

The Pre-Tribulation Rapture

The next major event on God's prophetic calendar is the Rapture of church-age believers.

The word "rapture" does not appear in the Bible, but it describes the catching away of the church-age saints at the end of the age.

There are two major passages that describe the Rapture: 1 Thessalonians 4:13 -- 5:11 and 1 Corinthians 15:51-58.

The Greek word translated "caught up" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 is used in Acts 8:39 of the Spirit of God snatching away Philip after the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch.

1 Thessalonians 4:13 -- 5:11

1. The Rapture is an event in which the dead in Christ will be raised (1 Th. 4:14-16) and the living New Testament saints will be changed and glorified (1 Th. 4:17).

2. The dead in Christ are presently with Him in heaven (1 Th. 4:14). The dead in Christ do not "sleep in the grave" as some false teachers claim.

3. The Rapture is the believer's hope and comfort (1 Th. 4:13, 18). This is what we are waiting for. We are not looking for the antichrist and the Great Tribulation. If the Rapture did not occur until the end of the Great Tribulation, it could not produce hope and comfort for the Christian.

4. The Rapture occurs before the Day of the Lord's wrath (1 Th. 5:1-10).

a. The "Day of the Lord" is the time of Tribulation when God will judge the world for its sin and idolatry. In that "day," God will be exalted and rebellious men will be humbled. See Isaiah 2:10-21.

b. Note the change in pronouns in this passage. In verse 3 the pronoun "they" is used, because the Day of the Lord will come upon the unsaved world. But in verses 4-5 the pronoun "ye" is used, referring to believers. That day will not overtake us.

c. The Rapture will occur as a thief in the night (1 Th. 5:2), but this is not how the Lord's return in glory will occur. It will come with unmistakable signs in the heavens and will be seen by all (Mat. 24:27-31). The Rapture pertains to the church, whereas Christ's Second Coming pertains to Israel and the world.

d. The believer is to be watching for the Lord's return at all times (1 Th. 5:6). We do not know when it will happen. It is imminent.

e. Believers are not appointed to go through the time of God's wrath (1 Th. 5:9). Compare 1 Thessalonians 1:10. Believers have been subject to the wrath of men and devils throughout the church age, but we are not appointed to go through the wrath of God that will be poured out upon this wicked world. Compare Isaiah 2:9-21.

f. The place of protection during the days of apostasy before the Rapture is the Bible-believing church (1 Th. 5:12-14). Each believer needs to be a faithful member of a good church that is led by godly men who are sound in the New Testament faith. The leaders and the church members work together to accomplish God's will on earth in preaching the gospel to every nation while they wait for the Lord's return. The way to have peace in the churches is for the leaders to teach the Bible faithfully and for the members to show respect to the leaders and follow them. Church leaders should be honored and obeyed as long as they are following the Bible. Those who are unruly in the churches should be rebuked, because they hurt the Lord's work.

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

1. The Rapture is a mystery that was not revealed in the Old Testament prophecies (1 Cor. 15:51). The Old Testament prophets taught about the bodily resurrection, but they did not teach that some would be glorified without dying. They prophesied about the resurrection of Jews at the end of the Tribulation (Dan. 12:1-2), but they did not see the Rapture of New Testament believers before the Tribulation.

2. The dead in Christ will be raised to incorruption and the believers who are living at that time will be changed from mortal to immortal (1 Cor. 15:52-53). "Incorruptible" means the resurrection body will be incapable of such things as pain and sickness. "Immortal" means incapable of dying.

3. The Rapture of church-age believers is a source of great encouragement and motivation to godly Christian service (1 Cor. 15:58). The Rapture is a very important doctrine. It helps to motivate the Lord's people to stay awake spiritually and it helps to motivate the churches to stay busy in the work of preaching the gospel to lost souls before it is too late.

4. What about "the last trump"?

The trumpet that will sound at the Rapture of the church-age saints has nothing to do with the trumpets that will sound in Revelation as judgments on this world or the trumpets that sound in reference to Israel. The church is not a part of these other programs. Her "trump" is a different one. The church's last trump is when she shall finally be congregated together to the Lord (1 Th. 4:17). Compare Numbers 10:7.

The Time of the Rapture

NOTE TO TEACHERS: The following section can be omitted if there is a shortage of time to teach this course. Or you might want to hit the highlights of the following study

by way of review and amplification of what has already been taught on the Rapture.

Among those who believe in a literal Rapture of church-age saints, there are three positions regarding its timing in relation to the Tribulation. The three views are as follows:

1. Pre-tribulational -- church-age saints will be raptured before the Tribulation
2. Mid-tribulational (also called Pre-wrath) -- church-age saints will go through the first half of the Tribulation
3. Post-tribulational -- church-age saints will go through the entire Tribulation period

For the following reasons we are convinced the Bible teaches a Pre-tribulational Rapture. In this study, we are using the term “church” in a general, institutional sense. We have already looked at most of these reasons in the previous sections, but we want to gather all of the points together in one place and elucidate more on some of them:

1. Church-age believers are promised salvation from wrath (1 Th. 1:9-10; 5:1-9; Rom. 5:9; Rev. 3:10).

The Great Tribulation is expressly called the day of God’s wrath. Today the Lord is withholding His anger; He is offering men salvation through the preaching of the gospel, but the day approaches when He will take the seat of judgment. Then “*the day of his wrath*” will be upon all the world (Psa. 110:5; Isa. 13:6-13; Rev. 6:16-17). It is true that in every century, Bible-believing churches have been subjected to persecution, but this is different from the Great Tribulation. The persecutions of the saints are caused by the wrath of wicked men and the devil, whereas the seven-year Tribulation is a period especially pertaining to **God’s wrath** (Rev. 6:16-17; 14:10). Some believe that the church will not be saved *out of* the time of wrath, but will be saved *through* it. This cannot be true, since the Bible clearly reveals that those who are on earth during the Great Tribulation will not be delivered from wrath but will be overcome (Rev. 13:7). The Scriptures that promise church-age believers deliverance from wrath must refer to salvation out from the very presence of the wrath. Concerning the Great Tribulation, we are told that “*as a snare shall it come on ALL them that dwell on the face of the whole earth*” (Lk. 21:35). Church-age believers must either be physically removed from the earth, or they will be involved in the day of wrath. God promises removal. “... *I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth*” (Rev. 3:10). This verse does not say that God will keep the church age saints *through* the temptation but *from* it.

2. The Holy Spirit will be removed before the Tribulation (2 Th. 2:1-8).

In other passages of the Bible, the Holy Spirit is said to be the restrainer of sin (Gen. 6:3; Isa. 59:19). The Holy Spirit came into the world in His present dispensation at Pentecost (Acts 2), when He came to empower the church for the Great Commission (Acts 1:8). He will remove the church-age believers before the time of God’s great wrath. This does not

mean the Holy Spirit will not be present in the world at that time. The Holy Spirit is God and is omnipresent. It means that He will not be present in the same sense that He is in this age.

3. Church-age believers are promised mansions in heaven (John 14:1-3).

When the Lord Jesus returns to earth at the end of the Tribulation, He sets up His Messianic kingdom. If the Rapture occurred at the end of the Tribulation, the promise to church-age believers pertaining to heaven would not be fulfilled. Church-age believers are a heavenly people with a heavenly hope (Eph. 1; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1-3). Some dispensationalists teach that the church-age saints will live in heaven during the millennium. I believe they will live both in heaven and in earth. Jesus promised the apostles, who are the founders of the churches, that they would reign with Him over Israel (Mat. 19:28).

4. The Rapture of church-age saints is imminent (it could happen any time) whereas the Second Coming is said to be preceded by specific signs.

Christ taught that the Rapture is imminent (Matthew 24:42, 44; 25:13; Mark 13:33). **Paul** taught it (Phil. 4:5; Titus 2:12-13). **James** taught it (Jam. 5:8-9). And **Peter** taught it (1 Pet. 4:7). The early Christians were living in constant expectation of Christ's return (1 Th. 1:9-10). The apostle Paul instructed the church at Thessalonica that they did not need to heed signs and times, because the New Testament believer has been promised redemption from the "day of darkness" that shall overcome the whole world (1 Th. 5:1-9). The church is not waiting for the antichrist, but for Christ Himself.

5. The church is a mystery that is not revealed in the Old Testament (Eph. 3:1-11).

The New Testament church has no part in the chronology of events foretold by the Old Testament prophets. They clearly foretold the first coming of Christ, His miraculous birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. The same prophets described Christ's Second Coming in glory, preceded by a time of unprecedented worldwide tribulation and followed by the establishment of the glorious Messianic kingdom centered in Jerusalem. But these prophets did not see the church age--"*which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*" (Eph. 3:5).

Between the first and second coming, there is a time gap that was not seen by the Old Testament prophets. This gap is the church age. The prophets did not see that Israel would be set aside temporarily while God called out from among all nations a special body of people. After He has accomplished this purpose and the fullness of the Gentiles is come in, God will restart Israel's prophetic clock with the last seven years of Daniel's 70th Week and will fulfill all Old Testament prophecies in relation to His ancient chosen nation. "... *blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in*" (Rom. 11:25).

The Great Tribulation pertains to God's dealing with Israel and the Gentile nations, not

to the church. This present mystery period will end with the removal of church-age believers from the earth; and the Lord will then pour out His judgments on the Gentile nations and fulfill His covenants with Israel. The Great Tribulation is called “the time of the heathen” (Ezek. 30:3), referring to the Gentile nations, and “the time of Jacob’s trouble” (Jer. 30:7), referring to Israel.

