

**WRONGLY DIVIDING  
THE WORD OF TRUTH**



# **WRONGLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH**

**A Critique of Dispensationalism**  
Third Edition

JOHN H. GERSTNER, Ph.D.

Foreword by R. C. Sproul

Edited by Don Kistler



Draper, Virginia

*Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*

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This edition is a slightly revised, newly typeset version of the second edition. In the second edition various spelling and research errors were corrected in response to critiques by some dispensationalist authors. Before his death in 1996 Dr. Gerstner responded to several critics in a handwritten manuscript which he called "Wrongly Dividing 'Wrongly Dividing.'" Selections from that manuscript are included in this edition.

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## PREFACE

In his Preface to the 1991 edition of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, R. C. Sproul lamented that dispensationalism “in all probability is the majority report among current American evangelicals.” He was correct then; his lament still rings true today. But some remarkable changes have occurred in the interim.

It looked to all intelligent people on our “late great planet Earth” that dispensationalism would embarrass itself to death in the last twenty years of the Twentieth Century. Its most visible proponent, multi-million best-selling author and televangelist Hal Lindsey, wrote two painfully misdirected books calling for the Rapture: *1980s: Countdown to Armageddon* and *Planet Earth 2000: Will Mankind Survive?* Yet the system continues on as if nothing happened (in fact, contrary to dispensational expectations, nothing *did* happen).

Historically it has generally been the case that only hard-nosed cults could weather such glaring storms of error. William Miller called for the return of Christ and had his followers expect it — twice, in 1843 and 1844. Yet the Seventh-day Adventist Church arose despite this embarrassing gaffe in their historical foundation. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were certain that Armageddon would transpire in 1914. They guessed again in 1918. Third time’s a charm, so they pointed to 1925. That did not work, so they tried again in 1975. With each of these dates they thought that they, as the 144,000, would be vindicated. Yet they continue with us today.

And so it is with dispensationalism. The “imminent” return of Christ has not happened, despite Israel’s return to the Promised Land in 1948 and the aging of those living in that “generation.” Despite such enormous humiliations as those in the writings of Lindsey and many others, the dispensational behemoth continues moving forward.

We should understand, though, that its progress is more like the stumbling Imperial Walkers entangled in the harpoon and tow cables in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Dispensationalism continues to stumble forward with its large installed populist audience aboard, but it has lost its intellectual defenders and its theological balance. Stumbling is something of a forward movement, to be sure — but it is a forward movement generated from sheer mass in motion, not from a finely-tuned engine racing on. But such inertial progress cannot continue forever. Gravity will win out. The free falling mass will eventually hit the ground with a

deafening thud (though “thud” stands for “Theologically Humiliated yet UnDeterred”).

The relentless harpoons of so many evangelical scholars in the last part of the Twentieth Century began to take their toll on dispensationalism. The well placed tow cables began entangling the dispensational behemoth every step of the way, while its more intellectual advocates abandoned ship. Classic dispensationalism (Darby to Chafer) and Modern Revised dispensationalism (Ryrie, Walvoord and Pentecost, who represent the thinking of the majority of dispensationalists today) began experiencing a painful “brain drain.” Many of its academic representatives died and many others converted to “progressive dispensationalism” — a radically restructured scheme that has been seriously impacted by Reformed thought.

Unfortunately, for dispensationalism’s future, the progressives do not tend to produce popular works for the masses — or even eschatological works to encourage the “prophecy experts” who somehow crowd the airwaves. In fact, progressive dispensationalism appears to be “progressing” *out of* dispensationalism altogether (hence, the shrill cries of alarm from the classic and revised modern dispensationalists). Thus, the system so loved by the untold millions in the pews has been left in the hands of prophetic novelists and trinket salesmen. Dispensationalism is stumbling — entangled in a web of confusion.

Classic and revised modern dispensationalism has been badly hampered in its forward progress by the unrelenting challenges that have snarled the system like harpoons and tow cables from so many snowspeeders. Among the better aimed harpoons fired against the unwieldy dispensational machine was the present book: *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* by the late John H. Gerstner, Ph.D. (1914–96).

This book was first published in 1991, creating an immediate storm of controversy. Gerstner’s no-holds-barred criticism of dispensationalism warned of the very serious systemic errors within the movement, errors that were tripping it up as an intellectual option. Unlike more “sensitive” writers, Dr. Gerstner did not launch his harpoons with rubber, suction-cup, safety heads. He saw dispensationalism negatively impacting the very gospel itself — not just creating fanciful prophetic schemes. And he told his readers so in no uncertain terms.

To change our metaphors, in this large-sized (almost 400 pages) and wide-ranging (historical, philosophical, theological, and exegetical) analysis Dr. Gerstner shows he is truly a doctor possessing surgical skills. He cuts the heart right out of the dispensational monstrosity. Though his



book was written almost two decades ago, and though dispensationalism has greatly changed since then, Gerstner's book is *still* an important work deserving our attention today. In fact, historically we should recognize that it is *because* of such books as this one that the intellectuals in the system began either radically altering it (e.g., Darrell Bock; Craig Blaising; Robert Saucy) or rapidly abandoning it (Bruce Waltke; Stanley J. Grenz; Kim Riddlebarger).

Unfortunately, as noted above, the older, classical and revised modern system still has an enormously large installed base (witness the tens of millions of books sold in the *Left Behind* series). Dispensationalism's "head" may have died but the body still moves in Frankenstein-like fashion, creating a continuing fascination among the masses armed with torches and continuing to look for the Antichrist. And because so many still cling to the old rugged dispensationalism, we need to keep harpooning it until we witness its final collapse.

Dr. Gerstner's thorough critique clearly exposes several of the very serious errors within the system. *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* probably will not be read by the masses who still delight to play "pin the horns on the Antichrist." But it *will* be read by *some* of the more astute students within the movement. And if they read far enough within, they may succumb and begin challenging their fellow stumblers. Dr. Gerstner was once a dispensationalist; and so was I. Perhaps you may also see the light.

NiceneCouncil.com and The Apologetics Group is delighted to be re-releasing this book as we continue our criticism of this misguided system known as "dispensationalism." I would encourage the reader to look up our specially designed website: [AgainstDispensationalism.com](http://AgainstDispensationalism.com) — and check out our documentary on dispensationalism, called "The Late Great Planet Church." Despite its inertial movement, dispensationalism is stumbling to its death. Enter into Dr. Gerstner's operating room and find out why.

Jerry Johnson, M.Phil.  
President, NiceneCouncil.com & The Apologetics Group  
Fall, 2009  
Hoping for the final *fall* of dispensationalism



## FOREWORD

When Karl Barth's *Epistle To the Romans (Romerbrief)* was published in 1918, it was said that it exploded like a bomb on the playground of theologians. This current work on dispensationalism by Dr. John H. Gerstner will be equally explosive on the American evangelical scene. This bomb — unlike missiles that suffer from dubious guidance systems and are liable to land on civilian populations wreaking havoc indiscriminately — is delivered with pinpoint accuracy into the laps of dispensational scholars.

It is a hard book, not in the sense of theological difficulty, but in that it hits hard against a theological system that in all probability is the majority report among current American evangelicals. Gerstner does not have a reputation for dueling with gentility; he asks no quarter and gives none. Yet Gerstner is not interested in substituting vitriolic polemic for hard debate. Rather, he is convinced that nothing less than the gospel is at stake here, and hence it is not a time for pussyfooting timidity.

As a debater Gerstner is steeped in the tradition of Paul, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards where the issues are of such importance that it is imperative that those who go to the mat are dealt with not as weaker brothers, but as able-bodied, indeed, formidable opponents. In this sense the book is hard and not for the weak-minded.

As a world-class historian, Gerstner has done his homework. The book is a result of years of careful and painstaking research. Gerstner has examined in the minutest detail the works of the most important historic dispensational theologians. He has canvassed scholarly journals and Ph.D. dissertations. He has been in repeated dialogue and debate with contemporary dispensational scholars. The current publication is the crystallized essence of over one thousand typescript pages of Gerstner's research and conclusions.

In most modern discussions about dispensationalism, the issues usually brought into sharp focus are eschatology and the "Lordship Salvation" question. Gerstner gives a close analysis of these matters. The scope of the book, however, goes far beyond these issues. Gerstner's chief criticism is directed at dispensationalism's entire structure (classic and current) of soteriology.

Historic dispensationalism tends to view itself as an innovative and modified form of Reformed theology. It frequently claims to be a four-point type of Calvinism, embracing 80 percent of the acrostic

T-U-L-I-P, which summarized the Reformed response at the Synod of Dordt to the chief objections leveled by the Remonstrants. Dispensationalists tend to affirm total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints, while demurring on the doctrine of limited atonement.

Gerstner not only responds to those who would beat the “L” out of “TULIP” (in the process taking some of his own Reformed colleagues to task), but charges that in reality dispensationalism, closely studied, actually deviates from all five points, crushing the flower altogether. Perhaps most significant in this portion of the book is Gerstner’s tight critique of dispensationalism’s view of regeneration. Here he touches a core issue between Reformed theology and other theologies.

One of the most serious charges Gerstner levels at dispensationalism is the charge that its system of theology is inherently antinomian. Though Antinomianism is at the heart of the Lordship Salvation debate, it is not limited to it. The Biblical doctrine of sanctification has been imperiled in every generation. It is a difficult task to steer between the Scylla of legalism and the Charybdis of Antinomianism. It is rare that a legalist ever calls himself a legalist; it is perhaps even more rare for an antinomian to call himself antinomian.

Even the king of modern antinomians, Joseph Fletcher, goes to extraordinary lengths in his book, *Situation Ethics*, to show how he escapes the charge. Likewise dispensationalists cringe at the charge of Antinomianism and repeatedly deny it. Gerstner insists, protests to the contrary, that the dispensational system of theology is inherently and inescapably antinomian. Surely dispensationalists do not desire to be antinomian any more than they want to be neo-nomists or legalists. What Gerstner suggests, however, is that if dispensationalists avoid Antinomianism personally, they do it by a happy inconsistency — not because of their theology, but in spite of it. For Gerstner, when a dispensationalist eschews Antinomianism, he is, in effect, eschewing dispensationalism. It is by embracing the ism that one becomes an ist.

I am convinced that dispensationalist theologians will be exceedingly distressed by this book. Surely many will cry “foul!” They will claim that Gerstner is either unfair or inaccurate in his assessments and evaluations. They will argue that Gerstner erects a straw man and then demolishes it. Anyone familiar with Gerstner’s work knows that he is not interested in building scarecrows. Scarecrows are for the birds, not for serious theologians. If a dispensationalist reads this book and honestly says, “This is not what I believe,” nothing would please Gerstner more.

Is it possible that Gerstner has misunderstood dispensational theology and consequently misrepresented it? We must surely hold to this possibility. Knowing Gerstner, I am confident that he would prefer torture or death to intentionally distorting or misrepresenting anyone's position. This would be particularly true in the case of dispensationalists because he has such a high regard for their relentless and uncompromising adherence and defense of the inerrancy of Scripture.

If Gerstner is inaccurate — if he has failed to understand dispensational theology correctly — then he owes many a profound apology. But first he must be shown where and how he is in error. This is the challenge of the book. If Gerstner is accurate, then dispensationalism should be discarded as being a serious deviation from Biblical Christianity. The issues here are not trifles; they touch on the *cor ecclesia*.

My hope is that this book will spark earnest debate. Recent years have witnessed cordial and helpful dialogue between Reformed theologians and dispensational theologians. In that dialogue much has been accomplished. This book will escalate the debate. It will surely generate heat. My hope is that in the heat there will be light, and that in mature debate our understanding of the gospel will be sharpened and not obscured.

R. C. SPROUL  
Orlando, FL  
1991



## INTRODUCTION

How I have come to write this book is a story in itself. My conversion came about, I believe, through the witness of a dispensationalist. As I grew older in years and in the faith, I realized, however, that dispensationalism as a system of doctrine was not sound, though it retained the elements of truth by which I came to know Jesus Christ savingly. About Him I learned more soundly two years later. For the following fifty-plus years, I have taught the Reformed faith, leaving dispensationalism on the back burner of my attention except for occasional references and a seminary course.

Although I had become aware of its serious departure from biblical teaching, I had not really realized how serious it was until I was teaching a survey course in church history at the Campus Crusade Summer Institute in Fort Collins some years ago. Before that, I had delivered the Griffith-Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary and had tried on various occasions to persuade some of the professors of dispensationalism's non-Calvinistic character. Even then, I had not fully realized that the divergence was far more serious than that. Finally, questions from the Campus Crusade students concerning Antinomianism — and particularly the anti-Lordship teaching of Charles Ryrie — brought home to me the realization that contemporary dispensationalism, like past dispensationalism, is still committed to the non-negotiable doctrine of Antinomianism.

Not quite able to believe this, I corresponded with Dr. Ryrie. Troubled by his response, in spite of his sincere denials that he and others were guilty of this deep anti-evangelical heresy, I felt constrained to publish a little *Primer on Dispensationalism* in 1982. (This primer, along with all my other primers, has been reprinted by Soli Deo Gloria under the title *Primitive Theology*.)

The only serious responses I have had to the *Primer* have argued that dispensationalism as seen, for example, in Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* is no longer where I located it. This larger work of mine is written to show that there has been no *essential* change. Dispensationalism today, as yesterday, is spurious Calvinism and dubious evangelicalism. If it does not refute my charges, and the charges of many others, it cannot long

continue to be considered an essentially Christian movement. As John MacArthur says, “There is no salvation except Lordship Salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that there is not a great deal of truth being proclaimed by dispensationalists. Dispensationalism affirms the inerrancy of Scripture and the deity of Jesus Christ along with many other important and indispensable verities of the Christian religion.

However, the more truth an essentially unsound movement teaches, the more dangerous it becomes — especially for lay Christians. The little ones of Christ’s flock hear in dispensationalism so much of what their Shepherd does say that they are terribly confused when they hear the same voice uttering what they know the true Shepherd would never say. Liberalism, cults, and the occult do not deceive the sheep because these movements explicitly deny Christ. Dispensationalists are bewildering because they are faithful to such an extent that many simply cannot believe that such people could end up denying Christ. But the sheep must listen carefully. If they do not, they will prove to be little bears rather than little sheep. “My sheep hear my voice,” says the Great Shepherd.

No one disputes, of course, that there have been some changes in dispensationalism, especially in this century and in this country. Changes are evident, for example, in the progression of dispensational study Bibles from *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) through *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1917), *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (1967), and *The Ryrie Study Bible* (1978). In my opinion, all of the little changes are for the better. Nevertheless, they are minor and their significance lies only in their pointing in a

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<sup>1</sup> Real dispensationalists reciprocate this view. Zane Hodges, for example, does not hesitate to call an attack on dispensationalism an attack on Christianity. See his *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981). Charles Ryrie is also direct. “The message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel; therefore, one of them is *false and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel* (Galatians 1:6–9).” *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 170 (emph. mine). That this is not a correct statement of Lordship teaching does not relieve Dr. Ryrie of the responsibility for anathematizing what goes by that name, correctly understood.

This is strong but honest language on both sides. If Calvinism is what dispensationalists say it is, it is a curse. If dispensationalism is what Calvinists say it is, it is a curse. The present vogue of confounding the meaning of Calvinism and dispensationalism only delays the inevitable reckoning. The Bible teaches dispensationalism or Calvinism. It cannot teach both and be the infallibly true Word of God. True dispensationalists and true Calvinists agree on that.



certain direction. But, until dispensationalism moves instead of merely timidly pointing, it will have to be recognized as spurious Calvinism and dubious or false evangelicalism.

I am grateful to many libraries with which I have had the privilege of consulting while preparing this work. The British Museum and other London libraries were valuable in the English background to which I give only passing attention. The Speer Library of Princeton Theological Seminary had many sources for Plymouth Brethrenism as well as American dispensationalism. Dallas Theological Seminary Library was, of course, especially valuable, particularly its hundreds of masters and doctoral dissertations. The Roberts Library of Southwestern Baptist Seminary was also useful. While serving as a Yale Divinity School Research Fellow, I had access to the riches of the Sterling and Yale Divinity School libraries. Capital Bible Seminary has also been helpful.

All of these and many other shrines of learning were invariably kind and helpful in every way. Along the way, some students helped me in aspects of this research, among whom I would mention David F. Coffin with particular gratitude. John Dulling has helped in gathering bibliographical data. James M. Boice (1938–2000) very graciously, thoroughly, and critically read this work. I am deeply grateful to him, though he is in no way responsible for what I have written here.

The “Gerstner Project,” R. C. Sproul, Robert D. Love, and Bill and Jeanne McKelvey have, by their generous assistance, sped up the production of this work, as has my wife, Edna, by her complete cooperation. Ron Kilpatrick has made especially valuable contributions concerning recent dispensational literature of the eighties. The Rev. John Wilson has also been helpful in research, and in correcting some of my early research errors.



**Part One**  
**HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT**



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## ANTECEDENTS OF MODERN DISPENSATIONALISM

It has been said that, to keep abreast of the times, one must first get abreast the times. In other words, an awareness of the past is crucial if we wish to understand the present and the future. Dispensationalism, a school of thought with a penchant for dividing history into dispensations or epochs, has its own “dispensations,” its own history. In this chapter, I will briefly survey anticipations of dispensationalism prior to the nineteenth century. Subsequent chapters will deal with the definitive development of dispensationalism in England under John Nelson Darby and with its spread to Europe, Asia, and the United States. Attention will also be paid to the development of Ultra- or consistent dispensationalism.

### The Early Church

There is little point in closely surveying early church history for anticipations of dispensationalism proper. Dispensationalists themselves claim novelty for their system. They recognize that it was mainly a nineteenth-century phenomenon. Nevertheless, some elements of the system are very old, while, of course, the specific combination is new. Some dispensationalists, such as A. D. Ehlert, claim antiquity for their system.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Ehlert views anyone who used the term “dispensation” as a dispensationalist and thus his bibliography (which cites such foes of dispensationalism as Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge) is almost worthless as a proper bibliography of dispensationalism.

Still, there is genuine antiquity to some of the various features found in dispensational theology. To point out every occurrence of items in dispensational theory would be very tedious and only slightly profitable. I shall restrict myself to one indispensable feature of all dispensa-

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold D. Ehlert, “A Bibliography of Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (1944):319–28, 447–60; *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965). Ehlert later wrote a more precise bibliography: *Brethren Writers, A Checklist with an Introduction to British Literature and Additional Lists* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969).

tionalism-premillennialism. Every dispensationalist regards this as an indispensable element in his theology.

