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*Discovering Dispensationalism:
Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-First Century*

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A Misunderstood Theology

The following are real statements by real people that appeared on social media in early 2020. The only things altered are personal names.¹

- Dan Allis: “Dispensationalism: Junk theology for those with no knowledge of ancient history or terms and phrases of the day, and the willingness to simply ignore John’s direct statements that these events were soon to come.”
- Christopher Hill: “Utterly false and laughable. Dispensationalism is a novelty for the untutored. It has done horrible damage and that is why it is revised every few years. Shocking to find a young person gripped in it. You need better peers.”
- Amy Marshall: “American churchianity, led by dispensationalism, is utterly oblivious to the fact that [Israel] is a nation guilty of war crimes and atrocities just like every other. Not a good look for the church. I don’t believe a single good thing has ever come out of dispensationalism.”
- Lori Lancer: “Dispensationalism is the [the Jesuits’] creation to lead the gullible away from the Reformed emphasis on the pope being the antichrist....Dispensationalism appeared with the printing of the Scofield Bible in 1909 and Presbyterians were not the first converts. Then, as now, Presbyterians are well educated.”

Such comments are, unfortunately, not uncommon. In fact, many more can be given as these were taken from a single post on a single day that started with five simple words: “Dispensationalism advances the Reformed Legacy.”² Dispensationalists encounter such disparaging remarks as often as racecar drivers do against those who suppose NASCAR is not a sport (it certainly is!). These misguided, uninformed assertions traverse the dialectical-landscape from popular level discussions on social media to academic publications, whether scholarly books or journal articles.³

In the world of academia, published rhetoric hurled at dispensational thought has been fueled by vitriol matched only by the most extreme Trump critic. Common descriptions of dispensational thought include “recent invention,” “anti-intellectual,” “antinomian,” “false gospel of prosperity,” “oppressive,”

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¹ Taken from the Facebook thread, “Dispensationalism advances the Reformed Legacy” by Ian Alexander Hicks, 1/7/2020.

² Though no contributors or editors of the book *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2017) were behind the initial post, the book, nevertheless, was the obvious motivation behind the statement and subsequent comments.

³ There is hardly a doubt that mainline academic Christian publishing houses marginalize dispensational scholarship in favor of traditionally Reformed-covenantal authors. Indeed, the largescale dismissal of academic dispensational scholarship among notable Christian publishers provided the main impetus for establishing SCS Press. Traditional, conservative dispensational scholarship has thriving representation among academics and pastors around the world (the current book being a small example) and needs to be given fair representation by publishers.

“dangerous,” “guilty of societal neglect” and a “selfish non-concern for the world.”⁴ Ad hominem mantras like “leave behind *Left Behind*” are now the norm within the academy, intended to mock dispensationalists by calling to mind sensationalized movie scenes or doomsday novels.⁵ Remarkably, one scholar even claimed that dispensationalism is more “anti-Semitic” than replacement theology.⁶ In a stunning display of *ad hominem* pomposity, Kenneth Gentry critiqued dispensationalists for celebrating the return of Jews to Israel out of an assumed sick prophetic anticipation for their eventual “wholesale slaughter.”⁷

Another recent critic went so far not only to dismiss dispensationalism as a recent novelty, but also condemn its rapture theology as inherently and historically racist.⁸ And still another published a lengthy monograph detailing major research endeavors performed over the years on the Book of Revelation and splattered dismissive remarks about dispensational positions along the way.⁹ The author, a respected professor of New Testament in an American seminary, presented thorough approaches reflecting history-of-religions, theological, pacifist, feminist, and even post-colonial political perspectives on Revelation. But, when it came to dispensational-premillennialism, he thought it sufficient to exclude any real treatment whatsoever. Curiously, he dismissed out of hand literal approaches to Revelation—which can be traced to the second century—as simply sensational and unwarranted.¹⁰ Picking up on the obvious lacuna, another New Testament professor in the Netherlands uncritically accepted the book’s astonishing neglect of literal millenarian perspectives, assuming that “no scholarly defense of Dispensational Premillennialism exists.”¹¹

⁴ All of these inflammatory descriptions of dispensationalism can be found, but are certainly not limited to: Gary M. Burge, *Whose Land? Whose Promise?: What Christians Are Not Being Told about Israel and the Palestinians* (Cleveland: Pilgrims Press, 2013); Michael Phillips, *White Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in Dallas 1841–2001* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010); Barbara R. Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (New York: Basic Books, 2005); R. C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology: Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *House Divided: The Break Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); and John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).

