

After Dispensationalism: A Review of Another Recent Critique of Dispensationalism

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Introduction

We live in an era of a critical spirit toward dispensationalism among evangelicals. It reminds me of the so-called evangelical critique of thirty years ago. Then, the issue was the multitudes of problems within born-again Christianity primarily in North America, a kind of self-critique which always follows the Faith and is often a good exercise. No one – no movement – is free from criticism, and that is as it should be. Those being critiqued must respond in a gracious and rational way. Dispensationalists must be forgiven if this is a difficult task in light of the poor analysis and over the top caricature that often exists at their expense.

Here we are analyzing the recent critique of dispensationalism given in *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World* by Brian P. Irwin with Tim Perry.¹ Irwin is associate professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Scriptures at Knox College in Toronto, Ontario, where he has served since 2004. There is no doctrinal statement at the Knox website, although a clear statement is given that it attempts to follow the Reformed tradition and is a seminary of The Presbyterian Church in Canada (PCC). The PCC appears to lean toward a liberal stance on social issues such as gay marriage, although it lists the Westminster Confession of Faith as one of its subordinate standards. Tim Perry is listed on the book jacket as a professor of theology at Providence Seminary in Otterburne, Manitoba. According to author information from Faithlife, Perry is a lay reader in the Diocese of Rupert's Land, Anglican Church of Canada. It is unclear what contribution Perry makes to the book. It is for the most part a work by Brian Irwin.

Brief Survey of the Book

Unlike Daniel Hummel's recent book, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*,² which is mostly history with some theology, Irwin's *After Dispensationalism* is mostly theology with some history. Occasionally, there is a somewhat condescending tone similar to Hummel's writing: "Commentaries from the futurist perspective are uncommon among academic writers today. Its best expositors r

¹ Brian P. Irwin and Tim Perry, *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023). Any future references to Irwin's book will cite page numbers in the body of the text in parentheses.

² Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023).

remain older dispensational authors” (219). This appears to echo the exaggerated opinion going around that there are no real young dispensational scholars today. However, in spite of such occasional hyperbolic statements, there are many times when Irwin expresses a positive assessment of dispensationalism. Notice these examples:

- In Irwin’s introduction, he comments, “In short, this book commends dispensationalism’s scriptural zeal even as it finds that its way of reading often misses what the biblical authors wished to communicate” (2). This by itself shows a balanced attitude for a critique of this kind.
- In discussing issues such as those who would want to destroy the Dome of the Rock so that the Jewish Temple can be rebuilt, Irwin notes, “Although reinforced by the plotlines of novels, television dramas, and films, dispensationalist Christians are not keen to manipulate events in order to hasten the return of Christ or bring on the apocalypse...While many dispensationalist Christians share an interest in developments that might precede the return of Christ, the dispensationalist understanding of the sovereignty of God and his working through prophecy means that no human endeavor can force his hand or change his timing” (68-69).
- One of the reasons for the book appears to be a practical pastoral concern: “We wrote this book from the shared observation that too many pastors, unable to understand dispensationalist members of their congregations, write them off as a mild nuisance. This is to dismiss biblical knowledge, energy, and a passion for the gospel that can enliven and support the life and ministry of any congregation—dispensational or otherwise. To ignore such a resource is to miss out on the strengths that one part of the body of Christ can offer” (107).

In light of such positive assessments of dispensationalism along with the overall negative critique, the well-written work of Irwin can be read with a certain amount of pleasure by a dispensationalist.

