

The Term *Dispensationalism* in Historical Perspective: How Useful is the Term in Today's Theological Climate?

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This is a paper that I have wanted to write for a long time. As early as 1986, in the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society, the issue of whether the term *dispensationalism* still had value was raised.² At the present time many dispensationalists that are traditional, progressive, and so-called ultra-dispensationalists still affirm the use of the term to describe their approach to the Bible and theology. This article explores the issue of the ongoing relevance and usefulness of the term *dispensationalism* at the current time.

The Trouble with Labels

Historical labels of theological positions do not all have the same staying power. As history ebbs and flows, labels can change over time. One example of a doctrinal label that has remained strong in usage down through the centuries is the term *trinity*. Tertullian is usually credited as the first to use the Latin term *trinitas* to describe our trinitarian beliefs in his work *Against Praxeus* (213). Before that time, biblical Christians believed the doctrine (to the degree of their understanding) without using the word *trinity*. Since the time of the trinitarian and Christological theological controversies of the third through fifth centuries (mostly over the deity of Christ), the term *trinity* has been maintained as a major category of orthodox theology. While from time to time, I hear some suggest we need to come up with a new term, it is highly unlikely that a new term will emerge in light of the longevity of the widely accepted label.³

A second example shows how doctrinal positions are maintained for the most part while the labels for those positions change over time. The early church used the term *chiliasm* or *chiliasm* to express the belief that Christ was returning to earth to set up a thousand-year earthly kingdom. This English expression originates with the transliteration of the Greek term for one thousand (*χίλια*) which appears six times in Revelation 20:2-6. This term was widely used to describe the doctrinal position even though over time amillennialism replaced chiliasm as the dominant view of handling eschatological texts such as those in the Apocalypse. In the mid-sixteenth century, Calvin strongly opposed chiliasm while using the word *chiliasm*.⁴

¹ This paper is a minor update of the original paper delivered at the annual 2022 Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics.

² I refer to this occasion in Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 6 n 1.

³ This does not mean that there are no contemporary issues with trinitarian terminology in the present culture. See Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 11-29.

⁴ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.25.5; The edition of Calvin's work that I use is John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. 2, translated by Ford Lewis Battles; The Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 21 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). See also my paper entitled "An Analysis of John Calvin's Criticism of Premillennialism in *The Institutes*" given at the Pre-Trib Study Group in 2021. It can be found in the article section of www.pre-trib.org.

However, the more prominent label for Christ's coming to reign for one thousand years shifted to the expression *millenarian* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵ The advantage of this term over *chiliasm* or *chiliasm* is that the word includes in it the idea of a thousand years rather than just the number 1000. In the early nineteenth century, *millenarian* gave way to the term *premillennial* which includes the timing of Christ's coming relative to the millennium.⁶ This usage probably came about due to the rise of postmillennialism in the post-Reformation days and the need to distinguish positions since both held to a future earthly kingdom. In the debates of academic circles, all three of the terms (chiliasm, millenarian, premillennial) can still be found today. However, popular parlance at the present time usually speaks of premillennialism when meaning the belief that Christ returns before the earthly millennium to set up his kingdom. Hence, theological labels have changed over time although the main thrust of the doctrine from the earliest days to the present time has remained much the same.

A third historical illustration highlights what sometimes happens when doctrinal differences force the use of different terms to translate biblical words. Here I speak of the difference between expiation and propitiation. Both are biblical concepts but have different meanings. Expiation refers to the covering or sending away of sin. One expiates a thing – sin. However, one propitiates a personal being – God. It is unfortunate that the term *propitiation*, defined as the satisfaction of the wrath of God upon sin, comes across as too harsh for those who reject or downplay the notion of a penal substitutionary atonement. The most visible adherents of the pushing aside of propitiation are those who propose a nonviolent atonement.⁷ Nonetheless, the diminishing of the doctrine of propitiation is also demonstrated in various Bible translations.⁸ Hence, it is possible to see labels bogged down in debates among various camps on many issues of theology.⁹

A fourth case involving change of theological terminology is the transition from *Palestinian Covenant* to *Land Covenant* in dispensational writings. The word *Palestinian* is actually a geographical term established by the Romans with their renaming of Israel as *Syria Palestina* in AD 135. After the Bar Kochba rebellion, the Romans wanted to separate Israel from its land. In modern times, the reestablishment of Israel as a nation in 1948 gave the name *Israel* back to the land. At the time of modern Israel's founding, Jewish people living in the land were referred to as Jewish Palestinians while the Arabs were called Arab Palestinians. In the 1960s,

⁵ "Millenarian," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/millenarian>; accessed July 28, 2022.

