

Is Dispensationalism a Systematic Theological Construct Forced onto the Bible?

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Introduction

Although brothers in Christ, covenant and dispensational interpreters, view each other's theology as a construct that is foisted onto the Bible rather than being fully derived from the Bible in an inductive way. For example, dispensationalists often view the covenants of covenant theology, primarily the covenant of works/creation and the covenant of grace, as systematic theological constructs that are used to govern and interpret the texts in the Bible rather than being structural covenants that are derived inductively from the Bible. Nondispensationalists, especially covenantalists, return the favor and view dispensationalism as a system that is a pre-commitment to a certain theology that is overlaid upon the Bible. This presentation will respond to this charge against dispensationalism in three areas: 1) the scheme of dispensations, 2) Daniel's Seventy Weeks, and 3) the pretribulational rapture.

Scheme of Dispensations¹

The covenant interpreter G. I. Williamson wrote concerning modern dispensational premillennialism, "This view can only be called a recent innovation. It is rather a product of the dispensational system, of which it is a part, than of the ancient teaching of the Christian Church."² The implication of these statements is not just that dispensationalism should be distrusted because it is not ancient teaching, but that dispensationalism comes from a system that is not really based upon an inductive study of the Bible. In the listing of dispensational elements which follows, Williamson's description certainly gives the impression that dispensationalism has a host of assumptions and missteps when it comes to biblical teaching.

The recent critique of dispensationalism by Brian Irwin makes a similar suggestion. He notes that "The Scofield Reference Bible's two editions (1909, 1917) used cross-references to trace key themes through Scripture; footnotes elaborated on these and provided brief commentary about the dispensational relevance of various passages. It brilliantly transposed an entire theological system onto the biblical text..."³ While this summary statement may refer to m

¹ The fact that I start with the scheme of dispensations should not be taken to mean that I believe that the concept of dispensations is at the heart of the definition of dispensationalism. Rather, I see dispensations properly understood as part of dispensationalism. Unfortunately, because the name, originating with detractors, comes from the word *dispensation*, the outline of dispensations has erroneously been moved to the center of the discussion.

² G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 340.

³ Brian Irwin, *After Dispensationalism: Reading the Bible for the End of the World* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2023), 54.

ore than Scofield's outline of the dispensations, later on Irwin, noting the varying views of the number of dispensations among dispensationalists, makes the following significant assertion: "If dispensationalists themselves cannot agree, we may ask whether the system is inherently biblical or something imposed on the text."⁴ In addition, he throws Darby's alleged divisiveness into the mix while saying, "Being able to approach Scripture through the sequence of dispensations has provided structure and predictability, lowering the barrier to entry and creating enthusiasm for Bible study among dispensationalists. The clouds of eisegesis and sectarianism, however, hang over the benefits offered."⁵

Hence, those who oppose the dispensational approach sometimes convey the idea that dispensationalism takes its scheme of dispensations and forces it onto the Bible rather than letting the Bible speak for itself considering such an outline of biblical history. The best place to start with a response is to consider the book of Ephesians. Dispensationalists claim correctly that this Pauline book gives the exegetical basis for three dispensations. Elliott Johnson argues that "a dispensational view of biblical revelation is a Pauline concept expressed with particular fullness in the book of Ephesians. Within that epistle Paul refers to two dispensations explicitly and one implicitly."⁶ The key passages are the following (using NASB95):

- Ephesians 1:10 – "...with a view to an *administration* [οἰκονομία, dispensation, stewardship, management] suitable to the fullness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." It is hard not to see a future fulfillment in view in this passage. The text speaks of a future dispensation when there is a "climactic stewardship in human history."⁷
- Ephesians 3:2 – "...if indeed you have heard of the *stewardship* [οἰκονομία] of God's grace which was given to me for you." Here the Apostle Paul speaks of his personal stewardship before God as he ministered to the Gentiles such as those at Ephesus. However, the revelation for this stewardship was also granted to other prophets and apostles (3:5). Specifically, God's work in and through the body of Christ, a body containing both Jews and Gentiles, is in view.
- Ephesians 3:9 – "...and to bring to light what is the *administration* [οἰκονομία] of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things." The context is clear that this mystery has now been made known and is the same as the earlier discussion of the chapter, namely, the body of Christ which is the Church in the present age. However, the language implicitly points to an earlier time when God was apparently doing something else in his arrangements with the world since this work of God was

⁴ Ibid., 100.