⁵ E.g., Leah D. Schade and Jerry L. Sumney, *Apocalypse When?: A Guide to Interpreting and Preaching Apocalyptic Texts* (Eugene: Cascade, 2020), 26–29. Interestingly, Schade never disproves dispensational eschatology, e.g., the rapture or a literal antichrist, but discards it merely because it frightened her as a child. Even though she admits that “distorted fundamentalist end-times narratives” are what eventually led to her pursuing pastoral and professorial vocations, in the end, she resorts to suggesting dispensational theology is responsible for a host of earthly woes, including, but not limited to, “white nationalism.”

⁶ See Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. in, “Anti-Semitism and Dispensationalism,” *Modern Preterism*, 2011, https://www.preteristarchive.com/2011_gentry_anti-semitism-anddispensationalism/.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Nathaniel P. Grimes, “The Racial Ideology of Rapture,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 211–21. For a critical interaction and counter to Grimes’s article, see Cory M. Marsh, “The Rapture: Cosmic Segregation or Antidote for Oppression? A Critical Response to the ‘Racial Ideology of Rapture,’” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology*, forthcoming.

⁹ Russell S. Morton, *Recent Research on Revelation*, RRBS 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014). See also Morton’s prior monograph, *One upon the Throne and the Lamb: A Tradition Historical/Theological Analysis of Revelation 4–5*, SBL 11 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

¹⁰ See Morton, *Recent Research on Revelation*, 7, 12, 156.

¹¹ See Alexander E. Stewart’s review on *Recent Research* in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (September 2015): 658. This assumption is quite remarkable given the overwhelming amount of scholarly literature produced by dispensationalists over the years concerning Revelation—so much so, that dispensationalists have been relentlessly critiqued for emphasizing the Book of Revelation to the extent they have! (e.g., the futurist school of interpretation, a literal understanding of Rev 20’s millennial passage, literal 144k Jews in Rev 7, and the weighty indirect references throughout the book of the pretrib rapture). Perhaps the best scholarly commentary on the Book of Revelation by a premillennial-dispensationalist is Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation: An Exegetical Commentary*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1992).

The ignorance of dispensational thought by these newer scholars is not surprising as the previous generation of critical scholarship set the bar high for such dismissals. One need not look any further than Stanley Grenz's and Roger Olson's critical survey *20th Century Theology* that discusses punctuated positions of eschatology, not through the contributions of noted twentieth century futurist thinkers McClain, Walvoord, or Pentecost, but through German existentialist and higher critics Bultmann, Moltmann, and Pannenberg.¹² One fleeting remark concerning dispensational thought appears in Grenz and Olson, placing it within a "retreating fortress of anti-intellectual emotion" and juxtaposing it with the charismatic movement.¹³ In light of such dismissals, it is certainly hopeful that some critics of dispensationalism, such as Professor of New Testament and Greek at Southeastern Baptist Seminary Benjamin Merkle, chose to lend a more fair and accurate voice, understanding that the premillennial view of Revelation 20, "has many able defenders both past and present and is considered a theologically acceptable interpretation for evangelical Christians."¹⁴

The portrait of dispensational thought in the popular or non-academic world fares no better. If unsure, the social media comments earlier should remove any doubt. A dispensationalist who speaks of distinctions such as that between Israel and the church or who advocates for an imminent rapture of the church will not go long before enduring erroneous mantras made popular by lay-critics: Nobody before Darby ever held to such beliefs! Dispensationalism was invented in the nineteenth century! Dispensationalism only cares about their prophecy charts! Indeed, if ever there was a boogeyman in Christian theology, dispensationalism is it. If such discussions and comments are indicators of the current milieu regarding dispensational thought, a corrective is desperately needed for age-old misconceptions; hence this book, *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing Dispensational Thought from the First to Twenty-First Century*.

Our Contribution to the Discussion

Of course, many worthwhile treatments explaining or defending dispensationalism exist, and have for some time. Indeed, dispensational scholarship enjoys a rich literary heritage.¹⁵ In this sense, the current volume merely adds to an on-going discussion while gratefully acknowledging those "dispensational giants"

¹² Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

¹⁴ Benjamin L. Merkle and W. Tyler Krug, "Hermeneutical Challenges for a Premillennial Interpretation of Revelation 20," *Evangelical Quarterly* 86, no.3 (2014):210. See also 210, n. 2 where Merkle and Krug offer warranted push-back on Craig Blomberg's supposed "pointed challenges to premillennialism."

