

Dispensational Theology

AN ESSAY BY
Michael J. Vlach

DEFINITION

Dispensationalism is an evangelical theological system that addresses issues concerning the biblical covenants, Israel, the church, and end times. It also argues for a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies involving ethnic/national Israel, and the idea that the church is a New Testament entity that is distinct from Israel.

SUMMARY

Following a brief introductory description of dispensational theology this essay will survey, in turn, the essential features of Dispensationalism, its distinctive hermeneutic, its specific theological beliefs, and, finally, its later developments.

Dispensationalism is an evangelical theological system that addresses issues concerning the biblical covenants, Israel, the church, and end times. It also argues for a literal interpretation of Old Testament prophecies involving ethnic/national Israel, and the idea that the church is a New Testament entity that is distinct from Israel.

Like other evangelical systems, Dispensationalism is a post-Reformation development. In his book, *Dispensationalism before Darby*, William C. Watson documents a strong futuristic hope for ethnic/national Israel that existed among many English theologians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century Dispensationalism picked up and built upon this hope.

As a system Dispensationalism is linked with the teachings of the Anglo-Irish theologian and Plymouth Brethren minister, John Nelson Darby (1800-82). Based on his study of [Isaiah 32](#), Darby believed that Israel would experience earthly blessings in a future dispensation that were different from what the church would experience. He advocated for a strong distinction between Israel and the church. Darby also popularized the idea that the church would be raptured or snatched to heaven just prior to the seventieth-week of Daniel.

Early Dispensationalism began in Britain but then experienced great popularity in the United States. Darby and other Brethren ministers brought Dispensationalism to America. The rise in popularity of Dispensationalism also occurred through Bible conferences, the rise of Bible institutes and colleges, the influence of Dallas Theological Seminary (est. 1924), and the popularity of radio and television programs from dispensational teachers. Hal Lindsey's book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and the *Left Behind* book series (Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins) were books published from a dispensational perspective that became best sellers. Dispensationalism remains popular in the United States but also has many critics.

Dispensations and the Pre-Tribulational Rapture

The two most recognized features of Dispensationalism involve belief in (1) seven dispensations and (2) a pre-tribulational rapture of the church in which the church will be snatched to heaven before a coming seven-year Tribulation Period.

First, while affirming that salvation has always been by grace through faith alone, Dispensationalism teaches that God has worked in different ways in different eras of history. Dispensationalism often taught that the various dispensations involved a test for mankind, a failure, and then a judgment. This then would be followed by another dispensation. These seven dispensations are (1) innocence; (2) conscience; (3) human government; (4) promise; (5) law; (6) grace; and (7) kingdom. Not all dispensationalists agree on how many dispensations there are and what they should be called. While belief in seven dispensations is held by many, others say there are anywhere from four to eight. Plus, some have differed on the criteria for determining a dispensation.

Also, Dispensationalism is known for affirming a pre-tribulational rapture. This involves the idea that the church will be raptured or snatched to heaven before a coming seven-year tribulation period. This tribulation or Day of the Lord includes God's judgment on an unbelieving world. It will also involve God bringing Israel to salvation. Dispensationalists believe that [1 Thessalonians 1:10](#) and [Revelation 3:10](#) reveal that the church is promised physical rescue from this period of divine wrath. They also believe that [1 Thessalonians 4:15-17](#) describes the rapture event. While most dispensationalists believe in a pre-tribulational rapture, some hold to other rapture views such as mid-tribulational, pre-wrath, and post-tribulational. Thus, the pre-tribulational rapture view is not an essential doctrine of Dispensationalism even though most dispensationalists believe it.

Essentials of Dispensationalism

Dispensational scholars have emphasized certain beliefs as most essential to this system. Charles Ryrie (1925-2016), for example, presented a *sine qua non* (i.e. essential conditions) of Dispensationalism that involved three areas: (1) a distinction between Israel and the church; (2) a hermeneutic of "literal interpretation" to all areas of scripture including Old Testament prophecies; and (3) the glory of God as the underlying purpose of God in history.

Another dispensationalist, John Feinberg, offered six "essentials" of Dispensationalism: (1) multiple senses of terms like "Jew" and "seed of Abraham; (2) a hermeneutic in which the New Testament reaffirms and does not reinterpret the Old Testament; (3) unconditional promises to national Israel in the Old Testament must be fulfilled with national Israel; (4) a distinctive future for Israel; (5) the church as a distinctive organism; and (6) a philosophy of history in which history is the gradual implementation and outworking of the kingdom of God.

The lists from Ryrie and Feinberg show that Dispensationalism is primarily about a hermeneutic for Bible interpretation, especially involving Old Testament prophecies concerning ethnic/national Israel. And it involves certain beliefs concerning Israel and the church.

