

Towards an understanding of dispensationalism before John Nelson Darby:
A transition from Disregard to Dialogue

By

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Abstract

The broad aim of this study is to recognize the instances where dispensational concepts arose throughout church history in order to dispel the common belief that dispensationalism is a modern phenomenon. The research highlights the various instances where dispensational concepts or ideas arose in church history prior to John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). This research was used as a basis to dialogue with the ministers of the Dutch Reformed Churches in Pretoria, South Africa, in order to form a model and bridge for others in cities and suburbs seeking to form partnerships and relationships with their own local Dutch Reformed Ministers.



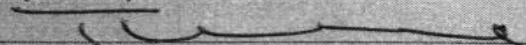
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1. INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

The broad aim of this study is to recognize the instances where dispensational concepts arose throughout church history in order to dispel the common belief that dispensationalism is a modern phenomenon that should be regarded as an aberrant theological system. This threadbare argument has caused deep divisions within the church, especially in the Evangelical Churches of the United States. These divisions and the accompanying retorts have spread throughout the World, even into South Africa, leading to unnecessary mistrust and the resulting isolationism within the body of Christ.

Whenever the matter of dispensationalism arises, its opponents often raise the newness argument.

This system of literalism has no roots in the historic Christian faith but was created around 1830 in reaction against the spiritualization of the liberal theology of the Nineteenth Century. Modern Dispensationalism arose basically in the teachings of the former lawyer John N. Darby (1800-1882), leader of a Christian group called the Plymouth Brethren (in England) and is popularised in the footnotes of the New Scofield Reference Bible (LaRondelle 1983:12).

Having interacted with those of differing approaches to scripture, the newness of dispensationalism is their first objection. Based on an interview with the director of church administration for the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk, it has been stated there:

“The idea of a pre-tribulation rapture, where believers will be taken bodily is hardly known among Christians until the 19th century. The same for a so-called secret rapture built on dispensational premillennialism with its roots also in the 19th century”. (Personal Meeting with Doctor. Johan Schutte of the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk, in May 2017).

The reason for quoting from the above meeting and discussion with Doctor Schutte, is that this interaction became the real motivation to begin research into the origins and history of dispensationalism.

This has been a common experience by others also who hold a dispensational approach to the scriptures (Ryrie 2007:215). Certain others have experienced disparaging and sometimes hostile reactions from those who may differ in their approach to scripture (Markel, J. This Ship is Sinking – Chad Thomas and David Fiorazo, 18th September 2020, 8:52-10:40).

2. RESEARCH PROBLEM

The main subject matters at the heart of this study can be refined by the following questions: Is the dispensational approach to scripture a modern phenomenon? Is there a palpable record of the dispensational approach to scripture before John, N. Darby? Is there evidence that the rudimentary elements of dispensational thinking were formed by various theologians at different times throughout the history of the church? If a local minister was made aware of the history of dispensationalism, would they be willing to consider its merits?

The refined research question then would be:

If the minister of the local Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was made aware of the history of dispensationalism, would they be willing to discuss and evaluate dispensationalism's claims?

Rather than disregard dispensationalism on the grounds of its apparent newness, South African theologians, biblical scholars, ministers and pastors may be willing to discuss its merits, if they were alerted to the evidence of dispensational history. This important dialogue may have the potential to promote a greater acknowledgement of dispensationalism within the South African church and challenge dispensationalists about their presuppositions of the DRC and covenant theology.

3. THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The global world that faces the church today cannot be one of dismissal, but rather of dialogue and engagement. De Gruchy states that:

“The promise of globalization lies in the possibilities for networking and connections that were previously the domain of the Colonizers” (2004:248).

Ignoring opposing ideas and not allowing different voices to be heard, kills dialogue, thought and diversity even within the body of Christ. Being willing to listen and being open to ideas other than one's own has the possibility of fostering a deeper unity among various traditions and people groups inside the church.

...to build relationships, people must keep on talking, especially leaders and members of ordinary congregations at grassroots level (Meiring 2016).

When the apparent newness of dispensationalism is highlighted, its origins, foundations and legitimacy are brought into question. This stifles discussion and debate about its merits, claims and legacy in the body of Christ. In contrast to the current American culture of hostility and

antagonism, the South African culture has become an icon of open and robust dialogue seeking diversity and multiplicity even in the area of theology.

African Christianity refers to multiple and various practices, movements and interpretations of biblical texts across the massive continent and also through various times, denominations, countries, genders, races, classes, ethnic groups, cultural beliefs, and interested groups (Dube 2012:2).

South African culture and diversity is strengthened, not by disparagement of the different, but rather by the willingness to engage. Under apartheid and in colonial times, there was this “umbilical cord” that mediated the communication between the Colonial power, “The Mother Nation” and its puppet church denominations within the colonies. Now that globalism has loosened this power, new horizons have opened to the promise that South-South dialogue can begin to become a reality as people can move and communicate outside of the power networks of the ex-colonial nations (de Gruchy 2004:248).

Despite his misgivings for the perils of Globalization, de Gruchy initially states that: “This (*Globalization*) enables information to be accessed and shared, new insights to emerge and ultimately for solidarities to be forged in the light of the common experience of colonization and struggles for liberation and national identity” (2004:248).

With the advent of the new South Africa, opportunities for interaction, discovery and dialogue amongst various churches from different backgrounds are no longer forbidden but anticipated. The possibilities to relate and discover what previously separated ministers and leaders from different denominations had to endure, are now definite options. How one should go about initiating and setting up these interactions between ordinary pastors or lay leaders and the ministers of the Dutch Reformed Churches, in urban areas in South Africa, is one of the intended aims of this study.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reformed theology, generally speaking, holds to three confessions and finds its basis in these confessionals which are hundreds of Years old: *The Belgic Confession* (1559), *the Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) and *the Canons of Dort* (1619) (McGoldrick 2001:23-24). These important documents have been at the foundation of Reformed Theology for centuries and continue to be the bedrock of Reformed Theology.

However, dispensationalism has no creed, no confession or canon to formalize dispensationalism. As a result, there have been and are varied and vastly differing kinds of dispensationalists.

Barker admits that very few attempts have been made to produce a work of Theology which is oriented towards dispensationalism (Barker, 1971:7). Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* published in 1948 and Ryrie's *Basic Theology* published in 1986 are the older standard works on Dispensational Theology that exist. The Scofield Bible, published in the early 1900's, which Riesebrodt calls "the textbook of the movement", was by no means a theology rather a Bible containing notes on Scofield's version of dispensationalism and was widely published and read. (Riesebrodt, 2012:469). Clarence Larkin's (1850-1924) *Dispensational Truth or God's Plan and Purpose in the Ages* (Published in 1918) with all of its charts and arrows was a ground breaking production more than a century ago.

The Reformed confessions and catechisms have gone a long way towards unifying reformed theology. On the other hand dispensationalism's lack of an ancient formal creed or confession does not help negate the perceptions about dispensationalism's novelty. The lack of a formal dispensational catechism or ancient creed and confession on dispensationalism could well be reason to believe in its novelty.

4.1 Defining dispensationalism's essentials

According to Ryrie, "A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose" (2007:33). A dispensation is an *oikonomia* or an administration and thus the central idea in the word dispensation is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household. (2007:30-31). The word or the concept of a dispensation is seen in John 1:17, Ephesians 1:10 and Ephesians 3:2 amongst other places in the Bible.

However, Stallard (2010:10) is correct when he says that dispensationalism cannot just be defined as a theology with dispensations because it fails to fully capture the significance of the modern historical movement that has come to be known as dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism can be understood as the results of the method of interpreting the Bible in a normal or plain manner that does not spiritualize or allegorise the text of scripture (Ryrie 2007:91-95). Herein lies the difference between dispensations and dispensationalism. An example of dispensations would be understood as the differences between the old and new testaments, the laws of Moses and the church etc. However, dispensationalism is the outcome of a particular way of interpreting the scriptures.

Classic dispensationalism is a result of consistent application of the basic hermeneutical principle of literal, normal, or plain interpretation. No other system of theology can claim this (Ryrie 2007:97).

Kurt Obermeyer understands dispensationalism not simply as a scheme by which to interpret the Bible, but rather as a system of theology that is a result of interpreting the Bible consistently, literally, grammatically and historically across all genres, including prophecy (Obermeyer 2022:64, *The Merging of Religion and State*).

It is the result of a method of interpretation and not a method of interpretation in and of itself... Dispensationalism is not a lens to look at the Bible through... rather than interpreting the words on the page... Dispensationalism is a system of theology that is the result of how we interpret the Bible. It is not a method to interpret the Bible.

Decker also arrives at the same conclusion when he states that:

...there is a yet more basic hermeneutic that must control our handling of the text, a hermeneutic that ultimately generates dispensationalism. That hermeneutic is a historical, grammatical reading of the text of scripture – a hermeneutic no different at the fundamental level than what we use to understand any written text or oral utterance (2008:3).

The researcher also understands dispensationalism as the outcomes of employing a consistent literal, grammatical-historical, normative and plain approach to all of scripture seeking to understand the original intent of the biblical authors. In order to be a dispensationalist, one has to hold to a consistent literal approach of interpreting the Bible as opposed to a figurative and allegorical approach. When compared to other interpretative approaches, dispensationalists take the text more literally and one has to hold to a consistent literal approach of interpreting the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation (Ice 2009:2).

This (*dispensational*) theology arises from a consistent use of the grammatical-historical hermeneutic also known as literal interpretation (Ice 2009:1).

Lee Brainard highlights the consistent use of the historical-grammatical hermeneutic as essential when trying to understand the Bible (2021:5) which he defines as the literal approach to scripture.

By historical-grammatical hermeneutic, Brainard means the understanding derived from the grammar and vocabulary, the historical context, the textual content, parallel passages, other passages that cast light on the subject, and the general tenor of Scripture (Brainard: Soothkeep Website, <https://soothkeep.info>).

However, Vern Poythress (1994), presents dispensationalism's fundamental tenant as the distinction between Israel and the church. He believes that at the heart of dispensationalism is not a literal approach to scripture but the particular concept of the distinctions between Israel and the

church and as a result, dispensationalism is a recent phenomenon. He states that those who hold to dispensationalism have

...a particular view of the parallel-but-separate roles and destinies of Israel and the church. Along with this view goes a particular hermeneutical stance, in which careful separation is made between what is addressed to Israel and what is addressed to the church (1994:6).

This novel distinction of dispensationalism, Poythress claims, can be called “Darbyism” after its originator, John Nelson Darby. On a point of contention, the researcher differs with Poythress in that the outcome of reading the scriptures, in a so called consistent literal manner, ultimately leads one to the distinction between Israel and the church. In other words, the reason why dispensationalists hold to a distinction between Israel and the church is because they claim to approach the scriptures in a consistent literal manner. Clearly stated, a consistent literal and normal reading of scripture tends towards dispensationalism.

Moderating against a literal approach to scripture, Allis provides three basic reasons for why there needs to be a limit to the literal approach to scripture. He claims that the presence of figures of speech in the Bible, the theme of the Bible being Spiritual and the fulfilment and fuller revelation of the Old Testament in the New Testament are reasons to mitigate a literal reading of scripture (1969:16-19). There are indeed new, varied and dynamic movements in hermeneutics which tend to expose dispensational theology as simplistic and naïve. For example, McKim’s book on modern trends in biblical hermeneutics highlights some of the shortcomings of the literal approach to scripture in the light recent developments in biblical interpretation (1986:53).

To Allis three objections above, Ryrie responds stating that no dispensationalist denies that there are figures of speech in the Bible which ultimately convey some literal truth, that the content of scripture does not determine the hermeneutics of the interpreter and that God communicated plainly in both Old and New Testaments. Ryrie provides a strong case and defence for literal interpretation of scripture in Chapter 16 of his *Basic Theology* (1999).

Dispensationalists never required every single passage of scripture to be taken literally. Feinberg makes a fair case for the literal interpretation of scripture in his book, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism*, where he states:

...if the language is symbolic, it is to be governed by the laws relating to symbols; if figurative, by the laws dealing with figures; if typical, by the laws connected with types, it literal, by the laws of non-figurative speech (1936:50).

Unlike Riesebrodt, (2012:470. Footnote 4) who claims that the founding of the modern State of Israel in 1948 became the cornerstone of the entire dispensational movement, the researcher of this paper aims to show that dispensationalism developed from the normative, historical-

grammatical, plain sense of the reading of Scripture long before 1948. Given that Riesebrodt consistently calls the movement, “modern dispensationalism” in his article, this term could well be a possible hint that there does exist something that could possibly be called “ancient dispensationalism” or “pre-modern dispensationalism”.

Lee Brainard, of the Soothkeep group (<https://soothkeep.info>) is a Greek and Hebrew scholar who has very recently published his translation work of the Greek writings of some of the early church fathers (Ephraim, Eusebius and Irenaeus). Brainard claims that some church fathers wrote of a rapture which would take place before the tribulation. Brianard does, however, admit that some of the works of these early church fathers are not yet translated into English and others translations are rather obscure. This claim goes against many dispensationalists who readily admit that the early church was not pretribulation but rather premillennial. This field of study opens up a wonderful possibility for those willing to do the work of translating the yet untranslated works of the Church Fathers to uncover what their approach to the scriptures was. (Some of the translation work of some early church fathers that Lee Brainard has done will be discussed below in Chapter Three of this paper).

Two recent books dealing directly with the apparent modernity of dispensationalism are:

1) William C. Watson’s *Dispensationalism before Darby Seventeenth-Century and Eighteenth-Century English Apocalypticism*. (March 2015). Watson goes to extreme lengths to show how many English theologians were active in England at that time who were laying down a framework of what eventually would be called dispensationalism. This is the strength and weakness of the book as it is very difficult to read and extremely repetitive and laborious.

2) James C Morris’ book *Ancient Dispensational Truth: Refuting the Myth that Dispensationalism is New*, (October 2018) provides evidence from more than Thirty Years of research for why dispensationalism is as old as the church itself. He covers the period from Irenaeus to Augustine and boldly claims:

The threadbare argument that dispensationalism is “new” has been the propaganda of anti-dispensationalists for decades (Morrison 2018).

Watson has chosen to focus on sources essentially from England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries but Morris goes back to the Church Fathers from the Second Century finding traces of dispensational thinking in their writings.

4.2 The Essentials of Dispensationalism

Ryrie has developed what he has called the *sine qua non* (the absolute indispensable parts) of dispensationalism. Ryrie believes these to be the distinction between Israel and the church, a literal interpretation of the scripture and the purpose of God's ultimate glory. (2007:46-48).

This researcher agrees with Obermeyer, above, that the one element that gives rise to dispensationalism is the consistent employment of a literal approach to scripture. If Ryrie has his three *sine qua non* of dispensationalism, then the consistent literal approach to scripture is the one *condicio sine qua non* (the indispensable and essential action, condition or ingredient) of dispensationalism. If this is true, then the central ingredient of dispensationalism is the literal approach to scripture.

Randy White's Dispensational Publishing house (DPH) encapsulates what he believes dispensationalism is on their website's blog.

Dispensationalism is more than a series of key words by which we can divide the epochs of history. It is a systematic way of understanding the Scriptures that offers a comprehensive view of all of God's dealings throughout history-and thus informs us as to how we are to serve the Lord at the particular time in which we live. All of this is built upon a literal approach to interpreting the Bible. When applied consistently, such a literal interpretation yields a futurist, premillennial, pretribulational understanding of Bible prophecy that fully recognizes the important distinction between Israel and the church. (DPH Blog: What is dispensationalism? <https://dispensationalpublishing.com/about-us/what-is-dispensationalism/>)

If one were to consistently apply this literal and normative approach to Scripture consistently, five basic outcomes or results would emerge for the dispensationalist:

- 1) God has always had varied and distinct ages or economies with humanity throughout History.
- 2) Israel and the Church have two distinct origins, missions and destinies.
- 3) There is a physical removal of the church prior to the coming wrath of God on the Earth.
- 4) There is a coming literal 1000 Year Kingdom reign of Christ on Earth fulfilling God's Covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants.
- 5) The ultimate purpose of all creation and history, is the eternal Glory of God in His Kingdom.

In her article on Apocalypticism and Popular Culture in South Africa, Margaret Mollett also encapsulates, to a certain extent, some of these fundamentals in dispensational thinking by stating:

Darby, by default, became the spearhead of premillennial dispensationalism; he was to put into place an interpretive scheme resting on three principles: (1) A consistently literal principle of interpretation, particularly of Bible prophecy; (2) The recognition of a distinction between Israel and

the Church; (3) Acceptance that the primary purpose of God is his own glory rather than individual salvation (Mollett 2012:223).

A label that dispensationalism continues to be marked by is its apparent novelty, the focus of this study. In other words: “Too new to be true”. What was so unique about the time Darby lived in that led him to fully systematize the theology dispensationalism, being named thus? Even though some, like William Watson (2015), may claim that dispensationalism existed before Darby, what was the reason dispensationalism took so long to be systematized?

Gribben’s peer reviewed article of 2016, *J N Darby, dispensational eschatology, and the formation of trans-Atlantic evangelicalism*, provides a fascinating description of the national, social and geo-political world Darby was born into (in Ireland) in the 1800’s. The *sitzen leben* of Darby’s day and “the narrative of despair”, gave the impetus for the explosion and growth of dispensationalism into the West at that very unique time in History.

Backtracking from the Church of Ireland and the postmillennial hope then common among evangelicals, they constructed what some critics have described as a narrative of despair, reading prophetic scripture to make sense of their unhappy situation (2016:5).

On the other hand, Harrison’s Book (1979) on *The Second Coming Popular Millenarianism*, focuses on the so-called ordinary people’s experiences with “prophets and preachers” just prior to the days of Darby. It highlights a time of incredible confusion and chaos within many so-called fringe groups of Christianity in Europe. Preachers and leaders of these fringe break away groups made the most incredible claims throughout England and even in parts of Europe. A prophetess named Joanna Southcott (1750-1814) claimed to be God’s second instrument for a virgin birth of the man child of Revelation 12:5 at the age sixty-four, which she called, Shiloh. When no child was ultimately born, Joanna died but her many followers claimed that a spiritual child was born and caught up to God and to his throne (1979:97-99). This type of spiritualism and mysticism was common amongst so many fringe groups at that time in England.

Could the spiritual culture in England at this time be one possible reason Darby sought to formalise dispensationalism at this time? Was the determined efforts and hard work of Darby, and others in formalizing this theology the reason it grew in popularity during and after his lifetime? What was the spiritual condition of the Church of England in Darby’s days? Was Darby and others living at the perfect time to promote, popularise and systematize dispensationalism with all the advancements in travel and print available at that particular time?

When one considers Gribben and Harrison (1979) above, this researcher sees how it was possible that after almost a millennium, the “dispensational seeds” that had been sown and left dormant in the church age, could suddenly and powerfully grow so pervasively into the evangelical world of

the twentieth century by Darby. This researcher agrees with Ryrie that dispensationalism was indeed systematized recently but that the tenets, rudiments, principles, outlines and historical references are evident, in some or other form, throughout church history. “There is evidence in the writings of men who lived long before Darby that the dispensational concept was part of their viewpoint” (Ryrie, 2007:71). However, the dialogue about dispensations should not end with its disregard because of its apparent novelty, but rather the dialogue should ultimately be about dispensationalism’s Scriptural accuracy (Ryrie, 2007:70-71). Whether one believes that there are dispensational concepts and tenets throughout church history or not, the popularity and growth of the dispensational movement could justify it being considered a theological system.

The importance of being willing to investigate and consider the evidence of dispensationalism through Church History is basic to moving from disregard to a dialogue about dispensationalism. There are, in certain areas, moves from disregard to dialogue between covenant and dispensational theologies. Vern Poythress did acknowledge that in his research, he was grateful that unlike in the past, in our days many dispensationalists and covenant theologians alike are showing themselves willing to lay aside past biases and acknowledge some of the insights that exist on the other side (Poythress, 1994).

Poythress’ book, *Understanding Dispensationalist* (1994), is all about finding ways to engage in profitable dialogue between the two opposing theologies:

I believe dialogue is possible in principle even between “hard-line” representatives of dispensational theology and equally “hard-line” representatives of its principal rival, covenant theology. Until now, “hard-line” representatives have been tempted to regard people in the opposite camp as unenlightened. The opposing views seem so absurd that it is easy to make fun of them or become angry and cease even to talk with people in the opposite camp (1994:2).

Stephen Strehle, in his book *Calvinism, Federalism and Scholasticism*, mentions that the doctrines of dispensationalism have enjoyed a distinguished legacy throughout church history, both in the early church, the middle ages, and the reformation (1988:363). He mentions three early dispensational thinkers in this book: John Edwards (1639-1716), Jacob Brocard (1518-1594?) and Friedrich Lampe (1683-1729). Strehle mentions that Friedrich Lampe considered that “along with the doctrine of the covenant, dispensational instructions were as a **Hauptschlüsse**, (German for master-key) for biblical interpretation” (1988:362).

Although in conceptual forms, various and basic tenets of Dispensationalism have been prevalent before Darby (Ryrie 2007:71). Men like Irenaeus (186-188 AD), The Shepherd of Hermis (140 AD), Pseudo Ephraim (300AD), Brother Delceno (1260 AD), Joseph Mede (1586-1638AD) and

Morgan Edwards (1722-1792 AD), to name a few, have been espoused as those who held a form of Dispensationalism (Foote, W. Did John Darby Invent the Rapture in 1830? 21 November 2020).

If it is true that dispensational concepts have been around before John Darby, then the positive and negative outcomes of the dispensational movement will also have to be considered. (This will be further discussed in the final chapter of this paper)

Dispensationalists have essentially advocated Bible study as one of its major tenants. A typical example would be Manuel Lacunza (1731-1801 AD) who through personal bible study and not the study of the church fathers, wrote of a premillennial return and a millennial reign of Christ on Earth (According to The Seventh Day Adventist Encyclopaedia). Out of the dispensational movement emerged numerous prophecy conferences throughout England and America resulting in the re-emergence of the study of the end times. Along with many other dispensationalists, the formation of the modern state of Israel could never have been realized without the groundwork of people like William E. Blackstone (1841-1935). However, dispensationalism has brought along with it the so-called “date setters” who predicted the end of the world and the return of Christ. When these events failed to occur, they simply moved onto the next date. Riesebrodt (2012:472) calls this “The Disconfirmation of Dispensationalism ” and the many so-called “date setters” of the centuries have resulted in dispensationalism being perceived in a bad light.

4.3 What is Literal Interpretation?

As discussed above, the central thrust behind dispensationalism is not just God’s differing economies and arrangements with human kind throughout History, but equally important and at the heart of dispensationalism, is its literal approach to scripture.

