

Dispensational theology refers to the unified teachings of [Dispensationalism](#) that address what other views teach as divergent theologies in the [Old Testament](#) and [New Testament](#). Its name reflects a view that biblical history is best understood as a series of dispensations, or separated time-periods, in the Bible.

Each dispensation is said to represent a different way in which God deals with man. Some writers also believe that it also involves a different testing of Man. "These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God's method of dealing with mankind, in respect to two questions: of sin, and of man's responsibility," explained [C. I. Scofield](#). "Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure in every dispensation."

Seven dispensational periods

Dispensationalism seeks to address what many see as opposing theologies between the [Old Testament](#) and [New Testament](#). Its name comes from the fact that it sees biblical history as best understood in light of a series of dispensations in the Bible. Most dispensationalists cite seven dispensations although this is not a critical or foundational factor to the theology:

- the dispensation of [innocence](#) (Gen 1:1–3:7), prior to Adam's [fall](#),
- of [conscience](#) (Gen 3:8–8:22), Adam to Noah,
- of [government](#) (Gen 9:1–11:32), Noah to Abraham,
- of [patriarchal](#) rule (Gen 12:1–Exod 19:25), Abraham to Moses,
- of the [Mosaic Law](#) (Exod 20:1–Acts 2:4), Moses to Christ,
- of [grace](#) (Acts 2:4–Rev 20:3—except for [Hyperdispensationalists](#) and [Ultradispensationalists](#)), the current church age, and
- of a literal, earthly 1,000-year [Millennial](#) Kingdom that has yet to come but soon will (Rev 20:4–20:6).

[John Nelson Darby](#) did not consider the [Garden of Eden](#) to represent a dispensation, and listed only six.

Each one of these dispensations is said to represent a different way in which God deals with man, specifically a different test for man. "These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God's method of dealing with mankind, in respect to two questions: of sin, and of man's responsibility," explained C. I. Scofield. "Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure in every dispensation."

Viewing the flow of biblical history as a series of "dispensations" may be seen in some works that predate Darby's dispensationalism. [Joachim of Fiore](#) proposed that human history would be divided into the [three ages](#) of the [Father](#), [Son](#), and [Holy Spirit](#). The term "dispensation" is drawn from [Calvinist](#) theology, as in the [Westminster Confession](#), to describe the different forms of divine worship and law practiced in Judaism and Christianity. Some writers, such as *L'Économie Divine* by [Pierre Poiret](#) (1646–1719), listed multiple dispensations. However, these earlier works did not include the unique testing/failure motif described by Scofield or any hint of the four underlying tenets of classic dispensationalism listed below.

Basic tenets of dispensationalism

Progressive revelation

One of the most important underlying theological concepts for dispensationalists is progressive revelation. While some nondispensationalists start with progressive revelation in the New Testament and refer this revelation back into the Old Testament, dispensationalists begin with progressive revelation in the Old Testament and read forward in a historical sense. Therefore there is an emphasis on discontinuity as seen in Scripture. Biblical covenants are intricately tied to the dispensations. When these Biblical covenants are

compared and contrasted, the result is a historical ordering of different dispensations. Also with regard to the different Biblical covenant promises, dispensationalists place more emphasis on to whom these promises were written, the original recipients. This has led to certain fundamental dispensational beliefs, such as a distinction between Israel and the church.

Historical-grammatical interpretation

Another important theological concept is the emphasis on what is referred to as the historical-grammatical method of interpretation. This is often popularly referred to as the "literal" interpretation of Scripture. Just as it is with progressive revelation, the historical-grammatical method is not a concept or practice that is exclusive to dispensationalists. However, a dispensationalist distinctive is created when the historical-grammatical method of interpretation is closely coupled with an emphasis on progressive revelation along with the historical development of the covenants in Scripture.

Distinction between Israel and the church

All dispensationalists perceive a clear distinction between Israel and the church, particularly as different groups who receive a different set of promises. Dispensationalists hold that God provided the nation of Israel with specific promises which will be fulfilled at a future time in the Jews. The Church has received a different set of promises than that of Israel. Most dispensationalists also recognize "membership" overlap between Israel and the Church. Jewish Christians such as Paul, Peter and John are in this category. While most do not believe that Israel and the church are mutually exclusive groups, there is a small minority of past and present dispensationalists who do. Those who do hold that Israel and the church are mutually exclusive include some classical dispensationalists and virtually all ultradispensationalists.

