The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism, Reviewed by Gary E. Gilley

Video Below Premiered Aug 23, 2023 – The direction of *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* is well expressed by its author:

Video Below Premiered Dec 10, 2023 – Dr. Daniel Hummel and we discuss his new book along with the theological implications of Dispensationalism

> *The following pages make sense of these different trajectories and manifestations of dispensationalism through the study of its history. I do so by telling the story of ideas, institutions, and individuals that built dispensationalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the later generations who presided over its entrance into the mainstream of American popular culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (pg. xvi-xvii).*

Dispensationalism, a term which first appeared in 1882 (p. xi), or was it 1927 (pg. 1, 3), rests on the plain, literal meaning of Scripture; the separation of the church from Israel; the world careening toward decline, ultimately climaxing in the rule of the antichrist during the Tribulation; and a pretribulation belief in the rapture (see p. xvii). Like many Christians historically, dispensationalists are premillennial in their eschatology, but, unlike those in the past, dispensationalists espouse a new premillennialism which sees the kingdom of God entirely in the future, established by Christ at His return (p. 1).

This understanding flows from the teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and the Brethren movement he founded in the

1830s, which taught "a 'literal' or nonsymbolical interpretation of biblical prophesy to produce a new sect. The Brethren offered a new way to read Scripture, a new set of expectations for Christians, and a new vision of how God would ultimately redeem the world" (p. 6). Hummel, who is obviously not a dispensationalist (his bias is evident throughout the book), nevertheless, accurately describes what the system teaches (see pg. 9-15), and even as he seemingly distains dispensationalism, fairly admits its benefits as demonstrated in the following quote by anti-dispensationalist George Ladd:

> *[It is] doubtful if there has been any other circle of men [than dispensationalists] who have done more by their influence in preaching, teaching and writing to promote a love for Bible study, a hunger for the deeper Christian life, a passion for evangelism and zeal for missions in the history of American Christianity (p. 15).*

Similar sentiments have been voiced in every decade since.

It is interesting to note that Darby and the early Brethren were deeply concerned about the anemic state of the Anglican church, of which they were a part, and in particular the low bar of teaching concerning salvation. Darby sought to lead the church toward greater maturity and holiness and preached a high barrier for salvation (p. 11). Later, dispensationalists influenced by revivalism of the 1800s reversed this emphasis, lowering the barrier to "little more than a onetime mental assert to the proposition that Jesus is Savior" (pg. 11, 19, 21). This "free grace" position was later solidified in the writing of C. I. Scofield, especially in the notes in his Reference Bible (1909), and later by L.S. Chafer and Dallas Theological Seminary. Darby, who was Reformed in his theology (p. 21), led early Brethren to embrace a clear "Lordship" soteriology, as well as Calvinistic leanings. Many later dispensationalists would depart from Lordship and most of the points of Calvinism. Another morphing in the system concerns

reading of Scripture. Throughout the history of dispensationalism, literal, plain interpretation of the Bible has been prized. But the early promoters leaned heavily on allegory and typology, as is evident in the writings of the first couple of generations of dispensationalists and peppered throughout the original Scofield Reference Bible. But later theologians moved away from strong reliance on typology to a grammatical-historical hermeneutic emerging from Dallas. By the revised edition of the Scofield Bible (1967), most typological notes had been removed. However, all generations of dispensationalists have assumed absolute inerrancy of the Bible (see p. 11).

The Brethren placed emphasis on ecclesial revival and were opponents of revivalism, which was mostly postmillennial in theology and shallow in its results (pg. 25-27, 36, 39). They were fixated on holiness and taught what Hummel calls dualism, the idea that Christians are heavenly citizens living in a doomed, corrupted world. As a result, believers should not become too comfortable in their earthly pilgrimage and should rather focus on holy living and rescuing the lost from eternal destruction (p. 33). Darby viewed American Christianity as superficial, and despite the well-known quote by Alexis de Tocqueville about Americans being incredibly religious, Tocqueville later came to the same conclusion as Darby (pg. 35, 48-49).

