

# Dispensationalism Defined Historically

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*Bringing together Palestinian and Messianic Leaders*

## **Seminar 1:**

I would like to begin by putting dispensationalism within its historical context.

### **1. Evangelicalism**

The term 'Evangelicalism' denotes a broad spectrum of theological opinion arising out of the Reformation, Puritanism and Revivalism. Tertullian was one of the first to use the term around AD 200 in his defence of biblical truth against Marcion. Martin Luther used the term to describe John Hus, but it was Thomas More who introduced the word to the English language. In a '*vitriolic attack*' on William Tyndale in 1532, More referred to those '*evangelicalles*'. The distinctive doctrines of Evangelicalism include a belief in the supreme authority of scripture over tradition (*sola Scriptura*); in the literal interpretation of scripture; adherence to the historic creeds; the need for a personal faith in Jesus Christ for salvation and holiness; and a belief in the imminent, visible and personal return of Jesus Christ.

### **2. Fundamentalism**

Within Western evangelicalism there are many strands defined by adherents as much as by opponents. These include those of *fundamentalist, conservative, and liberal*. This spectrum has sometimes been simplified into the three categories of right, centre and left. The fastest growing and most influential of these is fundamentalism, also known in the United States as the '*Evangelical Right*'. Fundamentalism draws its support primarily from the Baptist, Pentecostal and Independent Bible churches. The term '*fundamentalist*' derives from a series of tracts entitled 'The Fundamentals' published from 1910 onwards in an attempt by American conservative evangelicals to defend the basis of historic Christianity and repudiate what they saw as 'modernism' and theological liberalism. The term 'fundamentalism' was first used by Curtis Lee Laws, the editor of the Baptist Watchman Examiner, in 1918 to describe the movement within Baptist circles dedicated to such a position.

Within contemporary Evangelicalism and American Fundamentalism in particular, the most influential theological interpretation of history is known as premillennial dispensationalism.

### **3. Premillennialism**

Traditionally there have been three mutually exclusive interpretations of the references to a millennial reign of Christ in Revelation 20 depending on whether it is understood literally or figuratively. These are amillennial, postmillennial, and premillennial. Premillennialists hold to the belief that Christ will return prior to the millennium, and will reign on earth for a thousand years with the risen saints. Premillennialists are themselves divided on the question as to when the so called 'rapture' will occur. Four distinct positions have and continue to be held within premillennialist circles. The traditional view is known as pre-tribulationism. Some

dispensationalists have come to hold alternative views known as mid-tribulation, post-tribulation and pre-wrath tribulation. We don't have time to examine them today but I will just mention the main one - pre-tribulationism.

J. N. Darby influenced by Edward Irving and followed by C. I. Scofield and the early dispensationalists such as Lewis S. Chafer and Charles Ryrie held to this position. Ryrie describes pre-tribulationism as '*normative dispensational eschatology*' and '*a regular feature of classic dispensational premillennialism*'. Pre-tribulationist premillennialists believe that Jesus Christ will return in the air to secretly 'rapture' true believers before the Tribulation begins on earth. After seven years of tribulation, Christ will return with His saints to overcome the Antichrist and his forces and establish God's millennial kingdom on earth. One popular exponent of this position is Tim LaHaye.

*Are you ready for Christ's return? Do you believe that at any instant you could find yourself hurtling through the skies to meet your Lord face to face? Are you confident that God will spare you and your loved ones the horrifying judgment of the Tribulation...Are you living your life as if each moment could be your last on earth?*

At the late 19th Century Niagara Prophetic Conferences attended by men like D. L. Moody and C. I. Scofield, alternative views of the chronology of the rapture, already present in the increasingly sectarian Brethren circles, emerged here also and caused considerable internal division within dispensational circles. This came to be known as the 'Rapture-Rapture'

## **4. Dispensationalism**

### **4.1 The Origins of Dispensationalism**

J.N. Darby is regarded by many as the father of premillennial dispensationalism and the most influential figure in the development of its prodigy, Christian Zionism. However, William Kelly and Edward Irving played no small part in the restoration of premillennial speculations out of which Darby's dispensationalism arose. Charles Ryrie the foremost dispensationalist scholar today attempts to show how latent dispensational ideas can be found in earlier times - for example in the writings of an amillennial Calvinist named John Edwards (not Jonathan) (1637-1716), a French mystic, Pierre Poiret (1646-1719), and the hymn writer, Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Ryrie does, however, concede that the 'system' of dispensationalism is recent in origin.

Coad, the Brethren historian claims to trace Darby's views back to the works of a Jesuit, Francesco Ribera of the sixteenth century, whose writings were later popularised in the nineteenth century by another Spanish Jesuit, Manuel Lacunza. Lacunza used the pseudonym Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra, allegedly a converted Jew, for his book, '*The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty*' which Edward Irving translated into English. Irving's 203 page preface to the translation superimposed his own prophetic speculations about the end of the world, predicting, like Darby, the apostasy of Christendom, then subsequently the restoration of the Jews and finally the imminent return of Christ.

