

BY GREG ALBRECHT

Ideas have consequences, but it's usually much easier to see the consequences of someone else's wrong-headed thinking than our own. While it is comparatively easy for Christians to identify myths and superstitions in world religions, when preposterous ideas invade Christendom we often fail to recognize their pernicious implications.

The harmonious relationship between the nation of Israel and evangelical Christians remains one of the most bewildering of all religious mysteries. Israelis obviously welcome evangelical, political and economic support for Israel. Yet Israelis remain both puzzled and offended by the fact that the same people who relentlessly support them are convicted that the people of God of the Old Testament are going to hell for eternity.

These same Christians who pour money into Israel and unequivocally support Zionism are absolutely confident that the Holy Land will soon turn into a bloodbath, with rivers of blood flowing to the depth of a horse's bridle in one valley (the result of a literal reading of Revelation 14:20). Playing an endless game of retrofitting newspaper headlines into Scripture, evangelical and fundamentalist Christians have no question that apocalyptic carnage will happen before the Second Coming. *Ideas have consequences*, and religious convictions have practical implications; in this case it logically follows that anyone who accepts such presuppositions must build and support the nation of Israel today so that it can be destroyed tomorrow.

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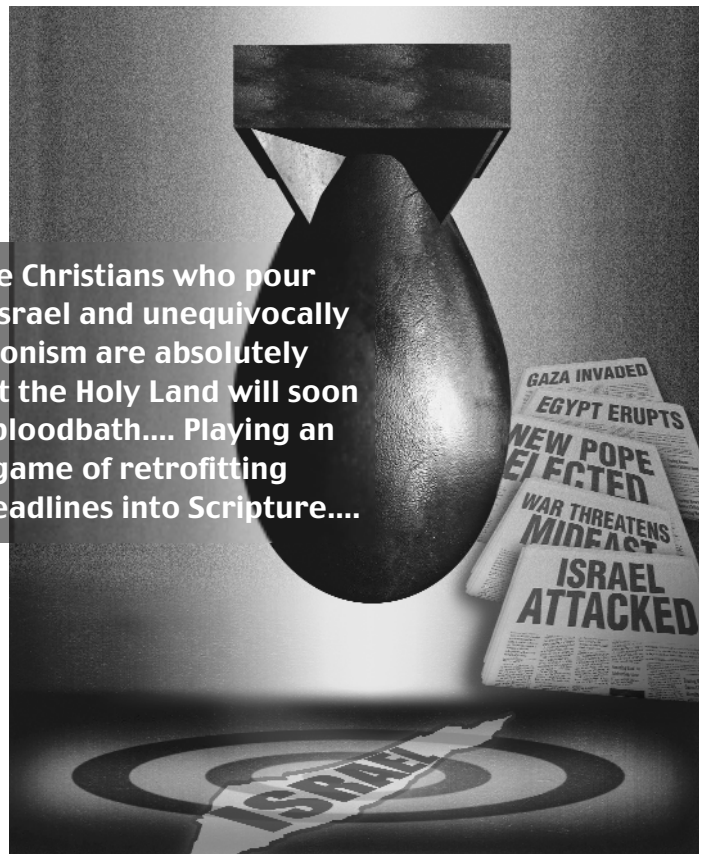
How could Christians, who take their name and theological convictions from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, have such rabid views of the fate of the Jews? How can Christians embrace a message that is essentially anti-Christian, a message that can overwhelm and even contradict the fundamental virtues of the teachings of Jesus, all the while becoming a passionate force for war and bloodshed, all in the name of Christ?

There is no doubt that unending group tours arriving in Israel, filling buses that wind their way throughout Israel, create a bonanza for the Israeli economy.

It makes sense that the Jewish economy welcomes tourist dollars/pounds/Euros. But it is a mystery why Jews continue to roll out the welcome mat for such tourists when one considers what the average Christian on those buses believes.

Evangelical Christian tours make their way to Megiddo so that Christians may view a valley they are persuaded will one day soon host the war to end all wars, dwarfing the horror of the Holocaust. One contemporary advocate of dispensationalism is quoted as saying that Armageddon would be "the mother of all Holocausts." Most of those same not so accidental tourists firmly believe that Jews will suffer eternal torture in hell. These are friends of Israel?