The literal approach to scripture is what Ryrie calls dispensationalism’s hermeneutic (2007:91) Michael J Vlach proposes that a literal approach to the scriptures (also called the literal-grammatical-historical hermeneutic) is to discover the intended meaning of the original author. Michael, J, Vlach. Is Dispensationalism Wrong for Emphasizing Literal Hermeneutics? September (2023, 0:40-2:46).

Bernard Ramm (1953:81-124) shows how literal interpretation of the Minor Prophets gives to every word the same meaning it would have in normal use. Ryrie gives various synonyms to literal interpretation like normal or plain interpretation (2007:91). Bass’ estimation of what literal interpretation is seems to summarise this hermeneutic which is that method which gives the word the meaning it would normally have according to its natural construction and usage (1960:22).

One of the challenges that dispensationalism faces is the use of symbolism, in particular in apocalyptic passages of the Bible, and how to interpret these passages literally.

Dispensationalists, like Chuck Missler, are quick to mention that dispensationalists do acknowledge the use of symbolic language in the Bible noting up to two hundred such uses in the Bible.

There are many different figures of speech in scripture. When people say: “I take the Bible literally”, a variety of sceptics instantly appear to quibble. They might fuss over whether God has feathers because Psalm 91:4 says: “He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust...” Of course, they’re being silly, because descriptives like this are rhetorical devices and are not meant to be taken literally. The bible uses a large number of literary tools to create pictures and develop understanding in our minds (Missler 2017:30).

An example of this literal approach, without noting the historical context, is seen in the often quoted verse, Jeremiah 29:11, which has developed into the so-called “coffee mug verse”. This famous verse is sometimes said to mean that “God has a plan to prosper” any and every one. However, a simple reading of the context of Jeremiah 29, reveals that the chapter claims to be part of a letter written to the Jews concerning their return from captivity after seventy years in Babylon, if taken literally and in this context. This is apparently how the person in the book of Daniel chapter nine possibly interpreted his reading of this section in Jeremiah. The dispensationalist would read Jeremiah 29:11’s context and then interpret this section literally as part of a letter addressed to the Jews in Babylon, at that time, concerning the length of their exile and the promise of the Jews ultimate return to their land.

McGinniss, a dispensationalist, has shown the need to clarify what is meant by literal interpretation (2016:4-5). Indeed, Ryrie and others have to add extra words onto literal, like plain and normal, in order to clarify what the term literal means even going as far as adding grammatical, historical interpretation for clarification. McGinniss suggests that the term “contextual interpretation” should be used rather than the words literal interpretation as this takes the historical and logical contexts into consideration as suggested by Osbourne (1991:19). McGinniss concedes, in his paper, that contextual interpretation of scripture can be another term for the grammatical, historical approach to scripture. However, “contextual interpretation” has come to refer to the modern reader’s context rather than the original author’s intended meaning (An 2005).

Elliot Johnson (2016), a dispensationalist, has written an article entitled *E.D. Hirsch and Literal Interpretation*. In it he shows how the so-called literal approach to scripture has particular assumptions and apparent contradictions at its core.

The word approach is used rather than method because we don't have a method consisting of a sequence of steps that lead to a necessary conclusion. Rather the approach involves a paradox. The approach contains the apparent contradiction that a text as a whole (*form*) must be understood before it (*content*) can be understood. This is what the hermeneutical spiral states. The apparent contradiction is that the meaning of the text must be understood before the text can be understood in full (Johnson 2016:3-5).

This is why Ryrie (2007) has to include the terms normal (*the way interpretation commonly occurs*) or plain (*the clearly understood meaning*) to "help" give meaning to the word literal. If the rules of language, linguistic forms and content are not understood or utilized correctly, then it could lead the interpreter into what Hirsch (1976:53) calls linguistic determinism or positivism (Johnson 2016:1).

However, Johnson (2016) also says that a literary method that only considers textual forms is insufficient as the original author's intention needs to be considered as well as the readers working with the text are both vital for interpretation (2016:2). The reader or interpreter must consider the double sidedness of communication: meaning and interpretation (2016:4).

Ultimately, Johnson (2016:6) concludes that a literal approach happens when,

- 1) The reader or interpreter begins on the side of fashioning the author's intended message in the text itself.
- 2) The reader or interpreter is able to test whether the intended meaning of the author is adequate to explain naturally the terms and constructions in the composition.
- 3) The reader or interpreter traces the argument as the message that is developed in the whole text.

This is the normal approach to clarify an argument, developed in the exposition of a message. Thus the meanings expressed in the textual particulars are unfolded in plain terms based on the message. So literal interpretation is derived from a normal approach in reading the text. This results in a plain understanding of the text (Johnson 2016:6).

According to the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICOB) held in 1978, the meaning of a passage of scripture for the dispensationalist is the original author's single intended meaning. (https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_2.pdf) In Article VII they state that:

We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed.

We deny that the recognition of the single meaning eliminates the variety of its application.

When dispensationalists speak of the literal interpretation, it can be summarized as:

Interpretation should adhere to the literal sense, that is, the single literary meaning which each passage carries. The initial quest is always for what God's penman is meant by what he wrote. Symbols and figures of speech must be recognized for what they are, and arbitrary allegorizing (*noting typology*) must be avoided (ICOB 1978:7).

Dispensationalists will do well to note the explanations and mitigation given in this literature review. There are many assumptions about what dispensationalism is and what the literal interpretation means. These assumptions are rife even amongst every day dispensationalists.

4.4 Views Opposing Dispensationalism

On the opposite side of this theological debate is covenant and reformed theology which holds to a less literal reading of the Text of Scripture. Reformed theology has much of its fundamentals in the creeds and catechisms of the reformation. A basic tenant of reformed theology is that there has only been one people of God throughout all the ages all bound together by a Covenant of Grace and a Covenant of Works, guiding one's understanding of the Scriptures (Ryrie 2007). Where dispensationalists see distinctions between Israel and the church, covenant theology sees God fulfilling promises to Israel in Christ and through the church.

Grover E Gunn III (1994:4-5) comparing dispensationalism to reformed theology states that God has a single plan of salvation and a single people of God throughout history but dispensationalists make distinctions between Israel and the church.

William Bell (1967), a pre-tribulation rapture critic said that if dispensationalism existed before Darby then there should be references which meet at least one of four criteria:

1. Any mention that Christ's second coming was to consist of more than one phase, separated by an interval of years.
2. Any mention that Christ was to remove the church from the earth before the tribulation period.
3. Any reference to the resurrection of the just as being in two stages.
4. Any indication that Israel and the church were to be clearly distinguished, thus providing some rationale for a removal of Christians before God "again deals with Israel"

Amongst the many opponents of dispensationalism is Daniel G. Hummel who objects to this literal approach to scripture in his book (2023) *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation*. Mark Noll's forward to the book states:

Not the least of the book's many merits is to show why dispensationalists are largely responsible for pervasive confusion over the notion of "literalism" that bedevils Bible-reading America (2023:1).

Despite the many opponents of dispensationalism and its literal approach to scripture, it will be the aim in Chapter Three to show various instances where these references were made by various authors prior to John Darby. Given that Bell's dissertation was written more than fifty years ago, some of the references to dispensationalism before Darby in Chapter Three are fairly new discoveries of which Bell could not have known.

5. RESEARCH GAP

The history of the South African church has been split and separated on theological and even racial grounds leading to the fragmented nature of denominationalism and independents. According to Patrick Johnstone, there were 32 Mainline Denominations and 4,760 Other Denominations in South Africa in 2001 (2001:576).

De Gruchy states that: "By 1857, the [NGK] synod had to change its stance and depart from the plain sense of the Word of God. It decided that, though not desirable or scriptural, due to the weakness of some (i.e., whites), it was permissible to hold separate services for whites and blacks" (de Gruchy 2009:8).

There has been little known critical discussion and dialogue between reformed, covenant and dispensational approaches to scripture in South Africa. What has made this missing dialogue worse in the past in South Africa, is that many who were reformed or covenant in their bent, were from Dutch or European descent. Those who were of a dispensational persuasion were largely those who had been influenced by evangelical American missionaries who came to South Africa to specifically reach the "unbelieving natives". With the advent of apartheid, the forced segregation of people by race created the absence of dialogue. The separation and isolation of believers led many to become untrusting and suspicious of those from different theological systems. According to de Gruchy the Rosettenville Christian Council of 1949 still rings true for the Church in South Africa today as "The real need of South Africa is not 'Apartheid' but 'Eendrag' in other words unity through teamwork" (2005:54).

Consequently, the so-called racial differences may have resulted in no critical and thought provoking interaction between dispensationalism and reformed theologians over the years. In 1956, The Dutch Reformed theologian, Professor B.B. Keet, as cited in du Gruchy (2009), critically commented on this by stating:

Why could the coloured Christian not have come into his own inside the church of the Europeans? The answer is obvious: It is because the white man was not prepared to give him the opportunity of doing so (2009:9).

For this reason, the South African church has been robbed of its natural diversity and the interaction of ideas. As the famous Sunday school song goes: “You in your small corner and I in mine” (Bogert Warner, 1868) has been the history of reformed and dispensational theology in South Africa.

A common search online or in university publications yields little to no research in this particular topic of discussion and debate. In a recent paper by Noel Woodbridge (2001:1) critically evaluating his beliefs about dispensationalism, *Conspectus of SATS (The South African Theological Seminary)*, calls for an academic response to this article. The contribution of this study will be to form the outline for future bridge building between reformed theologians and dispensationalists in South Africa

5.1 A common place to start

No theological system is without its difficulties, but the need for the church to seek dialogue in the midst of diversity is critical if the church is to remain relevant in the new South Africa. One reason the church needs to remain relevant in South Africa is because “The New South Africa” has, of its own, become multi-racial and multi-cultural. The legacy of apartheid has divided and separated some churches along racial and cultural lines long after apartheid's demise. In order for the church in South Africa to minister to all people groups it will have to “cast its net on the other side”.

According to Kruger and van der Merwe, the Dutch Reformed Church had lost its credibility and prophetic role in South Africa after the elections of 1994 (Kruger, 2017). Likewise, truly dispensational churches are not common in South Africa. Dispensational Publishing House only lists one dispensational church in the whole of South Africa according to Dispensational Publishing House Inc. (<https://dispensationalpublishing.com/dispensational-church-finder>)

Allis believes that dispensationalists pose a danger to evangelicalism because dispensationalists make cooperation difficult (1969:7). However, it is the aim of this research project to change this

perception. Both Dutch Reformed Churches and dispensational churches need to find relevance through the dynamic ministry of God's Word to a needy world. If those having differing theological approaches to scripture are able to engage with each other, it would create many new possibilities for the church in Southern Africa.

It may well be that when the church demonstrates true biblical unity, the world will recognize the true identity of the church and her head, Jesus Christ (John 13:34-35 and John 17:21).

5.2 Bringing hope to churches

The New Testament reveals that the context of the passages of scripture that deal with the return of Christ (a prominent message in dispensationalism) almost invariably addresses issues relevant to the Christian life (1 John 2:28 and 1 Thessalonians 4:18 as examples). David Jeremiah rightly stated that "Many of the passages that tell us The Lord is coming back also tell us what to do as we waiting" (Living with confidence in an uncertain world-David Jeremiah, 10 September 2021-6:40-7:20).

Being free to discuss dispensationalism allows one to discuss the positive outcomes of its basic tenets, in order to encourage all believers who are facing many trials. These outcomes can be listed as:

1. **THE BELIEF THAT GOD IS ALWAYS IN CONTROL:** If God has a distinct plan for every age, then His plan for the church and the world today is not falling apart, because of what we experience, but rather coming to pass (Isaiah 46:9-10).
2. **THE CONTINUOUS FOCUS ON TAKING THE GOSPEL TO THE WHOLE WORLD:** If the Nation of Israel was to be a light to attract the nations of the world to itself and ultimately to God (Isaiah 49:6) and to demonstrate to the world God's great blessings on Israel (II Chronicles 8:9) then, the Church is to remain focused on going into all the world, preaching and taking the Gospel to everyone (Mark 16:15) and being a witness of Christ's resurrection to all nations (Acts 1:8).
3. **THE BLESSED HOPE OF THE CHURCH:** If the steady and intense rise of sin and wickedness in the world is true, then dispensationalism offers the blessed hope of Christ's return prior to sin's ultimate culmination. (I Thessalonians 1:10). This belief in an unknown day for Christ's imminent return for His church, necessitates a personal holy life (I John 3:2).
4. **BELIEF IN A PEACEFUL AND PROSPEROUS WORLD IN THE COMING KINGDOM:** Those who see an Earthly theocratic kingdom taught in Scripture, sacrifice their lives in order to gain the rewards followers of Christ are promised in that kingdom (Mark 10:28-31).

Dispensationalists see significant global events fulfilling Bible prophecy leading up to the consummation of Christ's coming kingdom (Ezekiel 36:24-25).

5. **FEARLESS AND CONFIDENT LIVING:** Dispensationalists tend to see God's unfolding plan in significant world events and live with confident certainty that God's sovereign plan is soon to be fulfilled (Luke 21:28).

Based on the above five outcomes of dispensational theology, it may possibly be on the cutting edge of the most critical challenges that the church and individual believers face today especially in the light of current Covid challenges.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Paradigm

As a church planter from a small dispensational church in Centurion Pretoria, the many magnificent and quite splendid Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK) buildings, The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in English, are both intimidating and quite overwhelming, to say the least. Since beginning work in the area of Centurion, Pretoria, five years ago, the researcher has not had the opportunity nor the privilege to even meet one Reverend (Dominee) of these huge and elegant structures that dominate the church landscape throughout Pretoria and Gauteng. Often, large closed fences, the security detail at Dutch Reformed Churches and the unnatural trepidation from apartheid's legacy silently screams: "**Keep out...**" in the mind of this researcher. This has contributed to the ontological framework of the researcher. This great gulf has robbed many like me of the understanding and fellowship with those of the Dutch Reformed persuasion. Is it possible that the church in South Africa is being robbed of a powerful unity because we are failing to even begin to undo the errors of the past as so evident at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s? It is hoped that the research conducted in this paper becomes a forerunner and template for non-white pastors in South Africa to interact with their local Dutch Reformed Reverends because almost every City, Town and Suburb in South Africa has at least one Dutch Reformed Church in it. The lessons learned from these vital interactions, which under the apartheid system would not have taken place, could serve as motivation for previously separated church leaders to begin interactions on issues of theology and engagement with other relevant issues they may face.

6.2 The Hypothesis

Therefore, the central argument for this study is that if evidence for dispensational ideas are shown to have a long and credible history in the church, then there would be no grounds to

dismiss dispensationalism out of hand. This would then provide an opportunity for sincere and respectful discussions about dispensation's claims, ideas and beliefs that are so desperately needed and lacking in South African churches today. These discussions will take place in a manner that is courteous rather than combative and dismissive. The converse will then be evident where dispensationalists will likewise be challenged and confronted with opposing ideas and beliefs so as to foster understanding of the scriptures rather than animosity towards believers. This can all be done with our South African culture of tolerance at the forefront, which is the willingness to accept and learn from our fellow brothers in Christ who may differ in belief, praxis and other ways (Proverbs 27:17).

Judge Albie Sachs rightly spoke of "dialogue truth" which he described as the "truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion and debate" (Sachs 1995: 105).

6.3 A South African culture of dialogue

This paper seeks to break free from the American way of dealing with theological differences by means of ignoring, disparaging and disrespecting the different. This paper seeks rather to appeal to our common African and South African culture of dialogue and discourse within the local churches of South Africa.

6.4 Methods

The research method for this study will be personal interviews with as many of the local Reverends or Dominees of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerke (NGK) as possible. This method of qualitative research is also called the phenomenological method of research as the assumptions and attitudes of the researcher will be changed, challenged and set aside (Taylor in Psathas 1973:14-15).

Interviews concerning the Reverends approaches to scripture will initially be explored because the aim of qualitative research and the phenomenological methodology is to try to view what people say and do which ultimately defines their world and their reality. The aim of collecting the data will be to understand the concepts and insights of the respondents of the research as well as their understanding of dispensational concepts. The aim of the interviews with the NGK Reverends will ultimately be to understand and see things from their point of view.

Next, the origins and newness of dispensationalism will be explored. Their knowledge, presuppositions and perceptions about the origins of dispensationalism will be derived. Evidence

for the early origins of dispensationalism (which will be evidenced in Chapter Three in this paper) will then be presented to those being interviewed and their willingness to further discuss dispensational ideas and concepts will be investigated. If this hypothesis is correct, there will be a willingness to discuss and evaluate their understanding of the five basic outcomes of literal interpretation, mentioned above. Once discussions have taken place, with meekness and trembling (1 Peter 3:16), a new relationship of understanding and tolerance will emerge for both dispensationalism and reformed theological approaches to scripture. The results of these interactions and interviews will be the basis to prove the hypothesis true or false and a basic template for future discussions and meeting with local NGK Reverend will result.

7.CHAPTER OUTLINE

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 3: DISPENSATIONALISM PRE-DARBY

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

BIBLIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER TWO:

1. PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS

Research and in particular, traditional qualitative research, has with it certain negative connotations. It has been called “the dirty word” of research (Denzin 2008:1) because of its association with colonization and its racist agenda. Denzin states that traditional qualitative research was a racist project (2008:2). In some traditional qualitative research, the colonizer was the researcher and the colonized was the respondent. The aim of this type of qualitative research was to objectify and further the agendas of the colonizer.

Be this as it may, one of the aims of this research project is to “turn the tables”, as it were, on the above perception. The research conducted in this study will come from the perspective of the so-called “disadvantaged and colonized”.

Because we live in a world where there are so many religious traditions and a plethora of religious affiliations, it was important for the researcher to investigate the historical origins of their own or other belief system, viz. dispensationalism. Ursula King (1995) makes an important observation about religious studies and methodology.

It is necessary to stress again and again that the plurality of religions in the present world and the variety of cultures moulded by different religious traditions cannot be adequately understood without a thoroughly historical study of the origin, growth and development of particular religions, affected by the ongoing dynamic of continuity and change (1995:48-49).

If King’s observation is true, then a study of the origins of dispensational theology and thinking will go a long way towards ending the debate about the age of dispensational concepts in church history and ultimately, dispensationalism in church history. Along with the research on dispensationalism and its origins, there will be research into the Dutch Reformed Church or NGK Minister’s approach to scripture. These two studies go hand in hand for the aims and purposes of this research. The varying and deeply personal approaches of the NGK Ministers, leads into an evaluation of the various NGK Minister’s ideas about the history of interpretation and dispensationalism.

1.1 Breaking Stereotypes

The research conducted in this particular study, however, had a particular aim in mind viz. “to seek to build bridges between two varying religious traditions in South Africa. The research had the express aim of dialoguing between what some have considered an “agent” of apartheid, the Dutch Reformed Church, and a non-white pastor, the researcher.

It was a Dutch Reformed missionary conference in 1950 that was to recommend ‘traditional apartheid’, and so prepare the ground not only for one of the most controversial and heart breaking pieces of apartheid legislation, the Group Areas Act, which has caused such tremendous bitterness with the black community, but for separate development itself (de Gruchy 2005:32).

Because of the negative connotation of traditional qualitative research and the Dutch Reformed Church’s (NGK) previous association with apartheid, (Hope & Young 1981:46) this research provides the possibility of a paradigm shift for the researcher as it forced the researcher to break free of long held fears, stereotypes and previously held prejudices about the Dutch Reformed Church and its Reverends. Unlike traditional qualitative research, the proverbial shoe, through this study, this time would be placed on the other foot, so to speak.

If some Ministers from the NGK were originally and at one time involved in apartheid’s agenda, then dialogue with the current and retired NGK Ministers of the new South Africa, would help the researcher understand, from primary sources, the incredible changes and developments within the Dutch Reformed Church. These developments include unity, diversity, equality and interdependence within the body of all God’s people and the church as a whole.

Denzin, (2008) understanding of qualitative research makes this methodology the best choice for the aims and objectives stated above.

Qualitative research is a set of practices which embrace within its own multiple disciplinary histories constant tensions and contradictions over the project itself, including its methods and the forms its findings and interpretations take (2008:10).

1.2 The Importance of this Chapter

Research Methodology is a structured systematic process through which research can be done. The methodology guides the researcher in the proper norms and ethical standards for research to be done correctly and ethically (Cassim 2023). It is the step by step process in correctly recording, validating, analysing, assessing and interpreting the relevant data gleaned through the research project. Mastering Research Methodology in post graduate studies lays the groundwork for the study and prepares the researcher for any future studies undertaken. Reliable outcomes in qualitative research depend largely on proper methods employed to achieve relevant findings.

This chapter will briefly describe the type of research methodology employed in this study, the type of data used and how it was analysed. This chapter will highlight the sampling errors and possible biases of the researcher, define key terms and concepts in the research. It will also list the

interview questions and acknowledge the stakeholders and ethical issues involved in this research project.

2. TYPE OF RESEARCH METHODOLOGY USED

A qualitative approach was used in this study in order to discover the opinions and approaches to the scriptures employed by the Ministers of the Dutch Reformed Churches (DRC) in Gauteng Province, South Africa. Qualitative research is concerned with how people think and act (Taylor 2016:19) and to gain a deeper understanding of a particular group or phenomenon. This approach is sometimes called Critical Realism which could be understood as a world made up of feelings and thinking people whose interpretations need to be studied (Danermark 2002:200).

Qualitative research has been defined as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world (Denzin 2008:4). Taylor (2016:18) describes qualitative research methods as research that produces descriptive data, people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviour. Qualitative research has to do with people's perspectives, their frames of reference and how they experience and see reality.

Qualitative researchers believe they can grasp the respondent's point of view much better than quantitative researchers because "they can get closer to the actor's perspective through detailed interviewing and observation". (Denzin, 2008:16) The interview became what Kong calls "a method of friendship" (2002:254) as an objective of the research was to build bridges between the researcher and the Reverends of Dutch Reformed Churches.

The reason a qualitative research method was chosen because Rubin (2005:3) claims:

1. Qualitative research and interviews allows the researcher to understand experiences and reconstruct concepts that they are not participants in.
2. They can extend one's intellectual and emotional reach across boundaries of age and race.
3. Qualitative research is good at describing processes and how things are different.
4. Important personal issues and beliefs are highlighted in in depth qualitative research.
5. The results of qualitative research can shed new light on old matters.
6. This study and the research examines and highlights both sides of the theological divide.

