The Historical & Scriptural Missteps of Dispensationalism

Introduction

In the modern church, few theological systems have gained as much traction—and generated as much controversy—as dispensationalism. Advocating distinct eras in which God deals differently with humanity, this framework promotes doctrines such as a pre-tribulation rapture, a future literal Jewish kingdom, and a permanent division between Israel and the Church.

In defense of this system, some modern proponents claim that dispensationalism is not a recent theological innovation but has deep historical roots. One such example comes from the website *Real Bible Believers*, which asserts that many early church fathers and notable theologians held to dispensationalist views long before John Nelson Darby systematized them in the 19th century. Similar claims are frequently found across the internet and in dispensationalist teaching materials.

This study was undertaken to carefully examine these claims, comparing them with both the historical writings of the cited figures and the plain teaching of Scripture. What emerges is a clear and undeniable conclusion: while many early theologians recognized different periods of God's work in history (sometimes referred to as "economies" or "covenants"), **none taught the distinctive doctrines that define modern dispensationalism.**

This study is not presented to attack anyone's personal

beliefs or the theological framework to which they subscribe. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that systematic theological frameworks—whether accurate or not—are ultimately the product of human interpretation. While such systems may help organize one's understanding of Scripture, we must not assume they were developed using sound principles of biblical interpretation. Many have been constructed through **eisegesis** (reading ideas into the text) rather than **exegesis** (drawing meaning out of the text as it was originally intended). For this reason, all theological systems must be carefully tested against the plain teaching of Scripture, allowing God's Word to speak for itself rather than forcing it into man-made constructs.

It is also important to recognize that behind every distortion of truth, no matter how intellectual or sophisticated it may appear, lies the subtle working of the great deceiver. As Paul warned, *"But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ"* (2 Corinthians 11:3). Doctrinal systems that complicate or obscure the plain teaching of Scripture often serve as tools in the adversary's strategy to divide and weaken the Church. This study, therefore, not only addresses historical inaccuracies but also stands as a defense against the spiritual craftiness that seeks to draw believers away from the sufficiency and clarity of God's revealed Word.

As the Apostle Paul further admonished, *"That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive"* (Ephesians 4:14). May this study serve as a call back to the authority of God's Word and the clear testimony of history, exposing error so that the Church may walk in truth and unity.

□ I. Justin Martyr (c. 100–165 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Justin Martyr divided history into distinct dispensations: from Adam to Noah, Noah to Moses, Moses to Christ, and from Christ to the Millennium."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
In *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 11, Justin wrote:

> *"We, who have been quarried out from the bowels of Christ, are the true Israelitic race."*

In Chapter 123, he stated:

> *"For the true spiritual Israel… are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ."*

These quotes clearly demonstrate that while Justin acknowledged historical periods, he believed the Church—comprised of all believers in Christ—was the true Israel. He did not see a future, separate plan for ethnic Israel.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *Galatians 3:28-29* – "There is neither Jew nor Greek… ye are Abraham's seed."
- *Romans 2:28-29* – True circumcision is inward, not outward.

Final Verdict:
Justin held to an early form of **covenantal theology**, not dispensationalism. While he acknowledged historical phases in God's dealings, he did not divide salvation history into separate redemptive programs for Jews and Gentiles, as Darby's system does.

Error or Speculation:

- Premillennial expectation, which leaned toward a literal thousand-year reign but did not develop the concept of dispensational separation.

II. Irenaeus (c. 130–202 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Irenaeus taught different dispensations and even alluded to a pre-tribulation rapture."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *Against Heresies*, Book 5, Chapter 29:

> *"But when this Antichrist shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months… and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom…"*

Irenaeus clearly places the coming of Christ **after** the tribulation period, not before it.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *Matthew 24:29-31* – Christ returns "immediately after the tribulation."
- *1 Thessalonians 4:16-17* – The resurrection and rapture occur together at Christ's final coming.

Final Verdict:
Irenaeus taught a form of **historic premillennialism**, not

dispensationalism premillennialism. He believed the Church would endure tribulation before Christ's return and did not separate Israel and the Church into distinct future programs.

Error or Speculation:

- He expected a literal, future earthly kingdom but still maintained that the faithful—whether Jew or Gentile—were part of God's one people.