Indeed, he does more than that by arguing that, in dispensationalism, premillennialism has its only and necessary logical and systematic support. In other words, consistent premillennialism, the dispensationalist says, implies dispensationalism. Non-dispensational premillennialists, whom I will call classical or historic premillennialists, do not admit this. All agree, however, that you cannot have dispensationalism without premillennialism. Therefore, the presence of premillennialism admits the possibility of the presence of dispensationalism. Conversely, the absence of premillennialism almost proves the absence of dispensationalism.

### *The Second Century*

Most dispensationalists are prone to claim the whole sub-apostolic age for premillennialism. For example, John Walvoord calmly states that “the most ancient view, that of the church of the first few centuries, was what is known as premillennialism or chiliasm.”<sup>2</sup> Such an ambitious statement goes far beyond the evidence. While I grant that Justin Martyr, Hermas, Papias, and Irenaeus may have been premillennarians, and that many regard the Epistle of Barnabas as also premillennial, the following considerations need to be noted.

First, it can be shown with respect even to some of these that their theology was clearly not dispensational. For example, Justin and Irenaeus<sup>3</sup> regarded the church as the fulfillment of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31. This fact precludes their dispensationalism because dispensationalism regards the church age as not predicted by the Old Testament prophets.

Second, Justin Martyr, though a premillennialist, did not regard premillennialism as a test of orthodoxy, but admitted that some right-minded Christians did not agree with his view on this subject.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord, “Posttribulationism Today, Part II: The Rapture and the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (1982): 4.

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, “Dialogue with Trypho,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952; reprint ed.), 1:260–67. Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952; reprint ed.), 1:511, 562.

<sup>4</sup> Justin, “Dialogue,” 239

Third, it should also be pointed out that chiliasm was widely held among the heretics. Agreeing with the great German church historian (and Jewish convert to Christianity) August Neander, W. G. T. Shedd noted that the premillennialism in Christian churches was just a revival of a Jewish belief that flourished especially between A.D. 160 and A.D. 250. "Chiliasm never formed a part of the general creed of the church. It was diffused from one country (Phrygia), and from a single fountainhead."<sup>5</sup> The archheretics Cerinthus, Marcion, and Montanus were premillennialists, as were the apocalyptic books of *Enoch*, *The Twelve Patriarchs*, and the *Sibylline* books.

Fourth, as intimated by Neander, premillennialism was not the doctrine of the catholic creeds. Furthermore, the creeds appear to be distinctly anti-chiliastic. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds leave no room for a millennium, and, speaking of Christ's kingdom, the Council of Constantinople affirmed that "of whose kingdom there shall be no end." The Athanasian Creed states: "at whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account for their own works, and they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the eschatology of these early creeds is better characterized as amillennial or postmillennial.<sup>7</sup>

Finally, the millennialism of the first few centuries is itself rather ambiguously premillennial. One of the ablest recent premillennial writers, D. H. Kromminga, claims far less for ancient millennialism. He finds Barnabas to be not only not a premillenarian, but "The Father of Amillennial understanding."<sup>8</sup> Of the Apostolic Fathers, Kromminga claims only Papias as a millenarian, but does not find the evidence in his case conclusive.<sup>9</sup> He grants that Justin and Irenaeus acknowledge the presence

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<sup>5</sup> W. G. T. Shedd, *A History of Doctrine*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis, Minn.: Klock & Klock, 1978; reprint ed.), 2:642. See also Emil Schurer, *A History of the Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols. in 5 (New York: Scribner, 1896), II/2:170–77.

<sup>6</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (6th ed.: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990; reprint ed.), 2:45, 59, 69–70.

<sup>7</sup> See James H. Snowden, *The Coming of the Lord* (New York: MacMillan, 1919), 20. From a survey of the early creeds, Snowden concludes that they are "postmillennial." This, however, was because he entertained no alternative to premillennialism except postmillennialism.

<sup>8</sup> D. H. Kromminga, *The Millennium in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 43, 48.

of millennial eschatologies in the church.<sup>10</sup> He notes that Justin laid the foundation for the Reformed doctrine of the covenants and that he was not a premillennialist.<sup>11</sup> Speaking generally, he says:

So far as the available evidence goes, there is no ground for ascertaining that Millenarianism was prevalent in the church during the apostolic period, ending with the year 150 A.D. Not only was there very little of it, so far as the literature indicates, but what little there was can be traced rather definitely to un-christian Jewish apocalyptic sources.<sup>12</sup>

Others take a similar view of premillennialism in the early church. W. Masselink, for example, finds no chiliasm in Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Athanasius, or Theophilus.<sup>13</sup> Louis Berkhof writes, “It is not correct to say, as Premillenarians do, that it was generally accepted in the first three centuries. The truth of the matter is that the adherents of this doctrine were a rather limited number.”<sup>14</sup>

An important treatment of this period by a dispensationalist is found in the Dallas Seminary thesis by Alan P. Boyd.<sup>15</sup> This work indicts the statement by Charles Ryrie that “Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church.”<sup>16</sup> Citing noted dispensationalists Dwight Pentecost, John Walvoord, and others, Boyd points out that the assumption of “continua-tive premillennialism” is general among dispensationalists. Focusing on Ryrie, Boyd shows that his “premillennialism” includes rapture thinking, the division of Israel and church, dispensationalism, literalism, and pretribulationism.

After carefully surveying and citing the texts of the early church fathers, Boyd ends by saying, “It is the conclusion of this thesis that Dr. Ryrie’s statement is historically invalid within the chronological frame-

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<sup>10</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 43.

<sup>11</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 49. We will see later that Reformed covenants are quite different from dispensational covenants. See Harold O. J. Brown, “Covenant and Dispensation,” *Trinity Journal NS* 2 (1981):69–70.

<sup>12</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> W. Masselink, *Why a Thousand Years?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 270.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Patrick Boyd, “A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977).

<sup>16</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (New York: Loizeaux, 1953), 17.



work of this thesis.”<sup>17</sup> “These early churchmen were not literalistic; drew no essential distinction between Israel and the Church; did not have a dispensational view of history; though Papias and Justin had a thousand-year kingdom, that was the only similarity to dispensationalism; did not hold to imminency and pretribulationism; and their eschatological chronology was not synonymous with dispensationalism’s.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, the early eschatology was “inimical” to dispensationalism and was “perhaps” a seminal amillennialism.<sup>19</sup>

What was Ryrie’s response? Boyd comments in the preface that, “on the basis of classroom and private discussion . . . Dr. Charles Ryrie, whose statements regarding the historicity of dispensational premillennialism in the Church Fathers are carefully scrutinized in this thesis, has changed his opinion on these matters. Unfortunately, he has not published these clarifications, and it is hoped that he will do so in the near future.”<sup>20</sup>

### *The Third Century and Beyond*

In the period leading up to the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), millenarianism is not especially conspicuous. Millenarians themselves, who have often made excessive claims for the preceding period, see this time as one when their faith began to wane as the church became more worldly. Nevertheless, there were some strong premillennial voices in this era. Commodus, early third-century bishop, anticipated a thousand years during which the Christians were to be served by sinners. This era was to follow upon the defeat of the Antichrist by Christ. Methodius, an opponent of Origen and his excessive spiritualizing of all prophecy, is often claimed by premillennialists, but Kromminga finds the case for his chiliasm no stronger than for that of Barnabas.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Lactantius was, according to Kromminga, the last great representative of premillennialism. “His views are so much like modern premillennial views, that it must be acknowledged, that these were in all their essentials

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<sup>17</sup> Boyd, “Analysis,” 89.

<sup>18</sup> Boyd, “Analysis,” 89.

<sup>19</sup> Boyd, “Analysis,” 91.

<sup>20</sup> Boyd, “Analysis,” Preface. Larry Crutchfield has tried to offset this somewhat by his study of later church fathers in “Israel and the Church in the Ante-Nicene Fathers,” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 144 (1987):254–76.

<sup>21</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 71.

current in the ancient church.”<sup>22</sup> Over against these men were anti-millenarians such as Origen, Hippolytus, and Victorinus.

With the coming of Constantine and the favoring of the Christian church, we note a more complete turning from premillennialism. In Tyconius and Augustine, this reached the stage of complete repudiation, though the latter held to the six ages of the world.<sup>23</sup> The Donatist Tyconius was more of an eschatological specialist than Augustine, and his commentary on the book of Revelation influenced Augustine profoundly. But, since most of his essential ideas are taken up and popularized by Augustine, I will consider the latter rather than the former.<sup>24</sup>

Augustine put a virtual end to millennialism for a millennium of church history. Although he had once held to chiliasm, Augustine rejected it because of its carnal features. He did not object particularly to the idea of the Millennium and the saints enjoying it; rather, he insisted that the joys were to be purely spiritual. Fundamentally, however, the Millennium was to be understood as the reign of the saints with Christ during the interadvent period. The first resurrection in Revelation 20:5 refers to regeneration, and only the second to the physical resurrection. Satan’s being restrained refers to his inability to prevent the church from gathering souls from the nations. His binding took place at the first coming of Christ which began the world conquest by the gospel. The church is the kingdom. Here, the saints reign with Christ over their own lusts and their church.<sup>25</sup> The millennial thinking of Pope Gregory the Great, who is generally known as the popularizer of Augustine, and through whom Augustine strongly influenced the Middle Ages, followed the basic pattern of the Bishop of Hippo in expecting the end of the church age to issue in immortality.

Glancing back at the early church I note that there was some premillennialism which, while clearly existing at first, died out after

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<sup>22</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 76.

<sup>23</sup> Aurelius Augustine, “On the Catechising of the Uninstructed,” trans. S. D. F. Salmond, in *A Select Library of the Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, first series, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977; rep.), 3:282–314.

<sup>24</sup> For the work of Tyconius, see LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers*, 4 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1950), 1:465–73.

<sup>25</sup> See Aurelius Augustine, “City of God,” trans. Marcus Dods, in *A Select Library of the Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, first series, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977; rep. ed.), 2:421–51.

Augustine. I must also note that the chiliasm of the early church can in no way be characterized as dispensational premillennialism. Advocates of premillennialism in the early church lacked dispensational eschatological distinctives such as the notion of a pretribulational rapture. Furthermore, they affirmed beliefs, such as the nature of the relationship between Israel and the church, which are fundamentally incompatible with dispensationalism.

### **The Middle Ages**

The medieval period was not noted for its eschatological writings although I will consider a few typical positions taken during this era. Some theologians, such as Thomas Aquinas, saw the reign of the church as the millennial glory. In direct opposition to this, the Franciscan Spirituals, such as Ubertino of Casale and Peter Olivi, regarded the “Babylon” of Revelation 18 to be the church and the “Beast” as the papacy. This view became rather prominent during the latter part of the medieval period. Some, such as Hildegard, looked for the fulfillment of apocalyptic hopes in the reform of the church.

Most notable of the eschatologists was the Cistercian monk Joachim of Flora (c. A.D. 1135–1202). He saw history as three ages — the age of the Father (the law), the age of the Son (the gospel), and the age of the Holy Spirit (monasticism with its spiritual earnestness). This last period was the proper fulfillment of Christ’s promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. His position was opposed by Aquinas, and in 1260 (the very year that the third age was to begin according to Joachim) his writings were condemned at the Council of Arles. These views lived on, however, among the Joachimites and the Spiritual Franciscans. Donnino, for example, saw the age of the Spirit in the mendicant orders and regarded Joachim’s writings as the eternal gospel.

### **The Reformation Period**

With the Reformation came a resurgence of eschatological thinking and preaching, but the Reformation-era creeds were substantially the same with regard to eschatology as the creeds of the early church. They usually affirmed that Christ would return to judge the living and the dead and then establish the eternal state. This is true of such creeds as the Tetrapolitan Confession, the First and Second Confessions of Basle, the Second Helvetic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, the Canons of Trent, the Orthodox Confession of 1642, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Thirty-Nine Articles of the

Church of England. Article seventeen of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession condemned the “Jewish notion” that, before the resurrection, the saints should occupy this world, as does the Reformed Second Helvetic Confession: “We also do reject the Jewish dream of a Millennium, or golden age on earth, before the last judgment.”<sup>26</sup>

The Second Helvetic also affirms that

Christ will come again to judgment, when the wickedness of the world shall have reached the highest point, and Antichrist corrupted the true religion. He will destroy Antichrist, and judge the quick and the dead (2 Thessalonians 2:8; Acts 17:51–52; 1 Thessalonians 4:17). The believers will enter into the mansions of the blessed; the unbelievers, with the devil and his angels, will be cast into everlasting torment (Matthew 15:41; 2 Timothy 2:11; 2 Peter 3:7).<sup>27</sup>

John Calvin himself may never have written a commentary on the book of Revelation but that does not imply indifference to apocalyptic notions. According to Calvin, the numbers “144 thousand” (Rev. 7:4, 14:1), “666” (Rev. 13:18) and “one thousand” (Rev. 20:2) were not to be taken literally. Of those who did so construe them, “their fiction is too puerile to deserve refutation.” Calvin dismissed such teaching as a childish fantasy without scriptural support.

### **The Post-Reformation Period**

The modern period has seen a great deal of eschatological activity, especially in the form of the resurgence of premillennialism. While the Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic traditions remained fundamentally a- or postmillennial, premillennialism gained standing within these traditions. Johannes Bengel, for example, made premillennialism respectable in the Lutheran church because he took away the imminency doctrine often associated with it. Jung-Stilling effectively introduced premillennialism into the Reformed communions. The Jesuit Ribera, who died in 1591, expected the Antichrist to come as a Jew who would reign three and a half years.

John Alated, one of the great seventeenth-century Reformed theologians, wrote a solid volume defending premillennialism. His prestige tended to overcome suspicion arising from his deviation from amillennial orthodoxy. This tends to prove that, though chiliasm was not

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<sup>26</sup> Second Helvetic Confession, ch. 11.

<sup>27</sup> Second Helvetic Confession, ch. 11.

a standard feature of Calvinism (detested, as we saw, by Calvin), it could be accommodated within the school. Since that time, it has become much more common.

Johannes Cocceius (1603–69) was especially significant. Kromminga enumerates quite a number of dispensational features. First, he posited seven dispensations (which, however, differ widely from those of Scofield). Second, he placed great stress on the prophetic literature. Third, he felt that there is a one-to-one correspondence between prophetic prediction and its historical fulfillment. Fourth, he stressed typology. Fifth, he was especially interested in unfulfilled prophecy. Sixth, he did not regard the Sabbath as binding (though this position has been taken by many non-dispensationalists, it is always held by dispensationalists). Seventh, he distinguished between *aphesis* (the forgiveness of sin) and the *paresis* (the overlooking of sin) of Romans 3:25, believing that the Old Testament saints had an imperfect justification. Eighth, he was tinged with chiliasm. Ninth, he believed that peace will come, the Jews will be converted, Babel (the Roman Catholic church) will perish, the kingdom of Christ will appear in which all the nations will serve, and the gospel will be preached in all the world. All this is to come suddenly at the time when the anti-Christian power will have reached its highest point.<sup>28</sup>

Our comment on all this is that it hardly proves Cocceius to be a modern dispensationalist. Many of these features have been held by classical premillennialists. He comes closest to dispensationalism in his stress on the difference between *aphesis* and *paresis* and his insistence that the Old Testament saints, who had received only the *paresis* of their sins, were not fully justified. But, even at this point, we recognize that Romancists, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and others (believing that the Old Testament saints were not ready at death to go to heaven because Christ had not yet offered up the sacrifice of Himself), seem to be assuming a kind of imperfect justification of the Old Testament saints. Nevertheless, Cocceius' combination of so many features characteristically found in

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<sup>28</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 204ff. See also: C. S. McCoy, "Johannes Cocceius: Federal Theologian," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963):352–70; "The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1957). See also Michael A. Harbin, "The Hermeneutics of Covenant Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986):246–59.

dispensationalism, while hardly justifying Kromminga's term "father of dispensationalism," does make him very significant in its history.<sup>29</sup>

Kromminga seems to find other forerunners of modern dispensationalism as well. F. A. Lampe, the eighteenth century theologian, is regarded as a dispensationalist. He, too, had dispensations but more than this is necessary to prove the presence of dispensationalism. Attention must also be paid to the *theology* which underlies an historical schema of dispensations.

While premillennialism in the eighteenth century was becoming more prominent, it was free of the modern dispensational theology. Unfortunately, this point has been missed by those who seek to enlist eighteenth-century figures such as Isaac Watts as dispensationalists. Ehlert, commenting on Watts' *The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all Dispensations Toward Them*, remarked that here we find "exactly the outline of the first six dispensations that have been widely publicized by the late Dr. C. I. Scofield in his notes."<sup>30</sup> Ehlert does not show, however, that the dispensational theology of Scofield underlay the divisions of Watts. Dr. Ryrie quotes similarly from Watts. He also notes that, except for the Millennium, it is exactly like *The Scofield Reference Bible*. Ryrie concludes, "This was a period of developing dispensationalism."<sup>31</sup>

Rather than proving Watts' alleged dispensationalism, the work in question shows how pure a *covenant* theologian Isaac Watts was. Thus, it is not surprising that Watts calls the "Mosaical dispensation, or the Jewish Religion" nothing less than "a fourth edition of the covenant of grace."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Rutgers' evaluation is probably more appropriate: "As a more representative characterization of this novel doctrine [dispensationalism] I would prefer to style it Coccejanism run riot . . . several covenants, each one representing a specific method of God's dealing with men during that particular period." William H. Rutgers, *Premillennialism in America* (Goes, Holland: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1930), 172. C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* (Richmond: John Knox, 1958), 57–59, notes Cocceius' significant departures from Reformed orthodoxy as follows: first, many covenants of which the covenant of grace is only one; second, the covenant of grace is not said to be one and the same in all dispensations; third, the church is not the climax of redemptive history.

<sup>30</sup> Ehlert, "Bibliography," 454.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), 73.

<sup>32</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 55.

Writing as if he were forewarning of John Nelson Darby and his dispensationalism, Watts observes about our present “Christian dispensation” that “this is the last edition of the covenant of grace.”<sup>33</sup>

A great weakness of Ehlert’s *Bibliography* and of C. F. Lincoln’s “The Development of the Covenant Theory” is the failure to demonstrate the real points at issue.<sup>34</sup> Both seem to be ready to settle for the mere occurrence of certain terms as proof of a great deal more than the mere terms necessarily signify. As we have seen, Augustine spoke of six ages and Jonathan Edwards had more.