Many evangelical Christians offer unquestioning support of the nation of Israel, even at the expense of Palestinian Christians who share this land of the Bible with Jews. Based on Old Testament passages, fundamentalist Christians presume, along with conservative Israelis, that Israel has a divine right to all the land from Egypt to Iraq.



The primary rationale for the contradictory beliefs that Christians hold about their faith and about Israel is found in a particular methodology that holds sway over conservative evangelical Christians—a methodology that causes them to understand biblical prophecy in one, and only one, way.

Defects and Deceptions of Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism—A method of biblical interpretation that divides history into different periods (dispensations), insists on an overly literal method of reading the Bible, and a belief that Jesus’ Second Coming will occur before his 1,000-year millennial rule. Many dispensationalists believe that Jesus will return after 6,000 years of human history, assuming that each day of creation equates to 1,000 years. The presumption is that six days (6,000 years) of mankind’s “week” is followed by the seventh day, a 1,000 year rest, the rule of Christ. Classic dispensationalism includes a “fear factor”—the big stick motivational tool of an any-moment Rapture, whisking true believers away from other, not so favored, mortals.

I grew up in a prophecy-saturated religious culture. I lived in constant apprehension and fear of an impending doomsday. The “end times” biblical interpretation I was taught exercised incredible power over me—influencing my view of the future, as well as my geo-political perspectives.

I was into my fourth decade on planet earth before I started to question my prophetic presuppositions. After all, they came directly from the Bible—they were the literal Word of God, why should I question them? I discovered that what I had been taught about eschatology (the study of last things) came directly from a interpretative method of understanding the Bible called dispensationalism.

It was a dark journey, but I finally had to admit that what I had accepted without question was fatally flawed. I discovered that this methodology that had so ordered my life and contributed to my values and beliefs originally came from the United

Kingdom, specifically through the writings and teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).

By the 1870’s, Darby’s teachings became known as “dispensationalism,” and as the 19th century came to a close, prophecy conferences became a feature of Protestant fundamentalist

not and will not return to our world unless and until certain events occur. Dispensationalism is not only popular within fundamentalist and evangelical Christian churches that believe in historic Christian doctrine, but enjoys a strong following within cults that consider themselves Christian.

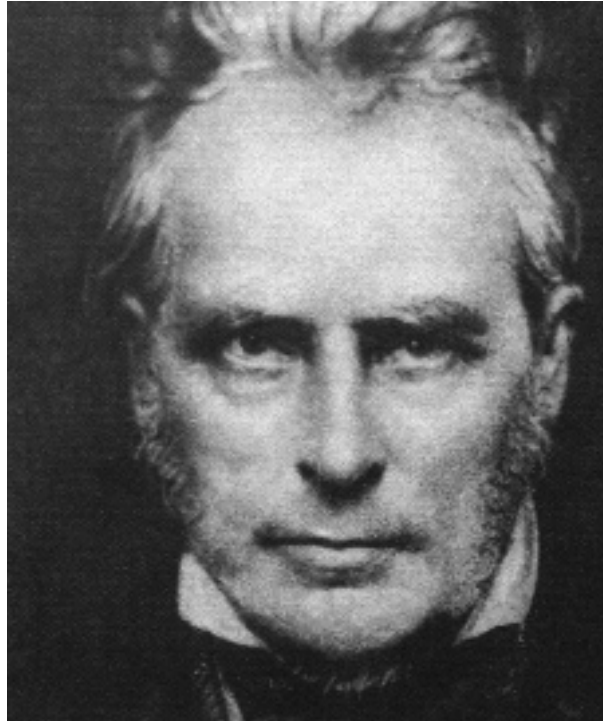
While there are many versions of dispensationalism, the most popular view offers common denominators found elsewhere. Dispensationalism ignores sound, tried and tested principles of understanding the Bible (see for example, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, Zondervan Publishing). Dispensationalism is based on overly literal interpretations of prophetic passages, which may at times involve some twisting and manipulating to make passages fit its conclusions. Such biblical gerrymandering produces a prophetic “outline” or “timetable.” Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series, admitted to be fiction by its co-authors, illustrates this cobbled-together end-time scenario. Here is a one-size-fits-all dispensational summary of what will happen “at the end.”

1. Jesus will return to Rapture millions of Christians, who will suddenly disappear from this earth. They will be saved from the physical suffering others will endure in the Great Tribulation. This, for dispensationalists, is the “first” Second Coming.