6. The book of Revelation shows that the church is not on earth during the Tribulation.

a. The church is not seen on earth in chapters 4-18.

b. The witness for God in the earth during the Tribulation is Israel, not the church (Rev. 7).

c. The prayers of the saints in Revelation 8 are prayers for judgment. Only Israel prayed such prayers. The church-age saints are instructed to pray *for* her enemies, not *against* them (Lk. 9:51-56). The imprecatory prayers of Revelation are those of the Psalms and are based on God’s promise to Abraham to curse those that cursed Israel (Gen. 12:1-3).

d. The scorpion-like creatures of Revelation 9 are given freedom to hurt all earth-dwellers except those Jews who were sealed by the angel of Revelation 7; if church-age believers were on earth, they would be subject to this horrible judgment.

e. Revelation 10 identifies the events of Revelation 4-18 with those foretold by Old Testament prophets--the days of the Great Tribulation, the “Day of the Lord.” The church age was never in the view of these Old Testament prophecies; it was a mystery not yet revealed. The church has a different purpose and program than national Israel. It is Israel that is in view in Old Testament prophecy and in Revelation 4-18.

f. The ministry of the two witnesses of Revelation 11 identifies them with national Israel and with Old Testament prophecies of the “*Day of the Lord*.” The two witnesses minister from Jerusalem, Israel’s capital. The churches have no such capital, her hope being heavenly, not earthly (Col. 3:1-4; Phil. 3:17-21). The two witnesses are clothed in sackcloth, which speaks of Israel. The sackcloth signifies repentance from sin and sorrow because of some calamity (1 Ki. 21:27; 2 Ki. 19:1; Est. 4:1; Isa. 15:3; Jer. 4:8). Nowhere are the churches seen in sackcloth. The churches are told, rather, to “*rejoice in the Lord alway*” (Phil. 4:4). The church-age believer’s judgment is forever past, and he is to keep his mind centered in the heavenlies where, positionally, he is already seated, eternally victorious with Christ (Eph. 2:5-10). Revelation 11:4 identifies the two witnesses with the Old Testament prophecy of Zechariah 4:3, 11, 14. This is a prophecy about Israel, not the church. Further, the two witnesses call down judgment upon their enemies in Revelation 10:5-6. Jesus rebuked his disciples for desiring to do just this and instructed the church-age believer to pray for the well-being of his enemies, not for their destruction (Lk. 9:54-56; Rom. 12:14, 17-21).

g. The devil persecutes Israel, not the church, during the Tribulation (Rev. 12). There can be no doubt that the woman in this chapter signifies Israel. Verse 5 shows the woman bringing forth Christ; it is obvious that Jesus was brought forth by Israel, not by

the churches (Isa. 9:6-7; Rom. 9:5). Also, the symbols of Revelation 12:1-2 recall familiar Old Testament typology of Israel. She is referred to as a woman (Isa. 54:5-7). The sun and moon and the 12 stars of verse 2 remind us of Joseph's dream regarding Israel (Gen. 37:9). The words of Revelation 12:2 are almost an exact quote from Micah 5:3, again speaking of Israel's delivery of the Messiah. These symbols are not used in the New Testament of the churches.

The Attack on the Pre-Tribulational Rapture

The doctrine of the pre-tribulational Rapture is under severe attack today. Consider some examples from the emerging church:

Brian McLaren, a prominent leader in the emerging church, calls the imminent return of Christ the "eschatology of abandonment" (interview with Planet Preterist, Jan. 30, 2005). This is because he believes that Christians should build the kingdom of God on earth today instead of waiting until Christ returns, so he claims that those who believe in a pre-tribulation Rapture are abandoning their duty to save the earth from global warming and to solve the problems of hunger, disease, war, etc.

Jonny Baker of Grace in London, England, rejects dispensationalism as "escapology theology" and "advocates that Christians need to invest themselves in the current culture, not live on hold until time runs out" (*Emerging Churches*, pp. 78, 79).

N.T. Wright, who has a great influence on the emerging church, warns that the doctrine of an imminent rapture is dangerous because it interferes with kingdom building and environmental activities. "If there's going to be an Armageddon, and we'll all be in heaven already or raptured up just in time, it really doesn't matter if you have acid rain or greenhouse gases prior to that. Or, for that matter, whether you bombed civilians in Iraq. All that really matters is saving souls for that disembodied heaven" ("Christians Wrong about Heaven, Says Bishop," *Time*, Feb. 7, 2008).

Tony Campolo says: "I think that we need to challenge the government to do the work of the Kingdom of God, to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. That whole sense of the rapture, which may occur at any moment, is used as a device to oppose engagement with the principalities, the powers, the political and economic structures of our age" ("Opposition to women preachers evidence of demonic influence," Baptist Press, June 27, 2003).

Mark Driscoll refers to the pre-tribulational Rapture as "pessimistic dispensationalism" (*Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, p. 146). He has said that "eschatology-minded Christians" are not welcome in his church.

The Importance of the Pre-Tribulational Rapture

The doctrine of the pre-tribulational Rapture is not a minor one. As we have seen, Jesus, Paul, James, and Peter taught that the return of Christ was imminent and was to be expected at any time (Mat. 24:44; Phil. 4:5; Jam. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). The early Christians

lived in expectation of Christ's return and the literal fulfillment of the prophecies (1 Th. 1:9-10).

The doctrine of a pre-tribulational Rapture is a great motivator for purifying one's personal Christian life.

1. It encourages the believer in trials and persecutions. "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words" (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18).

2. It keeps the church's focus on the Great Commission (Mat. 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk. 24:44-48; Acts 1:8). It teaches us that preaching the gospel, winning people to Christ, and establishing churches as the pillar and ground of the truth is the most urgent matter. D.L. Moody had it right when he said: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'"

3. It motivates us to be busy in the Lord's work (1 Cor. 15:58).

4. It motivates us to live obedient lives (1 Jn. 3:1-3; 1 Th. 5:4-7).

5. It motivates us to separate from evil (Tit. 2:13-14).

6. It keeps believers on the outlook for heresy and apostasy (2 Timothy 4:3-4; 1 John 2:24-28).

What about the pre-wrath position that says believers will not be raptured until part way through the Tribulation?

The "pre-wrath" doctrine says that the Rapture occurs mid-way between Daniel's 70th Week. It is based on the view that the "church" is to be kept from God's wrath and the wrath is limited to the last half of the seven-year tribulation period, beginning when the antichrist sets himself up in the Jewish temple as God.

I believe this position is wrong for three reasons, chiefly.

1. The first reason I believe this position is wrong is the Bible's teaching about the imminency of His coming (Mat. 24:44; 44; 25:13; Mark 13:33; Phil. 4:5; Jam. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). If the believer is not taken away until part way through the Tribulation, he would know the time of the Rapture precisely, almost to the day, because he would see the events unfold during the first half of Daniel's 70th week.

2. We do not accept the teaching that only the last seven judgments are the wrath of God (Rev. 15:1; 16:1). The wrath of God is mentioned in Revelation 6:16-17, at the beginning of the Tribulation. The fact is that the entire Tribulation is the wrath of God, each part growing in intensity. The seal judgments affect a fourth of the world (Rev. 6:8). The trumpet judgments affect a third of the earth (Rev. 8:7-11; 9:15). The vial judgments

affect the entire world (Rev. 16:2, 3, 4, 8, 10, 14, 20).

3. The entire period of Daniel's 70th Week pertains to Israel and not to the church. As we have seen, the church is not seen on earth after Revelation 3. Everything described on earth in Revelation 6-18 pertain to the Gentile nations and Israel. The "pre-wrath" position does not make a proper and consistent distinction between Israel and the church.

When Was the Pre-Tribulation Rapture First Taught?



It has long been claimed by amillennialists, preterists, and others who interpret prophecy allegorically that the doctrine of the pre-tribulation Rapture is a new doctrine, and since it is alleged a new doctrine it cannot be a true one.

Gary DeMar, President American Vision, says: "A majority of prophecy writers and speakers teach that the church will be raptured before a future tribulational period. But did you know that prior to about 1830 no such doctrine existed. No one in all of church history ever taught pretribulation rapture" (cited from "Why Christians Will Suffer Great Tribulation," Ourdailybreadbyjoeortiz).

When Demar says the pre-tribulation Rapture did not exist prior to 1830, he is referring to the *The Morning Watch* prophecy journal and the writings of John Darby which popularized dispensational theology in the 1800s.

Though this claim continues to be made, it is patently false.

MORGAN EDWARDS (1722-1795)

The pre-tribulation Rapture was taught by prominent Baptist leader Morgan Edwards. His *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties* was published in 1744 in Philadelphia.

Morgan Edwards was one of the most prominent Baptist leaders of his day. He was the pastor of the Baptist church in Philadelphia and the founder of Brown University, the first Baptist college in America. A summary of life was featured in the *Baptist Encyclopedia*. He was one of the first Baptist historians of repute, his *Materials Toward A History of the Baptists* (1770) providing a foundation for all subsequent works.

Following is what Edwards believed about Bible prophecy:

“The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years. I say, somewhat more; because **the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ’s ‘appearing in the air’ (I Thes. iv. 17); and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many ‘mansions in the father’s house’ (John xiv. 2), and disappear during the foresaid period of time.** The design of this retreat and disappearing will be to judge the risen and changed saints; for ‘now the time is come that judgment must begin,’ and that will be ‘at the house of God’ (I Pet. iv. 17)” (Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties*, 1744).

Edwards first wrote the previous statement in an senior essay while at Bristol Baptist College in Bristol, England, before coming to America. At the beginning of the essay, in a comment addressed to his teacher, Edwards said,

“And is it come to my lot to treat of the Millennium, or Christ thousand years reign on earth? Thousand pities, sir, that you had not allotted the task to one of these older and abler students! But since it is your pleasure, I will do my possible: and IN THE ATTEMPT WILL WORK BY A RULE YOU HAVE OFTEN RECOMMENDED, VIZ. ‘TO TAKE THE SCRIPTURES IN A LITERAL SENSE, EXCEPT WHEN THAT LEADS TO CONTRADICTION OR ABSURDITY.’”

This rule of literal interpretation of prophecy is exactly the rule from which pre-Tribulationists work today. It is the rule that I teach in my courses on Bible interpretation.

Edwards bluntly rejected the allegorical approach. Of the millennial kingdom prophecies, he said, “Miserable work do the Antimillenarians make of these texts.”