After Dispensationalism is divided into three parts. The first part reviews the world of end-time teaching starting with the early Church and progresses to modern times with an examination of the beliefs and behaviors of dispensationalists. One must be careful here to note the possibility of a guilt-by-association argument in light of the conflating of all date setters like the Millerites with later

dispensationalists.³ The second part attempts an analysis of genre issues, particularly the interpretation of prophecy and apocalyptic literature. The third part of the book is entitled “The Meaning of Biblical Apocalyptic.” Essentially, Irwin gives his views of three Bible books: Ezekiel, Daniel, and Revelation. He is definitely not a futurist relative to these writings. For Ezekiel, he dismisses the futurist interpretation with this question: “Does it make any sense that God would seek to bring hope to a group of people, languishing in exile by promising something that would never be fulfilled in their lifetime?” (175). This problem in Irwin’s mind is extremely important as demonstrated by the fact that he returns to this issue several times. For Daniel, Irwin holds to “prophecy after the fact” with adherence to the Maccabean timeframe for its writing. For Revelation, he adopts an eclectic view which encompasses some elements of partial preterism, idealism, futurism, and historicism. Earlier in the book, Irwin summarized his view that “in almost all cases, biblical prophecies were fulfilled during the lifetime of the original audience” (27). This review will not delve into the details of the exegetical and theological analysis of Irwin’s handling of these three books, although a later additional review of them would be warranted.

Thirteen Theses for Encountering the End of the World

After the three major parts of the book, Irwin gives what is perhaps the most useful feature of the book. A concluding chapter lists thirteen theses for dealing with end time issues. These theses actually summarize well the rest of the book and provide a useful grid for responding both positively and negatively to Irwin’s assessment of dispensationalism. In light of this aspect of the book, I will use the thirteen points as the grid for my major response. Each declaration will be listed followed by my response.

1. Using the Bible or biblical tropes to arrange and interpret human history is not new; dispensational arrangements are no older than the mid-nineteenth century and are peculiarly Anglo-American in their history (287-88).

Irwin’s first point wades into controversy rather quickly. The first part of the statement is albeit a true one; Christians throughout history have interpreted the Bible in such a way that various administrations in God’s plan for history can be discerned. This conclusion is an empirical fact. The rest of the thesis, unfortunately, simply echoes the old, worn, and faulty idea that dispensationalism

³ This is similar to Timothy P. Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel’s Best Friend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 11-14.

is a “Johnny-come-lately” theology that provides its version of biblical history divided into dispensations. A few responses are necessary.

First, it is important to note, as I have argued many times elsewhere, that dispensationalism is not defined primarily by its belief in dispensations, although dispensations are certainly elements within God’s doxological purpose for biblical history. Irwin seems to assume that a dispensational scheme is what dispensationalism is all about. Nonetheless, Irwin correctly notes that dispensationalists have offered many different views of the dispensational outline of history.⁴ Irwin deduces from that truth that dispensationalism is not “*the way to understand Scripture, but one of many attempts that Christians have made to unlock God’s word and understand his work in the world.*” While there is a measure of truth to such a statement, one wonders if Irwin would say the same thing of the Reformed tradition and where he draws the line on what exactly Bible teaching yields.

Second, by “dispensational arrangements” is meant the teachings on dispensations in modern dispensationalism. Furthermore, the statement uses the recent systematization of dispensationalism beginning in the nineteenth century to leave a negative impression against the system. Perhaps dispensationalists take such a statement that way because of the constant barrage of the idea, mostly from the Reformed camp, that dispensationalism should be jettisoned because it is a recent innovation. In the days ahead, robust scholarship will necessarily move away from this conclusion since the historical facts are not in its favor. How many times do dispensationalists have to point to the historical research of the last thirty years, such as William Watson’s *Dispensationalism Before Darby*?⁵

Third, Irwin appears to imply that dispensationalism is somehow inadequate because its modern development has been limited largely to the English speaking world. Several observations push back on this analysis:

- If dispensationalists are correct that Irenaeus among the second-century Church Fathers is a precursor of dispensationalism, then we have a rather early presentation that is not Anglo.

⁴ For example, see Arno C. Gaebelein, “The Dispensations,” *Our Hope* 37 (December 1930): 341-46 and “The Wonders of Progressive Prophecy,” *Our Hope* 47 (October 1940): 235-41. For a brief analysis of Gaebelein’s various schemes, see Michael D. Stallard, *The Early Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelein* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 146-47.

⁵ William C. Watson, *Dispensationalism Before Darby: Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism*, 2nd ed. (Navasota, TX: Lampion House Publishing, 2023).

