

Seven Age Dispensationalism

To say that the appearance of the *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909 caused a dramatic change in evangelical Christianity would be an understatement. Many have studied its footnotes with great care, almost giving them an authority equal to the biblical text itself. Anyone who dares raise any question about its teachings is immediately called a "liberal," or worse, and the walls go up as if one were making an attack on a believer's faith. Yet the "Seven Age Dispensationalism" of the *Scofield Bible* just may be a case of the emperor wearing no clothes. This writer was a firm believer in Scofield's presentation at one time, and remembers well the crisis when it began to unravel for him. I researched two different theological libraries to trace the roots of Scofield's thesis, and present my findings briefly on this page. But let me say this--if you feel that the material here might be a threat to your faith, please read no further. And if you do continue, you may decide that seven age dispensationalism is completely biblical. But please believe me when I say that I am not attempting to do a "hatchet job" on some well intentioned men who earned the respect of generations of my Christian brothers and sisters.

Cyrus I. Scofield

Scofield was educated as a lawyer, and had a faith strong enough that he made the pilgrimage to the Niagara Bible Conferences. Those conferences are mostly remembered as an attempt to stem the liberalism that was turning the gospel of Christ into a lukewarm message of social action with virtually no spiritual component, but in its last years it ventured into other areas. One of those was a presentation of "Darbyism," a system that had been developed in England by a Christian group called The Plymouth Brethren. That presentation lit a fire under Scofield, who came up with the idea of printing an annotated Bible to help Christians master the complexities of the Darbyite system. He approached the organizers of the conference, but got no encouragement. Finally he encountered Arno Gaebelein, who had a network of wealthy friends who he managed to talk into backing the project. Once the funding was secured, Scofield set about the task--trading in his attorney's hat for that of a theologian. The *Reference Bible* went on the market in 1909. Another acquaintance of Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, took up the dispensational cause after Scofield died (1921) and founded the institution now known as Dallas Theological Seminary to train leaders in the Darbyite system. Chafer shared another similarity with his friend Scofield--neither man had ever had any training in theology. Chafer, in fact, bragged about this in his eight-volume theology, claiming that it was an advantage that he had not been tainted with the work of the theologians of the past. In the meantime, the *Scofield Reference Bible* has continued to be a big seller, being updated by an editorial committee every few decades.

The Plymouth Brethren

But what is this "Darbyism"? We need to go to the British Isles to trace its roots. John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) was trained at Trinity College in Dublin, but soon became dissatisfied with institutional Christianity and its various denominations. At the age of 28 he started a small association devoted to Christian evangelism, and that group grew quickly, soon starting a second branch in Plymouth, England. By 1830 the group was given the name "The Plymouth Brethren," and the association continued to grow to form a number of chapters.

Darby began to develop his seven-age dispensationalism about this time. By 1835 he added "secret rapture," and had gradually added dispensations up to 1838. One can imagine the excitement during those years as these men worked on their theories--it must have seemed as if God had unlocked the secrets of the Bible to them. Yet even a superficial study of the Brethrens' proceedings reveals that their road was a very rocky one, full of dissension and acrimony. Napoleon Noel's two-volume *The History of the Brethren* (Denver: W. F. Knapp, 1936), in fact, documents one of the most contentious histories imaginable for a Christian fellowship. It is easy to conclude that Darby ran his organization with an iron hand, and was ruthless when one of the Brethren contradicted him on a fine point of his system. One of these controversies is of particular interest, as it touches one of the greatest works of God in all of nineteenth century England--the great orphanages at Bristol that were built by George Müller.

George Müller

George Müller was born in 1805 and studied in Halle, Germany, where he stayed for two years in a building that had once been one of a complex of Christian orphan houses that had been established a century earlier by Auguste Francke. A Plymouth Brethren named Henry Craik had met Müller and invited him to come to Bristol, which he did in 1832, and within two years he had begun to set up a society dedicated to duplicating Francke's efforts in Bristol. God blessed his work, and over ten thousand children would eventually pass through the orphanage complex built by Müller's by the time he died in 1898, a huge number of them receiving a profound conversion into the Kingdom.

Müller married the daughter of another Plymouth Brethren named Anthony Groves, a man who sacrificed a lucrative dental practice to become a missionary in Baghdad. So it is not surprising that Müller would become a Brethren himself, and in the event he depended greatly on Brethren associates when he needed good people for the orphan houses and his other Christian enterprises. Whatever peace there may have been between Müller and John Darby, however, suddenly came to an end when one of the Brethren battles touched Bristol. Darby called Müller "a liar" and excommunicated the Bristol congregation *en bloc*. It was a

painful schism, and we can get a revealing insight into the problems by reading the words of Henry Craik:

Oh, what a terrible thing is party spirit! Am I not justified in discarding and avoid it? The truth is, Bretherenism as such, is broken to pieces. By pretending to be wiser, holier, more spiritual, more enlightened, than all other Christians; by rash and unprofitable intrusions into things not revealed; by making mysticism and eccentricity the test of spiritual life and depth; ... by grossly offensive familiarity of speaking of such sacred matters as the presence and teaching of the Holy Ghost; and by a sectarianism all the more inexcusable, that it was in the avoidance of sectarianism that Bretherenism originated; by these and similar errors, the great Scriptural principles of church communion have been marred and disfigured [see William Reid, below].

