



# Dispensationalism, the Secret Rapture, and Scripture

**W**hile returning from Oregon a few days ago, I listened to a radio sermon from an earnest dispensationalist Christian. He spoke of the soon-coming secret rapture of the saints seven years before the end of the world and proceeded to elaborate on the experience of 144,000 Jewish evangelists during that period who would have more success than the Christian church since Pentecost.

I groaned. Why is it that this human nature of ours not only uncritically receives but jealously hoards doctrinal traditions which have no basis in Scripture? My mind roved over many denominations (including the one I served for over thirty years), each of which cherishes one or more nonbiblical teachings rejected by a consensus of Bible scholars of various church back-

grounds. I do not know of any Christian church which is not rightly accused of heresy by others. Bible study without prejudice and presuppositions is not only rare but perhaps nonexistent. This writer and his readers no doubt have their due share. But we are heading in the right direction if we remain sensitive to this human frailty.

Take dispensationalism. There are numerous Christians in churches, giants of faith and love who cling to the secret rapture and its analogues. Yet for decades, leading teachers in the same churches have acknowledged dispensationalism contrary to Scripture. Dr. G. E. Ladd of Fuller Theological Seminary, wrote numerous works on biblical eschatology exposing the errors of popular fundamentalist views on the end of the world. He was well received by many readers, but sometimes risked his employment and church fellowship.

In his book, *The Blessed Hope*, Ladd lists some prominent churchmen who gave up the pretribulation teaching (the idea that the church will be raptured before the tribulation precipitated by Antichrist). Here are some of them: A. J. Gordon, Nathanael West, W. J. Erdman, Henry Frost, W. G. Moorehead, Charles R. Erdman, Philip Mauro, Oswald Smith, Rowland V. Bingham, Bishop Frank Houghton, Dr. Harold J. Ockenga and G. Campbell Morgan. Why did these men reject the teaching they once cherished?

## Basic Ideas: Secret Rapture

The study of church history shows that pretribulationism and modern dispensationalism as a whole were unknown to the Christian church for eighteen centuries. Such views arose within one wing of the Plymouth Brethren 150 years ago and were quickly popularized in Britain and America. These teachers made semantical distinctions which cannot be supported by a careful study of the text. For example, they taught that the revelation (apokalypsis) of Christ (also called his epiphany or manifestation, and parousia or coming) is not the blessed hope but a secret gathering of the saints which takes place seven years before that glorious event. Anyone with a Strong's or Young's concordance can take the various key words associated with the New Testament references to the Second Advent—*apokalypsis*, *parousia*, *epiphaneia*—and find that they all mean the same event, and that that event is the one upon which all Christian hope should be centered (see 1 Ti 6:14; 2 Ti 4:8; 1 Pe 4:13; 1 Pe 1:7; 1 Cor 1:7; Jas 5:7-8; 2 Pe 3:4; 1 Th 4:15-17).

## Daniel's Seventieth Week

The idea of a secret coming seven years before the end is derived from a severance of Daniel's seventieth week from the preceding sixty-nine. But what textual reasons can be offered for such an arbitrary procedure? The verb translated

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“determined” in Daniel 9:24 is a singular passive construction and guarantees, therefore, that the seventy weeks are regarded as a unit—a singular subject. The New Testament alludes to Daniel 9:27 repeatedly and applies it to specific events of the first century (i.e., destruction of Jerusalem, etc.) to events preceding the Second Advent (see Mk 13:14; 14:24; Mt 24:15; 26:28, etc.) To say, as dispensationalists do, that Daniel 9:27 applies to Antichrist’s making a covenant with the Jews ignores the fact that elsewhere in Daniel the word covenant always means God’s covenant. Dispensationalists also ignore the fact that the New Testament uses these words of Daniel in connection with the ratifying of the new covenant instituted by Jesus during passion week. Furthermore, the Hebrew term for “make” (Dan 9:27) means to establish something already existing—i.e., the ratification of a covenant already well known. The dispensationalist view has Antichrist both making and breaking a covenant in the same week, and insists on this despite the fact that the antecedent for the maker of the covenant is the Messiah of the preceding verses. The Messiah confirms the covenant by making the typical sacrifices to cease by the antitype of his death. The only reference in the passage to the opposing prince is one stressing his people rather than himself.