III. Tertullian (c. 155–240 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Tertullian recognized multiple dispensations and acknowledged the idea of multiple raptures."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *Against Marcion*, Book 5, Chapter 16:

> *"For the souls of the righteous, waiting in the bosom of Abraham, receive the reward of their faith and patience, not before the resurrection, but when the great day of the Lord arrives."*

Also in Chapter 10:

> *"The resurrection of the dead is the Christian's trust… it will come at the end of time, not before."*

Tertullian clearly speaks of **one general resurrection at the end of time**, not multiple raptures or staged resurrections.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *John 5:28-29* – One general resurrection of all: "All

that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth…”

Final Verdict:
Tertullian acknowledged that God worked through historical covenants but did **not** teach a dispensational framework. He held firmly to the idea of one final resurrection and final judgment, aligning with a historic Christian view rather than Darby’s dispensationalism

Error or Speculation:

- Expected an earthly kingdom but did not advocate for multiple resurrections or raptures as dispensationalists do.

IV. Hippolytus of Rome (c. 170–235 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
“Hippolytus taught the idea of multiple raptures and that the Church would be removed before the tribulation.”

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *On Christ and Antichrist*, Chapter 30:

> *“When the times of the kingdom have been fulfilled, and the ten horns spring from the beast in the last times, and the Antichrist comes, then, at length, the Lord shall come from heaven in glory…”*

Also in Chapter 61:

> *“And the Church shall flee into the wilderness… being*

> *nourished for a time, and times, and half a time, from the face of the serpent."*

Hippolytus clearly expected the Church to experience the rise of Antichrist and face tribulation before the return of Christ. He did not advocate for a pre-tribulation removal of the Church.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *2 Thessalonians 2:3* – "That day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed…"
- *Revelation 13:7* – "And it was given unto him to make war with the saints…"

Final Verdict:
Hippolytus held to a **post-tribulational premillennialism**, teaching that the Church would face the Antichrist before Christ's return. His writings do not support multiple raptures or a secret, pre-tribulational event.

Error or Speculation:

- Somewhat speculative apocalyptic expectations but **no clear teaching of a pre-trib rapture or separate salvific plan for Israel**.

V. Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Clement recognized distinct dispensations, teaching that God

dealt differently with humanity throughout history."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *Stromata* (Miscellanies), Book 6, Chapter 15:

> *"Before the advent of the Lord, philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness. And now it becomes conducive to piety; being a kind of preparatory training to those who attain to faith through demonstration."*

Clement spoke of historical periods of God's preparation, such as using philosophy to prepare the Greeks and the Law to prepare the Jews. However, he saw all history culminating in Christ and the unification of Jew and Gentile through the gospel.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *Ephesians 1:10* – "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ…"
- *Romans 11:17* – Gentiles are grafted into the **same** olive tree, not a separate plan.

Final Verdict:
While Clement spoke of stages in human history, he did **not** teach a future, separate plan for Israel or multiple ways of salvation. His views are aligned with **covenantal unity in Christ**, not dispensational separation.

Error or Speculation:

- Overly allegorized some scripture but did not teach dispensational separation.

VI. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
“Augustine recognized dispensations but ultimately became anti-dispensational by rejecting a literal future kingdom.”

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *The City of God*, Book 20, Chapter 7:

> *“The Church, even now, is the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of heaven. Accordingly, even now, His saints reign with Him, although otherwise than as they shall reign hereafter.”*

Augustine explicitly rejected the idea of a future, earthly kingdom and held firmly to **amillennialism**—believing that Christ’s kingdom is spiritual and already present. He also rejected a future separate plan for Israel.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *Colossians 1:13* – “Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son…”
- *John 18:36* – “My kingdom is not of this world…”

Final Verdict:
Augustine was indeed a strong opponent of millennialism and any future earthly kingdom narrative. While he discussed historical periods, he did **not** teach a dispensational framework. His theology is the opposite of Darby’s, and his views became foundational for amillennial theology in the Western church.

Error or Speculation:

- Over-spiritualized some prophetic texts, but rightly rejected any future, distinct Jewish-centered kingdom separate from the Church.

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7. Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135–1202 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Joachim divided history into three distinct ages—The Age of the Father, the Age of the Son, and the Age of the Holy Spirit—suggesting an early dispensational framework."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From his *Expositio in Apocalypsim* (as cited in historical references):

> *"In the third status of history, the Age of the Spirit, men will live without the institutions of the Church and enter directly into a state of spiritual freedom."*

Joachim's theories were mystical and speculative, not based on solid scriptural exegesis. His concept of three ages was a highly symbolic and esoteric philosophy that was later condemned by the Catholic Church.

Scriptural Evaluation (Refuting His Claims):

- *Matthew 24:36* – "But of that day and hour knoweth no man…"
- *Hebrews 1:1-2* – God's final revelation is through His Son, not through a new "Age of the Spirit."