#### **4.1.1 J.N. Darby**

Darby had been ordained into the Church of Ireland in 1825 with a burning desire to convert Roman Catholics through the work of the Home Mission. His own writings indicate that he apparently achieved a degree of success.

He claimed that Catholics were '*becoming Protestants at a rate of 600 to 800 a week*' which amounted to something of a revival. However, when his Bishop insisted that converts also swear an oath of allegiance to the English Crown, Darby protested that this was unthinkable because it was, '*unscriptural, and derogatory to the glory of Christ*'. His Bishop was unmoved, so Darby, remaining resolutely consistent with his own emerging theological stance, took the logical step of renouncing the visible church, both Anglican and Dissenting, as apostate. '*This manifestation of the glory of Christ by the Church in unity no longer exists.*'

His analysis of the contemporary ecclesiastical scene was to become increasingly pessimistic, judgmental and sectarian. His repeated response was to declare '*The Church is in ruins*.' He went on to insist that this was not merely the result of denominational division but that, '*...the entire nature and purpose of the church has become so perverted that it is diametrically opposed to the fundamental reason for which it is instituted*'. The prevailing eschatology arising from the 18th Century Great Awakening was essentially postmillennial, inspiring great optimism and the rise of world-wide missionary endeavour. This Darby, and others like Irving, opposed strongly and vigorously. In a lecture given in 1840, Darby insisted,

*What we are about to consider will tend to show that, instead of permitting ourselves to hope for a continued progress of good, we must expect a progress of evil; and that the hope of the earth being filled with the knowledge of the Lord before the exercise of His judgment, and the consummation of this judgment on the earth, is delusive. We are to expect evil, until it becomes so flagrant that it will be necessary for the Lord to judge it...I am afraid than many a cherished feeling, dear to the children of God, has been shocked this evening; I mean, their hope that the gospel will spread by itself over the whole earth during the actual dispensation.*

During the period 1826-1828 he began meeting with a few influential friends for prayer, study and fellowship in 1828 they established what in effect became an informal house church. Their meetings drew others disenchanted with the religious establishment and soon developed into a close knit and exclusive connection of fellowships known as the 'Brethren'. Darby was the undeniable founder of the Brethren movement. Doctrinally, he was the primary influence in expressing and propagating what came to be the distinctive theology of the Brethren, forging and maintaining a rigid, almost fanatical creed of doctrinal purity, in what he and others believed were the final days of history.

Darby's distinctive premillennial views were inevitably influenced by those of a similar persuasion whom he met, for example, at the Powerscourt prophetic conferences held near Dublin in the early 1830's, which came to be shaped by his dominating and charismatic leadership. These exclusive prophetic gatherings which focused on a pessimistic interpretation of world events and the imminent return of Christ, confirmed both Darby's denunciation of the established churches, and also his own prophetic calling. Coad insists, '*He felt himself an instrument of God, burdened with an urgent call to His people to come out of associations doomed to judgement.*'

For Darby, '*Separation from evil was the divine principle of unity*,' since doctrinal error led, he claimed, to '*gross moral contamination*.' Not surprisingly perhaps, Charles Spurgeon observed in Darbyism, a growing tendency to isolationism, obscurantism and a party spirit. Darby was a charismatic figure, a dominant personality, persuasive speaker and zealous

missionary for his dispensationalist beliefs. He personally founded Plymouth Brethren churches as far away as Germany, Switzerland, France and the United States.

The churches Darby planted with the seeds of a separatist premillennial dispensationalism, in turn sent missionaries to Africa, the West Indies, Australia and New Zealand, so that by the time of his death in 1885, around 1500 Plymouth Brethren churches had already been founded world-wide. His views also came to influence the Bible and Prophetic Conferences associated with Niagara and other centres in North America from 1875.

*During his lifetime, Darby wrote more hymns than the Wesleys, travelled further than the Apostle Paul, and was a Greek and Hebrew scholar. His writings filled forty volumes.....If Brightman was the father of Christian Zionism, then Darby was its greatest apostle and missionary...*

#### **4.1.2 Darby's Innovative Dispensational Scheme**

Darby was not the first to discover 'dispensations' within Biblical history, nor was his own scheme universally accepted even within Brethren circles. He was the first however to promote a form of dispensationalism, in which he perceived that biblical history was broken into discreet dispensations, distinguished by an irreversible and sequential change in the means by which God has apparently dealt with mankind. This enabled Darby to speculate about an imminent change of dispensation in which true believers would soon be 'raptured' to heaven and replaced by the Jews who would be the people of God on earth during the final millennium.

*...the dispensations themselves all declare some leading principles or interference of God, some condition in which He has placed man, principles which in themselves are everlastingly sanctioned of God, but in the course of these dispensations placed responsibility in the hands of man for the display and discovery of what he was, and the bringing in their infallible establishment in Him to whom the glory of them all rightly belonged.....in every instance, there was a total and immediate failure as regarded man (sic), however the patience of God might tolerate and carry on by grace the dispensation in which man thus failed in the outset; and further, that there is no instance of the restoration of a dispensation afforded us, though there might be partial revivals of it through faith.*

Darby recognised that his interpretation was novel, but insisted this was for two reasons. First, because others had not studied the Scriptures correctly.