⁶ "Premillennial," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/premillennial>; accessed July 28, 2022. See also the interesting overview of these terms in James H. Brookes, *Maranatha: Or The Lord Cometh* (5th ed., St. Louis, MO: Edward Bredell, Publisher, 1858), 13-23.

⁷ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). See also Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, gen. eds., *The Atonement Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008).

⁸ The New American Bible (Roman Catholic) opts for "means of expiation" rather than propitiation in Romans 3:25, "to expiate" in Hebrews 2:17, and "offering" in I John 2:2 and 4:10. In this writer's view, none of these properly translate the Greek words which refer to propitiation. In a similar way, the New International Version (1984) often uses "atoning sacrifice" as the translation for what should be propitiation. While this is true, it does not say enough about the term involved in the judgment of this writer.

⁹ My own views are consistent with the excellent research of Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956). Later, Morris presented a more popular yet substantial version of this work in *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983).

however, the founding of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Yasser Arafat) led to the attempt, largely successful, to turn the term *Palestinian* into an ethnic label referring to the so-called Palestinian people. As a result, many dispensationalists, wanting to distance themselves from the hijacking of what was once a geographical designation, have more and more referred to the Land Covenant, a term which is actually superior since it goes to the heart of the nature of this covenant – the reaffirmation of the land promises first given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3, 15:18-21; cp. Deut. 29:1).¹⁰

A fifth illustrative example is the word *fundamentalism* or *fundamentalist*. The struggles with the term *fundamentalism* in some ways mirror the difficulties often expressed by scholars relative to *dispensationalism*. The term *fundamentalism*, first used in the 1920s on the heels of the writings compiled as *The Fundamentals*,¹¹ is a perfectly good historical term. The word refers to a particular doctrinal formulation of Christian orthodoxy in the fight against modernism in that day. Over time some within the movement emphasized an overly strident or militant tone coupled with hyper-separationism and anti-intellectualism. This caused some Bible-believing born again Christians to back away from using the term to describe who they were. Later, the reemergence of Islamic Fundamentalism and the tragedy of 9-11 increased dissatisfaction with the notion of any fundamentalism. Consequently, the popular use of the term among believers has declined even though the term is quite an appropriate term historically and theologically understood.

These various examples show the sometimes tenuous and time-based nature of many theological labels down through history. The question before us now is whether the theological and historical label *dispensationalism* has run its course and needs to be replaced by some new designation. The reasons for any such change and the preliminary analysis will be given below.

The Label *Dispensationalism*

It is difficult to pinpoint when the word *dispensationalism* was first used. This is not the same question as the first use of the word *dispensation* which is a biblical term (something we will address below). It is clear that in the 1930s there is a veritable explosion of the use of the label *dispensationalism*. In 1936, dispensationalist Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Seminary, wrote his book entitled simply *Dispensationalism*.¹² Chafer does not offer a technical definition as Ryrie does later in *Dispensationalism Today*.¹³ He discusses the idea of biblical dispensations and how a proper understanding of them leads to a correct approach to doctrine and the concept of grace, including practical issues such as prayer and worship.

¹⁰ As an example, note J. Dwight Pentecost's use of *Palestinian Covenant* in *Things to Come*, first published by Dunham in 1958 with the first Zondervan reprinting in 1964 (see pages 95-98). Contrast this label to Andrew M. Woods' use of *Land Covenant* in the recent book *The Coming Kingdom* (Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2016), 14-15. Some later dispensationalists still use the older designation.

¹¹ The edition I often use is R. A. Torrey et al, eds., *The Fundamentals* (reprint ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990). The articles that make up the compendium were originally written 1910-1915.

¹² Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936). The work was later copyrighted by Chafer in 1951 and republished by Exegetica Publishing in 2015.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965).

