

WAS ISAAC WATTS A PROTO-DISPENSATIONALIST?

by
Scott Aniol¹

Both dispensationalists and their critics debate the exact origins of the system, the latter claiming that the system has no historical roots, and the former citing examples of dispensational schemes as far back as the church fathers.² As proof of its relative historical/theological novelty, critics usually argue that John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) first systematized dispensationalism. For example, Clarence Bass claims that “no dispensational writer has ever been able to offer...a single point of continuity between what is today known as dispensationalism and the historic premillennial view,”³ and Millard J. Erickson likewise asserts that “no trace of this theology can be found in the early history of the church.”⁴ Dispensationalists, on the other hand, argue that while Darby may have been the first to order dispensational distinctives into a lucid system, other theologians held certain dispensational-like presuppositions far before Darby. These dispensationalists include British hymn-writer Isaac Watts (1674–1748) among such theologians.⁵ This essay will compare the writings of Isaac Watts to essential distinctives of dispensationalism in order to determine to what extent, if any, he exhibits early dispensational-like characteristics.

ORIGINS OF DISPENSATIONAL DISTINCTIVES

John Nelson Darby

Dispensationalists today usually admit that dispensationalism as a system first appeared in Darby’s writings. For example, Charles Ryrie states that “there is no question that the Plymouth Brethren, of which John Nelson Darby (1800–1882) was a leader, had much to do with

¹Scott Aniol is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Church Music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, TX.

²See Arnold D. Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), p. 207.

³Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 14.

⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), p. 111.

⁵See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007), pp. 66–67.

the systematizing and promoting of dispensationalism.”⁶ However, they are, nevertheless, often quick to distance themselves from him, as Ryrie does in the very next breath: “But neither Darby nor the Brethren originated the concepts involved in the system, and even if they had that would not make them wrong if they can be shown to be biblical.”⁷ He repeats this in another place: “Darby’s teaching...was obviously not the pattern which Scofield followed.... The glib statement that dispensationalism originated with Darby, whose system was taken over and popularized by Scofield, is not historically accurate.”⁸ Others are even more adamant that Darby’s influence is exaggerated:

This writer does not believe that the prominence of Darby should be confused with the dominance of Darby, and he believes the facts cited in the foregoing paragraphs are adequate proof that dispensationalism was not invented approximately 125 years ago by Darby. Dispensationalism had its roots in the very theses of early church chiliasm; the concept of multiple ages was often expressed by the fathers. After the reformation controversy over soteriology was settled, men again began thinking and writing about the purpose of God in the world, and some of them suggested six-and seven-division systems long before Darby. That there has been refinement of these views and the growth of an extensive literature in comparatively recent times is conceded. But it is not conceded that dispensationalism is a modern invention and perversion.⁹

Dispensationalists attempt to distance themselves from Darby for perhaps two reasons. First, it allows them to escape charge of recency.¹⁰ Second, it prevents association with the perceived divisiveness of Darby and the separatist Plymouth Brethren movement of which he was a part.¹¹

C. I. Scofield

Although dispensationalism as a system may have first appeared

⁶Ibid., p. 67. He says elsewhere, “Dispensationalism was first promoted through the study and teachings of John Nelson Darby (1800–1882).... The basic elements, and the hermeneutical pattern, of Darby’s eschatology persist unchanged in contemporary dispensationalism” (Charles C. Ryrie, “Update on Dispensationalism” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, and Charles C. Ryrie [Chicago: Moody Press, 1994], pp. 16–17).

⁷Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 67.

⁸Ibid., p. 69.

⁹Clarence E. Mason, “A Review of Dispensationalism by John Wick Bowman: Part I,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 114 (Jan 1957): 19–20.

¹⁰Ryrie lists these two charges at the beginning of his chapter on “The Origins of Dispensationalism,” implying his motivation for writing the chapter (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 61). He answers this straw man charge well by claiming it is a “wrong use of history.” Nevertheless, he still sets out to demonstrate that “there are historical references to that which eventually was systematized into dispensationalism” (ibid., pp. 62–63).

¹¹See *ibid.*, pp. 72–76.

with Darby, it became popular, especially in America, through the influence of Cyrus Ingerson Scofield (1843–1921). Scofield's *Reference Bible*, first published in 1909, significantly spread dispensational teaching throughout American evangelicalism. More recent dispensationalism, dispersed through the teachings of men like Alva J. McClain, Harry A. Ironside, Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, and others, clearly finds its roots in Scofield. Yet where Scofield received his dispensationalism is a subject of debate. Some dispensationalists insist that Scofield could not have developed his system without the influence of Darby. For example, R. A. Huebner notes essentials of Scofield's system that appeared nowhere prior to him other than in Darby's writings:

Moreover, there would be no Scofield system had he not borrowed from [Darby] the distinction between Israel and the church, the truth of the pretribulational rapture, and the offer and postponement of the kingdom. Let someone describe a Scofield system without these truths! And, were these truths a systematization of what preceded [Darby]?¹²

Others, however, claim that stark differences between Darby's system and Scofield's system prove that Scofield developed his independently of Darby.¹³ In particular, they note how different Scofield's dispensational scheme is from Darby's. For example, after listing Darby's scheme and citing his philosophy of dispensationalism, Ryrie states, "Only one comment is necessary concerning Darby's teachings—it was obviously not the pattern Scofield followed."¹⁴

Proto-dispensationalists?

This insistence that Scofield developed his system apart from any significant influence from Darby has led some dispensationalists to cite other dispensational schemes that antedate Darby. They highlight, for example, Pierre Poiret (1646–1719), John Edwards (1637–1716), and Isaac Watts.¹⁵

They claim Isaac Watts in particular as the strongest possibility for direct influence upon Scofield. In an article titled, "The Harmony of All Religions Which God Ever Prescribed to Men, and All His

¹²R. A. Huebner, *J. N. Darby's Teaching Regarding Dispensations, Ages, Administrations, and the Two Parentheses* (Morganville, NJ: Present Truth, 1993), p. 96.