*The covenant is a word common in the language of a large class of Christian professors...but in its development and detail, as to its unfolded principles, much obscurity appears to me to have arisen from a want of simple attention to Scripture.*

The second reason Darby insisted that his interpretation was correct was because he believed the Lord had revealed it to him personally and directly.

*For my part, if I were bound to receive all that has been said by the Millenarians, I would reject the whole system, but their views and statements weigh with me not one feather. But this does not hinder me from enquiring by the teaching of the same spirit...what God has with infinite graciousness revealed to me concerning His dealing with the Church.*

*But I must, though without comment, direct attention to chapter 32 of the same prophet; which I do the rather, because it was in this the Lord was pleased, without man's teaching, first to open my eyes on this subject, that I might learn His will concerning it throughout.*

In response to public reaction to his doctrine of the dispensations, he wrote,

*...I believe it to be the one true Scriptural ground of the church...I am daily more struck with the connection of the great principles on which my mind was exercised...Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah XXXII...It was a vague fact that received form in my mind long after, that there must be a wholly new order of things...*

Even Coad, in his otherwise positive history of the Brethren Movement, admits that '*For the traditional view of the Revelation, another was substituted.*'

James Barr is less sympathetic arguing premillennial dispensationalism was,

*'...individually invented by J. N. Darby...concocted in complete contradiction to all main Christian tradition...'*

Referring to Darby's dispensational ideas, Bass concludes,

*'Such a concept is singularly missing from historic Christian theology...Darby is pointedly correct in stating that this came to him as a new truth, since it is not to be found in theological literature prior to his proclamation of it. It is not that exegetes prior to his time did not see a covenant between God and Israel, or a future relation of Israel to the millennial reign, but they always viewed the church as the continuation of God's single program of redemption begun in Israel.*

Darby's contribution then, to the development of Christian Zionism and a rigid differentiation between the Church and Israel arose out of ecclesiastical expediency, his novel dispensational speculations and an independent and rigid literalist hermeneutic. These led him to formulate two innovative doctrines concerning the Church and Israel. Both marked a significant departure from Christian orthodoxy and evangelicalism in particular.

The first might be termed a 'replacement theology'. Darby taught that Israel would soon replace the Church, rather than the Church having replaced, superseded, incorporated or indeed become, Israel. To accomplish this, Darby postulated his second distinctive doctrine involving two stages to the return of Christ instead of one, the first being to secretly gather the Church to heaven in a 'rapture' leaving a revived and gathered nation of Israel to rule on earth for the millennium.

#### **4.1.3 Darby's Ecclesiology - A Replacement Theology**

Darby's strong and repeated condemnation of the visible Church as apostate, clearly influenced his innovative belief that the Church era was now merely a 'parenthesis' of the Last Days soon to be replaced by Israel as God's chosen people on earth. '*Satan having beguiled the Church, the church is in the position of earthliness and united in system with the world.*'

Darby regarded the church as merely one more dispensation that had failed like the previous five. Each in turn had lost its place in the divine economy and was under God's judgement.

Just as Israel had been cut off, so he believed the Church would be. Just as only a small remnant of Israel had been saved, so would only a small remnant of the Church be saved. The remnant taken from the ruins of the Church would conveniently be, he claimed, his own followers, also known as 'the Assembly'. His answer to the condition of the visible Church was not to insist on the need for a new reformation, national repentance or even a revival, since to attempt to restore or repair the ruins would actually be sinful.

*We insist on the fact that the house has been ruined, its ordinances perverted, its orders and all its arrangements forsaken or destroyed; that human ordinances, a human order, have been substituted for them; and what merits all the attention of faith, we insist that the Lord...is coming soon in His power and glory to judge all this state of things.*

To those who saw things differently, Darby repeatedly asserted, *"The house is in ruin, and you are bad imitators acting from your own leading and wrongly."* Because Darby insisted on there being irreversible and progressive dispensations, in which the Church was merely one such dispensation, he deduced, a priori, that there could be no future earthly hope for the Church. He argued that the Scriptures do not,

*...present the restoration of a dispensation; it never justifies its actual condition; though grace may...effect revivals during the long suffering of God, the dispensation, as such, is actually gone, that the glory of the principle contained in it may shine forth in the hands of the Messiah. The attempt to set this dispensation on another footing, as to its continuance than those dispensations which have failed already shows ignorance of the principles of God's dealing for the calling of God was always by Grace..*

Instead he speculated that the Church would soon be replaced in God's purposes on earth by a revived national Israel.