- As early as the late fourth century, the published sermon of Pseudo-Ephraem shows a pre-tribulation rapture. This writing is obviously not Anglo-American, but from the collection of Syriac writings.
- Around 1300, a so-called Brother Dolcino, a Roman Catholic heretic, presented a version of a pre-tribulation rapture. This individual was from Italy and not from Britain or America.
- In the second decade of the nineteenth century, following the Napoleonic wars, the English evangelicals discovered their brothers on the European continent. They had been unable to communicate comprehensively due to the wars. However, many so-called brethren movements in Continental Europe were advocating ideas similar to truths taught by the Plymouth Brethren. It is best to describe the relationship as a reciprocal one. Among continental figures was the Genevan Pastor Émile Guers who clearly taught an interpretive methodology consistent with that of Charles Ryrie over a century later.⁶

The upshot of these examples is that, although much development of dispensationalism can claim Anglo-American heritage, one must not be hasty to dismiss the growth of dispensational concepts throughout history and outside of the modern English-speaking world. Perhaps we should simply recognize that believers throughout history and around the world were simply reading their Bibles and coming to similar conclusions.

2. Dispensationalism is one of many ways of engaging with Scripture that has had positive and negative impacts on the church (288-89).

This particular thesis is one that has some merit. It shows some measure of graciousness in allowing dispensationalism to be a positive influence in the history of Christianity. A dispensationalist may also be able to agree that there has been some negative impact, although qualifications should be given. Is the issue the development of dispensationalism as a hermeneutical-theological system or is it the abuse of some of the weak elements or people who claimed the dispensational label for themselves? This is somewhat tricky since dispensationalism, especially in America, has been a trans-denominational movement. An analysis should be based upon the best

⁶ Émile Guers, *Israël aux Derniers Jours De L'Économie Actuelle ou Essai Sur La Restauration Prochaine De Ce Peuple, Suivi D'Un Fragment Sur Le Millénarisme* (Genève: Émile Beroud, 1856); Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago; Moody Press, 1965).

that the dispensational approach has to offer. Dispensationalists should return the favor (remember the Golden Rule) and not pick out the weakest member of the Reformed herd to criticize.

At this point, however, Irwin gives one of the strongest positive assessments of dispensationalism found in the book:

Whatever its flaws, dispensationalism has encouraged the intense study of the Old and New Testaments. The emphasis on the any-moment return of Christ has spurred many to devote their money and energy to church planting and evangelistic and missionary outreach. While we may disagree with the way in which dispensationalism reads prophecy and the correlations it makes across the canon and its genres, we should not disparage the sincerity, passion, and faithfulness of those who have adopted it as their way into the Bible (289).

With all the rancor that dispensationalists have sometimes encountered from the Reformed camp, such an acknowledgment is quite encouraging and conducive for dialog on a host of issues. Irwin is to be applauded for the demonstration of this spirit.

3. It is wiser to use the Bible to interpret the news than the news to interpret the Bible; it is wiser to use the Bible to interpret our calendars than the calendar to interpret our Bibles (289).

I have spent a greater part of my ministry as a dispensationalist saying this same exact truth. Such an approach would be true of the vast majority of dispensational interpreters. Most of us are not interested in looking into the sky for “blood moons” or assuming that current military aggression in the Middle East is automatically the start of Ezekiel’s battle of Gog and Magog. Irwin cites Hal Lindsey and Jack Van Impe as his dispensational examples. These are certainly dispensational brothers whose positive contributions we gladly claim while rejecting the speculative over-the-top teachings. However, it is doubtful that most dispensational scholars and pastors would agree with predictions made on the fringes by all the popular advocates. The same caution here as cited above in # 2 can be repeated. Does Irwin’s placing of this observation within a book critiquing dispensationalism imply that he believes this is where dispensationalists *normally* live? Most dispensational scholars and pastors react negatively to newspaper exegesis as much as Irwin does.

4. Apocalyptic and prophetic texts are different genres that cannot be conflated and ought to be interpreted according to the guidelines unique to their literary types (290).
5. When reading apocalyptic and prophetic genres, a good reader will always read the text in its literal sense (290-91).