In the same year as Chafer's book (1936), Oswald T. Allis, an opponent of dispensationalism, wrote two articles using the label *dispensationalism*, one on the issue of the unity of the Bible¹⁴ and the second on the Law of God.¹⁵ The first article most likely was published before Chafer's book. An even earlier work (1934) whose title includes *dispensationalism* was A. W. Pink's interesting discussion in *A Study of Dispensationalism*.¹⁶ Pink, a former dispensationalist, came to view dispensationalism harshly. He claimed that dispensationalism was a pernicious error¹⁷ which was a subtle innovation used by the devil.¹⁸ Couch suggests that Pink had voiced such opinions as early as 1929.¹⁹ The earliest clear reference to the term *dispensationalism* that I have found is in Philip Mauro's 1929 work *The Hope of Israel: What Is It?*²⁰ Mauro, also a former dispensationalist, attempted to refute his old position.

It is of the utmost importance that this be understood; for the advocates of modern **dispensationalism** have wrought confusion, and have succeeded in giving plausibility to many misinterpretations of Scripture, by first taking for granted that a 'literal' interpretation necessarily calls for something *material* or *natural*, and by then insisting strenuously that all prophecies which refer to *Israel, Jerusalem, Zion, etc.*, should be interpreted 'literally.'²¹

This quotation shows that the term *dispensationalism* goes back into the 1920s, although it is hard to find before the 1930s.²² It is not clear if the term originates with adherents or opponents. I do not find it in the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909, 1917).

Dispensationalism Before the Term Emerges

It is quite natural that the label *dispensationalism* would emerge to tag as shorthand the hermeneutics and theology of the growing movement especially in North America. Prior to the later appearance of the label, those who held to the position referred to their approach to Scripture under various headings with other terms.

¹⁴ Oswald T. Allis, "Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 8.1 (Jan. 1936): 22-35.

¹⁵ Oswald T. Allis, "Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 8.3 (July 1936): 272-289.

¹⁶ I am using the electronic edition A. W. Pink, *A Study of Dispensationalism* (Fig Books, 2012).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, loc 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, loc 30.

¹⁹ Mal Couch, "Pink, Arthur," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* edited by Mal Couch (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 306.

²⁰ Philip Mauro, *The Hope of Israel: What Is It?* (Boston, MA: Hamilton Books, 1929).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14. The bold emphasis is supplied.

²² I have commonly taught that the term *dispensationalism* was first used in the 1930s. I first heard this idea from a professor at Dallas Seminary. This 1929 date shows that this historical understanding is technically in error but close. This writer would appreciate any information that any reader has concerning an earlier date than 1929 for the term *dispensationalism*. Such occurrences probably exist. Please send any available information by email to mstallard@foi.org.

Dispensational Truth

Clarence Larkin famously wrote an illustrative book entitled *Dispensational Truth* (1918).²³ The full title or sub-title shows his understanding of dispensational truth as “God’s Plan and Purpose in the Ages.” As a result, after an opening introductory chapter on the “Prophetic Word” and the panorama of the ages, he deals with premillennialism and the Second Coming.²⁴ In an earlier like-minded book, even beginning with a “panorama of the ages” diagram like the one in Larkin, J. H. Burridge presents an initial chapter explaining his diagram where he notes, “...the Chart takes in the whole course of time, and is intended to give an illustration of God’s ways with man from Creation till the end of all things, as well as His purposes concerning man. These ways of God vary according to the dispensations man is passed through.”²⁵ The rest of the book delves into the details of each epoch with its unique purpose of God during that time period.

Scofield additionally uses the term *dispensation* frequently in the Scofield Reference Bible. Especially instructive is his note at Acts 15:13 (the beginning of James’ message at the Jerusalem Council) which states, “Dispensationally, this is the most important passage in the N.T. It gives the divine purpose for this age, and for the beginning of the next.”²⁶ This shows, similar to Larkin and Burridge, that understanding texts dispensationally equated to dealing with passages in light of the divine purpose for various ages or dispensations.²⁷ In common dispensational parlance, dealing with these things correctly in their context would be part of “rightly dividing the Word of truth.”²⁸ In this regard, there is no need to force an unwarranted unity across the dispensations.

In a similar way, Arno C. Gaebelin, one of the associate editors of the *Scofield Bible* and editor of *Our Hope* magazine, without using the term *dispensationalism*, meant roughly the same thing when he spoke of passages being understood in a *dispensational* way or *dispensationally*. Notice his comments in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew:²⁹

²³ Clarence Larkin, *Dispensational Truth* (revised ed., Philadelphia, PA: Rev. Clarence Larkin Estate, 1918). Later editions are available.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2-18.

²⁵ J. H. Burridge, *God’s Prophetic Plan; A Comprehensive View of God’s Dealings with Man from Creation to the New Heavens and New Earth* (St. Louis, MO: Fred. Hammond Publishing, 1909), xv.

