

**The Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine
and the Progressive Dispensational System:
Are They Compatible?**

by

John A. Alifano

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AND THE PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONAL SYSTEM:
ARE THEY COMPATIBLE?

BY

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF CHRISTIAN STUDIES
with a concentration in
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Supervisor: James I. Packer

Second Reader: Sven K. Soderlund

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To my mother,
whose words of encouragement shall always be remembered,
and in memory of my father,
whose example of fortitude shall never be forgotten

ABSTRACT

In the year 1827 a new Protestant premillennial system of theology began to develop in Great Britain. John Nelson Darby is credited with developing the system now known as *dispensational premillennialism*, or simply *dispensationalism*. The system's distinguishing feature is that it understands Israel and the church to be two sharply distinct peoples of God. Israel is called the people of God in the Old Testament and the church is called the people of God in the New Testament. Both peoples have a distinct purpose and program in God's plan of redemption for humanity. Darby's view is in contrast to the then existing and even now more widely accepted view that the church is a continuation of the Old Testament people of God. Dispensationalism does not recognize this continuity. The church is an entirely new people. During this present dispensation, which exists between Christ's first and second advent, God is involved with his purpose and program for the church. He has put Israel aside. However, in a future dispensation he will resume his purpose and program with Israel. But God's work with the church must first be completed. Then Christ shall return from heaven to the air and "catch up", or *rapture*, the church from the earth and return to heaven with it (see 1 Thes. 4:17). This is the first stage of his second coming. The second stage of his second coming occurs seven years later when he returns to the earth with the church to establish the Davidic kingdom in accordance with his purpose and program for Israel. The intervening seven year period is known as the Tribulation. Christ's return for the church is known as the *pretribulation rapture*.

Today's dispensationalists have made changes to the original system. *Progressive dispensationalists* do not see two purposes and programs for two sharply distinct peoples of God. They see one purpose and program for two softly distinct expressions of the one people of God. Their adoption of the "already/not yet" eschatological framework is foundational to their new system. The church and Israel are part of the same kingdom program. The eschatological kingdom has "already" arrived with Christ's first advent but it has "not yet" arrived in its culmination. This must wait until the second stage of his second coming. Likewise, the Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants have "already" begun to be fulfilled with the church but have "not yet" been fulfilled with Israel. However, the progressives have not made changes to the doctrine of the rapture. The pretribu-

lation rapture has traditionally been based upon the notion that a sharp theological distinction exists between the two peoples of God. Is it logical to retain the doctrine while holding to the notion of a soft non-theological distinction?

This paper will argue the thesis that progressive dispensationalism cannot integrate the pretribulation rapture into its reconstructed dispensational system on any basis of theological distinctiveness between the church and Israel. This will be accomplished by first setting forth the systems of the three major forms of dispensationalism that have existed during its history, namely, classical, revised, and progressive dispensationalism, and second, by showing that each of three kinds of theological distinctiveness, namely, anthropological, soteriological, and eschatological distinctiveness, are present in the classical and revised systems and therefore these systems can support the rapture's integration, but are not present in the progressive system and therefore this system cannot support the rapture's integration.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Historical Overview

The *pretribulation rapture* doctrine is taught today in many Protestant churches. The teaching can be found in independent Bible churches, Baptist churches, Brethren assemblies, the Assemblies of God denomination, the Foursquare Gospel denomination, a number of Presbyterian churches, Calvary Chapel churches, and other churches.¹ The teaching is also promoted on many radio and television evangelistic programs. The teaching concerns the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Proponents of the doctrine believe that Christ's return shall occur in two stages. In the first stage he returns to "catch up", or *rapture*, his true church from the earth. Those who are alive at that time and experience the event shall receive a new glorified body in an instant. They shall not experience death. Their mortal body shall be changed "in the twinkling of an eye" into an immortal body (1 Cor. 15:51-53). This occurs in conjunction with the bodily resurrection of the deceased members of the church. They are described as being "asleep" in Christ (1 Thes. 4:13-15). So, at the first stage of Christ's return both those who are alive and those who are dead shall receive glorified bodies like the Lord's. Therefore, the rapture event is really another way of speaking about the resurrection event.

The key biblical text pertaining to the rapture doctrine is 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the

¹Thomas D. Ice, "Rapture, History of the," in Dictionary of Premillennial Theology, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 347.

