

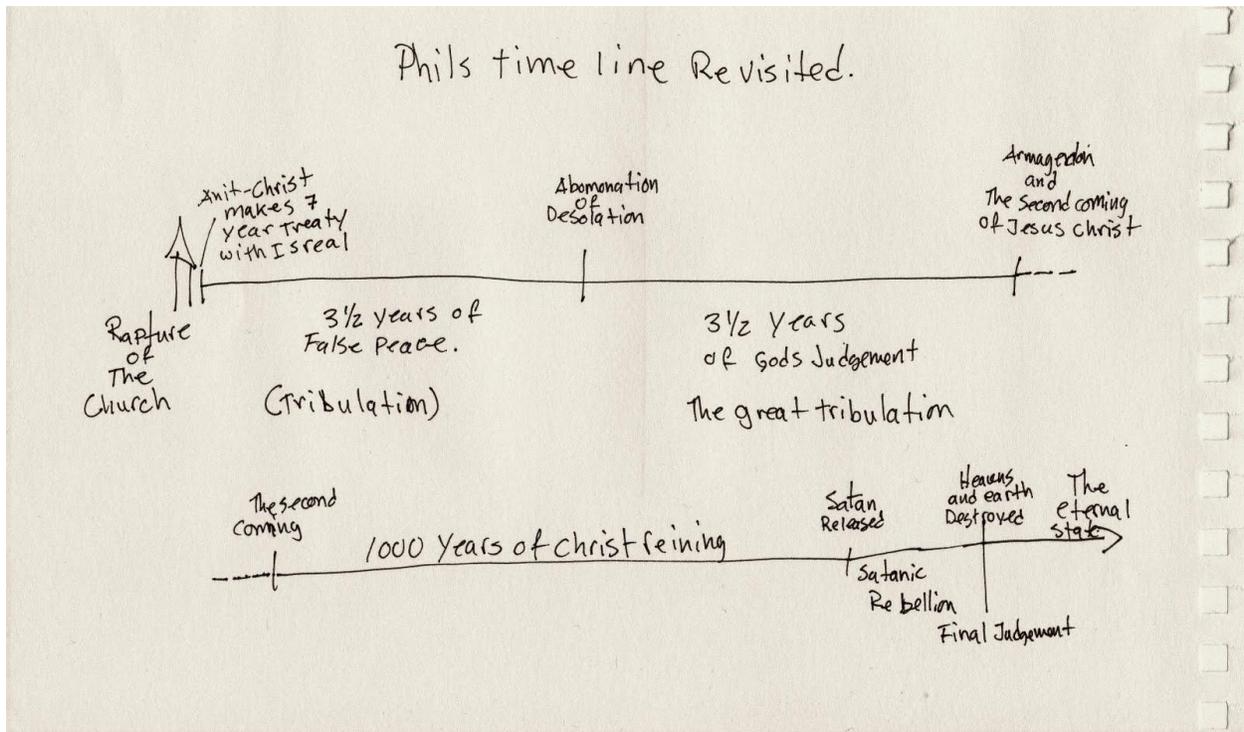
*This is an introduction to a 9 or 10 part series of articles I hope to share on the subject of what is known as Dispensationalism (dis-pen-say-shun-al-is-am) or Darbyism. I know that some have urged me to be brief in this regard but I have both the complexities of the view and a complete lack of talent for brevity to contend with. However I will try to add some diagrams and pictures for flare.*

I remember the night it all came together in my head for the first time. I had grown up in both the Assembly of God and Baptist evangelical protestant church traditions. I had always had an interest in theology and, like any 13 year old boy would, I found the question of the end of the world to be particularly enticing. I had heard of the rapture, I had heard of the second coming of Jesus Christ and some foreboding character ominously referred to as “the anti-Christ.” and of course a great many things that didn’t make sense to me, like terrible beasts coming up from the sea and mountainous asteroids falling to the earth, unimaginable earthquakes where untold numbers of people died. All of these images would swirl around my colorful imagination. But how these mysterious puzzle pieces fit together was illusive at best. Their meaning lay ever beyond my reach locked away in a book called Revelation.