¹³Along with Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 69, see Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1992), p. 207, and Robert Lightner, "Review of *The Origins of Dispensationalism* by Larry Crutchfield," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (Oct 1992): 497–98.

¹⁴Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 69. See Table 1 below for a comparison of Darby's and Scofield's dispensational schemes.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 65–66. Those who note Watts's dispensational scheme include Arnold D. Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), p. 453; Norman L. Geisler, "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (Jul 1985): 252; and Mason, "Review," p. 17.

Dispensations Towards Them,”¹⁶ Watts presents a detailed dispensational system of biblical ages that in many ways resembles Scofield’s system. For example, Watts’s definition of a dispensation is quite similar to Scofield’s definition. Watts says,

The public dispensations of God towards men, are those wise and holy constitutions of his will and government, revealed or some way manifested to them, in the several successive periods or ages of the world, wherein are contained the duties which he expects from men, and the blessings which he promises, or encourages them to expect from him, here and hereafter; together with the sins which he forbids, and the punishments which he threatens to inflict on such sinners: Or, the dispensations of God may be described more briefly, as the appointed moral rules of God’s dealing with mankind, considered as reasonable creatures, and as accountable to him for their behaviour, both in this world and in that which is to come. Each of these dispensations of God, may be represented as different religions, or, at least, as different forms of religion, appointed for men in the several successive ages of the world.¹⁷

This explanation resembles Scofield in several ways. First, like Watts, Scofield equates a dispensation with an age, something later dispensationalists like Ryrie qualify.¹⁸ Scofield states,

The Scriptures divide time (by which is meant the entire period from the creation of Adam to the “new heaven and a new earth” of Rev. 21:1) into seven unequal periods, usually called “Dispensations” (Eph. 3:2), although these periods are also called “ages” (Eph. 2:7) and “days”—as, “day of the Lord,” etc.¹⁹

Furthermore, Watts defines a dispensation in terms of its test, failure, and judgment, very similarly to how Scofield defines it:

These periods are marked off in Scripture by some change in God’s method of dealing with mankind, or a portion of mankind, in respect of the two questions: of sin, and of men’s responsibility. Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment—marking his utter failure in every dispensation.²⁰

Finally, and perhaps most notably, Watts’s dispensational divisions match Scofield’s almost perfectly, a fact made more significant by the

¹⁶Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Rev. Isaac Watts D.D. in Nine Volumes* (London: n. p., 1812), 3:333–76.

¹⁷Ibid., 3:333.

¹⁸For example, Ryrie states, “Age and *dispensation* are not synonymous in meaning, even though they may exactly coincide in the historical outworking. A dispensation is basically the arrangement involved, not the time involved; and a proper definition will take this into account. However, there is no reason for great alarm if a definition does ascribe time to a dispensation” (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 28).

¹⁹C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1986), p. 18.

²⁰Ibid.

striking dissimilarity between Darby's and Scofield's divisions. Table 1 compares the three schemes.

Table 1: Dispensational Schemes

| Isaac Watts 1674–1748 | John Nelson Darby 1800–1882 | C. I. Scofield 1843–1921 |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| Innocency | Paradisaical State to the Flood (not a dispensation) | Innocency |
| Adam after the Fall | | Conscience |
| Noahical | Noah | Human Government |
| Abrahamical | Abraham | Promise |
| Mosaical | Israel under law | Law |
| | Israel under priesthood | |
| | Israel under kings | |
| | Gentiles | |
| Christian | Spirit | Grace |
| Millennium (not a dispensation) | Millennium | Kingdom |

Similarities between Watts's and Scofield's dispensational definitions and divisions, combined with the relative dissimilarities between Darby and Scofield, have led dispensationalists like Ryrie to conclude that "if Scofield parroted anybody's scheme it was Watts's, not Darby's."²¹

Discussing dispensations or even articulating a detailed dispensational scheme does not make one a dispensationalist, however, a point that most dispensationalists recognize. For example, Walvoord observes that Charles Hodge, a postmillennialist, described four biblical dispensations,²² which leads him to the conclusion that "acknowledging the presence of dispensations is not limited to a single theological system."²³ Moreover, Ryrie himself admits that "Covenant Theologians hold that there are various dispensations (and even use the word)

²¹Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 69.

²²John F. Walvoord, "Reflections on Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (Apr 2001): 128.

²³Ibid., p. 132.

within the outworking of the covenant of grace,”²⁴ and even Watts notes a common naming of dispensations by other covenantal theologians in his day.²⁵ Bass points out that such dispensational divisions, rather than proving the presence of other dispensational distinctives, may rather be simply a natural practice of dividing biblical history into ages.²⁶ And as Dale Sumner DeWitt correctly notes, “Age schemes are almost as old as the Christian Church.”²⁷

Investigation into whether Watts may be accurately described as a proto-dispensationalist must, therefore, explore more deeply into Watts’s writings to arrive at a convincing conclusion. This exploration will rely on Charles Ryrie’s “*sine qua non*” of dispensationalism as a helpful framework through which to evaluate Watts’s understanding:

1. The hermeneutical principle of literal interpretation,
2. A clear distinction between Israel and the church, and
3. Belief that the underlying purpose of God in the world is the glory of God.²⁸

WATTS’S HERMENEUTIC

Investigating Watts’s interpretation of Old Testament texts will be key to appraising his interpretive method. Watts seems to be critical of the kind of allegorical interpretation common to his time. For example, in commenting on Job 14:13, Watts cites several common allegorical or figurative interpretations, but then says, “Where the literal sense of the words is plain and agreeable to the context, there is no need of making metaphors to explain them.”²⁹

Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy

Yet Watts was not afraid of spiritualizing Old Testament texts. Watts saw various types especially in the life and liturgy of nation of Israel, and how he treats those types reveals something of his underlying hermeneutic. He seems to give the New Testament priority in interpreting Old Testament types and prophecy. For example, Watts states,

²⁴Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 38.