More specially, a phenomenologist-historical approach was applied for this study. The researcher believes that the opinions, beliefs and approach of the DRC Ministers are very important, relevant enough to be studied, captured and understood as it relates to the origins and tenets of dispensational theology. King (1995:50-51) states that phenomenology is then primarily

understood as a systematic and comparative classification of all religious phenomena whatever they are as they relate to the historical development of these phenomena.

The researcher took the Phenomenological methodology as the social phenomena, the perceptions and realities of the respondents from the NGK Reverends. This would be collected and captured and used in in-depth interviews (Taylor 2016:14).

At its simplest, phenomenology seeks to understand the phenomenon of religion, or rather, specific phenomena of religion. Phenomenological discussions have been influenced by developments in biblical interpretation or hermeneutics... (King 1995:51-52).

The basic method of research took the form of a structured interview. Aurini, et al. (2016:80) state that interviews and qualitative research go hand in hand. Interviews for the research were planned and requested for one hour. Initially, the interviews took much longer than an hour, almost two hours, but as saturation levels quickly began to become more and more evident, the times of the interviews grew shorter and shorter; closer to half an hour.

2.1 Type of data used

The data used to capture the information, from the interviews, came in four mediums: written records, digital data, a PowerPoint presentation and a book. These formats provided the data which was captured in this study. The answers to the questions in the interview were recorded as accurately as possible. The data captured, in summary form, (See Chapter Four) was what was discussed in the interview. The answers provided by the Ministers of the NGK, in response to the questions, were captured as comprehensively as possible.

The researcher used a basic diary to capture the dates and the main discussion points from the interviews. The answers to the questions were also captured digitally and formed the basis for the data. The answers that were given by the NGK Ministers to the interview questions were transferred into a word document which formed the basis from which the data was analysed.

The digital data used to capture the interviews with the Dutch Reformed Ministers was always sought and granted without objection. The data was then transferred to a word document which formed the basis from which the data would be analysed. Summarized versions of some of the interviews will be given in Chapter Four of this study. The process of data analysis will be demonstrated in order to verify the outcomes and reliability of the interviews conducted and the data analysis produced.

In one of the cases the respondent was not able to attend the interviews because of time and other constraints that arose at the time of the interview. The respondent then graciously sent their answers for the interview questions in the form of a book the respondent had written. The book dealt in many ways with the questions in the interview.

In one case, the respondent did not have much time for the interview but was willing to show by use of a digital projector their philosophy and approach to the scriptures.

2.3 Method of analysis

Creswell (2016) provided the basic method and the general process to systematically categorize and interpret the recorded data. The answers to the various questions asked in the interview were transcribed onto a word document. Once captured, documents were read carefully and repeatedly to find certain themes or codes. These codes or key words were assigned to the text on the left side of the document. These codes were the groupings of similar concepts, exact words used, various ideas that were stressed or repeated, important emphasis or worthwhile quotes, commonalities between the answers and finally unexpected answers.

According to Creswell, coding is the process of analysing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting their data back together in a meaningful way (2016:174).

The codes became the themes from each answer. These themes were collapsed to form labels or codes (summary words) on the right side of the text. These codes were grouped in order to eliminate any redundancy.

Once the codes and the themes were discovered, a theme passage was written using the quotes and evidence cited. Finally a summary and narrative story was produced that tied the various themes together.

Qualitative research is based on observations that are converted into discrete units that can be compared to other units by using statistical analysis (Tamene, 2026:54).

There is a possibility that the research data may not be perfectly accurately interpreted. However, it is certain that the researcher will not give a totally false interpretation as Becker observed:

We can find out, not with perfect accuracy, but better than zero, what people think they are doing, what meanings they give to the objects and events and people in their lives and experiences (Becker 1996:58).

2.4 Sampling Errors

The sampling error in this study refers to the extent to which the sample of participants, the NGK Minister, or data collected was not representative of the broader body of Dutch Reformed Ministers. There was an inadequate representation as only twenty two ministers from the NGK were sampled.

The locality and specific area where the research was conducted is admittedly very small and in no wise representative of the National or International Dutch Reformed Churches of Southern Africa. Admittedly, this impacts the general findings of the research. As stated above, the research was focused on one province in South Africa, Gauteng. The reason for such a small sampling was the financial constraints and cost of travel. These churches were all within driving range of the researcher's residence and were relatively easily accessible by car. The objective of the study was to provide a bridge building model for dialogue between a pastor and DRC Minister in the context of a suburb or city in South Africa and not necessarily in a small town.

The two categories of DRC Ministers were active and retired ministers. The approved number by the university's ethics committee for active ministers was twenty and the approved number for retired ministers was ten. Fourteen interviews were conducted with active Ministers. There were three late cancellations for various reasons. In one case, a minister had to attend to a death in the home of a member of his church. Because of time constraints on the research, these interviews could not be rescheduled. Five interviews with retired or semi-retired ministers were conducted.

After only a few interviews, it soon became obvious that saturation levels would be achieved. The majority of the answers to the questions in the interview were very similar. Despite slight variations in their responses to the interview questions, the DRC Ministers disagreed with most of the basic tenets of dispensationalism, especially the apparent distinction between Israel and the church. The one area of dispensationalism the DRC Ministers agreed most often to, was God's purpose to glorify himself through history.

The inability of the researcher to obtain a wide variety of Ministers and gender diversity created a definite selection bias. The interviewees were mostly male. The interviews were based on convenience and participant availability. The researcher was only able to interview willing participants in the research and often under severe time constraints. There were many requests for interviews that were ignored, turned down or simply unanswered than were ultimately accepted and concluded. As a result, the findings of the research may contain a selection bias and the findings may not be applicable beyond the local context. One particular selection bias was the

inability of the researcher to interview more than one female Minister. This limited scope of research impacted the validity of the study in that a greater variety and wide spread sampling of interviewees was not obtained. However, the results of the interviews, though confined by a relatively small location, are valid and are represented in the findings.

King makes it clear that there are indeed shortcomings when doing phenomenological-historical research. King states that the researcher studies what the researcher believes himself rather than what others believe. (1995:53) King goes on to raise a critical issue when she states:

This also raises the further difficulty of what difference there may be in investigating a historical “fact” about religion(s) and understanding a religious “phenomenon”. Does one need to distinguish between “understanding a religion” and understanding a faith other than one’s own’ and if so wherein lies the difference between these approaches? (King 1995:53).

At the heart of these shortcomings is the very purpose of this research: “Understanding what others believe”. Because of South Africa’s unique separatist history and unscripted speculative future, the church must have, as a necessity, an understanding and knowledge of each people group and their beliefs, particularly in the church itself and in other religious circles. The secular world outside of the church has made significant efforts to bring people together with the dismantling of apartheid in all its forms. Somehow, the church seems to react slower than the secular world with regards to racial integration, social engagement and diversity. Schoeman’s research (2017:6) concludes that South African congregations have to redefine relationships as a partnership with other Christian institutions. Even the National Development Plan (NDP) of 2012 calls for the church to play an active role in reducing inequality, developing higher levels of social cohesion and social mobility (2012:27-29).

The demographics of the respondents were all Caucasian and of European descent. Rubin is correct in stating that interviewing has enabled us to jump social barriers, of race, income, national origin, sex, and occupation (2005:7). The reason for choosing this particular demographic was two-fold:

1. To highlight the biases that some may have towards the so-called “whites” in the NGK. On the 1st of April 2022 the researcher had a random discussion about this research with a Pastor who stated that the NGK Ministers would not be willing to conduct the interviews. He claimed that the NGK would “form a larger” and not grant permission for the interviews to be conducted. (Matthews, April 2022)
(The research will show that this was not the case with the DRC Ministers interviewed)

2. To show how to construct a possible model, through the experience and findings of the research, on the best possible way for an ordinary pastor or Christian leader in the city or suburbs to begin discussions and dialogue with a local NGK Minister.
3. To consider any possible future endeavours for further study and partnerships between reformed and dispensational theologies.

Research that changes nothing -not even the researcher- is not research at all, according to Clough (2012:14). Therefore, the research undertaken in this study and the outcomes thereof have the purpose of changing some of the above biases and hindrances that may possibly exist. The research has at its heart the objective to move church leaders from disregard to dialogue.

According to Stenhouse (1975:87), research is a systematic and sustained, enquiry, planned and self-critical, which makes public criticism. This public and self-criticism is the desired outcome of this research which motivates the researcher and the respondents of different theological persuasions to begin recognizing and grappling with the beliefs of others. In doing the research, the researcher has to seriously listen and consider the opinions, views and ideas of others, in particular, those from a Reformed Theological persuasion. In doing so, the researcher had to seriously evaluate their own dispensational biases and take cognisance of its shortcomings.

As a novice to qualitative research and the various arrays of theoretical perspectives that are available, this researcher will be guilty of what Taylor (2016:32-33) has suggested that “Just learning the language of research with certain perspectives, is a daunting task”.

3. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

There was a series of basic questions (see below) in the interview which could be divided into three sections as suggested by Aurini (2016:93):

1. Introductory: To gain insight into the DRC Minister’s chosen and personal approach to scripture.
2. Body: The DRC Minister’s knowledge of dispensationalism’s tenants before Darby, the application of their chosen approach to two passages of scripture from the old and new testaments and their willingness to discuss the five basic tenets of dispensationalism.
3. Closing remarks: The DRC Ministers had the opportunity to express their personal concerns, criticisms and reservations when it comes to dispensational theology.

Denzin calls the interview “a walking stick” (2008:116) as it is an active dialogue between two people. Unlike in a survey, the questions in the research were at times conversational tending towards discussion rather than just question and answers. Although the discussions were unique, the answers given to the questions below were often exactly the same and saturation levels were soon evident in the research process.

1. How would you describe your personal and chosen approach to scripture?
2. What has led you to adopt this approach to scripture?
3. What one word best describes your approach to scripture besides the answer in Question 1?
4. What principle(s) would you consider as important to all biblical interpretation?
5. For example, how would you understand Zechariah 14 from the Old Testament?
6. For example, how would you understand Romans 11 in particular V26-27 from the New Testament?
7. What do you understand or know about how the Church, at various times, interpreted scripture?
8. Have you been exposed to dispensationalism and what are your thoughts of it?
9. Are you familiar with one John Nelson Darby and what is your evaluation of him?
10. What do you know about the history of dispensationalism before JN Darby?
11. If you were made aware of the history of dispensationalism, would you be willing to discuss and give your personal perspectives on the following claims of dispensationalism:
 - *God has always had varied and distinct arrangements (called dispensations) with humanity throughout History.*
 - *Israel, as a nation and the Church, as a whole, have two distinct origins, missions and destinies.*
 - *There is a future, physical removal of the church (called the rapture) prior to the coming wrath of God on the Earth (called the tribulation).*
 - *There is a coming literal 1000 Year kingdom reign of Jesus Christ on Earth (called the millennium) fulfilling God’s covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants.*
 - *The ultimate purpose of all creation and history, is the eternal Glory of God in His Kingdom.*
12. Are there any questions or concerns you have with the dispensational approach to scripture?

4. THE RESEARCH STAKEHOLDERS

The researcher was greatly honoured to have Professor Johan M van der Merwe (BA Theology, BA Honour in Semitic Languages, BD, M Divinity, DD) from the department of Systematic and

Historical Theology and Faculty of Theology and Religion at the University of Pretoria in South Africa as their supervisor.

The department of Library services at the University of Pretoria provided necessary support and research resources for the possible completion of this research. The researcher was given the opportunity and privilege by the University of Pretoria's Library Services to participate and be a part of Doctor Layla Cassim's lectures in August 2023 which was geared towards helping and providing the tools necessary for postgraduate students aiming to complete their research.

The Ethics committee at the University of Pretoria granted permission for the research to be done in an ethically and acceptable manner.

The NGK Synod in Hatfield, Pretoria and Doctor Laurens Bosman, who granted permission for the research to be conducted ethically within the Dutch Reformed Church.

The various participating Ministers of the NGK in Pretoria and Gauteng who were willing to participate in this research have become more like partners rather than mere respondents in the research project. (Rubin, 2005:7)

The researcher's wife and family who sacrificially supported the researcher with their backing and financial aid as well as Doctor Frank Shayi of the Langham Institute who provided the funding for registration at the University of Pretoria.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher has read and familiarized himself with the UP policy and the POPI Act and followed it to the best of their knowledge. Each respondent with given a consent form to fill in and sign. The questions for the interview (above) were sent to the respondents ahead of the interview so that they could familiarize themselves with its contents and not be caught unawares.

5. SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

The topic researched was to highlight the instances where dispensational concepts or ideas existed prior to John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). This research was used as a basis to dialogue with the ministers of the Dutch Reformed Churches in Pretoria, South Africa, in order to form a model and bridge for others in cities and suburbs seeking to form partnerships and relationships with their own local Dutch Reformed Ministers.

The researcher found that there were many examples of dispensational ideas and concepts throughout church history although these concepts were formally systematized by Darby. These dispensational concepts and ideas were often random and scattered beliefs. These teachings held

to by that various theologians of church history were not comprehensively unified as modern dispensationalism does today.

The researcher also found that the best way to meet and dialogue with the Ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church (NGK or DRC) was to go through an intermediary or “middle man or woman” that was trusted and well known by the Dutch Reformed Minister. This intermediary, whatever form they may take, is the recommended method the researcher believes can be most effective in meeting with a Dutch Reformed Minister. Unilateral and private attempts to meet with a Minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, without having a known go between, are largely unsuccessful. For example, the influence of the receptionists in the office of the Dutch Reformed Churches in Pretoria plays a critical role in securing the interviews and meetings. Private telephone communications, in all its possible forms, do not necessarily secure a meeting or an interview. The researcher even tried attending a service of the Dutch Reformed Church which initially seemed to open up a possibility of dialogue. However, when the Minister was given the questions for the interview, he was no longer able to meet. Persistent requests for interviews were also not enough to secure a meeting for an interview.

The respondents, the Dutch Reformed Ministers in Pretoria, were very courteous and friendly, once the meeting ultimately was secured. Some interviews took place in the minister’s church office, home or chosen restaurant. In every instance, the ministers were extremely hospitable and kind. Each Minister expressed their hopes for success with regards to the research project.

All of the respondents were initially unaware of exactly what dispensationalism taught and who John Nelson Darby was. Most were willing to discuss the five basic tenets of dispensationalism, except where time was a constraint. Even though they were unaware of dispensationalism apparent novelty most were willing to discuss the five basic tenets of dispensationalism.

All respondents were in total disagreement with dispensationalism’s central feature, the consistent literal interpretation of all scripture, especially with regards to prophecy and eschatology. The DRC Ministers interviewed saw much of the prophetic genre in scripture as apocalyptic and highly subjective when trying to do interpretation.

Dispensationalism’s belief in a distinction between Israel and the church was also a point of disagreement. The DRC Ministers interviewed all hold to a single people of God both in the Old and New Testaments. The Covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 and the passage in Galatians 3:29-29 was often the reasons given for not seeing any distinction between the church and the nation of Israel.

Not one of the respondents believed in the so called pre-tribulation rapture of dispensationalism. However, some respondents flatly denied the possibility of such an event ever taking place. The respondents held to the Kingdom of God having already come when Christ came at his first coming. The respondents believed that there is no literal coming personal one thousand year reign of Christ on Earth because Christ is already ruling in glory.

The researcher found it very interesting to see how willing the Dutch Reformed Ministers were open to discuss South Africa's past and their views of apartheid, oftentimes, right at the outset of the meeting. They also spoke freely, without prompting, about the current and future challenges being faced by the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

This research can be illustrated thus: The research project was like a fisherman trying to see which tackle and bait would work best to "hook" or "catch" an opportunity to meet and dialogue with a Dutch Reformed Minister about their understanding of the Bible. This knowledge, as good fishermen do, can be passed on to other hopeful "fishers of men" (local pastors or leaders from other denominations and churches) who seek fellowship and partnership with those of other or like faiths.

The research changed some of the researchers' preconceived ideas about the Dutch Reformed Ministers. The Ministers whom the researcher was ultimately able to meet, were open and willing to discuss their ideas about the scripture. They were by no means antagonistic, indifferent or unwilling to talk and discuss issues of faith and theology.

The researcher believes that the respondents have gained a basic knowledge and regard for what dispensationalism teaches and holds to, through the interview process. One respondent wrote to the researcher after the interview and reported on his research regarding Israel's distinctives from the church.

The readers of this research will be able to see and evaluate the instances of dispensational concepts pre-Darby. The reader can use the experience gained and the model used in the research to form relationships and possible future partnerships with their local Dutch Reformed Ministers within their communities.

CHAPTER THREE:

1. INTRODUCTION

It has long been the claim that dispensationalism was the invention of one John Nelson Darby (1800-1882). George Ladd concurs with the novelty of dispensationalism when he alleges that: “we can find no trace of pretribulationism in the early church and no modern pre-tribulationist has successfully proved that this particular doctrine was held by any of the Church Fathers or students of the Word before the 19th Century” (Ladd 1956:126). Bass and others have stated categorically that: “no dispensational writer has ever been able to offer, however, a single point of continuity between what it today known as dispensationalism and the historic premillennial view.” (Bass 1960:14) Recently, even Bashiri Durham (2008) in his article, *A Comparative Look at Darbyian Dispensationalism & the Views Held by the Early Church Concerning The Second Advent*, states that dispensationalism, as a system, had its beginnings in the nineteenth century with Darby (2008:32). RC Sproul states that dispensational theology is a nineteenth-century aberration away from historic, orthodox, Biblical Christianity (2019:371).

The objective and aim of this chapter is to show that there were indeed elements, concepts and traces of dispensationalism throughout the history of the church age. These concepts were later systematized, categorized and organized into modern dispensationalism by John Nelson Darby in the nineteenth century. Even though the system of dispensationalism was formalized by Darby, traces of its tenants can be seen in the writings of theologians long before the nineteenth century.

1.1 Introductory Examples before Darby

The use of the word dispensations is evidenced in the writings of Irenaeus’ *Against Heresies* (c202). He saw dispensations as God working successively with and for humanities benefit.

And for this reason did the Word become the dispenser of the paternal grace for the benefit of men for whom he made such great dispensations revealing God indeed to men, but presenting man to God...revealing God to men in many dispensations (Irenaeus, book 4, chapter 20, paragraph 7).

One clear example of dispensationalism before Darby is found in the writing of Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the famous hymn writer, theologian and logician. He claimed that the general design of God was to recover sinners in what he called divine revelations or dispensations through the covenant of grace. From Adam to Christ and to the Apostles, Gentiles as well as Jews, Watts claimed that God, through various successive ages, had transactions with men by manifesting himself to mankind. Watts went on to say that these divine appointments were distinct into several corresponding dispensations.

These transactions of God with men, and his appointments, manifested to them, are usually distinguished into several corresponding dispensations, which in the substance of the discourse of this book, and I think they are each of them, distinguished from the other, by one or more special sign or emblem of grace or duty (Watts 1812:331).

Two important Books were published before Darby (1800-1882) which gave rise to the word dispensations being adopted by Darby and others as a name for his approach to scripture.

1. *The Divine O Economy: of a Universal System of the Works and Purposes of God Towards Men Demonstrated* by Pierre Poiret (1646-1719).
2. *A Complete History and Survey of all Dispensations* by Johnathan Edwards (1639-1716)

It is necessary to admit at this stage that the use of the word dispensations in Christian writings before Darby is not necessarily what modern dispensationalists understand the word to mean. Various writers may have used the word dispensations which to them meant different ideas and concepts. However, the use of the word dispensations in Christian writing before 1800 is important for this study.

Ryrie points out that these men developed dispensational models of the ages before Darby did (2007:81). Christianity Today, Billy Graham's Media Magazine, (<https://g.co/kgs/7Pe88e>) also claims that Pierre Poiret (1646-1719) was an early dispensationalist.

Dispensationalism is often traced back to John Darby, who made it popular. However, the first man to develop a fully worked out dispensational system was Pierre Poiret. His system said that God has dealt with or will deal with people on earth under seven dispensations (or economies) between creation and the end of the Millennium (the thousand year rule of Christ) (Christianity Today, Webpage: Pierre Poiret's Sober Mysticism).

1.2 The Literal Interpretation of Scripture

Initially there were some Church Fathers who interpreted the Scriptures literally. This approach to Scripture was based on early Christianity and its embattled faith which found its hope in the promised Kingdom of God. The literal approach to Scripture faded in the Fourth Century as Christianity began to enjoy an increasing acceptance in the Roman world, especially under Emperor Constantine, who some consider a Christian (Boyer 1992:48).

As mentioned in chapter one, the outcome of the consistent literal approach to all of scripture results in dispensationalism. The deliberate and intentional emphasis on a literal interpretation is clearly seen in the writings of English theologians from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Thomas Godwin (1600-1680), also known as The Elder, was an English puritan theologian who served as the chaplain of Oliver Cromwell. He was appointed president of Magdalen College in Oxford. He held to a literal interpretation of Scripture. He believed that allegorizing the text of scripture is to distort it. Godwin also held to a literal millennial view and used the word dispensations frequently in his writings. In his exposition of Revelation, he saw the various colours of the rainbow that surround the throne of God (Revelation 4:3) as the various dispensations (Godwin 1641:4-5).

Robert Maton (1607-1653) wrote a book entitled and summarized Christ's *personal reign on earth, one thousand years with his saints...* around 1652. It was written to refute Alexander Petrie. Petrie did not believe that the Jews would one day be literally restored to their ancient homeland in Palestine or Canaan. In his book, Maton clearly stated that the only way interpreters of scripture could come to a consensus of the meanings of the prophetic passages in the Bible, was to take the plain and literal approach. Maton claimed to have received this particular approach to scripture from Joseph Mede (1586-1639).

And for my own part I am persuaded, that the mystical interpretation of the plain prophecies which concern the Jews' future restoration in their own land, and our saviours and the saints visible reign over them and all the other nations hath been the occasion of the various and unsatisfactory interpretation of most part of the Revelation and of some part of Daniel's visions: and that divines will neither concur in judgement, not come near the truth in much of these obscure prophecies, till they agree upon the proper exposition of the foresaid plain prophecies; as Mr. Mede that renowned author calls them... (Maton 147:6).

Isaac Newton (1643-1727) was a brilliant mathematician and famous scientist who also had a keen interest in understanding the Bible, in particular, the books of Daniel and Revelation. According to Kenneth Jorgensen, Newton derived about nine principles for hermeneutics and biblical interpretation which can be summarised as simply:

Select those interpretations which are most according to the literal meaning of the scriptures unless where the tenor and circumstances of the place plainly require an Allegory (Jorgensen 2022:215 & 226).

Newton had a problem with allegorizing the scriptures where the plain meaning was obvious. Newton insisted that most of the Bible should be read in a straightforward manner with as little ambiguity as possible (Jorgensen 2022:220).