⁵ Ibid., 101.

⁶ Elliott E. Johnson, "Hermeneutics and Dispensationalism" in *Walvoord: A Tribute* edited by Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 239-40.

⁷ Ibid., 240.

unknown. In light of the discussion about Israel in chapter 2, it quite natural to view this as a reference to the dispensation under the Law.

In light of this discussion, we see three dispensations given as part of the outline of history in the book of Ephesians: a past dispensation (Law/Israel), a present dispensation (Church), and a future dispensation (Kingdom when Christ sums up all things). This is not a systematic theological construct external to the Bible that has been forced on the text. It flows from the exposition of Ephesians. Hence, it is true to a biblical theology of Ephesians or in a broader sense to a Pauline theology.

One question that remains, however, is how to view the seven-fold dispensational outline of Scofield used by many dispensationalists since that time. While there may be textual justification for the three-fold scheme outlined in Ephesians, is the common seven-fold scheme a construct forced onto the Bible? This discussion properly begins with Galatians. The word *dispensation* or *administration* does not occur in the book. However, there is a rather concentrated presentation of the idea that the giving of the Law at the time of Moses cannot annul the giving of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:17-19). The Law was “added” because of sin and brought a new arrangement in which the Law served as “tutor.” As Ryrie notes,

Promise and Law are sharply distinguished by Paul in Galatians 3 even though he maintains that the law did not annul the promise. And the Mosaic Law is kept so distinct from the promise to Abraham that it is difficult not to recognize a different dispensation. This is the essence of the definition, and if anything is kept distinct in that chapter, the law is. Therefore, the separate dispensation of Promise or of the Patriarchs is justified.⁸

Now that Christ has come, the arrangement has continued to move so that we are no longer under the Law (vv. 21-29). Hence, we see movement from Promise to Law to Christ. While various labels are given for the arrangements that emerge, the underpinnings of those arrangements flow inductively from the Bible, in this case, the books of Galatians and Ephesians. Thus, at this point, we can describe four stewardships which we will label Promise, Law (Israel), Church, and Kingdom.

The next question is to ask if exposition of the Bible supports any understanding of pre-patriarchal dispensations, that is, dispensations in Genesis 1-11. There are a couple of ways to look at the possibility. First, transitions are clearly offered in those early chapters of Genesis. The easiest one to observe is from Eden to the post-Fall world. There is a natural distinction in the arrangements in light of the judgments of Genesis 3. In addition, there is at least one change in the way that God governs in the world from the time of Cain and Abel until after the Flood. Cain’s guilt in murdering Abel is not dealt with by means of capital punishment (Gen. 4:14-15). When Noah comes off the Ark, however, capital punishment is demanded by God in the case of murder (Gen. 9:5-6). Such shifts in arrangements get the attention of dispensational

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 61.

interpreters and raise the issue of dispensations in the pre-patriarchal period. However, the paucity of evidence causes most of us to be undogmatic and partly accounts for the varying views about the number of dispensations. This state of affairs is not the result of extra-biblical speculation but of a reasonable induction of the text that raises the question of transitions.

Second, it is not unreasonable nor extra-biblical to ask if patterns in the times associated with the dispensations of Promise, Law, Church, and Kingdom can be seen in the early chapters of Genesis. Since those four dispensations have strong exegetical support, perhaps an analysis of the sweep of history for those administrations will show forms that might fit the early pre-patriarchal period. One way to do this is to observe the primary and secondary characteristics of dispensations which Ryrie posited, following earlier dispensationalists. This was essentially an inductive attempt to understand the various stewardships by identifying such things as new revelation to accommodate change, a different governing relationship, and variation in man's responsibilities.⁹ An example would be to note the obvious revelation of Eden in Genesis 2, the post-Fall revelations of judgment and change in Genesis 3, and the new order of the post-Flood world. The point here is not to give a full-blown exegesis and theological integration of these ideas, but enough has been given to show that this entire discussion by dispensationalists is biblically based. It is not the reading of a preconceived systematic theological grid into the various texts of the Bible.