²⁵For example, in his descriptions of the various dispensations he says, “This covenant is usually called the dispensation of Abraham” (Watts, *Works in Nine Volumes*, 3:346).

²⁶Bass, *Backgrounds*, p. 16.

²⁷Dale S. DeWitt, *Dispensational Theology in America During the Twentieth Century: Theological Development and Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Grace Bible College, 2002), p. 23.

²⁸Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, pp. 38–41.

²⁹Isaac Watts and D. A. Harsha, *The Life and Choice Works of Isaac Watts, D. D.* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1857), p. 378.

As a prophecy is the foretelling of things to come in words, so a type is the foretelling of something to come in some real emblem or figure or resemblance of it: Now as there are many ancient prophecies which were not understood by the persons to whom they were first spoken, nor by the persons who spoke with them; 1 Pet. 1:11, 12. Yet when they are fulfilled they come to be better understood, and bear witness to the hand of God both in the prophecy and in the accomplishment: So though types may be obscure when they are first appointed, yet when they are accomplished or fulfilled they are better understood, and shew the hand of God both in appointing the sign, and bringing to pass the thing signified.³⁰

Watts understands types to be merely shadows of spiritual reality to be realized in the church, and thus he downplays the importance of the type itself. John Feinberg explains what this implies:

Nondispensational systems stress that the type is shadow and the antitype is reality; therefore, the meaning of the antitype supersedes and cancels the meaning of the type in its own context. Dispensationalists do not think types necessarily are shadows, and they demand that both type and antitype be given their due meaning in their own context while maintaining a typological relation to one another.³¹

Of particular interest in this discussion is what is perhaps Watts's most famous and influential work, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and Applied to the Christian State and Worship*. Besides his discontent with the poetic awkwardness of the metrical psalmody in current use,³² Watts thought the psalm paraphrases were not "proper for the Christian Church" even in their content.³³ Indeed, Watts said of the content of the inscripturated Psalms, "When the best of Christians attempt to sing many of them in our common translations, that spirit of Devotion vanishes and is lost, the Psalm dies upon their lips, and they feel scarce any thing of the holy pleasure."³⁴ He believed that the Christian church could not sing strict translations of the Psalms for two reasons that shed light on his hermeneutic. First, Watts believed that some of the psalms applied so specifically to the author and his circumstances that no other person could

³⁰Isaac Watts, *The Works of the Reverend and Learned Isaac Watts, Containing, Besides His Sermons and Essays on Miscellaneous Subjects, Several Additional Pieces, Selected from His Manuscripts by the Rev. Dr. Jennings and the Rev. Dr. Doddridge, in 1753: To Which Are Prefixed Memoirs of the Life of the Author* (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 3:355.

³¹John S. Feinberg, "Systems of Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), p. 78.

³²Watts said, "While we sing the Praises of our God in his Church, we are employed in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven: and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon Earth" (Isaac Watts, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* [Boston: T. and J. Fleet, 1772], p. iii).

³³Watts, *Works in Nine Volumes*, 9:52.

³⁴Ibid., 9:27.

sing them authentically.³⁵ Second, some psalms were “fitted chiefly for Jewish worshippers,” and thus Christians cannot necessarily sing them in their own worship.³⁶ This led Watts to produce, not a new translation of the Psalms, but songs that would imitate the language, sentiments, and subjects of the Psalms but in the language of Christians rather than Jews: “I come therefore to explain my own design, which is, to accommodate the book of Psalms to Christian Worship and in order to do this, it is necessary to divest David and Asaph of every other character but that of a Psalmist and a saint and to make them always speak the common sense and language of a Christian.”³⁷

In this goal, Watts often reinterprets or adjusts the original meaning of psalms in light of New Testament truth or Christian experience. For example, of his setting of Psalm 4, Watts says, “Though this Psalm may not directly intend the Messiah, yet I have taken occasion to apply some expressions in it to Christ and His Gospel, I hope with some advantage, and without offence.”³⁸ Likewise, of Psalm 12, Watts explains, “The signs of Christ’s coming, mentioned in the New Testament, Matt. 24:12, Luke 18:8, *are abounding iniquity, love waxing cold, and faith scarce to be found*; and seem very much akin to the sense of this Psalm.”³⁹ And in reference to “Thy throne, O God, for ever stands” in Psalm 45, he opines, “This Psalm is a description of the personal glories of Christ, and the success of His Gospel; and probably it refers to the Church.”⁴⁰ Watts’s understanding of Old Testament types is particularly evident in a note accompanying Psalm 47:

The ascent of Christ into heaven is typified in this Psalm, by the ark brought up to Zion, 2 Sam. 6:15. And the kingdom of Christ among the Gentiles is here represented by David’s victory over the nations, verse 3. I have chosen to omit the type, and do honour to my ascending and reigning Savior in more express language.⁴¹

Thus Watts seems to give the New Testament priority in his interpretation, and in some cases readjustment, of Old Testament texts.

A poignant example of this reorientation is found with Psalm 27, which illustrates Watts’s typological approach to viewing the nation of Israel. The psalm speaks of delight and safety with the Lord, and in particular, in his temple:

³⁵Ibid. Watts even argued on this point that he did not believe such psalms were ever intended for public worship even in the Old Testament economy.

³⁶Ibid., 9:29.

³⁷Ibid., 9:31.

³⁸Isaac Watts and N. A. Woychuk, *The Poetic Interpretation of the Psalms* (St. Louis: Bible Memory Association International, 1974), p. 24.

³⁹Ibid., p. 25 (emphasis original).

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 80.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 83.

One thing have I desired of the LORD,
 that will I seek after;
 that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
 all the days of my life,
 to behold the beauty of the LORD,
 and to enquire in his temple.

For in the time of trouble
 he shall hide me in his pavilion:
 in the secret of his tabernacle shall he hide me;
 he shall set me up upon a rock (Ps 27:4–5, KJV).