¹⁵ While space limits the listing of the various treatments on dispensationalism produced the past few centuries, several bibliographic essays on dispensationalism published over the years do exist for the public and are available for the interested reader. Several classics and important monographs that deserve mention here are: Erich Sauer, *From Eternity to Eternity: An Outline of the Divine Purposes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954); Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Dale S. Dewitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During the Twentieth Century: Theological Development and Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002); Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* rev. exp (Chicago: Moody, 2007); Paul Richard Wilkinson, *For Zion's Sake: Christian Zionism and the Role of John Nelson Darby* SEHT (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007); R. Todd Magnum, *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936 to 1944*, SEHT (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2007); and William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth Century and Eighteenth Century English Apocalypticism* (Silverton: Lampion, 2015).

of the past and present who have and continue to equip both the Church and Academy through consistent literal hermeneutics, inductive exegesis, and biblical theology.¹⁶

Yet, in another sense, this book does break new ground. As far as we are aware, never before has a single dispensational book contained the eclectic cadre of contributors as does this one, that is, highly credentialed experts with diverse backgrounds from around the world who might otherwise (and do!) disagree with one another. Yet, they each remain united in their commitment to help readers discover the impressive historical legacy of dispensational thought. Primary voices from Traditional, Mid-Acts, Progressive, and even Brethren perspectives are represented in this volume, each having been sought out by myself and my co-editor James Fazio due to their respective expertise.

These scholars were tasked to give a firsthand historical accounting of dispensational ideas as they developed from the NT through the Patristics, into the Middle Ages and eras surrounding the Reformation, to Darby's monumental contribution, and landing on how that affected—and continues to affect—American evangelicalism today. The various authors of this project are active professors, historians, biographers, and theologians who have impressive publishing pedigree and who teach at the college and seminary levels. Like its predecessor *Forged From Reformation: How Dispensational Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy* (El Cajon: SCS Press, 2017), *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-first Century* is a first in its bold, yet responsibly demonstrated claims.¹⁷

Our Goal

Important caveats must be stated. That is, it is helpful here to clarify what this book does *not* set out to do. First, the volume does not claim a monopoly or complete ownership of ideas customary to dispensationalism, for example, the premillennial return of Christ or grammatical-historical hermeneutic. There have been numerous positions throughout history shared by dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists alike, barring wholesale claims by either side. In fact, though most contributors of the book consider themselves “dispensationalists,” some do not. Rather, the goal to which each author has committed is an honest *historical* appraisal of theological ideas within a specific era in church history that reflect distinct dispensational beliefs. In other words, this book seeks to trace historically where and when these ideas first emerged and how they found a home within what would later be termed “dispensationalism.” As such, no claim is made that dispensationalism *as a system* is as old as the New Testament or even that certain figures in church history, the Apostolic Fathers for instance, considered themselves to be “dispensationalists” in the modern sense of the term. Like “covenant theology” or “covenantalist,” it is well known that technical nomenclature to describe a system or person holding to a distinct pattern of beliefs, whether Reformed, Lutheran, Arminian, Calvinist, covenantal, or dispensational, did not exist until later in church history.¹⁸

¹⁶ One recent work that exposes both academic and lay audiences to current discussions within dispensational thought is Paul Miles, ed., *What is Dispensationalism?* (Wynnewood: Grace Abroad, 2019).

¹⁷ The fact that *Discovering Dispensationalism* contains multiple authors who write from their respective expertise and constituencies—ensuring a fair representation—immediately sets it apart from well-intended treatments on dispensationalism that are inevitably biased, being written by a single, non-dispensationalist author. If John Gerstner's *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, and William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Peabody: P&R, 1971) represent the most uncharitable anti-dispensational diatribes written by non-dispensationalists, better examples of examinations of dispensationalism written by non-dispensationalists are, Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Peabody: P&R, 1993), and most recently, Benjamin L. Merkle: *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theology* (Bellingham: Lexham, 2020). These latter works, while laudably charitable to a point, inevitably fall short due to their sole authorship.