Edwards was writing 175 years before the destruction of the Ottoman Empire’s hold on the land of Israel (1917) and 200 years before the establishment of the modern state of Israel (1948), yet he knew that these things would happen. Consider the following fascinating prediction that he made based on a literal interpretation of Bible prophecy:

“The Turkish or Ottoman Empire will be demolished; for otherwise the right owners cannot possess their inheritance ... The twelve tribes (as observed before) will return to their ancient inheritance, else how can the twelve apostles be their judges? ... In this

united capacity they will rebuild Jerusalem in its place, and the temple in its place on mount Zion; for in this temple will antichrist sit as god, and be the abomination mentioned by Daniel, and referred to by Christ” (Edwards, *Two Academical Exercises on the Subjects Bearing the Following Titles; Millennium and Last-Novelties*, 1744).

From the case of Morgan Edwards, it is obvious that there were Baptists in the 18th century in England and America who held the literal principle of interpretation of Bible prophecy as opposed to the allegorical.

We must remember that most preachers do not leave a permanent record of their teaching. From Paul’s day to ours, the vast majority of sound preachers have been common men as opposed to scholars.

Typically, they are not writers and do not publish books. In the record church history, we only have a tiny glimpse into what was happening, and that glimpse is based on the pittance that has survived of the little that was ever recorded.

“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (1 Cor. 1:26-27).

EPHRAEM THE SYRIAN (AD c. 303-373)

We now go back to two centuries after the apostles. Ephraem is venerated as a “saint” by the Catholic and Orthodox churches, but they would not allow him to teach his doctrine of prophecy today.

Ephraem is called “the Syrian” because he lived in that region.

He was a voluminous writer. Many of his sermons and psalms are included in the 16-volume *Post-Nicene Library*. (The Council of Nicea was held in AD 325, and historians divide the “fathers” into Ante-Nicene, before 325, and Post-Nicene, after 325).

Some of Ephraem’s sermons and hymns are used in the liturgy of Orthodox churches.

In the 1990s some of Ephraem’s writings were translated into English for the first time, one of these being *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*, A.D. 373.

The translation was done by Professor Cameron Rhoades of Tyndale Theological Seminary at the bequest of Grant R. Jeffrey. It was subsequently published in Jeffrey’s 1995 book *Final Warning*.

It is obvious that Ephraem believed in a literal fulfillment of prophecy, including a Rapture of New Testament saints prior to the Tribulation.

“For all the saints and Elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins” (Ephraem the Syrian, *On the Last Times*).

Observe that Ephraem taught that the saints will be taken to the Lord so they will not see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world, which is exactly what 1 Thessalonians 5:3-9 says.

Ephraem taught a literal antichrist who will sit in a literal rebuilt temple in Jerusalem, a literal 3.5 year Tribulation, a literal Two Witnesses or prophets who will preach in Jerusalem, a literal battle of Gog and Magog.

“And when the three and a half years have been completed, the time of the Antichrist, through which he will have seduced the world, after the resurrection of the two prophets, in the hour which the world does not know, and on the day which the enemy or son of perdition does not know, will come the sign of the Son of Man, and coming forward the Lord shall appear with great power and much majesty, with the sign of the word of salvation going before him, and also even with all the powers of the heavens with the whole chorus of the saints. ... Then Christ shall come and the enemy shall be thrown into confusion, and the Lord shall destroy him by the Spirit of his mouth. And he shall be bound and shall be plunged into the abyss of everlasting fire alive with his father Satan; and all people, who do his wishes, shall perish with him forever; but the righteous ones shall inherit everlasting life with the Lord for ever and ever” (Ephraem the Syrian, *On the Last Times, the Antichrist, and the End of the World*, A.D. 373).

Ephraem believed in the imminency of the return of Christ and urged his fellow Christians to live godly lives in expectation of His return.

EARLY CHRISTIANS TO AUGUSTINE

Actually, Ephraem the Syrian was not alone in interpreting Bible prophecy literally in his day.

He was living one generation from the era of Augustine (354-430), whenever there was a dramatic change. When Ephraem died in 373, Augustine was 19 years old.

It was in the era of Augustine that allegoricalism widely replaced the previous method of interpretation. Prior to this, it was common among Bible believers to interpret prophecy literally. They believed that Christ would return literally (and imminently), bind Satan, and establish a literal millennial kingdom on earth.

This is admitted by church historians.

William Newell says: “The early Church for 300 years looked for the imminent return of our Lord to reign, and they were right” (Newell, *Revelation*).

Phillip Schaaf said, "... the most striking point in the eschatology of the ante-Nicene age [prior to AD 325] is the prominent chiliasm, or millenarianism, that is the belief of a visible reign of Christ in glory on earth with the risen saints for a thousand years, before the general resurrection and judgment" (*History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1960, 2:614).

Henry Thiessen says, "It is clear ... that the Fathers held not only the pre-millennial view of Christ's coming, but also regarded that coming as imminent. The Lord had taught them to expect His return at any moment, and so they looked for Him to come in their day. Not only so, but they also taught His personal return as being immediately, with the exception of the Alexandrian Fathers, who also rejected other fundamental doctrines" (Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 477).

In fact, Augustine, "the father of amillennialism," once believed in a literal millennium himself. He said, "I myself, too, once held this opinion. ... They who do believe them are called by the spiritual, Chiliasts, which we may literally reproduce by the name Millenarians" (Augustine, *City of God*, book 20, chapter 7).

The following statement by Irenaeus is an example of what was commonly believed among the early "church fathers," as they looked forward to Christ's return and the establishment of His kingdom:

"The predicted blessing, therefore, belongs unquestionably to the times of the kingdom, when the righteous shall bear rule upon their rising from the dead; when also the creation, having been renovated and set free, shall fructify with an abundance of all kinds of food, from the dew of heaven, and from the fertility of the earth. ... In like manner [the Lord declared] that ... all animals feeding [only] on the productions of the earth, should [in those days] become peaceful and harmonious among each other, and be in perfect subjection to man" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers).

The church at Antioch long interpreted Bible prophecy literally. Antioch was an important church founded by Barnabas and Paul, and it is from this church that the first foreign missionaries were ordained and sent out (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-4). It was at Antioch that the believers were first called Christians.

Some of the preachers associated with Antioch were Lucian (died 312), Theodore (AD 350-428), Chrysostom (AD 354-407), Theodoret (AD 386-458), and Diodorus of Tarsus. These men interpreted Bible prophecy literally and believed in a literal millennium.

In his *History of Interpretation*, F.W. Farrar observed, "Diodorus of Tarsus' books were devoted to an exposition of Scripture in its literal sense, and he wrote a treatise, now unhappily lost, 'on the difference between allegory and spiritual insight'" (Farrar, pp. 213-15).

"The Antioch's school's two greatest exegetes, Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 350-428) and John Chrysostom (AD 354-407), were 'anti-allegorical'" (Matthew Allen, "Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology," bible.org).

Some of the early Christians after the apostles even taught a form of dispensationalism. Examples can be found in the extant writings of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Methodius. Justin Martyr (100-165) believed in four phases of history in God's plan: From Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, and from Christ to the eternal state. Irenaeus (120-202) taught something similar, dividing the dispensations into the creation to the flood, the flood to the law, the law to the gospel, the gospel to the eternal state.

Larry Crutchfield observed that some of the early church leaders "came very close to making nearly the same divisions modern dispensationalists do" ("Rudiments of Dispensationalism in the Ante-Nicene Period," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Oct. 1987). Crutchfield is Professor of Christian History and Culture, Columbia Evangelical Seminary.

Crutchfield concludes, "**We do not say that the early fathers were pretribulationists in the modern sense, only that the seeds were indeed there but were crushed under the allegorist's foot before they could sprout and bear early fruit.** ... Many biblical principles and concepts held by the millenarian fathers were in an embryonic state. And while elements of their teachings lack the sophistication and systematic presentation the modern scholar might like, it should be remembered that these 'doctors' of the primitive church lived on the frontier of Christian theological formulation."

The allegorical interpretation was invented by false teachers after the apostolic era as the apostasy was growing and spreading toward the formation of the Roman Catholic Church.

A school was established at Alexandria, Egypt, which became the headquarters for the allegorical method of interpretation. Egypt was a place where false teaching proliferated in the first centuries after Christ. **Clement**, who headed the school from AD 190 to 202, corrupted the Christian faith by mixing it with the worldly philosophy and allegoricalism of Philo. He taught many false doctrines, including purgatory, and believed that most men would eventually be saved even though Jesus said only a few would be (Mat. 7:14). "Clement saw the literal meaning of Scripture as being a 'starting point' for interpretation. Although it was 'suitable for the mass of Christians,' God revealed himself to the spiritually advanced through the 'deeper meaning' of Scripture. In every passage, a deeper or additional meaning existed beyond the primary or immediate sense" (Matthew Allen, "Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology," bible.org).

Origen (AD 185-254) was one of the chief fathers of allegoricalism. He led the school at Alexandria from AD 202 to 232. Though he endured persecution and torture for the cause of Christ under the Emperor Decius in 250, Origen was laden down with heresies. Like Clement, he mixed the truth of the Bible with pagan philosophy. He taught that celibacy was a holy state above marriage, contrary to the teaching of the apostles. He taught baptismal regeneration, purgatory, and the pre-existence of the human soul. He

taught that all men, even Satan and demons, would eventually be saved. He taught that the Holy Spirit was the first creature made by God, and denied the full Godhead of Jesus. He did not believe that the Scriptures are wholly inspired by God.

Origen claimed that “the Scriptures have little use to those who understand them literally.” He described the literal meaning of Scripture as “bread” and encouraged the student to go beyond this to the “wine” of allegoricalism, whereby one can become intoxicated and transported to heavenly realms. Origen’s commentaries contained a wealth of fanciful interpretations, abounding in “heretical revisals of Scripture” (Frederick Nolan, *Inquiry into the Integrity of the Greek Vulgate*, p. 367).