It is easy to see how the Holiness Movement emerged from these observations, as Darby and the Brethren wanted to revitalize God’s people and call them to be a holy, heavenly-minded community. It would be D. L. Moody and the Moody Movement that popularized Brethren teaching, especially premillennialism, higher life, and its focus on fleeing the world and longing for heaven (pg. 88-95). Moody’s motto, “I look on the world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat, and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can’” (p. 97), became the agenda of the new premillennialists, who spread their theology through three

organizations: Bible Institutes, Bible conferences, and mission agencies (pg. 98-107).

Pentecostalism split the Moody Movement, as it embraced new premillennialism while ignoring other dispensational distinctives (pg. 118-121); however, Scofield and his Reference Bible standardized the teachings of dispensationalism and greatly increased Bible reading among Christians (pg. 130-138). *The Fundamentals,* a twelve-volume publication from 1910-1915 with a three million plus distribution, further solidified and spread the teachings of new premillennialists (pg. 146-151, 169). *The Fundamentals* also included a chapter by Scofield advocating "free grace" that went largely unopposed (pg. 148, 156). With this link, premillennialism became associated with Fundamentalism (p. 161), leading to fierce battles between the Fundamentalists and the Modernists (pp. 162-168). Eventually, a substantial parting of ways between the two contingencies led to the Fundamentalists leaving the liberal denominations and seminaries and forming their own.

Out of this division emerged L.S. Chafer and the birth of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1926 and, along with it, scholastic dispensationalism (pg. 179-203). Grace Theological Seminary, under the leadership of Alva McLain, began in 1937. Both schools emphasized their commitment to "consistently reading all Scripture literally, guided by historical and grammatical context rather than typologies or dualism" (p. 202). This literalism became the hallmark of scholastic dispensationalism. Dallas and Grace were joined by Talbot on the West coast in 1952. Under the leadership of these theological schools and men such as Walvoord, Ryrie, Pentecost, and Feinberg, dispensationalism was experiencing its golden era.

But challenges emerged that eroded scholastic, if not pop dispensationalism. Those challenges included in-fighting among Fundamentalists leading to major splits (pg. 184-196); the

rise of neo-evangelicalism with its emphases on ecumenism and social action, under leaders such as Billy Graham and Carl Henry (pg. 203-229); and new seminaries such as Fuller. George Ladd's inaugurated eschatology, and the increasing popularity of covenantal theology, also challenged dispensational teaching, but most devastating of all to academic dispensationalism was the birth of pop dispensationalism. Pop dispensationalism kept the basic eschatology of the system—the Rapture, the Tribulation, and the coming antichrist—but largely ignored the other essential details. As the pop variety caught the world's attention, beginning with Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* (pg. 234-243) and later the fiction of Tim LaHaye, interest in the theology of dispensationalism unraveled and slowly drained away (pg. 233-250). Other undermining features included hyped and failed predictions of the return of Christ, lack of interest in prophecy and theology, increased interest in psychology and social concerns, criticism of its teachings by other evangelicals, and this disappearance of traditional dispensationalist professors from seminaries. As pop dispensationalism conquered the American culture, scholarly dispensationalism was in freefall (pg. 256-259).

The new Christian right emerged under Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Francis Schaeffer, Pat Robertson, Carl McIntire, and the Moral Majority, eclipsing attention on the finer points of dispensational theology while maintaining, if loosely, the end-time tenets of the system (pg. 287-296). Hummel summarizes the reason for the collapse of academic dispensationalism in chapter eighteen. Today, challenges come from rising interest in theonomy (p. 303), progressive dispensationalism (pg. 312-317), the Christian right (p. 332), and "holistic eschatology" championed by N. T. Wright, among others. Pop dispensationalism, in a variety of forms, is alive and has infiltrated the American culture and imagination, but it is a far cry from the dispensationalism of Darby, Scofield, and Ryrie. Scholastic dispensationalism, Hummel believes, is dead

(reviewers comment: Scholastic Dispensationalism lives on but has been largely marginalized by the academy and major publishers), even as its pop version lives on. But he admits the final chapter has yet to be written on dispensationalism.

As a historical treatise on dispensationalism and new premillennialism, this work would be hard to beat. Hummel is obviously not a dispensationalist, and his bias is often obvious. Some of his conclusions are questionable and open to challenge, and, of course, trying to offer a comprehensive snapshot of 200 years of the history of anything will prove inadequate. But Hummel has done his research and anyone looking for a historical account of dispensationalism will learn much from this volume.

by Daniel G. Hummel (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2023), 382 pp., hard $26.99

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Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism – History of Dispensationalism & Its Influence On Popular Culture, Politics, & Religion.