These two theses should be taken together. In fact, on the surface they provide a confusing mixture of thoughts about genre criticism. At the outset one wonders how things work for Irwin when apocalyptic texts and prophetic texts cannot be interpreted the same way (thesis # 4) but must both be interpreted with the literal sense (thesis # 5). He correctly asserts: “Reading the Bible ‘literally’ includes being aware of the genre that is in front of us and reading and interpreting accordingly.” If I understand him correctly, he is asserting that one reads the text using grammatical-historical interpretation and in doing so discovers the genre of the text in front of him (e.g., poetry). Another way to say that is that literal interpretation precedes genre recognition. Information about genre gleaned from the text by the exegete gives clues that help to see other elements in the context just as doctrinal content once understood helps the reader to put things together better as he does his biblical theology. If this is what Irwin means, I have no problem with thesis # 4.

However, his final statement under # 4 (which leads to his # 5) needs qualification: “If we read prophecy and apocalyptic as if they are the same, we risk failing to grasp the life-changing message that God conveyed through each and stumbling in our efforts to apply it today.” But if we are using grammatical-historical interpretation, we will not stumble. This is no different than the mistake of seeing a passage as dealing with incarnational life rather than resurrection life (e.g., debate over Rom. 5:10). On the other hand, apocalyptic in my judgment is a subset of prophecy not an entirely separate category. Apocalyptic language is prophecy that contains elements that highlight certain features such as angelic interpretation, distressing times, visions, heightened symbolic language, etc. To me this is primarily a content question. Regardless, I certainly agree with Irwin’s statement that we must interpret both prophecy and apocalyptic in a literal sense based upon the text. Oftentimes, interpreters unfairly use symbolism or poetry in prophecy or apocalyptic texts to dismiss literal interpretation.⁷ In fact, in light of how Irwin understands prophecy in key texts like Daniel and Revelation throughout *After Dispensationalism*, it comes across to the dispensationalist that he has at certain points abandoned the literal sense.

⁷ I have in mind here D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) among many others.

In light of this, it is important to consider what Irwin actually means by *literal sense*. Three sets of questions are presented. He begins this way: “If we are serious about reading literally, the first questions are always, ‘What might this text have meant in its original setting? To its original hearers or readers?’” Dispensationalists can certainly agree with this sentiment. I often teach that in Matthew’s Gospel, the original audience would have understood the word *kingdom* in light of antecedent revelation from the Old Testament. It is theoretically possible that a biblical author may change his own use of terms, but such a change must be clearly discernible in the actual text under consideration. So, the modification I want to make is to highlight the centrality of the text and not some cultural background to the text. In other words, the chief input to understanding what the original audience understood is the actual text itself.

Irwin goes on, however, to suggest some theological readings as part of the literal sense. Notice his second question associated with the literal sense: “What does this text now mean as part of the canon of Scripture?” I often allude to this as level two in doing theology which is something that should be done. However, I do not see this as part of the literal sense of a passage. Theological synthesis of several passages of Scripture in doctrinal development is surely important, but such integration uses literal exegesis already obtained from several passages to craft a doctrinal conclusion. Irwin may agree with this, but his language may open the door too far to allow systematic theology to dominate biblical theology.

Irwin’s third question associated with the literal sense is “What does this text mean *about Jesus*?” Such a Christological reading may assume too much. Are we to suppose that every individual verse yields divine information about Jesus the Messiah? Is this a case of an overblown application of Luke 24:27 (“Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures”)? This is perhaps an invitation to read theology into a text instead of letting the text speak for itself. Such an understanding would not be consistent with the literal sense as understood by dispensationalists.

6. When reading Scripture, it is better to begin by asking how Old Testament prophecies and apocalyptic texts were understood by the original recipients than to speculate about how they might be fulfilled in our future (291-92).