L. S. Chafer also suffered from this inexplicable misunderstanding of Edwards when he wrote, “in his day dispensational distinctions were a living topic of theological discussion.”<sup>35</sup> This is true but rather irrelevant. More to the point is Edwards’ contention that “the work of redemption is a work that God carries on from the fall of man to the end of the world.”<sup>36</sup> This “work” is done at different times, periods, ages, dispensations, but all are the redemption of God’s elect, the church, through the covenant of grace.

While it is highly doubtful that we have any real dispensationalists in this period before the nineteenth century, we certainly have a goodly number of premillennialists. Indeed, premillennialism became very prominent and even dominant among many who stressed eschatology and wrote on it.

As I conclude this brief survey of millennialism prior to the nineteenth century, I observe its general character in contrast to dispensational millenarianism. It is worth noting that dispensational premillennialism represents quite an innovation over against historic premillennialism and traditional Christian eschatology in general.

One area of innovation is in the interpretation of the book of Revelation. Dispensationalism uniformly follows the futurist interpretation. Everything from Revelation chapter 4 through the end of the book is yet to be fulfilled. While classic millenarians have seen the prophecies of Revelation fulfilled in various historical men and movements,

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<sup>33</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 562 (emph. mine).

<sup>34</sup> Charles Ford Lincoln, “The Development of the Covenant Theory,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 100 (1943):134–35.

<sup>35</sup> L. S. Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (1936): 392–93.

<sup>36</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, with a Memoir by Serena E. Dwight, 2 vols., rev. and corrected by Edward Hackman (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987; reprint ed.), 1:534.

dispensationalists regard the Beast, Antichrist, seals and trumpets, and so forth as yet to be manifested.

The dispensational tendency toward innovation is also seen in the details of its eschatology. While classical premillenarians agreed with post- and amillennialists that the church would suffer through the Tribulation, virtually all dispensationalists are pretribulationist. That is, dispensationalists believe that Christ will return secretly for His saints prior to the onset of the Tribulation. This doctrine of a pretribulational return leads dispensationalists to speak in reality of three comings of Christ — the Incarnation, the coming of Christ for His saints (the Rapture), and the return of Christ with His saints (the Revelation). This stands in marked contrast to the historic view, held by all except dispensationalists, that there would be only two comings — the Incarnation and the return or Second Advent.

Another dispensational innovation is evident in its anticovenantalism. This is a peculiar way to designate this new view for it is pro-covenantal in a sense. It rejects the traditional two-covenant schema of law and grace in favor of many covenants and dispensations. While the traditional view sees the covenant of works as ended by the fall of Adam from his probation and the covenant of grace as then initiated and continued through the Old and New Testaments and into eternity, dispensationalism finds many covenants and regards this unity of the covenant of grace in different dispensations as a fundamental error.

There are really more than new factors here — this is a new system of theology. It can hardly be said that the eschatological is even the most important element in the system, although it is the most discussed and the most conspicuous. As we shall see in our study of this movement, it has a new theology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and a new systematic arrangement of all of these as well.<sup>37</sup> Dr. Wick Broomall, in an unpublished syllabus entitled “The Bible and the Future,” gives a helpful list of ten distinguishing features of modern dispensationalism as over against the older premillennialism:

1. Older premillennialism taught that the church was in the forevision of the Old Testament prophecy; dispensationalism teaches that the church is hardly, if at all, in the Old Testament prophets.
2. Older premillennialism taught that the great burden of Old Testament prophecy was the coming of Christ to die (at the First Advent)

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<sup>37</sup> See Kromminga, *Millennium*, 242, 252, 302–03.



and the kingdom age (at the Second Advent). Dispensationalism says that the great burden of Old Testament prophecy is the kingdom of the Jews.

3. Older premillennialism taught that the First Advent was the specific time for Christ to die for man's sin; dispensationalism teaches that the kingdom (earthly) should have been set up at the First Advent for that was the predicted time of its coming.

4. Older premillennialism taught that the present age of grace was designed by God and predicted in the Old Testament; dispensationalism holds that the present age was unforeseen in the Old Testament and thus is a "great parenthesis" introduced because the Jews rejected the kingdom.

5. Older premillennialism taught that one may divide time in any way desirable so long as one allows for a millennium after the Second Advent; dispensationalism maintains that the only allowable way to divide time is in seven dispensations. The present age is the sixth such dispensation; the last one will be the millennial age after the Second Advent. It is from this division of time that dispensationalism gets its name.

6. Older premillennialism taught that the Second Advent was to be one event; dispensationalism holds that the Second Advent will be in two sections — "the Rapture" and "the Revelation." Between these two events they put the (to them) unfulfilled seventieth week (seven years) of Daniel 9:23–27, which they call "the Great Tribulation."

7. Older premillennialism taught that certain signs must precede the Second Advent; dispensationalism teaches that no sign precedes the "rapture-stage" of the Second Advent, which may occur "at any moment." However, there are signs that precede the "revelation stage" of the Second Advent. The "Rapture" could occur "at any moment," but the "Revelation" must take place after the seven years of the Great Tribulation. The first stage is undated and unannounced; the second stage is dated and announced.

8. Older premillennialism had two resurrections — the righteous before the Millennium; the unrighteous after the Millennium. dispensationalism has introduced a third resurrection — "tribulation-saints" at the "revelation-stage" of the Second Advent.

9. Older premillennialism usually held what is called the "historical-symbolic" view of the book of Revelation. This view makes Revelation a picture in symbolic form of the main events in the present age. dispensationalism holds generally to the "futurist" view of the book of Revelation, which view makes almost the whole book (especially chapters 4 to 19) a literal description of events to take place during "the Great Tribulation" or Daniel's seventieth week, which dispensationalism considers as yet unfulfilled.

10. The general attitude of older premillennialism was on the whole mild and reverent in its approach to Scripture. There have been some outstanding scholars who have been persuaded that the premillennial is the correct view. In contrast, dispensationalism has assumed a far more dogmatic attitude. It has introduced a number of novelties in prophetic interpretation that the church never heard of until about a century ago.

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### MODERN DISPENSATIONALISM IN ENGLAND

The Plymouth Brethren movement, from which modern dispensationalism arose, began in the second decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> From one perspective, it may be seen as part of the general Independent movement which had been firmly established in England since the Puritan period. Like the earlier Independents, who viewed the established Church of England as either apostate or severely defective, the Brethren were also a reaction against the established church.

#### Precursors of the Brethren Movement

A specific independent movement, known as the Walkerite group, began in 1804 when a Mr. Walker left the Anglican Church. Though his movement lapsed after a decade, his ideas lived on in the Dublin area. Furthermore, it seems that this spirit of dissatisfaction with existing forms of organized religion was fairly widespread. It has been observed by Noel, Ironside, and others that from 1812 to 1820 a correspondence was carried on between believers in New York City and Great Britain who were dissatisfied with the contemporary condition of the organized churches.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Napoleon Noel, *The History of the Brethren*, 2 vols. (Denver: Knapp, 1936), 1:20. Historical investigation is more difficult because secondary works are neither numerous, nor easily accessible, nor written with much documentation. I shall rely primarily, though critically, on Noel's work. Other important sources for this chapter include W. Blair Neatby, *The History of the Plymouth Brethren* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901); H. A. Ironside, *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1942); and W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby* (London: Hammond, 1951). Attention should also be drawn to other helpful studies including F. Roy Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1968); Harold Hamlyn Rowden, *Who Are the Brethren and Does It Matter?* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1986); and Graham Carter and Brian Mills, *The Brethren Today, A Factual Survey* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980). See also Nathan DeLynn, *Roots, Renewal and the Brethren* (Pasadena: Hope, 1986); G. H. Lang, *Anthony Norris Groves* (Miami Springs, Fla.: Schoettle, 1988); and Robert H. Krapohl, "A Search for Purity, the Controversial Life of John Nelson Darby" (Ph.D. dissertation, Baylor University, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Noel, *History*, 1:20; Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 8.

Rennie has a neat summary of other factors present at this time:

As historicist pre-millennialists and all pre-millennialists were such between 1815 and 1830 — they saw a number of signs that indicated the Second Coming. And it appeared as if these signs were being fulfilled before their eyes. One sign was the conversion of Jews, and the aggressive ministry after 1815 of the L. S . P. G. J. with its trickle of Jewish converts convinced many that the turning of the Jews as a whole to Christ was about to take place. . . . Another sign of the Second Advent was the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world, and the partial decline, at least, of opposing forces. The modern missionary movement provided the former, although the pre-millennialists were not as imaginatively exuberant about its achievement as other Evangelicals. Events in Ireland also suggested that God was calling many out of the Roman Catholic Church. During the 1820's many Irish Roman Catholic children began to attend schools provided and directed by Protestants where the Bible was taught.<sup>3</sup>

The movement which concerns us seems to have been precipitated by the dissatisfaction of one man with an Independent church in Dublin. Dr. Edward Cronin, who had been converted from Roman Catholicism, had at first enjoyed the fellowship of this independent church. However, when it came time to take communion, he discovered that he was not considered qualified until he joined some visible and independent church. It did not seem right to him that he was welcome to fellowship but not to the communion service. Cronin then withdrew together with Edward Wilson, and these were later joined by H. Hutchinson, William Stokes, J. Parnell, J. G. Bellett, and J. N. Darby. They fellowshipped apart from an organized Christian community.

This would appear to be the actual beginning of the Plymouth Brethren as they were later to be called. One of their foremost principles was already in evidence — where two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, there is He in the midst of them. This gathering together of believers is the only church there actually is. That no ordained minister was necessary was a second of their principles. Only the third fundamental principle of early Brethrenism was still lacking — the breaking of bread together by those who had thus assembled in the name of Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Ian S. Rennie, "Nineteenth-Century Roots," in *Handbook of Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 46.

### The Influence of John Nelson Darby

When the first breaking of bread by this group took place is not easily determined. Some think it was prior to the appearance of John Nelson Darby among them. Others argue that he introduced this feature. Andrew Miller is quoted approvingly by Napoleon Noel, who is a strong advocate of the primacy of Darby in the founding of the movement:

So the first breaking of bread was in 1826, and the first formal meeting for that purpose was in a private house in Dublin in 1827 (as Mr. Andrew Miller says), and the first meeting in a public meeting place was in 1830.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Darby did not join the group before 1827 at the earliest, and some think it was not until 1828. Still, Noel argues strenuously that it was Darby who introduced the practice of breaking of bread by these assemblies. “Nothing is easier to prove,” Noel writes, “than that it was at Mr. Darby’s suggestion that they broke bread together.”<sup>5</sup> Noel himself seems inconsistent in saying that the Brethren were breaking bread together in 1826, although Darby, who was supposed to have introduced the practice, did not join them until 1827. In the light of this inconsistency in Noel’s evidence, I am inclined to believe that Darby was not the innovator at this point, and that the movement was under way before he joined it in its early years.

This fact, however, does not vitiate Noel’s contention that Darby was in a real sense the founder of the movement. As we shall see, it was Darby’s views on ecclesiology, communion, and eschatology which shaped the Brethren movement. Noel writes:

Mr. W. Blair Neatby’s view is similar to that of another, who claims that Dr. Cronin learned certain things before J. N. Darby, “but only in the germ and much simplicity.” But could every person who had watched the steam raise the lid of a boiling tea kettle claim to be the inventor of the steam engine?<sup>6</sup>

There may still be some question whether Darby was the founder or only the chief systematizer and teacher of the movement; there is, however, no question whatever that he was the leading figure and has remained to this day the chief influence. We turn, therefore, our attention to his story

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<sup>4</sup> Noel, *History*, 1:25.

<sup>5</sup> Noel, *History*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Noel, *History*, 54–56.

and how he came to be related to the movement and quickly rose to the leadership of it.<sup>7</sup>

The youngest son of John Darby, of Leap Castle, Ireland, John Nelson Darby was born in London in 1800, the same year as Pusey, Newman, and Macaulay. Following his father's wishes, he studied law at Westminster College, and he received his B.A. degree from Trinity College, Dublin. A change in career plans led him to study for the ministry, and he was ordained to the Anglican priesthood in 1826.

Assigned to a primitive parish in the mountainous country of county Wicklow in Ireland, Darby was an earnest priest but grew increasingly dissatisfied with the church he served. The formality and externalism of the church were depressing to him, and he concluded that "Christendom, as seen externally was really the world and could not be considered as 'the church.'"<sup>8</sup>

Darby's thoughts on these matters were further crystallized by a statement, to which Darby took great exception, from the Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, calling for the establishment of the Anglican Church as the state church of Ireland. This was a transparent attempt to protect the interests of Protestants in Ireland, and Darby could not understand, as J. G. Bellett noted, why "Ministers of Christ in doing their business as witnesses against the world for a rejected Jesus, should, on meeting resistance from the enemy, turn round and seek security from the world."<sup>9</sup>

About this time (1827–28), Darby fell from his horse and, while convalescing in Dublin, came into contact with the little band of original Brethren.<sup>10</sup> As indicated above, it is difficult to ascertain whether the

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to the standard life by W. G. Turner (see note 1 above), I call attention to the recent brief studies by William Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979); Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960). Particularly interesting is the evaluation by E. E. Whitfield, "Plymouth Brethren," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*. I note that this writer sees Darby as the main Plymouth Brethren influence and that in their eyes Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were "mere ciphers." See also L. V. Crutchfield, "The Doctrine of Ages and Dispensations as Found in the Published Works of John Nelson Darby" (1800–1881) (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1985).

<sup>8</sup> J. N. Darby, letter to F. A. G. Tholuck, quoted in Noel, *History*, 1:35.

<sup>9</sup> J. G. Bellett, quoted in Noel, *History*, 1:29.

<sup>10</sup> See Turner, *Darby*, 17.

Lord's Supper was already being celebrated or whether Darby himself introduced the practice to the group. It is also not clear whether Darby at this time left the Anglican Church, nor is it apparent exactly when he left Ireland.<sup>11</sup> We do know that he went to Oxford, Plymouth, and Paris in the following years.

In 1831 the first Powerscourt meeting, a sort of symposium on Biblical prophecy, was hosted by the wealthy Lady Powerscourt. These meetings, of which several were held, had a great impact on Darby's developing thought on this subject. Darby resided at Oxford for a time before moving to Plymouth where he worked with B. W. Newton, another Brethren leader. The influence of the Brethren at Plymouth was apparently profound on Darby. He wrote a short while later that "Plymouth has altered the face of Christianity to me."<sup>12</sup>

The year 1831 also saw the beginning of Darby's extensive publishing efforts in the field of prophetic interpretation. We know that he began his considerations of the Second Coming the following year, although the origins of his "secret Rapture" doctrine are unclear. The doctrine itself seems to have emerged at the Powerscourt prophetic conferences, although who actually originated it is a matter of debate. Darby's prominence at the Powerscourt meetings has led to the supposition that he is responsible for it, but Clarence Bass questions this. Jon Zens attributes the idea of a secret, pretribulational Rapture to Edward Irving while Dave MacPherson concludes that it arose through the charismatic prophecies of Margaret MacDonald, a visionary in the Irvingite group, though Darby later concluded that she was deluded.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Neatby, *History*, 17, thinks this is the probable year. See also Friedrich Loofs, "Darby, John Nelson," *Realencyklopaedie fuer Protestantische Theologie und Kirche*.

<sup>12</sup> John Nelson Darby, *Letters of J. N. D.*, 3 vols. (London: G. Morrish, 1914–15), 3:492. Loofs, *Realencyklopaedie*, 87, considers the importance of Plymouth so great for Darby that he writes, "So far from Darby being the originator of the Plymouth Brethren, they showed him the way."

<sup>13</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds*, 41; Jon Zens, *Dispensationalism: A Reformed Inquiry Into Its Leading Figures and Features* (Phillipsburg, N. J: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 18; Dave MacPherson, *The Unbelievable Pre-Trib Origin* (Kansas City, Missouri: Heart of America Bible Society, 1973) and *The Incredible Cover-Up* (Medford, Ore.: Omega, 1975). Thomas Ice responds, from a dispensational perspective, to MacPherson's claims in "Why the Doctrine of the Pretribulational Rapture Did Not Begin with Margaret MacDonald," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147

As the numbers of Brethren increased, the scope of Darby's ministry also widened. In 1833, Darby came into contact with George Mueller, of Bristol orphanage fame, who was also an early brother. Darby's relation to the Anglican church at this point is still not clear. Darby does indicate that, in 1833, he still attended the Church of England ministry.<sup>14</sup> It is probable, at this point, that Brethren weddings and funerals were still done by ministers. During this period, Darby, who had been disinherited by his father, received his uncle's legacy.<sup>15</sup> This inheritance subsequently allowed Darby to devote his considerable energies and talents to his ministry without further monetary worries.

In 1837 Darby traveled on the continent, visiting Switzerland, eastern France, and possibly Geneva before returning to Plymouth. His labors in Europe began to show fruit, and a Brethren *Gemeinde* (congregation) was formed in 1839 in Elbersfeld, Germany.

Returning to Plymouth in 1845, Darby found a developed clericalism in the Brethren assembly there. B. W. Newton and J. L. Harris were recognized as elders, and they alternated Sabbaths in their preaching. After considerable controversy, Darby and others withdrew from the Plymouth assembly on the last Sabbath of 1845. Establishing a pattern that was soon to be played out repeatedly, the split spread to other Brethren groups in England. The embers of this controversy were again fanned into flames in 1848 when the Bethesda assembly in Bristol received some members from the Plymouth assembly. Darby, arguing for a strict principle of "separation," maintained that this act constituted a toleration of the Plymouth errors and that such toleration tainted the Bristol assembly. This controversy was the origin of the split, which continues to the present, between the so-called "Open" and the "Closed" or exclusive Brethren. Darby continued his extensive ministry of writing and speaking, and he traveled extensively in England and Europe. In 1864–65, he visited the United States twice. Through these visits the 16th and Walnut Avenue Presbyterian Church, which was pastored by James H. Brookes, became a chief center for the dissemination of dispensationalism in America.

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(1990):155–68. Robert H. Gundry gives a rather detailed history of the rise of pretribulationism in *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 185f.

<sup>14</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 1:20.

<sup>15</sup> Loofs, *Realencyklopaedie*, 474.



In 1866 a rift developed between Darby and some of his friends over his peculiar views on the sufferings of Christ (these will be considered later when I consider the soteriology of dispensationalism). This was only one of many Brethren conflicts which occurred during this period over a variety of church order and doctrinal issues.

Darby died in 1882 in Bournemouth, England, and he was buried there with eight to ten thousand persons present at the service. Seven hundred exclusive congregations existed at the time of his death — a remarkable testimony to Darby's energy and dedication.