*The Church has sought to settle itself here, but it has no place on the earth...[Though] making a most constructive parenthesis, it forms no part of the regular order of God's earthly plans, but is merely an interruption of them to give a fuller character and meaning to them (the Jews).*

Darby, through his rigid literalist interpretation of Scripture, regarded the covenantal relationship between God and Abraham as binding for ever, and that the promises pertaining to the nation of Israel, as yet unfulfilled, would find their consummation in the reign of Jesus Christ on earth during the millennium. He thereby encouraged an essential dichotomy between those promises that applied to Israel and those to the Church. In an article in the *Christian Witness* published in 1838, and attributed to Darby, he went further arguing that,

*There are two great subjects which occupy the sphere of millennial prophecy and testimony - The Church and its glory in Christ, and the Jews and their glory as a redeemed nation in Christ - the heavenly people and the earthly people. The habitation and scene of the one being the heavens; of the other, the earth.*

In a lecture entitled, *'The Hopes of the Church of God'*, Darby claimed that Israel was the theatre through which God had displayed His character.

*It is in this people, by the ways of God revealed to them, that the character of Jehovah is fully revealed, that the nations will know Jehovah, and that we shall ourselves learn to know him'*

Following his literalist interpretation of Old Testament prophecy, every promise and prediction concerning Israel that did not appear to have been fulfilled completely must, according to his logic, apply to the future.

*The great object of prophecy...is, the combat which takes place between the Second Adam and Satan. It is from this centre of truth that all light which is found in Scripture radiates. This great combat may take place either for the earthly things...and then it is in the Jews; or for the Church...and then it is in the heavenly places. It is on this account that the subject of prophecy divides itself into two parts, the hope of the Church, and those of the Jews...*

In his developing scheme, Darby therefore laid the foundation for a dispensationalism in which the Church was seen as a mere parenthesis to God's continuing covenantal relationship with Israel, which would be His primary instrument of rule on earth during the millennium. This fundamental error appears a result of Darby's narrow sectarian ecclesiology, indeed one that he superimposed on Scripture by virtue of his dispensational framework.

*It is not that exegetes prior to his time did not see a covenant between God and Israel, or a future relation of Israel to the millennial reign, but they always viewed the church as a continuation of God's single program of redemption begun in Israel. It is dispensationalism's rigid insistence on a distinct cleavage between Israel and the church, and its belief in a later unconditional fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant, that sets it off from the historic faith of the church.*

H. C. Leupold, professor of Old Testament exegesis at the Evangelical Lutheran Seminary, Columbus, Ohio, in his commentary on Genesis 12:3 and the promise made to Abraham, makes the following critique of Darby's dispensationalism,

*Now surely, as commentators of all times have clearly pointed out, especially already Luther and Calvin, this promise to Israel is conditional, requiring faith...History is the best commentary on how the promise is meant. When the Jews definitely cast off Christ, they were definitely as a nation expelled from the land. All who fall back upon this promise as guaranteeing a restoration of Palestine to the Jews...have laid into it a meaning which the words simply do not carry.*

#### **4.1.4 Darby's Eschatology - An Imminent Secret Pre-Tribulation Rapture**

It was into this dispensational scheme that Darby and his contemporary Edward Irving postulated two stages to Christ's imminent return. First, there would be an invisible 'appearing' when Christians would meet Christ in the air and be removed from the earth, a process which came to be known as '*the rapture of the saints*'. With the restraining presence of the Holy Spirit removed from the world, the Anti-Christ would arise. His rule would finally be crushed by the public 'appearing' of Jesus Christ. Darby argued that, regarding the rapture,

*The Church's joining Christ has nothing to do with Christ's appearing or coming to earth. Her place is elsewhere. She sits in Him already in heavenly places. She has to be brought there as to bodily presence..*

*...We go up to meet Christ in the air. Nothing is clearer, then, than that we are to go up to meet Him, and not await His coming to earth; but that this coming to receive us to Himself is not His appearing is still clearer...*

*..This is the rapture of the saints, preceding their and Christ's appearing ...so that at their rapture He has not appeared yet...This rapture before the appearing of Christ is a matter of express revelation, as we have seen from Colossians 3:4.*

In commenting on 1 Thessalonians 4:15, in his Synopsis of the Books of the Bible, Darby asserts,

*Observe, also, that this revelation gives another direction to the hope of the Thessalonians, because it distinguishes with much precision between our departure hence to join the Lord in the air, and our return to the earth with Him.*

Critiques argue that these passages actually say nothing about any secret rapture in any dispensational sense, still less that the Church will be removed and return later to earth with Christ at His public appearing. Bass insists, '*Only by involved exegetical interpretation can the pre-tribulation rapture be supported.*'

Darby's interpretation actually denies what the passage teaches (the blessed hope of the Church does have to do with the coming of Christ) and affirms what it does not teach (the blessed hope is the secret going and later public returning of the church). Darby admitted as much that his doctrine of the rapture was an innovation, the result of 'express revelation', indeed he seemed quite pleased with the reaction to it.