Daniel's Seventy Weeks

Amillennialist Sam Storms affirmed a rather clear assessment of the dispensational understanding of the gap between the 69th and 70th weeks of Daniel's important prophecy in Daniel 9:24-27:

I am also convinced that the theory of a gap is motivated by the antecedent determination to find additional justification for distinguishing between Israel and the Church, as it is by any factors actually present in the text itself. In other words, if one had not *already* decided in favor of two distinct peoples of God with distinct dispensations in which God deals with each, would Daniel 9 ever have been interpreted in such a way as to yield the concept of a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks? Or, again, to put it even more bluntly, dispensationalists find a gap in Daniel 9 because they are *predisposed* to find one in order to justify an already existent theological construct."¹⁰

Here, Storms plainly states that dispensationalism imports a systematic theological understanding into the text of Daniel's Seventy Weeks prophecy in order to arrive at a

⁹ Ibid., 36-43. Arno C. Gaebelin is an example of an earlier dispensationalist who saw in Scripture similar characteristics of dispensations. See Michael D. Stallard, *The Twentieth-Century Dispensationalism of Arno C. Gaebelin* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), 144-47.

¹⁰ Sam Storms, *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Scotland, UK, 2013), 84-85. Italics are original.

preconceived conclusion. In other words, it is forced on the text rather than correctly derived from the text in proper exegesis. The primary way that Storms sees this playing out in dispensationalism is invoking the distinction between Israel and the Church and reading it into the text. Storms and most amillennialists probably view dispensationalists this way in the passage because they see dispensationalists “wanting” a gap in order to insert the Church Age and keep the Church out of Israel’s timeline. However, this assessment may be wishful thinking on their part. In an earlier presentation, I have responded to Storms on many issues including the charge about the Seventy Weeks.¹¹ For the rest of this section, I have repeated my words from that presentation.

Only a cursory examination of the actual text of Daniel 9:24-27 shows that there is enough exegetical evidence to suggest a gap. Miller’s exposition notes the following: “The text also indicates that the seventieth seven would not follow the sixty-ninth immediately. For example, Christ’s crucifixion (“Anointed One ... cut off,” v. 26) and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 (v. 26) would occur *after* the sixty-ninth seven, but *not during* the seventieth seven (v. 27), revealing a gap between these sevens.”¹² Harold Hoehner, in his definitive work on the Seventy Weeks prophecy, definitively proves the existence of an exegetical and theological gap by means of seven arguments.¹³ Hoehner uses both exegetical and theological arguments to make his case. In no argument, however, does he assume the distinction between Israel and the Church or force such a distinction into the text as Storms posits. The language simply suggests that the death of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem happen *after* the 69th week and *before* the 70th week. Even the post-tribulationist Gundry agrees with this conclusion:

If the cutting off of the Messiah occurred in the middle of the seventieth week, it is very strange that the cutting off is said to be “after” the sixty-nine weeks (figuring the sum of the seven and the sixty-two weeks). Much more naturally the text would have read “during” or “in the midst of” the seventieth week, as it does in verse twenty-seven concerning the stoppage of the sacrifices. The only adequate explanation for this unusual turn of expression is that the seventieth week did not follow on the heels of the sixty-ninth, but that an interval separates the two. The crucifixion then comes shortly “after” the sixty-ninth but not within the seventieth because of an intervening gap. The possibility of a gap between the sixty-ninth and seventieth weeks is established by the well-accepted OT phenomenon of prophetic perspective, in which gaps such as that between the first and second advents were not perceived.¹⁴

¹¹ Mike Stallard, “A Critical Review of Sam Storms’ *Kingdom Come: The Amillennial Alternative*, (presented at the Pre-Trib Study Group, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas, December 2015). This is an expanded version of a presentation given at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics in Kansas City in 2014. However, the earlier edition did not have the section on the Seventy Weeks of Daniel.

¹² Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, vol. 18, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 269. It is not clear that Miller is dispensational although he is premillennial.

¹³ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 131-33.