An allegorical interpreter, Newton stated, trusts more in his own imagination, in that human authority, than in the Scripture (and by consequence that his is no true believer) He that without better grounds than his private opinion of any human authority whatsoever shall turn scripture from the plain meaning to an allegory or any other less natural sense declares thereby that he reposes

more trust in his own imaginations or in that human authority than in the scripture. And, therefore, the opinion of such men how numerous so ever they be, is not to be regarded (Jorgensen quoting Newton 2022:220-221).

So important was the principle of a literal and plain meaning of the words of scripture to Isaac Newton that he saw all those who held to a differing approach to the scriptures as opening themselves up to heresies. Newton believed that the true faith was in the text itself (Jorgensen 2022:220).

Burdon (1997) quotes Newton's rules for one interpreting scripture.

Observe diligently the consent of scriptures and analogy of the prophetic style ... to assign but one meaning to one place of scripture ... to keep as close as may be to the same sense of words especially in the same vision [and] to chose those interpretations which are most according to the literal meaning of the scriptures unless where the tenour and circumstances of the place plainly require an Allegory (Burdon 1997:48).

What is interesting for the purpose of this paper is that Isaac Newton saw Joseph Mede (1586-1639) as his master and mentor in things pertaining to theology and bible interpretation. Newton also believed that what he held and believed prophetically, was also held to by many in the history of the church (Jorgensen 2022:242).

Another author who held to a literal interpretation as well as a separation of the church and Israel was William Gouge (1578-1653). In his work on the calling of the Jews he states:

Where Israel, Judah, Zion, Jerusalem etc. are named in the argument, the Holy Ghost means not the spiritual Israel or Church of God collected of the Gentiles, no nor of the Jews and Gentiles both (for each of these have their promises severally and apart) but Israel properly descended out of Jacob's loins (Gouge 1626:6-7).

Gouge goes on to say that the promise of the Jews who will return back to their ancient homeland is not to be taken as allegory, similitudes or deliverances in Christ, but are to be taken really and literally for the Jews.

Feinberg (1980) also stresses this point when he argues for the historicity of a literal interpretation:

For it can be shown that the fact the early church was premillennial was traceable to its interpretation of the Word in a literal manner, whereas the cause of the departure from that view in later centuries of church history is directly attributed to a change in method of interpretation (Feinberg 1980:48).

Increase Mather believed in a physical return of the Jews to their own land in Palestine prior to a literal time of great trouble and prior to their national salvation (Mather 1669:36).

2. THE PREMILLENNIALISM OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Despite the objections from some modern day theologians, it can be shown that some of the early church fathers were premillennial in their eschatology (Kobler 1945:102). Henry Thiessen claimed that the Early Church was premillennial (Thiessen: 1949:470). The idea of the return of Christ to establish his kingdom had come to be known as chiliasm.

Johann Heinrich Alstead (1588-1638) wrote *The beloved city, or, The saints reign on earth a thousand years* as a summary of the much longer title and was published in 1643. He gives a summary of what was known about the early church in the time that he lived.

It was the constant opinion of the church, in the very next age to the apostles, that there should be a resurrection before the general rising at the last day, and an happy condition of the faithful upon earth for a thousand years. This we may learn from Tertulias, and Irenaeus, and Justin the Martyr...tells us plainly, that not only himself, but whatsoever Christian in his time were in all respects Orthodox, maintained the same, grounding their opinion upon these words (Alstead 1643:4).

Even though John Noe does not believe in a literal thousand-year reign of Christ on earth, and is essentially a preterit, he readily admits that:

Most early-church fathers believed in a future and earthly millennial reign of Christ. Called “chiliasts.” From the Greek word for “thousand,” this groups included Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Methodus, Commodianus, and Lactantius. They believed that they were living in the last times, that Christ’s return was imminent, and that it would occur prior to a coming millennium period. Chiliasm (premillennialism) was the dominant view for the first three centuries of Christianity. Thus chiliasm was the ancient name and forerunner of what today is known as premillennialism (Noe 2016:3).

The difference between these early chiliasts and today's dispensationalism has to do with the role of the church and Israel in the kingdom. Early millennial beliefs were that the church would be the focus of the blessings of the millennium. This is often referred to as historical premillennialism. However, dispensationalism today believes that the main focus of the earthly blessings of the millennium will be towards the nation of Israel or the Jews. Restated, the pre-millennialism of the early church fathers was what is known as historic premillennialism and is somewhat different to today's dispensationalists. Historic premillennialism, simply stated, sees the church as being the main force and beneficiary of the kingdom. This idea is different to modern dispensationalists who are known as dispensational premillennialist. Some modern dispensationalists believe that the nation of Israel, rather than the church, will be the main beneficiary and most prominent in the

kingdom. So despite similarities between the early church fathers and some pre-millennials today, it has to be admitted that there are distinct differences between the two.

The belief in a so-called millennial reign of Jesus Christ on Earth is a belief that was present in the teachings and beliefs of the early church. Erickson summarises that initially the early church did believe in a literal millennium.

For the first two centuries of its existence, the church was largely millenarian, regarding the thousand years of Revelation eschatological and futuristically. The church believed that Jesus would reign on earth in the future. The reign would be introduced by a definite event, probably the Lord's second coming (1977:58, 94).

In Bashiri Durham article (2008), an attempt is made to show that Darby misunderstood the early church's premillennial tenets. However, when one reads the writings of the early church fathers, it is easy to see how one could read into their writings a belief in a rapture or escape of the church before the tribulation and various other dispensational ideas. In fact, Durham has himself added the word "church" (2008:19) into the writings of the early church fathers to try to show that they believed the church would go through the tribulation. Ultimately, how one approaches and interprets the early church writings will determine ones estimation of their theology.

Examples of how dispensational ideas and tenants could be seen or interpreted from their writings can be seen in the following examples.

Pretribulational Ideas in the Early Church Writing

In 1873 the Didache was discovered and could possibly be from the beginning of the second century. (Dunn 1999:279). Though this document deals with various protocols for the early church, it also gives some insights into the beliefs of the early church regarding the end times or eschatology.

Be watchful for your life. Do not let your lamps be extinguished or your robes be loosed but be prepared. For you do not know the hour when our Lord is coming. Gather together frequently, seeking what is appropriate for your souls. For the entire time of your faith will be of no use to you if you are not found perfect at the final moment. For in the final days the false prophet and corruptors of the faith will be multiplied. The sheep will be turned into wolves, and love into hatred. For when the lawlessness increases they will hate, persecute, and betray one another. Then the world-deceiver will be manifest as a son of God. He will perform signs and wonders, and the earth will be delivered over into his hands. He will perform lawless deeds, unlike anything done from eternity. Then all human creation will come to the fire of testing, and many will fall away and perish, but

those who endure in their faith will be saved by the cure itself. Then the signs of the truth will be manifest: first a sign of a rip in the sky, then a sign of the sound of a trumpet, and third a resurrection of the dead. But not of all the dead. For as it has been said, “The Lord will come and all of his holy ones with him.” Then the world will see the Lord coming on the clouds of the sky (Ehrman 2003:441-443).

It is quite possible to see how the early church may have possibly had some dispensational tenets when one reads the Didache, viz. the order of events: There is the opening of the sky (heaven), the sound of a trumpet (I Corinthians 15:52), the resurrection of dead saints at Christ’s coming, then the coming of Christ when every eye will see him. The writer also seems to hint at two separate comings by his frequent uses the word “then” to describe differing and subsequent events. However, not all the events described in the Didache above, fit perfectly into the dispensational scheme of end time events. In the Dedache, the writer seems to hold to a return of Christ (a possible rapture reference) during the supposed “fire of testing” (a possible reference to the tribulation) which is unlike modern dispensation teaching.

The Shepherd of Hermas is said to have its origins in the middle of the second century. (Ehrman 2003:162). Like the Dicache, it also deals at certain points with end time events which could be interpreted as dispensational.

You have escaped a great affliction because of your faith, and because you were not of two minds even though you saw an enormous wild beast. And so, go and explain the great acts of the Lord to his chosen ones, and tell them that this wild beast is a foreshadowing of the great affliction that is coming, If then all of you prepare and repent before the Lord from your whole heart, you will be able to escape it...Trust in the Lord, you who are of two minds, because he can do all things; he both diverts his anger from you and sends punishments to you who are double minded (Ehrman 2003:233).

A general reading of the writings of the church fathers does not always reveal matters related to eschatology. The predominant subject matter being dealt with in their writings was that of salvation, repentance, holy living and the value of martyrdom. Issues related to the unity of the church and the faithful conduct of believers were prominent themes in their writings. However, a reader may come across some very intriguing reference in J.B. Lightfoot’s work on *The Shepherd of Hermas* concerning the coming tribulation. After having seen a very large and terrifying beast in a vision, a young lady (pictured as the church)explains to Hermas what the beast represented. She explains:

Go, therefore, and declare to the Lord's elect his mighty works, and tell them that this beast is a foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming. So, if you prepare yourselves in advance and turn to the Lord with all your heart, you will be able to escape it, if your heart is clean and unblemished and you serve the Lord blamelessly for the rest of the days of your life (Lightfoot 1989: 212).

Later the same young lady, in Hermas, explains:

Therefore the ears of the not cease speaking to the ears of the saints. You have also the foreshadowing of the great tribulation that is coming. But if you are willing, it will be nothing (Lightfoot 1989: 213).

In *The Epistle of Barnabas*, reference is made to the so-called fourth beast of Daniel 7, which is oftentimes referred to as the antichrist (Lightfoot 1989:165). In the same Epistle of Barnabas, some chiliastic (*millennial*) ideas are introduced. Gokey summarises these ideas:

According to Barnabas, before the general judgment, Christ was to return to the earth to reign with the just for a thousand years. He divided the history of the world into seven millennia (*possible dispensations*) which are typified by the six days of creation and the seventh day on which Yahweh rested (Gokey 1973:102).

The Fragments of Papias also seem to teach a literal reign of Christ on the earth.

He is the one who is said to have promulgated the Jewish tradition of a millennium, and he is followed by Irenaeus, Apollinarius and others who said that after the resurrection the Lord will reign in the flesh with the saints (Lightfoot 1989:319).

In 1995 Grant Jeffery claimed to have discovered a supposed pre-tribulation rapture statement by Ephraim (306-373) within a manuscript entitled, *On the Last Times, the Antichrist and the End of the World*. In his article evaluating the claim of Grant Jeffrey, David Malcolm Bennett quote from Ephraim's *Last Times* sermon:

Why therefore do we not reject every care of earthly actions and prepare ourselves for the meeting of the Lord Christ, so that he may draw us from the confusion that overwhelms all the world? Believe you me, dearest brother, because the coming (advent) of the Lord is nigh; believe you me, because the end of the world is at hand; believe me, because it is the very last time. Or do you not believe unless you see with your eyes? See to it that this sentence be not fulfilled among you of the prophet who declares: 'Woe to those who desire to see the day of the Lord!' (Amos 5:18). For all the saints and elect of God are gathered, prior to the tribulation that is to come, and are taken to the Lord lest they see the confusion that is to overwhelm the world because of our sins. And so, brothers most dear to me, it is the eleventh hour, and the end of the world comes to the harvest, and angels, armed and prepared, hold sickles in their hands, awaiting the empire of the Lord. And we think that the earth exists with blind infidelity, arriving at its downfall early (2008:10).

Ephraim the Syrian, also known as Ephraim, or Ephraemis, was a well-known church father from Nisibis. He is credited with more than one hundred and fifty Greek works. Many of Ephraim's works are not found in Standard English collections of church fathers and many are yet to be translated into English (Brainard's Website, Soothkeeps).

3. PRELIMINARY THOUGHTS ON LEE BRAINARD'S WORK

Lee Brainard has done his own translation work of some of Ephraim's sermons, and other church fathers like Irenaeus and Eusebius. In a quite recent translation of Ephraim (2022), Brainard boldly states that:

This treasure trove significantly bolsters the proof that biblical eschatology - I mean premillennial and pretribulation – survived deep into the patristic era (According to Brainard).

Even though Brainard's translations of Ephraim are by no means a proof of pre-tribulation beliefs in the early church, he claims that his work adds to the body of evidence that continues to grow demonstrating pretribulation concepts in the early church. He makes an interesting claim when he says:

My investigations have convinced me beyond all shadow of doubt that some of the early church fathers did indeed teach a pre-tribulation rapture. There are numerous clear pretribulation rapture references in the early church fathers, and this body of evidence is growing. Recent research in the untranslated Greek writings of the early church fathers has led to some amazing discoveries in the writings of both Ephraim the Syrian and Eusebius. (According to Brainard:

<https://soothkeep.info/irenaeus-ground-zero-for-the-rapture-controversy-in-the-early-church/>)

Brainard makes bold statements above about the pre-tribulation rapture in the early church. Other dispensationalists are only willing to state that the early church was pre-millennial. It seems quite astonishing to this researcher how after so many hundreds of years, no one has discovered what Brainard has discovered in his work on the church fathers.

A simple comparison of the translation work of Brainard (2022) and Pearse (2016) of the same document, shows that Brainard has to a large extent produced a very similar translation to Pearse. The researcher has corresponded with Lea Brainard via email and he is confident that his work cited below is worth placing in this study.

Other than Watson's work and my work on the early Fathers, there isn't much gathered on the history of the pre trib. rapture. You can use anything from my website that you please. I will send you a forwarded email with my latest piece on the Didache (Brainard 13th September 2023).

Brainard has taken his Greek sources from the work of Phrantzolas.

3.1 Ephraim and the Tribulation

Ephraim the Syrian has a sermon on *The Advent of The Lord, the End and the End of the Age and the Coming of the Antichrist*. Lee Brainard's translation of this has multiple mentions of the tribulation and describes it as a being a three and a half year period of time that Ephraim calls "the great tribulation", "the coming tribulation", "unrelenting tribulation everywhere" and "intolerable tribulation" amongst other adjectives and descriptions. In this sermon, Ephraim describes what the world would be like during this time:

When he sees the entire world troubled and everyone is fleeing to the mountains to hide, some dying from famine, others drooping like a candle from terrible thirst, and there is no one to show them pity. When he sees every face (person) crying and asking with longing (According to Brainard 2023).

Ephraim goes on further to explain that when the dragon (who may well be a reference to satan) rules on earth, "there shall not be rest upon the earth, but rather great tribulation, tumult and confusion and deadly pestilence and famines in every corner of the earth".

Ephraim also made reference to the tyrant (who may be a reference to the antichrist) who he mentions will be active during the time of the tribulation and describes them as such:

For the tyrant shall work in such a way that all shall bear the mark of the beast when he shall come in his own time with signs to deceive the entire world in the completion of the times (i.e. the end of the age). And this so they can buy foodstuff and every form of goods. And he shall establish government officials to fulfil the command (According to Brainard 2023).

Ephraim describes what is called the "mark of the beast".

Pay heed, my brethren, to the extreme nature of the beast. The handiwork of evil. For he begins with the belly so that whenever anyone is straitened and lacking food, he is forced to take his seal-not it so happens on any part of the body, but upon the right hand and likewise upon the forehead-the ungodly mark (According to Brainard 2023).

It is important to note that Ephraim includes divine judgements of pestilence, famines and earthquakes as part of the tribulation.

3.2 Ephraim: Possible Allusions to the Rapture

Some of the critics of dispensationalism state that the idea of the rapture of the church before the Tribulation was never heard of before Darby. In his book, *The Great Rapture Hoax*, Dave MacPherson states:

During the first 18 Centuries of the Christian era, believers were never rapture separators, they never separated the minor rapture aspect of the second coming of Christ from the second coming itself (1983:15).

Another well-known dispensational critic, John Bray, wrote *The Origin of the Pre-Tribulation Rapture Teaching*. In it he states that:

This teaching is not a recovery of truth once taught and then neglected. No it never was taught – for 1800 Years, nearly no one knew anything about this scheme (1982:31-32).

Even though Ephraim does not specifically mention the word rapture, he does make reference to the idea that believers are delivered and rescued out of the coming tribulation in his writing entitled: “*Sermon on the coming of the Lord, and the consummation of the age, and the coming of the Antichrist*”.

Watch always, praying continually, that you may be worthy to escape the tribulation (115) and stand before God. For if anyone has tears and compunction, let him pray the Lord that we might be delivered from THE TRIBULATION WHICH IS ABOUT TO COME UPON THE EARTH (116) that he might not see it at all, nor the beast himself, nor even hear of his terrors. For there shall be famines, earthquakes, and diverse pestilences upon the earth. This is why the Lord said to us, watch and pray continuously that you might escape the tribulation (122) (Phrantzolas 1992:111-28).

In another work of Ephraim entitled: *Sermon on repentance and judgement and the separation of the soul from the body*. In this sermon we read of various allusions to a departure before a time of tribulation.

The signs and wonders which the Lord has said had to happen, the famines, the earthquakes, the terrors, and the nations in upheaval...the report of these things does not disturb us nor the sceptical itself. For the elect shall be gathered prior to the tribulation, so they shall not see the confusion and great tribulation coming on the unrighteous world (Phrantzolas 1992:239).

In Ephraim’s poem entitled: *On the Fathers Who Have Completed Their Course*, he pleads with his readers to be readied for the Lord’s soon return by repenting from sin so as to escape the coming tribulation.

When we see the saints in glory flying off in light in the clouds in the air to meet Christ, the King of glory, but see ourselves in the great tribulation, who shall be able to bear that shame and terrible reproach (Pearse, 2016).

In his poem, Ephraim teaches that there is a difference between believers and unbelievers at the tribulation. He seems to show that believers go up in clouds while unbelievers endure the terrible horrors tribulation.

Ephraim also wrote: *On the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ* and in it he states:

Indeed the grace of God strengthens and rejoices the hearts of the righteous, and they shall be seized up in the clouds to meet him. While those who are lazy and timid like myself shall remain on the earth trembling (According to Brainard).

Again we see a similar theme of the believers experiencing a different fate to unbelievers after they are seized up in the clouds.

On Patience and the Consummation of This Age and on the Second Coming, Ephraim mentions that:

Let us take up in our hearts the full armour...that we may be able to fight the good fight and tread down all the power of the enemy that we might be delivered from the wrath coming upon the sons of disobedience (Phrantzolas 1992:179).

Ephraim in the passage above seems to refer to the blessing of the believer where they experience victory over the enemy and are delivered from the coming wrath.

In *Fifty Five-Beatitudes*, Ephraim also speaks of a deliverance from the tribulation in the 19th Beatitude.

Blessed (is) the one who continually remembers the fear of Gehenna and hastens with tears and groans to repent sincerely in the Lord, for he will be delivered from the great tribulation (Pearse: 2009).

Ephraim has another reference to what modern dispensationalists may believe is a reference to the rapture and how Ephraim's *Destruction of Pride* is translated.

Let us pray the Lord in great humility that he would take us out of the coming fear, and count us worthy of that rapture when the righteous are raptured in the clouds in the air to meet the king of glory (According to Brainard).

3.3. Ephraim and the second coming of Jesus

Ephraim seems to indicate in his sermon that he believed that the Lord would come in glory after the tribulation (which he believed was three and a half years) period much like dispensationalists believe today.

Now after the three and a half years (seasons) of the power and practice of pollution are fulfilled, and when all the scandals (stumbling blocks, snares) over the entire earth have been fulfilled, as the Lord says, next our holy, undefiled, terrible, and glorious God shall come as lighting flashing from heaven, with incomparable glory, with ranks of angels running before his glory, archangels, all being flames of fire, and a river full of fire, with a terrible rushing noise (According to Brainard).

It seems that Ephraim had similar ideas to some of the teachings of dispensationalism today of what some may call a pre-tribulation rapture and the tribulation.

3.4 Eusebius: Possible Allusions to the Rapture

Eusebius (260-340 AD) is a recognized church father who was the Bishop of Caesarea. He may be seen as one who held to an allegorical approach to scripture and could well have been an amillennialist (one who does not believe in a literal thousand year reign of Christ on Earth). However, Eusebius seems to have possibly made reference to a pretribulational rapture in *Fragments in Luke, Luke 17:26*.

Indeed, as all perished then except those gathered with Noah in the ark, so also at his coming, the ungodly in the season of apostasy...shall perish...At the time of the deluge, it (judgement) did not come and destroy all the inhabitants of the earth before (until) Noah entered into the ark. Therefore, in the same way, at the consummation of the age, it (this pattern) says (demands) that the cataclysm of the destruction of the ungodly shall not happen before those men who are found of God at the time are gathered into the ark and saved according to the pattern of Noah...all the righteous and godly are to be separated from the ungodly and gathered into the heavenly ark of God. For in this way [comes the time] when not even one righteous man will be found any more among mankind. And when all the ungodly have been made atheists by the antichrist, and the whole world is overcome by apostasy, the wrath of God shall come upon the ungodly (Migne, 24:584-585).

It is noteworthy to see the order of the events that Eusebius mentioned of the first entering in of the godly into the ark for safe refuge and then the coming of the wrath of God. This is similar to how dispensationalists would see the so-called and apparent order of future events.

In Eusebius commentary on Luke 18:1-8, in *Fragments of Luke*, he writes:

For the world shall meet with a great test in the season of apostasy, in which the faithful man will scarcely be found. Suddenly, there shall not even be one, because some have been taken, and the others left behind, delivered to the eagles. In this way, there shall be a lapse of faith among mankind, thereafter he shall take revenge for his saints which had been killed by the ungodly (Migne, 24:588).

In the above quotation, Eusebius seems to be referring to a sudden removal of the faithful man so that he cannot be found. Of others, who are of the apostasy, they are left behind.

The distinction and difference between the so-called rapture and the second coming of Christ to Earth, with the coming of the antichrist between these two events, has been one of the tenets of

dispensationalism. Eusebius may have hinted at this distinction in his *Fragments in Daniel, Fragment E*.

Hence, I think the apostle Paul was moved to write in this manner on the second coming of Christ. “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a command, with the call of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God” and so forth. But the same apostle also set forth in order following this prophecy the end-times coming of the antichrist and his depravity, and after this the glorious appearing of our Saviour (Migne 24:528).

Eusebius also gives what dispensationalists could call his description of the rapture when Eusebius writes in his *Commentary on Isaiah, Book 2 and Section 24 on Isaiah 43:5-6*.

Many sons, born by God, I shall gather into my heavenly city, taking them up, flying them through the air, lofted like birds on the winds – I am talking about angelic powers. Some of them I shall gather to myself from the north, others from Africa, or as others say it, from the south (Ziegler 1975:Vol.9).