Above we dealt with the issue of understanding Scripture as it was given to the original audience. Here it is important to deal with the concern Irwin has over speculation about how prophetic and apocalyptic texts are to be fulfilled in our future. The importance of this idea is highlighted by the fact that Irwin brings this issue up at several points within the book (27, 80, 95, 138-39, 158, 175-76, 214, 291-92). In giving this thesis, he summarizes his concern this way: “Would a

God who loves his people deliver to an endangered ancient audience a message that had no relevance for them and which only a distant future generation would have the ability to understand?” He refers to the books of Daniel and Revelation in this regard. Apparently, he is criticizing dispensationalists for interpreting prophetic books in such a manner that they are meaningless for the original audience. There are a couple of responses that need to be made.

First, it is important to challenge the notion that the original audience could not understand the text if it yields far off end time predictions. If we take a look at Daniel, one of the books that Irwin mentions in this regard, it is easy to show that the last vision, which is sweeping in its historical perspective, actually gives predictions all the way to an end time resurrection of the dead (Dan. 12:2). Would this not be an encouragement to the exilic Israelites even if it was far away in time? They certainly would have understood the basic meaning of the text even if they did not view the prophecy as being fulfilled in their lifetimes. A corollary to this idea would be the extreme detail that God gives in Daniel’s end time predictions which would heighten the awareness of the original audience about God’s exhaustive, sovereign control of the future. The same holds true for other prophetic passages like Ezekiel 36-48. This awareness would easily translate into a strengthened faith as they endured their predicament. What about passages about the Second Coming itself which Irwin would affirm? Could the apostles understand those simple predictions by Christ and receive encouragement in spite of an open-ended fulfillment down the road? The answer is obvious. Far off prophecies do not constitute a problem for interpretation relative to the original audience.

One problem that may be at play here is that Irwin may be confusing the original audience’s understanding of the literal sense of a text and that same audience’s understanding of the fulfillment of that text. For example, when one considers the great prophecy of Christ’s death on the Cross given in Isaiah 53 over seven centuries before the event, it is clear that the original audience could understand the textual prediction that God would one day crush the Messiah as a substitute for the sins of human beings. However, they did not know that the Messiah would do this in the first century, that his name would be Jesus who came from Nazareth, and that He would die on a Roman cross. Not knowing fulfillment details is not the same as not knowing the meaning of the text (remember the debate over 1 Peter 1:10-12). We must be careful not to conflate these separate issues.

A second response is to note that prophetic texts can have both near and far implications, so it is not a black and white issue. It is not either far off or near but the presentation of a “both/and.” Again, let’s look at Daniel’s prophecies. The visions of four world empires in chapters 2 and 7 followed by the kingdom of God begin with Babylon while Daniel is in captivity within that empire. Yet, the book of Daniel clearly identifies the first three world empires as Babylon (chapter 2), Medo-Persia (chapters 5, 8) and Greece (chapter 8), even though Irwin suggests they are not identified in the text (191). Although some portions of Daniel use symbolic language to make these

identifications, the cited chapters do not. They are straightforward assertions. If Irwin is correct in his argument, we could ask what benefit it would be for Daniel and his friends in Babylon to know about a kingdom at least once removed from his lifetime (the 3rd kingdom Greece actually comes into history in fulfillment of the prophecies two centuries after Daniel's time). Yet God clearly gives information to Daniel that is well into his future.⁸ He not only could understand the basic words of the prophecies, but he could also profit from them with a strengthened faith even when he could not fathom the ultimate, far-off fulfillment.

One more comment involves the apparent contradiction in Irwin's presentation. In the second part of his book, he states that one of the positive things about apocalyptic literature in the Bible is that it reminds people that "God will someday intervene to usher in a better age" (164). This seems to be at odds with his criticism that the dispensational approach to the end time days looks too far into the future and ignores the original audience. However, Irwin seems to allow a far off possible implication of prophecy/apocalyptic without damaging the meaning for the original audience. Why can he not also allow that for dispensationalists?