The personal legacy of Darby is mixed. He is universally recognized as a man of exceptional talents and industry. His favorable financial condition permitted him to cultivate both, and he gave himself generously and influentially in the service of the Brethren. On the other hand, Darby showed little patience with those who disagreed with him or who failed to understand his arguments. That he could be ungracious and scathing in his criticism is evident in the incident where, when the great evangelist Dwight L. Moody failed to grasp a point, Darby turned to a bystander and remarked, "I am here to supply exposition not brains."<sup>16</sup> This kind of episode explains why Darby was seen to possess both Adams in force.

### **Brethren History-Dissension and Schism**

Having glanced at the life of J. N. Darby, I turn back now to pick up the more general history of the movement. As we have seen, the Plymouth group was the prominent branch of the new Brethren assemblies for the first decade and a half of the movement's existence. By the year 1845, when B. W. Newton was the leading spirit in this assembly, it had reached an attendance of twelve hundred. It had not only an imposing membership, but also an outstanding leader in Newton.

#### *B. W. Newton and the Issue of Clericalism*

B. W. Newton stood for the better things in the denominations from which most of the Brethren had come. For one thing, he recognized the need for church order and discipline. He himself seemed capable of leading and was recognized as such by most of the people at Plymouth. Alternating with J. L. Harris, he preached regularly. Impromptu speaking (into which the Spirit may have been thought to have led others) was

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<sup>16</sup> Turner, *Darby*, 21.

discouraged. The very arrangement of the assembly room revealed this “clericalism” of Newton.

In another and even more important respect, Newton attempted to preserve the sounder tradition of the denominations from which the Brethren had come. That is to say, he tried to prevent the virus of dispensational thinking from fatally infecting the Brethren movement at the outset. Newton was, in fact, a classical or historic premillennialist. Some of his antidispensational doctrines include the following: First, the church consists of the body of the redeemed throughout all ages and includes both the Old and New Testament saints. Second, the church’s New Testament form was definitely predicted in the Old Testament and was not a mystery in the sense of being utterly unknown before the revelation through the Apostle Paul. Third, Daniel’s seventieth week was fulfilled in Christ’s life and death and did not await its fulfillment after the Rapture. Fourth, the church would go through the Great Tribulation. In addition to these fundamental differences from later dispensational ecclesiology and eschatology, Newton’s soteriology also differed, at least from Darby.

J. N. Darby and some others, after futile efforts to change the situation at the Ebrington Street assembly, withdrew near the end of 1845. In April of 1846, a meeting of Brethren from various places was held in London and again in 1847. These meetings definitely denounced the situation at Plymouth and insisted on separation from it.<sup>17</sup> Newton himself came to London in 1848 and taught in the Compton Street assembly, but he continued occasionally to return to Plymouth.

#### *Bethesda and the Issue of Separation*

If the first major split of the Brethren history is considered as having occurred in 1846 at Plymouth, this rift widened considerably two years later at Bethesda. Some members from Plymouth who had not separated with Darby came to Bristol. They were received into the fellowship of the Bethesda assembly there, but the elders withdrew in protest, contending that the receiving of these persons was a condoning of the Plymouth error. *The Letter of the Ten* was written in reply to this charge, arguing that the persons received into the Bristol fellowship had not been in agreement with developments at Plymouth and therefore were not contami-

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<sup>17</sup> See Noel, *History* 1:211, note.

nated by them.<sup>18</sup> In the meantime, Darby had returned from France and wrote his *Bethesda Circular*. He rejected the position of the Ten as compromise, arguing that it was a duty not only to disapprove of Plymouth, but to separate from it and to have nothing to do with those who did not separate from it. Brethren leader George Mueller, who had been a friend of Newton, defended the Letter of the Ten, and the majority of the Bristol congregation also did. About fifty or sixty members withdrew, however, and the division extended throughout the fellowships. This was the origin of the “Open” versus the “Closed” or exclusive Brethren.

In spite of all the divisions, the Brethren movement continued to grow. Revivals in England tended to benefit the more scripturally-oriented Brethren as theological liberalism tended to weaken the established churches. Church of England losses often became Brethren gains.

The Darbyites have continued to the present day. Holding to exclusive principles, they remain one of the two major divisions of the Brethren movement, the Bethesda or Open Brethren being the other and somewhat larger division. The principles which are still championed by the exclusive Brethren are that every church should have elders who decide the time of meeting and who are qualified to say whether what is said is true or not. Discipline, however, is to be settled by the whole assembly. The Lord’s Supper is received weekly and liberty of ministry is associated with it.<sup>19</sup> The exclusives, although smaller in membership and lesser in activity than the Open Brethren, have had the outstanding teachers in men such as Darby, William Kelly, and C. H Mackintosh. All of these were gifted men, but Charles Haddon Spurgeon could say of Kelly what was true of all, “Kelly, a man for the universe has narrowed his mind by Darbyism.”<sup>20</sup>

Exclusivism is based on 2 John 10–11, and is applied to those in error and all in any way related to them.<sup>21</sup> Noel states their outlook in no uncertain terms: “Exclusive” here [those separating from Plymouth at the time of Newton] means the corporate position and unity of all scripturally gathered assemblies, meeting in separation from iniquity and from vessels to dishonor. (See 2 Timothy 2:19–22; 2 John 10–11.) They collectively and effectively exclude evil.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, p. 60 for the text of this statement.

<sup>19</sup> Neatby, *History*, 58–59.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Turner, *Darby*, 51.

<sup>21</sup> See Neatby, *History*, 186.

<sup>22</sup> Noel, *History*, 1:219.

The Bethesda group has continued, grown, and divided. It represents today the largest wing of the Brethren movement, and it has not had quite as many divisions as its exclusive rival. The three major offshoots are the F. Vernal group, the Philip Mauro group, and the Needed Truth movement. The Open Brethren have spread extensively and have been quite active in missions. Today they are found in Britain, China, India, the Straits Settlements, Mrica, New Zealand, Europe, and North and South America.

While they are considered much looser than the Closed Brethren, they hold tenaciously to the general principles of the movement and can divide on some extremely fine points. For example, Harry Ironside, who was at one time a member, tells us that the use of a platform has torn some of these assemblies apart because some have thought the platform is a symbol of the dreaded clericalism.<sup>23</sup> They have also put out members for “adultery,” which is defined as attending some meeting for Christian testimony other than a Brethren assembly.<sup>24</sup>

In spite of their fear of clericalism and insistence on not being a church or having a ministry, they carefully select their leaders before the meeting.<sup>25</sup> Harry Ironside bluntly notes the irony of this:

And each fellowship of Brethren is as truly a system as any other body of believers. If anyone doubts it let him venture to act on his own initiative or as he believes the Spirit leads, contrary to custom, and he will soon find out how sectarian an unsectarian company of Christians can be . . . . In their protest against sectarianism they have become the narrowest and most bigoted sect on earth, and are truly described in Scriptures as living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another.<sup>26</sup>

#### *Ramsgate — The Separation Principle Extended*

The Ramsgate division of 1881 was the next important schism. There had, however, been separations of individuals in the intervening years between 1848 and 1881. For example, in 1866 Hall and Dorman had separated from Darby because of his views on the sufferings of Christ wherein he denied that the first few hours on the cross were atoning. The Ramsgate matter was, like the Bethesda division, based not on doctrinal or theological principles but on church government or order. It is ironic

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<sup>23</sup> Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 137.

<sup>24</sup> Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 141.

<sup>25</sup> Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 174, 197.

how many divisions in their group (which itself divided from the organized churches to avoid organization) have come about on matters of church government and discipline. It also represents a further development of the principle of separation involved in the Bethesda affair.

At Ramsgate in Kent, a Mr. Jull excommunicated the whole Kennington assembly because it was vacillating about the treatment of Edward Cronin, the elderly original brother, who had gone clandestinely to Ryde and, on his own initiative, set up a table there against the judgment of Darby and others. Since not everyone was of the same opinion as Jull about the propriety of excommunicating a whole assembly for this reason, there was a split at Ramsgate. The division spread across the Atlantic, and Darby himself was quite distressed by it, especially because of his friend Kelly, with whom he did not agree but from whom he did not want to separate. The groups involved in this division were finally reconciled in 1926. The matter involved in this dispute represents an extension of the Bethesda principle. The latter involved the rightness of tolerating one who tolerated an offender; the former, the rightness of tolerating one who tolerated a vacillator.

#### *F. W Grant and Soteriological Dissension*

A much more serious division, the Grant affair, occurred two years after Darby's death. Frederick W. Grant was born in England but had moved to Canada and, while still young, had come to live in Plainfield, New Jersey. It is conceded, even by the exclusives, that his life at first was useful in the gospel. But he came to hold some views which were out of line with Darby's, and he had a controversy with the aged and frail leader at Darby's last public gathering at Croydon, England. He is reported to have said, before leaving England, that he would advocate his views after Darby had passed on. It does appear that he began seriously to press them in 1883, the year after the death of Darby. Matters came to a head in Montreal, where a few had been affected by his views. Lord Adalbert P. Cecil, a faithful Darbyite, came over from England to deal with the situation. Grant defended his views, and he and his supporters could not be dissuaded from their position. Since they could not win all the Brethren, a division followed. The group meeting at Natural History Hall in Montreal finally severed the Grant faction from fellowship, while the latter denied the legitimacy of the Lord's Table at the History Hall assembly.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See: Noel, *History*, 1:334–35.

It is clear from the literature surrounding this controversy that substantial doctrinal issues were at stake. Grant propounded four doctrines which diverged from Darbyite “orthodoxy.” First, he maintained that the Old Testament saints enjoyed the full bestowal of eternal life and union with Christ rather than a partial and provisional redemption. Second, he maintained that there was no temporal distinction between regeneration and the “sealing of the Holy Spirit.” Third, Grant argued that Romans 7:15–25 describes the experience of the Christian who has been sealed by the Spirit. Finally, with regard to assurance of salvation, Grant maintained that a genuine believer may not always be conscious of God’s favor.<sup>28</sup>

Ironside relates an incident which occurred in the course of the controversy that illuminates the nature of the doctrinal struggle. A young man had been converted on a sick bed, and he then asked to receive communion. The assembly examined him and it was judged that he truly believed in Christ. But that was not enough to admit him to the Lord’s Supper. The sealing of the Spirit was also necessary, and the young man had not been sealed.<sup>29</sup> Grant was appalled by the pastoral consequences of such a doctrine, and he argued strenuously that the sealing of the Spirit accompanies the saving exercise of faith.

It is clear that Grant’s position, in general, was really the position of the Anglican and other Reformed churches from which the Brethren had originally separated. The assembly in Montreal rightly sensed that it was a defection from the principles of Darby and the Brethren. We see it as the Holy Spirit calling those zealous but erring Brethren back to the church they had left and inflicting upon them, because of their stubborn refusal to be entreated, a further division. As might be expected, the Grant controversy spread and assemblies in England as well as America were split.

#### *C. E. Stuart and the Doctrine of Justification*

The third major division in five years occurred under Clarence Esme Stuart in 1885. He was expelled from the London Darbyites for his teaching that the standing of a Christian (i.e., justification) is complete through faith in the Atonement, independent of personal union with Christ. Union with Christ was considered a condition of added privilege, an improved condition but not an improved standing. The standing with

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<sup>28</sup> Noel, *History*, 1:336.

<sup>29</sup> See Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 99–100.

God was achieved when faith was exercised while a better condition was effected by this union with Christ. James Butler Stoney and C. H. Mackintosh, leaders of the Closed Brethren, attacked Stuart's teaching, maintaining that justification itself was found in the risen Christ.<sup>30</sup> Stoney argued that *standing* (both groups accepted the terminology of *standing* and *condition* which is standard in Brethrenism) consists of "removal of the First Man from under the eye of God" while condition depends upon "the Spirit's work forming Christ within."<sup>31</sup> Stuart and his followers were excommunicated and they formed their own assembly. In time, they broke the Darbyite discipline and admitted members freely in the Open Brethren manner.

#### *F. E. Raven and Christological Heresy*

The next major division of the Brethren, who were not supposed to have any organized or visible churches, was the Raven schism of 1890. Frederick E. Raven was a government official of a mystical temperament, and his mysticism led him into heresy concerning the person of Christ.<sup>32</sup> I have noticed that a number of the earlier divisions of the Brethren were occasioned by men trying to return to a sounder view from which the Brethren had originally separated. In Raven, however, we see the outbreak of explicit heresy which had been long condemned by the church. It is clear that Raven adopted a view of the person of Christ which is associated with Apollinaris of Laodicea, a fourth-century bishop whose views were condemned by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. The fault of Apollinaris lay in his refusal to ascribe a full and complete humanity to Jesus Christ by denying the presence of a human soul. Raven apparently went even further than the fourth century heretic in that Raven was not willing to affirm any genuine humanity in Christ. He was, therefore, taking a Docetic view — arguing that Christ only "seemed" to be human. Furthermore, according to Noel, he denied that Christ was eternally the Son of God or the Word (which would have scandalized even the Docetists).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Neatby, *History*, 311–13.

<sup>31</sup> See Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 114. The importance of the theological issue at stake here should not be underestimated. The faith which "justifies" does so in that it apprehends its object, the person of Jesus Christ. The Reformed faith has always confessed that mere assent is no saving faith at all.

<sup>32</sup> Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 130.

<sup>33</sup> Noel, *History*, 2:595ff.

In addition to this particular separation, there have been a number of other smaller ones and two larger ones connected with the names of John Taylor and Russell Elliott. By this time, however, the patterns of dissension and schism are no doubt clear to the reader, and it is neither profitable nor edifying to proceed further with the details of the story.

Never has one body of Christians split so often, in such a short period of time, and over such minute points of difference. The Brethren themselves used to ask in 1881, "To what section of the disorganization do you belong?"<sup>34</sup> This is party-spirit in the purity of its expression and, tragic as it is in itself, it also teaches most emphatically the evils of unnecessary separation from the visible church of Christ.

Reasons for this tendency toward schism are not difficult to find. The Brethren exaltation of the notion of the "invisible church" at the expense of "visible church" structure, organized ministry, and creedal continuity could only result, given the nature of the human condition, in the sort of splintering we have seen in this chapter. There is an even deeper theological problem involved. Darby's view of the activity of the "new nature" in the believer who has been sealed by the Spirit served to foster an attitude of spiritual arrogance and inflexibility on the part of those who claimed such sealing. A denial of the activity of the old man within the Christian can only lead to a failure on the part of that Christian to recognize the effects of that sinful humanity when they inevitably manifest themselves. The implicit Perfectionism involved in Darby's views at this point will be discussed in a later chapter. Theological error cannot but issue in negative practical consequences.

### **The Spread of the Brethren Movement**

Given the movement's tendency to fragment, the growth that the early Brethren did achieve is rather remarkable. There can be no doubt that the movement was able to tap into the enormous revival of millennial interest that swept England, Europe, and America in the early nineteenth century. From this perspective, the Brethren were only one of a number of eschatologically oriented groups whose number also included the Irvingites in England and the various Adventist groups in America.<sup>35</sup>

Social factors also contributed. Much of the early success of the movement was attributed to its aristocratic membership. Darby admitted

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<sup>34</sup> Neatby, *History*, 322.

<sup>35</sup> See Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 3-80.



this, and the feature has continued in a lesser degree to characterize the Brethren.<sup>36</sup> The bar and military service are forbidden vocations and, since medicine and dentistry are virtually the only professions approved, the large number of doctors among them is not surprising.<sup>37</sup> The society has also tended to follow the personal conduct principles of Darby who was opposed to voting, holding office, using musical instruments, and taking exercise.

Brethrenism has never been so extensive outside England, but, from Darby on, it has made efforts to expand. As already noted, the Open Brethren were more missionary minded. In any case we find the movement in south and central Africa, Egypt, the West Indies, Guiana, India, Burma, and Japan as well as in Europe and America. Switzerland was probably the land of most significant early growth outside Britain. Darby visited there before 1838. An influential member of the state church had invited him to fight Methodism which was beginning to draw people away from the establishment. It soon became apparent, however, that Darbyism was opposed to the Reformed state church as well as the Methodists, and the opposition of Swiss evangelicals limited the spread of the Brethren in Switzerland).<sup>38</sup>

From Switzerland, Brethrenism spread to France. Darby was especially active in the southern area of France around Montpellier. The Brethren in this region were called Darbists after the leader of the movement who had converted them.<sup>39</sup> George Mueller, as well as Darby, was instrumental in bringing Brethrenism to Germany. While Darby was especially active around Elbersfeld, Mueller was invited to Stuttgart by an official of the government who wished to know about the movement. He and his wife came in August of 1843 and were received by the Baptists. An inevitable separation quickly took place, however, and when Mueller left six months later there were about twenty-five Brethren worshipping together.<sup>40</sup> According to *Whitaker's Almanac* (1935) there were then seven hundred assemblies in Germany.

The first to take Brethrenism out of Europe was Anthony Norris Groves, one of the early leaders. In 1833, Groves moved into India and succeeded in causing a split in the Church Missionary Society mission in

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<sup>36</sup> Neatby, *History*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Neatby, *History*, 271.

<sup>38</sup> Neatby, *History*, 84.

<sup>39</sup> See Turner, *Darby*, 18–19.

<sup>40</sup> Neatby, *History*, 97ff.

Tinnevelly. His convert and follower, Aroclappen, was responsible for establishing Brethrenism in the north of Tinnerly.<sup>41</sup> Groves himself later fell into the Arian heresy, returned home, and died in 1856 in the home of his brother-in-law, George Mueller.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Neatby, *History*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> Neatby, *History*, 220.

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## DISPENSATIONALISM IN AMERICA

In the United States, the theology of the Plymouth Brethren blossomed into dispensationalism.<sup>1</sup> This theological movement gained adherents from among Christians of every sort, some so remote from Brethrenism as to be shocked upon learning the source of their doctrine. dispensationalism has produced a large body of literature, a great number of schools, and many Christian movements. Its adherents have constituted if not the backbone, at least much of the bony structure of American theological conservatism for the past hundred years.

Yet dispensationalism is a theology which is treated with studied ignorance by large sections of the theological world. A striking example is found in the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* which devotes one column to a discussion of "dispensationalism," while giving seven columns to an explanation of "Sufism."<sup>2</sup> Under the topic, "Theology, Twentieth Century Trends in," there is no mention of dispensationalism. A number of reasons account for this apparent neglect. For one, dispensationalism has tended to develop its own schools, while other theologies have gained their first footholds in established seminaries. Also, the literature of the movement has been aimed primarily at lay people. It is often in pamphlet form and in not very profound language. Finally, the implications of dispensationalism seem only recently to have made much of an impression on the theological world, particularly on the conservative wing in whose bed the dispensationalist has slept so comfortably for so long. Whatever the reasons, it is strange indeed that there should be such widespread neglect.