²⁶ C. I. Scofield, ed., *Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909 [1917]), 1169. Compare Arno C. Gaebelin, *Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (New York: Publication Office “Our Hope,” 1912; reprint ed., Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 265.

²⁷ I believe the approach to understanding dispensationalism in terms of how dispensations function throughout biblical history is a truncated view of dispensationalism. From the vantage point of Ryrie’s later synthesis, the hermeneutical concern of literal interpretation and the distinction between Israel and the Church should more forcefully be put forth. How dispensations function would be a part of Ryrie’s point emphasizing the doxological unifying theme of the Bible, which is in essence, a philosophy of biblical history (see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 98-105).

²⁸ Remember C. I. Scofield’s famous book *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Philadelphia, PA: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1921).

²⁹ Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Gospel of Matthew: An Exposition* (Publication Office Our Hope, 1910; reprint ed., Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961).

Because it [Matthew] is the Jewish Gospel, it is *dispensational* throughout. It is safe to say that a person, no matter how learned or devoted, who does not hold the clearly revealed dispensational truths concerning the Jews, the Gentiles and the church of God will fail to understand Matthew [emphasis original].³⁰

If the dispensational character of Matthew were understood, no ethical teaching from the so-called Sermon on the Mount at the expense of the Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ would be possible...³¹

When we think how many of the leaders of religious thought reject and even oppose all dispensational teaching, and never learned how to rightly divide the Word of truth rightly...³²

Throughout Gaebelien often appeals to the dispensational Gospel, truths, character, teachings, point of view, parts, and outline given in Scripture. The term *dispensational* for Gaebelien highlighted the framework from which interpretation is to be done.

This terminological usage dominates in other writings as well. One could speak of Darby and Kelly and the Brethren tradition from the nineteenth century in addition to others. However, it is important to point out that the word *dispensation* is a biblical term making its use ancient. The ESV erroneously translates the term as *plan* in Ephesians 1:10 and 3:9 thus removing any stewardship concept from the *term*.³³ In the Old Testament, the Hebrew language for someone ruling over a household for someone else is translated by the οἰκονόμος family of words in the LXX (1 Kings 4:6, 16:9, 18:3; 2 Kings 18:18, 37; Isa. 22:15-25). These occurrences show that the usage can be found in both the historical materials and the prophets. Its usage is the same as the later New Testament references to steward/manager (οἰκονόμος – Luke 16:1, 3, 8; 12:42; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 4:1-2; Gal. 4:2; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet. 4:10), stewardship/management/administration (οἰκονομία – Luke 16:2-4, 1 Cor. 9:17, Eph. 1:10, 3:2, 9; Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4) and the verb to dispense/manage (οἰκονομέω – Luke 16:2). Thus, the terminology that came to be used of dispensations relative to God's dispensing through others has had staying power in terms of meaning. Even in modern times the notion of a presidential administration in the United States in which the President administers the government on behalf of the people can be compared to usage in British influenced areas as a presidential dispensation.³⁴

In fact, the entire outline of dispensations common to modern dispensationalists can be found, as is commonly known, in the second-century writings of the Church Father Irenaeus. He has seven dispensations, a tribulation, the Second Coming, and the millennium. While we would not agree with all of his theology, the dispensational framework for interpretation is

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Ibid., 5-6.

³² Ibid., 6.

³³ It does translate the term as *stewardship* in Ephesians 3:2 when the text speaks of Paul's specific ministry.

³⁴ One example is the first-hand knowledge I have of newspapers in South Africa referring to the Nelson Mandela dispensation.

present except for the pre-tribulational rapture. Beyond this, we would have to say that the dispensational outline is substantial and not a minor or secondary matter.

Contrast this to the scant evidence put forward by Michael Horton to justify the ancient credentials of covenant theology. He comments,

The basic elements of the covenant of creation [works] can even be discerned in Augustine's claim: "The first covenant was this, unto Adam: 'Whosoever thou eatest thereof thou shalt die the death,'" and this is why all his children "are breakers of God's covenant made with Adam in paradise." Irenaeus, too, anticipated the central premises of the federal theologians on this point and clearly recognized the difference between the "covenant of law" and the "covenant of grace."³⁵

It seems to me that the ancient credentials of dispensationalism are stronger than those put forward for covenant theology. Perhaps we can join the Roman Catholics in suggesting that covenant theology is a recent innovation!