¹⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 190. Gundry is cited by Hoehner as given in the previous note. Miller refers to both Hoehner and Gundry. The arguments have changed little. The dismissive attitude of Storms is more problematic in light of this. There are exegetical arguments about

Gundry simply asserts that the exegetical results of seeing a gap should not be surprising in light of the existence of gaps elsewhere in the Old Testament. Dispensationalists have explored the exegetical and theological issues of gaps in great detail because the actual texts involved lead them in that direction.¹⁵ Storms interacts with little of the dispensational work along these lines. As a result of the exegetical and theological realities, he has merely dismissed the dispensational view of the gap as a case of theological proof-texting. In actuality, he has proven nothing at all. Perhaps in later editions of the book, he can expand this section with proper exposition and less assumptions.

The Pretribulational Rapture

George Ladd, a posttribulational scholar from the middle to late twentieth century, made the following comment about the dispensational view of a pretribulational rapture:

Therefore, pretribulationism is an unnecessary inference. It is an assumption in light of which the Scriptures are interpreted. Nowhere can its adherents really say, "Thus saith the Lord." Students of the Word may be permitted to make such an inference if they care to do so, but in such an important matter, they should be willing to admit that it is an assumption and not the sure Word of God; and that another inference, viz., that of a single coming of Christ to rapture the Church at the close of the Tribulation has an equal if not a stronger claim to support.¹⁶

Ladd's opinion is that those who hold to the pre-trib rapture are bringing an assumption to the text of the Bible that is not really justified. Of course, most of his book is an attempt to show that his view of posttribulationism is warranted from a study of Scripture.

Earlier at the outset of his book, Ladd gives another reason external to the Bible that dispensationalists use to support a pretribulational rapture: "Many who hold to a pretribulation rapture feel that the coming of Christ cannot be a Blessed Hope if the Church must go through the Great Tribulation. Is not the Blessed Hope the hope of deliverance from tribulation? Who wants to suffer the terrible experiences of those awful days?"¹⁷ Here Ladd approaches the criticism that labels pre-trib rapturists "escapists" who actually hold their view because they w

the gap that need to be addressed. Storms does given exposition of much of the Seventy Weeks prophecy from his amillennial viewpoint. However, he does not give real counter arguments to the dispensational exegesis in this writer's opinion.

¹⁵ Of special interest here is J. Randall Price, "Prophetic Postponement in Daniel 9 and Other Texts" in *Issues in Dispensationalism* edited by John R. Master and Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 133-65.

¹⁶ George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope: A Biblical Study of the Second Advent and the Rapture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 103-104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

ant it to be that way in the end. That is, they follow their emotions and not the reasonable text of the Bible.

What do pre-trib dispensationalists have to say to those who claim that our view is a preconceived system that is at least partially based upon an escapist mentality which we force on the Bible? It is, according to Ladd, a theological interpretation that does not flow inductively from genuine exegesis. While it may be true that some pre-trib rapturists in our churches hold the view out of wishful thinking, I know of no dispensational scholar who actually voices this sentiment. It is true that there are some theological arguments that are used – argument from the Israel-Church distinction, imminency, etc. – that should be categorized as correlation arguments (they fit) rather than as logical proofs from exegetical evidence. Nonetheless, it is quite possible to ground the pre-trib rapture teaching in exegesis with some solid theological integration among passages. The two key passages are 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and Revelation 3:10.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

The purpose here is not to do a full-blown exegesis of the passages in question, although such would be the ultimate proof of the point. Dispensationalists have presented commentaries on this passage to prove that their understanding of a pretribulational rapture is exegetically supportable.¹⁸ It is useful here to show that the pre-trib conclusion is inductively derived from the text thereby showing it is not a theological conclusion forced into the text as a matter of eisegesis.

The outline that dispensational interpreters notice in reading the text could be listed in the following way:

- The outline of the entire book is chronological based upon 1 Thess. 1:9-10.
- A catching up of the Church (rapture) occurs which includes both those saints who have died and those who are alive (1 Thess. 4:13-18).
- This is followed chronologically (*peri de*) by the Day of the Lord (5:1-2), a breaking through of God into history in judgment which can refer (in light of Old Testament

¹⁸ Thomas Constable, "1 Thessalonians" in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 703-706; Mal Couch, *The Hope of Christ's Return* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2001); D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992); Richard Mayhue, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1999); Mike Stallard, *The Books of First & Second Thessalonians: Looking for Christ's Return*, The Twenty-First Century Commentary Series (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2009).

antecedent theology) to either a duration of time (such as the tribulation) or an event (such as the Second Coming with the attendant judgments).