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge our indebtedness to the thesis of Talmadge Wilson, "A History of Dispensationalism in the United States of America: The Nineteenth Century" (Th.M. thesis, Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary, 1956). Wilson wrote this for me while a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and has here revised, modified, amplified, and up-dated his original account.

<sup>2</sup> *The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, s.v. "Sufism;" "Theology, Twentieth Century Trends in," 36

### **The Development of American Dispensationalism**

We have already seen that John Nelson Darby made repeated visits abroad from 1862 to 1877. E. R. Sandeen has estimated that forty percent of that time was spent in America.<sup>3</sup> His first visit to the United States seems to have been in 1864. There can be no doubt that, wherever this forceful man went, many found his views persuasive. His influence was greatest among Presbyterians and Baptists. One of the centers of his labors was the city of St. Louis where the prominent Presbyterian pastor, Dr. James H. Brookes, was associated with him. Since Brookes may be thought of as the “father of American Dispensationalism,” it is well that we should know something about this man.

#### *James H. Brookes and Early Dispensationalism*

James H. Brookes was born in 1830 in Pulaski, Tennessee. The child of a minister who died when James was three years old, his early life was lived with friends and relatives. He attended Miami University in Ohio and, while there, took theological work at the United Presbyterian Seminary in Oxford, Ohio. Later, he was graduated from Princeton Seminary and served a charge in Dayton, Ohio with great success. After four years there he went to St. Louis in 1858. Here he was noted for starting “colony” churches from the “parent” church which he served. A severe throat ailment threatened his career, but he found relief in Paris.

The Civil War brought him hurrying back to be with his people. While a southerner, he was not a secessionist and, though earnest in prayer for peace, he could not bring himself to pray for the success of the southern army. This aroused the ire of his more patriotic congregation, and Brookes moved to the pastorate of one of the colony churches that he had helped to found. This was the 16th and Walnut Avenue Presbyterian Church (which moved to Washington and Compton Avenues in 1879), where he was to remain until his death in 1897.

This was the man who met and worked with J. N. Darby. Beyond the bare fact of it, however, it is difficult to uncover evidence as to the real nature of their association. We are told that Brookes was an expert scholar in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, and that he was a great lover of books (a picture of his library shows walls lined with books). Yet, when he writes a pamphlet entitled *How I Became a Premillennialist*, he tells us he became one by Bible study alone. We would like to take this statement at

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<sup>3</sup> Ernest R. Sandeen, “Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism,” *Church History* 36 (1967): 70.

face value. It is difficult to do so, however, for such statements abound in dispensational literature. On the other hand, it is difficult to prove the source of Brookes' opinions. We may reasonably conjecture that he was familiar with the writings of the Brethren before welcoming Darby to close association.

This conjecture is at least not weakened by a circumstance connected with the publication of Brookes' book, *How to Be Saved*, in 1864. This book bears on the title page the author's name listed only as "J. H. B." This is a characteristic Brethren way of signing an author's name. While Allis calls attention to the reluctance of Brookes to credit Darby for influencing his views, many of Brookes' associates bore ample witness to the great influence which Brethren writers exercised.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Brookes came by his views under the considerable influence of Darby, however unaware he may have been of the force of this influence.<sup>5</sup>

Brookes became a most influential exponent of dispensationalism by three chief means. The first of these was his own Bible study and his habit of gathering young proteges around him for such study. By far the best known of these students was C. I. Scofield. The second means was his literary work. He published many books and pamphlets and he edited *The Truth*, a Christian magazine, from 1874 until his death.<sup>6</sup> The third means was his leadership in the Niagara Bible Conference and the various prophetic conferences of his day.

The importance of his public ministry notwithstanding, by far the greatest contribution made by Brookes to the dispensational cause was his personal influence on C. I. Scofield. In my own encounters with

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<sup>4</sup>Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church: An Examination of the Claim of Dispensationalists that the Christian Church Is a Mystery* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 13.

<sup>5</sup>Biographical material is largely drawn from the work of his son-in-law, David Riddle Williams, *James Hall Brookes: A Memoir* (St. Louis: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1897). See also Joseph H. Hall, "James Hall Brookes: New School, Old School, or No School," *Presbyterian* 14 (1988): 35–54.

<sup>6</sup>When Brookes died, *The Truth* merged with A. J. Gordon's magazine and became *Watchword and Truth*. On this transaction, Gaebelien comments, "Watchword and Truth did not continue in the prophetic witness of Drs. Brooks and Gordon, and so it came that *Our Hope* (Gaebelien's magazine which Brookes had warmly endorsed) was looked upon as the true and legitimate successor of *The Truth*." Arno C. Gaebelien, *Half a Century* (New York: Publication Office of Our Hope, 1930), 45ff.

dispensationalists, in person or in their literature, almost all are intimately familiar with Scofield but relatively few seem to have read Darby directly. Even fewer are aware of Brookes. They tend to go from Scofield forward to contemporary dispensationalism rather than backward to their roots elsewhere.

Before turning to Scofield, however, we must take stock of the historical factors which contributed to the success of Scofield and his cohorts. Ian Rennie draws a larger canvas on which he locates the crucial emergence of C. I. Scofield. The British historian aptly describes the American scene:

The strident period of dispensationalism began with the new century. The non-dispensational leaders of premillennialism in America felt they could not honestly participate in a movement whose dominant theology contained implications to which they could not subscribe. Their secession brought an end to the Niagara Bible Conference and might have wrecked the movement; but instead it made the movement more homogeneous and ready to move forward when the right opportunity arose. This opportunity came with the revival of 1904–1908 which was the last in that chain of movements of spiritual renewal which began with Wesley. In 1908, a presentation edition of W. E. Blackstone's, *Jesus is Coming*, a dispensational work first published a generation before, was sent to several hundred thousand ministers and Christian workers. Then in 1909, profiting from the same impetus, the *Scofield Reference Bible* was published. Its orthodoxy was unambiguous in a day of battle, and its eschatology more than ever, appeared to provide a valid interpretation of the current situation. Soon the badge of North American Evangelicalism was the Scofield Bible. It was revised in 1917, with the result that its distinctive teachings were even more cogent and forceful than ever, and just at the time that the British mandate of Palestine provided an apparent fulfillment of premillennial hope in the promised return of Jews to their native land.<sup>7</sup>

### *C. I. Scofield*

Cyrus Ingerson Scofield was born in 1843. Like Brookes, he was reared in Tennessee. He served with distinction in the Confederate army and later determined to study law. He was admitted to the bar in the territory of Kansas, served in the Kansas House of Representatives and was, for two years, U.S. District Attorney for Kansas. Leaving this post, he went to St. Louis to take up private practice. He also began gaining a reputation as

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<sup>7</sup> Ian S. Rennie, "Nineteenth-Century Roots," 48.

something of a dissolute person. In 1879 he was led to the Lord by a persistent friend named McPheeters and all his intensive nature was now brought to the service of God. He soon came under the influence of Brookes, and for many months he studied the Bible in the latter's home. Through the influence of Brookes, Scofield became involved in a Congregational church and before long he was asked to become pastor of a struggling Congregational church in Dallas, Texas. He was ordained to the ministry there and served as pastor from 1882–1895.

Bible study was an important part of his ministry, and soon he began to write. *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth*, embodying many of the principles of his studies with Brookes, came off the press in 1885.<sup>8</sup> The lessons which were later to form the *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course* gradually began to take shape and were hammered out on the anvil of teaching experience with young men.<sup>9</sup> Later, these pamphlets were brought together in three bound volumes and the course is still available through the Moody Bible Institute, which took it from his shoulders in 1915.

Scofield began to make a name for himself in Bible conference work throughout much of America. He met Hudson Taylor on a number of occasions at the Niagara Bible Conference. This served to stir up within him a missionary imperative and later led to his leadership in the Central American Mission. W. Cameron Townsend, one of its early missionaries, later founded the Wycliffe Bible Translators. Scofield was called to the Moody Church in Northfield, Massachusetts as pastor in 1895. There he served as president of the Northfield Bible Training School from 1900–1903. Though he returned to his own church in Dallas in 1902, his service there was very limited from then until 1907 when he was made pastor emeritus.

Between 1902 and 1909, he was largely engaged in work on the *Scofield Reference Bible*.<sup>10</sup> According to Arno C. Gaebelin, Scofield and he talked together around the first of August, 1902 concerning the production of such a work. This conversation occurred at the Sea Cliff Bible Conference, which had been largely financed by John T. Pirie, a Plymouth Brother, as a successor to the former Niagara conference. It was agreed

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<sup>8</sup> C. I Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1928; rep. ed.).

<sup>9</sup> C. I Scofield, *The Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, 19th ed. (Chicago: Moody Colportage Association, 1905).

<sup>10</sup> G. C. Trumbull, *Life Story of C. I. Scofield* (New York: Oxford, 1920).

that Gaebelein should speak to some friends to sound them out about financial support. He received a “considerable sum of money to assist in the project” pledged by Alwyn Ball, Jr., and John T. Pirie put up a similar amount. Others, among them John B. Buss of St. Louis, and Francis B. Fitch, who had published *The Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, also contributed.<sup>11</sup> Francis B. Fitch, John T. Pirie, and Alwyn Ball, Jr. were all Plymouth Brethren and it was through them, in 1899, that Gaebelein himself

became acquainted with the works of those able and godly men who were needed in the great spiritual movement of the Brethren in the early part of the nineteenth century, John Nelson Darby and others. I found in his writings, in the works of William Kelly, Mackintosh, F. Grant, Bellett and others the soul food I needed. I esteem these men next to the Apostles in their sound and spiritual teaching.<sup>12</sup>

Financial support being secured from these Plymouth Brethren, and receiving leave of absence from his Dallas Church, Scofield went abroad to gain more free time. In London, through the good offices of Mr. Scott of the religious publishers, Morgan and Scott, Scofield secured the Oxford University Press as the publisher. Then he went to Montreaux, Switzerland where almost at once he fell ill. After some time, he was able to resume the work in earnest. He returned to his Dallas church around 1905, but it soon became apparent that he must give up one or the other. He gave up the congregation.

Later he returned to Europe, staying at Oxford. While there, he worshiped with a group of Open Brethren. Another trip to Montreaux saw the completion of the work, which was first printed in 1909 and revised in 1917. About that year, Scofield left the Congregational church because of his concern about alleged modernism in that denomination, and he became a member of Texas Presbytery of the southern Presbyterian church. Scofield died in 1921, having lived to see his *Reference Bible* become an extraordinarily influential document in American evangelicalism.

#### *The Theology of the Scofield Bible*

There can be no doubt that Scofield believed that his ideas came from the Bible and that he held and propagated them as such. *The Scofield Bible*

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<sup>11</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The History of the Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Loizeaux, 1943), 48ff.

<sup>12</sup> Gaebelein, *Half a Century*, 83ff.



is, after all, only the King James version of the Bible with interpretive notes affixed.

On the other hand, Scofield did not start interpreting the Bible *de novo* without previous exposure to other interpretations. Rutgers observes that Plymouth Brethrenism was advocated by the saintly Malachi Taylor in the vicinity of New York shortly before or after the beginning of this century. “Scofield making acquaintance with it became so enthused and enamored of its charm, that he proposed to issue a Bible with appended notes and cross references in accordance with this scheme.”<sup>13</sup> Clarence Bass asserts that Scofield “borrowed ideas, words, and phrases” from Darby, and Boettner detects the same influence.<sup>14</sup>

Hardly anyone questions that Scofield was profoundly influenced by Darby in the production of *The Scofield Reference Bible*. Charles Ryrie, however, while admitting this fact, attempts to qualify it in a way with which we will take issue. He writes:

Although we cannot minimize the wide influence of Darby, the glib statement that dispensationalism originated with Darby, whose system was taken over and popularized by Scofield, is not historically accurate.<sup>15</sup>

How does Ryrie justify this charge of inaccuracy? He simply asserts that Scofield’s system is more like that of Isaac Watts than Darby. We have already seen that Ryrie has egregiously misrepresented Isaac Watts’ “dispensationalism” (see chapter one). Any resemblance between Scofield and Watts is purely superficial while that between Scofield and Darby is deep and systemic.

Some have maintained not that Scofield did not derive from Darby, but that the Scofield Bible did not necessarily derive from Scofield. Some have urged differences among the very editors of *The Scofield Reference Bible*. Daniel Fuller, however, has laboriously shown that, though there was some independence and variation in the committee of sub-editors, Scofield himself shaped the views and was ultimately responsible for

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<sup>13</sup> Rutgers, *Premillennialism in America*, 173.

<sup>14</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds*, 18; Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 369f.

<sup>15</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 76.

them.<sup>16</sup> Clarence Bass correctly argues that Scofield's "synthesis of Darby's principles forms the core of *continuing* dispensational hermeneutics."<sup>17</sup>

One sub-editor who clearly did have a marked influence on Scofield was Arno C. Gaebelein. Indeed, it appears that the Scofield Bible's prophetic teachings were mainly those of Gaebelein. Scofield wrote a foreword for Gaebelein's *The Harmony of the Prophetic Word* and requested and received from Gaebelein a number of analyses of prophetic books and interpretations of disputed prophecies. On September 2, 1905, Scofield wrote to Gaebelein:

By all means follow your own views of prophetic analysis. I sit at your feet when it comes to prophecy, and congratulate in advance the future readers of my Bible on having in their hands a safe, clear, sane guide through what to most is a labyrinth.<sup>18</sup>

Gaebelein's views were in turn largely developed through three contacts. Around 1888 when he was a twenty-seven-year-old Methodist preacher, he had contact with Orthodox Jews and he began to adopt their hopes for a literal fulfillment of Messianic prophecies. This brought him into conflict with the "spiritualizing method" (quotation marks his) which he had previously followed.<sup>19</sup> Through the Niagara Bible Conference, he came to know James H. Brookes who, he said, "took me literally under his wings."<sup>20</sup> Finally, we have seen that, in 1899, he became acquainted with the Brethren writers whom he ranked next to the Apostles.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the continuing influence of Scofield's Darbyite dispensationalism is seen in his most influential disciple, Lewis

<sup>16</sup> Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957), 117ff.

<sup>17</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds*, 150 (emph. mine).

<sup>18</sup> Gaebelein, *History*, 32.

<sup>19</sup> In his autobiography, *Half a Century*, 20, Gaebelein makes this incredible statement about the traditional Christian view, which unfortunately, is characteristic of writers of the dispensational school. "Israel, that method teaches, is no longer the Israel of old, but it means the Church now. For the natural Israel no hope of a future restoration is left. All their glorious and unfulfilled promises find now their fulfillment in the Church of Jesus Christ." This certainly does make it hard on the Jews! When they might have had a glorious piece of real estate on the Mediterranean, all they end up with under this interpretation is Christ, of whom it was said that "it pleased the Father that in Him should all the fullness dwell" (Col. 1:19). To add further irony, by no means all covenantalists deny a future for the Jews in Israel.

<sup>20</sup> Gaebelein, *Half a Century*, 40.

Sperry Chafer. Before we trace this influence, however, let us note the significant role of D. L. Moody in the dispensational heritage.

*D.L. Moody and the Transmission of Dispensationalism*

Moody is, of course, profoundly associated with the Northfield conferences which he founded in 1880. Ernest Sandeen calls attention to something he believes has been missed. “No historian of Moody’s amazing career has noted, however, that his Northfield Conferences were virtually dominated by dispensationalists, particularly from 1880 through 1887 and again from 1894–1902.”<sup>21</sup> Be that as it may, it is well known that Darby directly and indirectly influenced Moody’s theological thinking (of which Darby did not have a high opinion).

Notwithstanding the importance of the Northfield Conferences, there is no question that Moody’s greatest dispensational influence has come down through the Bible institute that still bears his name. Ian Rennie tells this story more pungently and accurately than any other brief historical survey we have seen:

Moody’s Institute in Chicago, although not the first of such schools, became the prototype; and since Moody had imbibed a fair dose of dispensationalism in a rather typical unstructured form, and his colleague and successor R. A. Torrey in a more systematic way, it was natural that the burgeoning Bible school movement, with a few exceptions, should follow this line of thought. And as the Bible schools unintentionally became training centers for evangelical ministers as many of the theological seminaries opted for divergent views, Darby’s prophetic teaching became more widely accepted than ever.<sup>22</sup>

*Lewis Sperry Chafer and Dallas Seminary*

Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871–1952) also had his ecclesiastical roots in the Reformed tradition. In 1900 he was ordained to the Congregational ministry in Buffalo. A few years later he joined the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. In that denomination he served a congregation in East Northfield while Scofield was in Northfield. Although Chafer moved to other pastorates and later gave himself to full-time Bible teaching, the contact with Scofield continued and, after the latter’s urging, he established Dallas Theological Seminary in 1924.

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<sup>21</sup> Sandeen, “Origins,” 76.

<sup>22</sup> Rennie, “Nineteenth-Century Roots,” 57.

Although a Presbyterian minister, Chafer had not undergone the usual Presbyterian seminary training. This fact led him naively to claim that “the very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind and to be concerned only with what the Bible teaches.”<sup>23</sup> This leads his biographer, C. F. Lincoln, to conclude that “this independent research has resulted in a work which is unabridged, Calvinistic, premillennial, and dispensational.”<sup>24</sup> Every claim except “Calvinistic” is indisputably true, though “premillennial” must be taken in the dispensational sense.

Chafer has, in the history of American dispensationalism, a double distinction. First, he established and led dispensationalism’s most scholarly institution through the formative first thirty years of its existence.<sup>25</sup> Second, he produced the first full and definitive systematic theology of dispensationalism. This massive eight-volume work is a full articulation of the standard Scofieldian variety of dispensational thought, constantly related to the Biblical texts and data on which it claims to rest. Its influence appears to have been great on all dispensationalist teachers since its first publication, though it is fading today.

All of Chafer’s work and career was openly and obviously in the Scofieldian tradition. A few years before his death, Chafer, faithful to his mentor to the last, was to say of his greatest academic achievement, “It goes on record that the Dallas Theological Seminary uses, recommends, and defends the Scofield Bible.”<sup>26</sup>

The major line of dispensational orthodoxy is clear and unbroken from Darby to Scofield to Chafer to Dallas.

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<sup>23</sup> C. F. Lincoln, “Biographical Sketch of the Author,” in Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 8:5–6. A full-scale scholarly biography of Chafer is still lacking. See also Jeffrey Jon Richards, “The Eschatology of Lewis Sperry Chafer: His Contribution to a Systematization of Dispensational Premillennialism” (Ph.D. dissertation, Drew University, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> Lincoln, “Biographical Sketch,” 6.