Another father of allegoricalism was **Augustine** (AD 354-430), one of the fathers of the Roman Catholic Church. He was exalted as one of the “doctors” of Rome. Augustine invented the terrible and unbiblical doctrine of the inquisition that was used by the Catholic Church against Bible believers for more than 1,000 years. The German historian Neander observed that Augustine’s teaching “contains the germ of the whole system of spiritual despotism, intolerance, and persecution, even to the court of the Inquisition.” Augustine instigated fierce persecutions against the peace-loving, Bible-believing Donatists who were striving to maintain pure biblical churches. He taught that “the sacraments,” such as baptism, were the means of salvation. He taught that Mary did not commit sin. He taught the heresy of purgatory. He was one of the fathers of infant baptism, claiming that unbaptized infants are lost and calling all who rejected infant baptism “infidels” and “cursed.” He exalted the authority of “the church” over that of Scripture.

“Through Augustine, Origen's allegorical hermeneutic became the backbone of medieval interpretation of the Bible” (Matthew Allen, “Theology Adrift: The Early Church Fathers and Their Views of Eschatology,” bible.org).

These heresies grew and became a fundamental part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

When the Protestant denominations (e.g., Anglican, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist) broke away from Rome, one of the errors they brought with them was the allegorical interpretation of prophecy.

THE APOSTLES

When it comes to sound doctrine, the bottom line is not what anyone has or has not taught in church history. It is “what saith the Lord?” Period. The Bible is the *sole* authority for faith and practice. It is not one authority among many, and it is not the authority only as confirmed by “church fathers” and “theologians.”

The bottom line is that the apostles and early Christians interpreted prophecy literally.

They believed in an imminent return of Christ.

“For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And **to wait for his Son from heaven**, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Th. 1:9-10).

They believed in a Rapture of New Testament saints.

“But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Th. 4:13-18).

They believed that the New Testament saints would be saved from the Tribulation to come.

“For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th. 5:9)

They believed in a literal Antichrist.

“Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (2 Th. 2:3-4).

They believed in a literal return of Christ and a literal fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began” (Acts 3:19-21).

They believed in a literal fulfillment of Israel's covenants following the church age.

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is

my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” (Romans 11:25-27).

CONCLUSION

Brethren, do not let anyone rob you of a literal interpretation of prophecy.

A large portion of the Bible consists of prophecy, and much of it has not yet been fulfilled. The portion that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled literally. We think of the great Messianic prophecies of Christ’s first coming in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. The prophecies are breathtaking in detail, and every detail was fulfilled “literally.”

Further, if we do not interpret prophecy according to the “normal literal” method, there is no way to determine for sure what it means.

A literal interpretation of prophecy results in the doctrine that the church is not Israel, and that Israel’s covenants will yet be fulfilled after the church age.

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” (Romans 11:25-27).

The 70th Week of Daniel 9:24-27 pertains to Israel, not to the church. Every event of the 70 Weeks pertains to “thy [Daniel’s] people, and the holy city” (verse 24). Before God turns His attention, so to speak, to fulfilling Israel’s ancient covenants, including the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7, the Church will be Raptured and will not see the coming of the antichrist and the other signs that immediately precede the glorious return of Christ.

The doctrine of the Pre-tribulation Rapture is not a minor one. Jesus, Paul, James, and Peter taught that the return of Christ is imminent and is to be expected at any time (Mat. 24:44; Phil. 4:5; Jam. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). The early Christians lived in this expectation (1 Th. 1:9-10).

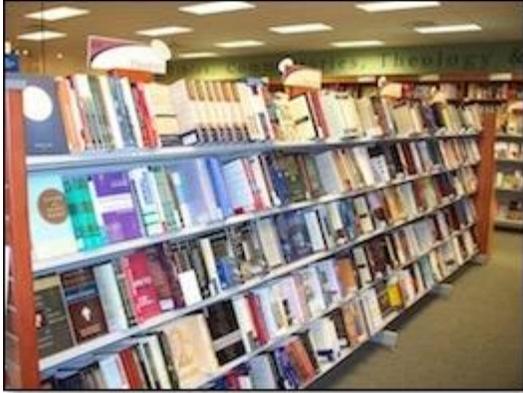
The doctrine of a pre-tribulation Rapture is a great motivator for purifying the Christian life.

1. It encourages the believer in trials and persecutions. “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18).

2. It keeps the church’s focus on the Great Commission (Mat. 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk. 24:44-48; Acts 1:8). D.L. Moody had it right when he said: “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”

3. It motivates believers to be busy in the Lord's work (1 Cor. 15:58).
4. It motivates believers to live obedient lives (1 Jn. 3:1-3; 1 Th. 5:4-7).
5. It motivates believers to separate from evil (Tit. 2:13-14).
6. It keeps believers on the outlook for heresy and apostasy (2 Timothy 4:3-4; 1 John 2:24-28).

Hating the Rapture



Evangelical bookstores typically feature many writers who hate the doctrine of an imminent Rapture of the saints, in spite of the fact that it is plainly described in Paul's writings and the early saints were living in expectation of it.

“For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

“Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (Matthew 24:44).

“For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; And to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

James and Peter and John also taught that the Lord's coming is at hand.

“Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door” (Jam. 5:9).

“But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer” (1 Pet. 4:7).

“Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand” (Rev. 1:3).

In contrast, consider the following heretical statements against the imminent return of Christ:

Tony Campolo hates dispensationalism and rejects the doctrine of Christ's imminent return. He calls it “a weird little form of fundamentalism.” Speaking at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's annual meeting in June 2003, Campolo said: “That whole sense of the

rapture, which may occur at any moment, is used as a device to oppose engagement with the principalities, the powers, the political and economic structures of our age” (“Opposition to women preachers evidence of demonic influence,” Baptist Press, June 27, 2003).

Brian McLaren mocks the “fundamentalist expectations” of a literal second coming of Christ with its attendant judgments on the world and assumes that the world will go on like it is for hundreds of thousands of years (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 305). He calls the literal, imminent return of Christ “pop-Evangelical eschatology” (*Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 267) and the “eschatology of abandonment” (interview with Planet Preterist, Jan. 30, 2005, <http://planetpreterist.com/news-2774.html>). McLaren says that the book of Revelation is not a “book about the distant future” but is “a way of talking about the challenges of the immediate present” (*The Secret Message of Jesus*, 2007, p. 176).

Mark Driscoll mocks the idea of a Rapture for believers and a one-world government with an Anti-christ who makes people wear a mark to buy, sell or trade (*Confessions of a Reformissional*, pp. 49-50). He adds that this kind of end-time “mission” is not a message from Jesus but rather one “concocted from a cunning Serpent” (“Mark Driscoll Rejects McLaren but Embraces Contemplative,” Jan. 11, 2008, <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/blog/index.php?p=931&more=1&c=1>). Driscoll mocks the imminent Rapture. He claims that the Rapture doctrine is evidence of the sickness of American Christians and mocks those who have the goal of leaving “this trailer park of a planet before God’s tornado touches down on all the sinners” (*The Radical Reformission*, p. 78). He libelously calls dispensationalists “nutty, Christian, end-times-prophecy Kaczynskis” (p. 165). [Ted Kaczynski was the “Unabomber” terrorist who murdered three people and maimed 23 others in his 18-year-long campaign against modern technology.]

Dan Kimball describes how that he rejected dispensational theology and the doctrine of an imminent Rapture and moved to his current position that “the kingdom of God is here, now” (*Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, pp. 87-90, 102).

Ed Stetzer says it is wrong to worry about whether the Rapture is imminent. “When the disciples had an inordinate interest in the end times, much like we do today in North America among evangelicals, Jesus said, ‘Do not get focused on that’” (*Breaking the Missional Code*, p. 40). Stetzer is referring to Acts 1:6-8. Jesus was not talking about the timing of the Rapture but about the coming of the kingdom of God. The disciples were expecting the kingdom to be set up immediately, but Jesus told them to focus rather on preaching the gospel and leave the coming of the kingdom to Him. This passage corrects the emerging church doctrine that we are building the kingdom of God in the world today, but it does not support the idea that we shouldn’t be concerned about the imminent return of Christ.

The rejection of the imminent Rapture is not a light matter.

As we have seen, Christ, Paul, James, and Peter taught that the return of Christ is imminent and is to be expected at any time (Mat. 24:44; Phil. 4:5; Jam. 5:8-9; 1 Pet. 4:7). The early Christians lived in expectation of Christ’s return and the literal fulfillment of the prophecies (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

The doctrine of a pre-tribulational Rapture is a great motivator for purifying one's personal Christian life.

It encourages the believer in trials and persecutions (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18). It keeps the church's focus on the Great Commission (Mat. 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lk. 24:44-48; Acts 1:8). It teaches us that preaching the gospel, winning people to Christ, and establishing churches as the pillar and ground of the truth is the most urgent matter. D.L. Moody had it right when he said: "I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.'" The imminent Rapture motivates us to be busy in the Lord's work (1 Cor. 15:58), to live obedient lives (1 Jn. 3:1-3; 1 Th. 5:4-7), and to separate from evil (Tit. 2:13-14).

How many conservative evangelicals and conservative Southern Baptists have torn down the idol of the hatred toward the biblical Rapture and removed the high places where this heresy has spread?

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Study the Bible Dispensationally

One of the things that I am most thankful for in my Bible education is having been taught the importance of a normal-literal method of interpretation of prophecy. I fondly recall how that this opened up the Scriptures to me in a wonderful way when I was a young Christian. I didn't accept it blindly. I had filled my mind and heart with Scripture before I went to Bible School, and I had learned to test all things by it. I was trusting in promises such as John 7:17 and 8:31-32, and the normal-literal method of interpretation rang true to me as soon as I heard it. I knew that it was the truth, and I sensed that it was a very important truth.

A consistent application of the literal method of interpretation will result in a dispensational theology. We agree with the following statement by Charles Ryrie: "If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist. As basic as one believes normal interpretation to be, and as consistently as he uses it in interpreting Scripture, to that extent he will of necessity become a dispensationalist" (*Dispensationalism*, revised 1995, p. 20).

This, to me, is the bottom line, because I am convinced that the normal literal method of interpretation is the only proper method.