Yet because Watts sees Israel as merely a type of the church, he applies these sentiments directly to the church, even titling the hymn, “The Church is our Delight and Safety.”

One privilege my heart desires;
 O grant me an abode
 Among the churches of thy saints,
 The temples of my God!

There shall I offer my requests,
 And see thy beauty still;
 Shall hear thy messages of love,
 And there inquire thy will.⁴²

An example of his method that is at odds with traditional covenantalism, however, is with Psalm 87. In its original context, the psalm praises Zion, the city of God, which “symbolizes God’s kingdom presence.”⁴³ Zion refers literally to Jerusalem, the city of God’s covenant people Israel, which stands as a testament to the covenant relationship between God and the nation:

His foundation is in the holy mountains.
 The LORD loveth the gates of Zion
 more than all the dwellings of Jacob.
 Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God.

I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me:
 behold Philistia, and Tyre, with Ethiopia;
 this man was born there.
 And of Zion it shall be said,
 This and that man was born in her:
 and the highest himself shall establish her.
 The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people,
 that this man was born there.
 As well the singers as the players on instruments shall be there:
 all my springs are in thee (KJV).

⁴²Isaac Watts, *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts: With All the Additional Hymns and Complete Indexes* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), p. 50.

⁴³Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in vol. 5 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), p. 561.

The Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter, the one commonly in use during Watts's time, treats the Psalms quite strictly. Table 2 compares this version with Watts's "imitation." Watt's version is surprisingly close to the original and the Sternhold and Hopkins version, with a few notable exceptions. First, Watts clearly connects Zion with the church in stanza two. Second, even when referring to Zion with relation to the earthly Jerusalem, he places the narrative in the past tense. Finally, Watts ends the hymn by looking forward to the day when the church will gather with throngs from every race to praise the Lord on Zion. So in Watts's rendering of Psalm 87, he seems willing to adjust the natural reading of Old Testament texts by integrating New Testament revelation, but he also understands a literal rule of Christ on earth in the future.

Table 2: Psalm 87⁴⁴

| Sternhold and Hopkins (1549) | Watts (1718) |
|--|--|
| That city shall full well endure, her ground-work still doth stay | God in his earthly temple lays Foundations for his heav'nly praise: |
| Upon the holy hills full sure, it can no time decay. | He likes the tents of Jacob well, But still in Zion loves to dwell. |
| God loves the gates of Zion best, his grace doth there abide; | His mercy visits every house That pay their night and morning vows; |
| He loves them more than all the rest of Jacob's tents beside. | But makes a more delightful stay Where churches meet to praise and pray. |
| Full glorious things reported be in Zion, and abroad; | What glories were described of old! What wonders are of Zion told! |
| Great things, I say, are said of thee, thou city of our God. | Thou city of our God below, Thy fame shall Tyre and Egypt know. |

⁴⁴Sternhold and Hopkins version taken from Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins, *The Whole Book of Psalmes* (London: Printed for the Companie of Stationers, 1622), p. 30. Watts version taken from Watts, *The Psalmes and Hymns of Isaac Watts*, pp. 118–19.

| | |
|---|--|
| On Rahab I will cast an eye, and bear in mind the same; | Egypt and Tyre, and Greek and Jew Shall there begin their lives anew; |
| To Babylon also apply, and them that know thy Name. | Angels and men shall join to sing The hill where living waters spring. |
| Lo, Palestine, and Tyre also, with Ethiopie likewise, | When God makes up his last account Of natives in his holy mount, |
| A people old full long ago, were born and there did rise. | 'Twill be an honor to appear As one new-born or nourished there! |
| Of Zion they shall say abroad, that divers men of fame Have there sprung up, and the high God hath founded fast the same. | |
| In their records to them it shall by him be made appear, Of Zion, that the chief of all had his beginning there. | |
| The trumpeters, with such as sing, therein great plenty be; My fountains and my pleasant springs are all contained in thee. | |

Christ's Rule on Earth

Watts's interpretation of Christ's earthly rule departs from a typical covenantal perspective, however. One of Watts's most well-known hymns, "Joy to the World," is actually an "imitation" of Psalm 98. Psalm 98 praises God for his sovereign rule over all things, but many interpreters broaden its reach to a Messianic rule. Here dispensationalists and nondispensationalists draw slightly different conclusions. A note on verses 7–8 in Ryrie's *Study Bible* applies the passage to the literal Millennial Kingdom,⁴⁵ yet notes in the *ESV Study Bible* interpret the psalm differently. The notes highlight the fact that Psalm 98 and 96 have a similar subject of God's rule over all, coming judgment, and extension of blessings to the whole earth. In this context, one note says,

⁴⁵Charles C. Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: New Testament: New American Standard Version* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), p. 921.

Thus the psalm is more focused on a time in which Gentiles acknowledge the true God, and the benefits that will bring to all the earth, than it is on the final judgment. Christians sing this, knowing that God has ushered in this long-awaited epoch with the resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁶

Dispensationalists see the universal rule in this psalm as entirely future, while nondispensationalists see it as beginning with Christ's resurrection and extending through the Church Age.

In his setting of this text, Watts uses language in his "imitation" that was not in the original text but that seems to place its prophecy, not after the first coming of Christ, but after his second coming. For example, Watts says that when Christ comes in the manner of Psalm 98, "sins and sorrows" will no more "grow," and "thorns" will no longer "infest the ground." The fact that these kinds of universal blessings have not yet occurred seems to indicate that Watts sees them as future reality.