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trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

Of importance is the fact that the text reads that Christ shall return from heaven *to the air* and not to the earth. It is from the air that the church will hear the trump of God and be *caught up*, or *raptured*.² This rapture will immediately precede a seven year period of time commonly known as the Tribulation. During this time the personality known as Antichrist shall rise to power. Men and women shall worship him as a god. In addition, Satanic activity shall run rampant upon the earth. As a consequence, God shall pour out his wrath upon this godless and Christ-rejecting world. Also during this time, God shall awaken the people of Israel to the truth that Christ is their Savior and Messiah (Rm. 11:25-26).

The pretribulation rapture takes its name from the fact that the rapture of the true church occurs before the Tribulation begins. The true church (as symbolized by the church of Philadelphia in Revelation 3:7-13) shall be kept *out of* (Greek, *ek*) the Tribulation by means of the rapture. The Darby translation of the text reads:

And to the angel of the assembly in Philadelphia write:...Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee *out of* [emphasis mine] the hour of trial, which is about to come upon the whole habitable world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. (Rev. 3:7, 10; New Translation)³

At the end of the Tribulation the second stage of the Lord's return occurs. He and his church shall return from heaven *to the earth* to establish his kingdom.⁴

²From the Latin *rapio*. See R. G. Clouse, "Rapture of the Church," in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 908. See 1 Thessalonians 4:17 in the Latin Vulgate translation of the Greek text: "*simul rapiemur cum illis in nubibus.*"

³John Nelson Darby, New Translation, (London: G. Morrish, 1890; reprint, Lancing, Sussex, Great Britain: Kingston Bible Trust, 1980), 1490 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁴Of the Protestant denominations that hold to a future Tribulation (not all do), most hold to a posttribulation rapture. This position understands Christ's return to be in only one stage, at the end of the Tribulation. It is believed that this is what 1 Thessalonians 4:17 teaches. There is no first-stage return of Christ "to the air" for the church before the Tribulation. The text is believed to be saying that the church shall first meet him in the air just before he returns at the end of the Tribulation and then immediately return to the earth with

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Those who hold to the pretribulation doctrine believe the doctrine was taught by the apostles and is found in the New Testament writings, especially in those of Paul. It is argued that the early church was looking for an imminent return of Christ. Christ can return for the church at any moment. The church is not to be looking for signs of his return but Israel should, as Matthew 24 indicates. This idea of imminency is the primitive equivalent of what has developed into the modern doctrine of the pretribulation rapture. Dispensationalists believe that, like the lost truth of justification by faith recovered by Martin Luther, the truth of a two-stage return of Christ has likewise been lost to the church.⁵ It was not until December 1826 through January 1827 that John Nelson Darby began to recover this truth.⁶ The idea of imminency came to him while he was recovering from a horse-riding accident. He recalled that time, saying in 1855 and 1863 respectively:

It then became clear to me that the church of God...was composed only of those who were so united to Christ.... At the same time, I saw that the Christian, having his place in Christ in heaven, has nothing to wait for save the coming of the Saviour, in order to be set, in fact, in the glory which is already his portion "in Christ".

... In my retreat, the 32nd chapter of Isaiah taught me clearly, on God's behalf, that there was still an economy to come, of His ordering; a state of things in no way established as yet. The consciousness of my union with Christ had given me the present

him. The church shall go through the Tribulation and be kept *from* experiencing the wrath of God, although it is not exempt from experiencing the persecution of the antichrist. One need look no further in history than the sufferings experienced by the early church at the hands of the Roman empire to realize that the church is not exempt from persecution. Most translations of the Bible differ from Darby's translation. The more common translation of *ek* in Revelation 3:10 is *from*, so translated in the Authorized Version, the New American Standard Version, the New International Version, and others.

⁵Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 8 vol. in 4, vol. 4, Ecclesiology-Eschatology (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 3-4, 257-58 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁶Darby was a clergyman in the Anglican Church. He saw the church of his day as worldly and apostate. Seeking the true church, he began to meet with similarly minded Christians who were experiencing a spiritual renewal. These newly-formed gatherings of believers came to be known as the Plymouth Brethren. See also Thomas Ice, "Rapture, History of the," in Dictionary of Premillennial Theology, 346. For a challenge to the 1826/27 date see Dave MacPherson, The Rapture Plot (Simpsonville, SC: Millennium III Publishers, 1995), 91, 97-99.