¹⁸ See the helpful essay by Stephen R. Spencer, “Reformed Theology, Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism,” in Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *Integrity of Heart and Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and*

Second, this book avoids hubris declarations such as, “Dispensationalism is the system of the Bible” or that “The pure gospel is only found in dispensationalism.”¹⁹ Adherents to any theological system, including dispensationalists, need to approach their task with humility recognizing that blind spots may indeed exist in their method, and that it often takes one’s opponents rightfully to point them out. Thus, an apologetic contending for the system’s truth, value, or accuracy is not the aim either. Rather, the book is *descriptive*, not polemical, and as such, intends a more modest and realistic goal. Consequently, the aim of the volume is merely to demonstrate the historical fact that ideas that are advanced most clearly and consistently within dispensational thought existed throughout the history of the church. In other words, the dispensational system did not “invent” them; rather, it was *formed* by them. If these ideas are judged to be true or not is left to the reader’s own discernment and falls outside the scope of the volume.

Our Audience

The various academic yet accessible contributions in what follows makes the book uniquely viable for its intended dual-audience, namely, the church and the academy. Because such targets can be vague, it is helpful to narrow down our intended audience to a more personal level. *Discovering Dispensationalism* will best serve the church pastor who too often falls into “sermonizing” theology in loose categories, the inquisitive church member who hears suspect rumors about dispensational beliefs, the seminary student who is taking a course on theological systems, and the scholar seeking a well-documented resource on the history of dispensational thought. By no means excluding its value for interested lay-church groups, adoption of this volume as a textbook in Bible colleges and seminaries, however, would probably be its most suitable fit.

As such, almost a dozen leading scholars representing the entire spectrum of dispensational thought have assembled in the pages that follow. They have done so to offer a well-researched corrective on the vast sea of unqualified opinions regarding the history of dispensationalism; opinions that continue to promulgate—despite the evidence—that dispensational theology is a recent novelty with fanciful or unsubstantiated doctrines. From experts engaging primary sources vis-à-vis distinct historical periods, a

Leadership Studies in Honor Donald K. Campbell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 238–254, as well as those in John S. Fienberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson Jr.* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1988); cf. also Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity* for a useful survey of six theological systems ranging from “discontinuity” to “continuity,” none of which existed prior to the seventeenth century.

¹⁹ Ironically (and unfortunately), such audacious claims have been made by well-intended Reformed Christians who declare that Covenant Theology or even Calvinism is the gospel. A recent example is Shawn D. Wright’s essay, “Covenant Theology,” in *God’s Glory Revealed in Christ: Essays on Biblical Theology in Honor of Thomas R. Schreiner* (Nashville: B&H, 2019), 35, who dogmatically declares: “Covenant theology, then, is the gospel.” Needless to say, to equate a modernized system of theology with the gospel of salvation is stunningly irresponsible. Contrary to Wright’s claim, the biblical gospel is simply the message that Christ lived, died, and rose for underserving sinners who trust in Him for eternal life. No theological system equates with such incredible news. A system may *include* it—as both Covenant Theology and Dispensational Theology do—but no system should be conflated with the purity of the infallible gospel itself. Theological systems, as helpful they are to trace and categorize ideas, are still just that: systems. And as such, they are susceptible to error and development while God’s Word does not suffer such fallibilities. In fairness to Wright, he has clarified through personal correspondence with me that he most certainly believes and teaches the pure biblical gospel (to which, I, of course, had and have no doubt). However, his statements in the book remain as is. Indeed, the un-checked publication of Wright’s statement, which develops into another dogmatic claim that “the covenant of grace, then, is the gospel” (38), supports my earlier contention of how far some Christian publishers are willing to go in embracing Reformed-covenant theology. It is difficult to imagine a dispensationalist (a dispensational scholar or professor no less) ever declare that “Dispensationalism, then, is the gospel.” Assuredly, if it ever were to happen and be published by a respected publisher—both virtually impossible—than perhaps many of the vitriolic insults launched at dispensationalism may finally be warranted!

diachronic study is presented in the volume that traces various elements pertinent to dispensational thought from the New Testament to the present day. Numerous milestones that emerged over two millennia, which in time would be codified in the theological system known as dispensationalism, are plotted and assessed demonstrating the significance a dispensational framework has had in Christian theology.

