

COMPANION TO WITH THESE WORDS

The Dispensational Landmines

A Confessional Lutheran Overview

Student Handout · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*

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Dispensationalism is the system — devised in the nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby and spread through the Scofield Reference Bible and a long line of popular books and films — that divides history into separate “dispensations,” sets Israel and the church apart as two distinct peoples, and reads biblical prophecy as a literal countdown to a secret rapture, a seven-year tribulation, and an earthly millennium. Many who hold it love Christ sincerely, and the aim here is not to mock them but to mark, plainly, where the system goes wrong and where the older confessional ground stands firm. What follows maps the chief landmines, the Lutheran footing beneath each, and the books that take up this ground at greater length.

The Landmines

The secret rapture. Dispensationalism splits Christ’s return into two stages — a silent, invisible “rapture” that snatches the church away years before a later public coming. But Scripture knows only one return, loud and visible (Augsburg Confession XVII), and the “catching up” of 1 Thessalonians 4 pictures the church going out to welcome the descending King, not being evacuated from a doomed earth. The hope is not escape but to be “always with the Lord.” The two-stage scheme is a recent innovation; the church did not read it here for eighteen hundred years.

Two peoples of God. The system holds that God runs two separate programs — an earthly, national Israel and a heavenly church — with the church a mere “parenthesis” in his Israel plan. Scripture confesses one people of God in Christ across both Testaments: Abraham’s true offspring are those who share his faith (Galatians 3), Jew and Gentile are made “one new man” (Ephesians 2), and every promise finds its Yes in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20). The church is not a detour from Israel; it is Israel’s promised fulfillment.

Israel as the prophetic clock. Christian Zionism treats the modern state of Israel and the day’s geopolitics as the literal ticking of God’s prophetic countdown, even anticipating a rebuilt temple and restored sacrifices. But the kingdom of God is not a geopolitical entity (the two kingdoms), and the temple and its sacrifices are not awaiting revival — they are fulfilled and forever finished in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews). The “Israel of God” is the whole company of those who belong to Christ by faith (Galatians 6:16).

Wooden literalism and newspaper exegesis. Dispensationalism prides itself on “literal” interpretation, matching prophetic symbols to modern nations, weapons, and leaders read off the headlines. This ignores the genre of apocalyptic writing and turns Scripture into a code to be cracked. The confessional rule is older and surer: Scripture interprets Scripture, and Christ is its key. Prophecy is given to proclaim his victory and comfort his people, not to decode tomorrow’s news.

Date-setting and sign-watching. Because the end is thought to be readable from current events, the movement has produced a long parade of failed predictions and a constant scanning of the skies for signs. Jesus forbids it directly: no one knows the day or the hour, and his coming will be “like a thief.” Readiness is never a matter of cracking the timetable; it is a matter of identity — belonging, already, to the day (1 Thessalonians 5). Each failed prediction only discredits the gospel before a watching world.

Escapism and world-flight. If the world is only doomed to worsen until the rapture whisks believers away at any moment, why invest in it? The system breeds disengagement — and, as at Thessalonica, sometimes outright idleness. The Lutheran answer is the doctrine of vocation: the right way to wait for the Lord is to love the neighbor in front of you and do your honest work. Eschatology was given to order ordinary life, not to abandon it.

The elite remnant and the great harvest. In the same end-times-fevered soil grows a sibling error: latter-rain and “harvest” movements that promise a triumphant final revival led by a spiritual elite — a special “remnant” of restored apostles and prophets seizing the earth for Christ. This is the theology of glory in full bloom, and it is often manipulative and cultic. Scripture promises no such triumph before the end; the church lives by the ordinary means of grace under the shadow of the cross, and the true remnant is simply all who cling to Christ by faith — not an aristocracy of the specially anointed.

Where the Books Go Deeper

- ***With These Words*** — the eschatology itself — the rapture, the day of the Lord, the man of lawlessness and the restrainer, the date-setting and the escapism — handing Paul’s Thessalonian letters back to the church as comfort. (Landmines one, four, five, and six.)
- ***Judeo-Christian Values?*** — the Israel question and the framing beneath it — the two-peoples scheme, Christian Zionism, and what the popular “Judeo-Christian” shorthand can obscure about the discontinuity between the old covenant and the gospel. (Landmines two and three.)
- ***Counterfeit Harvest*** — the sibling movements that grow in the same soil — the harvest, latter-rain, and “remnant” enthusiasms, and the counterfeit gospel of triumph and special anointing beneath them. (Landmine seven.)

At root, every one of these landmines springs from the same mistake — treating prophecy as a timeline to be decoded rather than a Christ to be trusted. The confessional alternative is the burden of all three books and of the study they accompany: an eschatology that is Christ-centered, cross-shaped, sustained by the ordinary means of grace, and given, from first to last, for the comfort of God’s people.