The term *dispensationalism*, then, originates from the biblical and ancient term *dispensation*. Its increased usage after the First World War is most likely the result of the popularity of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In the same way that *trinitas* became a term describing earlier held trinitarian beliefs, dispensationalism encompasses beliefs that go back to the early Church and, more importantly, to the Holy Scriptures. The label both simplifies communication and hardens the boundaries between various positions. Neither of these is a necessarily negative function.

Premillennialism

There are some dispensationalists that use the term *dispensation* sparingly if at all. They of course would not use the later term *dispensationalism*. As one example, in reviewing the earlier work by James Brookes entitled *Maranatha: Or the Lord Cometh* (1858),³⁶ I found no mention of any form of the d-word. However, there is a robust defense of premillennialism over against postmillennialism, which at that time would predominate in American Christianity. There is a clear assertion of literal interpretation understood as grammatical-historical interpretation along with the affirmation of Israel's restoration in the last days.

Émile Guers is another writer who only occasionally used the word *dispensation*. The title of his most significant work, however, acknowledges the significance of the dispensational framework: *Israel in the Last Days of the Present Economy; or, An Essay on the Coming Restoration on This People* (1856).³⁷ This work, more than any other dispensational writing of the nineteenth century lays out the hermeneutical framework of a developing

³⁵ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 84-85. The reference from Augustine is *City of God*, 16.28. The reference from Irenaeus is *Against Heresies*, 4.25.

³⁶ The edition I use is James H. Brookes, *Maranatha: Or The Lord Cometh* (5th ed., St. Louis, MO: Edward Bredell, Publisher, 1858).

³⁷ 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*, (Gèneve: Émile Beroud, 1856). The short title is *The Future of Israel*.

dispensationalism. His discussion of literal interpretation is at home with and useful for our modern debates in this area. Theologically, he focuses on the future of Israel with a strong premillennialism. In light of these kinds of examples (Brookes and Guers), if you asked dispensationalists what they were before the term *dispensationalism* was available, they would probably say they were born again Bible-believing Christians who were premillennial in their understanding of Scripture with a belief in Israel's future.

Why Some Shy Away from the Term *Dispensationalism*

The term *dispensationalism* comes across as an academic term, although as a young Christian in a dispensational church that was not afraid to say so, I was able to grasp what it meant. It is perhaps this perception of it being a difficult area to discuss that has pushed people away from it. When one adds to this the fact that dispensationalists, unlike so many other evangelicals, have typically not been afraid to wade into the deep waters of prophecy, the entire approach to those who are unstudied seems to be above the average Christian. Frankly, I often find the writings of covenant theologians to be much harder to engage.

Added to this problem is the negative literature about dispensationalism, much of it considered fake news by dispensationalists. One such work is the 1958 book *The Church Faces the Isms*.³⁸ In a somewhat irenic way, this work places dispensationalism in the category of "Isms Predominantly Biblical" which also includes fundamentalism, Adventism, and perfectionism. The actual negative article on dispensationalism wrestles mostly with Scofield's presentation in his Bible notes.³⁹ Of course, who can forget Gerstner's infamous book *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (1991).⁴⁰ He declares dispensationalism to be not only deficient in its Calvinism but to be a cult which has the wrong doctrine of salvation with all the unsaid inferences about destiny.⁴¹

As a result of these kinds of misrepresentations of dispensationalism, a list of such criticisms can easily be given as to what adversaries believe is wrong with the movement. This sometimes scares Bible students away from the robust methodology and truth lodged in dispensationalism. It also tempts adherents to stop using the label *dispensationalism*. I provide a list here without discussion and would welcome any additions which readers might include.

Myth # 1 – Dispensationalists only care about eschatology.

Myth # 2 – Dispensationalists like to set dates for the Second Coming.

Myth # 3 – Dispensationalists believe in two ways of salvation.

Myth # 4 – Dispensationalists destroy the unity of the Bible (like higher criticism).

³⁸ Arnold Black Rhodes, ed., *The Church Faces the Isms* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958).

³⁹ W. D. Chamberlain, "Dispensationalism" in *The Church Faces the Isms* edited by Arnold Black Rhodes (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), 95-110.

⁴⁰ John H. Gerstner, *Wrong Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991). The foreword is written by R. C. Sproul.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105-147, 149-169.

Myth # 5 – Dispensationalists believe in “cheap” grace.