<sup>25</sup> See: Rudolf A. Reafer, *A History of Dallas Theological Seminary* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1959), and John A. Witmer, “‘What Hath God Wrought’ — Fifty Years of Dallas Theological Seminary,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130 (1973):291–304.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Jon Zens, *Dispensationalism*, 12.

### **Recent Developments in American Dispensationalism**

The foregoing discussion should not suggest an absolute homogeneity of doctrine at Dallas and in dispensationalism. Until recently, however, the differences have been peripheral and not touching the system itself. Nevertheless, even at Dallas there now appears to be a movement away from Scofield and Chafer, though the fact of any such movement has been challenged by the administration and the movement itself has been militantly challenged by Zane Hodges.

We mention a few instances of the tight dispensational conformity in Dallas dispensationalism. For one thing, the doctrine of a pretribulational rapture of the church seems to be a litmus test of orthodoxy. To “outsiders,” including classic premillennialists, this doctrine is not crucial, if it is believed at all. But not only is it vigorously maintained in Dallas dispensationalism, but deviation from it causes a person to be suspect and institutions to shake and sometimes split. Second, professors at Dallas tend to be graduates of that institution. Very rarely is any chance taken with unknown and untried dispensationalists. This is one way of perpetuating an orthodoxy, and it is conspicuous at this academic “Jerusalem” of dispensationalism. Third, there is the mandatory adherence to Dallas dispensationalism required of students who would receive the Dallas degree.<sup>27</sup>

Now what appears to be a serious crisis at Dallas and elsewhere has arisen with the outspoken advocacy of traditional dispensationalism by New Testament professor Zane Hodges. As we see the matter, Hodges is utterly loyal to Dallas dispensationalism, but his militant advocacy has revealed slippage on the part of many, if not most, of his colleagues. Whether these colleagues are guilty of this slippage or not, they certainly are not shouting the traditional Dallas position from the rooftops in the way Hodges is prone to express his views.

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<sup>27</sup> I discussed this point several times with professors and students when I gave the Griffith-Thomas Lectures at Dallas in 1975. I received neither clear affirmation nor clear denials in response to my questions. I feel certain that this much can be accurately stated: students, no matter how competent, who basically oppose the dispensational system, would not be welcome to come or stay at the seminary. Any who showed any serious departure from dispensational orthodoxy would be intensely investigated and perhaps not be permitted to graduate.

In a later chapter I will critique Hodges' *The Gospel Under Siege*.<sup>28</sup> It is sufficient to say here that what Hodges conceives of as the "gospel" is actually Antinomianism, and he is defending that antinomian "gospel" against the very general criticism it is today receiving from some of his fellow dispensationalists. Former Dallas professor S. Lewis Johnson has, by invitation, critiqued Hodges' book at Dallas Theological Seminary. Some on the faculty appear ill-at-ease with Hodges' position and are suggesting, albeit in somewhat muted tones, that it is "extreme." Some dispensationalists outside Dallas, including Johnson, the popular teacher at Believer's Chapel, and John MacArthur are not so muted. Old Testament scholar Bruce Waltke left Dallas for Reformed theological institutions at Vancouver and Philadelphia. Others have gone elsewhere.

Whenever I have discussed the question of Antinomianism with various Dallas professors and others, I have usually been told that Hodges is the one. No doubt he is, but he is not alone. I will be demonstrating later in this volume that John Walvoord and Charles Ryrie are teaching (less polemically) the same doctrine. More importantly, what Hodges is maintaining is dispensational orthodoxy and those who are differing with his position (in and out of Dallas) are guilty of "declension" or departure from this orthodoxy.

Another dispensationalist who complains of the Dallas drift is W. C. Mellon. He maintains that Dallas has profoundly shifted its position and that this has been accomplished under cover of a terminological "camouflage" whereby the Dallas theologians now call the old dispensational orthodoxy "ultradispensational," and claim the dispensational label for their new deviation.<sup>29</sup>

Obviously, a crisis is brewing. I believe it is a good thing, representing the beginning of a possible return, on the part of many dispensationalists, to true historic and Biblical orthodoxy. But, in all fairness, a departure must be admitted. Anti-antinomians cannot claim Darby, Mackintosh, Kelly, Tregelles, Pettingill, Arno Gaebele, Scofield, and Chafer for fathers. The current "Lordship" controversy is a symptom of this crisis (to be discussed later in some detail).

If Hodges and others are now raising problems, dispensationalism has been growing wholesale elsewhere. Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*

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<sup>28</sup> Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study of Faith and Works* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981).

<sup>29</sup> W. C. Mellon, *We've Been Robbed! Or a Dispensationalist Looks at the Baptism of the Holy Spirit* (Plainfield, N. J.: Logos International, 1971), 15.

was the non-fiction best seller of the seventies, if not of all time (apart from the Bible).<sup>30</sup> Many millions of copies have been printed even while formidable critics have lampooned Lindsey's interpretation of biblical terms such as *Meshech*, *Rosh*, and *Tubal* as referring to Moscow, Russia, and Tobolsk respectively.<sup>31</sup> Dyrness thinks "it is no coincidence that the publication of Hal Lindsey's first book on prophecy coincided with the greatest revival of astrology in three hundred years."<sup>32</sup> Jerry Falwell became a household name in the 1980s, and his strong and influential pro-Israel stance is often, if not always, supported by the dispensational theology which underlies it.<sup>33</sup> It was popularly rumored that Menachem Begin, the prime minister of Israel, would phone Falwell before President Reagan for help.

This remarkable popular success of dispensationalism is balanced, however, by an increasingly independent stance on the part of many evangelical institutions toward dispensational orthodoxy. Not only has dispensational Fundamentalist and arch-separatist George Dollar<sup>34</sup> been denouncing dispensational declensions everywhere, but less stringent voices have raised questions about Wheaton and Gordon Colleges, Eastern Baptist Seminary, and Baptists in general. For example, John Walvoord charges Gilbert Bilezikian with teaching amillennialism at Wheaton, and R. V. Clearwater notes the conflict concerning dispensationalism in Baptist churches.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hal Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

<sup>31</sup> See Cornelis Vanderwaal, *Hal Lindsey and Biblical Prophecy* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Paideia, 1978); George C. Miladin, *Is This Really the End?* (Cherry Hill, New Jersey: Mack, 1972); Charles D. Provan, *The Church is Israel Now* (Vallecito, California: Ross House, 1987).

<sup>32</sup> W. Dyrness, "The Age of Aquarius," in *Handbook of Biblical Prophecy*, ed. Carl E. Armerding and W. Ward Gasque (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 22.

<sup>33</sup> Jerry Falwell, *Fundamentalist Phenomenon: The Resurgence of Conservative Christianity* (New York: Doubleday, 1981).

<sup>34</sup> George Dollar, *A History of Fundamentalism in America* (Greenville, South Carolina: Bob Jones University Press, 1973), 26–27, 231.

<sup>35</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Posttribulationism Today, Part 2: The Rapture and the Day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (1982): 10; R. V. Clearwater, *Forty Years of History Looks Down Upon Conservative Baptists* (Minneapolis: Central Baptist Press, n.d.).

### **The Institutions of American Dispensationalism**

Although the conservative exodus from the mainline denominations meant the loss of many educational institutions and denominational organizations to liberalism, dispensationalists showed a remarkable capacity to develop an alternative set of institutions to meet the growing needs of their movement. Indeed, the success of twentieth-century American dispensationalism was due, in part, to the vitality of dispensational schools, literature efforts, Bible conferences, and missions.

#### *The Bible School Movement*

In addition to the schools mentioned above such as Dallas Seminary and Wheaton College, another type of school has heretofore received little scholarly scrutiny — the Bible school. We need to consider this important factor in order to assess the larger movement properly.

The last half of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries were periods of intense evangelistic activity by such leaders as Dwight L. Moody, J. Wilbur Chapman, Reuben A. Torrey, A. B. Simpson, and Billy Sunday. These were merely the greater lights of an evangelistic firmament which also included a multitude of lesser ones. The evangelistic campaigns which these men conducted produced a large number of people who felt the need for training in the Bible.

A need for Christian lay workers, felt keenly in the conduct of the campaigns, became more widely recognized, and some means had to be found to provide Bible training for people who were in no position to undertake a standard theological course. As a result, Bible schools began attempting to fill the gap described. Brookes' work with a few men gathered around him for Bible study in his own home was rather typical of the humble beginnings of many of these schools. Often, evening classes were arranged to meet the needs of lay people employed during the day. If successful, these were expanded to day school status. Academic requirements, from the nature of the case, were traditionally minimized and emphasis lay on zeal, eagerness to learn, and spiritual qualifications.

The oldest of the modern Bible schools began in this fashion in 1882 with classes conducted in a New York theater under the leadership of A. B. Simpson, a former Presbyterian who was to found the Christian and Missionary Alliance church. Later, this developed into the Missionary Training Institute of Nyack, New York.

Not all of these schools were begun under such humble circumstances. McCormick's money (Harvester) played a large part in the establishment of the Bible-Work Institute of the Chicago Evangelization



Society in 1886. By 1899, this school was known as the Moody Bible Institute.<sup>36</sup> Stewart money (Union Oil) paved the way for the Bible Institute of Los Angeles to open under the presidency of R. A. Torrey in the second decade of this century.<sup>37</sup> LeTourneau money (earth-moving equipment) has backed the Toccoa Falls Institute in Georgia more recently. For most other schools, finances have been a chronic problem. Nevertheless, the need for such schools is still apparent as the Youth for Christ and Campus Crusade movements, the preaching of Billy Graham and others, have continued to give impetus to this need.<sup>38</sup>

The contributions of the Bible school movement to the spread of dispensationalism in the United States have been enormous. While it should be pointed out that some of the evangelists, notably Moody and Simpson, did not allow their ministries to be taken up with concern for the second coming of Christ to the point of preoccupation, yet it must be admitted that all the more prominent evangelists leaned toward dispensational views of history and prophecy. Moody, as we have seen, had a somewhat unsatisfactory relationship with Darby. Darby held what Moody considered an extreme Calvinist position on the perversion of man's will and Darby later condemned Moody's work vigorously. W.G. Turner notes that "Mr. Moody even confessed his indebtedness to the writings of the Brethren for much help in understanding of the Word, but it was C. H. Mackintosh and Charles Stanley who had the greatest influence."<sup>39</sup>

While the evangelists may only have leaned in the direction of dispensationalism, the serious study required by the presence of an inquiring student body soon brought the Bible schools to open avowal of a more fully developed dispensationalism. An accrediting association was formed, of which Terrelle B. Crum was the secretary. Crum reported that the majority of Bible schools were then dispensational. This was true of

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<sup>36</sup> William H. Smith, *D. L. Moody*, 76.

<sup>37</sup> Gaebelien, *Half a Century*, 207.

<sup>38</sup> Information on the Bible School movement has largely been supplied by Terrelle Crum, dean of Providence-Barrington Bible College and secretary of the Accrediting Association of Bible Institutes and Bible Colleges, either through personal conversation, articles by him in the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* or publications of the Association which he has kindly provided.

<sup>39</sup> Turner, *Darby*, 21f.

both private and interdenominational schools, as well as denominationally controlled schools.

Of the forty-one schools listed in 1956 by the association as members or associates, fourteen were inter-denominational. These schools, which were located in every region of the United States, included six of the eight largest and accounted for half of the student body of the forty-one schools. That student body amounted to over ten thousand students. When it is remembered that four-fifths of the Bible schools were connected with the association, it will be seen how favorably this compares with the approximately twenty-two thousand students then enrolled in all the Protestant theological seminaries of the nation.<sup>40</sup>

The Bible schools have produced thousands of lay workers, missionaries, ministers, and Bible teachers, and have furnished thousands of wives for such Christian workers. In many cases, the students were given a more or less stereotyped course and were not exposed to literature of a different school of thought. The assumptions on which they operated were held with considerable naivete. It should be emphasized that they are not the only students guilty of this, but they do share in this guilt to a large degree.

In this connection, we must say a word about other types of schools that have been headquarters for dispensationalism. Liberal arts colleges such as Wheaton, founded in 1860, and Bob Jones, founded in 1927, have undertaken a program of wider educational range. In theology, however, Bob Jones University has maintained a strict dispensational line up to the present. Wheaton College, while technically continuing to insist on faculty adherence to premillennialism, has clearly broadened its perspective in recent years. Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924 near the scene of C. I. Scofield's labors, and it still may be considered the flagship of dispensational seminaries. Quite a number of other dispensational seminaries have arisen, however, including Grace Theological Seminary, Western Conservative Baptist, and Capital Bible Seminary.

#### *Dispensational Literature*

We have already indicated that the literature of the movement is largely of the pamphlet type. Prominent in dispensational publishing were

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<sup>40</sup> Figures for the forty-one members or associations were derived from the official 1955–56 AABIBC listing. The figure for theological students is derived from an addition of the figures supplied by the *Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*.

Paul and Timothy Loizeaux who came from England to Vinton, Iowa in 1876. Three years later, they moved to New York where they established the Bible Truth Depot, a most important source for Brethren and dispensational pamphlets and books.

Among other items of literature influential in the spread of American dispensationalism, we mention only a few. *Jesus is Coming*, by W. E. Blackstone, had enormous impact in helping to popularize the movement.<sup>41</sup> First published in 1878, a presentation edition of several hundred thousand copies was published in 1908, and in this fashion it came into the hands of thousands of Christian workers.

A great number of magazines devoted to these themes were regularly published. Especially influential were *The Truth*, edited by James H. Brookes, and the *Sunday School Times*, edited by C .G. Trumbull. In theological literature, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, the oldest theological quarterly in America which was taken over in 1933 from Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary by Dallas Seminary, is outstanding as a dispensational guide.<sup>42</sup> This brief sketch will serve only to indicate the prodigious literary labors which have marked dispensationalism.

#### *The Bible Conference Movement*

The Bible conference movement has also played an important role in the dissemination of dispensational theology. The Niagara Bible Conference was particularly significant. Begun in a small way by J. H. Brookes, Nathaniel West, W. J. Eerdman, and J . M. Parsons near Chicago in 1875, the conference grew each year and changed locations until 1883 when it settled at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. The list of speakers at these conferences is a veritable catalog of outstanding American dispensationalists and premillennialists. Moorehead, Garrett, Gaebelein, Whittle, Needham, Gordon, and Pierson were prominent. That Brookes was a chief influence at the conference cannot be doubted, and it is significant that the conference dissolved two years after his death.

The manner of its dissolution is instructive. A controversy arose about the theory of the “two comings” of Christ, one for His saints, and one with His saints. Nathaniel West and others taught that this distinction originated with Edward Irving and bitterness, recriminations, and division

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<sup>41</sup> W. E. Blackstone, *Jesus is Coming* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, n. d.).

<sup>42</sup> See G. C. Houghton, “Bibliotheca Sacra: Its Beginning in 1843” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126 (1969): 214–23.

followed. This type of controversy has not died out and is often seen to be the “Achilles heel” of dispensationalism.

The Niagara Bible Conference gave impetus to many other such conferences built especially around the theme of the Second Coming. Out of the summer Bible conferences grew large national or regional “prophetic conferences.” The first of these was in New York City in 1878 and attracted considerable interest even in the secular press. Again the leading spirit was James H. Brookes. Kromminga notes that the call for the conference was signed by thirty-one Presbyterians, ten United Presbyterians, twenty-two Baptists, ten Episcopalians, ten Congregationalists, and one Lutheran.<sup>43</sup> A similar conference was held in Moody’s Farwell Hall in Chicago in 1886, where papers were read by many leading chiliasts. The representation was truly international and even included Franz Delitzsch of Leipzig and Frederic Godet of Switzerland. Allegheny in 1895, Boston in 1901, and Chicago in 1914 were scenes of additional prophetic conferences, and the practice was institutionalized at various Bible conference grounds around the country. More recently, volumes of prophetic conference addresses have been produced under the editorship of Charles Lee Feinberg — an indication of continuing interest in such matters.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Dispensational Mission Efforts*

American dispensationalism has been very missions-minded. Scofield founded the Central American Mission, and the faith missions movement, which originated with Hudson Taylor’s China Inland Mission, has been largely dominated by dispensationalists and has operated in accordance with dispensational principles. Operating in a very different manner from denominational mission agencies, faith missions have attracted a largely interdenominational and nondenominational constituency. In a large measure, interdenominational cooperation among members of a mission has been made feasible by the importance attached to agreement on eschatology.

Here at home, most leading evangelists have been teachers or followers of dispensationalism. Earlier in this century, the radio broadcasts of dispensationalists such as D. G. Barnhouse, Charles E. Fuller, and

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<sup>43</sup> Kromminga, *Millennium*, 232.

<sup>44</sup> See Charles Lee Feinberg, ed., *Prophetic Truth Unfolding* (Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1968); *Prophecy in the Seventies* (Chicago: Moody, 1971); *Jesus the King is Coming* (Chicago: Moody, 1975).

M. R. DeHaan attracted a wide audience. Today, most of the noted “electronic” evangelists, including Rex Humbard, Jerry Falwell, Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, James Robison, and Billy Graham are dispensational.

A special concern has been missions among the Jews. This was the life work of Arno C. Gaebelein and many others have taken an interest in this work to the present day. Since the establishment of the modern state of Israel, a major factor in these endeavors has been the strong dispensational advocacy of Israel. This defense has stemmed in large measure from the dispensational insistence on the eternal claim of the Jewish people to the land of Palestine. It is curious, however, that dispensationalists ignore the clear teaching of the Old Testament to the effect that the occupancy of the land of Palestine was granted to the Jews on condition of covenantal obedience (see Deut. 28:15–68). The return of the Jews to Palestine in unbelief hardly fulfills such a biblical requirement.

#### **Ultradispensationalism or “Bullingerism”**

This movement, which many critics of dispensationalism regard as the only consistent dispensationalism, had its origins as a distinct movement in the work of Ethelbert W. Bullinger (1837–1913). Bullinger was, like Darby, an extraordinary man and, also like Darby, he came from a distinguished family and enjoyed a good education. Bullinger was a descendant of Heinrich Bullinger, the successor of Zwingli and a leader of the Swiss Reformation. An Anglican clergyman and a scholar of some note, Bullinger distinguished Israel and the church even more radically than Darby, maintaining that the origin of the church lies with the ministry of the Apostle Paul after the close of the book of Acts. Bullinger argued that the church was not to observe the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and he advocated the theory of soul sleep — the notion that the soul passes out of conscious existence between death and the resurrection.