Hermeneutics

Concerning Bible interpretation, dispensationalists promote what they call a “consistent literal” or “grammatical-historical” hermeneutic to the Bible. The word “literal” is disputed and dispensationalists acknowledge other systems are often literal too with their interpretations. But by this they mean that all Bible passages, including Old Testament prophetic sections and the Book of Revelation, should be consistently understood according to their grammatical, historical, and genre contexts. Doing so affirms the significance of ethnic/national Israel in God’s purposes and that the church and Israel are distinct.

Also concerning hermeneutics, Dispensationalism holds that the New Testament builds upon the meaning of the Old Testament. But the New Testament does not transcend or reinterpret Old Testament passages or the storyline that began in the Old Testament. Thus, there is storyline continuity between Old Testament expectations and New Testament fulfillments over the course of Jesus’ two comings. In addition, Dispensationalism acknowledges the existence of types and typological connections in the Bible, but it does not believe types remove or transcend the significance of ethnic/national Israel in the Bible’s storyline. Also, the fact that Jesus is the ultimate Israelite does not mean that promises to the corporate entity of Israel will not be fulfilled as stated. Dispensationalism affirms that Jesus is the ultimate Israelite who will save and restore ethnic/national Israel and bring blessings to the Gentiles (see [Isa. 49:3-6](#)). An initial phase of this is occurring in the church today, while a final fulfillment will occur in Jesus’ earthly kingdom after the second coming.

Theological Beliefs

Fulfillment of All Aspects of the Covenants of Promise

Most Christian theological systems affirm that God’s covenant promises will be fulfilled and that this occurs through Jesus. Dispensationalism, though, affirms that all spiritual, physical, and national promises contained in the covenants of promise (i.e. Abrahamic, Davidic, New) must be fulfilled literally. This includes promises concerning Israel, the nations, and land. Some promises were fulfilled with Jesus’ first coming, while others await Jesus’s second coming. So not only must spiritual blessings occur such as forgiveness of sins, salvation, Jew-Gentile unity, and the indwelling Holy Spirit, but physical promises involving nations, land, culture, and agriculture, etc., must be fulfilled literally as well. Also, promises to ethnic/national Israel must be fulfilled with ethnic/national Israel. While certain spiritual blessings associated with these covenants are participated in or partially fulfilled with the church, the full scope of covenant blessings, including physical, land, and national blessings for Israel await Jesus’ return and kingdom.

Continuing Significance of Ethnic/National Israel

Dispensationalism asserts that ethnic/national Israel remains significant in God’s purposes and will be so in the future. In addition to saving a remnant of believing Israel in this age, God will save and restore ethnic/national Israel as a whole in the future (see [Rom. 11:26](#)). Just as Israel as a whole rejected Jesus at His first coming (see [Luke 19:41-44](#)) Israel as a corporate entity will believe in Jesus around the time of His second coming to earth (see [Matt. 23:39](#); [Rom. 11:26-27](#)). The nation that received covenant curses for disobedience will also receive covenant blessings for belief and obedience (see [Deut. 30:1-10](#)). This will lead to a reversal of the “times of the Gentiles” in which Gentile powers dominate Israel and its land (see [Luke 21:24](#)), and it will lead to greater blessings for the world (see [Rom. 11:12, 15](#)). Dispensationalism believes that Israel will have a functional role to the nations when Jesus rules the nations at His return to earth (see [Isa. 2:2-4](#); [Matt. 25:31](#)).

Church a New Testament Entity

Dispensationalism affirms that God has always had a people throughout history, but the church is a New Testament entity that began in the Book of Acts. The church did not exist in the Old Testament but is a New Testament organism linked with the arrival of Jesus the Messiah and the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit. While God has always had a “people” from ancient times, it is Jesus and the Holy Spirit’s ministry that usher in the era of the church. These are New Testament, not Old Testament realities. The church also has a specific structure (elders, deacons, etc.) and function (the Great Commission) that is fitted specifically for this age before Jesus’ return to earth.

Distinction between Israel and Church

Dispensationalism maintains a distinction between Israel and the church. Israel is an ethnic/national entity that has roots back to Abraham (see [Gen. 12:2-3](#)), while the church is a New Testament entity.

In addition to Israel’s being God’s vehicle for Scripture and the Messiah, Dispensationalists hold that the nation is intended to bring world blessings (see [Gen. 12:2-3](#)). This occurs both in this age, with Israel in unbelief, and in the future when Israel as a whole believes in Jesus (see [Rom. 11:12, 15, 26](#)).

On the other hand, the church of this age is a multi-ethnic entity with a government structure and mission fitted for worldwide gospel proclamation before Jesus returns. When Jesus comes again to establish His kingdom the church will reign with Jesus on the earth (see [Rev. 2:26-27](#); [5:10](#)).

The Israel-church distinction means that promises and covenants made with Israel cannot find a complete fulfillment with the church since the church is not Israel, and God must fulfill His promises with the group to whom the promises originally were made (i.e. ethnic/national Israel). Some dispensationalists believe no promises to Israel find fulfillment in the church today (Classical Dispensationalists), while others believe there is a partial fulfillment of some covenant promises with the church (Progressive Dispensationalists). But all dispensationalists believe the complete fulfillment of Old Testament promises will occur in the future when Israel is saved and restored.