7. The modern nation of Israel is not identical with biblical Israel (292).

When evaluating this thesis, one has to ask what Irwin thinks the meaning of the word *Israel* is in the Bible. An inductive study of the over 2500 times the term *Israel* occurs shows that it always refers to the man Jacob, the twelve sons and tribes that come from Jacob, or the northern ten tribes which also come from Jacob. Dispensationalists reject the idea that Gentiles or the Church is the meaning of Israel in so-called proof texts like Romans 9:6 and Galatians 6:16. Thus, when looking at the Jewish people in the nation of Israel today, we must say they qualify as being called Israel. Dispensationalists are quick to point out that present day Israel is not the promised restoration of the kingdom mentioned in the prophets. Israel's ultimate national and spiritual restoration will not come to pass until the Messiah Jesus returns. Dispensationalists, however, take heart that Israel is in the land. We know that the end time days happen when Israel is in the land. We could be living in the setup for the end time days. When will we know this is that setup? I'll let you know at the rapture!

One of Irwin's concerns seems to be the association of the dispensational view of biblical Israel with modern Israel, which in his mind leads to wrong political conclusions: "God's word to Abram in Genesis 12:3...is not a call to uncritical support of a modern secular state but a warning about rejecting divine mercy...This verse is not a call to unqualified support of the modern state of Israel, but to take heed to the ones (the first being Abram and his descendants) who bring the

⁸ Recall that Irwin holds to a Maccabean timeframe for the writing of Daniel.

message of reconciliation with God.” One is reminded somewhat of Bruce Waltke’s position that dispensationalism is to blame for 9-11.⁹ Irwin does not seem to go that far in his assessment. However, there is a concern that has been voiced, at least since the Knox Seminary Open Letter in 2002, that dispensationalists (and for that matter modern Israelis) treat the so-called Palestinians as “virtual Canaanites” to be conquered.¹⁰ To be sure dispensationalists must not hold an “Israel right or wrong” position. When Israel sins as a nation and its leaders make horrible decisions, they should be criticized as much as any other nation. To do so is not necessarily a violation of Genesis 12:3. On the other hand, the history of the modern Arab-Israeli conflict, as I have demonstrated in numerous other places, demonstrates that the facts on the ground favor support of the Israelis. At a time when antisemitism is on the rise, dispensationalists should not back down on this issue.

8. We are on the surest interpretative footing when we consider the whole of a biblical book, not when we piece together tiny portions of different books (292-93).

This particular thesis is one that dispensationalists can get behind without any hesitation. I often encourage believers to read books in one sitting when possible. Dispensationalists believe in biblical theology which means that the starting point is the text as given by an author. The arguments and themes of the biblical author only emerge fully in a comprehensive reading of the books which they wrote. Dispensationalists join Irwin in encouraging any dispensational popularists who choose to integrate a string of isolated passages throughout the canon that may or may not have validity. While integration across the entire canon is part of the process of doing systematic theology, such synthesis follows the establishment of biblical theology of various books of the Bible. It does not hold sway until such a whole book interpretation has been accomplished.

On the other hand, Irwin states that sometimes “an older image is repurposed to bring a new message to a new audience.” The word *repurposed* carries with it the possible idea that a New Testament author does not do justice to the Old Testament contexts of passages that are appropriated. Many dispensationalists will be uncomfortable with this way of stating the use of the Old Testament in the New.

⁹ Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 558-59.

¹⁰ See Mike Stallard, “A Dispensational Response to the Knox Seminary Open Letter to Evangelicals,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7 (Fall 2003): 5-41. Almost all of the Open Letter is given in this article along with my assessment of the various theses.

9. Understanding some biblical passages symbolically is not to question the reliability, inspiration, or perfection of the Scriptures (293).

This particular thesis is not problematic. Dispensationalists believe in symbols and figures of speech. Who believes Jesus will have a piece of steel hanging off his tongue at the Second Coming? (Rev. 19:15). There is no need to accuse nondispensationalists of having a low view of Scripture because they take some passages symbolically that dispensationalists take at face value. Irwin again speaks in a positive way about the dispensational approach: “Those who seek to read the Bible ‘literally’ do so because they value Scripture and want to take its message seriously. Such readers rightly chafe at an approach that avoids the plain teaching of Scripture by imposing a self-serving ‘symbolic’ reading.” Thus, the issue becomes on what basis language is symbolic. So, the differences are hermeneutical commitments and exegetical analysis not whether someone holds to inspiration and inerrancy.

