

DESTRUCTIVE DISPENSATIONALISM

We make a conscious effort in this journal to try to confine our content to matters related to apologetics—to questions that have to do with how we know there is a God, which God it is that we should believe in, and how science and faith are compatible. Necessarily we sometimes have to get into areas that involve science and apologetics in indirect ways, and thus we have explored UFOs, ancient astronaut theories, the occult, pseudoscience, and cults. These areas of study overlap science and faith in many ways, and the misuse of science and the Bible in these areas has always been a major focus of the material we have printed.

There is probably no religious belief that has caused more problems in modern times than dispensationalism. Ronald L. Numbers in his book *The Creationists* has shown that a vast percentage of fundamental creationists have based their beliefs on dispensationalism. Christian Zionism, in which churches are actively involved in promoting the Nation of Israel, is rooted in this belief system. Over half of Protestant denominations hold to dispensationalism in one form or another, and virtually all “televangelists” promote it including John Hagee, Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, Paul Crouch, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, and Billy Graham. Other well known dispensationalists include Tim LaHaye, Hal Lindsey, Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and Eric Sauer. Several well-known Christian organizations also promote it including Moody Bible Institute and Dallas Theological Seminary.

John Nelson Darby, Cyrus Scofield, and D. L. Moody were the architects of dispensationalism early in the twentieth century. The basic claim was that in 2 Timothy 2:15 when Paul told Timothy to “rightly divide the word of truth” that he was to divide it into seven discrete dispensations. Various dispensationalists had different views of how the seven dispensations were to be identified, including Scofield’s version which is built into the famous Scofield Study Bible. While different early dispensational preachers had different understandings and views, their basic belief system was constant. They all viewed the seven dispensations to be leading to the reestablishment of Israel as a world power with Jerusalem as the capital of the world and Jesus the supreme King of the world.

Most dispensational systems broke their seven dispensations into something like this:

Innocence	Genesis 1:3–3:6
Conscience	Genesis 3:7–8:14
Civil Government	Genesis 8:15–11:9
Patriarchal Rule	Genesis 11:10–Exodus 18:27
Mosaic Law	Exodus 19:1–John 14:30
Grace	Acts 1:1–Revelation 19:21
Millennium	Revelation 20:1–15

In dispensational tradition there is a permanent distinction made between Israel, the Gentiles, and the Church. Lewis Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, put it this way: “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 heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. Israel is an eternal nation, heir to an eternal land, and with an eternal kingdom, on which David rules from an eternal throne.” Dispensationalists go on to say that the promises made to Abraham and through him to the Jews are eternal, unconditional, and await future realization so that the land promised to Abraham and his descendants from the Nile to the Euphrates will be literally instituted and that Jesus Christ will return to a Jewish kingdom centered on a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem.

Many dispensationalists believe that when the Jewish nation was reestablished in Palestine in 1948 that it was an indication that this was the generation when all of this was to take place. Very shortly then, in this belief, there will be a rapture in which Christ appears in the heavens and resurrects all dead Christians and together with all living believers takes them into heaven for seven years. During this seven years God is said to anoint 144,000 Jews to be missionaries for Christ. The Roman empire is revived as the European Common Market. The “Antichrist” solves the world’s problems and becomes the world dictator in Rome. A second “Antichrist” arises to govern Israel in collaboration with the Roman ruler. Israel rebuilds the temple and reestablishes Jewish worship including animal sacrifices. Arab countries, Russia, and Red China get involved and Christ returns with resurrected Christians to end the war and rules on David’s throne for 1,000 years. Later there is a final judgment for all of the wicked of all ages.

There are many variations of this scenario, and there are many detailed studies of the claims which show biblically why it is an incorrect theological view. If you cannot find studies in your local bookstore or church library, contact us and we will be glad to give you some addresses for materials to examine this in depth. That is not our purpose here. What we want to do here is to point out some major misunderstandings that impact people’s belief in the Bible as the Word of God, and major consequences that come from this belief system.

DISPENSATIONALISTS DO NOT TAKE THE BIBLE LITERALLY.