These examples from the book of Psalms indicate that Watts was willing to renegotiate Old Testament prophecy in light of New Testament truth to a certain extent, but he still saw a future literal reign of Christ on the earth. The difficulty here is that Watts's "imitations" could have been driven by one of two motivations: either Watts was merely "spiritualizing" Old Testament texts and applying them to the New Testament church, or he saw such a clear distinction between Israel and the church that he did not believe songs written for the former could be sung by the latter and instead sought to draw out transdispensational principles in his renderings. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate on his motivation fully enough to answer this question satisfactorily, but the fact that he sees a literal coming and reign of Christ on earth in the future does distinguish him from typical covenantal interpreters. Watts was clearly premillennial, but was his premillennialism due to dispensational-like presuppositions?

WATTS'S VIEW OF ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH

The answer to the previous question will become clearer in considering how Watts views the relationship between Israel and the church. In several cases Watts calls Israel "the church,"⁴⁷ proclaims the "church or nation of the Jews" to be a "type or figure of the whole invisible church of God,"⁴⁸ and explains that for Israel "the church was their

⁴⁶*ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008). The *ESV Study Bible* notes are known for their Reformed leaning. Notes in the Psalms were written by C. John Collins of Covenant Theological Seminary.

⁴⁷For example, Watts dedicates an entire discourse to comparing the Jewish "church" and the Christian "church" in which he states that "the Jewish nation was once the only visible church of God among men, and the Gentiles were excluded" (Watts, *Works in Nine Volumes*, 3:603.)

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 3:598–99.

whole nation, for it was ordained of God to be a national church.”⁴⁹ This does not necessarily indicate a blurring of the two, however, for dispensationalists are not immune from calling Israel a “church”—both Darby and Scofield do so. For example, Darby mentions the “Jewish church (i.e., assembly) or nation” in his writings,⁵⁰ and likewise, Scofield says, “It [‘church’] is thus appropriately used, not only of the New Testament church and of the New Testament churches, but also of Israel in the wilderness (Acts vii : 38), and of the town meeting of Ephesus (Acts xix : 32, 39, 41, ‘assembly’).”⁵¹ As both of them highlight the underlying meaning of “assembly,” however, they seem to be using the term in its general sense rather than specifically referring to the New Testament body. Watts, however, appears to use the term more specifically and sees at least a typological relationship between the two bodies and very likely a replacement of Israel by the church.

Watts manifests this replacement emphasis in several places. He argues that God has rejected Israel as his people because of their sin and has replaced them with the Christian church:

God has fulfilled his word, and cut them off according to his threatenings, from his relation to him as their God, nor are they any longer his people; they have *left their names for a curse* to his chosen people, that is, the gospel church made up chiefly of Gentiles, who esteem the name of a Jew a reproach or a curse, and God has called his people, *by another name*, that is, christians, as he threatened so plainly by Isaiah, his prophet, chapter lxxv. 15. These were the children of the kingdom concerning whom our Savior foretels, that they should not sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, but *should be cast out into outer darkness*; Mat. viii. 11, 12.⁵²

The church, according to Watts, inherits all of the promises God made to Israel, albeit in spiritual form:

As those Gentiles who do, really and inwardly, receive the Messiah, and practise his religion in faith and holiness, come into all these inward, real, and spiritual privileges and blessings; so all that make a visible and credible profession of faith, and holiness, and universal subjection to Christ, come into all the outward privileges of the visible church, under the gospel: Some few of which privileges are continued from the Jewish church, but the greatest part of them are abolished, because the gospel state is more spiritual than the dispensation of the levitical law, and not such a typical state as that was; and none are to be admitted into this visible church, and esteemed complete members of it, but those who make such a declaration and profession of their faith in Christ, and their avowed

⁴⁹Ibid., 3:601.

⁵⁰John Nelson Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, 34 vols. (Sunbury, PA: Believers Bookshelf, n.d.), 2:35.

⁵¹C. I. Scofield and Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *Things New and Old: Old and New Testament Studies* (New York: Publication Office “Our Hope,” 1920), p. 257 (emphasis original).

⁵²Watts, *Works in Nine Volumes*, 3:612 (emphasis original).

subjection to him, as may be supposed, in a judgment of charity, to manifest them to be real believers in Christ, the true subjects of his spiritual kingdom, and members of the invisible church.⁵³

Watts's ideas are perhaps best understood on this matter when it becomes clear that he views both Old Testament Israel and the Gentile nations as types of believers and unbelievers in every era. He argues that the Jews represent those "under the kingdom of God," while the Gentiles picture those "under the kingdom of Satan." The physical nature of these two groups enters then a "more spiritual state and economy" in the New Testament, wherein birth no longer grants one entrance into one group or the other, but now "a visible profession of our being born of God, of real faith in Christ, of true repentance, and inward holiness...render [believers] real members of the invisible church *of God*."⁵⁴ Again, Watts's typological understanding of Israel in the Old Testament seems to downplay the importance of the nation itself in order to highlight the reality of its antitype, the church.

Despite the fact that Watts appears to blur a distinction between Israel and the church, he does anticipate a literal coming of Christ to earth, a quality many cite as proof that he may be included in the proto-dispensational ranks. Arno C. Gaebelein, an associate of Scofield, for example, notes Watts's hymn, "Jesus Shall Reign," an "imitation" of Psalm 72, as proof of his premillennialism.⁵⁵

Called "A Song for Solomon," Psalm 72 is a royal psalm praying for the successful rule of David's descendants. The psalm prophesies the global extent of that rule one day in the future, when one of his descendants "shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth" (Ps 72:8, KJV). This descendent will have ultimate victory over all of his enemies (v. 9), he "shall spare the poor and needy" (v. 13), and "daily shall he be praised" (v. 15). Dispensationalists and nondispensationalists interpret this hymn differently. Although both groups admit that the psalm "is messianic in the sense that Jesus is the 'Christ' ('anointed one') who shares in all the promises made to David and to his descendants (cf. 2 Sam 7),"⁵⁶ dispensationalists see the universal rule in this psalm as entirely future, while some nondispensationalists see it as beginning with Christ's death and resurrection. For example, Scofield says in his *Reference Bible* note, "The Psalm as a whole forms a complete vision of Messiah's kingdom so far as the O.T. revelation extended. All David's prayers

⁵³Ibid., 3:613.