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heavenly portion of the glory, whereas this chapter clearly sets forth the corresponding earthly part. I was not able to put these things in their respective places or arrange them in order, as I can now....

What was to be done? I saw in that word the coming of Christ to take the church to Himself in glory.⁷

...the great principles on which my mind was exercised...Christ coming to receive us to Himself; and collaterally with that, the setting up of a new earthly dispensation, from Isaiah xxxii. (more particularly the end); all this was when laid aside at E. P.'s in 1827....⁸

However, some are unconvinced that Darby was the first to speak specifically of a pretribulation rapture. It is pointed out that in 1830 in a Port Glasgow church service a 15 year old girl by the name of Margaret MacDonald (also spelled "Macdonald") claimed to have received a revelation from God. It was revealed to her that Christ would return to gather only the "Spirit-filled" Christians to himself before the persecution from Antichrist begins. It is argued by some that MacDonald's revelation is the first reference to a partial and pretribulation rapture for the church. We read of her prophecy in the following excerpts taken from her handwritten account of that spring evening event (brackets are mine):

Many passages were revealed, in a light in which I had not before seen them. I repeated, 'Now is the kingdom of Heaven like unto ten virgins, who went forth to meet the Bridegroom, five wise and five foolish; they that were foolish took their lamps, but took no oil with them; but they that were wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps' [Mt. 25:1-4]. 'But be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is; and be not drunk with wine wherein is excess, but be filled with the Spirit' [Eph. 5:17-18]. This was the oil the wise virgins took in their vessels--this is the light to be kept burning--the light of God--that we may discern that which cometh not with observation to the natural eye [Lk. 17:20]. Only those who have the light of God within them will see the sign of his appearance [Mt. 24:30]. No need to follow them who say, see here,

⁷John Nelson Darby, Letters of J. N. D. (London: G. Morrish, 1915; reprint, Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), 3:298-99 (page references are to reprint edition).

⁸Ibid., 1:344.

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or see there [Lk. 17:23], for his day shall be as the lightning to those in whom the living Christ is [Mt. 24:27; Lk. 17:24]. 'Tis Christ in us that will lift us up--he is the light--'tis only those that are alive in him that will be caught up to meet him in the air [1 Thes. 4:17]...--so that two shall be in one bed, the one taken [the Spirit-filled] and the other left [not Spirit-filled; Lk. 17:34], because the one has the light of God within while the other cannot see the Kingdom of Heaven. I saw the people of God [not Spirit-filled] in an awfully dangerous situation, surrounded by nets and entanglements, about to be tried, and many about to be deceived and fall. Now will THE WICKED [Antichrist] be revealed, with all power and signs and lying wonders [2 Thes. 2:8-9], so that if it were possible the very elect will be deceived [Mt. 24:24].⁹

Evidence has been offered that Darby's notion of a rapture at the beginning of the seven year Tribulation for all the church (not just for the Spirit-filled Christian as MacDonald taught) materialized many years after both the generally accepted January 1827 date and MacDonald's 1830 revelation. One researcher sees a conspiracy by Darby's Plymouth Brethren defenders to shift attention away from young MacDonald and onto a more credible Darby. Dave MacPherson argues the doctrine was established late within the theological system's development and not in its beginning stage. He says the idea of a rapture occurring at the beginning of the seven year Tribulation is not conclusively seen in Darby's writings until 1870! MacPherson says of Darby:

In 1870 he sees the "church" not "in the world" but "seated upon thrones around the throne of God" (Rev. 4:4) and says that "Philadelphia...shall be kept from the day of temptation..." (my emphasis but his change of "hour" to "day").¹⁰

⁹Dave MacPherson, The Incredible Cover-Up (Medford, OR: Omega Publications, 1991), 151-53, citing Robert Norton, Memoirs of James & George Macdonald, of Port-Glasgow (London: John F. Shaw, 1840), 171-76. According to Robert Norton, on the same evening of the giving of the pretribulation rapture revelation Margaret also named Antichrist, a Mr. Owen, whom Norton and MacPherson identify as Robert Owen (1771-1858). MacPherson, The Incredible Cover-Up, 156-57 n. 1, citing Norton, Memoirs, 171.

¹⁰MacPherson, The Rapture Plot, 119. MacPherson cites Darby, Letters, 2:105-6.