None of the foregoing comments should be seen as denying a local application of Daniel 9:24-27 to the great crisis of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. Just as all the “Day of the Lord” prophecies had their initial applications to the time of the prophet or soon after, so do those of Daniel. But to fail to recognize in Daniel 9:24 a portrayal of the blessings of the messianic kingdom accomplished by Messiah’s sacrifice is to ignore the New Testament’s application of the passage and the messianic fulfillment demanded by the themes of Daniel 9:1-23 which call for the eschatological establishment of God’s covenant. Daniel 9:24-27 affirms that Jerusalem would be destroyed as a result of its

rejection of the Messiah, and our Lord himself enlarged this prophecy by his application of it to the catastrophe of A.D. 70 (see Mt 24; Mk 13; Lk 21). But dispensationalists lift the blessings of 9:24 out of their context, deny that they received a fulfillment at the cross and project them to the end. Dispensationalists would be on safer ground if they realized that the Second Advent consummates what the First Advent fulfilled. Instead they allow the Second Advent to overshadow the cross.

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**Israel and Prophecy**

Dispensationalists teach that a future Roman prince will covenant with the Jews to restore their national temple service with its sacrifices. But there is not a verse in the New Testament which teaches such a thing. Dispensationalists cannot find one sentence from our Lord or his apostles which clearly teach that the Jews will become God’s chosen nation again in the land of Palestine. (Keep in mind that there are more Jews in New York than in Israel, and that the Jews now in Palestine are mainly Zionists—nationalists, not believers in Holy Writ.) The idea of a literal battle of Armageddon in Palestine is also a feature of this prophetic schema.

The popular emphasis upon modern Israel as figuring largely in the end-time prophecies of the Bible is without foundation. The book of Deuteronomy (chs. 28,29) with its repeated “if” makes it plain that the promises of God to Israel were *conditional*. The New Testament tells us that Christ pronounced the severing of Israel from the divine covenant (Mt 21:43; 2 Th 2:16). The new covenant brings Gentiles into the

family of God and names them as Israelites (see Rom 2:28,29; Gal 3:29; Php 3:3). The whole book of Revelation assumes that Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, are now the Israel of God. The seven-fold candlestick of the earthly sanctuary is used as the symbol of the seven Christian churches in Asia (see Rev 1-3). The 144,000 are those who have been washed in the blood of Christ (see Rev 7:1-14). They, as “the elect,” have survived the great tribulation, (compare Rev 7:14 and Mt 24:21-22). Nowhere does Scripture claim that Christians will have immunity from the trials of the last days. They are “kept” amid the storms, not mollicoddled by being lifted out of the great tribulation. When in history have the saints ever been kept free from suffering in times of war and persecution? We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom (Acts 14:22).

**Second Advent: Two Stages?**

According to dispensationalists, Christ’s coming before the millennium will take place in two stages. But where does the New Testament teach such a thing? In the parables of the wheat and tares, the good fish and the bad (Mt 13), we see both Christians and non-Christians on earth until the judgment which takes place at the visible appearing of our Lord. Matthew 24:3 and 28:18-20 clearly assert that the presence of Christ would be with the disciples as they carry out the great commission even until “the close of the age.”

**Unconditional Election?**

Accompanying dispensationalism’s unscriptural teachings on eschatology are similar errors implying that once Christians have claimed faith in Christ, they, like Israel have unconditional election. This is contrary to many passages of Scripture (see Lk 8:11-15; 11:28; 1 Ti 4:1,16; 1 Cor 15:1,2; Lk 12:42-46; Heb 2:14; 3:6-19; 4:1,14; 6:4-9,11; 10: 23,26-31, 38; 2 Pe 1:5-11; Jn 15:1-14, etc.) As the faithless Jews were broken off the covenant tree so it will be with faithless Christians (Rom 11:17-21).