Myth # 6 – Dispensationalists are too pessimistic about social action.

Myth # 7 – Dispensationalists throw away the Ten Commandments.

Myth # 8 – Dispensationalists throw away the Sermon on the Mount.

Myth # 9 – Dispensationalists reject the local church.

Myth # 10 – Dispensationalists believe the Church is Christ’s Plan B.

Myth # 11 – Dispensationalists are the cause of ongoing violent conflict in the Middle East.

Myth # 12 – Dispensationalists oppress Palestinian Arabs in the Middle East.

Myth # 13 – Dispensationalists support an unbelieving, imperialistic nation in supporting Israel.

Myth # 14 – Dispensationalists believe that God’s future kingdom is only 1000 years.

Myth # 15 – Dispensationalism is inherently Arminian.

Myth # 16 – Dispensationalism is primarily about believing in seven dispensations.⁴²

In light of such a massive number of alleged, aberrant teachings of dispensationalists, is it any wonder that some believers would struggle with using the term *dispensationalism* to describe what they believe even if such beliefs aligned with the Bible.

The Possible Use of *Futuristic Premillennialism*

One term that has possibilities as at least a partial replacement for the term *dispensationalism* is the phrase *futuristic premillennialism*. In the book *Christ’s Prophetic Plan* edited by John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue,⁴³ the term *futuristic premillennialism* is highlighted to a degree. To be clear, the many authors in the book frequently use the label *dispensationalism* including two definitional chapters.⁴⁴ In the preface, MacArthur notes that dispensationalism is broader than futuristic premillennialism.

⁴² Myths # 15 & # 16 are taken from Michael Vlach, “What Is Dispensationalism Not?” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plans* edited by John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue (Chicago: Moody Press, 2012), 47-54. This present author is considering writing a book on these and other misrepresentations of dispensationalism.

⁴³ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Christ’s Prophetic Plan: A Futuristic Premillennial Primer* (Chicago: Moody, 2012).

⁴⁴ Michael Vlach, “What is Dispensationalism?” and “What Is Dispensationalism Not?” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plan*.

Futuristic Premillennialism serves as a more focused term than dispensationalism when addressing prophetic issues. Futuristic Premillennialism stands in contrast to Historic (or Covenant) Premillennialism, which is one of three major prophetic options associated with Covenant theology, along with Amillennialism and Postmillennialism.⁴⁵

MacArthur goes on to say “Futuristic Premillennialism results from understanding and applying prophetic Scripture in a way that is most consistent with the normal or literal approach for interpreting Scripture.”⁴⁶ In short, futurist premillennialism refers to the eschatological approach of dispensationalism. MacArthur is correct in stating that dispensationalism is broader. While we may be known for our eschatology charts, our interests involve the entire panorama of the ages, creation teachings, salvation issues, approaches to sanctification, evangelism and missions, and a philosophy of history as God works throughout history to bring his ultimate kingdom to pass.

Richard Mayhue, the other editor of the book, also refers to futurist premillennialism and equates it to “dispensational premillennialism.”⁴⁷ In an excellent chapter entitled “Why Futuristic Premillennialism?” he presents the case for what is normally called dispensational premillennialism over against historic premillennialism, amillennialism, and postmillennialism. The usual arguments such as unconditional covenants are part of the appeal using mostly the new vocabulary. Mayhue had used the label *futuristic premillennialism* as early as 1999.⁴⁸ Like MacArthur, he uses the term to focus on the eschatological aspects of dispensationalism. The term is not a simple replacement.

The advantage of using futuristic premillennialism in the debates with others, especially with historic premillennialists, gives a precision relative to the positions. It is also (remotely) possible that by using the term instead of dispensational premillennialism the negatives associated publicly with dispensationalism will be somewhat muted. Eschatology is the doctrinal area where the differences between dispensationalism with its consistent literal interpretation and other end-time views are most quickly recognized. If the d-word is not used, perhaps preconceived notions will not weigh down the discussion nearly as much. That is the probable hope. However, we must notice that the list of myths given above shows that the over-the-top critiques of dispensationalism go way beyond eschatology. Even if we use different terminology in eschatological discussions, it is doubtful that we would temper the debate in any meaningful way.