Final Verdict:
Joachim of Fiore's teachings have no relation to dispensationalism as systematized by Darby. His ideas were

mystical, lacked biblical grounding, and were rejected as heretical by both the Roman Catholic Church and later Reformers.

Error or Speculation:

- His ideas were mystical, speculative, and not founded on scriptural authority.

VIII. Pierre Poiret (1646–1719 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Pierre Poiret clearly outlined historical dispensations and laid groundwork for Darby's dispensational system."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *The Divine Economy*, Preface:

> *"God's dealings with men have been governed by a series of distinct economies, but all culminating in the final revelation of His grace through Jesus Christ."*

Poiret did speak of historical "economies," but his primary focus was on God's unfolding revelation leading to the finality of Christ's work. He did not systematize a pre-trib rapture doctrine or permanently separate Israel and the Church.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *Hebrews 1:1-2* – "God… hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son…" (Final and complete revelation through Christ.)

Final Verdict:
While Poiret acknowledged stages of God's dealings, he did **not** build a dispensational system resembling Darby's. His thinking was more philosophical than doctrinally rigid, and he affirmed the culmination of all things in Christ.

Error or Speculation:

- His ideas were largely philosophical, lacking in solid biblical exegesis.

IX. Isaac Watts (1674–1748 A.D.)

Claim by Real Bible Believers:
"Isaac Watts outlined distinct dispensations and taught in a way that supports dispensational thinking."

Actual Historical Position (Direct Quote):
From *A Short View of the Whole Scripture History*, Preface:

> *"The government of God over mankind has appeared under various dispensations, but the grand design has ever been the same—to bring men to God through the Mediator."*

Watts did outline historical periods (Patriarchal, Mosaic, Christian), but he was a **postmillennialist** and firmly believed in the advancing kingdom of Christ through the Church, not through a restored Jewish kingdom or separate program for Israel.

Scriptural Evaluation:

- *Daniel 2:44* – "And in the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom, which shall never be destroyed…"

- *Revelation 11:15* – "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord…"

Final Verdict:
Isaac Watts recognized historical stages in God's dealings but maintained a **covenantal and postmillennial** perspective. He did not advocate for a future Jewish-centered kingdom or the separation of Israel and the Church.

Error or Speculation:

- Overly optimistic in his postmillennial expectations but never advanced a dispensational framework separating Israel and the Church.

Conclusion

After a thorough examination of both historical records and the testimony of Scripture, the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that the core doctrines of modern dispensationalism—such as a pre-tribulation rapture, a future Jewish-centered millennial kingdom, and a permanent division between Israel and the Church—are not rooted in the teachings of the early Church. Nor do they stand upon the plain and consistent message of Scripture.

While historical theologians did recognize distinct periods of God's dealings with humanity, these were always understood as part of a unified redemptive plan, culminating in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures declare that in Christ, all who believe—Jew and Gentile alike—are made one body, one people, and one household of faith:

- *"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners,*

but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God.” (Ephesians 2:19)

- *“There is neither Jew nor Greek… for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”* (Galatians 3:28)

It should not escape our attention that this confusion and division over God’s redemptive plan is not merely a product of human misunderstanding, but often the result of Satan’s ongoing efforts to corrupt the truth. Scripture warns us that *“Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light”* (2 Corinthians 11:14), and that his schemes frequently masquerade as intellectual or spiritual enlightenment. Through such deceptive theological systems, the adversary sows division, obscures the simplicity of the gospel, and entices believers to place their hope in earthly kingdoms rather than in the eternal kingdom of Christ.

As believers, we must be vigilant against doctrinal systems that fracture this unity and distort the simplicity of the gospel. While human theological frameworks can provide helpful structure, they must always remain subordinate to the authority of Scripture.

The Church must guard against being drawn into speculative systems that shift its hope away from the sufficiency of Christ and the present reality of His kingdom. Let us heed the words of Paul, *“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good”* (1 Thessalonians 5:21), and continually test every teaching against the unchanging truth of God’s Word.

May this study strengthen the Church’s resolve to pursue unity in Christ, stand unwavering in the faith once delivered to the saints, and reject every teaching—no matter how popular or historically entrenched—that fails under the light of Scripture. While this subject offers valuable historical insight, our prayer is that the division it exposes will lead to a renewed and earnest study of what the Bible truly

teaches. Through Spirit-led exegesis—and far less eisegesis—we pray that many will come to see the unifying truth that holds the entire message of Scripture together: not a system of dispensations, but the golden thread of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.” *(Jude 1:24–25, KJV)*