- The statement in verse 3, that the day of the Lord judgments happen when unbelievers are thinking they have or are about to have “peace and safety” clinches whether the day of the Lord is the full seven years. Here we do a little theological integration with other passages (primarily in Daniel and Revelation).
 - If the post-trib rapture is correct and the day of the Lord is related to only the Second Coming event, then the unbelievers right before the day of the Lord comes would be involved in the battle of Armageddon and bowl judgments. This is hardly a time of peace and safety.
 - If the prewrath rapture is correct and the day of the Lord covers more or less the last quarter of the seven years of Daniel’s Seventy Weeks, the unbelievers right before the day of the Lord would be in the seal judgments (according to Rosenthal¹⁹). These seal judgments would include the appearance of the Antichrist, war, famine, pestilence, and martyrdom. It is difficult to picture this time as a time of peace and safety.
 - If the mid-trib rapture is correct and the day of the Lord covers the last half of the tribulation period, the unbelievers right before the day of the Lord would be in the seal and trumpet judgments (according to Buswell²⁰). The descriptions of these judgments in Scripture prevent their characterization as a time of peace and safety.
 - Interestingly, the pre-trib rapture is the only view that can point to another passage that helps to establish the time before the rapture as a time when unbelievers would think they have peace and safety. In Daniel 9:27, the Antichrist figure (Roman prince as he is called in Daniel 9) signs a peace treaty with the nation of Israel at the beginning of the seven-year tribulation. This event has a built-in “peace and safety” motif which helps to establish that the day of the Lord in 1 Thess. 5:2 is the full seven years. So, by process of elimination no other rapture view except the pre-trib view can account well for the peace and safety statement of 5:3.

¹⁹ Marvin Rosenthal, *The Pre-Wrath Rapture of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 186.

²⁰ J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973); see also Mike Stallard, “A Comparison of J. Oliver Buswell’s Mid-Trib Position with the Pre-Wrath Rapture View,” *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (Spring 1999): 84-96.

- The exemption in 5:9 helps to finalize the truth that believers will not endure the seven-year day of the Lord wrath that the passage envisions.

All of these points flow out of the text and are not some external reality brought to the text. To be sure, some integration or analogy of Scripture was used in handling the peace and safety statement in 1 Thess. 5:3. However, the use of other Scriptures was true to the context of the books that were invoked (especially Revelation). Daniel 9:27 was used as an antecedent revelation. Its exegesis should be logically prior to that of 1 Thess. 5:3. In every case, dispensationalists can unashamedly point to an ultimate defense of the pre-trib rapture in 1 Thess. 4-5 following a clear commitment to biblical theology over systematic theology.

Revelation 3:10

The second passage where an exegetical defense of the pre-trib position can be made is the controversial single verse in Revelation 3:10 – “Because you have kept the word of My perseverance, I also will keep you from the hour of testing, that hour which is about to come upon the whole world, to test those who dwell on the earth.” Even some dispensationalists see this as only applying to the Philadelphian church.²¹ There was some undesignated time of persecution in the first century that they were promised deliverance from or protection from. Thus, it would not relate in any way to end time events such as the rapture of the church. I see this view as unlikely based upon the fact that each letter must be applied to all churches and because the time of testing in context seems to be what starts in the very next chapter and dominates the bulk of the entire book (chapters 4-22, the tribulation with chapters 4 & 5 as introduction).

The Post-Tribulational Proposal

The content of the promise of Revelation 3:10 in most post-tribulational thinking means that God would guard Christians through the tribulation period to come. That is, those who are alive when the tribulation comes will be protected and watched over by God during that time. The argument appeals largely to the lexical possibilities of *tereo ek* (kept from). It is possible to see the phrase as meaning “guard through” rather than the first thought ideas of the words “kept from.” We grant them this possibility. *Tereo* can mean “guard” and *ek* can mean “through.” Furthermore, it is suggested that in John 17:15 the language is used to mean “guard through” or “protect from.” There the enemy is the Evil One (Satan). However, in that passage it is not at all clear that “protect from” is the meaning. It is just as likely that Jesus is praying for them to be kept out of the sphere of the Evil One altogether.