2. Led by the Antichrist who bears the apocalyptic number of 666 (Revelation 13:18) and his false-prophet sidekick—a political and religious combination gains worldwide power. The exact identity of this combination morphs as our own history unfolds, with each new political reality reported in daily newspapers said to then be clearly identified in “Bible prophecy.”

3. The Antichrist terrorizes the world, causing the world to worship Satan and bear his mark of 666 on their hands or forehead (Revelation 13:16-17).

4. The Antichrist moves to Jerusalem, having previously resided (at least in most versions of classic dispensationalism) in Rome. Dispen-



John Nelson Darby, (1800 – 1882) an Anglo-Irish evangelist, considered the father of Dispensationalism. Beliefs about the re-establishment of the Kingdom of Israel put dispensationalists at the forefront of Christian Zionism.

churches in North America. Cyrus Ingerson (C.I.) Scofield (1843-1921) emerged as a leading advocate and spokesman for dispensationalism, eventually publishing his *Scofield Reference Bible* in 1909. Scofield’s Bible was what we would today call a study Bible—a Bible that featured a running dispensational commentary printed alongside biblical passages. At times it was hard to distinguish the notes from the text, so that many who used this Bible, throughout the 20th century, accepted dispensationalism as Holy Writ.

The practical implications of dispensationalism in the Christian world view includes the idea that Jesus can-



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sationalism is a fringe Protestant Christian innovation that identifies the Antichrist as having connections and affiliations with Rome. The Antichrist either builds a temple or appropriates one that has been recently constructed, and at that time all hell breaks loose. Natural disasters, like those metaphorically described in Revelation, abound.

5. As human history comes to a close, one last huge battle takes place in the valley of Armageddon with two vast coalitions of forces facing each other (Revelation 16:14,16).

6. Jesus returns (this is the “second” Second Coming!) with his Raptured, safe-and-sound saints, defeats the armies of the earth gathered in Armageddon, and the thousand-year utopia begins.

The fruits of dispensationalism strongly suggest that it is at best a fringe teaching. Many evangelical Christians would be surprised, perhaps even disappointed, to discover that Christianity existed for some 1,800 years before dispensationalism came on the scene. Further, the central features of dispensationalism are embraced by many authoritarian and charismatic cultic groups and leaders for it offers many opportunities to manipulate and control.

20th Century Dispensationalism— A Dizzying Daze

Dispensationalism and the 20th century? A tragic tale of flawed and bogus predictions, all based on the

same broken-beyond-repair dispensational presuppositions. The predictions of evangelist after evangelist failed, with perhaps the best known in the latter half of the century being Hal Lindsey of several decades ago (*The Late Great Planet Earth*) and the contemporary writings of Tim LaHaye, with his *Left Behind* series.

Seemingly learning from the mistakes of his dispensational forefathers, but still riding the cash cow of fortune-telling-in-the-name-of-Jesus, LaHaye distanced himself by writing fictional horror stories of what would happen to those who were not Raptured (another dispensational creative innovation).

But many of LaHaye’s readers are not adequately prepared to discriminate between fiction and non-fiction, with many swallowing LaHaye’s fiction as gospel truth.

LaHaye will prove to be yet another in a long line of “end-times” preachers and authors who completely misfired on their predictions. Here are just a few highly publicized predictions, and while redactions and explanations by those who continue to support these personalities and movements rise almost to the depth of a horse’s bridle themselves, original source documents for these embarrassing gaffes are generally available.

The following are but a few of the

failed prophecies that can be traced to some version of dispensationalism:

- William Miller, one of many involved in “millennial fever” in the 19th century—a rash of date setting for the Second Coming—predicted that Jesus would return in 1843.

- When Jesus failed to respond to Miller’s pronouncement, Miller set a new date, 1844. When Jesus again did not come, this event became known as the “Great Disappointment” and is generally credited with the eventual birth of the Adventist movement.

- Ellen G. White, founder of the Seventh Day Adventists, made many predictions about the “advent”—all failed. The most specific prediction she is said to have made about the Second Coming was her interpretation of a vision she claimed to have had. She told a 1856 conference that some present would be alive “at the coming of Jesus.”

- The Jehovah’s Witnesses arrived at 1914 for the Second Coming, from a dispensationally inspired study of the book of Daniel. When 1914 passed, the prediction was changed—

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with 1915, 1918, 1920, 1925, 1941, 1975 and 1994 being other dates that failed.