*The rapture of the saints to meet the Lord in the air, before His manifestation to the earth, and the existence of a Jewish remnant in whom the Spirit of God is graciously working before the Lord manifests Himself to them for their deliverance, is happily attracting the attention of Christians. It has made sufficient way to be the occasion of renewed opposition...*

Following his literalist hermeneutic, Darby insisted that the tribulation would end seven years after the rapture when Jesus Christ would return to Jerusalem to set up his kingdom from which he would rule the world for a thousand years. Indeed Darby made the 'pre-tribulation rapture' yet one more of his exclusive tests of Brethren orthodoxy.

*It is this conviction, that the Church is properly heavenly, in its calling and relationship with Christ, forming no part of the course of events of the earth, which makes the rapture so simple and clear, and on the other hand, it shows how the denial of its rapture brings down the Church to an earthly position, and destroys its whole spiritual character and position.*

His attitude toward those who disagreed with his doctrine of the secret rapture was scathing,

*...Wherever this is enfeebled, Satan is at work....He who awaits Christ's appearing, as the time in which he is to go to be with Him, has denied the proper hope and proper relationship of the Church with Christ. On this point there can be no compromise. Ignorance of privilege is one thing...the denial of it another*

He regarded disinterest in his teaching of the rapture as a sign that the church was apostate and his own 'Assembly' elect.

*The rapture of the saints before the appearing of Christ, strange as it may appear to some, has nothing to say to the church, directly or exclusively; but as we form part of those caught up, it of course, interests us in the highest degree.*

Darby and his supporters clearly believed the '*secret rapture*' would occur in their own life time and certainly before the end of the 19th Century. Looking back, Blair Neatby, writing his history of the Brethren in 1901 reflects,

*If anyone had told the first Brethren that three quarters of a century might elapse and the Church be on earth, the answer would probably have been a smile, partly of pity, partly of disapproval, wholly of incredulity. Yet so it has proved. It is impossible not to respect hopes so congenial to an ardent devotion; yet it is clear now that Brethrenism took shape under the influence of a delusion, and that delusion was a decisive element in all of its distinctive features.*

Among Darby's supporters however, '*his delineations of millennial glory dazzled the minds of his hearers.*' Despite its novelty, Darby's belief of the 'pre-tribulation rapture' became central to his doctrine of the Church as well as his dispensational eschatology, and subsequently came to be '*a foundation for contemporary Christian Zionism*'

## **4.2 Darby's Dispensationalism Criticised and Refined**

Darby's novel ideas were not left unchallenged even within Brethren circles. B. W. Newton, his chief assistant in Plymouth, confronted Darby arguing that these views were heretical and a departure from Biblical orthodoxy. Darby's intransigence led to one of many splits within the Brethren movement, and with former colleagues like Irving from the prophetic conference days in Albury. Strong differences also repeatedly emerged within the Brethren movement, particularly between Darby and Newton, as to the implications of his new doctrines concerning the rapture and the relationship of the Church to Israel. If the Church had already been removed before the Antichrist could persecute them, who then would be the remnant persecuted under his rule? For Darby, a Jewish remnant would reign on earth after the rapture and remain faithful to the Law under persecution, seeing the literal fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies still to be realised. The church however, Darby insisted, would play no part in this earthly reign. '*This remnant has neither the church's heavenly blessings nor the church's hopes.*'

Newton and other Brethren leaders saw Darby's elevation of Israel above the Church as '*full-blown heresy*' since the Church in Scripture is made up of both Jews and Gentiles who are now one in Christ, and Darby's scheme, followed logically, implied two distinct and separate ways to salvation. Samuel Tregelles, an early Plymouth Brethren and Biblical scholar was another who rejected Darby's interpretation as the '*height of speculative nonsense.*'

If the Church were removed and a Jewish remnant were the fruit of God's redemptive work apart from Christ then it must be the result of '*another*' Gospel condemned by the Apostle Paul in Galatians.

Newton and others within the Brethren sought to devise alternative, less problematic interpretations of the future to Darby's system which, even to those favourably disposed to the Brethren, like Coad, admitted was built on a '*completely new structure of Biblical interpretation.*' These included what came to be known as 'the partial rapture.' In 1836, for example, Newton contradicted Darby's scheme arguing, '*Accordingly, the resurrection glory of the saints is as distinctly connected with Israel and Jerusalem, as with the earth.*'

Newton also argued that the New Testament writers spiritualised the promises in the Old Testament to the inheritance of a literal land.