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Before this time Darby identified the man child that was "caught up" to heaven as the rapture of the mystical body of Christ (Rev. 12:5). This event occurs 1260 days before Christ's return to earth and not seven years before (Rev. 12:6). Darby writes, "I apprehend the proper application of the catching up of the man child, besides Christ, to be to the Church of the first-born--His body...."¹¹ MacPherson contends that this is Darby's rapture position as described in his 1839 commentary on the book of Revelation.¹² However, MacPherson's conclusions are not shared by all. Scholars from within the pretribulation camp place the final formation of Darby's premillennial system along with the doctrine of the pretribulation rapture in 1833 in accordance with Darby's own testimony.¹³ However, MacPherson even questions Darby's recollection of the doctrine's beginnings saying he was prone to exaggeration as were his defenders.¹⁴

Whether or not Darby was the first to conceive of the doctrine does not affect the fact that he is responsible for developing the theological system which has come to be known as *dispensational premillennialism*, or simply *dispensationalism*. The idea that God worked differently with humanity in different periods of time, or dispensations, was important to the system. Floyd Elmore says:

For Darby, a dispensation is an economy, any order of things that God has arranged on the earth. The primary characteristics of a dispensation include governmental administration, responsibility, and revelation to fulfill both. Secondary characteristics include testing, failure, and judgment. When a group fails the test to exercise their responsibility given to them by God, judgment falls and ends the dispensation.¹⁵

Early in the 20th century Darby's body of teaching gained popularity by the publication and distribution of the Scotfield Reference Bible. It was at that time that the designation *dispensationalism* first came into common use,

¹¹John Nelson Darby, "Notes on the Revelation," in The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby, 34 vols., ed. William Kelly, vol. 2, Prophetic No. 1 (London: G. Morrish, n.d., reprint, Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971), 216, n. (page references are to reprint edition).

¹²MacPherson, The Rapture Plot, 114-19.

¹³Floyd Elmore, "Darby, John Nelson," in Dictionary of Premillennial Theology, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 84.

¹⁴MacPherson, The Rapture Plot, 121.

¹⁵Elmore, "Darby, John Nelson," 84.

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being applied to the interpretations offered in Scofield's Bible.¹⁶ Scofield defines a dispensation, saying, "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God."¹⁷ The number of dispensations is not fixed among dispensationalists. Scofield believed seven are revealed in Scripture. Some saw fewer while others saw the Tribulation as an eighth.¹⁸

The prominent feature of Darby's system was that the church and Israel were viewed as being two distinct peoples of God with each having its own purpose in God's redemptive plan for humanity. The church is a heavenly people while Israel is an earthly people. The pretribulation rapture was

¹⁶Craig A. Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," in Progressive Dispensationalism, coauthors Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 22.

¹⁷C. I. Scofield, ed., Scofield Reference Bible, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909, reprinted as The First Scofield Reference Bible, Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1986), 5 (page references are to reprint edition).

¹⁸According to Scofield there is the dispensation of (1) Innocency, ending in the testing and failure of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden; (2) Conscience, ending in the testing and failure of humankind from the expulsion of Adam and Eve until the flood of Noah's day; (3) Human Government, from Noah (a) until the confusion of tongues at Babel (for the races of humanity) (b) until the failure of Israel under the Palestinian Covenant (for Israel--being taken into captivity they lost the right of self government) and (c) until the failure of the Gentiles when Christ judges the nations at the establishing of his kingdom on earth (for the Gentiles); (4) Promise, from Abraham to Israel's rash acceptance of the Law at Mt. Sinai; (5) Law, from Sinai to the Cross; (6) Grace, from the death and resurrection of Christ until the apostasy of the professing church and the resultant apocalyptic judgments; and (7) Kingdom, which is the kingdom covenanted to David that shall be established on earth when Christ returns. I assume it is the revolt of the nations (Rev. 20:8-9) that marks the end of testing and failure for humankind during the Kingdom dispensation. Scofield does not say. Scofield, Scofield Reference Bible, 5, 10, 16, 20, 94, 1115, 1250.