Other proposed distinctions: law and grace

Classical dispensationalism teaches that law and grace are mutually exclusive concepts. Statements made by Scofield and other early classic dispensationalists teach a radical law-grace distinction.^{[1][2]} In other words, they teach that law *contains* no grace, and that grace is not *conditioned* on keeping the law. This does not mean that grace was missing from the dispensation of law, only that the law itself was diametrically opposed to grace, which operated by other means (such as promises and blessings). Some modern dispensationalists disagree with making such a radical distinction. In fact, Daniel Fuller, a non-dispensationalist, stated in his book *Gospel and Law* (p. 51) that "Although today's dispensationalism explains the relationship between law and grace in wording that is different from that of [covenant theology](#), there is no substantial difference in meaning."

Classical dispensationalism

Early dispensational writers such as Darby and Chafer are referred to as classical dispensationalists. This view differs from today's traditional or "revised" dispensationalists. The early Scofield Bible (but not the Revised Scofield Bible) reflects a classical dispensational view. Classical dispensationalists are a small minority today, and Miles Stanford is one writer who represents this point of view.

Traditional dispensationalism

The traditional view is the majority view for dispensationalists today. John Walvoord and Charles Ryrie are two traditional dispensational authors. The Revised Scofield Bible of the 1960s also reflects a traditional dispensational view, which is why traditional dispensationalists are sometimes called "Revised" dispensationalists.

Hermeneutics

Both traditional and progressive dispensationalists share the same historical-grammatical hermeneutic. As with all dispensationalists, progressive revelation is emphasized so that the dispensationalist interprets the Old Testament in such a way as to retain the original meaning and audience. Thus progressives, like traditionalists, place great emphasis on the original meaning and audience of the text.

For traditionalists who perceive the present dispensation as a parenthesis, the standard approach has been to view Old Testament quotations in the New Testament as applications rather than fulfillment. If an Old Testament quotation is said to have a fulfillment role in the New Testament, then that may imply that the present dispensation is no longer a parenthesis, but has a relationship or connection with the prior dispensation.

Alternatives to dispensationalism

Prior to dispensationalism's 19-20th century systemization, [Covenant Theology](#) was the prominent [Protestant](#) view regarding redemptive history and is still the view of the Reformed churches. A relatively recent view, which is seen as a third alternative, especially among Reformed Baptists, is called [New Covenant Theology](#).

The early Christian theologians saw the New Covenant in Christ as a [replacement](#) for the Mosaic Covenant (see "Roman Catholicism", below). Historically, statements on behalf of the [Roman Catholic Church](#) have claimed her ecclesiastical structures to be a fulfillment and replacement of Jewish ecclesiastical structures (see also [Jerusalem as an allegory for the Church](#)). As recently as 1965 Vatican Council II affirmed, "the Church is the new [people of God](#)," without intending to make "Israel according to the flesh", the Jewish people, irrelevant in terms of [eschatology](#) (see "Roman Catholicism", below). Modern Catholicism affirms these spokesmen as authoritative for doctrine, alongside the New Testament. Modern Protestants hold to a range of positions, some with more emphasis on continuity ([covenant theology](#)) and others with more emphasis on discontinuity ([dispensationalism](#) and [New Covenant Theology](#)).

John Nelson Darby

John Nelson Darby (18 November 1800 – 29 April 1882) was an [Anglo-Irish](#) Bible teacher, one of the influential figures among the original [Plymouth Brethren](#) and the founder of the [Exclusive Brethren](#). He is considered to be the father of modern [Dispensationalism](#) and [Futurism](#) in the English vernacular. He produced a translation of the Bible based on the Hebrew and Greek texts called [*The Holy Scriptures: A New Translation from the Original Languages by J. N. Darby*](#).