Nonetheless, it is possible to discuss some significant implications in some areas. For example, if someone takes the land promises under the Abrahamic Covenant (e.g., Gen. 15:18-21, Amos 9:11-15) in a symbolic or nonliteral way, as some in the Reformed camp do, the dispensationalist asks, “does this not challenge the character of God and His Word?” If it is not fulfilled exactly as God gave it, does not His holy character come into question? Consider also the promises under the Davidic Covenant as outlined in Psalm 89. God Himself says if he does not keep his promises to maintain the covenant with David, He would be an unholy liar (Ps. 89:33-36). This is true even if Davidic sons on the throne disobey Him and lose their blessing. The covenant as a whole throughout history is only based on the promise of God. This means that there will be a Davidic kingship that lasts forever over a literal Israel. Thus, while the dispensationalist does not accuse the nondispensationalist of having a low view of Scripture when they take prophetic passages symbolically, the dispensationalist asks the nondispensationalist to double check what damage he may have unwittingly done in the area of theology proper.

10. We should be on the lookout for the antichrist but should exercise wisdom in doing so.

Identifying the antichrist with Nero or the Roman emperor does not prevent such identifications with present political systems or leaders but gives us the grammatical and theological rules to do so responsibly (294).

This particular thesis is an interesting but curious one. One must know that Irwin holds that the Antichrist of Revelation 13 is the Roman Emperor Nero, a view that is rejected by virtually all dispensationalists. But he correctly notes that 1 John 2:18 implies that there is not just one Antichrist

in history. The dispensationalist can gladly agree that there are many antichrists, those who oppose the true Christ in history, while there is the ultimate one Antichrist coming in the last days turning the world away from God. Irwin is concerned that we are “playing amateur cryptologist with the names of world leaders” to discover the identity of the Antichrist in our day. Surely, no dispensational scholars I know have dogmatically asserted that a current world leader (Putin, Khamenei, Obama, Trump, etc.) is the predicted evil one. We understand why many dispensational Christians during World War II thought that Hitler had a shot to be the Antichrist since so many qualities fit. Perhaps from Satan’s point of view, he was groomed for the job, but the timing from God’s point of view was not available.

Irwin’s thesis notes that an identification of the Revelation 13 Antichrist as Nero does not prevent identifications of modern political systems or leaders as being of the same character. If I understand him correctly, the grammatical and theological rules he wants to use to be responsible in doing the modern identification involves understanding the identification of evil in the world which is contrary to Christ rather than focusing on a particular leader who may be the end time Antichrist. It is in this way that we should be on the lookout. To be sure, dispensational scholars avoid dogmatic speculation about the identification of the Antichrist in the present hour and benefit from understanding which leaders in the world oppose Christ the most. Dispensationalists, however, are not really looking for the Antichrist at all. We are looking for Christ Jesus who will come to rapture the Church saints.

11. To live in expectation of Christ’s return does not require knowing when Christ will return (294-95).

In his discussion of this point, Irwin wisely rejects date setting citing the Millerites of 1843-44 and Hal Lindsey of recent times. Of course, the Millerites were not dispensationalists although they were premillennial. Apparently, they were not Zionists. Lindsey, on the other hand, is a dispensationalist. Modern amillennialists such as Harold Camping have also been date setters. In fact, if one studies the history of eschatology, the vast majority of date setters in Church History have been historicist amillennialists.¹¹ No one should be surprised since amillennialism dominated the teaching of the Church from at least the fourth through seventeenth centuries. We agree with Irwin that date setting leads only to disappointment and that we should heed Jesus’ declaration to “keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour” (Matt. 25:13). In my teaching of over four decades, I have tried to constructively correct those who want to be sensational date setters w

¹¹ See Le Roy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1950-1954).

hether to sell books and videos or to get an audience. We should respect those dispensationalists who are biblicists following textual observation about the end times. An expectant heart is always possible when facing an open-ended prophecy that is nonetheless guaranteed by Christ Himself (John 14:1-3).