⁵⁴Ibid., 3:620 (emphasis original).

⁵⁵Scofield and Gaebelein, *Things New and Old*, p. 159. Interestingly, others attempt to portray the same hymn as expressing postmillennialism. See Roger E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2002), p. 352.

⁵⁶VanGemeren, "Psalms," p. 469.

will find their fruition in the kingdom,”⁵⁷ and Ryrie says of the “rule from sea to sea” in verse 8, “This will not be fulfilled until the millennial reign of Christ.”⁵⁸ In contrast, a note in the *ESV Study Bible* claims that Jesus “has begun to fulfill this task through the Christian mission (cf. Matt. 28:18–20; Rom. 1:1–6)” and even goes so far as to use this interpretation as a basis for “Kingdom” work in the church today.⁵⁹ The note ironically cites “Jesus Shall Reign” as an example of its interpretation. Since the original psalm itself does not clearly indicate the exact timing of its prophecy, such interpretations are based on other hermeneutical presuppositions, and thus Watts’s “imitation” of the psalm may shed some light on his view of Christ’s Kingdom.

While much of his setting utilizes almost the exact language and phraseology of the original psalm, and thus gives no clear indication as to when he believes these events to take place, two phrases in particular that are not in the original may offer some clues. First, Watts says in his fourth stanza that “His name like sweet perfume shall rise / With ev’ry morning sacrifice.” This reference to a morning sacrifice occurs nowhere in the original psalm, so it is clearly an interpretive addition by the author. The fact that there are no sacrifices today during the Church Age seems to indicate that Watts did not see the events of Psalm 72 as taking place during this age. He may have considered the psalm to take place entirely in the time of its writing, but three factors indicate otherwise. The most obvious is that he makes Jesus the subject of his interpretation in the hymn. Second, Watts specifically cited “royal psalms” in his Preface as those that had little profitability for Christians. If he saw this psalm as only a reference to a king of Israel, it seems unlikely he would have rendered it as literally as he did. The third indication that Watts did not understand the psalm as relating only to a king in ancient Israel is the other phrase he uses that was not in the original psalm. In stanza seven he says, “Where he displays his healing power / Death and the curse are known no more.” Again, the original psalm itself says nothing of healing, death, or the curse, which leads to a belief that Watts had Jesus, the ultimate descendent of David, in mind here. Yet this language proclaiming the end of death and the curse is certainly not true of the Church Age, so Watts very likely interpreted its meaning to be a future time when Christ would literally reign over all the earth and be praised “with every morning sacrifice” (Ezek 46:13, KJV).

“Jesus Shall Reign” is not the only hymn by Watts that seems to indicate a future restoration of a fallen earth and literal reign of Christ. Watts’s hymn based on Revelation 21:1–4 interprets the passage quite

⁵⁷C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible: The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 633.

⁵⁸Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible*, p. 895.

⁵⁹“This also explains why Christian witness, when it is true to the messianic picture of the Bible, goes beyond basic gospel proclamation and also fosters social justice and the moral transformation of whole societies” (*ESV Study Bible*, p. 1025).

literally, titling the hymn “A Vision of the Kingdom of Christ Among Men” and painting a picture of the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven “adorned with shining grace.”⁶⁰ In a hymn based on Isaiah 9:6, Watts sings of the day when Christ will have wide rule and when the government of the earth and the seas will be laid on his shoulders, and he specifically says that this reign belongs to “ages yet unknown.”⁶¹ In other hymns he expresses certainty of a literal resurrection of the body “at the revival of the just,” and he pleads for the Lord to “bring that delightful, dreadful day.”⁶²

What is strikingly absent from these triumphant declarations of the future earthly reign of Christ, however, is the nation of Israel. In fact, Watts clearly articulates that it will be among the church that Christ will receive his crown:

It is foretold concerning Sion and the church of God, that the *crown* of David shall flourish there, *that his horn shall be made to bud, and his enemies be clothed with shame*; Psalm cxxxii. 18. Jesus Christ, the true David, shall have his head crowned with glory and honour, in the assemblies of his people, where God has recorded his name. Here shall he receive the first homage of numerous subjects; *they shall be made a willing people in the day of his power*; Psalm cx. 3. Hither shall they come from the family of sin, and Satan, and death, and here shall they be made living subjects of Jesus their king. *His horn shall bud*, his power shall reveal itself, *he shall have a new seed to serve him*, growing up continually under the instructions of the sanctuary. *The Lord shall send the rod of his strength out of Zion*, and Jesus shall rule and reign in the midst of his enemies, and melt and soften the hearts of thousands of them into willing subjects. Satan, his grand enemy, shall be put to shame, by the loss of so many souls out of his dominions: All his arts of mischief to ruin mankind shall be confounded; the church of Jesus our king shall never be lost or die, *the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*; Mat. xvi. 18.⁶³

Here also Watts sees a present reality of Christ’s spiritual rule in the church in addition to a future hope of literal reign. For in this very context of applying Zion’s promises to the church, Watts says that such promises have already been fulfilled in every present church, “a little Sion,” having “the blessings of Sion belonging to it.”⁶⁴ He goes on to say, “Many of the promises, which art literally made to Israel, and Jerusalem, and mount Sion, are applied to christians, under the New Testament, by the apostles themselves; and by their example, we are encouraged in the same manner to apply them.”⁶⁵

Interestingly, however, Watts does seem to hope for a gathering of

⁶⁰Watts, *Psalms and Hymns*, pp. 304–5.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 300.

⁶²Ibid., p. 476.

⁶³Watts, *Works in Nine Volumes*, 3:586 (emphasis original).

⁶⁴Ibid., 3:583.

⁶⁵Ibid.

