Hummel, Daniel G. *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023. 360pp. + 40pp. (back matter).

Histories of dispensationalism vary in tone, often depending on whether they originate from within the movement or without. Charles Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* (1965, later revised in 1995 as simply *Dispensationalism*) is a classic statement from within, defining and defending the movement and providing some historical context. *Progressive Dispensationalism* (2000) by Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock maintains a respectful tone even as it seeks to revise older versions of dispensationalism. On the other side is C. Norman Kraus's *Dispensationalism in America* (1958), which is, to put it mildly, unsympathetic. This work by Daniel Hummel leans in the direction of Kraus and is certainly not history from within, but Hummel has written one of the fullest histories of dispensationalism.

Foremost among its strengths is the book's comprehensiveness. Hummel helpfully lays out the origins and development of the dispensationalist system, doing a fine job of describing the development of both scholarly and popular dispensationalism. He explores thoroughly the views of John Nelson Darby, one of the chief fountainheads of the movement, showing his influence but also how later interpreters modified his system, selecting and rejecting points according to their needs. For example, he points out how Darby emphasized reliance on spiritual illumination in understanding the Scripture as opposed to the devotion of later dispensationalists to a plain reading of the Bible (46). Likewise, Hummel observes that later dispensationalists did not generally adhere to Darby's idea of the ruin of the church, that is, that the modern institutional church is irredeemably corrupt, necessitating that believers follow a highly decentralized pattern of church order like that practiced by the Plymouth Brethren. An interesting fact Hummel notes is that the term *dispensationalism* itself dates only from 1927 in the writings of Philip Mauro, an acerbic critic of the movement. Hummel in fact prefers the label "new premillennialism" (as opposed to the older historicist premillennialism) as a descriptor prior to 1927.

The work offers numerous other helpful particulars. Hummel notes that along with the increasingly systematized dispensationalists, such as the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary, there were also what one might call "sort-of dispensationalists," such as John R. Rice and Bob Jones Sr., who favored pretribulationalism and end-times declension but were otherwise not system dispensationalists. They were an important if underappreciated factor in American dispensationalism.

Hummel also describes—and indicts—popular, or "pop," dispensationalism (or as one of my former colleagues labeled it, "Christian science fiction"). He describes particularly Hal Lindsey (*Late Great Planet* Earth) and the writing team of Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins of the *Left Behind* series. He points out Tim LaHaye's influence in both religious and popular culture, such as how LaHaye extrapolates principles of dispensationalism for current application. For example, LaHaye taught a "pretribulational tribulation," an oppressive "humanist tribulation" against Christians just before the rapture (272). LaHaye's idea highlights a problem with popular dispensationalism. Despite the argument of dispensationalists that there are no prophetic signs prior to the rapture of the church, many still presume to find signs and insist that the event must come soon. Hummel quotes an apt observation from Carl Henry: "Fundamentalism was not wrong in assuming a final consummation of

history, but rather in assuming this is it" (229). Christ's imminent return means that one should be ready for the coming of Christ but that one must also be ready to wait.

Hummel's work, however, has flaws along with its virtues. Some are simple mistakes of fact. Louis Napoleon (Napoleon III) was the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, not his cousin. Bob Jones Sr. never became "an independent Baptist." The famous filmmaker is Orson *Welles,* not "Wells." J. Frank Norris had nothing to do with the founding of the John Birch Society, dying six years before it was founded. Baptist John Piper is not a member of the PCA. Likewise, it is odd to refer to "centuries" of postmillennial consensus on the Bible in the 1800s when the postmillennial system was not that old (53). One might also debate some of the terminology. Hummel refers to academic dispensationalism as "scholastic" instead of "scholarly." The connotation of "scholastic" recalls the common perception of medieval Catholic theology or Protestant orthodoxy of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as arid and narrowly punctilious, a label that could slant perceptions.

One can identify some problems even in the author's title. The book might better be called the "rise and *decline*" of dispensationalism rather than its "rise and *fall.*" Even Hummel admits that although dispensationalism has passed its height of influence (perhaps in the middle of the twentieth century), there are still advocates of dispensationalism in some schools, churches, publications, and other organizations.

In reckoning with the theological impact of dispensationalism, Hummel simplifies a complicated narrative in tracing what we would call "easy-believism" primarily to the "free-grace" teachings associated with many dispensationalists. The roots of easy-believism are broader, found more in the democratization of American theology associated with the nineteenth century and particularly Charles Finney's version of the New England Theology, which Hummel himself acknowledges as part of "the American revivalist tradition" (11). That the free-grace teaching contributed to the concept of easy-believism is highly likely, but there are other factors to consider. Also to be noted is that nearly all of the early dispensationalists, including J. N. Darby, sound rather Calvinistic on soteriology (as Hummel himself notes).

This discussion of free-grace teaching suggests a problem with the work, a tendency to stress too greatly the larger impact of dispensationalism. To justify the subtitle of the book, "How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation," the author suggests effects of dispensationalism on American culture greater perhaps than the evidence will bear. For example, he claims that dispensationalists played a significant role in fostering the sentiment for national reunion between North and South after the Civil War in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a sentiment that ignored the civil rights of African Americans. He cites James L. Brookes and D. L. Moody as particular examples. Undoubtedly some (perhaps many) of these premillennial leaders felt that way, but was such a concept really key to their theological agenda? And were they markedly influential in promoting that sentiment? It is too much to say that sectional reconciliation was a "project by white northern evangelicals" (348) as though it were their creation, and they were its mainstay. The tendency in American society was strong and far from dependent on certain religious leaders. Christian leaders undoubtedly shared a range of ideas common (and sometimes bad) in their era, but that is a very different matter from viewing them as a source. Yet in defense of the author, it does appear that some

ideas derived from dispensationalism such as the rapture and the idea of an end-times individual leader known as the Antichrist do seem to have permeated American culture to a great extent. How wide their influence is may be debated.

Despite these criticisms, one must recognize the value in how the author pulls together so much history into one coherent narrative. I would add this book to the reading list for students of the history of dispensationalism, perhaps in connection with other histories.

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