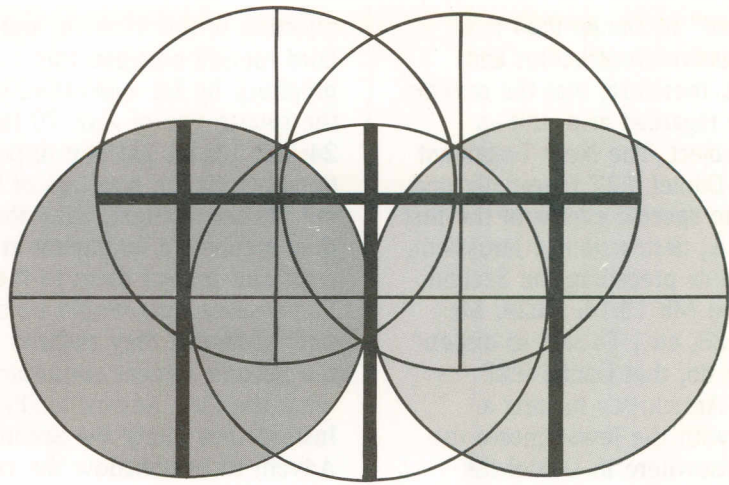


None of what I am asserting should be understood as teaching that any trembling, erring soul can be lost while he or she looks trustingly to Christ. Eternal life is sure for all who trust, but trusting is like breathing—it must be maintained. The evidence of true faith is obedience. While perfection is never available to believers, loyalty is. A careful reading of the second half of the Pauline epistles, which are loaded with ethical exhortations is surely enough to convince anyone of the error of easy-believism. Note also the letter of James and Revelation (12:17; 14:12).

### Dispensations

Prominent in the system of interpretation we are discussing is the idea that God has dealt with men differently in different dispensations—namely, the eras of innocence, conscience, civil government, promise, law, grace, the kingdom. But such a paradigm is forced upon Scripture. The writers of the New Testament make *one* distinction—the way the grace of God was made known before the coming of Christ and the way it was manifested after (see 2 Cor 3).

True, Scripture does urge us to rightly divide the word of truth. But dispensationalism is repeating the error of ancient Judaism which led them to crucify Christ. The medieval church committed the same error and crucified Christ afresh. What do we mean by that? The Jews looked for a political Messiah to deliver them from the yoke of Rome and to give them a literal kingdom. They literalized the Old Testament promises of redemption. While the Old Testament abounds in predictions of the glories of the messianic kingdom, those predictions stress the reign of righteousness more than the reign of things. The promises, despite their symbolic trappings, are nonetheless spiritual. But spirituality was the one thing Israel lacked at the first advent of Christ (see, for example, Jn 6:60-66). Wherever religion puts the form above the spirit, the trappings above the essence, the visible above faith and the evident above hope—there we have carnality—not the



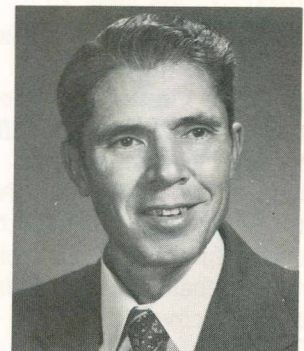
religion of Scripture. The lusting after a tangible Jewish kingdom here and now with a visible temple, partakes of the same spiritual disorder that ruined ancient Israel and crucified the Son of God, who offered no deliverance from the Romans but from sin. In the Middle Ages the popular church pursued the same error by applying the privileges of literal Israel to itself and claiming an earthly kingdom with a visible king, a literal sacrifice (the Mass), literal holy water, literal incense, literal priests, etc. The Old Testament prophecies were again applied literally, and the New Testament's spiritual application of such passages were ignored (see Acts 3:18,24; 13:27,29,33; Jn 7:37-39; 2 Cor 6:14-18; 1 Pe 2:4-10; Jn 6:58; Lk 22:29 and the whole book of Revelation which applies the literal things of old Israel to the Christian church).

### The Spiritual Nature of the Gospel

The basic error of modern Western religion is the failure to give priority to the spiritual nature of the gospel of Christ. Positive thinking, possibility thinking, the health and wealth gospel, the name it and claim it heresy and the varied forms of Dispensationalism, have bypassed the cross and Pentecost which established a spiritual kingdom and spiritual blessings perceived now only by faith. During "the sufferings of this

present time" when "the whole creation groans together in travail," believers have but "the first-fruits of the Spirit" and live by faith in the invisible Lord Christ. God's Israel, likewise, is discernible only to the eye of faith, and in the great crucible of the coming tribulation, she shall survive knowing that "hope that is seen is not hope," and that faith is "the evidence of things unseen."

Good News Unlimited, like Paul, would like to be "all things to all men." But again, like the apostle, it is not always possible. Truth brings a sword. May we, therefore, plead that there are two mistakes the Lord's people should studiously avoid—tolerance of any doctrine that threatens the gospel and intolerance in matters of small importance. It may be that like Christ we shall be accused of dividing the people, but if the charge is similar, in principle, to that leveled against our Lord, we shall wear it as a crown.



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