Jews sometime in the future. For example, in a note accompanying Psalm 106, Watts says,

Though the Jews now seem to be cast off, yet the Apostle Paul assures us, that “God *hath not cast away his people whom he foreknew*” (Rom. 11:2). Their unbelief and absence from God is but for a season; for they shall be recalled again, verses 25, 26.⁶⁶

Likewise, in his setting of Psalm 105, he sings,

Then let the world forbear its rage,
Nor put the land in fear;
Israel must live through every age,
And be the’ Almighty’s care.⁶⁷

Yet he does not indicate in any of his writing a belief that Israel as a nation has a future; he likely saw this future gathering of the Jews simply as a large number of ethnic Jews coming to Christ and being made part of the church. Here, then, Watts seems to fit well into John Feinberg’s explanation of a nondispensational premillennialist: “Christ reigns spiritually over his church now, but someday he will reign over all the earth” for 1000 years.⁶⁸ Watts does indeed see a future earthly reign of Christ, but Israel as a nation is notably absent, the church receives all the blessings and promises of that Kingdom, and Christ reigns spiritually over his church even now.

WATTS’S UNIFYING PRINCIPLE

Investigation into what Watts views as the Bible’s unifying principle will shed further light on whether he exhibits characteristics worthy of being called a proto-dispensationalist. One need go no further than Watts’s own discourse on dispensations to discover that he saw these “age divisions” as progressive “publishings” of the covenant of grace. The dispensations are merely successive “transactions of God with men, and his appointments manifested to them” within the “general design of God to recover sinners.”⁶⁹ Watts understands the covenant of grace to begin with the promise of Genesis 3:15, teaches that it “runs through the whole scheme of divine counsels,”⁷⁰ and he explains that “the different dispensations, under which mankind have been placed ever since [the establishment of the covenant of grace], are but different editions or manifestations of this covenant of grace to men in several ages of the world.”⁷¹ He believes all people to be condemned by

⁶⁶Watts, *Poetic Interpretation*, p. 159.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 157.

⁶⁸Feinberg, “Systems,” pp. 81–82.

⁶⁹Watts, *Works in Nine Volumes*, 3:331.

⁷⁰Ibid., 1:616.

⁷¹Ibid., 1:337.

the “law of works” until “they enter into the covenant of grace by repentance and faith in the mercy of God.”⁷² He clearly understands this covenant as the overarching unifying feature of God’s plan for mankind:

“By two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie;” that is, his oath and his promise, he hath established his covenant of grace, “that the heirs of salvation, might have strong consolation;” Heb. vi. 18. Hereby it comes to pass that we have a sure hope of eternal life; for “God that cannot lie hath promised it to us in Christ Jesus before the world began;” Tit i. 2. and 2 Tim. i. 9. And though it was so long ago since the first promise was made, the first promise made to Christ before the foundations of the world, and the first promise made to fallen Adam a little after the foundations of the world were laid; yet our God hath not forgotten his promises and his covenant; he remains still faithful to fulfil every Word of grace “that is gone is out of his lips;” Ps. lxxxix. 33, 34. And should not this oblige us to like faithfulness to our fellow-creatures, since God, who is so infinitely our superior, is pleased thus to bind himself by promises, and thus to fulfil them.⁷³

Some of Watts’s hymns manifest his emphasis on the covenant of grace as a central feature of God’s plan for human history. For example, in a hymn he called “The Promises of the Covenant of Grace,” Watts highlights Old Testament covenant promises from Isaiah, Zechariah, Micah, and Ezekiel, and specifically applies them to the work of Jesus Christ:

Our God will every want supply,
And fill our hearts with peace;
He gives by covenant and by oath
The riches of his grace.

Come, and he’ll cleanse our spotted souls,
And wash away our stains,
In the dear fountain that his Son
Pour’d from his dying veins.⁷⁴

Thus the apparent contradictions between Watts’s dispensational scheme on the one hand, and his lack of key dispensational characteristics on the other hand, begin to make sense. Like the dispensationalist, Watts sees progressive stages in the outworking of God’s plan in the world. But Watts understands that plan much differently than the dispensationalist. He sees the plan of God as rooted in a covenant of grace, manifested primarily in spiritual blessings upon the church, and culminated in the spiritual reign of Christ over his church with no place for national Israel.

⁷²Ibid., 1:256.

⁷³Ibid., 1:295.

⁷⁴Watts, *Psalms and Hymns*, p. 296.

ANALYSIS

From a survey of Isaac Watts's writings and hymns, it is apparent that he did not possess enough of dispensationalism's essential characteristics, even in seed form, to consider him a proto-dispensationalist. Although he believes in a literal return and reign of Christ on the earth in the future and articulates a system of age divisions in God's plan for mankind, he nevertheless renegotiates much of Old Testament prophecy in light of New Testament revelation. This leads him to see the church as simply the next stage in Israel's development, inheriting the promises and blessings made to the nation in spiritual form, rather than seeing the two groups as distinct. Finally, Watts understands the covenant of grace to be the organizational structure of Scripture and human history, and his dispensational divisions are simply progressive stages in the development of the covenant. Rather than demonstrating early dispensational distinctives, Watts is simply a covenantal premillennialist with a well-developed system of historical ages.⁷⁵

Answering the Charge of Recency

Part of the reason for citing Watts as a proto-dispensationalist has been the attempt to answer the charge by critics that the system is novel and finds no roots in historic theology. Yet rather than attempting to find traces of the system in theologians earlier than Darby, perhaps dispensationalists would be better off simply explaining the historical reality of the development of Christian doctrine. The articulation of biblical dogma has developed over thousands of years, and those issues related to dispensationalism have naturally come to the forefront later in time, as James Orr explains: "The doctrine of eschatology has been one of the last doctrines to come to the fore as a topic for theological discussion."⁷⁶

Some dispensationalists do answer the charge this way. For example, Mason explains why the distinctives of dispensationalism came relatively late in history:

⁷⁵It may be important to note at this point that some theologians have questioned the orthodoxy of Watts's views concerning the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit (Levi L. Paine, "New England Trinitarianism," *The New World* 5 [1896]: 275; Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003], p. 43; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], p. 206). The evidence in support of this charge is far from conclusive (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. [London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1872], 2:423-27; Edwin Paxton Hood, *Isaac Watts: His Life and Writings, His Homes and Friends* [London: Religious Tract Society, 1875], p. 312), but if the charges are true, this would provide another reason dispensationalists should not want to claim Watts as a proto-dispensationalist.