Not surprisingly, those who are committed to Reformed theology and its allegorical method of interpretation despise dispensationalism. Charles Ryrie, in his book *Dispensationalism*, gives many examples of this, including the following. Arthur W. Pink warned of the "crudities and vagaries" of dispensationalism and described those who follow it as "poor dupes" (Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, p. 10). John Gerstner called dispensationalism "a cult and not a branch of the Christian church" (Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, pp. 150, 262). John Bowman said Scofield dispensationalism "represents perhaps the most dangerous heresy currently to be found within Christian circles" (Bowman, "The Bible and Modern Religions: II. Dispensationalism," *Interpretation*, April 1956, p. 172). *The Presbyterian Journal* called it "a conservative heresy" (*Presbyterian Journal*, Jan. 2, 1963, p. 8). Rousas Rushdoony called dispensationalism "unbelief and heresy" (Rushdoony, Foreword to *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed., 1984). The faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary included dispensationalism in their list of "isms" alongside of Seventh-day Adventism and Perfectionism (Arnold Rhodes, ed., *The Church Faces the Isms*, 1958).

What Is Dispensationalism?

Dispensationalism refers to the fact that Bible history can be divided into distinct periods of time during which God works out His purposes. Dispensationalism is based on a literal interpretation of the Bible and a clear distinction between Israel and the Church.

The Bible uses the word "**DISPENSATION**" in Ephesians 1:10. "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ,

both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him.” This is the Greek word *oikonomia* (oy-kon-om-ee'-ah), which Strong defines as “administration (of a household or estate); specially, a (religious) ‘economy.’” This Greek word is also translated “stewardship” (Lk. 16:2-4). It refers to a period of time during which God is doing some particular work.

Another Bible word for this is “**TIME.**” We see this word in Ephesians 1:10—“the fulness of times...” Though the word “time” means different things in the Bible, one of its meanings is a period of time during which God is working out His purposes. In Ephesians 1:10 we see God’s grand plan of the ages, which is to gather together all things in Christ. In Acts 1:7 we find the phrase “the times,” referring to God’s plan. These are also called “the seasons.” It refers to the time on God’s great calendar. The Bible speaks of the “times of the Gentiles” (Lk. 21:24), the “times of the restitution of all things” (Acts 3:21), and “this present time” (Rom. 11:5).

Another Bible word for this is “**AGE.**” The Bible refers to “ages past” (Eph. 3:5), “ages to come” (Eph. 2:7), and “all ages” (Eph. 3:21).

Another Bible word for this is “**DAY.**” This term is used in many different ways in the Bible, but one of the ways it is used is to refer to a period during which God performs a certain work. Examples are “the day of salvation” (Isa. 49:8; 2 Co. 6:2), “the day of the Lord” (Isa. 2:12), “the last day” (Jn. 6:54), and “the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Co. 1:8; Ph. 1:10; 2:16; 2 Th. 2:2).

Thus, the Bible teaches that there are great periods of time during which God works out His eternal plan. These periods are called “dispensations,” “ages,” “times,” and “days.”

Following are some definitions of dispensationalism based on the previous terms. These are taken from Charles Ryrie’s book *Dispensationalism*, pages 29-20.

Charles Ryrie: “Dispensationalism views the world as a house-hold run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time. These various stages mark off the distinguishably different economies in the outworking of His total purpose, and these different economies constitute the dispensations” (*Dispensationalism*, p. 29).

W. Graham Scroggie: “[Dispensationalism is] the administration of the human race or any part of it, at any given time. Just as a parent would govern his household in different ways, according to varying necessity, yet ever for one good end, so God has at different times dealt with men in different ways, according to the necessity of the case, but throughout for one great, grand end” (Scroggie, *Ruling Lines of Progressive Revelation*, 1918, pp. 62-62).

Harry Ironside: “[Dispensationalism is] an ordered condition of things. ... There are various economies running through the Word of God. A dispensation, an economy, then, is that particular order or condition of things prevailing in one special age which does not necessarily prevail in another” (Ironside, *In the Heavens*, p. 67).

Clarence Mason, Jr.: "... in its Biblical usage, a dispensation is a divinely established stewardship of a particular revelation of God's mind and will which brings added responsibility to the whole race of men or that portion of the race to whom the revelation is particularly given by God. Associated with the revelation, on the one hand, are promises of reward or blessing for those responding to the obedience of faith, while on the other hand there are warnings of judgment upon those who do not respond in the obedience of faith to that particular revelation. However, though the time period (age) ends, certain principles of the revelation are often carried over into succeeding ages, because God's truth does not cease to be truth, and these principles become part of the cumulative body of truth for which man is responsible in the progressive unfolding revelation of God's redemptive purpose" (Mason, notes on his course on Eschatology at the Philadelphia College of Bible, pp. 5-6).

Paul Nevin: "A dispensation is God's distinctive method of governing mankind or a group of men during a period of human history, marked by a crucial event, test, failure, and judgment. From the divine standpoint, it is a stewardship, a rule of life, or a responsibility for managing God's affairs in His house. From the historical standpoint, it is a stage in the progress of revelation" (Paul Nevin, "Some Major Problems in Dispensational Interpretation," unpublished Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1963, p. 9).

What Are the Dispensations?

The Bible does not specifically tell us how many ages there have been since God made man or how many there will be in the future. C.I. Scofield, author of the famous Scofield Bible, and many other well-known dispensational teachers, have taught that there are seven dispensations. Scofield said, "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."

The seven Scofield dispensations are as follows:

1. Man innocent (Genesis 2-3)
2. Man under conscience (Genesis 3-8)
3. Man in authority over the earth (Genesis 9-11)
4. Man under promise (from Abraham to Moses)
5. Man under law (from Moses to the first coming of Christ)
6. Man under grace (from the first coming of Christ until the second coming)
7. Man under the personal reign of Christ (the millennial kingdom and new heaven and new earth)

That is one way that the ages can be explained and divided; but there are other ways to look at them, and the number seven is not necessary. It depends on how you define an age. The important point is that there have been various periods during which God has worked out His purposes, and during these periods God has related to men in different ways and has required different things of him. The knowledge of this is necessary for a

right interpretation of the Bible.

I am not satisfied with the Scofield dispensational system for several reasons. For example, to call the time from Adam's Fall to the Flood "man under conscience" is misleading and arbitrary, it seems to me, because there is no significant difference in God's dealings with man before the Flood or after the Flood. To call the age from the Flood to Abraham "man in authority over the earth" is also misleading, since man was actually in authority over the earth from the time of Adam's creation. To call the age from Moses to Christ the age of "man under law" is misleading, since the law of Moses was given to Israel, not to mankind in general. Further, to call the church age "man under grace" is misleading, since salvation has always been by grace and always will be (Romans 4:1-8).

I believe it is more profitable to divide the ages into the following categories:

1. *The Age of Testing.* This refers to the time when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden before the Fall (Genesis 1-3). The first man and woman were created sinless and were given only one commandment, which was not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they were tempted by Satan and sinned, the age of testing ended. We do not know how long Adam and Eve lived in the Garden of Eden before they sinned, but we do know that they didn't have any children until after they were put out of the Garden.

2. *The Age of Lawlessness.* This age lasted from Adam's Fall to Abraham (Genesis 4-9). During this period, rebels such as Cain built godless cities and societies. The world became so corrupt that God destroyed it with a global Flood and only Noah and his three sons and their wives survived. This period lasted roughly 1,600 years.

3. *The Age of Babel.* After the Flood Nimrod and his associates built the godless empire of Babel (Genesis 10:8-12; 11:1-9). Idolatry was invented at Babel and spread throughout the world (Romans 1:21-23). This resulted in great moral perversion (Rom. 1:24-28). The age of Babel has continued through the millennia and will not end until God destroys the Babylon world system during the Great Tribulation (Revelation 17).

4. *The Age of Israel's Beginning.* During this period, God built the foundation of the nation of Israel (Genesis 12-50). God called Abraham out of Ur and gave him the covenant; the covenant passed to Isaac, then to Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel), then to the 12 sons of Jacob who were the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel. During the days of Joseph, Israel moved to Egypt and dwelt there until the time of Moses. This period lasted about 430 years.

5. *The Age of the Law of Moses.* This age lasted from Moses to the coming of Christ (Exodus to the end of the Old Testament). During this period, God put Israel under the Mosaic Law to prepare for the coming of Christ. The law does this in two ways: First, it shows God's holiness and man's sinful condition and condemnation before God and his need of salvation. Second, it points to Christ by many types, such as the Passover lamb and the Tabernacle. It is important to understand that men were never saved by keeping

the law of Moses. Salvation has always been by God's grace through faith in His Word (Romans 4:1-8). The law was given as a schoolmaster to lead men to Christ (Galatians 3:24). This period lasted roughly 1,500 years.

6. *The Church Age*. This age lasted from the Cross to the Rapture. During this age, God is calling out a special body of people from among all nations (Acts 1:8; 15:14-17; Romans 11:25-26). So far this period has lasted almost 2,000 years.

7. *The Age of Daniel's 70th Week*. This seven-year period lasts from the Rapture until the return of Christ in glory. It is the final seven years of Daniel's prophecy of the 70 Weeks (Dan. 9:24-27). It is called the Day of Lord (Isaiah 2:12) and the day of Jacob's trouble (Jeremiah 30:7). It is described in Matthew 24:3-31 and Revelation 6-19. During this period, God will prepare Israel and the world for the return of Christ. He will judge the nations for their sin and rebellion and idolatry. He will complete His judgments upon Israel and convert her according to the New Covenant. The antichrist and his armies will be overthrown at Armageddon, and Satan will be bound in the bottomless pit.

8. *The Age of the Millennial Kingdom*. This age lasts from Christ's second coming to the end of millennial reign (Revelation 19-20). During this period, God will establish the Messianic kingdom on earth, with its headquarters in Jerusalem, and the nations will be ruled with a rod of iron. This period will last 1,000 years.

9. *The Ages of the New Heaven and New Earth* (Revelation 21-22). From this point on, God will continue to work out His plans from age to age throughout eternity, but the Bible does not reveal any further details. We call this the "ageS" plural rather than "age" singular, because the Bible indicates that there will be endless ages during which God will work out His eternal purposes. The Greek phrase translated "forever and ever" is *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, which means "into the ages of the ages" (1 Pet. 4:11; Rev. 11:15; 20:10; 22:5).