*It is thus that the descriptions which in the Old Testament are confined to the earthly city, are used by the Apostles to express the glories of Jerusalem which is above; for these are the expansion and heavenly antitype of the typical (though real) glories of Jerusalem below. They both belong to the same system - they are different courts of the same glorious temple visibly united yet distinct.*

Newton postulated a millennial reign whereby the dispensations were not consecutive and in which Israel would be restored under the same covenant of faith as the Church, not one in which, as Darby claimed, national Israel would be restored and the Church excluded. Newton did not see the means of blessing as parallel and distinct but converging, both on the basis of grace through faith, and a foretaste of heaven. In 1838 Newton sought a reconciliation between Darby's dispensationalism and more orthodox Covenant theology. In a paper called 'The Dispensations' he argued that in Abraham,

*This covenant therefore must be everlasting, and all that ever will be effectually blessed either in earth or in heaven, hand upon it as a covenant of promise. Upon this covenant the natural seed of Abraham, Israel according to the flesh is secretly sustained now...*

*...But not only the earthly Jerusalem and the land, the Heavenly Jerusalem likewise does equally rest upon the covenant of promise to Abraham; for the promise was not made simply to Abraham, but equally to his seed, i.e. Christ (Galatians iii). 'And therefore if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise.'*

Like Darby, Newton believed that the Church would be raptured, and that the Jews would be restored, but instead, he brought together Darby's views of the 'heavenly' Church and 'earthly' Israel arguing this would all occur after the tribulation and return of Christ, not before and that the remnant of Jews in Jerusalem would be brought to faith in Messiah and so too be blessed.

*The dispensation, therefore, which commenced with Abraham, is necessarily an eternal one, for (though many earthly and temporary blessings yet to be accomplished were included in it), it had respect to a heavenly and eternal city-Jerusalem which is above...the manifestation of Sarah blessing is altogether future and will not be shown forth in its power until the whole family both in earth and heaven, Jerusalem above and Jerusalem below, are alike manifestly brought under its bond of blessing.*

*Restored Israel in Jerusalem, will in many respects resemble the Church now. Not indeed, in suffering, for that is a privilege possessed by the Church of the first-born distinctly. But as it is now said of the Church, that they are a chosen generation, a royal Priesthood; so it is written of Israel in that day, that they shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*

It seems inexplicable that Darby should have ignored these attempts by other Brethren leaders like Newton to accommodate themselves to his own idiosyncratic doctrinal position, nor recognise that their views fitted the Scriptures more convincingly than his own speculations.

*Only the supposition of a mental block can explain Darby's total failure to acknowledge that what was proposed was a strengthening, not a weakening, of his own system. Not only did it bring his teaching back into accord with the basic*

*Reformed orthodoxies, without denying anything essential in it, but it also cured the dangerous Docetic tendencies that were latent in Darby's own vivid distinction between the exclusively earthly hopes of Israel and the exclusively heavenly hopes of the Church. It is significant that a tendency to Doceticism has always been a serious flaw in Darbyite thinking.*

Friction between Darby and Newton came to a head in 1843 when Newton published his *Thoughts on the Apocalypse*, and Darby felt impelled to attack it. Coad summarises the split between Darby and Newton.

*Newton, to Darby, was depriving the Church of its glories in Christ. The simple thought that Newton's system did nothing of the kind, but that it rather added the glories of the redeemed Israel to the glories of the redeemed Church, seems never to have entered Darby's mind.*

Darby's response to opposition was to charge his critics with sectarianism and to excommunicate them. Darby led the 'Exclusive' Brethren and Newton the 'Open' Brethren. George Muller and others tried to remain neutral, refusing, as Darby insisted, on excommunicating those who remained in fellowship with Newton. Those who suffered his wrath in this way included Groves, Muller, Harris and Newton, and by 1865 without them, his hold over the Exclusive Brethren gradually waned. Darby's Exclusive Brethren underwent further schism splitting into three parties by 1881, known after the names of their leaders as the Darbyites, Kellyites and Cluffites.

#### **4.3 Darby's Influence on the Rise of Modern Dispensationalism**

Professor Francis W. Newman was a contemporary of Darby and offers this assessment of his impact on those who came under his influence.

*For the first time I perceived that so vehement a champion of the sufficiency of the Scriptures, so staunch an opposer of creed and churches, was wedded to an extra-scriptural creed of his own, by which he tested the spiritual state of his brethren.*

*...this gentleman has every where (sic) displayed a wonderful power of bending other minds to his own, and even stamping upon them the tones of his voice and all sorts of slavish imitation. Over the general results of his action I have long deeply mourned, as blunting his natural tenderness and sacrificing his wisdom to the Letter, dwarfing men's understandings, contracting their hearts, crushing their moral sensibilities, and setting those at variance who ought to love, yet oh! how specious it was in the beginning! he only wanted men 'to submit their understanding to God,' that is to the Bible, that is to his interpretation.*

From 1862 onwards, as his influence over Brethrenism in Britain waned, Darby focused his ministry more and more on North America, making seven journeys in the next twenty years. During that time he had a considerable influence on such evangelical leaders as Dwight L. Moody, William Blackstone and C.I. Scofield, as well as the emerging *Bible and Prophecy Conference* movement which, '...set the tone for the evangelical and fundamentalist movements in North America between 1875 and 1920.'