It appears that Scofield is saying the dispensation of Human Government does not end with the start of the dispensation of Promise but runs along with the dispensations of Promise and Law (for Israel and Gentiles), and Grace (for Gentiles). He says, "The judgement of the confusion of tongues ended the *racial* testing; that of the captivities the *Jewish* [he appears to mean at A.D. 70. He cites Luke 21:24 on page 16, note 1, and later interprets the verse as being fulfilled in the siege of Jerusalem by Titus on page 1106, note 1]; while the *Gentile* testing will end in the smiting of the Image (Dan. ii.) and the judgment of the nations (Mt. xxv. 31-46)." Scofield, Scofield Reference Bible, 16. However, other dispensationalists have clearly set the end of the dispensation of Human Government at the fall of the tower of Babel.

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directly related to the idea of distinct peoples as we shall see in the following chapters of this thesis.¹⁹

Darby promoted his novel views while traveling through the European continent, North America, Australia, and New Zealand. Today many North American Bible colleges and graduate schools of theology, such as Dallas Theological Seminary, Talbot Seminary, and Grace Theological Seminary, continue in the dispensational tradition. To greater or lesser degrees all dispensational institutions in North America, and the world, continue to teach a distinction between Israel and the church with many of them continuing to make the pretribulation rapture doctrine a part of their statement of faith.

The Thesis of the Study

An offshoot of traditional dispensationalism has recently gained attention. *Progressive dispensationalism* has been making its presence known in the world of theology. Progressive dispensationalism is espoused mostly by younger dispensational teachers and scholars who have rejected many of the views of earlier dispensationalism.²⁰ The

¹⁹Vern Poythress explains Darby's mind-set, saying:

Darby's distinctive ideas in eschatology appear to have originated from his understanding of union with Christ, as did his views of the church....

Both the heavenly character of Christ and the reality of salvation by grace apart from works of the law made Darby feel an overwhelming distance between his own situation of union with Christ and the situation of Israel discussed in Isaiah 32. Israel and the church are as different as heaven and earth, law and grace....

Unfortunately Darby did not realize that the distance and difference he perceived could be interpreted in more than one way. Darby construed the difference as primarily a "vertical," static distinction between heaven and earth and between two peoples inhabiting the two realms. He did not entertain the possibility that the difference was primarily a historical one, a "horizontal" one, between the language of promise, couched in earthly typological terms, and the language of fulfillment, couched in terms of final reality, the reality of God's presence, the coming of heaven to human beings in Jesus Christ. Vern Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2d ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994), 16.

²⁰Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock say the following:

Although the name is relatively recent, the particular interpretations that make up this form of dispensationalism have been developing over the past fifteen years. Sufficient revisions had taken place by 1991 to introduce the name *progressive dispensationalism* at the national meeting of the Evangelical

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progressives appear to have been influenced by the views of historic premillennialist George E. Ladd. It is apparent that Ladd's "already/not yet" view of the kingdom has played a major role in their thinking. The view of the progressives is that the kingdom has "already" arrived with the first coming of Christ but it does "not yet" arrive in its culmination until his second coming. The "already/not yet" view is in contrast to the traditional dispensational view which understands the kingdom's arrival as being almost entirely "not yet" (although this term was not used).²¹

Theological Society that year. Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 22-23.

The label *progressive dispensationalism* is being suggested because of the way in which this dispensationalism views the interrelationship of divine dispensations in history, their overall orientation to the eternal kingdom of God (which is the final, eternal dispensation embracing God and humanity), and the reflection of these historical and eschatological relations in the literary features of Scripture. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 380.

Progressive dispensationalists understand the dispensations not simply as *different* arrangements between God and humankind, but as *successive* arrangements in the *progressive* revelation and accomplishment of redemption. The plan of redemption has different aspects to it. One dispensation may emphasize one aspect more than another, for example the emphasis on divinely directed political affairs in the past dispensation and the emphasis on multiethnic spiritual identity in Christ in the present dispensation. But all these dispensations point to a future culmination in which God will *both* politically administer Israel and Gentile nations and indwell all of them equally (without ethnic distinctions) by the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the dispensations *progress* by revealing different aspects of the final unified redemption. Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 48.

²¹Gordon Fee explains how this "already/not yet" mind-set existed in the primitive church, saying:

The absolutely essential framework of the self-understanding of primitive Christianity...is an eschatological one. Christians had come to believe that, in the event of Christ, the New (Coming) Age had dawned, and that, especially through Christ's death and resurrection and the subsequent gift of the Spirit, God had set the future in motion, to be consummated by yet another coming (Parousia) of Christ. Theirs was therefore an essentially eschatological existence. They lived "between the times" of the beginning and the consummation of the End. Already God had secured their eschatological salvation; already they were the people of the future, living the life of the future in the present age--and enjoying its benefits. But they still awaited the glorious consummation of this salvation. Thus they lived in an essential tension between the "already" and the "not-yet." Gordon D. Fee, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 19.