That night, however, as I attended a bible study with my dad and mom, a conversation sprang up about when exactly the “end times” had begun or if they had begun. It was a spirited but light hearted discussion between (as I recall) two or three of the more outspoken men (which is typical). The rest of us listened in and occasionally someone would interject a question here or there. Through the discussion one of the spectators expressed some frustration with the whole issue of the end times. She felt that it was too complicated for the “non-scholar” to understand. Further this person felt that the whole study and debate was quite impractical and may even be dangerous in that it might cause division. At this point one of the 2 outspoken gentlemen, Phil, took the opportunity to explain to anyone who would listen an overview of how everything was going to play out in the end times.

He drew a crude time line on a piece of paper for us explaining that the next thing we are looking for on the prophetic time line is the rapture of the church, a time when all believers, past and present will “rise”, or be “caught up” into the clouds with the Lord Jesus. Jesus would then take these resurrected believers (meaning those who have received new imperishable eternal bodies) to a great 7 year “wedding feast” where He and the church will celebrate their union. This would be followed by the rise on earth of some devilishly handsome, debonair political personality who would manage to establish a peace treaty with the nation of Israel for 7 years signaling the beginning of the tribulation. The first 3 and a half years of the tribulation, this cunning and

charismatic leader would weave the threads of human culture together in an astounding tapestry of lies and false peace. At the end of the first 3 and a half years the anti-Christ would enter a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem and declare himself to be God in the holy place (this is known as the "abomination that causes desolation" and signals what is called "the great tribulation"). The Holy Spirit would then withdraw himself as a restraining power against evil in the world. For the next 3 and a half years all hell would brake lose on earth as God poured out his wrath on mankind. Eventually things would come to a head in the "Valley of Megido" where a great battle would be interrupted by Christ descending in the culmination of the second coming. After wiping everyone out he would set up a kingdom for exactly one thousand years (this is called the "millennial rein of Christ or just "the millennium"). At the end of this golden age the devil would be released from his temporary prison and would deceive enough people to lead another rebellion against God and his people. But, of course, the Lord would have the victory. He would resurrect the wicked for judgement (the believers of course were resurrected at the rapture.) And then the Lord would do away with heaven and earth and make a new heaven and a new earth that we would inhabit in the eternal state.



I was enthralled! Phill had just laid out how the world would end! It was all so clear and in that moment I, like any child would, accepted this teaching without question. After all, every man I ever respected and loved – even my own father – who were present gave no objection to this doctrine. Indeed they all seemed to concur on the issue. The deal was sealed.

Over the next few years this particular view was reinforced with every sermon I heard (and that was a lot). I remember, in my mid-teens, participating in a lengthy, in-depth study of the book of revelation which was led by none other than my father. At the end of it my perspective on the issue was that it was firmly grounded in scripture. Oh, I knew there were other views. Some people thought that the rapture happened half way through the tribulation or even right before the second coming of Christ. Some people thought Jesus wouldn't come back until we had had a thousand years of peaceful Christian rule on the earth and some really crazy liberal fringe thought there wasn't a millennium at all. They just allegorized everything. But the "pre-millennial, pre-trib rapture" view was based on a "literal" exegetical interpretation of the bible.

And then came "left behind." It was a phenomenon. At last! Someone finally put it all together in the form of a compelling dramatic story. It was brilliant! We fell upon it like starving children upon fresh pancakes and warm syrup. I personally remember the growing suspense as I waited for the next book to come out. Everybody was reading them and talking about them, wondering how the portrayal of the seal or the trumpet judgements would be played out. Fortunately the novelty of the LaHaye books wore out before the series was finished and I never made it to the 80th book, or however many they wrote. I think the Jabez fad stole a fair sized portion of their audience near the end as people started running with that. But that's another story.