The Benefits of Dispensationalism

1. Dispensational theology employs a consistent normal-literal method of interpretation throughout the Scripture.

We have already seen the importance of a literal approach to Bible prophecy. Dispensationalism is the only theology that uses the normal-literal method of interpretation consistently throughout Scripture.

2. Dispensational theology helps us to study the Bible within its proper context.

Paul instructed Timothy to rightly divide God's Word (2 Tim. 2:15). The Greek word *orthotomeo*, which is translated "rightly divide," means "to make a straight cut, to dissect correctly." The Bible is one Book, but it is also divided into individual books and major divisions (e.g., law, prophecy, Gospels, Acts, Epistles), and each segment must be

rightly interpreted within its proper context. Dispensational theology enables the student to accomplish this.

Consider Genesis 1:29-30, which says that man may eat only vegetables. This is no longer in effect, though, since after the Flood God told Noah that he could eat meat (Gen. 9:30).

Consider Leviticus 11:7-8, which forbids the eating of pork. These dietary restrictions were required by the law of Moses, but Paul taught that the New Testament believer is not under dietary restrictions (1 Tim. 4:3-5).

Consider Deuteronomy 13:6-10 and Exodus 22:19, which command that idolators and witches be stoned to death. That was true in Israel under the law of Moses, and it will be true in Christ's kingdom, but in the church age Christians don't put idolators and witches to death. Paul didn't call for the death of the witch in Acts 16:16-18. When he visited the idolatrous city of Athens, Paul didn't try to seek to have idolators put to death; instead, he preached the gospel to them (Acts 17:22-34). We aren't living in the age of the law of Moses; we are living in the age of the Great Commission.

Consider 2 Kings 23:14-15, where King Josiah destroyed the idols. As a king of Israel operating under the law of Moses, he had God's authority to do this. But we never see the apostles and early churches breaking up idols, except for their own personal idols after they were saved. When Christ returns, He will destroy all idols from the earth, but today is the Great Commission age. It is not time to destroy idolators and break down their idols; it is time to preach the gospel to every person to give sinners an opportunity to be saved. This is what we see in the book of Acts. A believer can and should destroy his own idols, but he cannot destroy idols not belonging to him. If he rents a house or apartment that has an idol, he should ask the landlord if he can cover up the idol while he is occupying the facility. If the landlord does not agree, the believer should find another place to rent, but he is not authorized by the Bible to destroy idols that don't belong to him.

Consider Ezekiel 33:12-16, which says men are judged by whether or not they keep the law. Many have erred by thinking that this teaches how to be saved. Those who believe you can lose your salvation use verses like these to prove their doctrine. But the Bible student must interpret every passage in its context, and the context here is the law of Moses. We know from the New Testament that Moses' law was not written to show men how to be saved. It was written to show men that they are sinners under God's judgment and that they need to flee to Christ for salvation (Romans 3:19-20). The law of Moses required perfect obedience (Ezek. 33:15), which no sinner can do. Compare Galatians 3:10-12.

Consider Matthew 5:25-26, which calls for imprisonment for those who do not reconcile with their adversaries. This is not referring to believers in the churches. Nowhere in the book of Acts or in the New Testament epistles do we see the early churches operating prisons. In Matthew 5 Jesus is preaching the principles of the kingdom He will establish when He returns.

Consider Matthew 10:5-15. Here Christ sends out His disciples to preach, but note the following restrictions: (1) They were to preach only to Jews (v. 6). (2) They were to preach that the kingdom of heaven is at hand (v. 7). (3) They were to do miracles (v. 8). (4) They were not to carry any money or extra clothes (v. 9-10). (5) They were to carry no weapons (a staff). This is directly contradictory to the commands given later in the New Testament. Later Christ Himself commanded His disciples to preach to all men (Matt. 28:18-20), to preach the gospel of the death, burial, and resurrection rather than the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Mark 16:15), to carry both money and a sword (Lk. 22:35-26), and there is no command to do miracles. What is the difference between these accounts? The difference is that they are spoken under different dispensations. In Matthew 10, Christ was sending His disciples out to proclaim to Israel that their Messiah and King was present. That is the meaning of the message they preached, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." It was at hand because the King was standing right there! Thus in Matthew 10 the messengers were to preach only to Jews, were to do miracles to demonstrate that the Messiah had come as foretold in the prophets, were not to provide anything for themselves because it was just a short period of time and they were operating under the direct earthly supervision of the Messiah. Later, after Israel had rejected Christ, He began to prepare for the church age and the preaching of the gospel to the ends of the earth. In the church age, the program of God changed.

Consider the miracles of Christ in the Gospels and the miracles of the apostles in the book of Acts. These are not examples for believers today to imitate. Rather, they were signs to authenticate special ministries. Jesus did miracles to prove that He was the Messiah (John 5:36; 20:30-31). The apostles did miracles to demonstrate that they were the Lord's special apostles (2 Cor. 12:12).

Consider Revelation 13:10. This is written in the context of the reign of the antichrist (see verses 1-8). When verse 10 says, "He that leadeth into captivity shall go into captivity; he that killeth with the sword must be killed with the sword," it refers to the antichrist's law that will require all people to worship him (v. 8). It is not referring to using the sword at any time and in any age. Pacifists who use this verse to forbid the use of weapons in every situation are abusing the Scripture by taking things out of context. Jesus Himself at one point instructed His disciples to get a sword (Lk. 22:36). What Revelation 13:10 is warning about is joining hands with the antichrist in his war against those who refuse to bow to him.

3. Dispensational theology allows us to see that not everything in the Bible was written *to* or is directly *about* the church-age believer, but everything in the Bible is *for* the church-age believer in that everything has lessons for us.

See Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:1-11.

Consider Psalm 126:5-6. These verses are used for evangelism, but the verses actually refer to the return of Israel to the land. See verses 1-4. This is a promise that God will fulfill His covenants with Israel and will bring them back to the land. We can apply these

verses to evangelism, but it is important first to understand the main interpretation of a passage according to its dispensational context.

Consider 2 Chronicles 7:14. This is a promise given to Israel when the First Temple was built by Solomon. The promise, therefore, belongs particularly to Israel and not to the churches. Israel had a promised land, but we don't have a promised land in this present church age. We can make an application of this promise, though. God does bless nations to some extent when His people in the churches walk in obedience. How the Christians live will have an effect upon their nations. But we are strangers in this present world and our citizenship is in heaven, and nowhere does God promise to heal a pagan nation if Christians have a spiritual revival.

4. Dispensationalism makes a clear distinction between Israel and the Church.

1 Corinthians 10:32 states that there are three categories of people in the world today -- the JEWS, the GENTILES, and the CHURCH. Obviously, then, Israel is not the same as the church.

Some of the most common errors in theology have occurred through confusing the church with Israel. This is called "Replacement Theology."

This is one of the errors of ROMAN CATHOLICISM. Rome claims to be the new Israel and has adopted many things from the Old Testament dispensation, such as priests, temples, candles, incense, and sprinkling of water. This is one reason why Rome attempted to take over the Holy Land during the crusades of the Middle Ages, but the Holy Land belongs to Israel, not the Church.

This is also one of the errors of PROTESTANTISM. By this, I am referring especially to Anglican, Presbyterian, Methodist, Reformed, and Lutheran denominations. When the Protestant denominations left Rome, they did not leave behind all of Rome's errors. One of the errors they brought with them pertains to ecclesiology and the interpretation of prophecy. They teach that Israel was permanently rejected by God and replaced with the church. They do not believe that the Old Testament promises and prophecies pertaining to Israel will be literally fulfilled. To one extent or another they have also adopted certain rituals from the Old Testament dispensation, such as priests, liturgy, infant baptism (which they claim is the spiritualizing of circumcision), sabbath-keeping (which they foisted onto the first day of the week with no Scriptural authority), etc.

Most of the CULTS also claim to be a continuation of Israel in one form or the other. For example, the Worldwide Church of God, founded by Herbert W. Armstrong, claimed that 10 of the tribes of Israel had been lost and had re-surfaced today in England and America and had been restored in his cult. This is called British-Israelism, and there are other heretical groups that teach a form of it. Jehovah's Witnesses apply things from the book of Revelation that are for Israel, directly to itself, such as the sealing of the 144,000 from the 12 tribes in Revelation 7. Seventh-day Adventists claim that New Testament believers are obligated to keep the Sabbath and keep Old Testament dietary restrictions.

God's promises to Israel have not failed. God warned that if Israel rejected His Law she would be judged and evicted from her land and scattered among the nations (Deuteronomy 28:15, 25, 37, 64-67), but God also promised to restore Israel (Deut. 30:1-9). This is summarized in the prophecy of Hosea 3:4-5.

God's covenants with Israel (other than the Mosaic covenant) are unconditional, eternal, and unchangeable.

Consider the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7. In His covenant with David, God (1) promised that Israel would own her own land (2 Sa. 7:10), (2) promised that the throne of David would be established forever through David's seed (2 Sa. 7:13), (3) promised chastisement for sin, but never annulment of the promise (2 Sa. 7:14-15), (4) established David's house and kingdom forever (2 Sa. 7:16). All of this is fulfilled through Jesus Christ, David's Son, who has inherited the throne of David (Mat. 1:1) and who will establish the Davidic kingdom when He returns from heaven (Isa. 9:6-7).

All of God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament will be literally fulfilled.

- a. Israel will be restored to the land (Zech. 10:6-12).
- b. Israel will be brought through severe judgment during the Great Tribulation and one third of the Jews will call upon God's name (Zech. 13:8-9).
- c. Israel will repent and will be redeemed (Zech. 12:10 - 13:1).
- d. Messiah will return and defeat Israel's enemies and rule from Jerusalem (Zech. 14:1-21).

In contrast to Israel's covenants and prophecies, the Church is a mystery that was not revealed in Old Testament prophecies. See Ephesians 3:4-6.