Some of the terms that Eusebius uses above are indeed different to the terms that dispensationalists use today. For instance, Eusebius may be calling the so called tribulation “the season of apostasy”, “the cataclysm of the destruction of the ungodly” and “a lapse of faith among mankind”, however the concepts are similar to modern day dispensationalism about the tribulation. Again Eusebius may also be calling to the so-called rapture, “the gathered into the heavenly ark of God” and “some have been taken”, “flying through the air” and “lofted like birds on the winds”.

3.5 Irenaeus: Possible Allusions to the Rapture and the Tribulation

Irenaeus (120-200) is an important Church Father because of his close association to Polycarp, a disciple of the Apostle John. Irenaeus taught that there would be a literal thousand-year earthly reign of Christ with his saints. He believed that it would not come until after the Anti-Christ was revealed and destroyed by the coming of the Lord. (Grenz 1992:40) Irenaeus most famously argued against the gnostic beliefs of his day by arguing for a literal and bodily resurrection. He believed the resurrection would take place in the promised inheritance of the fathers to reign in it beholding God in this renewed creation. Irenaeus saw this thousand year kingdom as the promised salvation to Israel and described it in terms of peace, prosperity and material restoration. (Daley 1991:31)

In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus may have hinted at a distinction between Israel and the church of the New Testament when he speaks of the church in the tribulation as the Jews.

Now I have shown a short time ago that the church is the seed of Abraham; and for this reason, that we may know that He who in the New Testament “raises up from the stones children unto Abraham”, is He who will gather, according to the Old Testament, those that shall be saved from all the nations. Jeremiah says: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that they shall no more say, The Lord liveth, who led the children of Israel from the north, and from every region whither they had been driven; He will restore them to their own land which He gave to their fathers” (Irenaeus: *Against Heresies*, 5.34.1).

Irenaeus may have also believed in a rapture prior to the tribulation when he writes in *Against Heresies* using words like “when” and “suddenly caught up” and “there shall be tribulation” in that unique order.

“And therefore, in the end when the Church is suddenly caught up from this, it is said, “There shall be tribulation such as has not been since the beginning, neither shall be.” For this is the last contest of the righteous, in which, when they overcome, they are crowned with incorruption” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.29.1).

In another section Irenaeus seems to make clear that the righteous will be delivered from the tribulation just as Enoch was translated prior to the flood of Noah. This is a model or a type that some modern dispensationalists have used to teach a pre-tribulation rapture.

“For Enoch, when he pleased God, was translated in the same body in which he did please Him, thus pointing out the anticipation of the translation of the just. Wherefore also the elders who were disciples of the apostles tell us that those who are translated are translated to that place (for paradise has been prepared for righteous men, such as have the Spirit; in which place also Paul the apostle, when he was caught up, heard words which are unspeakable...) and that those who have been translated shall remain there until the end of the consummation (the end), as a prelude to incorruptibility (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*: 5.5.1).

Another interesting teaching of Irenaeus was that he believed that the church would not remain on the earth just like Christ did not remain on the earth. Irenaeus may have taught, like modern dispensationalists do, that the church will go to be with the Lord in heaven in bodily form.

For as the Lord “went away in the midst of the shadow of death”, where the souls of the dead were, yet, afterwards arose in the body, and after the resurrection was taken up, it is manifest that the souls of His disciples also, upon whose account the Lord underwent these things, shall do away into the invisible place allotted to them by God, and there remain until the resurrection, awaiting that event; then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety, that is bodily, just as the Lord arose, they shall come thus into the presence of God” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.31.2).

From the above quotations it seems to be that Irenaeus may have taught that the church ascends into heaven when they are caught up and remain in heaven until they receive their resurrected bodies.

3.6 The belief in a literal thousand year reign of Christ.

The belief in the return of Christ, to establish his so-called kingdom, has long been so prominent in church history that Eugene Weber claimed that Christian history developed in concurrence with prophecy and its interpretation. So important was the belief in the supposed millennial return of Christ, it determined the counting of the centuries, naming of times and seasons of the church and the counting of time itself for the church (Weber 1999:2). Weber goes on to ask how it is possible that such an important, pervasive belief and motivating agency could be so long ignored in modern times.

One of dispensationalism's main tenets is also the belief that Jesus will dramatically and bodily return to Earth for a second time. After a so-called tribulation period to establish his earthly kingdom, he will bind Satan in the bottomless pit and literally fulfil the promises made to Israel by the prophets. In describing dispensationalism and the doctrine of the Kingdom, Loraine Boettner, a non-dispensationalist, states that:

...Christ and the saints return to earth, Antichrist and his forces, who are persecuting the Jews and have them shut up in Jerusalem, will be destroyed in the battle of Armageddon, and the millennial Kingdom will be set up on earth. (1957:141)

Boettner goes on to summarise some of the tenets of dispensationalism and mentions:

That after the battle of Armageddon, Christ establishes a world-wide Kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital, in which He and the resurrected and transfigured saints rule for a thousand years in righteousness, peace and prosperity. (1957:142)

Brian E. Daley (1991), of the University Of Notre Dame, clarifies that the millennial hopes of a number of important Christian thinkers in the second and third century existed in Asia Minor, Rome, North Africa and Egypt. Bishop Dionysis of Alexandria, a third-century bishop of Egypt is an example of at least one African minister who held to the millennial traditions of the early church (Mc Ginn 2000:7).

In Tertullian's work *Against Marcion*, Daley states that Tertullian defends the millennial traditions of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus. Tertullian even goes as far as to say that independent eyewitnesses saw something like a city suspended over Judea (1991:35). Tertullian understood that there is a

vast difference between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Millennial Kingdom that precedes it (Daley 1991:36).

Even though there were church fathers who rejected the teaching on the millennium, like Tyconius and Augustine (354-430), Botha et al (1988:140), do admit that church fathers like Papias, Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and to a limited extent, Hippolytus, were contenders for the millennium.

Irenaeus, (130-202) bishop of Lyon believed in a literal reign of Christ on earth. He strongly defended and believed that the millennium would take place after the appearance and destruction of antichrist when Christ shall come in glory. In Wood's discussion on the Eschatology of Irenaeus, he quotes from *Against Heresies* (174-189 AD):

When this Anti-Christ shall have devastated all things in this world, he will reign for three years and six months, and sit in the temple at Jerusalem; and then the Lord will come from heaven in the clouds, in the glory of the Father, sending this man and those who follow him into the lake of fire; but bringing in for the righteous the times of the kingdom, that is, the rest, the hallowed seventh day; and restoring to Abraham the promised inheritance, in which kingdom the Lord declared, that 'many coming from the east and the west should sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Wood 1969:32).

Irenaeus appears to hold to an end time scenario that saw the antichrist reigning at the time of the so-called tribulation. It would seem that Irenaeus interpreted II Thessalonians 2 in a literal manner when he spoke of this antichrist in a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. Irenaeus then spoke of the second coming of Christ after a time of trouble and the time of the antichrist to set up a kingdom in order to fulfil his promise to Abraham and his descendants. This is quite similar to the end time scenario of modern day dispensationalists.

Wood also comments that the beliefs of Irenaeus were the orthodoxy of his day and that he received by tradition the same beliefs about the millennium which were handed down to him which he himself had received. Similar teaching-though less fully developed-is to be found in the Didache, in the epistles of Ignatius, Polycarp and Barnabas, in Hermas and in Justin Martyr (Wood 1969:36).

Justin Martyr, an early Church Father and apologist, composed his two *Apologies* and his *Dialogue with Trypho* between 155 and 166 AD. He writes that in the kingdom, the saved will possess the land formerly known as Canaan and they will reign there with Christ for a thousand years in a renewed Jerusalem, enjoying the peace and prosperity prophesied by Isaiah (Daley 1991:20-21).

In the Encyclopaedia of Apocalypticism, Daley speaks of Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165?) who was the first major Christian writer to develop the tradition of the millennial hope in a consistent manner.

He mentions that Justin believed in both the first and second coming of Christ to Earth where Christ and the just would rule for a thousand years from Jerusalem. Justin believed that those who hold to a bodily resurrection must also hold to a millennium, which he claimed was indispensable to an understanding of the bodily and physical resurrection (2003:7-8).

Erickson adds that Justin Martyr interpreted all Old Testament prophecies about the future glory of the chosen people literally (1977:94). Assessing Justin's account of future and end time events, one can easily come to a conclusion that he interpreted the scriptures literally, in particular, the book of Revelation.

According to Norman Cohn, the church has always had an eschatology and in particular a millennial eschatology. Cohn states some in the early church believed that after the second coming, Christ would establish a messianic kingdom on earth and would reign over it for a thousand years before the last judgement (2011:4).

Cohn also claims that millennial beliefs were common among a group called the Montanists in the second century. The Montansits were denounced as pagan by the ecumenical synods. Even Tertullian, who later joined their ranks, proclaimed that he saw Jerusalem appearing in the skies above Judea (2011:16) Chon, quoting Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho*, says that he too believed that one day the city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt and inhabited again by Jews under Christ (2011:17). Of all the early church fathers, Cohn believed that Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, was a distinguished theologian. He did the most to influence these millennial ideas in the West through his treaties *Against Heresies*. Along with Irenaeus, Cohn states that another church father, Lactantius, also held to the same millennial expectations of a literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth (2011:19).

Not only did some Church Fathers write about the return of Christ, some also mentioned the antichrist. James Cooper and Arthur J. McLean translated *The Testament of the Lord* (Edinburgh, 1902) into English which is believed to be a work from the middle of the Fourth Century (1902:41). In *The Testament*, this ancient author claims that Christ himself described the physical description (physiognomic) of the antichrist having two pupil eyes, flat toes and a fiery flamed head. Whatever one may think of the way the early church and medieval church depicted the antichrist (Verbeke, Verhelst, & Welkenhuysen, 1988) it is interesting to note that they believed the antichrist to be an embodiment of Satan in some form who would come and cause havoc on earth (Cooper 1902:52).

4. The Move from Premillennialism to Amillennialism

Because of Roman persecution in the early church, the initial hope and expectation of the coming kingdom to deliver the church was strong. With the end of persecution, the church struggle moved

from an outward threat of persecution to the internal threat of Gnosticism and other perceived false doctrines. Many theologians of the early church naturally focused rather on confronting these false doctrines rather than addressing apocalyptic or end time scenarios which may have been deemed of lesser importance.

Along with the destruction of Jerusalem (70AD), the scattering of Jews from the land of Palestine in the second Century, the influence of Greek philosophy, as well as the growth of the Alexandrian School of Origen, it became easier to accept a more symbolic and allegorical method of interpretation. This allegorical system of interpretation came chiefly from Alexandria in Egypt and Caesarea (Boyer 1992:47).

A critical shift from a literal expectation of the millennial kingdom of Christ to a more allegorical approach happened in the church under Origen's influence, a highly influential theologian of the third century. Origen believed that the Kingdom was not a literal event but rather the reigning of Christ is the souls of believers (Cohn 2011:21). This shift came as a result of the easing of state run persecution and a relative time of peace in the church.

Origen (185-254) also, Weber writes, did not believe that the Scriptures should be interpreted literally as this was too Jewish and had to be interpreted and read symbolically. Jerome (342-420) agreed with Origen and stated that sensible folk avoided literalness. Jerome rejected millennialism (chiliasm) as simply, Jewish fables (1999:44).

Augustine, popularised the allegorical method and for the next millennia, this became the common method of biblical interpretation. When the persecution of the church ending about 313AD, there was less of a desire to look forward to a better day viz. a millennial age.

One of the most important factors in the fading of the literal interpretation of Scripture was the influence of Augustine (354-430) a prominent North African Church Father. He essentially influenced the interpretation of Scripture throughout Christendom for almost a Thousand Years with his classic work: *The City of God*. In it he essentially made eschatology the work of God in the present, rather than in the future and saw the Book of Revelation as an Allegory (Cohn 2011:22). Boyer gives a clear summary of Augustine's influence on Eschatology and how it became the standard way of understanding eschatology:

Augustine's vision of the interpretation of sacred and secular history profoundly influenced all future Christian eschatology, both Catholic and Protestant. He made the apocalyptic part of the everyday eschatological awareness by embedding it in liturgy and preaching. But his approach also distanced Catholic thought from all literalist readings of prophecy and especially from the notions of an earthly millennium (Boyer 1992:49).

Clearly, Augustine did not hold to a consistent literal interpretation of scripture when he said that God's time table was inscrutable, the city of God lay in heaven, the city of man lay on earth, and never the twain shall meet. The Saviour "comes throughout this present age in the person of his church" (Weber 1999:34). Cohn believes that there was a deliberate effort to suppress the millennial expectations of the early church. It was only in 1575 that the treatises of Irenaeus was eventually discovered (Cohn 2011:24).

Added to this, The Council of Ephesus in 431 also condemned millennialism and went as far as expurgating the works of those who previously held to the coming Kingdom of God like Irenaeus (Weber 1999:34).

Despite the shifts in interpretation of Scripture in church history, underneath the formalism of Christendom, there was a remnant of those who continued to hold tightly to apocalyptic speculations. This is clearly seen in what has come to be known as the Sibylline Oracles. Although there are many unanswered questions as to the source and credibility of the Sibylline Books, it is evident that in the middle ages, there were those who held to future apocalyptic hopes.

John Noe (2016:3) writes that by the advent of the Roman Church in the 4th Century, premillennialism was condemned and rejected at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431-2. By the fifth century Christ had not returned, the Jews were banished from their land and that the church was becoming more and more Gentile. These factors lead to a departure from chiliasm towards post millennialism. (The belief that Christ would come after the church ushered in a time of prosperity and peace through the growth of Christianity)

The influence of the Latin Church Fathers in eroding the literal interpretation of the scriptures cannot be understated. Robert Lerner believes that the works of Augustine, Jerome and Gregory the Great's theological masterpieces were held in such high regard, that for centuries, the church never looked to the brighter days of a supposed literal reign of Christ on earth (McGinn 2000:326).

Erickson, quoting MacCulloch, gives a clue as to why this important belief has been ignored throughout Church History when he claims that as the middle ages developed seemingly and increasingly that only fringe groups and cranks viewed the millennium as a future event. (Erickson 1977:61)

The above statement alludes to possible reasons why such an intriguing history is being ignored by today's historians. Weber also hints that it may be because those who held end of the world apocalyptic ideas were referred to as "the lunatic fringe" (1992:3). However, one would be hard pressed to refer to Oliver Cromwell, Sir Isaac Newton, John Milton and various other prominent men as the lunatic fringe who are said to have held strong apocalyptic and chiliastic ideas. Richard

Mark Saver's (a reformed scholar) overview of dispensationalism in church history acknowledges that the Spanish Jesuit priest, Francisco Ribera (1537-1591) was one of the first to publish a commentary on Revelation. In it he refuted the prevailing view of the reformation that the office of the papacy was the antichrist. Ribera showed rather that the antichrist would be a single evil person.

5. The Medieval Period

Gumerlock (2002:6) states that many who may have held to, what may be termed as an early pre-tribulation type theology, were severely persecuted by the Papacy during the medieval period. Persecution may well have been a sufficient deterrent to the spread of opposing belief systems, including dispensational ideas that were in conflict to the Catholic Church.

One example of this is that of Brother Dolcino of Novara (d 1307). He was the leader of the Apostolic Brethren who fled to the mountains of Northern Italy. However, more than four hundred of the Apostolic Brethren were slaughtered in 1307 by the Papacy. Dolcino was mutilated and later burned at the stake. However, the beliefs of Dolcino are recorded in *The History of Brother Dolcino*. Gumerlock suggests that Dolcino may have a reference to a pre tribulation rapture:

Again, Dolcino believed and preached and taught that within those three years Dolcino himself and his followers will preach the coming of the Antichrist. And that the Antichrist was coming into this world within the bounds of the said three and a half years; and after he had come, then he [Dolcino] and his followers would be transferred into Paradise, in which are Enoch and Elijah. And in this way they will be preserved unharmed from the persecution of Antichrist. And then Enoch and Elijah themselves would descend on the earth for the purpose of preaching [against] Antichrist. Then they would be killed by him or by his servants, and thus Antichrist would reign for a long time. But when the Antichrist is dead, Dolcino himself, who then would be the holy pope, and his preserved followers, will descend on the earth, and will preach the right faith of Christ to all, and will convert those who will be living then to the true faith of Jesus Christ (Gumerlock 2002:10).

Brother Dolcino and the Apostolic Brethren of the fourteenth century, seem to have had a belief that the entire true church, and not just an individual, of Christ would be transported to heaven as opposed to those who have been left behind. The purpose of this removal, or so called rapture from earth for some significant time, would be for the preservation of these brethren. Even more interesting is the return of the preserved believers back to earth which could possibly be in the kingdom (Gumerlock 2002:12-13).

Even though Gumerlock is not a dispensationalist, he readily admits that the teachings of Brother Dolcino stand as yet another literary witness to pretribulationism before the nineteenth century (2002:18).

Baxter's (1615-1691) book, *The Glorious Kingdom of Christ, Described and clearly Vindicated...* published in 1693 has in its sub heading: *Against the bold asserters of the future calling and reign of the Jews and 1000 Years before the conflagration and the asserters of the 1000 Years Kingdom after the conflagration.* It is a fact that Baxter did not believe in a literal 1000 Year reign of Christ but in his book hence its title. However, despite his book being against those of his day who held to a so-called millennial reign of Christ, he mentions some men during his days who held to and believed in such a reign of Christ. William Watson mentions some of these

Indeed there was a "millennialist silence" in the West from Augustine's time until about 1050. This is to say that no Latin writer during the long period expressed original millenarian ideas in his or her own words (2016:239).

The medieval church was commonly seen by many as worldly, extravagant, prideful, full of luxury, litigation and simony. The works of Theology that did not focus on the noble arts of poverty and asceticism were unpopular. Any talk of the financial and physical blessings of the so-called millennium was considered carnal, worldly and unspiritual.

Despite these obstacles to millennial beliefs in the medieval church, Lerner mentions two important works that have been preserved in Syriac and Greek viz. *The Revelations of Pseudo-Methodius* and *The Tiburtine Sibyl* (McGinn 2000:329).

The dearth of apocalyptic and millennial literary scholarship did not hinder the resurgence of end times thinking that has been preserved in varied and multiple forms of art. The art of the medieval period reveals much about what was thought and expressed by the artists and thinkers of the day. Just as Louis Bourgeois stated: "An artist can show things that other people are terrified of expressing" (Khawaga 2016). Medieval art is an obvious clue to what people believed but may not have openly expressed.

a) The Tapestry of Angers

This beautiful and magnificent tapestry was commissioned by Louis I, the Duke of Anjou, and was produced between 1377 and 1382. It depicts in chronological order ninety scenes mentioned in the biblical book of Revelation. It uses colourful and striking images woven in tapestry. It is indeed a masterpiece of French Cultural History and the probable belief system of someone at that time. It is currently housed at the Chateau d'Angers in France. The amount of apocalyptic artworks and

tapestries in the middle ages is clear evidence of the popularity of people's readings of end time's prophetic scriptures.

b) The Play of Antichrist

This play was written in Germany anonymously around 1150 and it depicts what the writer believed were end time events which are strikingly similar to the book of Revelation. The concept of the antichrist was important to the artists and thinkers of the medieval period.

c) The Arch of Titus

This architectural wonder celebrated the destruction of the Jewish Temple. This monumental reminder of the fulfilment of prophecy provides the assurance that there may yet be prophecy to be fulfilled.

d) People Groups

In 1491 thousands of people from Bohemia known as Taborites believed that Jesus Christ would return to the place of their gathering, Tabor. He would come to establish his thousand year reign on earth there. They had reorganized their entire society, devastating churches and monasteries thinking that they were the agents of God's wrath endeavouring to establish the kingdom with the sword. (Laborie and Hessayon 2020:1)

e) Letter to the Pope: Codex Amiatinus (ca. 690-716)

This Latin document was commissioned by Abbot Ceolfrid in England as a gift to the Pope. The document's title for Psalm 22 is: *Psalm of David, the voice of the church after being raptured* (Wurthwein 1979:206).

d) Music

One of the most famous and often performed pieces of classical music is the Hallelujah Chorus and oratorio of George Fredrick Handle, Handel's Messiah (1742). In it, the consistent theme of the earthly reign of Christ is repeated throughout with random passages taken from the Old and New Testaments quoted within the score.

Hallelujah for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign for ever and ever. King of kings, Lord of lords.
(Revelation 19:6; 11:15; 19:16)

f) The Crusades

The Crusades are also evidence of the groundswell of those from all walks of life who believed in the cause of Crusades to free Jerusalem from the Turks and to set up God's eternal kingdom in Jerusalem. Richard the Lionhearted, on his way to the Third Crusade, made a special effort to meet with Joachim of Fiore to ask about the place where the antichrist would be born (Weber 1999:53). Walls also agrees that for many the motivation for the crusades was to forcefully bring about the millennial kingdom. He states that peasants by the thousands joined the crusades, hoping to be in the holy land when Jesus established his kingdom (Walls, 2008:371).

Of Joachim de Fiore (1135-1202) Kobler writes:

The disappointment caused by the failure of the church, after the elapse of a thousand years, since the beginning of the Christian era, led to the revival of the millennial ideas. The Italian monk, Joachim de Floris, in the twelfth century, was the first prominent proponent of this trend. (1945:102)

Lerner states that because Joachim sought to study the scriptures carefully, he came up with a system that matched the patterns of, dare say, dispensations, of history in both the Old and New Testaments. Because of his studies, Joachim believed that there laid ahead for Christianity a marvellous earthly future at the end of time. Just like many dispensational thinkers today, he believed that Revelation 20 foretold a future Sabbath rest or millennium unlike Augustine who ruled out such an interpretation of this controversial passage.

According to Lerner, Joachim of Fiore's dispensational outline of history was unique in that it was based on the so-called three persons of the trinity. He was able to subdivide each age of history into seven states with a Sabbath at the end of each age. Thus, Joachim of Fiore believed that after the Anti-Christ there would be a Sabbath or the millennial kingdom. Even more interesting was Fiore's interpretation of the many Old Testament prophecies like Isaiah 2:2-4, which he believed were referring to the second coming of Christ which is exactly how modern dispensational thinkers interpret these and other similar passages (2000: 246-348).

Joachim's influence on the Franciscan traditions cannot be ignored. Most famously Peter John Olivi (1248-1298) held that Christ who had already come in the flesh, would come in the spirit and would one day come in glory at the end of time (Lerner 2000: 350).

The Medieval Period of church history was greatly influenced by the Alexandrian School of interpretation. However, there were a few seeds of premillennial thought throughout the Medieval Period.

6 The Rise of Dispensational Ideas of the Rapture in England

According to Harrison (1979:13), the millenarians of the 1790's did not appear out of nowhere. Those who taught and believed that there would be a rule of Christ on Earth, may have been in the minority. However, they believed they belonged to a society which had a long experience of prophets and prophesying.