Some time in my early 20's I was visiting with my friend Dan, a very close friend of my late father. Dan was, in fact one of the two outspoken guys who were talking about the end times that night I was first shown the pre trib time line. He and I were discussing theology and he asked me the fateful question; the question that would eventually lead me to actually test this closely held view (and several other views) in light of scripture.

"Are you a dispensationalist?" he asked

"A dispah-wha?" I said.

"A dispensationalist." he laughed.

“I don’t know. What is... it?” I replied. He went on to explain that it is a somewhat complicated view which teaches, basically, that God has dealt with mankind in different ways through various dispensations of time. He said that there were a broad range of ideas within dispensationalism but the primary interest centered on its view of the end times. It seemed to me that this was the view he held to. Beyond that I don’t recall any details of the conversation. But it set me asking the question: “what exactly is dispensationalism?”

I asked a lot of people and I think I got as many different answers as people I asked. One thing was clear at the outset: the typical everyday Christian layman really did not and does not know what dispensationalism is all about. I remember picking up a book called “The Apocalypse Code” by Hal Lindsay at the Christian book store and reading about 3 chapters. I had heard of Hal Lindsay but had never really read anything of his or listened to any of his messages. The only thing I actually remember from his book was his notion that the way to read revelation was to realize that John, as he was writing, was seeing visions of the 20th century. And all such things as we would be familiar with, like a helicopter or a tank, would be really strange to someone living in the 1st century. So John, not knowing what he was seeing, was trying to explain them the best he could using language that the people of his day could understand; likening things to beasts and locust and what not. Later in the book he was talking about how some government run research and development program called HAARP in Alaska was trying somehow to use the radio frequencies generated by the northern lights to read people’s minds (see chapter 3 of his book *Apocalypse Code* if you can find it that is). I wasn’t sure what to think about the overall message of the book but that last point was kind of an obvious red flag so I didn’t waste my money on it.

Later on I heard a message by Hal Lindsay. He was explaining that the reason we know there is a pre-trib rapture is because we see how most of the New Testament is dealing with the church. After a point, however, it seems like the book of revelation shifts focus back to Israel. This tells us that there are yet future dealings with Israel and that we, the church will be taken out of the picture. This, at the time sounded perfectly reasonable to me and I felt like I had just put a big piece of the end times puzzle together. However I was disturbed to learn that Hal Lindsay was somehow connected with Chuck Missler.

I was not (and am not) a big fan of Missler. I think it was his message on how the Nephilim of Genesis 6 were now malicious disembodied half breed spiritual beings who had managed to slice through the fabric of our dimension. They were, in his estimation, currently posing as aliens who abduct people in order to perform all

manner of grotesque experiments on them. The current popular view (which he was disputing) held that aliens were actually creatures from another planet who traveled the vast distances of space just to see what we were up to. To Missler, It seemed more reasonable to suppose that these creatures had escape the prison of God by breaking into our universe, somehow taking on a physical form and flying around in spaceships they had brought with them from the other side. If I had to take sides I would likely prefer the late Douglas Adams interpretation. In his book "The Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy." He described the UFO/Abduction phenomenon as being the work of what were known throughout the galaxy as "Teasers." Teasers were rich kids with nothing to do. They would land their shiny space cruiser next to some unassuming farmer who no one would ever believe and strut up and down their ships walk way making "beep beep" noises. It certainly seems to be just as plausible a theory and just as provable. But I digress.

As outrageous as all of that may sound I must credit Mr. Misler with his consistency in qualifying his hypotheses as just that - an hypotheses. One largely based on speculation. And I will say for both Lindsey and Missler that I could not accuse them of any damning heresy. As far as I know they are my brothers in Christ. Strange folk they may be, we are yet kin. And I have on rare occasion found some elements of their teaching to be edifying. But really this is all completely off topic.