Krauss, the church historian claims that by 1901, following a good deal of controversy at these prophetic conferences toward the end of the 19th Century,

*...the dispensationalists had won the day so completely that for the next fifty years friend and foe alike largely identified dispensationalism with premillennialism.*

Darby's influence over D.L. Moody came about through one of Darby's disciples, a young evangelist Henry Moorehouse who impressed Moody with his 'extraordinary' preaching. According to his son, Moody's message and style were revolutionised, '*Mr Moorehouse taught Moody to draw his sword full length, to fling the scabbard away, and to enter the battle with the naked blade.*' Newman, a contemporary American historian confirmed the strong influence Darby and his colleagues had over Moody,

*The large class of evangelists, of whom Dwight L. Moody was the most eminent, have drawn their inspiration and their Scripture interpretation largely from the writings and the personal influence of the Brethren.*

Bass, in his definitive critique of Dispensationalism concludes,

*The line of continuity from Darby to the present can be traced unbroken from the works of his contemporaries, C.H. Mackintosh, William Trotter, William Kelly, and F.W. Grant, through the intermediary works of W.E. Blackstone, James Hall Brooks, A. J. Frost, G. Campbell Morgan, Harry Ironside, A.C. Gaebelein, C.I. Scofield, and his Scofield Bible, to the contemporary adherents of his views...Suffice it to say that he stamped his movement with his own personality. Much of its spiritual atmosphere undoubtedly belongs to his influence; and certainly its interpretative principles, its divisive compartmentalization of the redemptive plan of God, its literalness as to prophetic interpretation, and its separatist spirit may be traced to this personality. Perhaps it is too broad a summary to say that Darby's personality influenced directly the spirit of contemporary dispensationalism, but certainly the pattern which he set into motion is reflected in it.*

Similarly, George Marsden, in his history of the rise of fundamentalism between 1870 and 1930, traces the considerable influence of Darby's dispensationalism on the American evangelical world of Moody and Scofield.

*This new form of premillennial teaching, imported from England, first spread in America through prophecy conferences where the Bible was studied intently. Summer conferences, a newly popular form of vacation in the age of the trains, were particularly effective. Most importantly, Dwight L. Moody had sympathies with the broad outlines of dispensationalism and had as his closest lieutenants dispensationalist leaders such as Reuben A. Torrey (1856-1928), James M. Gray (1851-1925), C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), William J. Erdman (1833-1923), A.C. Dixon (1854-1925), and A. J. Gordon (1836-1895). These men were activist evangelists who promoted a host of Bible conferences and other missionary and evangelistic efforts. They also gave the dispensationalist movement institutional permanence by assuming leadership of the new Bible institutes such as the Moody Bible Institute (1886), the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (1907), and the Philadelphia College of the Bible (1914). The network of related institutes that soon sprang up became the nucleus for much of the important fundamentalist movement of the twentieth century. Dispensationalist leaders, in fact, actively organized this antimodernist effort. Notably, they oversaw the publication between 1910-1915 of the widely distributed twelve-volume paperback series, *The Fundamentals*.*

Darby's dispensational views would however probably have remained the exotic preserve of the dwindling and divided Brethren sects were it not for the energetic efforts of C.I. Scofield

and his associates to introduce them to a wider audience in America and the English speaking British Empire and bestow a measure of respectability through his *Scofield Reference Bible*. The publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 by the Oxford University Press was something of an innovative literary coup for the movement, since for the first time, overtly dispensationalist notes were added to the pages of the biblical text. What distinguishes Darby's scheme and subsequent dispensationalists from the earlier attempts to categorise redemptive history is the conviction that the dispensations are irreversible and progressive. While such a dispensational chronology of events was largely unknown prior to the teaching of Darby and Scofield, the *Scofield Reference Bible* became the leading bible used by American Evangelicals and Fundamentalists for the next sixty years.

#### **4.4 A Summary of Traditional Dispensational Doctrine**

##### **4.4.1 The Seven Dispensations**

Dispensationalists claim to find in Scripture evidence of seven distinct dispensations during which mankind has been tested in respect of specific revelation as to the will of God.

- 1. Innocence (Genesis 1,28);*
- 2. Conscience or Moral Responsibility (Genesis 3,7)*
- 3. Human Government (Genesis 8,15);*
- 4. Promise (Genesis 12,1);*
- 5. Law (Exodus 19,3);*
- 6. Church (Acts 2,1);*
- 7. Kingdom (Revelation 20,4)*

In each, mankind, including in the sixth dispensation, the visible Church, has failed the test according to the distinct way in which God responded to humankind. These dispensations began with Creation and will end, it is claimed, in the Millennial kingdom. What distinguishes Darby's scheme and subsequent dispensationalists from earlier attempts to describe phases in biblical history is the conviction that God's way of dealing with humanity in previous dispensations were and remain, irreversible and progressive. These dispensations are seen by proponents as '*providing us with a chronological map to guide us.*'

##### **4.4.2 Israel and the Church**

Dispensationalism claims that God has two separate but parallel means of working, one through the Church, the other through Israel, the former being a parenthesis to the later. As Ryrie insists, "*A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct.*" Thus there remains a distinction, '*between Israel, the gentiles and the church.*' Chafer elaborates this dichotomy,

*The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.*

Dispensationalism therefore refutes the supposition inherent in covenant theology that God has one purpose for all people and that in Jesus Christ the earthly is transformed into the heavenly.