Romans 11:25-29 tells us more about the mystery of the church. Christ came to Israel but was rejected (John 1:11). Christ was crucified and raised from the dead and ascended back to heaven. A few years later the armies of Rome destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and the Jews were scattered among the nations and for 2,000 years she did not have a home of her own. Israel has been blinded because of her rebellion against God. During the Church Age, God is calling out people from among all nations to form the Church. See Acts 15:13-18. When God is finished with this work, the Church believers will be Raptured out of the world and God will turn His attention back to fulfilling His covenants with Israel.

Contrast Covenant or Reformed Theology

The opposite of Dispensational Theology is Covenant Theology. This is the standard Presbyterian theology. It is also called Reformed and Federal Theology. It can be traced back to the time of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1584 and was encapsulated within the Westminster Confession one hundred years later. There is considerable variety within Covenant Theology traditions, but the following are some of the standard characteristics:

a. Covenant Theology says that there were only two covenants. Traditional Covenant Theology says there was a covenant of works before the Fall and a covenant of grace since the Fall, a covenant of works with Adam and a covenant of grace with Christ. The Westminster Confession stated, "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ." Another variety of covenant theology, called New Covenant Theology, says that the two covenants are the old covenant of law with Israel and the new covenant of grace with the church.

b. Covenant Theology claims that the Old Testament prophecies pertaining to Israel have already been fulfilled spiritually or allegorically or symbolically in the church. Covenant theologians believe that Israel has been permanently rejected.

c. Covenant Theology says there has been only one group of redeemed people: Israel in the Old Testament times and now the church, which supposedly has replaced Israel.

d. Covenant Theology has traditionally been accompanied by the practice of infant baptism, which is seen as the entrance into God's new covenant. They argue that since the old covenant had the rite of circumcision for babies, the new covenant must have the rite of baby baptism.

NOTE TO TEACHERS: The rest of this study on dispensationalism can be skipped if there is a lack of time.

Some Dangers of Dispensationalism

1. One potential danger of dispensationalism is thinking that the Bible student must accept one certain form of dispensational teaching.

While it is obvious that there are different dispensations in the Bible, the Bible student is not forced to accept the view of dispensationalism as taught by any certain man or group of men. In fact, no two dispensational teachers have agreed in every point. They have differed as to whether the church will be on earth during the millennium, as to how the new covenant relates to the church, as to how men were saved under the Law of Moses, as to how the Church will relate to Israel in eternity, and other things. Every systematic theology and every teaching of man must be carefully tested by the Bible itself. We must never forget the admonition found in the following three important verses: Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

It appears to me that no one system of dispensational theology can satisfy everything the Bible teaches about Israel, the Church, and future events. One reason is that God does not tell us everything. Not every question can be answered in this present time.

Further, I do not agree with the doctrine of the church as taught by most of the aforementioned men. (I say most, and not all, only because I am not familiar with what is taught by every one of them.) Typically they hold to a Protestant view of a universal church and they speak of “the church” in a universal sense as much as or even more often than they speak of the local sense, and I do not see this in Scripture. There is a “church” that is beyond the local church as described in Ephesians 2-3, but this is not a Protestant universal church and it is not something that is emphasized in the New Testament because it has no present practicality. Of the 110 mentions of the Greek word “ecclesia,” no more than two or three can refer to anything other than the local assembly by any standard of interpretation. It is not scripturally correct to refer to the church in a universal sense as Protestants use the term, such as “the church in America” or “the church in Europe.” There are churches, plural, in these localities, but it is unscriptural to refer to the church, singular, in this sense. The New Testament is very precise in the use of these terms. When referring to churches in a country or region, the term is always used in the plural -- e.g., the churches of Judea (Gal. 1:22), the churches of Macedonia (2 Cor. 8:1), and the churches of Asia (1 Cor. 16:19).

2. Another potential danger of dispensationalism today is Modified or Progressive Dispensationalism.

Since the late 1980s some men have made significant modifications to the traditional dispensational view. Three names are prominent in this field: Darrell Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary), Craig Blaising (Dallas Seminary), and Robert Saucy (Talbot Theological Seminary). In 1993 Bock and Blaising published *Progressive Dispensationalism* while Saucy published *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*.

Some of the principles of Progressive Dispensationalism are as follows:

- a. The church is not a parenthesis but is the first step towards establishment of the kingdom of God.
- b. The term “mystery” does not mean that the church was unrevealed in the Old Testament, but only that it was “unrealized.”
- c. The church is not a separate category distinct from Israel and the Gentiles. There are not “two peoples of God.” There is no distinction between Israel and the church in the future state. A Jew who becomes a Christian will be a part of Israel in the Millennium.
- d. The Davidic Covenant and the New Covenant have already been inaugurated and Jesus is presently sitting on the throne of David.
- e. Within biblical history there are only four dispensational eras.
- f. Kingdom righteousness and “holistic redemption” (for all of society) is to be pursued in the church age. “Revisionists give more attention to social action than they feel normative dispensationalists did or do” (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 176).

A good review and refutation of Progressive Dispensationalism can be found in the revised edition of *Dispensationalism* by Charles Ryrie.

3. Another potential danger of dispensationalism is in making improper dispensations and making too sharp a division between them.

This is called “ultra-dispensationalism” or “hyper-dispensationalism” and is characterized by making a sharp division between the ministry of Christ and that of the apostles, and of further dividing Paul’s teaching from that of Peter and the other apostles. Some of the well-known teachers of ultra- or hyper-dispensationalism are E.W. Bullinger, Cornelius Stam, J.C. O’Hair, Charles Welch, Otis Sellers, A.E. Knoch, and Charles Baker.

There are many varieties of ultra-dispensationalism, but the following are some of the chief characteristics:

a. The four Gospels are entirely Jewish and contain no direct teaching for the churches. Yet, the writer of Hebrews said that the same gospel of salvation that was preached by the apostles was preached by Christ (Heb. 2:3-4). Though we know that Christ presented Himself to the Jewish nation and we do understand that there are differences between the gospels and the epistles, yet in Hebrews 2 we do not see a sharp delineation between the gospel preached by Christ and that preached by the apostles who followed. In fact, the Gospel of John presents exactly the same gospel as that preached by Paul. Further, 1 Timothy 6:3 shows that Christ spoke directly to the church age.

b. The book of Acts is also largely Jewish. Hyper-dispensationalists commonly believe that after Christ was rejected by Israel in the Gospels, that they were given a second chance to receive the kingdom in the first part of the book of Acts. They teach that there are two different churches viewed in the book of Acts, and the true Pauline church only started after Acts 9, 13, or 28. The church mentioned in the first part of Acts allegedly refers to a different church than that of Paul’s prison epistles. The earlier “church” in Acts is simply an aspect of the kingdom preached in the Gospels. Most of the book of Acts is therefore discounted as a guideline for the churches today. Yet, at the very end of the book of Acts we still find Paul preaching about the kingdom (Acts 28:23). In fact, he was still preaching about it in his epistles! (2 Thess. 1:5; 2 Tim. 4:1). While we can see an obvious transition in the book of Acts, and not everything in Acts continues to be in effect in the churches today (e.g., tongues speaking and apostolic sign gifts) this does not mean that there are different gospels and different churches in various parts of Acts. The book of Acts is a book about and for the churches. The pattern of the first church as described in Acts 2 is the pattern for the churches throughout the age, except for the temporary and unique aspects pertaining to the coming of the Holy Spirit and the apostolic miracles.

c. The mysteries given to Paul are a different revelation from that given to Peter and the other apostles, and only Paul’s writings are directly for the church today. The other epistles, such as Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and John’s epistles are not for us today in a direct sense. Yet, Paul himself said that the church is built upon the “apostles”

plural and not merely upon himself (Eph. 2:20) and the mysteries were “revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets” (Eph. 3:5) and not to him alone. Peter also referred to the writings of Paul and made no distinction between Paul’s teaching and the teaching of the other apostles (2 Pet. 3:1-2, 15-16). Peter said Paul wrote to the same people and preached the same message. Though we know that Paul was the special apostle of the Gentiles and he was given unique revelations about the church as the body of Christ, his revelations in no way contradict the revelations given in the General Epistles (Hebrews - Jude).

d. The gospel preached by Peter in the early part of the book of Acts is different from the gospel preached by Paul. Yet, there is no difference between the gospel preached by Peter and that which Paul preached. (1) Consider the gospel Peter preached in his first epistle. He preached salvation through the blood of Christ (1 Pet. 1:2), salvation by God’s free mercy (1 Peter 1:3), the new birth (1 Peter 1:3), eternal security because of the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet. 1:3-4). (2) Acts 15 plainly states that all of the apostles, including Peter and Paul, agreed on the gospel. (3) Paul plainly said in 1 Corinthians 15:11-14 that they all preached the same gospel. (4) Even in Acts 2, Peter was preaching the gospel of the grace of Christ rather than a “kingdom gospel.” He preached Christ -- His crucifixion (Acts 2:23), resurrection (Acts 2:24-32), ascension and Lordship (Acts 2:33-36). He preached that the people should repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). This is not a “kingdom gospel.” (5) Further, Paul states in Galatians 1, that anyone who preached a different gospel was cursed. If Peter were truly preaching a different gospel in those days, he would have fallen under this curse.

e. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were given to Paul before he received the church age mysteries; thus they are not for the churches today. Hyper-dispensationalists differ on this point. Some accept both baptism and the Lord’s Supper; some reject water baptism and the Lord’s Supper altogether; while others reject only baptism and keep the Lord’s Supper.

f. According to hyper-dispensationalism there are different ways of salvation in the Old Testament and during the Tribulation. Peter Ruckman, for example, teaches that men were saved by faith plus works in the Old Testament and that they will be saved by faith plus works in the Tribulation and by works alone in the Millennium. In *Millions Disappear: Fact or Fiction?* Ruckman says: “If the Lord comes and you remain behind, then start working like a madman to get to heaven, because you’re going to have to. ... You must keep the Ten Commandments (all of them, Ecclesiastes 12:13), keep the Golden Rule (1 John 3:10), give your money to the poor, get baptized, take up your cross, hold out to the end of the Tribulation, wait for Jesus Christ to show up at the Battle of Armageddon, and be prepared to die for what you believe. In the Tribulation you cannot be saved by grace alone, like you could before the Rapture.” In fact, Romans 4:1-8 plainly states that Abraham before the law and David under the law were saved by faith without works. This is the only plan of salvation God ever has had and ever will have--salvation by grace alone through faith alone based upon the shed blood of Jesus Christ alone. The Old Testament saints did not know what the New Testament saint knows, but Romans 4 makes it plain that they were saved by faith without works. Like

Abraham, they believed God and it was counted unto them for righteousness. Those who are saved in the Tribulation will also be saved through faith in God's Word and by the blood of Jesus Christ and through this alone (Rev. 7:14).