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The progressives' reexamination of certain key biblical themes has led them to reject many of the tenets of earlier dispensationalism, including the tenet that Israel and the church are two distinct peoples of God with each having its own distinct purpose pertaining to God's plan of redemption. Proponents of progressive dispensationalism prefer to discuss the subject of distinctiveness in the softer sense of ethnic and national plurality rather than in the sharp sense of redemptive purposes. This softer view is in harmony with their *holistic and unified* view of eternal salvation which God gives to all of redeemed humankind without distinction.²²

Although progressive theologians have rejected the traditional belief(s) in two peoples and two purposes, they have not rejected the belief in a pretribulation rapture for the church. In my opinion, their position seems to be inconsistent. The doctrine of the pretribulation rapture finds its theological basis in Darby's belief that the church and Israel are two sharply distinct peoples of God. In other words, the two do not share important elements of biblical anthropology, soteriology, and eschatology. The question must be asked: is it logical to continue acknowledging the doctrine while maintaining a softer view of distinctiveness? The thesis which I will argue for is as follows:

Progressive dispensationalism cannot integrate the pretribulation rapture into its dispensational system on any basis of theological distinctiveness between the church and Israel. By "on any basis of theological distinctiveness" I mean on the basis of anthropological, soteriological, and eschatological distinctiveness.

The Importance of the Study

This study is important for the following reason. If it can be shown that the progressives cannot integrate the pretribulation rapture into their dispensational system on the basis of theological distinctiveness between the church and Israel, then further study of the doctrine by them would be called for. Stanley Grenz has observed that there are five major arguments which support the doctrine.

²²Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 47.

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Less immediately obvious [for progressive dispensationalism] is the biblical case for what in the minds of most people is the chief characteristic of dispensationalism, the pretribulation rapture (or the two-stage return of Christ, as it is sometimes called). This doctrine is central to classical dispensationalism. Although generally voicing no objections to the older view, progressive thinkers tend to devote less attention to it. Dispensationalist writings--especially those of classical articulators--offer at least five major arguments supporting this doctrine.

First, the pretribulation rapture is demanded by the nature or purposes of the tribulation....

The imminence of the blessed hope of the believer is a second argument....

Third, the pretribulation rapture is demanded by the book of Revelation....

The fourth argument for the pretribulation rapture arises from Paul's declaration that the restrainer must be removed before the revelation of the man of sin (2 Thess. 2:6-8)....

Finally and most important, the pretribulation rapture is demanded by the dispensationalist system itself. This is readily evident in the classical expression of the system. If there are two peoples of God and two phases of God's program in the world, and if the Israel phase has been placed in abeyance during the church age, then the pretribulation rapture follows logically. The church phase must come to an end before the Israel phase can once again re-emerge. God's program for the church must be brought to completion--which will occur by means of the rapture--before God's program for Israel can continue.²³

My study is limited to focusing upon the final and most important argument, that is, the dispensational system itself. If it can be shown that the progressive system cannot accommodate the doctrine, then a reexamination of the other four arguments seems warranted. It would be interesting to imagine what new eschatological perspectives might possibly emerge from such a fresh study. But it is also quite possible that a new study may have the beneficial effect of further unifying Evangelical Christianity. It is common knowledge that during the last two centuries Christians have been divided over the theory of the two-stage return of their Lord. Even at the start of this new postmodern millennium that same separatist spirit persists

²³Stanley J. Grenz, The Millennial Maze (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 104-7.

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among many of God's people. If further study of the return of our Lord were to lead to the acceptance of a common position (and hopefully the correct position) within evangelicalism, then an important milestone would have been reached along the road to unity. Therefore, this current study is important because it may provide the impetus for further study in the area of eschatology which may in time lead to greater unity among the people of God.