*This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.*

Darby's insistence on two dispensations, one for the Church and another for Israel is the basis on which much non-evangelistic but triumphalist Christian Zionism views Israel, the stance taken for example by the International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem, the Messianic Testimony, and in large measure, Christian Friends of Israel. This framework expects the revival among Jews to occur after Jesus returns.

#### **4.4.3 Literalist Hermeneutic**

Dispensationalism is based on a hermeneutic in which all Scripture, and especially the prophetic, must always be interpreted literally. Scofield, who popularised and synthesised Darby's theology, taught,

*Not one instance exists of a 'spiritual' or figurative fulfilment of prophecy... Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion...Prophecies may never be spiritualised, but are always literal.*

Chafer likewise criticises non-dispensational theology for giving a spiritual interpretation to earthly realities. Ryrie insists that dispensationalism and, in particular, *'this distinction between Israel and the church is born out of a system of hermeneutics that is usually called literal interpretation.'* One is left in no doubt that such an interpretation is the only consistent one for evangelicals who claim to hold to a literal as opposed to liberal allegorical hermeneutic. Ryrie asserts,

*To be sure, literal/historical/grammatical interpretation is not the sole possession or practice of dispensationalists, but the consistent use of it in all areas of biblical interpretation is.*

Based on such an interpretative principle, dispensationalists hold that the promises made to Abraham and Israel must await future fulfilment since they were never completely fulfilled in the past. So, for example, it is an article of normative dispensational belief that all Israel will be literally saved; that the boundaries of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants will be literally instituted; that Jesus Christ will return to a literal and theocratic kingdom centred on Jerusalem in the State of Israel.

For dispensationalists then, the church is relegated to the status of a parenthesis in God's future and literal kingdom rule. This will be centred on Jerusalem during the millennium in which the Temple will be rebuilt and sacrifices restored. Often this kind of dogma, based on forced exegesis, is also asserted by those who are uncomfortable with or disillusioned by Jewish resistance to proselytism and who rest in the belief that *'all Israel will be saved'* when or after Christ returns.

#### **4.5 Progressive Dispensationalism**

A new generation of younger dispensationalists among the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary have attempted to redefine their movement as 'progressive dispensationalism'.

They distance themselves from what they regard as the the 'naïveté' of the founder's vision, distinguishing the traditional dispensationalism of Lewis Chafer and Charles Ryrie from 'Scofieldism', as well as from 'the popular 'apocalypticism' of Lindseyism'. They regard themselves as 'less land centred' and less 'future centred'. Ryrie is sceptical, however, unwilling to concede to such revisionism. He prefers to describe the position of theologians such as Blaising and Bock as 'neo-dispensationalist' or 'covenant dispensationalist', for holding for instance to a 'slippery' hermeneutic.

#### **4.6 Hyper-Dispensationalism**

Ryrie similarly insists on distinguishing normative dispensationalism from 'Ultradispensationalism'. This is rooted in the teaching of Ethelbert W. Bullinger (1837-1913) and his successor Charles H. Welch, who, according to Ryrie, have merely carried dispensationalism to its 'logical extremes'. Ultradispensationalists hold for instance, that the Church did not begin at Pentecost but in Acts 28 when Israel was set aside; the Great Commission of Matthew and Mark is Jewish and therefore not for the Church; the Gospels and Acts describe the dispensation of the Law; only the Pauline prison epistles, that is Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, relate to the Church Age; water baptism is not for the Church Age; and Israel, not the Church, is the Bride of Christ. Their teachings are perpetuated today by the Berean Bible Society, Berean Expositor, Berean Publishing Trust and Grace Mission.

#### **4.7 Dispensationalism Summarised**

Following Scofield's literalistic hermeneutic, most contemporary premillennial dispensationalists of what ever type, equate the State of Israel with biblical Israel; the Jews are still regarded as God's 'chosen people'; and consequently people of Jewish descent have a divine right to the land in perpetuity.

Crucial to the premillennial dispensationalist reading of biblical prophecy, drawn principally from Daniel and Revelation, is the assertion that the Jewish Temple will be rebuilt on the Temple Mount as a precursor to the Lord returning to restore the Kingdom of Israel centred on Jerusalem. This pivotal event is also seen as the trigger for the start of the war of Armageddon. Premillennial Dispensationalism has come to dominate American Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism especially through the influence of Dallas Theological Seminary and the Moody Bible Institute, to the point where the two (Evangelicalism and Dispensationalism) are virtually synonymous. Leading exponents include Charles Ryrie, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, Eric Sauer, Hal Lindsey and Mike Price. The movement has grown in popularity within evangelical circles, particularly in America and especially since 1967, coinciding with the Arab-Israeli Six Day War and a few years later in 1970 with the publication of Hal Lindsey's blockbuster '*The Late Great Planet Earth.*'