Larry Crutchfield in his excellent work on *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor*, mentions two key pre-Darby figures in dispensational history who have been mentioned already:

Isaac Watts was a hymn writer as well as a theologian. His collection of works are contained in six volumes and his concept of dispensations is outlined in a forty-page essay entitled: *The Harmony of all the Religions Which God ever Prescribed to Men, and all His Dispensations towards them*"

Pierre Poiret (1646-1719) was a French Mystic and philosopher who set forth a dispensational system in his six volume work, *L'oeconomie Divine*.

These two were by no means the only ones who had dispensational tenets in their books and teaching. Below are just a few of the famous names who had dispensational ideas:

Joseph Mede (1627) used the word rapture and also believed in a short tribulation. Joseph Mede of Cambridge University, published *Clavis Apocalyptica* (Key to Revelation) on the book of Revelation in 1627. Walls comments that Mede leapfrogged over Augustine to the apocalyptic millennialism of the early church (2008:375). Mede's work was very popular and was often cited in works on eschatology at the time. Mede was considered the Father of British millenarianism and set the standard for 17th Century eschatology (Watson 2016:71). Mede believed that the millennium started with Emperor Constantine and believed that the battle of Armageddon was a future event. He believed that the first part of the book of Revelation had already been fulfilled in the judgements on the Roman Empire.

William Watson (2016) provides an extensive list of English theologians and authors who mentioned an early form of the word rapture, "rapt". Daniel Whitby (1700), William Bond (1531), Thomas Draxe (1613), Barton Holiday (1626) and Joseph Hall (1635) all used the word "rapt" in their writings about Christ's return.

Watson (2016) states that William Bridge (1641) believed in multiple second comings of Christ and believed that there would be a resurrection of the saints well before Christ returned to earth.

Robert Maton (1642), Watson claims, used the words left behind and also believed in multiple second comings of Christ. Maton believed that there would be a resurrection of the saints before Christ's coming to earth.

Captain John Brown (1654) also used the word rapture in his writings. John Brown also believed that the saints will be kept safe in heaven from troubles. He believed in a resurrection before the 2nd coming of Christ.

William Sherwin (1665-1667) used the word rapt and rapture and believed that the saints would be kept safe in heaven from troubles.

Increase Mather (1709) also used the word rapture in his writings. Mather believed that when the Jews were restored to their ancient homeland, they would become the greatest nation upon the whole earth (Cogley, 2003:318-319).

John Gill (1748) used the word rapture and believed the escape to heaven was only for a short time.

Martha Brewster (1757) wrote a poem on the rapture:

Ye Courtiers of this Lower House, Lift up your raptur'd Eyes
Behold, the Bridegroom's on his Way,
Behold he tears the Skies (Quoted in Watters, 1980:197)

Thomas Godwin (1600-1680) was the president of Magdalen College in Oxford. He held to a literal interpretation of scripture. He said that to allegorize the text of scripture is to distort it. He held to a literal millennial reign of Christ on earth.

"A glimpse of Zions glory, or, the church's beauty specified published for the good and benefit of all, those whose hearts are raised up in the expectation of the glorious liberties of the saints" (Thomas Godwin 1641).

7 The Reformation Period

Watters makes it clear that prior to the Great Awakening, most New Englanders believed in a premillennial eschatology. This would mean that the Millennium would only occur once Christ had physically and personally arrived on Earth and the resurrection had taken place (1980:195).

However, Waters says that Johnathan Edwards held to a postmillennial eschatology but Edwards wrote:

And there remains yet a more dreadful destruction of men than has perhaps ever yet been since the flood, which is spoken of, Rev. 19, at the latter end, just before the setting up of Christ's Kingdom through the earth (Watters 1980:2001).

Isaac Newton (1642-1727), is the world famous scientist and mathematician who developed his three laws of motion. However, Newton was also an incredible theologian who wrote more than eight thousand pages of theological notes which are currently kept in Israel's National Library. He believed that the Jews would return to their land in Israel, build a temple and that the Tribulation would precede the second coming of Christ. (Article, *The Inner Workings of the mind of Newton*, Google Arts and Culture: (<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/6wVBvplzrFDeKA?hl=en>)).

The invention of the printing press and the translations of the Bible into the vernacular were the primary reasons for the shift away from the Allegorical Method to a more Historical, Grammatical and Literal approach to the Scriptures as people began to read the Bible for themselves.

Vanhoozer (2005) states that during the period of the Protestant Reformation, there was a move towards seeing the Scriptures as God breathed which led to the belief in the authority of the Scriptures.

Consequently, the exegetical strategies employed by Reformation era exegetes and their immediate successors presumed a unified biblical message. The literal sense of the text was the sense that was intended by the divine Author and mediated summed up a unified biblical message and primarily on linguistic aspects were decisive during this period (ed. Vanhoozer 2005:633).

Vanhoozer adds that throughout the Protestant era, presumptions concerning the nature of Scripture, its authority and its location of meaning have changed, leading to an alteration in the methodology employed in the interpretative enterprise.

During the middle ages, commentators often merely reproduced the church fathers or resorted to allegorical exegesis. With the arrival of the Protestant Reformation the allegorical interpretation of scripture was replaced by grammatical and literal interpretations (ed. Vanhoozer 2005:798).

During the reformation, William Tyndale (1590-1636) became the greatest translator of the New Testament into English. He, in many ways, made it possible for the so-called man on the street to freely have an English copy of the Bible in England. His commentaries on the Bible paved the way for a literal reading and understanding of the scriptures in England for the years long after his murder. Tyndale continuously encouraged the readers of his articles to hold and adopt the literal interpretation of scripture, continuously warning them about using "subtle allegories" (Duffield 1965: 49). Tyndale called the literal interpretation "the plain text and literal sense" of scripture (Duffield 1965:37).

Thou shalt understand, therefore, that the scripture hath but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never faileth, whereunto if thou cleave, thou canst never err or go out of the way (Duffield 1965:340).

Like modern day dispensationalists, Tyndale freely admitted that the Bible does use many figures of speech and symbols but he consistently encouraged his readers to “diligently seek out the literal sense” (Duffield 1965:340). This renewed approach to scripture was the fertile ground for a more literal reading of the Scriptures for the years to come.

Francis Kett published his book in 1585 entitled *The Glorious and Beautiful Garland of Mans Glorification, Containing the Godlye Misterie of heavenly Irusalem*. Kett was burned to death in the castle ditch of Norwich in 1558/1559 for what was called heresy. Despite believing and teaching what Wallace (1974) calls Arianism, there were many beliefs he was charged with for which modern day dispensationalists may easily agree with and even hold to.

When looking at his charge sheet, it is stated that Kett believed that Christ would come before the end of the world before the last day. Kett called for the Jews to return to their land and that Christ was busy regathering his people back to their land, Israel. He was convicted of believing that when Christ does come in physical form to earth to establish a material kingdom, Christ would rule and reign in Mount Zion, Jerusalem. Kett believed that only when Christ comes to establish a literal kingdom on earth, will the new covenant come into force. Like many dispensationalists today, Kett believed in two judgements which would mean that he of necessity would have believed in two resurrections, one before the return of Christ to Earth and one after (Wallace 1974:463).

All this adds up to a striking revival of the New Testament sense of a realized eschatology, the Kingdom breaking in now and about to be consummated (Wallace, 1974:463).

Henry Finch (1558-1625) one of the first Englishmen to advocate for the return of the Jews to their ancient homeland in Palestine believed that the hope of the return of the Jews was linked to the ancient hope of the Church Fathers but also to a future literal kingdom on earth.

The re-emergence of the Holy Land and, particularly, of Jerusalem to their former or even more splendid glory constitutes not only the never abandoned hope of Israel but also an essential part of the Christian eschatology, as developed by the founders of the church. The principle expectations based chiefly on the Book of Daniel and Revelation of St. John, were the return of Jesus and his victorious struggle against Antichrist whose fall would lead to the Millennium, the heavenly Kingdom of peace bound to last a thousand years and to be followed by the last Judgement. The Christian fathers – Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Lactantius and others – imagined these events as pending and taking place in the Holy Land, with Jerusalem, miraculously rebuilt as centre (Kobler, 1945:101-102).

From the time of the Reformation, the belief that the Jews should return to the land of Israel became popular particularly among Protestants and English Puritans. Because of their belief and use of the literal interpretation of apocalyptic prophecies, they claimed that the second advent of

Jesus was at hand and that he would rule from Jerusalem for a Thousand Years. These millenarians concluded that there would be a return of Jews to their land (called restorationism) and that they would also be converted to Christianity. This restoration movement spread from 16th Century England to North America in the 18th Century (Israel Pocket Library Zionism 1973: 323).

During the short life of Conrad Grebel (1498-1526) an early Anabaptist, he wrote many letters to various prominent reformers including Zwingli, Luther and Muntzer. However, a letter to Grebel's friend Vadian demonstrates that the Anabaptist approached the scriptures in a normal or plain sense much like dispensationalists do today.

I believe the word of God without a complicated interpretation and out of this I speak. (Taylor, D. The Essence of Anabaptism, 5th January 2018, 2:00-2:45)

Thomas Brightman (1562-1607) was a forerunner of English puritanism holding to a "Judeo-centric" version of the Millennium which believed that the millennial reign of Christ would be from Jerusalem and not in England, New England, Massachusetts or Mexico. This Judeo-centric biased of this primitive form of puritanism which some puritans believed that the Jews would be restored back to their ancient homeland which would ultimately culminate in the return of Christ to establish the kingdom there. Because his prophetic views were so opposed to the then Anglican church, his books were published posthumously (Cogley, 2003:308-315).

John Archer's book was called and summarised: *The personal reign of Christ upon Earth* in 1642. In it Archer he states that Christ has both a spiritual Kingdom now but one day will have a physical Kingdom which he called Monarchicall.

But I call this last state of his Monoarchicall; because in this, when he entereth upon it, he will govern as earthly Monarches have done, that is, universally over the world, (in those days known and esteemed) and in a worldly visible earthly glory; not by tyranny, oppression, and sensuality, but with honour, peace, riches, and whatsoever in and of the world is not sinful; having all Nations and Kingdoms doing homage to him, as the great Monarchies of the World had (Archer 1642:2-3).

It is interesting to note that John Archer distinguishes the two kingdoms of Christ and does not see Christ's ruling and reigning in heaven now as the ultimate kingdom of God. Archer saw the providential and spiritual kingdom of Christ as separate to the literal coming kingdom of Christ to earth. In covenant theology, Christ is ruling now in his heavenly kingdom but for the dispensationalist, Christ will return literally to earth to rule and reign in his theocratic kingdom. Archer also called this kingdom the restitution of all things and Israel's Kingdom (1642:9-10).

Archer also believed in the physical return of the Jews to their ancient homeland, Israel at the time of the return of Christ to earth. Archer believed that God's promises to "natural Israelites" are eternal and that Jerusalem and the Jews are to dominate the world at that time.

As the twelve tribes shall be subjects of this kingdom, so the cities of the tribes shall be built again, and inhabited by natural Israelites, especially Jerusalem, which shall be the most eminent city then in the world, or that ever was in the world...but the Israelites shall have the greatest glory...therefore, it shall be called the Kingdom of Israel...because its primitive glory shall be Israel's...and then by and from the Israelites shall glory descend to the Gentiles (1642:26).

In discussing the different resurrections at the coming of Christ and for the final judgement, Archer makes no mention of the resurrection of the church. Even though this is an argument from silence, it is significant that he only calls those who are resurrected at the coming of Christ to earth, saints. (1642:24-25). For the dispensationalist, the resurrection of the church takes place at the rapture and not at the second coming.

8. Dispensationalism shortly before Darby

Morgan Edwards (1722-1795) was a Welsh Baptist historian and pastor who moved to America in 1761. He was ultimately responsible for starting Browns University in the USA. Thomas Ice quotes from Edward's Book, *Two Academical Exercises on Subjects Bearing the following Titles; Millennium, Last-Novelties* which was published in 1788.

The distance between the first and second resurrection will be somewhat more than a thousand years. I say, somewhat more -; because the dead saints will be raised, and the living changed at Christ's "appearing in the air" (1 Thess. 4. 17); and this will be about three years and a half before the millennium, as we shall see hereafter: but will he and they abide in the air all that time? No: they will ascend to paradise, or to some one of those many "mansions in the father's house" (John 14.2), and so disappear during the foresaid period of time (Ice 2009:3).

Note that Edwards saw the resurrection and disappearance of the saints (called the rapture by recent dispensationalists) as a separate event to the coming in of the Millennium. Most early dispensational thinkers saw the time space between these events as three and a half years, unlike Darby who eventually believed it to be seven years.

Watson (2016) recounts the words of a female writer M. Marsin (1660-1702). She was an English feminist and tract writer who taught a pre-tribulation rapture. Marsin believed that promises of "The Coming of the Lord" was found in I Thessalonians 4:16-17: "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout." According to Marsin, "these are those that are said will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air." Then "after the Lord's coming, most of the great plagues mentioned in the revelations will be poured out upon the Earth and the Wicked" (Watson 2017:237).

What Marsin held to is what dispensationalists call the pre-tribulation rapture. Watson goes on to say that Marsin believed that after the saints are “caught up”, God will make good on the promises he made to Israel and this will only take place after the coming of the Lord (Watson 2017: 237).

One of the features of dispensational thinking is its belief in the distinction between Israel and the Church. This belief had some followers before Darby. Mark Sarver’s article evaluating dispensationalism states that the heart of dispensationalism is the distinction between Israel and the church. Saver suggests that Ryrie failed to show this distinction in the early church. Saver may be correct, but this research seems to indicate that the clearer distinction came through the influence of Joseph Mede (1586-1639).

Because Robert Maton (1607-1653?) held to a literal interpretation of the scriptures he saw a distinction between Israel and the believing gentiles in his 1652 book on the personal reign of Christ. Maton addresses what would ultimately become a fundamental dispensational idea when he states:

And we know that by our proper exposition of these prophecies, we do make a just distribution of the word of God: that we give unto the Jew, whatsoever belongs unto the Jew: and to the Gentile, whatsoever belongs unto the Gentile: whereas you by your proper interpretation of the prophecies which concern the Gentiles; and your figurative exposition of the prophecies which concern the Gentiles; and your figurative expositions of the prophecies which concern the Jews; do keep your own things to yourself, and make the mercies prepared for others to be common mercies; yea to be as much, or more yours than theirs (Maton 1652: In the final chapter).

Jorgensen (2022) work on Isaac Newton’s approach to the scriptures states that Newton came up with at least nine principles of interpreting the scriptures. It is interesting that the first and eighth principles are so much like modern dispensationalism: a literal approach to scripture, varying out workings of God in history and a distinction between Israel and the nations which form the church respectively. The following two quotes from Newton in Jorgensen’s dissertation are worth noting which seem to indicate the varying dispensations and following a distinction between Israel and the church:

If historians divide their histories into sections, chapters, and books at such periods of time where the less, greater, and greatest revolutions begin or end; and to do otherwise would be improper: much more ought we to suppose that the Holy Ghost observes this rule accurately in this prophetic dictates since they are no other than histories of things to come (2022:234).

The Jews and the nations by which they were to be captivated, and particularly the nations within the bounds of the four Monarchies (*of Daniel*) are the subject in the Old Testament and the nations

through which the Christian Religion was to be propagated are the subject of the sacred prophecy and the New... (2022:234).

Archer also saw Israel and the Gentile believers as distinct and different in God's plan and work. He even goes as far as saying that the Jews will be kept out of God's plan for the Gentiles, calling it the fullness of the Gentiles. The fullness of Israel, Archer believed, was a distinct episode which would happen at a different time.

From the time of the Jews rejection, till their calling again, while the Gentiles alone, without the Israelites and God's people, a set number of persons, and a set degree of grace and glory is appointed to them; which accomplished is called their fullness, and till that is fully done, the Israelites must be kept out (1642:26).

It seems that John Archer may have seen a distinction between God's plan for Israel and God's plan for the church.

Nathaniel Marwick (1664-1735) held that the Jews were still God's chosen people for whom God's promises to their patriarchs were still in force. He believed that eventually the Jews would be restored to their ancient homeland which we, of the twenty first century, now know did take place in May 1948 and still continues to develop and grow as an independent and very powerful nation state.

Nathaniel Marwick believed that the present Gentile church (*as opposed to the nation of Israel*) was only a stopgap measure, a temporary parenthesis to God's real plan where Gentiles would be merely servants and handmaids to the Jews in a right religious harmony and compliance. They were a substitute or surrogate Church to keep up God's name and worship in the world and to continue till the Jew, called by the Lord to bring in the fullness of both Jew and Gentiles.

Watson (2016) writes that in 1621, Sir Henry Finch (d. 1625), barrister, member of Parliament, and associate of Sir Francis Bacon, wrote *The World's Great Restauration, or Calling of the Jews, a study of biblical passages concerning a spiritual return of the Jews to piety and a physical return of the Jews to Judah and Jerusalem*. Finch believed that the promises God made to the Jews referred to physical Israel, not to the Church, as was commonly thought at that time (Watson 2016:33).

Where Israel, Judah, Zion, Jerusalem, etc. are named in this argument, the Holy Ghost meaneth not the spiritual Israel, or Church of God collected of the Gentiles, no nor of the Jews and Gentiles both (for each of these have their promises severally and apart) but Israel properly descended out of Jacobs loins. ... These and such like are not allegories, setting forth ... deliverance through Christ (whereof those were types and figures) but meant really and literally of the Jews. ... that one day

they shall come to Jerusalem again, despite kings and chief monarchs of the Earth, sway and govern all (Watson 2016:33).

For holding onto his beliefs, Sir Henry Finch was also burned alive in a ditch in Norwich England on the 14th of January 1625 because he ultimately believed in Christ as sovereign ruler over the world rather than the King of England. However, his work paved the way for others to continue the belief that God would one day restore the Jews to their own land. The rebirth of the Nation of Israel, dispensationalists believe happened in May 1948 some three hundred years after Finch's death.

William Gouge (1578-1653) states in his work on the calling of the Jews that the interpreter of scripture should note the distinction between Israel and the church.

Where Israel, Judah, Zion, Jerusalem etc. are named in the argument, the Holy Ghost means not the spiritual Israel or Church of God collected of the Gentiles, no nor of the Jews and Gentiles both (for each of these have their promises severally and apart) but Israel properly descended out of Jacobs loins (Gouge: 1626, 6-7).

He goes on to say that the promise of the Jews who will return back to their ancient homeland is not to be taken as allegory, similitudes or deliverances in Christ, but are to be taken really and literally for the Jews.

Henry Finch (d. 1625) and William Gouge's (1578-1653) work entitled and summarised: *The calling of the Jews A present to Judah and the children of Israel that joined with them...* starts off their work emphasising the distinction and difference between Israel and the church. Because they saw this dissimilarity of the two groups, they then were able to write of the literal restoration of the Jews to Israel and the blessings that would befall this nation upon their conversion to Christ.

Where Israel, Judah, Zion, Jerusalem etc. are named in this argument, the Holy Ghost meaneth not the spiritual Israel, or church of God collected of the gentiles, no nor of the Jews and Gentiles both (for each of these have their promises severally and apart) but Israel properly descended out of Jacobs loins (Finch and Gouge 1621:6).

The great Hymn writer Isaac Watts (1674-1748) wrote 750 hymns. One of his hymns *Abraham's Blessing on the Gentiles* states in reference to Romans 11:16-17, he demonstrates his ideas of their distinctions:

Gentiles by nature we belong to the wild olive tree
Grace took us from the barren tree and grafts us in the good.
With the same blessings grace endows the Gentile and the Jew
If pure and holy be the root such are the branches too

William Watson (2016) quotes a number of writers from the seventeenth century in his book, *Dispensationalism before Darby* who saw God's covenant with the Jews as eternal. He includes Robert Maton (1642), Peter Bulkeley (1646), JJ Philo-Judaeus (1654) and Nathaniel Homes (1653). Other writers Watson quotes saw the preeminent place of Israel in the Kingdom, rather than the church. Writers like Henry Jessey (1656), John Dury (1658), Peter Serrarius (1658) and William Sherwin (1665). This is a similar idea to modern dispensationalism which claims that the Nation of Israel will be the main focus and beneficiaries of Christ's earthly kingdom.

Praise-God Barebone, sometimes called Barbon (1598-1679) was a puritan preacher who was a contemporary of Oliver Cromwell. Barebone believed that various passages in the old (Daniel 7) and new testaments (Luke 19:12-15) that speak of the coming kingdom of God are to be literally fulfilled with the coming of Christ to Earth.

It is dominion, kingdom and power, outward and visible, which our treaty is of: this; our Lord hat not taken to him as yet; he hath not taken to him his great power and kingdom: he is gone to fetch it: when he comes he will bring it with him, Luke. 19.12.15. 2.Tim. 4.7. And then; he will fully set it up, and reign gloriously in the midst of his enemies (Barebone 1675:111).

Much like modern dispensationalists, Barebone also believed that Israel would be the main beneficiary of the kingdom of Christ. In the title of Chapter 12 of his book, *Good things to come...*

Containing the proposing to consideration some things which the holy scriptures hold forth, concerning dominion and power, sovereignty and rule; which the changed people, the Israelites especially, are likely to have at the restoration, in the world to come, under the Lord Christ, being then come, and reigning: with some eminent Scriptures, ascertaining the sureness of the making all good, so foretold and declared (Barbone 1675).

Barebone held to a literal interpretation of the verses in the Old Testament that he believed concerned the Kingdom and held to a literal interpretation of scripture. He believed the promised kingdom was not a type but will have its fulfilment. Even though he admitted that he did not fully understand how these prophetic passages would be fulfilled, he believed it would occur sometime in the future (1675:105).

Finally, Barebone believed that God has an eternal covenant with the Jews and that God would bring about their restoration so that they could be a preeminent nation in the coming kingdom.

The world to come, of which we have been speaking: it will be new peopled with the raised and changed saints: wherein Israel, the seed of Abraham, a nation born in one day: will have the pre-eminence, being God's nation: and the gentile saved nations, shall walk in their light, to wit, the light of the new Jerusalem, Rev. 21:24. And then, will that be fully fulfilled, in Rom. 11:26... Then: in the

world to come: when the saints shall be so changed at the coming of our Lord Christ; will those prophecies be fully fulfilled (1675:59-60).

Thomas Draxe also wrote of the return of the Jews to their land. In his Book, *“The Worlds Resurrection: or the general calling of the Jews, A familiar Commentary upon the Eleventh Chapter of Saint Paul to the Romans, according to the sense of Scripture* (London, 1608) Kobler 1945:107 quotes Draxe and states:

“We must not roughly condemn the Jews, nor expel them out of our coats and countries but hope well of them, pray for them, and labour to win them by our Holy zeal and Christian example.”