Carson Coad summarized Darby's schism with Müller and Craik with these words:

The Bristol leaders shared neither his [Darby's] militant anti-clericalism, nor his dramatic expectations concerning the Second Advent. On the contrary, they were glad to recognize the gifts of God shown by men with whose church order and position they disagreed, and on the second matter, despite their expectations as to the Second Advent, the intense apocalyptic note was almost entirely absent from their teaching. They certainly held the probability of the near return of Christ, but equally certainly they did not make that expectation a foundation of their teaching.

Darby's System

The system eventually became known as "dispensationalism," although it is more properly described as "seven age dispensationalism" to distinguish it from the biblical "two age dispensationalism" that recognizes two "ages" (Mt. 12:32, Gal. 1:4, Heb. 6:5). The system itself hardly needs explanation due to its immense popularity in modern Christian circles In short it offers the following seven dispensations (*Scofield Bible* note on Gen. 1:28):

1	Gen. 1:28	Innocence
2	Gen. 3:7	Conscience or moral responsibility
3	Gen. 8:15	Human Government
4	Gen. 12:1	Promise
5	Ex. 19:1	Law
6	Acts 2:1	Church
7	Rev. 20:4	Kingdom

Darby's system provides for two tracks of salvation--one for Jews, and one for Gentiles. This had been the cause of another of the Brethren's internal battles, centring on B. W. Newton (1807-1899), who regarded this idea as a "full fledged heresy." Newton's voice would be echoed in our own era by modern theologian Bernard Ramm who wrote, "The sharp division of the church and Israel, each going its own unique course through history into eternity is a remarkable piece of

theological heresy." Perhaps Darby had taken Rom. 11:26, "And so all Israel will be saved," out of its context--a passage intended to get Gentiles in Rome who had been treating Jews as second class citizens to understand through the olive tree allegory that God's glorious plan (the "mystery" of Rom. 11:25) provided salvation for both Jews and Gentiles through Christ Jesus. Some of the Roman house churches were working at cross purposes with God by their treatment of the Christians of Jewish ancestry, and Paul wanted them to accept the Jews into their churches with the same love that they had for non-Jewish Christians (Rom 15:7)--see N. T Wright, [below](#).

Darby's Church Age Parenthesis

Darby divided the Bible into seven periods of time (dispensations) and eight ages. The present "age" is not among them, it being unforeseen by Daniel and the rest of the Old Testament prophets and which is a great parenthesis inserted between the 69th and 70th week of Daniel. Advocates vary on whether the "secret rapture" is to occur in the beginning, middle, or end of the 70th week.

Critique

Seven age dispensationalism greatly appeals to the "Greek linear thinking" that characterizes the modern West, but has the outstanding weakness of connecting concretized aspects of Torah, prophets, epistles, gospels, and apocalyptic literature as if they were a single literary genre and without taking into account the cultural differences, let alone biblical contexts, in which each of these were set. The desire to have definite answers overcame all the rules of good biblical hermeneutics. But God wants us to trust him with our eternity, to base that trust in his love, and to be willing to let some things remain unrevealed. We are, like the ancient Hebrews, to let God keep his "secret things" and to accept with joy the things that God has revealed (Deut. 29:29). To treat the Bible as a great puzzle for clever men to figure out is hardly the manner of its inspired, Hebrew-thinking authors.

The words of Henry Craik, above, written over 150 years ago, summarize the problem with dispensationalism so eloquently that they might have been written yesterday. I would add only one extra note -- one finds very little discussion of God's love in dispensationalism. Darby regarded history as a rigid system with rigid rules with little allowance for grace. He came up with a scheme that satisfies those who want to be able to give a definite answer to any question and can tolerate no uncertainty in matters of God. If you, dear reader, are of that persuasion, we will have to agree to disagree on dispensationalism. I hope we can

find many other places where we can share the love, the Word, and the table of our Lord together.

James M Effird, *End-Times* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), 17-37).

William Reid, *Plymouth Bretherenism Unveiled and Refuted*, Edinburgh: William Oliphant & Co., 1975), 49.).

Carson Coad, *The Heresies of the Plymouth Brethren*, (London: Houlston & Sons, 1870), 127-128.

Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1963), 186.

N. T Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).