Early years

John Nelson Darby was born in [Westminster](#), London, and christened at [St. Margaret's](#) on 3 March 1801. He came from an Anglo-Irish landowning family seated at [Leap Castle, King's County, Ireland](#). He was the nephew of [Admiral Henry D'Esterre Darby](#) and his middle name was given in recognition of his godfather and family friend, [Lord Nelson](#).

Darby was educated at [Westminster School](#) and [Trinity College, Dublin](#) where he graduated Classical Gold Medallist in 1819. Darby embraced Christianity during his studies, although there is no evidence that he formally studied [theology](#). He joined an [inn of court](#), but felt that being a lawyer was inconsistent with his

religious belief. He therefore chose ordination as an [Anglican](#) clergyman in [Ireland](#), "lest he should sell his talents to defeat justice." In 1825, Darby was ordained [deacon](#) of the [established Church of Ireland](#) and the following year as priest.

Middle years



Gravestone of John Nelson Darby

Darby became a curate in the Church of Ireland parish of [Delgany, County Wicklow](#), and distinguished himself by convincing Roman Catholic peasants in the Calary area to abandon the Catholic Church. The well-known gospel tract "How the Lost Sheep was Saved" ^[1] gives his personal account of a visit he paid to a dying shepherd boy in this area, painting a vivid picture of what his work among the poor people involved. He later claimed to have won hundreds of converts to the [Church of Ireland](#). However, the conversions ended when [William Magee](#), the [Archbishop of Dublin](#), ruled that converts were obliged to swear allegiance to [George IV](#) as rightful king of [Ireland](#).

Darby resigned his curacy in protest. Soon after, in October 1827, he fell from a horse and was seriously injured. He later stated that it was during this time that he began to believe that the "kingdom" described in the [Book of Isaiah](#) and elsewhere in the [Old Testament](#) was entirely different from the [Christian church](#).

Over the next five years, he developed the principles of his mature theology—most notably his conviction that the very notion of a clergyman was a sin against the Holy Spirit, because it limited the recognition that

the Holy Spirit could speak through any member of the Church. During this time he joined an interdenominational meeting of believers (including [Anthony Norris Groves](#), [Edward Cronin](#), [J. G. Bellett](#), and [Francis Hutchinson](#)) who met to "[break bread](#)" together in Dublin as a symbol of their unity in Christ. By 1832, this group had grown and began to identify themselves as a distinct Christian assembly. As they traveled and began new assemblies in Ireland and England, they formed the movement now known as the [Plymouth Brethren](#).

It is believed that John Nelson Darby left the Church of Ireland around 1831.^[2] He participated in the 1831–33 [Powerscourt Conference](#), an annual meeting of Bible students organized by his friend,^[3] the wealthy widow [Lady Powerscourt](#) (Theodosia Wingfield Powerscourt). At the conference Darby publicly described his ecclesiological and eschatological views, including the pretribulation [rapture](#).^[4] For about 40 years [William Kelly](#) (1821–1906) was his chief interpreter and continued to be a staunch supporter until his own death. Kelly in his work *John Nelson Darby as I knew him* stated that "a saint more true to Christ's name and word I never knew or heard of".

Darby saw the invention of the [telegraph](#) as a sign that the end of the world was approaching; he called the telegraph an invention of Cain and a harbinger of Armageddon.^[5]

Darby defended [Calvinist](#) ^[6] doctrines when they came under attack from within the Church in which he once served. His biographer Goddard ^[7] states, "Darby indicates his approval of the doctrine of the [Anglican Church](#) as expressed in Article XVII of the [Thirty-Nine Articles](#)" on the subject of election and [predestination](#). Darby said:

"For my own part, I soberly think Article XVII to be as wise, perhaps I might say the wisest and best condensed human statement of the view it contains that I am acquainted with. I am fully content to take it in its literal and grammatical sense. I believe that predestination to life is the eternal purpose of God, by which, before the foundations of the world were laid, He firmly decreed, by His counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and destruction those whom He had chosen in Christ out of the human race, and to bring them, through Christ, as vessels made to honour, to eternal salvation." ^[8]

Later years

Darby traveled widely in Europe and Britain in the 1830s and 1840s, and established many Brethren assemblies. He gave 11 significant lectures in [Geneva](#) in 1840 on the hope of the church (*L'attente actuelle de l'église*). These established his reputation as a leading interpreter of biblical prophecy. The beliefs he disseminated then are still being propagated (in various forms) at such places as [Dallas Theological Seminary](#) and by authors and preachers such as [Hal Lindsey](#) and [Tim LaHaye](#).