Futurism

Dispensationalism is strongly connected to futurism. Futurism is the view that major portions of Bible prophecy await future fulfillment from our current standpoint in history. This includes [Daniel 9:27](#), much of the Olivet Discourse ([Matthew 24-25](#); [Mark 13](#); [Luke 21](#)), and [Revelation 6–22:5](#). Particularly significant to Dispensationalism is the belief that the seventieth week of [Daniel 9:27](#) will occur in the future. This allegedly involves a coming seven-year period that includes the activity of an antichrist figure who does an abomination event in the Jewish temple. Dispensationalists believe that several events described in Jesus’ Olivet Discourse and [Revelation 6-19](#) correspond to the events explained in [Daniel 9:27](#).

Premillennialism

All dispensationalists hold to premillennialism and the view that that the thousand-year reign (i.e. millennium) of [Revelation 20:1-6](#) is a future earthly kingdom that follows the second coming of Jesus. This millennium is viewed as the fulfillment of various kingdom passages in the Old Testament (see [Isaiah 9; 11](#); [Zechariah 14](#)). While not all premillennialists are dispensationalists, all dispensationalists are premillennialists. What often distinguishes dispensational premillennialists from non-dispensational premillennialists is the dispensational belief that Israel will be restored as a nation with a functional role of leadership and service to other nations during the coming millennial kingdom.

Significance of Geo-Political Nations in Future

In addition to affirming a future significance for ethnic/national Israel, Dispensationalism asserts that God has a future purpose for geo-political nations in the coming earthly kingdom (see [Isa. 19:16-25](#); [Zech. 14](#)). Thus, God’s future purposes involve both saved individuals and nations (see [Rev. 21:24, 26](#)). Egypt, for example, is featured as having a significant role in the coming kingdom of God according to passages like [Isaiah 19:16-25](#) and [Zechariah 14](#). Dispensationalists believe the nation Israel will have a functional role of leadership and service to these nations in the future. One implication of this dispensational view is that the church of this age is not the final era of God’s plans on earth. A coming rule of Jesus over the nations and Israel will occur after this age. Most dispensationalists believe the church of this age will rule with Jesus over the nations at this time (see [Rev. 2:26-27](#); [3:21](#)).

Developments Within Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism has developed from the time of Darby until today. Three general eras or forms of Dispensationalism have been recognized: (1) Classical or Traditional Dispensationalism (1830-1940s); (2) Revised Dispensationalism (1950s-1986); and (3) Progressive Dispensationalism (1986-present). These three eras or forms are united by belief in a future for ethnic/national Israel and a distinction between Israel and the church. The latter two—Revised and Progressive—present more continuity between Israel and the church than that found with Classical/Traditional Dispensationalism.

As mentioned earlier, Dispensationalism involves beliefs that are foundational to the system. But there also are beliefs that are more secondary. The variations within Dispensationalism involve secondary matters that are not at the heart of the system. One example is the applicability of the Sermon on the Mount for this age. Classical/Traditional Dispensationalism sometimes asserted that the Sermon on the Mount applied only to the future millennial kingdom. Revised and Progressive Dispensationalists, however, affirmed that the Sermon on the Mount applies to the church today. Another issue involves the relationship of the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. Classical/Traditional Dispensationalism sometimes claimed these two kingdoms were different—the former referring to God’s general rule over the universe, the latter referring to the Messiah’s coming kingdom upon the earth. But Revised and Progressive Dispensationalism have stated that kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven refer to the same thing. Early Classical and Traditional Dispensationalism argued that there are two peoples of God—one with an earthly destiny and the other with a heavenly destiny. Revised and Progressive Dispensationalism assert that all believers of all ages share the same destiny on a restored earth. To use another example, Progressive Dispensationalism breaks from both Classical and Revised Dispensationalism by affirming that there is real covenant fulfillment (not just application) of the covenants of promise (Abrahamic, Davidic, New) to the church.

FURTHER READING

- Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock. *Progressive Dispensationalism*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1993.
- Ryrie, Charles C. *Dispensationalism*. Charles C. Ryrie. 1995.
- Saucy, Robert. L. *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.
- Vlach, Michael J. *Dispensationalism: Essential Beliefs and Common Myths*. Los Angeles: Theological Studies Press, 2017.
- Watson, William C. *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism*. Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015.

This essay is part of the Concise Theology series. All views expressed in this essay are those of the author. This essay is freely available under Creative Commons License with Attribution-ShareAlike, allowing users to share it in other mediums/formats and adapt/translate the content as long as an attribution link, indication of changes, and the same Creative Commons License applies to that material. If you are interested in translating our content or are interested in joining our community of translators, [please reach out to us](#).

This work is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](#) 