In America, the main exponent of the Bullinger views was J. C. O’Hair, pastor of the North Shore Church in Chicago and founder of Milwaukee Bible College. While disagreeing with Bullinger on such extremes as soul sleep, and non-use of the Lord’s Supper, O’Hair agreed on the abandonment of water baptism in this dispensation and he was tireless in attacking Fundamentalists who disagreed with him. A self-taught man, he wrote nearly two hundred books and pamphlets, the style of which makes one wish he had been less diligent. Cornelius R. Starn has continued the tradition, and his literary output is both voluminous and cogent in its adherence to dispensational presuppositions.

Ultradispensationalism has been vigorously resisted by traditional dispensationalism. Harry Ironside called Bullingerism “an absolutely Satanic perversion of the truth.”<sup>45</sup> Then he affirms, “Let one point be absolutely clear: No one was ever saved in any dispensation on any other ground than the finished work of Christ.”<sup>46</sup> While this statement is hardly consistent with Ironside’s dispensationalism, we may well rejoice that, when forced to choose between Christian orthodoxy and dispensational consistency, the specter of Bullingerism has caused traditionalists to reject Ultradispensationalism.

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<sup>45</sup> Harry Ironside, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (New York: Loizeaux, n.d.), 11. The reader will note that while Ironside applies this title to Bullingerism, deemed extreme dispensationalism, I apply it to dispensationalism in general.

<sup>46</sup> Ironside, *Wrongly Dividing*, 57.

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## DISPENSATIONALISM AND THE REFORMED CHURCHES

Brookes may have been the first Presbyterian convert to dispensationalism, but he was not the last. Given the prominent role that Presbyterians played in the dispensational movement, it is necessary to pay close attention to this relationship.<sup>1</sup>

### The Northern Presbyterian Church

The mainline northern Presbyterian alliance with dispensationalism begins in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, especially with the Niagara Bible Conferences of 1883–1897 in which J. H. Brookes was a central figure. The nature of this alliance has been a matter of scholarly debate in recent years, however. According to Ernest Sandeen, it was the 1878 Premillennial Conference which “marks the beginning of a long period of dispensationalist cooperation with Princeton-oriented Calvinists. The unstable and incomplete synthesis which is known as Fundamentalism, at this point, first becomes visible to the historian.”<sup>2</sup> This Sandeen account is insightful and instructive in one way, but has so many misleading — if not inaccurate — details that the position has to be picked apart meticulously.

A large part of the problem stems from Sandeen’s definition of Fundamentalism as “an alliance between two newly formed theologies, dispensationalism and the Princeton Theology which, though not wholly compatible, managed to maintain a united front against modernism until 1918.”<sup>3</sup> Sandeen’s notion of an “alliance” of “two newly formed theologies” is highly problematic for a number of reasons. First, Princeton *theology* and dispensational *theology* were never in “alliance.” They have generally been recognized as mutually exclusive by both sides of the discussion. Even Sandeen indulges in the understatement “not wholly compatible,” “managed to maintain a united front,” and “unstable and

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<sup>1</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870–1925* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 55f.

<sup>2</sup> Sandeen, “Origins,” 72–73.

<sup>3</sup> Sandeen, “Origins,” 67.

incomplete synthesis." Second, the "alliance" was between theologians of the two conflicting Christian theologies against a common anti-Christian enemy-modernism.

Third, this "alliance" still exists. Contemporary Princeton-theology men such as R. C. Sproul, Gleason Archer, Roger Nicole, and myself ally with dispensational theologians such as Charles Ryrie, John MacArthur, and Norman Geisler on the boards and programs of the recent International Council on Biblical Inerrancy. Dispensationalists and Princeton-theology theologians are still fighting the common enemy of modernism plus tendencies in contemporary evangelicalism leading in that direction. Fourth, in the early days from 1878 to 1918 dispensationalism (which is incompatible with the Princeton theology) was not always clearly distinguished from premillennialism (which is compatible). In any case, the alliance was on the basis of what the two theologies had in common against modernism.

Finally, the definition of the Princeton theology as a "new" nineteenth-century theology is mistaken. Dispensationalism has enough new features worked into a system of theology that it can accurately be called a nineteenth-century phenomenon. This is patently untrue of Princeton theology, which clearly preserved the historic theology known as Augustinian Calvinism. Every doctrine in the *Institutes* of John Calvin reappears in the work of Archibald Alexander, Charles Hodge, and B. B. Warfield. Warfield is the greatest Calvinist theologian of the twentieth century, and Old Princeton is almost universally recognized as the American bastion of Calvinism.

Why does Sandeen think otherwise? Without explicitly denying my contentions above, he cites two "new" doctrines in Old Princeton. They are, in fact, not at all new. Even if they were new, however, a position holding to the whole Calvinistic system with two non-essential additions could not be called a "newly formed" nineteenth-century theology or said to be teaching "a unique theology." The two novelties Sandeen alleges are the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture and biblical rationalism.



I critiqued Sandeen on the question of inerrancy in 1974.<sup>4</sup> There I commented on Sandeen's charge that Princeton championed inerrancy in a sense which seems to risk the *whole Christian faith* upon one proved error. This is so dreadful a misrepresentation that one wonders how anyone who knows anything about the Princeton theologians could write it.<sup>5</sup>

Whether Sandeen read this critique or not, his treatment of the matter in his later book, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*, is much more moderate.<sup>6</sup> Here he simply contends that the Princeton theology developed inerrancy and autographa arguments beyond the seveneenth-century position. No one denies *developments* in any definable school of thought. *Innovations* or *departures* are something else again.<sup>7</sup>

As far as the charge of rationalism is concerned, the same situation prevails. Here it is important to distinguish between "rationalism" (the belief that human reason is capable of attaining to all truth) and "rationality" (the commitment to the rational cognition and articulation of all truth including revelation). No one will deny that the Princetonians (every one of them utterly opposed to "rationalism") developed a more rational articulation of apologetics than is found in Calvin. That this again is a difference of degree and not kind is seen in the very title of a chapter in Calvin's *Institutes*: "So Far as Human Reason Goes, Sufficiently Firm Proofs are at Hand to Establish the Credibility of Scripture."<sup>8</sup> Brian Gerrish has pointed out the appeal to reason present in the thought of the Reformers (often thought by modern scholars, whom Sandeen echoes, to be absent),

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<sup>4</sup> John H. Gerstner, "Warfield's Case for Biblical Inerrancy," in *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. John W. Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 115–42. Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided: The Break-up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989). Jon Zens, "The Believer's Rule of Life: A Study of Two Extremes," *Baptist Reformation Review* 8 (Winter 1979): 5–19; See also his *Dispensationalism*.

<sup>5</sup> See Gerstner, "Warfield's Case," 119.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism 1800–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion of this point see Gerstner, "Warfield's Case," and "The Contributions of Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and J. Gresham Machen to the Doctrine of Inspiration," in *Challenges to Inerrancy, A Theological Response*, ed. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 347–81.

<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:81.

and E. Gilson has shown the same rationality to be present in Augustine.<sup>9</sup> Fideism (the notion that religious belief is utterly without rational foundation) is surely an academic disease widespread in the twentieth century, and it has a tendency to be read back into healthier centuries.

All of this notwithstanding, it cannot be denied that dispensationalism did infiltrate Reformed ranks. The influential Presbyterian missionary and Western Seminary professor, Samuel Kellogg, was sympathetic with dispensationalists but, as even Sandeen admits, only at the premillennial level.<sup>10</sup> In more recent times, when dispensationalism was clearly distinguished from premillennialism, some dispensationalists, such as the late Donald Grey Barnhouse, remained in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. and apparently never saw the discrepancy between dispensationalism and the Reformed confessional standards they had pledged to uphold.

Wilbur Smith was another example of this contradiction in terms — a dispensational Presbyterian minister. For years he served a Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. congregation in Coatesville, Pennsylvania. Paul Johnson, present pastor of the Renton, Washington congregation of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., told me of an interesting episode in the lives of these two Presbyterian dispensationalists. (Note that dispensationalism holds that the Lord's Prayer is not intended for the church.) Wilbur Smith was supplying the pulpit of Barnhouse's Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He concluded his pastoral prayer by inviting the congregation to join him in the Lord's Prayer. He found himself reciting that prayer all by himself without an echo from the congregation! Barnhouse had apparently taught his people a more consistent practice of dispensationalism than Smith, a reviser of the Scofield Bible, was espousing.

There were other Presbyterians who, in the thirties, were holding this incompatible theology along with a professed adherence to Reformed confessions. Roland T. Phillips, William Laird, and Allan MacRae were only a few among them.

By the mid-1930s, the *ad hoc* alliance of Princeton theology Presbyterians and dispensational Presbyterians was no longer able to stem the tide of modernism within the northern mainline church. A dispute over support for the denominational mission agency resulted in the dismissal of J. Gresham Machen and a number of other conservative leaders from

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<sup>9</sup> Brian Gerrish, *Grace and Reason: A Study in the Theology of Luther* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962); Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960).

<sup>10</sup> Sandeen, "Origins," 75.

the denomination. Machen and others formed what was then called the Presbyterian Church of America in 1936 and, initially at least, a number of dispensationalists were also a part of this new church. The difference between the two groups was immediately apparent and a second division was inevitable. As Jon Zens bluntly put the matter, “Pre-mils were welcome in the Church. Scofield-followers were not. There is a great difference between the two.”<sup>11</sup>

When the Presbyterian separation of 1936 took place, Machen saw three problems facing the new group. One was the presence of Carl McIntire. The second was the influence of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, and the third problem was premillennialism. The problem with the Scofield Bible was that its interpretive notes were fundamentally inconsistent with the Westminster Confession. The problem posed by premillennialism was the tendency on the part of many to confuse it with Scofield dispensationalism. The problem with McIntire was that he was the chief example of one who tended to confuse the two.<sup>12</sup> Machen, with the help of fellow Westminster Seminary professors John Murray and R. B. Kuiper,<sup>13</sup> was firm in his opposition to Arminianism and dispensationalism, while not opposing premillennialism (as compatible with membership in the new denomination).

In 1937 the inevitable split occurred, and the Presbyterian Church of America (later called the Orthodox Presbyterian Church) and the more dispensational Bible Presbyterian Synod went their separate ways. The Bible Synod then actually revised the Westminster Confession of Faith to teach premillennialism (though not dispensationalism). The Bible Synod suffered a further split in 1956 which resulted in the formation of what came to be known as the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. This group merged with the non-dispensational Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, General Synod in 1965 to form the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (RPCES). It is interesting to note that Barnhouse’s old church, now pastored by Barnhouse admirer James M. Boice, joined the RPCES without difficulty (though the Scofield Bibles were removed from the pews of Tenth Church). The RPCES joined the new

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<sup>11</sup> Zens, *Dispensationalism*, 48.

<sup>12</sup> J. Gresham Machen, “Editorial,” *Presbyterian Guardian* (November 14, 1936), 41–55.

<sup>13</sup> John Murray, “Modern Dispensationalism,” *Presbyterian Guardian* (May 19, 1936), 77–79; R. B. Kuiper, “Why Separation Was Necessary,” *Presbyterian Guardian* (Sept. 12, 1936), 225–27.

Presbyterian Church in America in 1982. Although it is difficult to be certain at this stage, it appears that the threat of dispensationalism has been quietly defused in these more conservative Presbyterian denominations.

### **The United Presbyterian Church of North America**

Dispensationalism also infiltrated the former United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA). This Reformed body was formed in 1858 and exactly a century later united with the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. to form the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (UPCUSA). One president of Xenia Theological Seminary of the UPCNA, W. G. Moorehead, was actually an editor of the original *Scofield Reference Bible* of 1909. So far as I can find, there was little or no protest on this manifest inconsistency, though the UPCNA held to the Westminster Standards as its only creed at that time.

When I attended Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary (1936–1937), I never heard a single reference to dispensationalism or *The Scofield Reference Bible* in any class. Dispensationalism was no issue on campus. Melvin Grove Kyle, the famous archeologist, had retired earlier, and Sandeen says of him that there is some “circumstantial evidence” that he was a dispensationalist.<sup>14</sup> That “evidence” seems to be that Kyle was one of the editors of the Sunday School Times. That would indeed be merely “circumstantial” because, as I have seen, Reformed thinkers and dispensationalists did cooperate against the common enemy of modernism then and now. Kyle’s successor, James L. Kelso, certainly seemed unaware of the existence of dispensationalism (though unfortunately he was not a Reformed theologian either, but tended to disparage theology *per se*).

The United Presbyterian Church of North America, until its union in 1958, seemed to be tolerant of dispensationalism. Its motto was “The Truth of God — Forbearance in Love.” The emphasis, without question, was on the forbearance and not the truth. At the time of this author’s licensure in the UPCNA, the other candidate for licensure was a thorough dispensationalist. Neither he nor the presbytery seemed aware of, or concerned with, the discrepancy. When I was later nominated for the chair of church history at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary, I was opposed in one of the presbyteries because I was an “Augustinian” until one of the presbyters asked what was wrong with having an “Augustinian”

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<sup>14</sup> Sandeen, “Origins,” 79, note 55.

in an Augustinian seminary. In other words, the UPCNA tended to be apathetic to both dispensationalism and Calvinism.

### **The Southern Presbyterian Church**

It is not surprising that dispensationalism encountered more opposition in the predominantly southern Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS). Dallas Theological Seminary was located in its domain, and students from that dispensationalist seminary poured into its ministry. In 1943, PCUS theologian James Bear wrote:

The situation in our Church today is: Dispensationalism is being widely taught in our Church. The Dispensationalists seem undoubtedly to be right when they say their position is widely divergent doctrinally from that of the Church, even on such an important doctrine as the Covenant of Grace. Yet we have not heard of any move being made by the proponents of "Dispensational truth" to revise our *Confession of Faith* in accordance with the teaching of this "Dispensational truth" which they declare to be the teaching of the Word of God.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately, this distress about dispensationalism in the Presbyterian Church in the United States climaxed in the appointment of an ad interim committee (headed by Bear) to consider whether dispensationalism was compatible with the church's subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith. The committee reported at the General Assembly of 1944, and the Assembly approved the report which stated that dispensationalism was not compatible with the Westminster standards.<sup>16</sup>

The struggle with dispensationalism, unfortunately, was not always clear and uncomplicated. The PCUS, for example, which clearly enough repudiated dispensationalism in 1944, was not equally clear in its own commitment to Reformed theology. Dispensationalism was clearly designated as error on the conservative side of the theological spectrum, but comparable care and skill was not devoted to noting the errors of the liberal left. As we have seen, theological conservatives in the northern Presbyterian churches were sympathetic with dispensationalism because of its thorough conservatism. This was not so much the case in the PCUS,

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<sup>15</sup> James E. Bear, "Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace," *Union Seminary Review* 49 (1938): 307. See also Zens, *Dispensationalism*, 42.

<sup>16</sup> Presbyterian Church in the United States, "Dispensationalism and the Confession of Faith," *Minutes of the 84th General Assembly* (May 25–30, 1944): 123–27.

however, because of the strong and explicit stand which the PCUS took on confessional grounds against dispensationalism.

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was formed in 1973 by conservatives from the PCUS who were disturbed by the liberal trend of the southern church. This new group has largely echoed the PCUS rejection of dispensationalism, and it has been much more diligent in its rejection of the modernist error than the denomination from which it emerged. The PCA and the RPCES merged in 1982, and, while dispensationalism may still surface in this denomination, it seems to pose little threat at the present time.

### **The Dutch Reformed Churches**

Dispensationalism has been considerably less evident in the two major Dutch-American Reformed denominations than in the Presbyterian churches. The ethnic character and confessional commitment of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) and, to an even greater extent, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) have conspired to limit the appeal and spread of dispensational doctrines among these groups.

While the older Reformed Church in America has been somewhat more influenced by American religious trends than its sister denomination, its theologians were critical of dispensationalism. The well-known Reformed church theologian, Albertus Pieters, pronounced *The Scofield Reference Bible* "one of the most dangerous books on the market."<sup>17</sup>

Within the Christian Reformed Church, dispensational doctrines were disseminated by Rev. Harry Bultema, but his contention that Israel and the church constitute two separate peoples of God was condemned by the CRC Synod of 1918 as incompatible with the Reformed confessions. The vigorous condemnation of Bultema within the CRC has resulted in a general suspicion within that denomination toward all forms of premillennialism, whether dispensational or not. The only other premillennialist of note within this group was D. H. Kromminga, a professor at Calvin Seminary, whose rather muted advocacy of premillennialism aroused some suspicion within the denomination.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Albertus Pieters, *A Candid Examination of the Scofield Bible* (Grand Rapids: Douma, 1938), 119. See also the trenchant criticism of dispensationalism in his *The Ten Tribes in History and Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1934), 24.

<sup>18</sup> See James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 95–98, 132–33.

### The Problem of Premillennialism

The experience of the Presbyterian and the Dutch Reformed denominations in this country illustrates the difficulties involved in distinguishing historic premillennialism from dispensational premillennialism. Our historical survey has revealed the importance of making such a distinction however.

As we have seen, all dispensationalists are premillennialists, but by no means are all premillennialists dispensationalists. I noted that premillennialism was present, though not dominant, in the early church and that it virtually died out after Augustine for a thousand years. We also saw that the premillennialism which arose after the Reformation was of the non-dispensational or historic variety and that what can be meaningfully described as “dispensational” premillennialism was very much an innovation of the nineteenth century.

In America we noted the conflict between historic premillennialists and dispensational premillennialists at the late nineteenth-century prophetic conferences and that dispensationalism largely won the day. Since that time, dispensationalism has professed to speak for pre-millennialism generally.

Moving into the twentieth century, we also see the vigorous resurgence of a self-consciously non-dispensational premillennialism associated with scholars such as George Eldon Ladd, Daniel Fuller, and J. Barton Payne. Fuller Seminary in particular, where Ladd taught for many years, became well known as a center of such thought. The effect of this was not lost on Fuller’s founder, Dr. Charles E. Fuller, who is said to have admitted shortly before his death that he could find no Scripture to support the theory of a pretribulational Rapture, though he still believed in it anyway.

From the dispensational perspective, it is no historical accident that they are premillennialists, or that many premillennialists are dispensationalists. For them, dispensationalism is premillennialism in the purity of its expression. As a matter of fact, most dispensationalists maintain that a consistent premillennarian will logically be a dispensationalist. They do not deny that some premillennarians are not dispensationalists, but they deny that they are ever logical and consistent in that position.