A more recent statement of hyper-dispensationalism is presented in *One Book Rightly Divided: The Key to Understanding the Bible* by Dr. Douglas Stauffer (2000, McCowen Mills Publishers). Stauffer's book comes with recommendations from some well-known independent Baptist preachers, including Evangelist Dennis Corle of Revival Fires, William Grady, and J. Wendell Runion of International Baptist Outreach Missions. In his glowing Foreword to Stauffer's book (which he calls a "spiritual masterpiece"), Grady says that "this book will undoubtedly create shock waves within certain 'camps' of fundamentalism..." I doubt that the book will create shock waves within any camps, but it probably will create shock waves in some individual lives and churches.

Stauffer's teaching is largely the same as that which has been promoted by Peter Ruckman for many years, though Stauffer gives Ruckman no credit. He does mention that he received "the principles of right division" from Dave Reese. I sat under Reese's hyper-dispensational teaching in a course on prophecy at Tennessee Temple Bible School in the mid-1970s. It was a blessing when Reese was forced to leave part way through the course, and we were no longer subjected to his hyper-dispensational rants. We had the joy of finishing the rest of the course under the sound and profitable teaching of Bruce Lackey.

There are many good things in Stauffer's book. He has an excellent section on repentance, defining it properly as "a change of mind and heart attitude which leads to a change of actions" and warning that "too many sinners bow their heads and say the 'sinner's prayer' without any inward conviction or belief on the Lord Jesus Christ."

Though Stauffer's hyper-dispensationalism is milder than some of the other approaches (he accepts both baptism and the Lord's Supper as church ordinances, for example), there is no doubt that he is teaching a form of hyper-dispensationalism and that his false teaching will produce confusion and division.

Following are some of the errors that Stauffer teaches:

- * Paul is THE spokesman for the church age (p. 17).
- * The epistles from Hebrews to Revelation, while containing some church age applications, are actually written for Great Tribulation saints (pp. 20, 27).
- * Salvation is obtained by works during the Tribulation (p. 23).
- * Hebrews and James do not teach eternal security (pp. 23, 29).
- * Peter did not preach the gospel of the grace of God (p. 26).
- * The seven churches of Revelation 1-3 are not the body of Christ (p. 29).
- * John's first epistle teaches that salvation is through works (p. 56).
- * The book of Acts was not given "to show how to establish the local church or its functions" (p. 72)
- * Abraham had to keep his salvation through works (p. 175).

Stauffer even has a chapter warning about “hyper-dispensationalism”! In this, he conveniently redefines hyper-dispensationalism to mean something other than what he himself teaches. In fact, he sets up a straw man form of hyper-dispensationalism that doesn’t actually exist, or if it does exist, is so exceedingly rare as to be of no concern. He claims, for example, that a real hyper-dispensationalist teaches that the law is inapplicable today, but in reality, hyper-dispensationalists commonly teach that the law has applications for the church. He claims that hyper-dispensationalists exclude some portions of the Bible from study and application, but hyper-dispensationalists typically claim that all portions of the Bible have some value for study. Stauffer defines hyper-dispensationalism as “any intentional false division of the Bible” (his emphasis) (p. 149). Such a definition would be impossible to employ for the simple fact that we cannot look into the heart of a man and see what his motives are. In fact, hyper-dispensationalism is “any false division of the Bible” period, regardless of the motive of the one doing the teaching. A hyper-dispensationalist can be sincere or insincere. That is beside the point. The whole issue is whether he creates divisions in the Scriptures that should not be created. Stauffer’s book does precisely this. (He drops the word “intentional” in the third edition.)

Stauffer’s expanded third edition (2006) slightly modifies a few of these things, but it presents the same type of hyper-dispensationalism. He does not renounce anything he taught in previous editions. To me, his chief error is three-fold. First, his error is in allotting the book of Acts and the General Epistles to a dispensation different from the church age. In chapter 16 he divides the New Testament era into four dispensations -- the Age of Readiness (Matthew-John and Hebrews-Revelation 19), the Age of Church (Romans-Philemon), the Age of Kingdom (Revelation 20), and the Age of Eternity Future (Revelation 21-22). As for the book of Acts, Stauffer says, “The church should not base its existence or functions upon the book of Acts any more than upon a history book of the Soviet Union” (p. 72). The so-called Age of Readiness into which he lumps the General Epistles is a dispensation in which people are required to “seek the kingdom and to be ready whenever it might come” (p. 188). Stauffer claims that these books are not addressed directly to the church-age believer and that reading them is like reading mail intended for someone else (p. 28), and that they are primarily written for the Tribulation time (p. 47). To the contrary, the General Epistles are fully church-age revelations. The epistle of James was written for the churches in this present age as certainly and fully as Ephesians. There are no doctrinal contradictions between Paul’s epistles and the General Epistles. And the book of Acts, though we recognize its transitional character and the fact that there are things in it of a temporary nature (e.g., the apostolic sign miracles, 2 Cor. 12:12), it should be studied as church doctrine rather than a book applying to some different dispensation.

Second, Stauffer’s error is in setting up Paul as THE spokesman for the church and in contradiction to Peter and the other apostles and prophets who wrote the New Testament. He says, “God’s specific directions for the Church are found predominantly in the thirteen epistles that God used Paul to pen for the Church” (p. 22). While we know that Paul holds a unique place as the apostle of the Gentiles and he was given some wonderful revelations of church truth, he was not the only apostle who wrote for the churches, the non-Pauline New Testament epistles are as much for the Church as Paul’s

are. Paul's revelations in no way contradict those of the General Epistles, and he did not preach a different gospel from the others.

Harry A. Ironside wrote a helpful little booklet about this problem called "Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: Ultra-Dispensationalism Examined in the Light of Holy Scripture." He deals largely with the error of Bullingerism. This is available on the Internet at <http://www.brethrenonline.org/books/ultrad.htm>.

For more about the way of salvation in other dispensations, see "Salvation Is the Same in the Old Testament and the New Testament" by Bruce Lackey and "Salvation in the O.T. and the N.T. Follow-up." These are available at the Way of Life web site and in the Fundamental Baptist Digital Library.

4. Another potential problem with dispensationalism is not recognizing that there are transitional periods between dispensations.

One problem that can arise when looking at the Bible dispensationally is to fail to recognize transitional periods. For example, John the Baptist is a transitional figure. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets to Israel, but he is also the forerunner of Christ, who is the founder of the church. Actually, the four Gospels themselves are transitional books. They are for Israel and for the church, as well. In Matthew, for example, Christ is presented as the king of Israel and is rejected by the nation Israel and then He begins to focus His attention on building the church (Mat. 16:18). Yet, there is not a sharp and immediate transition; it is gradual. The book of Acts is also a transitional book, and not everything in the book of Acts is the norm for churches today. Pentecost, for example, was unique. The gift of tongues was a witness to Israel (1 Cor. 14:21-22) and is no longer relevant. The baptism of the Holy Spirit was also unique for that initiation period of the church. None of the epistles instruct believers to seek a baptism of the Holy Spirit; they refer, rather, to the baptism of the Holy Spirit in the past tense (i.e., 1 Cor. 12:13).

5. Neglecting some parts of the Bible, thinking that they are not important for us today.

Some neglect the four Gospels or the book of Acts or the book of Revelation, but this is wrong. While not every part of the Bible is written TO us, every part of the Bible is written FOR us and has important lessons for Christians today. See 1 Cor. 10:6, 11; Rom. 15:4.

The Lie about Dispensationalism

Some who despise dispensationalism have claimed that it was not taught until the 1800s. Some claim it was started by John Darby, founder of the Plymouth Brethren movement.

While it might be true that a certain form of dispensationalism, such as Darby dispensationalism or Scofield dispensationalism, might not have been taught until more

recent times, it is plain that a belief in dispensations goes all of the way back to the apostles.

1. We have seen that the New Testament teaches that there are dispensations during which God has worked out His great purposes. These are also called ages, times, and days. In this sense, dispensationalism is 2,000 years old!

2. The early Christians after the apostles taught a form of dispensationalism. Justin Martyr (A.D. 100-165) believed in four phases of history in God's plan: From Adam to Abraham, from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, and from Christ to the eternal state. Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202) taught something similar, dividing the dispensations into (1) the creation to the flood, (2) the flood to the law, (3) the law to the gospel, (4) the gospel to the eternal state. In *Ages and Dispensations of the Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Larry Crutchfield observed that some of the early church leaders "came very close to making nearly the same divisions modern dispensationalists do."

3. Influential Baptist leader Morgan Edwards, the founder of Brown University, was teaching the pre-tribulational doctrine in the first half of the 18th century. Between 1742 and 1744 he wrote a book presenting this doctrine. The book was published in 1788 in Philadelphia where Edwards was a pastor. John Bray, who for many years published a challenge that he would give \$500 to anyone who could prove that the pre-tribulational rapture was taught before 1830, was forced to pay out! The *Plains Baptist Challenger* observed: "If Morgan Edwards wrote a book in 1742-44 teaching the Pre-Trib Rapture, then many people must have read it. No doubt there must have been other preachers who read the same Bible that Edwards did and preached the same truth. I wonder if John L. Bray will offer \$500 to anyone teaching the Pre-Trib Rapture before Morgan Edwards? I hope he does. Of course Paul taught it, but the enemies of the Pre-Trib Rapture will never accept that. They just explain it away. Of course, the Apostle John taught it in the book of Revelation, but they spiritualize the book of Revelation away" (*Plains Baptist Challenger*, Lubbock, Texas, September 1995).