Scofield maintained that dispensationalists are the only ones who take the Bible literally. One of his statements is “Not one instance exists of a ‘spiritual’ or figurative fulfillment of prophecy ... Jerusalem is al-

ways Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion ... Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal.” We have stated over and over in this journal that to take the Bible literally means to look at who wrote it, who they wrote it to, and why they wrote it. If you do not do that, you end up with multiple contradictions and massive incompleteness in understanding scripture—Matthew’s genealogy from Abraham to Jesus (42 generations in Matthew 1) versus Luke’s 57 generations in Luke 3 being just one simple example. It is interesting that the literalness that dispensationalists claim is never applied to statements that contradict their view. God’s promises are always conditional, and in passages like Deuteronomy 8:19–20; 30:15–20; and Joshua 23:15–16 the Jews were told that if they did not obey what God had given them, they would not inherit the promised land. In fact, in Joshua 23:14 as Joshua gets ready to leave the Israelites he tells them that all of the promises that God had made to Abraham had been fulfilled.

DISPENSATIONALISTS HAVE A RACIAL, ETHNIC COMPREHENSION OF GOD AND THE CHURCH.

It does not matter which proponent of dispensationalism you read, they all have a common theme that political physical Israel is favored by God above all other people on earth. The founder of dispensationalism, John Nelson Darby, stated “The Jewish nation is never to enter the Church.” This notion of special earthly significance to one group of people flies in the face of all Jesus and the Apostles taught. In Acts 10 when Peter is given a special revelation about Cornelius, he summarizes his new revelation by saying “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right” (verses 34–36).

Ephesians 2:11–22 Paul gives a beautiful picture of the fact that God has broken down all barriers, all walls, and made one body out of all of the division (verse 14). He tells the Ephesians there are no longer any foreigners, no aliens, but that we are all fellow citizens (verse 19). Galatians 3:26–29 beautifully shows that there are no special ethnic or racial groups in God’s sight. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” In Acts 15 the first century Christians dealt with attempts to promote Jewish tradition in the Church and rejected it. Jesus had a hard time getting His followers to understand that His “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36), and that same concept is misunderstood by many people today.

DISPENSATIONALIST IDEAS SPILL OVER INTO POLITICAL AND SCIENTIFIC AREAS CREATING NEGATIVE IMPLICATIONS.

In 1980 a foundation called “The International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem” was set up to aid Is-

rael—with a staff of 50 workers in 80 countries and an identity with the Likud party in Israel. Raising money for Israel and giving major support to Israel in its conflicts with its neighbors also takes place in some denominations in the United States, and there is a great deal of work done in lobbying and pressing political figures in our government to aid Israel. We have had several presidents in recent times who have been proponents of dispensationalism. Jesus was very clear that we are to “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). Religious pressure for Israel based on dispensational beliefs is misguided and misapplied.

As we mentioned earlier, most fundamental creationists are dispensationalists. If you take the view that the first dispensation was one of innocence, and that nothing ever happened to man or beast that was anything other than innocent, then man was essentially in heaven when he started. Nothing died, nothing bad ever happened, no pain existed, and nature was always pleasant, positive and, ideal. Not only is this view unrealistic, it violates the description given in Genesis. In Genesis 2:15 we are told that man was put “in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” Man was not a spirit creature already in heaven, he had to work—weeding, pruning, caring for the garden. When man ate something, it died. You cannot eat a banana without murdering massive numbers of seeds. When the curse was given to Eve she was told her pain would increase (Genesis 3:16), indicating she had been in pain before.

Another complication in dispensational teaching is that it puts time constraints on everything. Many dispensationalists take the reference to 1000 in passages like Revelation 20:2–3 to mean that the dispensations were all roughly that long. That makes the earth about 6,000 years old, and puts certain events in man’s history in the very recent past. Even such cities as Beijing, China, with city records going back far longer than 6,000 years have to be changed to fit this theology. Evidence continues to pile up from all areas of man’s studies in geology, astronomy, archeology, history, and genetics that this simply is not the case.

Dispensationalism is a man-made theology that is in conflict with the evidence, the Bible, and common sense. We must not borrow from its teachings in science, history, or politics because when we do we not only are misled ourselves, but we make God’s Word look foolish.

Quotations are from “Orchestrating the End” by Stephen Sizer, *SCP Journal*, Volume 31:4 & 32:1, 2008, page 52.

—John N. Clayton
Does God Exist? bulletin
November/December 2008
Page 11