Chapter Overview

The volume is deftly structured around three major geographies that neatly trace the development of dispensational thought as it progressed throughout the world. Such a progression begins with dispensational ideas as they originated and expanded in *the Ancient Mediterranean* (chs 1–4), matured throughout *Vintage Europe* (chs 5–8), and systematized in *Modern America* (chs 9–12). Within each geographical prong, four specific milestones are plotted that demonstrate the maturing of patterns of belief that would later be codified in the system known as dispensationalism. Wrapping up the book is a final chapter surveying dispensational thought in retrospect while offering a prospective on trajectories for future expressions of dispensationalism.

Dispensational Thought in the Ancient Mediterranean

A historical tracing of dispensational thought must begin by examining its very nomenclature. Initiating the discussion is the volume’s first chapter written by co-editor James I. Fazio of Southern California Seminary. Demystifying the term “dispensation” (*oikonomia*), Fazio offers an exegetical study of the word and concept that is both consistent to the biblical text and sensitive to the socio-historical milieu out of which the word appears. By focusing specifically on Jesus’ and the apostles’ use of “dispensation” against the backdrop of Second Temple and early Christian literature, Fazio clarifies its meaning and delimits its theological usage in a manner taking into full account the term’s historical, grammatical, and cultural contexts. Emerging from such a study are ideas pertaining to God’s administration of the earth throughout time. As the chapter unfolds, a suitable definition for “dispensation” (*oikonomia*) is given that respects each corner of its biblical and contemporaneous usage: “A dispensation is an administration of a household, whereby a steward is appointed to manage his master’s goods in order to yield a surplus, for which he will ultimately be judged according to his faithfulness as a steward.” From here, the groundwork is laid upon which each succeeding chapter and historical period develops in the history of dispensational thought.

The period immediately following the NT is tenuous at best. The complexities of patristic theology are due to the array of eclectic voices from church fathers still coming to grips with the crucified Jewish Messiah and His gospel. An unfortunate result is that this critical period—the second century—is often neglected in relation to the development of theology, especially as it relates to later theological systems. Bridging the gap, Paul Hartog of Faith Baptist Bible College and Seminary contributes a unique essay in chapter two by bringing into conversation the works of two prominent patristic scholars, one dispensational (Larry Crutchfield) the other non-dispensational (Charles Hill), both of whom hold differing conclusions concerning early chiliasm (or premillennial eschatology). Maintaining a close examination of these scholars—coupled with his own balanced interaction with primary sources—Hartog demonstrates that hermeneutics is the perennial issue at play. Particularly relevant to the discussion is that interpretive approaches from this early period which upheld a *Jewish* understanding of the OT were anything but novel. Indeed, such approaches led to what would later be accepted as premillennialism, the end-times position customary to dispensational thought.

In chapter three, Jeremiah Mutie of Southern California Seminary picks up where Hartog’s analysis ends by examining nascent dispensational ideas within the period known as the Nicene era, the third and

fourth centuries. The transition from the pre-Nicene to Nicene age marked significant changes in the area of biblical hermeneutics, most notably exhibited by the contrast of consistent literal methods with those adopting allegorical approaches to Scripture. As a result, rudimentary forms of “dispensational eschatology” began to wane in this rich period even more so as errant groups began to adopt earlier forms of chiliasm or premillennial eschatology. However, Mutie challenges the perception that with the onset of allegorizing Scripture during this era ideas resulting from a literal approach simply disappeared. As the chapter unfolds, enough evidence is recovered from Nicene writers that suggests pockets of (what is now called) dispensationalism continued to flourish and develop, despite the fanciful interpretations offered by allegorizers or positions appropriated by fringe groups. Perhaps the most surprising discovery from Mutie’s analysis is the ironic fact that even some of the leading allegorists could not completely detach themselves from a “dispensational literalism” on various points of eschatology.

Following the Nicene era was the vast epoch within Church history spanning the fifth to fifteenth centuries, known as the Medieval period. While historians tend to focus on seismic shifts that occurred during this time, fell swoops have caused scholars to overlook subtle, yet important, theological developments that took place. In chapter four, Colorado Christian University’s William Watson takes a scalpel to surviving medieval documents and provides a gripping analysis of the development of dispensational thought from this nebulous period of history. By focusing on dispensational ideas spanning both the Late Antiquity and Late Medieval centuries, Watson demonstrates that, contrary to popular mantras mistakenly tagging dispensationalism as an entirely modern-era invention, pervasive “proto-dispensational elements” were certainly present and developing during these periods. Included in Watson’s findings are medieval thinkers who divided history into distinct periods in which God deals with humanity, a belief in a personal and future Antichrist, a literal rapture of God’s people, and a future restoration of the Jewish nation—all of which resulted from a growing remnant of literal hermeneutic practitioners. Employing a keen eye to primary sources, Watson convincingly shows that while such positions may not neatly reflect those of later dispensationalists, they do represent a tenor much closer to modern dispensationalism than to other eschatological schemes promoted throughout history.

