

JOHN NELSON DARBY AND DISPENSATIONALISM



John Nelson Darby

(18 November 1800 – 29 April 1882)

Dispensationalism is a movement in theology that began in the 1800s and came on strong in the 1900s. The story of dispensationalism begins with **John Nelson Darby**. He was born in 1800 in Westminster, London, but his family roots were Irish, so when he came of age to go to college, he was sent to Trinity College, Dublin. He excelled as a student there and won the Classics Prize. That skillset would come in handy for him later. He would be involved in translating the Bible into German, Dutch, and French. He even had his own English translation of the complete Bible. Darby died in 1882.

He's known for two things.

1. He was one of the early founders in what is called the Plymouth Brethren Church, and
2. he was the father or founder of dispensationalism, which came about in the 1830s and 1840s.

There are ***four significant features to dispensationalism*** that Darby began and then were further developed by others.

The ***first*** is to see a distinction between Israel and the church. Prior to dispensationalism, the understanding was that there is one people of God. We could call it covenant theology. And there is a connection between Israel and the church. But Darby made a distinction between those two, teaching there are two peoples of God, as it were. He taught that God had a distinct and unique plan for Israel, and a distinct and unique plan for the church.

This led to the ***second feature*** of dispensationalism, which is to see Scripture as divided into dispensations. Darby had seven of them. The Scofield Reference Bible had seven of them. Dispensationalists did not always agree on the number of dispensations, but they did agree on the concept. The idea was that God dealt with humanity in different ways as he moved through the dispensations of Scripture.

The ***third feature*** is a literal hermeneutic that gets applied to prophecy and apocalyptic literature. Once that literal hermeneutic is applied, it leads us to the ***fourth*** feature, which includes end times events and charts. These include the rapture, and that's followed by the seven-year tribulation, and then that's followed by the second

coming of Christ, and then that's followed by the millennium, and then we enter into the eternal state.

These ideas come from applying that literal hermeneutic to the books of Daniel and Revelation, and seeing literal timetables for the end times, or eschatology.

Those are some of the features that were given to dispensationalism by John Nelson Darby.

Three things helped dispensationalism become very popular in the twentieth century.

The *first* was the beginning of the Bible Institute movement. D.L. Moody had one in Chicago; his was not the first, but it was certainly the flagship institution. These institutions sprung up all over both the United Kingdom and the United States, and they taught dispensationalism.

The *second* thing was prophecy conferences. These were popular in the early 1900s. They were held in Winona Lake, Philadelphia, and Dallas. They were everywhere.

The *third* thing that popularized dispensationalism was the Scofield Reference Bible, named for Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, who was born in 1843 and died in 1921. He used the dispensations as the framework to understand the Bible and its structure, and he applied that dispensational hermeneutic to texts. Scofield also put forth the

dispensational distinction of a separation between Israel and the church.

That's dispensationalism, started by John Nelson Darby and furthered along by the Bible Institute movement, the prophecy conferences, and the Scofield Reference Bible in the early 20th century.

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