Moses Wall, who translated Menasseh ben Israel’s book *The Hope of Israel* into English in 1652, wrote a defence of Ben Israel’s belief in God’s continued promises to the Jews:

I do firmly believe, and fear not to profess it; that the Jews shall be called as a Nation, both Judah and Israel, and shall return to their own Land, and have an earthly Kingdome again. ... yet I am far from denying Christ a kingdom now in being, Spiritual, and Invisible, but I look for a visible one yet to come (Wall 1654:61).

John of Rupescissa (1310-1366) wrote *Vade Mecum in Tribulacione* in 1356. It was a landmark and pivotal work in the middle ages. Rupescissa’s work became the eschatological manual for many centuries afterwards. Even though Rupescissa said that believers would go through the tribulation, he believed in a 13 year tribulation period on earth just prior to the 2nd coming of Christ which he believed would take place in 1370 (Kaup 2016:1).

Just as Joachim de Fiore influenced Olivi, Olivi influenced French Franciscan, the same John of Rupescissa above also known as Jean de Roquetaillade. He held to a millennial Sabbath for the exalted Jewish nation of a thousand years. He believed that the Jews would become God’s imperial nation and that Jerusalem would be rebuilt and be the centre of true faith. Rupescissa believed that the millennial reign of Christ was most certain, infallible and necessary.

... he drew on a literal exposition of Old Testament prophecies which until then had been read by Christian exegesis to apply either to the time of the incarnation or to the heavenly Jerusalem in the beyond. Rupescissa was the first since the time of Augustine to return to an expectation of a literal thousand-year earthly Sabbath (Learner 2000: 353).

9. The Rapture During and after the Reformation

Dave MacPherson wrote a trilogy of books (*The Great Rapture Hoax, The Unbelievable Pre-trib Origin, The Late Great Pre-trib Rapture*) dealing with the origins of the so-called pre-tribulation rapture. In these books MacPherson claims that John Darby received the information about the

pre-tribulation rapture from a young Scottish girl's charismatic utterances, named Margaret Macdonald in Port Glasgow, Scotland in 1830 (Ice, 1990:155-156).

Even though there is evidence that ancients in the church did hold to some ideas and aspects of dispensationalism, what often is not seen is evidence for those who believed in a so-called rapture or deliverance of the church prior to the Tribulation.

In a lecture given to a pre-tribulation study group, William Watson mentions at least 6 men who mentioned a so called pre-conflagration rapture: Thomas Draxe (1613); Joseph Mede (1627); Cotton Mather (1726); Praise-God Barebone (1598-1679); William Hooke (1600-1677) and John Gill (1748) (Watson 2012:3).

William Watson also makes this claim:

An expectation that the saints would be taken out of tribulation and protected from the wrath of the Antichrist was common in the seventeenth century. Another female student of prophecy and author, Mary Cary (n.d., but active ca. 1635-1655) believed that "enlargements shall come for the Saints, and they being delivered from the rage of the beast, shall be preserved wholly from his fury" (2017:154).

Jeremiah Burroughs (1600-1646) wrote about the great tribulation BEFORE Christ's deliverance from this great tribulation when he said:

The first thing that shall be done in this great day of Jezreel, shall be the deliverance of the Churches from woeful affliction which they shall be found to be in a little before, For so the Scripture tells us, Daniel 12:1 that before this day there shall be a time of trouble such never was... and at that time thy people shall be delivered.

John Asgill (1659-1738) wrote, *An Argument Proving, That According to the Covenant of Eternal Life revealed in the Scriptures, man shall be translated from hence into that Eternal Life....*

Asgill believed that there was to be a translation, but not of believers but of he himself, alone. Notably he believed that the translation would take place prior to the general resurrection of the saints at the start of the millennium. He makes a clear distinction between a translation event and the first resurrection.

And now I am single, yet I believe that this translation of faith without death will be general, before the general change (Paul speaks of) shall come. And that then, and not before, shall be the resurrection of the just (which is called the first resurrection) (Asgill 1700: 92-93).

Asgill suffered greatly because of the contents of his book. He was removed from the Irish (1703) and English parliament in 1707 after only four days of deliberation by the House of Commons. He

was accused of being mad, his book was pronounced as blasphemy and it was burned without him being able to provide a defence of it. Asgill spent the final thirty years of his life in prison, despite being advanced in years. Persecution and imprisonment provided ample reason for many theologians in England not to write or publicly express their thoughts about a so called rapture or translation of believers. Despite his persecution, he remained resolute in his beliefs till his death (Bramley-Moore 1905:321-322).

Despite the great suffering and disparagement suffered by Asgill, there arose a defence of his book by one Anne Baldwin in 1705. Bramley-Moore (1905:326) recounts her response which shows that there was indeed the belief by some that there would be a translation of living souls.

I do very believe that some men will be fitted for translation and transfiguration before the day of judgement. For before that time there will be the most miraculous things transacted in doing miracles for the conversion of the Jews, and for the bringing of all nations into one religion as must be effected before the end of the world. Even so, come Lord Jesus: come quickly, Amen.

Another very important contributor and possibly forerunner to dispensational thinking, just before Darby, was Emmanuel de Lacunza (alias: Juan Josafat Ben-Ezra) (1731-1801). He was a Jesuit priest, who wrote *The Coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty* around 1790. In it he mentioned the order of events before the Millennium was return and restoration of the Jews, the second coming of Christ and then the Millennial Kingdom (Ben-Ezra 1827: 314-315). It is clear from the writings of Lacunza that he got his ideas from the literal approach to Scripture.

Edward Irving (1792-1834) was a contemporary of John Darby who died relatively young. As an Englishman, he took on the mammoth task of translating *The coming of the Messiah in Glory and Majesty* by Emmanuel de Lacunza (1731-1801). He learned Spanish in order to translate the work from Spanish into English. By the time Irving did the translation, the doctrine of the rapture and the second coming of Christ to Earth, seemed to have been seen as distinct events. Although Irving was a contemporary of Darby, his translation of Lacunza's work is still prior to Darby who is said to have been the one to invent the rapture.

Christ comes from heaven to earth in the glory of His Father with His angels: at the first sound of His voice forthwith arise those who hear it, that is, all his saints, the dead in Christ shall rise first. These being risen, shall immediately ascend through the air to receive the Lord, and enjoy His bodily presence: together with them shall likewise arise, or be caught up, the living saints who are upon the earth (Irving 1827:101).

Lacunza, in the translation of Irving, continues by describing the events that were to follow this translation into the clouds. He describes the events on earth as these risen saints are removed far away from the destruction happening on earth. Given that Lacunza saw an immediate configuration

on earth rather than an extended tribulation period, the concept of saints being removed from the earth at the time of earth's great judgement, is interesting. Lacunza also believed that when the battle of Armageddon takes place, the Lord literally returns in power and great glory to earth. All of his beliefs, Lacunza claimed, were commonly taught and could be found in most libraries of his time (Irving 1827:101-102).

This is, in substance, all which the expositors and theologians set forth to us upon the text of St. Paul, whereof we are speaking; and, however many libraries you may wish to visit, rest assured, my friend, you shall find nothing different from what you have just heard (Irving 1827:102).

Edward Irving may have well been an influence behind Darby's ideas of the Rapture. Irving was so fascinated with Emanuel Lacunza's work that he learned Spanish in order to translate his work into English. By looking at Irving's work, we see the ideas of the pretribulation rapture already formed:

But the faithful among the Jews...to settle and establish them surely forever in their own land, and the faithful among the Gentiles shall be expecting the Lord to deliver them, according to the promise which he hath made to his elect church of being raised from the dead, or changed among the living at his coming (Irving 1827: 6).

Even though Irving did not use the words pre-tribulation rapture, the idea that the Lord will come to translate and deliver his church when the Jews have settled back in their land is provocative and quite similar to the ideas proposed by Hal Lindsay, the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

Irving, in his translation, also hinted at the distinction between the second coming of Christ to Earth and the translation of the church when he spoke of the differing points of opinion about the number of resurrections and whether Christ would come before or after his millennial reign. (Irving 1827:50)

The work of Lacunza is extremely detailed and well written. A catholic father, known as M.R.P. Father Paul, wrote a critique on the work of Lacunza for the Lord Vicar General in 1812 but it was more of a commendation. He was not able, in good conscience, to refute the basic tenants of the book. Father Paul cautiously admits that the Catholic Church may have made a grievous error for more than a thousand four hundred years in ignoring the basic tenets of the book. These tenants are the physical and literal return of Christ to rule and reign upon the earth and the eventual restoration of the Jews to their land along with their corporate salvation. Father Paul gives his permission for the printing errors of the book to be corrected and distributed. Father Paul writes:

My judgement is: That in this work there is not contained anything repugnant to our holy faith, but that it may be of good service in making known, and publishing abroad, many truths, whereof the knowledge, though not absolutely necessary in the first ages of the church, is become indispensable in the times in which we now live (Irving 1827:105).

Eschatology is not concerned just with the final momentary events of history, but with the dynamic force moving at the core of human history here and now, giving history its meaning and its destiny (Gamble 1992:154).

Love of the Jewish people and an expectation of their return to re-establish the nation of Israel constitutes a primary element in dispensational theology. Anti-dispensationalists deny any future eschatological role for the Jews as a distinct redeemed people, and the most vocal anti-dispensationalists of late are theologians of the Reformed tradition. How surprised they should be to discover that many of the seventeenth-century Puritan theologians whom they admire had a similar expectation of the return of the Jews to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants four thousand years ago (Watson 2016:56).

Considering the above evidence, though scattered and vast over two millennia, it is the researcher's belief that there were indeed many, recognised and others forgotten, who held some concepts or ideas on dispensationalism before Darby. What may have come to be known as dispensational concepts can indeed be found in various instances throughout church history. What Darby has done was to conceptualize and systematize what has come to be known as modern day dispensationalism.

CHAPTER FOUR:

1. DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative research is by its very nature subjective. It is therefore necessary to ensure that the task of analysing the data is systematized and organized. During the data analysis, each respondent's answers were themed and coded in order to produce the most reliable and valid outcomes and findings. The questions from the interviews form the outline of this chapter. The answers to the questions is the summary of what the Dutch Reformed Ministers said in response to the questions posed to them in the interviews.

Taylor provides a guideline for those producing data analysis from their research.

It is not always possible to achieve perfect reliability if we are to produce meaningful studies of the real world (Taylor 2016:21). How a person interprets something will depend on available meanings and how he or she sizes up the situation (Taylor 2016:23).

What is evident in this chapter and from the answers of the respondents below, is that some had different answers to the questions in the interview. There were also some answers that were similar at times. However, they all had one thing in common. Each one disagreed with the central tenet of dispensationalism, viz. the consistent literal approach to scripture. Therefore, the summary given below is varied and reflects the different responses to the questions of the interview. The answers below are the combined and summarised answers of the DRC Ministers who participated in the research project. What follows the combined answers is the researcher's general commentary and critique of the respondent's answers.

2. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND SUMMARY OF ANSWERS

2.1 How would you describe your personal and chosen approach to scripture?

- We have to understand the Bible in its context taking into consideration the historical backgrounds and the long time it took to compile the Bible. It is so precious that we have to understand it in its context which means we must understand its origins. The process and time it took to compile the Bible makes it very difficult to be sure of who the actual authors of the Bible were.
- People of conviction must have a Christian Faith that is bigger than themselves. Allowing liberal or conservative influences rather than faith is hijacking the DRC and

influencing interpretation. We have to read the Bible with belief and faith for certainty. The Bible is the Word of God that has come to us from God through human authors.

- Although the Bible has a divine origin, it will be up to the readers to decide for themselves what the real identity and meaning of the Bible actually is.
- The Bible is important BUT it is not a completely reliable source of knowledge. However, the Bible is important because it tells us about God. The Bible is God's word to us in human language.
- A comprehensive approach to interpreting the Bible means to consider the context of the passage and its background, the authors intended meaning for myself and for everyone.
- There is a multi-layered approach to understanding the Bible. There is not just one way to understand the Bible. One has to take into account that there are different communities and each one understands the Bible in different ways. In order to understand the text one has to consider what is in front and behind the text. There is no right or wrong way to understand the Bible, just a responsible way to understand it. There is also the literal approach where God speaks directly to someone through the text.
- The Historical Critical approach understands that there has always been diversity about the interpretation of scripture.
- There is also the critical scientific approach that tries to understand the genre of the text. There is also the Catholic approach that is a more devotional approach.
- The Bible is a normative book. It is complete but one has to do their work in studying, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in order to understand what it means for us in our times.
- I have an open approach to scripture without taking the Bible at simple face value.
- The Bible has different literary types and the different literary types have to be interpreted differently because the Bible was written in a different context and a different situation. My approach would therefore be to come as close as possible to how the original recipients understood it and then make the application of that message to our situation today.
- We must have a consistent approach to interpreting scripture because we all have our presuppositions.
- As a biblical scholar or bible scientist the mysterious aspects of the Bible (viz. faith) must be acknowledged.

- My approach is personal when one opens the Bible, it is God speaking to us personally.

Comment and Critique:

The data seems to indicate that most of the DRC Reverends have the individual freedom to interpret the Bible how they personally feel it should be interpreted. Their own personal approach may tend to be subjective rather than all DRC Ministers possessing a single chosen and unifying hermeneutic across the DRC. If these varying and individual approaches to scripture are commonplace among Reverends of the DRC throughout Southern Africa, then the possibility of differing belief systems in individual churches and amongst individual ministers may pervade the DRC. If this subjective approach to scripture is common, then the possibility of splits in the denomination on crucial and less critical matters of faith and praxis are very real.

According to the researcher, the method of interpretation used by the DRC Ministers is seen in the overuse of a general context for a passage to determine the meaning of a specific text. Content and context are equality essential for interpretation. In the interviews a context was provided or assumed (whether specific or general) for the text under consideration. An interpretation was derived from this assumed context without a due consideration of the specific content of the text. A more balanced approach to the context and content of the text may yield a different interpretation of the text.

It would seem logical that firstly, the content of the text informs the context of the text. In other words, the content helps us understand what the specific context of the specific passage is. If either one is ignored, minimized or shown to be insignificant, then the intended meaning of the passage could be lost. However, the content will inform the interpreter of what the context is. For example, when Israel returns from captivity in Babylon, the returning Jews have many obstacles placed in their path so that rebuilding their temple took many years to complete. We gain these details from a simple reading of the content of the book of Ezra. Then this content informs us about the context of the book of Ezra itself (the rebuilding of the temple after the captivity). This process of content informing context cannot be reversed. For example, if a random context is forced onto a specific text, then the content and meaning of the text will then also become random.

2.2 What has led you to adopt this (answer in Question 1) approach to scripture?

- My experiences though life as well as my studies and my upbringing has led me to adopt this approach to interpreting the scripture. My experience with God and his

people have been an influence. It was not just my studies that influenced me, but the relationships I had with my teachers and professors.

- The type of church one comes out of, the studies they are exposed to and one's unique personality influence one's approach to scripture.
- My studies and my deliberate intention to seek the context of the Scriptures.
- Because the Bible is about stories and I like stories, I see myself as part of these stories in the Bible.
- My family, my Christian service in School, my desire to know God and my studies at university.
- Inspired (Understanding the Bible comes from a Divine origin: "God's Word in human language")

Comment and Critique:

Virtually all the interviewees were greatly influenced by the institutions they studied at. It is commendable and admirable that these institutions where the DRC Ministers studied are so influential on the Minister's chosen approach to scripture. The importance and influence that the institutions of learning for DRC Ministers cannot be overstated. Many of the respondents spoke with glowing terms of their lecturers and have incredible respect for the teachers, instructors and theologians of the Dutch Reformed Church.

2.3 What one word best describes your approach to scripture besides the answer in Question 1?

- I would take a critical, social, scientific approach to scripture because it is a much more academic approach to understanding the Bible.
- I would say a responsible textual interpretation respecting the wonder of the text.
- We must aim to see the big picture of the Bible.
- Submission to the Holy Spirit and the place of prayer in interpreting the Word of God.
- Be a sensitive listener.
- Believe.

Comment and Critique:

It was interesting that some of the respondents struggled to formulate or summarize their approach to scripture in one word. The one word that dispensationalism regularly use to describe their approach to scripture is "consistent". This claim is made with regards to dispensationalism's apparent consistent literal approach to scripture.

2.4 What principle(s) would you consider as important to all biblical interpretation?

- Above all else we need to understand what the context of the passage is. This means one has to seek to understand where, when, why and who a passage of the Bible was written for. Understanding the context of the Bible increases its richness and meaning. Knowing the purpose of the original author and why the scriptures were written allows the scripture to make sense to the reader.
- I have to be open to the working and leading of the Holy Spirit in order to understand the text. I must also remember that my understanding of a passage is just my understanding and it is my personal point of view about a passage or the Bible.
- I feel strongly about the so-called grammatical historical way of understanding scriptures. That means that I do find it important that we try to understand both the author's language and origins. We must acknowledge the authority of scripture.

2.5 For example, how would you understand Zechariah 14 from the Old Testament?

- This passage is about what has happened, what is happening and what will happen one day. This passage cannot be taken literally because of the symbolic language in the passage. However, the passage simply means that all of creation will one day serve the Lord as he comes to us. We will not see his feet touch the Mount of Olives but we will know his presence with us.
- This passage is about people who have experienced post trauma and are looking for a new identity for Zion. It is not a prophetic text for the end of the world but it is a prophetic text for our situation today post Covid and post trauma.
- This is not a passage I would take literally because it is simply encouraging the people of Zechariah's day that God is in control.
- A lot of this passage is a metaphor of the Lord showing Israel that He will give them a better future. These are not actual events that will take place in the future.
- Dealing with the actual content of Zechariah 14 would be best understood from a New Testament point of view looking back in time. I see the content as symbolic (Hyperbole) and it would have made more sense to the people living in Zechariah's time. Thus the idea would be to show God's ruler-ship and punishment of his enemies.
- I won't take the section about the rotting of the flesh, as it were, as literal. I will take that the Lord is standing on the Mountain as God being in command. The nations will not come to Jerusalem.

- Whatever constitutes your paradigm that is the way the prophecy would be meaningful to you. Feet in this passage is figurative because in Psalms it says that God sits in heaven with his feet touching Jerusalem in Psalms.
- Because the ancients saw time as circular, Zechariah also saw time as circular. In other words, the events that Zechariah is speaking of have always happened and will continue to happen.
- This passage is not necessarily to be taken literally because God is a spirit. However, God will return to the Mount of Olives in judgement.

Comment and Critique:

When Zechariah 14 was used as an example, many of the DRC Ministers were not immediately or completely aware of the contents of the passage. Those who had prepared for the interview had read through the text. However, each interviewee used a context, almost as a default, that they personally believed was relevant to the text. Interestingly, not one of the DRC Ministers believed that the events described in Zechariah 14 were to be taken literally in any way.

It was noteworthy that many interviewees saw the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies in the person and work of Christ. The DRC Ministers will do well to consider some New Testament passages that predict a yet future fulfilment of Zechariah 14 viz. Acts 1:11-12.

When a non-literal approach to the Zechariah text was chosen, each interviewee had their own understanding of what the text meant. The researcher notes, with concern, the dangers in not considering the text itself carefully but then allegorizing or spiritualizing a passage of scripture based on a personal chosen paradigm in order to answer the questions for the interview.

Admittedly, the researcher was exposed for the first time to the theory that prophecy is a circular concept in time rather than a linear concept of prediction and fulfilment. This circular concept of prophecy could well be shown to have significance in the way prophecy is fulfilled. For example, if prophecy is circular and was continuously fulfilled in the past, an investigation and further study into how these prophecies were fulfilled may prove an interesting study.

2.6 For example, how would you understand Romans 11 in particular V26-27 from the New Testament?

- For the apostle Paul, Israel was a problem. He did not quite understand and was confused about them. However, what Paul was simply saying in this section was that

the grace of God is great. The Israel that Paul is referring to in Romans 11:26 that will all be saved are the believers, the new Israel of the new covenant that Jesus came and gave to all believers. The Israelites, the Jews, I don't know where they fit in.

- There is not a day in the future where God will open the eyes of the Jews and save them as a separate people.
- This passage is about all of God's people who will be saved in the olive tree motif in the context. One day the Jews will become a part of the olive tree and God will have one people not two separate people groups.
- In the New Testament the Lord when He speaks about Israel, he is talking about the believers in Christ, viz. The Church.
- There will not be a future day when God will save the Nation of Israel as a whole because there is only one way that anyone is saved and that is by believing in Jesus.
- In Romans 11:26, the "all Israel" is not the church (I am making a leap) but it is about the nation of Israel missing their purpose and what God had intended for them.
- The covenant changed from circumcision to baptism. Therefore, the covenant stopped. The Jews must not be part of the old covenant any more. Now, they (the Jews) must be part of the new covenant, the baptism in Jesus.
- We must look at the context and see what the recipients take for granted to see who Paul is writing to.
- Because Abraham is the Father of all who believe this promise has to do with all who believe in Jesus. The Jews have no advantage over any other people group because we are all equal in Christ.

Comment and Critique:

A critical difference between the reformed tradition and a dispensational approach to scripture is the distinction of Israel and the church. The question from the Romans 11:26-27 passage highlighted this difference in two specific areas:

1. The nature of the church. The DRC Ministers saw little to no distinction between believing Israel in the Old Testament and the church itself as they see all of God's people as one.
2. The nature of the covenant with Abram. The DRC Ministers see the church as being a part and the recipients of God's covenant with Abram.

It was not the intention of the researcher to debate or argue for dispensationalism in the interview. It would seem that as long as these two concepts are points of departure, the two theologies (covenant and dispensational) may remain separate and distinct as well.

2.7 What do you understand or know about how the Church, at various times, interpreted scripture?

- People of old were very simple and were not open to different interpretations but now that we are in the modern times, we are more open to different interpretations of the Bible and we are the richer for it.
- People have understood the Bible literally, symbolically and prophetically throughout church history.
- Initially, many hundreds of years ago, people did not understand the Bible, so they took it literally and this was very dangerous. In modern times, we have come to understand the correct context of the scriptures.
- We changed a lot of knowledge, theology and scientific knowledge.
- I am aware that approaches to scripture have changed over the Years. During the enlightenment there was a new focus on reason so different approaches like a more historic approach to scripture.
- Prophecy does not necessarily come to pass the way people may have thought prophecy is fulfilled exactly.
- The reformation was an attempt to find a just God.
- During the nineteenth century, there was a move towards liberalism and now we are once again returning to the same liberal approach to scripture.