Dispensational Thought in Vintage Europe

Chapter five, co-written by H. Wayne House of Faith International University and James I. Fazio of Southern California Seminary, provides the essential bridge connecting the late Medieval period to the Puritan age by narrowing in on the Reformation era nestled between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. While all agree that the Protestant Reformation marked a revolution in Christian thought, not all are aware that it provided the scaffolding for the systemization of dispensational ideas that would emerge in the centuries that followed. One of the highlights brought to the fore by House and Fazio is that the Reformers’ approach to Christian doctrine broke from a millennium of ecclesiastical tradition that was tenuously rooted in apostolic succession. Moreover, the renaissance that surrounded this era in the arts, architecture, and sciences, was manifest in equal measure in the Christian Church—most notably witnessed by a return to the original biblical languages. Convicted by the perspicuity of Scripture by implementing a principle of literal interpretation released the Reformers from the shackles of Papal domination that constrained the Church’s reception of biblical doctrine. Though it would take centuries for the revolution to reach full maturation, House and Fazio suggest the return to a reading of the Old and New Testaments in the original languages, rather than a recitation of Latin Roman Catholic Dogma, laid the foundation for the exegetical renaissance that would ultimately result in the development of a cohesive and systematic formulation of dispensational thought.

One of the most obscure periods of dispensational development within Church history are the centuries immediately following the Reformation and preceding the birth of J. N. Darby. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are often overshadowed by puritan reforms on one end and revivalist fervor on the

other. Yet within this sliver of two hundred years critical developments took place that helped clarify previous medieval and reformation scholarship vis-à-vis national Israel and its continuance as a people of God. In chapter six, Mark A. Snoeberger of Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary narrows in on thinkers within the two hundred years preceding Darby who maintained clear instances of distinction between Israel and the Church, or at bare minimum, distinctions for Israel within the Church—distinctives of dispensationalism since its earliest expressions. By examining extant primary sources, Snoeberger draws conclusions suggesting many from the incapacious period considered national Israel to be a “prominent, continuing, ethnic, and earthy people of God” despite there being no such national state at the time. The chapter demonstrates beyond any doubt that, while dispensationalism would not begin to be systematized until the nineteenth century, chief rudiments of dispensational theology precede the modern era by centuries.

There is perhaps no bigger name attached to dispensational thought than John Nelson Darby. Many consider this nineteenth century native Englishman to be the “father of modern dispensationalism.” Indeed, his notoriety merited a chapter unto himself in the current volume, as Darby signals a crucial era in the development of dispensational theology and its formation to an actual system. But, the epitaph on the tombstone of this enigmatic figure in Dorset reads a phrase borrowed from the apostle Paul: “As unknown and well known.” Fittingly, there is as much controversy as there is confusion surrounding the Brethren leader and his impact on dispensationalism. Into this puzzlement, noted Darby-biographer and critic Max Weremchuk steps in and contributes this volume’s chapter seven detailing Darby’s life and influences that eventually led to his “reducing the theological chaos to a semblance of order.” Despite the abundance of errant opinions concerning Darby, the chapter demonstrates that he did not invent any one doctrine of dispensationalism, for example, the notion of a pretribulational rapture or distinct, divine programs for Israel and the Church. Rather, he more clearly developed ideas that had been promulgated throughout Church history, a fact to which the book’s previous chapters testify. Not shying away from Darby’s over-ambitious drive that inevitably led to discord within his own constituencies, Weremchuk offers a fresh analysis from recently discovered first-hand (never before published) sources, of this “unknown and well known” thinker—a giant who influenced much of later evangelicalism by giving direction to modern expressions of dispensational thought.