- Herbert W. Armstrong predicted the Second Coming to occur in 1975. Throughout his ministry he and his ministers, as printed 30-60 years ago in *The Plain Truth* magazine by its original publisher, consistently warned that Jesus may come in a “few short years.”

- In 1948 the state of Israel was founded, encouraging dispensationalists around the world to predict that this was surely the “beginning of the end.” Once again ignoring sound, tested methods of biblical interpretation, many dispensationalists decided that the generation Jesus had reference to in Matthew 24:34 started in 1948.

- In 1967 the Israeli army captured all of Jerusalem, leading many to believe that the Rapture would come quickly—it didn’t, and it’s a good thing for those who published and wrote the *Left Behind* series—a generation later there was still money to be made in the business of predicting the end.

- In 1978 Chuck Smith, Pastor of Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California, predicted that the Rapture would happen in 1981. In his book *The Last Days are Here Again* (Baker Books) Richard Kyle quotes Smith, in his 1978 book *Future Survival*: “...the Lord is coming for his church before the end of 1981.”

- Pat Robertson predicted that the world would end in 1982.

- Hal Lindsey predicted that the Rapture would occur in 1988.

- In 1988 Edgar Whienaut sold 4 million copies of *88 Reasons Why the Rapture will Occur in 1988*.

Suffice it to say, the above are only

Disappointment” (the original “Great Disappointment” describing the aftermath of William Miller’s failed prophecy of the Second Coming). Preached dogmatically and convincingly from many respected church and electronic pulpits, Y2K spiritually consumed the energy and attention of many within Christendom. Instead of a high tech meltdown, faith was undermined. Rabid teachings about Y2K motivated many to sell properties, move to rural communities, dig wells and buy freeze-dried food

in order to survive the coming catastrophe. *Ideas have consequences.*

The non-event of Y2K was manipulative hype that ultimately caused many to lose faith (see “Y2K—High Tech Apocalypse” *The Plain Truth*, May-June 1999). Having believed many of the same tenets and principles that led to failed predictions, and having once taught them and preached them myself, I came to the humiliating conclusion that dispensationalism had led me and countless millions of others down a theological garden path.

My research and studies eventually drove me to publish a book titled *Revelation Revolution*—but

my interest in millennial madness, prediction-addiction and prophetic frenzy continues, as I believe it is imperative for Christians to be made aware of the harm that can come from dispensationalism.

Among its chief flaws, dispensationalism:

- Places an inordinate emphasis on future events, and at the very least distracts from the central message of the Gospel

- Is addictive. It can turn its followers into prophecy addicts, always looking for the next “high” given to them by esoteric speculation and predictions.

- Can cause people of faith to lose faith, and place blame for failed predictions with God rather than the flawed human methodology.



- Appeals to fleshly interests, of assuring that one’s personal interests and family will be saved from physical tribulations to be suffered by less fortunate non-believers (and believers) who do not believe cryptic dispensational prophetic insights.

- Is dishonest and dysfunctional, as the same mistakes continue to be perpetuated and taught to each new generation of dispensational believers.

- Teaches, without qualification or disclaimer, that Christian believers will be Raptured before the world at large goes to “hell in a handbasket.” The tribulation and coming horrific sufferings are primarily described from a North American and European perspective. Thus, dispensationalism holds out a carrot of promise that North American and European Christians will not have to suffer the biblical tribulation, but will instead be whisked away from the trouble others endure. This blatantly manipulative fear religion ignores biblical teaching about redemptive suffering, that Christians are called to pick up their own cross and follow the Lord.

- Promotes a nationalistic, egocentric view of the Bible, for 21st century North American Christian dispensational teaching fails to acknowledge the tribulations that much of the world suffered in the 20th century. The implicit idea in such teaching is that the biblical tribulation doesn’t happen until North American and European Christians are affected. □

Adapted—originally printed in the July/August 2006 issue of Plain Truth.

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a few of the dispensationally-inspired failures. This list does not include many of the contemporary sensationalists now making headlines with their outrageous claims, not to mention the money they attract from those who come to believe such prognostications.

The Consequences of Dispensationalism

There are practical implications and consequences of all belief, and dispensationalism is a prime example. For example, several years ago many were convinced that the year 2000 would witness a worldwide computer driven meltdown that might very well lead to the extinction of humanity from planet earth.

Y2K was our generation’s “Great