Daniel G. Hummel illuminates how dispensationalism, despite often being dismissed as a fringe end-times theory, shaped Anglo-American evangelicalism and the larger American cultural imagination.

Hummel locates dispensationalism's origin in the writings of the nineteenth-century Protestant John Nelson Darby, who established many of the hallmarks of the movement, such as premillennialism and belief in the rapture. Though it consistently faced criticism, dispensationalism held populist, and briefly scholarly, appeal—visible in everything from turn-

of-the-century revivalism to apocalyptic bestsellers of the 1970s to current internet conspiracy theories.

Measured and irenic, Hummel objectively evaluates evangelicalism's most resilient and contentious popular theology. As the first comprehensive intellectual-cultural history of its kind, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* is a must-read for students and scholars of American religion.

Daniel G. Hummel is a historian of US religion and the author of *Covenant Brothers: Evangelicals, Jews, and U.S.-Israeli Relations*. He works at Upper House, a Christian study center located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Endorsements:

"What do you say about a historical study that reads like a whodunit? Dan Hummel's book is a page turner, shedding light on details that I already knew from dispensationalist pop culture, filling in the gaps through patient analysis and good storytelling. Historians will love his patient analysis; it's the storytelling that hooked me. At the end of each chapter, I had to know what came next. Not only is *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* a superb academic study; Hummel's analysis of the gap left by the decline of dispensationalism helps us understand the ideological crisis of the so-called evangelical church today."
—J. Richard Middleton, professor of biblical worldview and exegesis, Northeastern Seminary

Library Journal (starred review)
"This is an exceptional resource for readers looking to understand conservative Christianity. The book also illuminates much of U.S. religious history in general."

"In this brilliant and original book, Daniel G. Hummel traces the extraordinary history of one of the most influential religious groups in modern American life. His research is impressive, his writing is sharp, and his arguments will

transform what we think we know about American religious history. An impressive achievement!"
—Matthew Avery Sutton, author of *Double Crossed: The Missionaries Who Spied for the United States during the Second World War*

"Daniel Hummel has written the best and most comprehensive history of dispensationalist theology currently in existence. Combining impressive historical research with an exceptionally nuanced attention to theological developments, Hummel's work offers a detailed, engagingly written historical survey of a movement that is often mentioned in studies of evangelical politics but rarely understood on its own terms. This is the book for people who want to go beyond the headlines to understand the long historical trajectory of the most influential end-times theology in American evangelicalism."
—Daniel K. Williams, author of *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*

"A tremendous achievement, based on meticulous research and bold synthesis. Thanks to Dan Hummel, we can finally understand how these influential ideas moved through North American culture and politics."
—Molly Worthen, associate professor of history, University of North Carolina

"As I write these words, I am looking at my bookshelf where I see a copy of the Scofield Reference Bible sitting next to my multivolume set of Lewis Sperry Chafer's theology and a few of the Left Behind novels. As someone whose teenage conversion to evangelical faith led him to study at a dispensationalist Bible college, I was reminded of my young-adult obsession with a brand of conservative Protestantism that shaped much of twentieth-century American evangelicalism. If you want to learn more about the evangelical fascination with the rapture, Israel, the antichrist, and the prophetic books of the Bible, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* is the place to start."
—John Fea, distinguished professor of history, Messiah

University and author of *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump*

“Daniel Hummel has done us all a service by digging up the bones of a theological beast that left massive footprints across the land and then (all but) disappeared. Dispensationalism needs to be reckoned with. Its history of theological innovations, inclinations, obsessions, and curiosities is with us still, even if they’re just skeletons buried in the backyard. Hummel’s careful accounting and thoughtful interpretations are a gift to anyone trying to understand the contemporary landscape of evangelicalism.”
—Daniel Silliman, author of *Reading Evangelicals: How Christian Fiction Shaped a Culture and a Faith*

Dispensationalism Before Darby Debunked

Premiered Jul 11, 2023 — The Rapture and the Endurance of the Saints