Dispensational Thought in Modern America

Chapter eight, written by Shepherds Theological Seminary’s Larry D. Pettigrew, represents a crucial pivot not only in the book, but also in the development of dispensationalism. By offering a historical appraisal of nineteenth century evangelicalism, Pettigrew traces the influences of Darby and previous European forms of dispensational thought across the Atlantic to the U.S. through the American Bible Conference movement. Explosive in evangelical fervor during a time when war and slavery cast their large shadows, the Bible conference movement gave rise to North America’s most definitive expressions of dispensational theology. The chapter documents that in addition to other factors, Darby’s multiple visits to North America between 1862 and 1877 played a key role in introducing new audiences to prophecy conferences. In turn, these conferences ignited scores of church-revivalists to age-old premillennialism, a passion for pre-tribulational rapture doctrine, as well as the belief in successive theological arrangements of God’s dealings with man leading to a future kingdom under Christ. Such positions were the fruit of an inductive approach to Scripture, the very basis of dispensationalism, that leaders of the Bible conference movements promoted. “For this reason,” notes Pettigrew, “the emergence and effect of the American Bible Conference Movement deserves special recognition for its role in the development of dispensational thought.”

The fruit borne from the nineteenth century Bible conferences developed into what chapter nine calls the “golden years” of American dispensationalism. This golden era encapsulated much of the twentieth

century and featured such luminaries as C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Alva McClain, John Walvoord, and Charles Ryrie, all of whom emerged from Reformed traditions. Throughout the chapter, Tommy Ice of Calvary University and the Pre-Trib Research Center traces the Calvinistic heritage of American dispensational thought, correcting the mistaken notion that dispensationalism and Calvinism represent polar opposites. Rather, continuity exists between the two, not only by the virtually exclusive Calvinist adherents of early dispensationalism, but also by the system's theological emphasis on God's sovereignty. As Ice contends: "Dispensationalism is a theology about what God is doing through His plan for history and beyond." In light of such historic roots, the chapter surveys dispensational thought as advanced during its most formative years in evangelical history, 1900–1970. Rejecting notions of "novelty," Ice persuasively demonstrates the Reformed heritage of dispensationalism as the system continued to develop its eschatology through a literal hermeneutic, resulting in positions considered more biblical than rival systems constraining God's plan for history in terms of personal salvation. As the chapter documents, the "golden years" of traditional, dispensational-premillennialism was advanced by a driven crop of young scholars, many of whom cut their teeth at Dallas Seminary, who made a sizable impact disseminating dispensational thought throughout both the Church and the Academy.

In addition to the most definitive expression of dispensational thought that arose during the "golden years" of American dispensationalism, another set of thinkers also began to rise who have not enjoyed such prominence. In fact, they have been among the most marginalized groups within the dispensational tradition, despite their legitimate place within its history. Contempt envelopes outside-labels and modifiers—such as, "hyper- "or "ultra- "or "extreme-—given to these sincere yet often misunderstood dispensationalists. Against this backdrop, chapter ten marks an unprecedented effort in the history of modern dispensational scholarship by placing alongside other more familiar expressions of dispensationalism, a development of the system too often discarded. To this, Phillip J. Long of Grace Christian University offers a first-hand examination and corrective to what is properly called Mid-Acts Dispensationalism. Expanding on the works of J. C. O'Hair, Cornelius R. Stam, and Charles F. Baker, Long provides a historical analysis of the Mid-Acts tradition and addresses questions raised by these thinkers that are often assumed without critique. Situating the church's birth after Pentecost and the questioning (or rejection) of water baptism for believers today are among the more controversial positions of Mid-Acts dispensationalists. These and other views are addressed and clarified as the chapter unfolds from the birth of "extreme" dispensationalism tied to E. W. Bullinger to its more tempered and contemporary expressions of the Mid-Acts or "grace theology" advanced by Dale Dewitt and the Grace Movement. Though Mid-Acts dispensationalism is often disparaged, perhaps with some good reason, Long rightly concludes: "Nevertheless, it serves as an undeniable example of the development of dispensational thinking in America which continues to this day." As such, Long's essay is a welcomed contribution to the volume.