Conclusion: Why *Dispensationalism* is Still a Useful Term Today

It is my conviction that the term *dispensationalism* is still valuable today. I have no intentions of giving it up as the moniker for my hermeneutical and theological commitments. Let me suggest a few reasons why. First, the term covers a historical movement from Darby to

⁴⁵ John MacArthur, “Preface” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plan*, 10.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁷ Richard Mayhue, “Why Futuristic Premillennialism?” in *Christ’s Prophetic Plan*, 61.

⁴⁸ Richard Mayhue, *First and Second Thessalonians* (Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 13.

the present (the modern dispensational movement) which has an amazing continuity in terms of hermeneutics and basic theological views. I have tried in my published writings to emphasize from time to time Émile Guers and his 1856 book *The Future of Israel* (mentioned earlier). His work is part of the reason I have stayed within the traditional dispensational camp. Guers was influenced by Darby's eschatological teachings when Darby stayed for several months at his church outside Geneva in 1837.⁴⁹ What is most remarkable about Guers' work is that he anticipates Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* by 109 years. Ryrie, without knowing anything about Guers' writings, looked generally at what dispensationalists have taught down through the years and produced what is now a well-known synthesis of consistent literal interpretation, a distinction between Israel and the Church, and a doxological unifying theme of the Bible. But over a hundred years earlier, Guers presented what he believed to be the general principles for interpreting prophecy: (1) literalism, (2) distinction between Israel and the Church, and (3) the word *day* in prophetic passages means day and not year.⁵⁰ The last one is, of course, not a match to Ryrie's doxological point. But the first two points highlight an amazing similarity across the years. While there is much diversity and development in the tradition from Darby to the present time which is cherished by traditionalists, there is nonetheless a substantial unity to that tradition. The later term *dispensationalism* has been used to label that strong continuity which is still being maintained.

The second reason that I still like the term *dispensationalism* is that it continues to maintain a significant place in the evangelical world in spite of all of the strange criticisms that have been leveled at it. There is room for dispensationalists to continue to turn the negatives into positives. Bingham and Kreider note,

Dispensationalism is an essential and enduring fact of the evangelical landscape. Its fivefold commitment to (1) inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, (2) the authority and relevance of the Word of God for Christian living, (3) the unity of the history of redemption, (4) the gospel and the need for conversion and (5) global missions all bear this out. It is an evangelical tradition in service to the global church.⁵¹

In other words, dispensationalism is solidly within evangelicalism (using that term in the best possible way in light of the five points listed above). Within that theological and ministry world, it is possible to have influence because of the agreements we share. If I surrender the term *dispensationalism*, I may water down my ability at this time in history to teach my evangelical brothers where they misdirect their criticisms. This is especially true when recent research into positions still shows a heavy respect for the importance of dispensationalism.⁵²

⁴⁹ In the Preface to *The Future of Israel*, Guers actually gives more credit to Darby's colleague in the brethren movement named Benjamin Wills Newton for Guers' understanding of literalism (iii). I take it that the Brethren movement on the whole influenced the Genevan pastor, but it was Darby who actually visited his church. However, it must be noted that the congregationalism of Darby clashed with Guers' Presbyterianism.

⁵⁰ Guers, *The Future of Israel*, 22-39.

⁵¹ D. Jeffrey Bingham and Glenn R. Kreider, "Preface" in *Dispensationalism and the History of Redemption: A Developing and Diverse Tradition* (Chicago: Moody, 2015), 13.

⁵² Benjamin L. Merkle, *Discontinuity to Continuity: A Survey of Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020).

My final reason for maintaining a hold on the term *dispensationalism* is my perception that this term points to the movement that reflects the teachings of the Bible at face value. Although a future term may arise to do the job, right now this movement with its label appears to be the rare place that spotlights the practice of inductive Bible study. We are the folks that take the word *Israel* to mean, well, *Israel*. While we are not perfect as a movement, on the whole our perspective models the reality of an Old Testament and New Testament taken at face value the way that God gave it.

In saying these things, I am not arguing that we should invoke the d-word in each and every encounter, whether academic, church-related, or social media. It is the content of our faithful rendering of Scripture that is more important than the labels that we use. Further, audiences are at different levels with various motivations for how they read what we have written or interpret what we have spoken. We should be wise as serpents and harmless as doves to borrow a textual aphorism. We should not say things poorly so our adversaries can say, "I told you dispensationalists were like that!" However, I see no reason to abandon the use of the d-word at this time. In light of such reasons as I have given above, I believe if we surrender the term *dispensationalism* at the present time, we will lose more than we gain.