Comment and Critique:

Some of the respondents seemed to believe that the ancients and the theologians of church history were inferior in their understanding of the Bible and reality. The idea that modernity is somehow superior to those of antiquity is debatable to say the least. This perception is rather concerning and hypocritical seeing that reformed theology is based on confessions and synods hundreds of years old. The argument against dispensationalism is that it is novel and a recent development as opposed to covenant theology that has a longer and more formalized history. If (the respondents seem to have alluded to) antiquity is sign of simplicity and those of old are assumed to be naive about better approaches to scripture, then it would seem illogical to base ones theology on ancient councils and confessions.

Some respondents stated that some in antiquity held to a literal approach to scripture but a more modern approach was to be less literal. If this were true, then the literal approach to scripture does have a long record in church history.

2.8 Have you been exposed to dispensationalism and what are your thoughts of it?

- Yes, and I am aware of their basic beliefs.
- No, I have not been exposed to dispensationalism.
- I have discovered that there is not one form of Dispensational Theology.
- I have known about it but in the past few days I have read a lot about it.

Comment and Critique:

Many of the respondents had little to no idea about what dispensationalism really was except for what they had read and assumed. One participant believed that dispensationalism held to a second chance of salvation based on the so-called rapture. The research conducted showed that some DRC Ministers were interested in what dispensationalism believed and were open to doing further investigation into its claims.

Are you familiar with one John Nelson Darby and what is your evaluation of him?

Only a few respondents were familiar with John Darby, initially.

He was like the Father of dispensationalism. He put it on the map.

What do you know about the history of dispensationalism before JN Darby?

There were some people who may have held dispensational ideas before John Darby.

Those who absolutize any passage in the Bible eventually bring about injustice in the world.

There were people before Darby that had ideas about dispensationalism but Darby coined it.

If you were made aware of the history of dispensationalism, would you be willing to discuss and give your personal perspectives on the following claims of dispensationalism:

YES! This was the answer for every Reverend.

Comment and Critique:

The goal of this study was to test if the local DRC Ministers would be willing to discuss the tenets of dispensationalism if they were exposed to the instances where it may have occurred in church history. There was not one respondent who was unwilling to discuss the tenets of dispensationalism. The hypothesis was that they would be willing to discuss dispensationalism if

they were exposed to its ancient roots and indeed proved to be the case. It would seem that the DRC Ministers are willing to discuss whatever theological matter was brought to the table. This has great potential then for anyone who seeks to meet with and discuss matters of faith and praxis with the local DRC Minister in their area.

God has always had varied and distinct arrangements (called dispensations) with humanity throughout History.

- God did have varied arrangements with people throughout history.
- God has acted in different ways with people but there are certain things that have remained the same with God.
- God has always been present with his people. Dispensationalists marry their theology into the Bible. To place dispensations onto the Biblical text is very difficult.
- We are living in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. If we go with a new dispensation, then we are ruling the word of God out.
- I do not really see a difference between the Old Testament rituals and the New Testament. I see it as a growing revelation and a growing of our understanding of how God works with his people in a cyclical or an unveiling revelation.
- I would agree that there are dispensations.
- Humanity has always had varied and distinct arrangements with God not God with man.

Comment and Critique:

Many respondents readily agreed that there are dispensations in God's working with humanity but admitted that there is a difference between dispensations and dispensationalism. Some respondents even used the word dispensations in the interview. However, believing in various dispensations does not make anyone a modern day dispensationalist. As discussed in Chapter One, at the heart of dispensationalism is literal interpretation resulting in dispensationalism. The distinction, therefore, would seem to be between reformed theology and dispensationalism, the literal approach to scripture.

(It may well be possible that the respondents had a different understanding of arrangements or dispensations are to the modern dispensationalist, hence their use of the word dispensations during the interview)

Israel, as a nation and the Church, as a whole, have two distinct origins, missions and destinies.

- The new covenant that Jesus brings unites the church to Abraham. We are not distinct from the Jews because Jesus makes us one. God told Abraham to go and be a blessing to all nations.
- There are areas of distinction but there are areas of similarity. The church is the new covenant that has replaced Israel and they are not God's only people.
- God has a covenant with humanity and Christ has come to fulfil this Messianic Covenant in which God elects his people who cannot be separated. There is a continuous plan where God calls his people to be part of his kingdom.
- The church will be in the world till the end. The nation of Israel is not the people who are living in Palestine today. Israel was the people that God made a covenant with in the Old Testament. The Israel of the Old Testament is not the Jews that we have today.
- Right or wrong, I don't see Israel as a nation playing a big role in the future.
- The passages like I Thess. 4:16-17 and I Cor. 15:51-53 are passages that deal with events of the second coming of Christ, not the rapture.
- There is one way to be saved therefore, there are no distinctions between people groups with God.

Comment and Critique:

One point that was concerning to the researcher was an opinion expressed by one respondent that the Jewish people in the so called state of Israel today are not the descendants of the actual people of Israel from the Bible. The researcher notes the dangers of a growing anti-Semitism in churches based on the argument that the nation of Israel today has no connection to the ancient Jews of the Bible.

There is a future, physical removal of the church (called the rapture) prior to the coming wrath of God on the Earth (called the tribulation)

- I don't believe that there is a rapture. The symbols and the context of 1 Thessalonians do not teach a rapture.
- I do not find evidence or an idea of the rapture in the Bible. I find the concept of the rapture troubling.
- My hope is not if a rapture or a removal from this world but my hope is in the fact that I am in Christ, I live in Christ if I die, I die in Christ.

- I believe that the so-called rapture will be at the end of time when Jesus comes and not this rapture that takes away some people leading to cataclysm.
- It does not matter if there is a rapture or not, we must be ready. The “Parousia” is a picture of Caesar coming to a town as a sign of respect.

Comment and Critique:

Not one of the respondents believed that there is a literal rapture. As a follow up questions the researcher asked some respondents how they would approach the so called rapture passages, for example I Thessalonians 4:13-18 and I Corinthians 15:51-53, in a sermon or Bible study. Some respondents used the motif of a Roman General who had won a battle over his enemies calling his followers and fellow citizens to come and celebrate the victory to explain the so called rapture event. The researcher asked some respondents if it was possible that there could be an actual rapture. Those who were asked said: “With God, anything is possible”.

There is a coming literal 1000 Year kingdom reign of Jesus Christ on Earth (called the millennium) fulfilling God’s covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants.

- There is no thousand year reign of Jesus Christ because this is symbolic language. Jesus will come again and make all things new.
- The kingdom is a metaphor. The kingdom came when Jesus came and it will grow more and more in time. This kingdom is not a future system but it is about the rule of Christ today over all things. The thousand years in Revelation is symbolic and not literal.
- We are living in the last thousand years as we speak. We must take the gospel to the world and then the end will come.
- If we understand the book of Revelation correctly, not fundamentally verse by verse, but the story behind the story of the whole book of Revelation, then we will understand that the thousand years of peace started when Jesus was born into this world. He brought peace through the cross and we are living in this dispensation of peace. There will never be a literal time of peace. Peace will be the difference that Christ is making in people’s lives.
- The millennium or thousand years is the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven.
- So the millennium is not necessarily a thousand years. It is about the present, not waiting for the second coming. I am not a futurist, I am a realist.

- Jesus already conquered death so he is reigning over his church. This is the Kingdom of God.

Comment and Critique:

The symbolic interpretation of Revelation 20 and the book of Revelation itself was common to each interviewee. No respondent interpreted the events of Revelation 20 as literal.

The ultimate purpose of all creation and history, is the eternal Glory of God in His Kingdom.

- The ultimate purpose of God is his glory. God is glorified in the salvation of people.
- The ultimate purpose is to make everyone God's children.

Comment and Critique:

Covenant Theology is said to hold to a more soteriological purpose in history, whereas dispensational theology, sees God's glory as the aim of all history.

On the other hand, for Covenant Theologians, the Church is the culmination of God's saving purposes for the ages. The Church is God's great masterpiece. It is the bride of Christ, the body of Christ (Waters 2020:372).

Interestingly, researcher observed that none of the respondents had a problem with believing that the ultimate purpose of God is his Glory.

Are there any questions or concerns you have with the dispensational approach to scripture?

- Dispensationalists place God in a box by their diagrams and schemes just like the four friends of Job who also placed God in a box.
- I am afraid of this dispensational thinking because I am a Reformed Theologian and I can understand why Martin Luther said: "sola scriptura". If you go with dispensations, then you say that God will come with another version in this new time with something else or with someone else.
- The literalism of dispensations concerns me.

3. A MODEL FOR DIALOGUE WITH DRC MINISTERS

As seen in the title of this paper, the broad aims of this research was not only to show instances of dispensational tenets and ideas before John Nelson Darby but also to create a model for laymen or pastors seeking dialogue with their local DRC Ministers. The variables in the research were that all of the DRC Ministers were reformed and covenant in their approach to the scriptures as opposed to dispensational. Many of the DRC Ministers were exposed to dispensational theology only at a basic level. The hypothesis was that if the ministers of the local Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) were made aware of the history of dispensationalism, would they be willing to discuss and evaluate dispensationalism's claims?

The outcomes and experiences from this research informed a model that could be used by laymen or pastors not associated with the DRC seeking dialogue and interaction with them on a one to one level:

- 1) It is necessary to purchase the latest "NGK Jaarboek" that has the latest contact details and information about local and international DR Churches and their Ministers.
- 2) It is critical to have a business card, pastoral identity or letter of commendation from ones local church before making contact with a local DR Church if such is requested.
- 3) A phone call or message to the church secretary or administrator stating the intended aim of the contact is firstly in order.
- 4) It is recommended that a meeting or a phone call with the secretary takes place first, rather than a direct call or message to the DRC Minister.
- 5) If no response or appointment date is secured, then a personal visit to the church reception or office may yield an appointment.
- 6) If there is no church secretary or administrator available, then a friendly message or call to the Minister may suffice stating who you are and your request.
- 7) It may well be that more than one visit to the secretary or reception office at the church is necessary, if no appointment date is secured.
- 8) If a date for the appointment is still not secured at this stage, it may be that a friendly visit to a Sunday Morning or Evening Service at a DR Church could secure an appointment directly with the Minister.
- 9) If the above steps yield no appointment or opportunity for dialogue, then an intermediary or "go between" needs to be sought.
- 10) The "go between" is one who personally knows and is trusted by the DRC Minister.
- 11) This intermediary person is able to personally assist by securing a meeting at an appropriate time and place.

- 12) It has been the experience of the researcher that tenacity, courage and persistence are the best personal qualities necessary if a meeting with the DRC Minister cannot be initially arraigned.
- 13) If, after all these requests go unanswered and a meeting remains elusive, do not continue to pursue the appointment any further. Rather seek another DRC Minister close by.
- 14) Once a meeting date has been secured, inform the secretary or the Minister in writing about the discussion points.
- 15) Be punctual and courteous keeping to the agreed time as many of the DRC Ministers have other appointments and ministry matters at hand.

CHAPTER FIVE:

1. Commonality Found

The interviews highlighted the various differences between reformed and dispensational theology. The interviews also brought to the fore the many similarities that both systems employ. Though some of the issues that dispensationalism espouses may be thought of as secondary (H. Hoffmeyer, 20 July 2023), there are some basic matters of theology that both systems willingly agree on and stand together in.

Some of these so-called basic issues are the battle for the relevance of the Bible, the historic gospel, the necessity of personal faith and repentance for salvation. Both groups, though they may critique each other, have an appreciation of these important matters. This commonality is critical for a common way forward for both the respective theologies in the light of the onslaught of liberalism and the irresponsible interpretation of Scripture.

Though there are areas of disagreement between the two systems, the threats to each other's system pales in comparison to the threats of liberalism in the church and community. If all of scripture were to be relegated to myths and fairy tales in the minds of ordinary believers, then both reformed and dispensational theology will suffer great losses. Thus, finding more areas of commonality, communion and dialogue may be of greater benefit for both systems of theology than for them to disregard or berate each other.

2. The Context

This idea of the context is critical for both dispensationalism and reformed theology. However, the DRC Ministers seemed to emphasise the context so much above the content of the text. Almost all the respondents said that the context was the key principle if one were to approach the scripture responsibly.

While conducting the interviews, some respondents often spoke of the context to the point of totally ignoring the actual words of the text under consideration. This, the researcher felt, was a way to actually avoid doing a simple exegesis of the passage to discover a possible meaning of the passage under consideration. The purpose of the interviews were by no means to debate or question the respondent's answers. Therefore, the context was often a major discussion point rather than the meaning of the passage and what the original author's intent was.

The researcher found that use of context was also used liberally. At times some respondents used the same context for each Old Testament book they referred to, viz. "The Babylonian Captivity". Is it possible to emphasise the context of the scripture or the Bible so much that no consideration is paid to what is actually being communicated by the author?

On the other hand, some dispensationalists may seem to go to the other extreme by not studying the context of a passage and only focusing on the content.

In the literature review, McGinniss and Johnson show why it is important for the dispensationalist to consider the context of the biblical author as well as the content of the text itself.

3. Drawing Straight Lines to Application

Straight lines refers to applications directly from the biblical text to the modern reader's situation. For instance, the prayer of Daniel in Chapter Nine can be applied to my personal situation when I find myself held captive like Israel was. The problem with straight lines from Daniel is that this prayer was not so much about the captivity but more about confession of sin. What the actual text says should be just as important as the context itself. Ignoring the text could be dangerous when interpreting the text. Someone who may not be familiar with the actual text may be led to believe something other than what the text is trying to convey.

For example, the one passage considered in the interview, Zechariah 14, the mountain in the text was the mountains and struggles in people's lives today.

4. General Knowledge of Scripture

Many of the Ministers that were interviewed had a fairly good knowledge of the scriptures. However, some of the Ministers struggled with referencing the texts that were being discussed. Finding books of the Bible that are not so commonly referred to and even mistaking names of characters in the Bible sometimes occurred during the interviews.

However, the misquoting of passages from the Bible to defend a view sometimes took place. The slight changes to some of the wording of the text that was being quoted would seem to give the DRC Reverends reasons to hold to their understanding of the scriptures. For example, one respondent said that God commanded Abram to be a blessing in Genesis 12 so we are commanded to do the same today. There were also general statements made about where certain verses were located in the Bible which were not necessarily the case.

In essence, some Ministers are not accurate enough with their handling of the text which could lead to misinterpretation or misunderstanding by those whom they teach.

5. Findings from the Research

The Dutch Reformed Church, like all other denominations in South Africa and the world, struggles to maintain its unity amidst a discourse about how to approach and interpret the Bible. (Reformed family Forum) The research conducted in the Dutch Reformed Church highlighted the DRC Minister's unity around Reformed Theology and its basic tenets.

However, the spiritualizing and allegorizing of prophetic or apocalyptic passages in the interviews highlighted the different interpretations held by the Ministers. Even though their answers were slightly different to each question in the interview, their approach to interpretation was essentially to spiritualise the passages from the Bible.

5.1 Dispensational Failures

Throughout the Centuries, many who have written on prophecy have often looked at prophecy fulfilled in their own times and seasons. For Centuries, it was the Papacy or The Turks who were the anti-Christ. Many looked at their immediate situations of wars, invasions, calamitous events, plagues and droughts etc. as fulfilments of scripture or prophecy. For example Increase Mather (1639-1723) saw important people of his day fulfilling the book of Revelation when he wrote that:

Where two great lights, the Sun (saith he) that is the Pope; and the Moon, that is the Emperor and truly, when this prophesies shall be fulfilled, woe to those Lights, they shall sit in obscure darkness:

Seeking to place geopolitical events into scripture has been common throughout Church History. John Milton (1608-1674) as well as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), the famous English poet, used the prophetic books of the bible to explain political events of his day. (Kitson, 1987:64)

This type of interpretive method this researcher has come to call: “Newspaper Theology”. It can be defined as interpreting the Bible through the events of the day. Riesebrodt correctly highlights one famous dispensationalist, John Hagee, who believed that Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 would ultimately lead to Israel’s invasion by Russia. (2012: 472, Footnote 8).

This has become so common amongst so called dispensationalists, that it is taken for granted that the so-called prophecy updates (programs or events that are well organized and promoted on various platforms) are actually the author or speakers’ take on the current developments in geopolitics. For example, J.D. Farag, a popular dispensational preacher and teacher, who has close to 300 000 online followers, claimed that the recent COVID 19 pandemic was the sign of the end of the world and that the rapture was about to take place.

The description of the world prior to the rapture is exactly the way it is in the world today. I am convinced and truly believe with all of my heart that this is how it ends. Covid 19, corona virus, is how it ends. This is how it ends. This is the end! (Farag, December 20 2020, 4:25-5:10)

Hal Lindsey (1970) famously said that because the state of Israel came into existence in 1948, that Jesus would return to Earth in 1988 in his best seller, *The Late Great Planet Earth*.

This type of interpretation is so commonplace amongst so called dispensationalists that it pervades the internet and Christian media. This was recently seen in a 14 part series of messages by Pastor Billy Crone on Klaus Schwab the World Economic Forum Leader. Crone believes that Klaus Schwab is the coming antichrist kingdom and will be responsible for the implementation of the mark of the beast.

This type of approach goes far beyond the literal approach of scripture and can make the scripture mean anything the writer or speaker desires. Riesebrodt (2012:472) calls this the disconfirmation of dispensationalism. Disconfirmation in dispensationalism are any or most current world events being superimposed into the Bible. When these events do not produce the predicted outcome, these events are soon forgotten and the audience and followers attention is pointed to the next world shaking event to fulfil prophecy. This type of disconfirmation has a damaging effect on the credibility of dispensationalism. Hal Lindsey’s *Late Great Planet Earth*, sold close to 30 million copies and was a bestseller making him a very wealthy man. ((National Endowment for the Humanities: Article)

The writer of the New Testament book, 2 Timothy 4:1-4, gives a clear warning to those who would practice “Newspaper Theology” by charging the reader to “preach the word”.

I charge thee therefore, before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom. Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long-suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from truth, and shall be turned unto fables (King James Version 2005:2110-2111).

5.2 Benefits of Interpreting the Bible Literally

Stallard (2021) provides four positive outcomes to interpreting the Bible literally.

1. Taking the Bible as God gave it and meant it for the original audience
2. The Old Testament has an autonomy of interpretation rather than an interpretation in the light of the New Testament
3. It allows for the significance of the progress of revelation for Biblical interpretation
4. It describes the modern historical movement of dispensationalism with a measure of precision

5.3 The Implication of Dispensationalism Before Darby

To make the claim that dispensationalism was never taught before 1830 is flawed. To make such a claim would mean that every single piece of literature or spoken word has been verified and studied over the last two thousand years of church history. This is exactly James Morris’ point in the preface of his 2018 book.

Many attempt to discredit dispensationalism by claiming that the church never taught it before around 1830. Such a claim is ridiculous, for proof that any particular idea was never taught in any particular time period would require an exhaustive examination of every teaching that took place during that period.

It would be an impossible task to verify dispensationalism's apparent modernity over more than eighteen hundred years of church history. Is it possible that because of the assumption that dispensationalism’s novelty is so widespread and pervasive, that some have failed to search for evidence to the contrary?

If it has been shown in this paper that there certainly are traces of dispensational thought and ideas before Darby and in particular, a literal approach to scripture, then it cannot be asserted that:

1. Dispensational is man- made and made from the ideas of John Nelson Darby

2. Dispensationalism is the culmination of the contribution of many throughout the history of the church
3. Dispensationalism has its primitive roots back in the early church amongst the church fathers
4. To dismiss dispensationalism on account of its apparent novelty is a straw man argument.

5.4 Uncovering New Dispensational Passages

Francis Gumerlock, believes that as the accusation of dispensationalism's novelty arose, so the search began for the historical roots of dispensationalism in the so-called church age. Because so many ancient books have not been translated and some yet to be translated into English, there may yet be discoveries that may yield further evidence of dispensationalism before Darby.

Consequently, a new history of pretribulationism is beginning to emerge, one that is breaking through the narrow confines of nineteenth century English eschatology. But this much more broad history of pretribulationism is still in the beginning of its construction. As theologians and other researchers gradually sift through the Church's massive treasury of Biblical commentaries, eschatological literature, and theological texts from the early, medieval, and Reformation periods-many of them only available in languages other than English-more examples of pretribulationism are sure to be uncovered (2002:6).

6. Concluding Remarks

It has been the aim of this paper to investigate the occurrence of dispensational ideas and concepts throughout the church age. Various instances were referenced in Chapter Three of what some would interpret as elements of dispensationalism. It has been asserted in this study that there have been elements of dispensationalism from different theologians. No one person combined all the elements of dispensationalism quite like Darby did. Dispensationalism was least prominent and evident during the medieval ages. However, with the advent of the scriptures in the vernacular and the printing press, dispensationalism began to grow until the nineteenth century. However, it is indeed clear that Darby did systematize and organize dispensationalism into its more modern features.

The investigation into the possibility of dialogue with the Dutch Reformed Ministers yielded interesting results. The researcher found that the DRC Ministers were open and happy to dialogue about their chosen approach to scripture. When they heard about the possibility of dispensation concepts before Darby, they were willing to discuss its main tenants.

Interviews are inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound (Denzin, 2008:115). However, as the interviews proceeded these shackles were mysteriously broken. These “active interactions” (Denzin 2008:119) are indeed the basis for future and further interactions between the researcher and the DRC Ministers and anyone else seeking to interact with their local DRC Minister.

Like Fontana and Frey have stated, these interviews were like two people that were involved in the process of collaboration (Denzin 2008:117). A model for pastors in a suburb, wanting to meet and discuss theological issues with the local DRC Minister was also investigated through this research project. (See Model on Page 89) It was clear from the outset that an intermediary, middle person or go between is needed to be used to arrange a successful meeting. The intermediary has to be someone who is known or trusted by the DRC Minister for this meeting to take place. Without such an intermediary, a meeting with the local DRC Minister may be difficult or even impossible.

The hypothesis that dispensational concepts are evident throughout church history was demonstrated in Chapter Three. It was concluded that even though there are elements of dispensationalism in church history, John Darby was indeed the one who systematized it into what it is today.

The hypothesis that if the DRC Ministers were made aware of dispensation’s long history, they would be willing to discuss dispensationalism’s merits, was evaluated in Chapter Four. It was found that the DRC Ministers were willing to discuss the concepts of dispensationalism not just because it may be shown to have an ancient history but because of their openness and willingness to engage and discuss theological matters.

This research hopes to lay the groundwork for others who are seeking partnerships with their local DRC Minister in the city or suburbs in order to form new relationships and forge new partnerships personally and for the well-being of their local churches.

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