The primary weakness of the post-tribulational proposal in my judgment is the actual content of the protection (if that is the assumed meaning). If the promise is that Christians will be protected during the tribulation, what does that mean? Does it mean that they will be protected from being killed? Hardly. In Revelation 7:9ff there are a great number of martyrs of

²¹ Related to me by a seminary colleague.

tribulation saints. Does it mean they will be protected from being hurt? This is true in some cases, but being killed is being hurt and some believers must undergo this ultimate hurt during the tribulation. Does it mean they will be protected from losing their salvation? This is true in any age and would not have any particularly significant import in this context. In the end, the post-trib proposal empties the promise of its meaning. It is one thing to say that they will be protected. It is quite another to explain what that looks like. There is no way to make that work and sound reasonable. On those grounds alone, the post-trib proposal must be rejected.

A second weakness of the post-tribulational view in Revelation 3:10 is that the promise is empty of any content for the original audience, namely, the Philadelphians. What help is it to them that God promised to protect them during a time they would not live to see? They are dead and gone. In what way does the promise function for them? It is possible that the passage is speaking representatively to them since the generation that sees the rapture is unknown in history. This approach to passages makes sense in some sections like Matthew 24, but there are contextual markers that suggest this (the transition from Matt. 23 to Matt. 24, etc.). Here, there is a letter given directly to a specific church. There must be some application made to it that is not empty of real content. Otherwise, the promise is useless for them.

The Pre-Tribulational Proposal

One can add some positive reasons for agreeing with the pre-tribulational view that the church will be exempt from the coming tribulation, hence, a pre-trib rapture. These arguments are well-known in dispensational circles.

- a. The church is promised exemption not just from the testing but also from the *time* of testing.
- b. The time of testing is specifically for the “earth-dwellers” and not the Church. In the book of Revelation, the term “earth-dwellers” is almost a technical term for pagans who reject God. This fits and strengthens (although it may not prove by itself) the exemption for the Church.
- c. The pre-trib proposal can handle the content of the promise for the Philadelphians. They were exempt from the time of testing altogether as evidenced by their death (of course, all believers who have died have been exempted in this way). The believing generation that is alive when Jesus comes will be exempted via rapture. The promise of exemption can at least be applied to the Philadelphians in this particular scheme. In the post-trib scheme, there is no way to apply the exemption to the church at Philadelphia.
- d. The pre-trib proposal has content for the promise. The promise of exemption makes perfect sense. There is no problem in seeing Church Age saints exempt from the time of testing while others, even future believers, in the tribulation are not necessarily protected from the judgments of the book in every case and every individual believer. In light of the application of each of the seven letters to all the churches, the promise of exemption extends to all saints in the Church Age.

In analyzing this discussion, what are we to make of the claim that pre-trib rapturists just assume their position to justify an escapist mentality relative to the tribulation? The language of Rev. 3:10 on the surface, with a casual reading, at least pushed into the mind the thought of an exemption. This is hardly an assumption. It must be dealt with as an exegetical matter. Notice also that the argumentation (aside from the short foray into John 17) is based totally on the context of the Apocalypse. In other words, we have been completely exegetical within a biblical theology of the entire book of Revelation. Therefore, it is impossible to judge dispensationalists as reading a preconceived idea into the text on this issue.

Conclusion

It could be that dispensationalism is the most caricatured evangelical theological option at the present time. Perhaps the harshest criticism is not that dispensationalism does incomplete exegesis or improper theological integration. The worst assessment from our Christian brothers who oppose us may be that our starting point is a theological system that does not really come from the Bible. This is the opposite of the truth. Modern dispensationalism since the early days of the simple Bible readings of the Plymouth Brethren²² has been a movement which has sought to build its way up from an inductive reading of the text rather than a creedal or theological understanding on the way down to the text. To be sure, dispensationalists have not always been clear or accurate in their presentations. But on the whole we have a hermeneutical heritage that is thoroughly biblical. May we never lose sight of that inheritance.

²² H. de Goltz, *Genève Religieuse au Dix-Neuvième Siècle* (Geneve: Henri Georg, 1862), 437-55. See also Mike Stallard, "Emile Guers: An Early Darbyite Response to Irvingism and a Precursor to Charles Ryrie," *The Conservative Theological Journal* 1 (April 1997): 31-46.