Chapter eleven serves as the book's final historical examination of dispensational thought, bringing the reader from the close of the twentieth to current state of affairs in the twenty-first century. In this final chapter, Dallas Theological Seminary's Darrel L. Bock offers an intimate, first-hand analysis of a movement that serves as the most recent form of dispensationalism, one that is maintaining a sizeable impact in the twenty-first century: Progressive Dispensationalism. Offering fresh updates to his widely influential *JETS* essay, "Why I am a Dispensationalist with a Little 'd,'" Bock traces the birth and development of progressive dispensationalism and offers comparisons and contrasts to more traditional forms of dispensational thought along the way. Hermeneutical methods familiar to previous expressions of dispensationalism are challenged as are formerly tightly held distinctions such as the arrangement of individual dispensations, and the relationships between Israel, the church, and the Kingdom of God. Bock, himself a principle founder of the progressive movement, contends that the richness of the dispensational tradition is that it is anything but monolithic, a historical fact the various expressions throughout the volume demonstrate. By tracing the history and clarifying the core tenets of this progressive "sub-tradition" within dispensationalism, the

chapter subtly underscores the plenteous legacy of dispensational thought—a tradition driven to advance the gospel of Christ and knowledge of Scripture since the days of the apostles to the current era of Christianity.

A Corrective on an Age-Old Misconception

The chapters making up the volume’s DNA clarify that dispensational thought is not as recent as commonly assumed. Moreover, the essays collectively demonstrate that dispensational theology subsumes various strands of doctrine that, while including eschatology, is certainly not limited to it. Hermeneutics, ecclesiology, Isrealology, and biblical history are just some of the subjects revolving around end-times themes that appear throughout the book. Seen in this light, it is odd that scholars, such as John Collins, would continue to propagate the misconception that, “The main apocalyptic tradition in modern America is pre-millennial dispensationalism, which is based on a system formulated by John Nelson Darby.”²⁰ In actuality, the ideas for which Darby would become most known pre-date him by hundreds of years. Premillennialism can be traced to the ante-Nicene Fathers while literal hermeneutics and a future restoration for ethnic Israel enjoyed advocacy throughout the medieval and enlightenment periods leading up to Darby. In other words, contrary to Collins and others, the dispensational scheme was not formulated by Darby; it merely continued *through him* as it developed into its most definitive expressions after him.

Additionally, as this volume attempts to demonstrate, dispensational thought is not a “continual attempt to identify and decode proof-texts” nor a “reductive variant of apocalypticism” that is “mainly preoccupied with the signs of the end.”²¹ Rather, dispensational theology has shown itself to be a diachronic biblical theology that views God manifesting Himself progressively throughout Scripture’s storyline in varied ways while continually bringing glory to Himself. While there will continue to be those who vilify dispensationalism as “irrational superstition” propagated by “smugly self-congratulatory” political conservatives who refuse scientific advances²² the trajectory of scholarship *within* dispensational thought is remarkably more advanced and inclusive to the academic guild. By its eclectic cadre of scholars representing the entire spectrum of dispensationalism and beyond, this volume is merely the most recent contribution to correcting outdated misconceptions. Ultimately, as the book sets out to demonstrate, dispensationalism did not appear in a vacuum or as the brainchild of any one individual. Its history of ideas can be traced with incredible precision from the twenty-first century back to the first-century and vice versa.

Conclusion

Though our sincere prayer is that the book helps establish the historical development, correct misunderstandings, and clarify mischaracterizations of dispensationalism, our greater desire is that it brings honor and glory to “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). Of course, critics are anticipated (what good book isn’t worth critiquing?). Yet, before conclusions are drawn, we trust they will first take into account the rigorous historical research fueled by a love for truth shared by each of our esteemed contributors. And, most certainly, we hope for any challenges to be marked by irenic, collegial dialogue befitting of Christian scholarship.

As one of our distinguished authors rightly pointed out, “Traditions can be of value as they dialogue with each other and correct each other’s blind spots. That only can happen when traditions are

²⁰ John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 355.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 356.

²² *Ibid.*

properly understood.”²³ Such is the aim of *Discovering Dispensationalism: Tracing the Development of Dispensational Thought from the First to the Twenty-first Century*. With that, I close this introduction and commend to the reader the chapters that follow, trusting God is glorified by our efforts. Perhaps no more fitting send-off can compare to Paul who eloquently declared: “Whether you eat or drink—whatever you do [even research!]-do all to the glory of God.” (1 Cor 10:31).

—Cory M. Marsh, Ph.D. (candidate).

²³ Darrel L. Bock, “Further Internal Developments: The Progressive Movement (1980-present),” *Discovering Dispensationalism*, forthcoming.