In spite of all the aforementioned nonsense, Hal Lindsey's teaching that revelations focus on Israel was a proof of a pre-trib raptured took root in my brain as being almost a sure thing. Further his method of interpreting scripture in light of current events was so reinforced by people I held in high regard that it seemed to me a compelling argument. Besides I really had no other choice. It was the only end times view I knew. Indeed dispensationalism, in all its views, was all I had ever been taught.

So here I was, a wondering modern conservative protestant evangelical Christian in the thick of dispensational teaching. I was looking for the rapture at any minute. I was sure that the tribulation was getting closer everyday and that I was going to miss it. I was part of a Calvary Chapel congregation, teaching youth about all these things. And, really, dispensationalism wasn't just part of the culture, it was the culture. We had it all figured out. It was so plain and clear. I even remember trying to explain the pre-trib rapture view to a pagan co-worker who thought I was off my rocker. But what did he know? He was a pagan and a stoner. Still, my point is that I was convinced. Convinced enough to teach others unashamedly.

But that all changed one day as I was driving through Sonoma County. I was listening to a man; I believe it was Steve Gregg, author of the book "Revelation. Four views." but I am not sure. Whoever he was, he had my attention as he was explaining what it was that dispensationalism actually teaches. All I remember him saying was that this view held that national Israel in the Old Testament was a completely separate work and entity from the church. That God was doing a work with Israel, but, because they rejected Him as their messiah, He essentially put this work on hold and decided to do a work with the gentiles which He called the church. Eventually, when the age, or dispensation, of the church is finished, God will rapture his church and begin dealing again with the nation of Israel. This was a significant blow to my theology because I have never believed this. I have always understood that the fulfilment of Gods promise to Abraham, that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed, was made manifest in Christ. As I had gone through Ephesians and Romans I felt it was pretty obvious that the church has been grafted into Israel and is the continuation, even the culmination of that chosen people now spread to every tongue and tribe and nation.

As my mind began to unpack the ramifications of this belief of mine I realized that if I didn't hold to this foundational view (and therefore rejected dispensationalims) what foundation did I have for believing in a pre-tribulation rapture? If the church is the continuation of the remnant of spiritual Israel there is no reason for God to return to a separate work. Where then does that leave my beliefs about the end times? In a big confusing mess, that's where. So I went back and started studying and asking more questions. I started looking closer at what I was being taught about certain passages. And I began to see even more inconsistencies.

On one occasion I was listening to a study by a pastor who was teaching on 1 Cor 15:51-53 where Paul says "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed- in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed." (Coupled with 1 Thess 4:15-17 which describes the same event) and he spent a great deal of time explaining why, when Paul said "at the last trumpet" he didn't really mean the "last last" he meant the "last before all the others." his argument was not compelling.

Later I attended a bible study on revelation and noted frequently that portions of several passages would be sectioned in a most peculiar way. The first part would be interpreted literally, the second part would be interpreted symbolically, and then the

end of the passage would, again, be interpreted literally. I was mystified to learn that this might happen within the space of a paragraph. I could not figure out how they chose what was literal and what was symbolic. Later I learned that this is done to uphold dispensationalism doctrine of interpreting the whole of scripture literally unless it can not be so interpreted. This is a second primary doctrine which I disagree with. That may seem crazy to you but please bare with me until I have an opportunity to make my case. You may find it more reasonable than you think. More can and will be said on the issue of dispensationalisms convenient interpretations of select passages in future articles.

Another feature of this view I have found to be highly suspicious is its ambiguous systematic nature. It is not taught as a "systematic theology" but as an "exegetical exposition of the Bible." One who investigates this claim would find quickly that the former classification is far more fitting than the latter (and perhaps better still would be the class of an exegetical exposition of the bible). But it is not taught as a system. One example of this is a conversation I had with a man I greatly respect who, though he is not a pastor, has taught many studies in scripture. I asked him what he thought about dispensationalism and he stated to my pleasant surprise that he thought it was not so. Later on in the conversation, however, he was stressing to me his earnest hope in a pre-tribulation rapture. He had, apparently, not yet made the connection between the two. But my hope is that you will see that the pre-trib rapture view is inextricably grounded in the assumptions of dispensationalism.