The Basis of the Study

Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language defines the Latin phrase *sine qua non* [lit., "without which not"] as "the one thing that is absolutely essential." In 1965 Charles Ryrie wrote an important apologetic in support of the dispensationalism of his day. In Dispensationalism Today he states what he believed to be the absolutely essential element of dispensational theology:

The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the Church. This grows out of the dispensationalist's consistent employment of normal or plain interpretation, and it reflects an understanding of the basic purposes of God in all His dealings with mankind as that of glorifying Himself through salvation and other purposes as well.²⁴

According to Ryrie, the *sine qua non* consists of three aspects.²⁵ The "distinction between Israel and the Church" is mentioned first. This distinction is born out of a hermeneutic which consistently employs a "normal or plain interpretation" of the words of the Bible. This kind of interpretation should lead the Bible student to understand that the "basic purpose of God" is to bring glory to himself. God does this through the "purposes" which he has for mankind. One purpose for humanity is salvation. There are also other purposes which fall outside the realm of redemption. One such other purpose is a non-soteriological purpose within the kingdom program.²⁶

²⁴Charles C. Ryrie, Dispensationalism Today (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 47.

²⁵Ibid., 44-47.

²⁶Ibid., 103.

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After having read this *sine qua non* it appears that an interdependence exists among the three aspects. This interdependence becomes apparent when Ryrie specifically addresses the aspect of "distinction." Quoting from Daniel P. Fuller's doctoral dissertation he writes: "The basic premise of Dispensationalism is two purposes of God [the third aspect] expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction [the first aspect] throughout eternity."²⁷ Referring to Arno C. Gaebelein's 1910 commentary on Matthew's Gospel, Ryrie says, "Gaebelein stated it [i.e., the distinction] in terms of the difference between the Jews, the Gentiles and the Church of God."²⁸ Ryrie ends his section on distinction by quoting Lewis Sperry Chafer:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity....²⁹

These statements are very helpful. It seems fair to say that the biblical distinction between Israel and the church has been generally understood in terms of two sharply distinct purposes of God. One purpose relates to the earth and the other to heaven. The earthly purpose relates to the Jew and the Gentile and their "salvation" and the heavenly purpose relates to the Church of God and its "salvation," as Ryrie's *sine qua non* indicates. Ultimately, it is the purpose of God that gives meaning to the distinction between the people of God. The idea of two purposes and two peoples is the "absolutely essential element" of dispensational theology.

However, by 1991 progressive dispensationalism was gathering momentum. With the introduction of their "complementary hermeneutic" and an emphasis on the theological concept of "already and not yet" the progressives were about to redefine dispensationalism. In 1992, Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: the Search for Definition, edited by Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, was published. It is a compilation of essays by eleven

²⁷Ibid., 44-45, citing Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), 25.

²⁸Ibid., 45, citing Arno C. Gaebelein, The Gospel of Matthew (New York: Our Hope, 1910), 1:4.

²⁹Ibid., citing Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936), 107.

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progressive dispensationalists. Blaising says that this book of biblical studies finds its identity in its "*hermeneutical reexamination of the relationship between Israel and the church, which in turn contributes to the process of self-definition currently underway in dispensationalism.*"³⁰

Blaising finds problems with Ryrie's *sine qua non*. He believes that Ryrie attempted to give the impression that the distinction had remained unchanged throughout dispensationalism's history.³¹ According to Blaising, this just is not so.

By making the distinction between Israel and the church the central defining feature, Ryrie meant to identify the earlier dispensational teaching on the two peoples of God: the heavenly people and the earthly people. Others had spoken of God's distinct purposes for Jews, Gentiles, and the church of God as "dispensational truth." Ryrie considered all these as different ways of saying the same thing. But they are not synonymous.³²

Blaising sees dispensationalism existing in history in three major forms with each form embracing a different understanding of the distinction. He calls the views of dispensationalists from the writings of John Nelson Darby to those of Lewis Sperry Chafer (c. 1952) *Classical Dispensationalism*. He considers the interpretive notes of the Scotfield Reference Bible (published in 1909) "a key representative of classical dispensationalism."³³ He continues, "And it [the Scotfield Reference Bible] has functioned as a reference point for the future development of the tradition."³⁴ It is dispensationalism in its classical form that emphasized a heavenly and earthly distinction between the two peoples of God. Blaising comments on this dualism, saying:

The heavenly-earthly division refers to distinct destinies in the plan of God as well as contrasting modes or rules of life. It is first of all a vision of

³⁰Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 34.

³¹Ibid., 23.

³²Ibid., 24.

³³Blaising, "The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism," 22.

³⁴Ibid.