gospel. The apostle Paul was raised up to supplement their lack. "Thus," writes Darby, ". . . this dispensation as well as any other failed and broke off in the very outset . . . it broke down in the commencement – no sooner fully established than it proved a failure."¹⁴ The church is beyond hope. Reformation is impossible. Darby writes, "the Scripture never recognizes a recovery from such a state" (i.e., the state of ruin).¹⁵

What is in store for the church and for Israel? The hope of the church is the rapture, the "first" second coming of Christ. Before the great tribulation, which will last for seven years, the true church is to be taken from the earth secretly and then, at a later time, Christ will return in a public "second" second coming. As Darby put it, "The church's joining Christ has nothing to do with Christ's appearing or coming to earth."¹⁶ Christ at the second public coming will establish together with the saints, the millennial kingdom on earth and Christ will offer the Kingdom to Israel again, David's throne will again be occupied, the temple restored, and sacrifices reinstated. Judaism will be completely restored and there will be a division between Jew and Gentile.

Although the source of dispensationalism is Darby, it has had its greatest success in North America. Darby's views became widespread through the Plymouth Brethren missionaries and the travels of Darby himself. Darby spent much time abroad, living for considerable periods in Switzerland, Italy, France, Germany, Holland, Canada, the U.S., the British West Indies, New Zealand, and Australia. Darby visited Canada as early as 1859. His activities here began in 1862. Except for visits to Montreal and Ottawa, and one short trip to Halifax, Darby restricted his ministry to the area between London and Toronto, Ontario. He also frequently visited the U.S. Plymouth Brethren missionaries also travelled extensively in North America. "In the 70's many of these preachers from Scotland and the north of Ireland came to America and labored with great blessing, particularly in the province of Ontario and in nearby eastern states. Later the movement extended all over the two countries."¹⁷

In Canada, the Brethren gained the greatest support in areas settled predominantly by Baptists. Although 'Brethrenism' in Canada never assumed the proportion of a major religious movement, it grew to such a strength as to constitute a serious challenge to the established churches. The Brethren proselytized among the membership of the regular churches more than they evangelized among the "unchurched masses."

The editor of the *Christian Guardian* wrote (in 1887) with specific reference to the work of the Plymouth Brethren evangelists: "Their whole manner of work is stealthy and uncandid. They open their mission . . . and generally conceal their most objectionable teaching at first. They live by proselyting from the protestant churches instead of going out into the unconverted world and gathering souls for Christ. In many places they have brought about dissension and strife, where brotherly relations had formerly prevailed."¹⁸

Since Darby's dispensationalism had anti-denominationalism as its point of departure, it was adapted by church leaders to a non or inter-denominational philosophy. As a result, we find many nondenominational chapels, tabernacles and churches in North America.

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1834-1921)

Probably no other one man in North America has been more influential in spreading Darby's dispensationalism than Cyrus Ingerson Scofield. Scofield studied law in St. Louis, Missouri and was admitted to the Kansas bar in 1869. Being a lawyer, he served for two years as the United States Attorney for Kansas. After his conversion in 1879 Scofield became strongly influenced by the dispensationalist J. H. Brookes. Though he never had formal theological training, he served as pastor of Moody Church, Northfield, Massachusetts, 1895-1902, and First Congregational, Dallas, Texas (now Scofield Memorial). He was a writer, a popular speaker, and much in demand as a Bible conference teacher. In 1903, Scofield started his work, as editor, on the now-famous Reference Bible. This work was completed in 1909. This year became in a sense a turning point in the history of contemporary dispensationalism as the Reference Bible made an immediate impact among evangelical believers. This Bible is now practically a textbook in many Bible colleges.

Scofield never accepted Darby's view of the church, but did promote his view on the last things in its totality. About 1900, he published a book entitled *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, in which he set forth the scheme he would use in his Reference Bible. His *Addresses on Prophecy*, published in 1902, also clearly present Darby's views.

The Scofield Bible creates a false sense of authority by continually referring to its explanatory notes, based on Darby's interpretation of Scripture. Its popularity is also attributed to its attractive format of typography, paragraphing, notes, and cross references.

1. Cf. Richard Quebedeaux, *The Young Evangelicals. The story of the emergence of a new generation of evangelicals.*
2. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
3. George W. Dollard, *A History of Fundamentalism in America*, pp. 379f.

4. Lorain, Boettner, *The Millennium*, p. 150.
5. Ernest Pickering, *The Importance of Premillennialism*, p. 25.
6. Bryan Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism*, p. 214. 7. E. H Broadbent, *The Pilgrim-Church*, p. 372.
8. Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism. British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930*, p. 31.
9. Quibcdcaux, p. 80. 10. Bryan Wilson, p. 228. 11. Arnold 1). Elert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispersationalism*, p. 47.
12. Ehlert, p. 31. 13. Ibid., p. 36.
14. E. 11. Broadbent, p. 374.
15. Ibid., p. 374.
16. Sandeen, p. 63.
17. C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America. Its Rise and Development*, p. 46.
18. S. D. Clark, *Church and Sect in Canada*, pp. 360f.

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