In 1848, Darby became involved in a complex dispute over the proper method for maintaining shared standards of discipline in different assemblies that resulted in a split between [Open Brethren](#), which maintained a congregational form of government and [Exclusive Brethren](#). After that time, he was recognized as the dominant figure among the Exclusives, who also came to be known as "Darbyite" Brethren. He made at least 5 missionary journeys to North America between 1862 and 1877. He worked mostly in [New England](#), Ontario, and the [Great Lakes](#) region, but took one extended journey from Toronto to Sydney by way of San Francisco, Hawaii, and New Zealand. A Geographical Index of his letters is currently available and lists where he traveled.^[9] He used his classical skills to translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek texts into several languages. In English he wrote a Synopsis of the Bible and many other scholarly religious articles. He wrote hymns and poems, the most famous being, "Man of Sorrows".^[10] He was also a Bible commentator. He declined however to contribute to the compilation of the [Revised Version](#) of the [King James Bible](#).^[11]

He died 1882 in Sundridge House, [Bournemouth](#) and is buried in Bournemouth, [Dorset](#), England.^[12]

Later influence

If one accepted Darby's view of the secret rapture... [Benjamin Wills Newton](#) pointed out, then many Gospel passages must be "renounced as not properly ours."...this is precisely what Darby was prepared to do.

Too traditional to admit that biblical authors might have contradicted each other, and too rationalist to admit that the prophetic maze defied penetration, Darby attempted a resolution of his exegetical dilemma by distinguishing between Scripture intended for the Church and Scripture intended for Israel...

The task of the expositor of the Bible was, in a phrase that became the hallmark of dispensationalism, "rightly dividing the word of truth".

From "The Roots of Fundamentalism:
British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930" (1970)
by Ernest R. Sandeen, [University of Chicago Press](#)
ISBN 0-22-73467-6, p. 65-67

Darby is noted in the theological world as the father of "[dispensationalism](#)", later made popular in the United States by [Cyrus Scofield](#)'s [Scofield Reference Bible](#).

[Charles Henry Mackintosh](#), 1820–1896, with his popular style spread Darby's teachings to humbler elements in society and may be regarded as the journalist of the Brethren Movement. Mackintosh popularised Darby, although not his hyperdispensational approach,^[13] more than any other Brethren author. In the early twentieth century, the Brethren's teachings, through [Margaret E. Barber](#), influenced the [Little Flock](#) of [Watchman Nee](#) and [Witness Lee](#)^[14]

Darby is credited with originating the "secret [rapture](#)" theory wherein Christ will suddenly remove His bride, the Church, from this world before the judgments of the tribulation. Some claim that this "the Rapture of the Saints" [date?] was the origin of the idea of the "rapture." Dispensationalist beliefs about the fate of the Jews and the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Israel put dispensationalists at the forefront of [Christian Zionism](#), because "God is able to graft them in again," and they believe that in His grace he will do so according to their understanding of Old Testament prophecy. They believe that, while the ways of God may change, His purposes to bless Israel will never be forgotten, just as He has shown unmerited favour to the Church, He will do so to a remnant of Israel to fulfill all the promises made to the genetic seed of Abraham.

Criticism

[Charles Haddon Spurgeon](#), Pastor of the [Metropolitan Tabernacle](#) and contemporary of Darby, published criticism of Darby and Brethrenism.^[15] His main criticism was that Darby and the Plymouth Brethren rejected the vicarious purpose of Christ's obedience as well as [imputed righteousness](#). He viewed these of such importance and so central to the gospel that it led him to this statement about the rest of their belief.

James Grant wrote: "With the deadly heresies entertained and taught by the Plymouth Brethren, in relation to some of the most momentous of all the doctrines of the gospel, and to which I have adverted at some length, I feel assured that my readers will not be surprised at any other views, however unscriptural and pernicious they may be, which the Darbyites have embraced and zealously seek to propagate"