It seems the vast majority of modern evangelicals that I have known and spoken to (primarily the laity) believe the doctrines of Darby without question. As far as they know dispensationalism has always been the prevailing view and is the only orthodox view. They swallow it just like I did from the time I was a child. This was clarified for me in another conversation I had with a brother, whom I love, where, as I explained some of what I had been reading and hearing and thinking about Israel, the church, prophecy and the end times , he interrupted me with the objection that these ideas sounded like some kind of new fad. He cautioned me against taking seriously ideas which were not firmly grounded in the traditional biblical interpretation we had always held too. Further he encouraged me to get a good grasp on the whole of scripture before I made any decision about this issue. Wiser counsel I have not been given and to be sure I took it to heart. I don't want to make it sound as though these brothers were gullible or simple minded. I honestly don't know two sharper swords, but it still serves as a powerful testimony to the obscurity of the doctrines in question. Here two very

knowledgeable seasoned Christian laymen were yet uninformed of the origin and basic tenets of the views they believed so firmly.

Teachers, I pray you take care to be clear and honest about whatever system you hold to. If you seek the truth you have nothing to lose by thinking critically and objectively and by sharing all of details of a doctrine including its origin and history. Christians today (including me) are woefully ignorant of most of what has happened in the church over the last 2000 years. Most don't know anything about those people who came after the apostles. Most people aren't going to read Josephus or Eusebius. At best they might learn about people like Nero or Diocletian from the history channel. But that's like eating food approved by the FDA. They approve what they want to sell, not what's healthy.

This introductory article has turned out to be a general history of my journey out of that strange Darbian country I was born into. My intention with this article is to introduce a topic I hope will generate discussion and deepening exploration of scripture and history. I do not wish to speak ill of anyone who holds to the views of dispensationalism. Indeed I do not currently know anyone who does not hold to this system in one way or another. I am, myself, still finding, as I explore these ideas, that most of what I have always held too has been sketched and colored by the same hand (and I do not mean the hand of the Almighty). The purpose of this and subsequent article is to ask those who read it, to carefully consider what they believe. If what you believe is true then you have nothing to fear by testing it in light of scripture. If nothing else it should only reinforce the truth of your view. It should not be threatening. If, however, what you believe is not true than you must test it so that you are not believing something that is false. That would be a sin for we are commanded to test all things and hold fast to that which is true (1 Tim 4:16 1 Thes 5:21). I do not claim to have figured everything out, I feel like I know just enough to be dangerous. I am still not prepared to subscribe to any of the various other views I have explored just yet. I am still in the process of investigation. But I am interested and willing to discuss, consider and debate all the issues which surround dispensationalism.

It is not generally an easy thing to lay aside all of your standing pre-supposition and re-examine all that you have held to. It is even harder to walk in the truth of what you learn. It is at times a lonely road. It will test friendships, your own maturity, and the maturity of those you respect, when you begin to challenge the common reigning system of thought. People will not understand you. They will question your motives, your ability to discern and reason, even the genuineness of your faith. You may be accused of being contentious, litigious and even arrogant. Fortunately for me I have

suffered very little alienation because, while my brothers and sisters don't necessarily agree with me, they are still mature enough to see that we are ever born of the same Spirit. Even so it is hard for me at times to find the courage to challenge people I respect. Despite what some may think I do not enjoy disagreeing with people or being the guy with the "weird view" on things.

Never the less, the more I study the more convinced I become that the tradition I have been brought up in is not consistent with the clear teaching of scripture. And whatever the masses may teach, no matter how they passionately articulate this view, no matter how much I may love and respect them as men and women of wisdom; unless I am convicted by sacred scripture and plain reason I cannot accept the popular modern views of Darby "for" to quote Martin Luther (rather dramatic, I know) "they have frequently erred and contradicted themselves. My conscience is captive to the word of God... ...To deny conscience is neither right nor safe. [so] Here I stand. I can do no other."