⁷⁶James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma: Being the Elliot Lectures, Delivered at the Western Theological Seminary, Allegheny, Penna., U.S.A., 1897* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 24-30.

It is a patent fact that a number of Scripture doctrines did not reach full development until after the Reformation. This is especially true of bibliology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, eschatology, and a great many aspects of soteriology. There has been growth here. This growth does not argue that men did not believe these things before, or at least the great principles. The refinement of them has come with study. Why should not this have been the case with the doctrine of the development of God's purpose with man, culminating in the kingdom reign of Christ?⁷⁷

Even Ryrie offers a similar explanation. He calls such a charge of recency a “straw man” and “the wrong use of history.”⁷⁸ His defense is worth quoting in its entirety:

The fact that something was taught in the first century does not make it right (unless taught in the canonical Scriptures), and the fact that something was not taught until the nineteenth century does not make it wrong, unless, of course, it is unscriptural. Nondispensationalists surely know that baptismal regeneration was taught in the early centuries, and yet many of them would not include that error in their theological systems simply because it is historic. After all, the ultimate question is not, Is dispensationalism—or any other teaching—historic? but, Is it scriptural? Most opponents of dispensationalism realize that this is the issue, but they still persist in using the historical argument with its fallacious implications.⁷⁹

Ryrie closes his argument with one from John Calvin, a place where he should have perhaps ended the argument rather than continuing to elaborate “Early Dispensational-like Concepts” allegedly apparent in theologians such as Poiret, Edwards, and Watts. Calvin answers those who claimed that Reformation doctrine was “new”:

First, by calling it “new” they do great wrong to God, whose Sacred Word does not deserve to be accused of novelty.... That it has lain long unknown and buried is the fault of man's impiety. Now when it is restored to use by God's goodness, its claims to *antiquity* ought to be admitted at least by right of recovery.⁸⁰

A Proto-“Progressive” Dispensationalist?

Ironically, Watts's covenantal premillennialism with a system of ages does, in many ways, resemble a more contemporary form of dispensationalism, namely, so-called “progressive” dispensationalism. Progressive dispensationalism developed in the early 1970s out of a desire for more unity between dispensationalists and covenantalists. Some of its later influential writers include Robert Saucy, Darrell

⁷⁷Mason, “Review,” p. 17.

⁷⁸Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, p. 62.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰John Calvin, “Prefatory Address to King Francis,” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: Wolfe & Harison, 1561), p. 4, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 62–63 (emphasis original).

Bock, and Craig Blaising.⁸¹ Progressives have sought to correct some of the perceived divisiveness they see between dispensationalists and their counterparts,⁸² and thus have attempted “a mediating position between nondispensationalism and traditional dispensationalism that provides a better understanding of Scripture.”⁸³

While progressives claim that their system is merely a natural development of classic dispensationalism,⁸⁴ more traditional dispensationalists insist that progressive dispensationalism shares more in common with covenant theology than with any traditional forms of dispensationalism. Roy Beacham, for example, enumerates the following presuppositions of progressive dispensationalism that align it with classic covenantalism:

1. An inclusive hermeneutical method
2. The hermeneutic of inaugurated eschatology
3. New Testament priority in the progress of revelation
4. Typological interpretation of prophecy⁸⁵

He thus concludes that

Progressive dispensationalism, in its view of salvation history, holistic redemption, and the single people of God, has moved significantly away from the position of traditional forms of dispensationalism and much closer to the position of covenant premillennialism with regard to the nature and makeup of the church.⁸⁶

Walter A. Elwell agrees: “The newer dispensationalism looks so much like nondispensationalist premillennialism that one struggles to see any real difference.”⁸⁷

⁸¹Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface between Dispensational & Non-Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1993); Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, eds., *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

⁸²“What we share with our responders in this book is an honest desire for dialogue and a pursuit of truth, but not at the expense of a fundamental unity that we know that God has given to us” (Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 386).

⁸³Saucy, *Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 27.

⁸⁴Blaising insists, for example, that while progressive dispensationalism does make some changes to traditional dispensational interpretations of Scripture, “changes of this sort are not entirely new to dispensationalism” (Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 9).

⁸⁵Roy E. Beacham, “Progressive Dispensationalism: An Overview and Personal Analysis,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (Fall 2004): 10–21.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁸⁷Walter A. Elwell, “Dispensationalism of the Third Kind,” *Christianity Today*,

Perhaps these more traditional dispensationalists have a point if one compares the defining characteristics of progressive dispensationalism with the covenantal premillennialism of Isaac Watts. Like Watts, progressives have a system of ages, yet they attempt to see more continuity of this system within the overarching idea of redemptive history. Like Watts, progressives give priority to the New Testament in their interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. And like Watts, progressives are premillennial, but they see Christ's Kingdom inaugurated already in a spiritual sense for the church.

CONCLUSION

Isaac Watts was a faithful student of Scripture, a gifted author, and an influential hymn-writer, but he was no proto-dispensationalist. Yet what he shares with the dispensationalist is a love of Scripture, a belief that God has a sovereign and unified plan for human history, and a desire to understand the progress of God's revelation to mankind. But perhaps best of all, Watts shares a deep hope and longing for that day in which Christ Jesus will return to rule among his people:

How long, dear Savior, O how long,
Shall this bright hour delay!
Fly swifter round, ye wheels of time,
And bring the welcome day.⁸⁸

12 September 1994, p. 18.

⁸⁸Watts, *Psalms and Hymns*, p. 305.