12. Questioning the idea of the rapture or other dispensational teachings is not to question the hope of Christ's promised return in glory to a creation made fit for eternal life (295).

On the surface, this is another point that dispensationalists can affirm. Although we greatly treasure the pretribulational rapture of the church, I do not know any dispensational scholars who teach that nondispensational evangelicals do not believe in the Second Coming and do not express a theological hope for future glory for the individual. Again, the issue here is hermeneutical approach and the practice of exegesis. While there are certainly practical implications of rapture views and millennial positions, difference on these issues does not mean that those who reject a pre-trib rapture, for example, refuse to pray "even so, come, Lord Jesus." At least among dispensational scholars, I have not seen this questioning of the genuine future hope of those in the Reformed camp.

13. Looking for Christ to come again should not distract us from his presence with and in the church by the Spirit in word and sacrament (295-96).

Irwin's discussion on this thesis emphasizes the present reality of God's kingdom. In particular, he focuses on the Church as the kingdom on earth today: "While we wait in expectation of Christ's return--however that might happen--we should not overlook the reality of the kingdom that is present as those filled with the Spirit do his will." Dispensationalists can affirm this idea to a point as long as strong precision is added. Traditionalists reject inaugurated eschatology. This means that we do not believe we live today in the Messianic kingdom. That eschatological kingdom awaits the Second Coming of Christ to the earth to establish it. The thousand years of Revelation 20 do not speak of the current age -- we reject the amillennial recapitulation outline of the Apocalypse.

On the other hand, traditionalists believe that Jesus reigns today as God in general sovereignty over all things. We have no trouble honoring his authority over all. What we reject is that the present age is the sovereign fulfillment of Messianic kingdom promises. Further, dispensationalists can attest that Jesus reigns as Head of the Church in the present age (e.g., Eph. 1:18-23; Col. 3:15-17). We also deny that this reign is what Revelation 20 is declaring or that the Old Testament prophets were predicting about the kingdom. Traditional dispensationalists teach that the sovereign expression of the Messianic Davidic Kingdom begins at the Second Coming.

Nevertheless, dispensationalists should not (and usually do not) dismiss the presence of God in the present age. Dispensationalism, prophetic extremists notwithstanding, has often emphasized the work of the Spirit in the present age with all of the ramifications for individual sanctification, evangelism and missions. So, the question emerges, is Irwin suggesting that dispensationalism as a system forces a focus on end times to the exclusion of the present needs of the Church? If this thought is in his mind, it is an incorrect analysis. Dispensationalism has always had much more to say than just eschatological pronouncements.

Conclusion

We have seen that Irwin has honored positive teachings and practices of dispensationalists, while strongly criticizing their approach to the end time teachings of the Bible. *After Dispensationalism* provides an extremely helpful sample of how at least some nondispensationalists understand dispensationalism. There appears to be an honest attempt to synthesize both popular and academic sources on the various end time passages and issues in Scripture. This is perhaps the difficulty of such analysis. Who do you choose? Is Hal Lindsey the right representative of dispensationalism? Or is it John Hagee? Or is it Charles Ryrie or John Walvoord? Or is it the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics (CDH)? Remember that dispensationalism is a much broader historical movement than people know.

Another problem that such an analysis raises is that it almost always gives the impression that dispensationalists are only interested in eschatology. It is, of course, quite true, that differences in our hermeneutics often show up the quickest when we are dealing with eschatology. But this may give a false impression. That is why there should always be a number of dispensationalists interested in other biblical themes. If one reviews the history of the CDH since its founding in 2008, it becomes clear that we have not overdosed on eschatology. Such ramblings aside, it is important to appreciate Irwin's *After Dispensationalism* as an honest attempt to understand the movement's actual teachings. Perhaps further dialog will be of value as both sides continue to critique each other.