For example, Dwight Pentecost goes so far as to say that “Scripture is unintelligible until one can distinguish clearly between God’s program for his earthly people, Israel, and that for the Church.”<sup>19</sup> That statement

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<sup>19</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), 259.

for Pentecost means that without pretribulational, premillennial dispensationalism, the Scripture is “unintelligible.” The church must be separated from Israel by the Rapture before the seven-year Tribulation. Even if a person were a traditional premillennialist, without this other element by means of which Israel is distinguished from the church, Scripture would remain a mystery and confusion would reign.<sup>20</sup>

There are many different responses to this claim of dispensationalism that it is the consistent form of premillennialism. One inadequate response is a tendency of some nonpremillennialists to agree with this dispensational allegation. For example, George Murray’s *Millennial Studies* is a generally good eschatological analysis from an amillennial viewpoint. Throughout, Murray opposes dispensationalism, but unfortunately, he does not distinguish between it and premillennialism. Using the two terms interchangeably, he frequently makes statements which are true of dispensationalism but not true of classical premillennialism.<sup>21</sup>

Loraine Boettner is more careful but, at the same time, he tends to equate premillennialism and dispensationalism. He writes:

While historical premillenarianism is a much less erroneous system than is that of Dispensationalism, it is only wishful thinking which assumes the two can be logically separated and kept in water-tight compartments. The two systems are basically the same and must stand or fall together. We believe that we have shown that the Scriptures not only fail to teach the premillenarian system, but that they definitely exclude it as a possible interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

It is this latter statement that probably explains Boettner’s earlier statement. Being convinced that premillennialism itself is unbiblical, he sees very little difference between that and the even more unbiblical dispensationalism. Still, one might agree with Boettner that premillennialism is unbiblical but distinguish between the premillenarian system of doctrine and the dispensational system of doctrine. It may not be a “water-tight” separation but it is a real one nevertheless.

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<sup>20</sup> Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 153f. This position that consistent premillennialism spells dispensationalism is so common and constantly cited that further references in Scofield, Darby, Chafer, Walvoord, and Ryrie seem quite unnecessary.

<sup>21</sup> George Lewis Murray, *Millennial Studies: A Search for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948).

<sup>22</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), 375.



The Dutch Calvinistic writers, being quite impatient with premillennialism as basically Judaistic and alien to the New Testament spirit, rather glibly identify it with dispensationalism. Rutgers, Masselink, Berggraff, and a host of others following in the footsteps of Abraham Kuyper tend to make this mistake of confusing the two systems. Masselink, for example, writes:

This is one of the saddest and most unscriptural defects in the whole premillennialist plan of the future [he is referring to bringing heaven down to earth in the millennium] . . . . We believe that when Christ comes again there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Creation will be restored and the curse will be removed. This is not the millennium of which the chiliast speaks, but this is the beginning of eternity on earth. Joyfully anticipating the renewing of all things, including the restoration of the whole creation of God, which shall accompany the complete consummation of the great purpose of redemption, the whole Christian Church looks forward to Christ's coming.<sup>23</sup>

A somewhat more adequate response to this dispensational claim of consistent premillennialism is found in writers such as G. E. Ladd. Ladd seems satisfied to stake his claim that premillennialism does not necessarily lead to dispensationalism. I consider this a massive understatement, but it does at least maintain a significant difference between the two eschatologies. Ladd challenges the dispensational claim to antiquity, and he denies that pretribulationism even existed before the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Ladd's position is similar to that of a number of early prophetic conference participants who tended to draw away from the dispensational movement when they sensed that it was going beyond their own conception of premillennialism. Nathaniel West, Henry Frost, and even Reuben A. Torrey are noticeable examples of this.<sup>25</sup>

Our historical survey will alert the reader to the fact that there is no historical support for (and 'Considerable historical argument against) any identification of premillennialism and dispensationalism. In light of this, dispensationalists should admit, at the very least, that the majority of historic premillennialists throughout history have been quite unaware of the alleged dissonance and confusion that dispensationalists claim to discern so clearly in the historic position. Now let me briefly indicate that

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<sup>23</sup> Masselink, *Why a Thousand Years?*, 222.

<sup>24</sup> George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956).

<sup>25</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, rev. John Walvoord (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 79ff.

there is no theological compatibility between these two traditions whatever.

The only fitting response to the dispensational claim of being premillennialism in full consistency is that, so far from that being the case, dispensationalism is antithetically opposed to premillennialism properly understood. That is, these systems of thought, being properly understood for what they truly do teach, are in complete disharmony with one another.

The point here is that premillennialism is merely an eschatology while dispensationalism is a theological system which includes “premillennialism.” It is this which makes it impossible for a proper premillennialist to be a dispensationalist rather than inevitable that he will be. Premillennialists are persons who believe the Christian religion and entertain the notion that Christ is going to come at a later date and establish a thousand-year reign of some sort on this earth. That millennial doctrine may be true or false, but it will not make a person who in all other parts certainly holds to the Christian religion to deviate therefrom. Dispensationalism, however, in its eschatology and its entire system is in constant deviation from essential historical Christianity (as I will attempt to show in the doctrinal part of this book).

Anticipating the theological critique which will be undertaken later, let me simply note here two crucial areas in which dispensationalism as a theological system diverges from orthodox Christianity. There is, first of all, the persistent Antinomianism which characterizes dispensational theology. This one feature alone, if demonstrated, vitiates any claim of dispensationalism to Christianity. One simply cannot be antinomian *and* Christian in his theology. Antinomianism teaches that a person *may* be truly regenerate while in no way obedient to the commands of the law. That means that he may have “faith without works.” According to the Bible, faith without works is “dead” (Jms. 2:26). Even a dispensationalist will admit that, if his theological faith is a theologically dead faith, his is a theologically dead-in-the-water system of doctrine. He needs only to be convinced of this accusation.

Another dispensational departure from historic Christianity is evident in the separation of Israel and the church into two separate and distinct peoples of God — an earthly people with temporal rewards (Israel) and a spiritual people with heavenly rewards (the church). This notion is the crucial conviction behind the pretribulational Rapture theory.

I have already noted that this separation entails the rejection of the unity of the covenant of grace and the implicit denial, despite some

dispensational protestations to the contrary, that Old Testament believers were saved by the grace that is in Jesus Christ. Thus, the giving of the Law to Moses on Mount Sinai is thought, by dispensationalists, to be a divine offer of a divine plan of salvation by works which Israel was ill-advised to accept. The Old Testament in its entirety is designated “legal ground” from which the dispensationalist is to flee.

That dispensationalists attempt to explain away the many scripture passages which clearly teach or assume the essential unity of Israel and the church (see, for example, Rom. 2:28–29; 4:11–17; 11:17–21; Gal. 3:7; Eph. 2:11–16) is a continuing source of amazement to non-dispensationalists. The pretribulational Rapture theory, the utter novelty of which has already been noted, is so problematic because it is here that this alleged separation of Israel and the church comes to eschatological fruition. Here the theoretical Rapture becomes an actual historical rupture.

Consequently, I maintain that the dispensational claim that premillennialism rests on dispensationalism, implies dispensationalism, and comes to its perfect fruition in the dispensational eschatology is utterly mistaken. Premillennialism is an eschatology of persons holding to the Christian religion. Dispensationalism is a theology of persons holding to a deviation from the Christian religion. Just as truly as a proper premillennialist would resent being called a Jehovah’s Witness because Jehovah’s Witnesses also are premillennialists, or a Mormon because Mormons also are premillennialists, so also a premillennialist should resent being called a dispensationalist because dispensationalists also are “premillennialists” (though I do not infer for a moment that Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons are orthodox Trinitarians at the heart as are all dispensationalists).

#### **Dispensational Premillennialism and the Trivialization of Eschatology**

The dispensational penchant for endless distinction-making and the separation of things which ought not to be put asunder has lead to a host of quarrels over trivialities which, although sad because of the error they represent, are also comical. Charles Ryrie makes a rather amusing comment regarding the question of how many “Second Comings” there will be:

Almost all agree that the rapture is to be distinguished from the second coming in the sense that the former is when Christ comes for his own

people and the latter his coming with them in triumph and glory. But how far apart these two events are in time is the disputed question.<sup>26</sup>

He even goes on to say that amillennialists view the two events as simultaneously occurring and that they therefore admit no “time apart.” This is surely a straining of a gnat and swallowing a camel. This whole idea of a coming of Christ “for” His saints and a later coming “with” His saints is a dispensational novelty. Premillennialists per se do not entertain that, not to mention post- and amillennialists. Whether Christ comes before the Millennium (premillennialism) or after the Millennium (postmillennialism) or whether there is no separate Millennium (amillennialism), there is only one final Second Coming. When Christ comes, His saints among others are raised.

The differences among the dispensationalists, though extremely important in their own eyes, in the overall eschatological picture are trivial. Much ink has been spilled in debates over whether the Rapture will be silent or audible, whether it will be followed by seven years or by three and a-half years and so forth. For example, John Walvoord became annoyed with D. Meresco because Meresco refers to himself as a pretribulationist when he is, according to Walvoord, a “mid-tribulationist.”<sup>27</sup>

Dispensationalists have also had trouble among themselves over the secrecy element in the Rapture. Certainly, the general position of dispensationalism calls for a secret and quiet Rapture in which the saints alone see Jesus Christ and the world is left in ignorance. Lindsey, for example, rather floridly describes what he believes will happen: There I was driving down the freeway and all of a sudden the place went crazy . . . cars going in all directions . . . and not one of them had a driver. I mean it was wild! I think we’ve got an invasion from outer space.<sup>28</sup> All of this will happen because, as Lindsey believes, though the Second Coming is visible to all, “only the Christians see Him” at the Rapture.<sup>29</sup>

The audible or “noisy” rapturists, on the other hand, have been present in dispensationalism from the very beginning. R. A. Torrey and others denied the secrecy doctrine, and one of the most notable Baptist dispensationalists, William Pettingill, likewise gave up the notion of a

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 167.

<sup>27</sup> Donald Meresco, *New Light on the Rapture* (New York: Bible Light, 1980); John Walvoord, review of Meresco in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (1982): 76.

<sup>28</sup> Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 124–25.

<sup>29</sup> Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 131.

secret Rapture: “so it will not be silent, or secret, or unheard. I know that many teachers insist that all this will be hidden from the world and will be heard only by the redeemed, but the record does not so read.”<sup>30</sup>

While proceeding further to chronicle the quarrels of dispensationalists would be tedious, it is evident that dispensational eschatology is dying the death of a thousand trivializations. Such silliness should not, however, obscure the fact that, whatever differences dispensationalists may have among themselves about the details of the Rapture calendar, they agree unanimously on the Rapture as the final separation of Israel and the church. The unity of the church, even if it is ultimately healed according to some (inconsistent) dispensationalists, is nevertheless for some time, if not for eternity, destroyed.

I sympathize with the contentions of historic premillennialists Robert Gundry, Barton Payne, Dan Fuller, and others on behalf of posttribulationism. They generally believe that the seven years of tribulation can be purifying for the church of Jesus Christ. Fuller remarks that just as Scofield declared that the sufferings of the tribulation would function as a purifying chastisement for the Jewish remnant, so posttribulationism says that these judgments, which will be punitive for the world, will function as salutary chastisements for the believer.<sup>31</sup>

### Conclusion

In conclusion, history shows dispensationalism to be a phenomenon of the last century. Its peculiar features were never developed into a system until John Nelson Darby. What gives dispensationalism some aura of historicity is its premillennialism — which has admittedly been present in the church from the beginning. I have shown this historic premillennialism is not only to be distinguished from dispensationalism, but is incompatible with it.

A pressing question today is whether dispensationalism has changed in any significant ways in recent years. I think not. In the following pages I shall attempt to show the general character of dispensationalism — its philosophy, hermeneutic, spurious Calvinism, and dubious evangelicalism. Along the way it will be seen that this has been its character yesterday and is so today.

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<sup>30</sup> William L. Pettingill, *Nearing the End* (Chicago: Van Kampen, 1948), 30.

<sup>31</sup> Fuller, “Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism,” 366. Cf. C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 788.



## Part Two

### PHILOSOPHY AND HERMENEUTICS

Dispensationalism is rather short on theory and long on practice. That is, it sees itself as a “Biblical theology” at heart and gets to the Bible as quickly as it can. In this sense, it is like Cocceius (see chapter 1), in the seventeenth century, who was moving away from scholastic Reformed theology via “Biblical theology,” somewhat as Geerhardus Vos did in the early part of this century.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, it says relatively little regarding theological method, philosophy, natural theology, and other introductory matters which are, in traditional dogmatics, discussed under the rubric prolegomena. About hermeneutics, however, it says far more than necessary. That is, as we shall show later, it raises a virtual non-issue to a level of prime importance.

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<sup>1</sup> See Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948); *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980). The influence of Vos is evident in Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (1975–76):284–88.





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## PHILOSOPHY AND APOLOGETICS

Methodism has its personalism, Old Princeton its Realism, and Roman Catholicism its Thomism, but it would seem that dispensationalism has no philosophy of its own. Indeed, dispensationalism is almost anti-philosophical in that it tends to de-emphasize philosophy. It has always been sympathetic to apologetics, as we shall see a little later, but it has not been inclined to philosophize beyond the immediate needs for Biblical verification, and it is almost impatient in its desire to get to Holy Scripture.

John Nelson Darby, for example, was a masterfully knowledgeable man, with expertise in languages and an intimate familiarity with the content of the Bible. Nevertheless, his inclinations do not seem to have leaned in the philosophical direction, and he left no philosophical imprint on his followers.

The same has been true of the most eminent dispensationalists since Darby's time. One can hardly think of anyone who has been noted both as a philosopher and as a proponent of dispensational theology. A possible exception to this is Norman Geisler, who has taught theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Dallas Theological Seminary, and at Liberty University. Geisler is noted, however, more for his wide knowledge and able critiques of various philosophical systems than for his own positive contributions to the fields of philosophy and theology.<sup>1</sup>

A survey of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, the journal of Dallas Seminary, as well as the theses produced by Dallas students, reveals many competent exercises in biblical and theological studies but relatively little concentrated attention to matters of philosophical importance. Indeed, it might well be argued that dispensationalism in general has been largely content to depend on the theoretical labors of others, especially Reformed theologians, in the evangelical camp. For example, William Evans, in his

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<sup>1</sup> Normal L. Geisler, *Philosophy of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974). See also his *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976).

popular dispensational theological textbook, expresses his debt to the theistic thinking of A. H. Strong and Francis Lindey Patton.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of this dependence are evident in the early part of this century in the circumstances surrounding the publication of *The Fundamentals*, a cooperative effort of dispensational and non-dispensational conservatives.<sup>3</sup> Scholarly Princetonians and other conservative academicians joined with the less academic dispensationalists in their common cause to defend inerrancy and other fundamental doctrines of the Christian religion. Recognized dispensationalists, such as Philip Mauro (who later became a critic of the movement) and James M. Gray, were writing alongside Reformed theologians such as B. B. Warfield and James Orr. Thus, the more scholarly conservatives often handled the academic and intellectual problems for dispensationalism when it was first becoming established in this country.

This rather strange partnership has continued to this day. For example, at the Congress on the Bible, held in San Diego on March 3–6, 1982, the same kind of alliance that produced *The Fundamentals* at the beginning of the century was again evident. There was the influential presence of old line conservatives such as James I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, Gleason Archer, R. C. Sproul, and others. On the other hand, the Congress was undoubtedly dominated by dispensationalists such as Harold Hoehner, Norman Geisler, Charles Ryrie, John MacArthur, Ray Steadman, Bill Bright, and many others. It is apparent, however, that dispensational scholarship has made significant strides in recent decades. The scholarly imbalance, evident at the time of the publication of *The Fundamentals*, is not as much a factor today.

James M. Boice, the chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and the Congress, is an interesting individual in this context. He is the successor of one of the nation's most famous dispensationalists, the late Donald Grey Barnhouse, is a strong premillennialist, and at the same time is quite Reformed in his general theology. He seems to view dispensationalism only as a methodology, and he may well become the transitional figure from traditional dispensationalism to a sound Reformed theology.

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<sup>2</sup> William Evans, *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Chicago: Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1912), 13f.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Dixon, Louis Meyer, Reuben A. Torrey, eds., *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, 12 vols. (Chicago, 1910–15).

### Dispensational Epistemology

One might suppose that if dispensationalism has no particular philosophy, it would be equally uninterested in epistemology. There can be no doubt, however, that dispensationalism does have a tacit confidence in sense perception. While sophisticated philosophers try to argue and prove the fact of sense perception, virtually all dispensationalists confidently assume it without a great deal of discussion.

Dispensationalists also tend to place great stock in the laws of logic. While they believe in mystery and occasionally even use the word *paradox*, they generally “think straight.” Some of them will bend their logic when they think it is in conflict with mystery, but apart from such a detour, they tend to follow a rather pedestrian line of logical thought.

The power of inductive logic is particularly attractive to dispensationalists. Alternative schools of thought are frequently dismissed with the charge that they impose an alien hypothesis on the data. Dispensational thought, on the other hand, is presented as an unbiased, empirical reading of the facts. This characteristic has prompted George Marsden to speak of the “Baconian ideal” of dispensationalism; he cites the following statement of A. T. Pierson as striking evidence:

I like Biblical theology that does not start with the superficial Aristotelian method of reason, that does not begin with an hypothesis, and then warp the facts and the philosophy to fit the crook of our dogma, but a Baconian system, which first gathers the teachings of the word of God, and then seeks to deduce some general law upon which the facts can be arranged.<sup>4</sup>

This raises the question whether dispensationalism is sympathetic to the Scottish Common Sense Realism of the Old Princeton theologians such as Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield. Scottish Realism provided Old Princeton with the philosophical framework for its articulation of Calvinism, and this realistic school of thought prevailed generally in post-revolutionary America.

Scottish Realism, as it was articulated by the Scottish philosophers Thomas Reid and Dugald Stewart, was a response to the unacceptable eighteenth-century skepticism of David Hume and to the implausible idealism of George Berkeley. Against Berkeley, who had argued that the essence of a thing lies in its perception by mind and so had denied the reality of material substance, and Hume, whose denial of general ideas

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<sup>4</sup> A. T. Pierson, quoted in Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 56. See also 43–71.

undercut the principles of causality, probability, and confidence in moral reason, Scottish Realism proposed a new and compelling vindication of the reliability of sense perception. Reid maintained that, although there are no innate ideas, an analysis of the operation of the human mind reveals an innate tendency to recognize ideas under the stimulus of sense perception. These tendencies are the condition of knowledge and, because these built-in tendencies are common to all and correspond to objective reality, a person may have confidence in the “common sense” appropriation of sensory perception.<sup>5</sup>

But how does dispensationalism stand on all of this? It is virtually impossible to know because dispensationalists, for the most part, have avoided writing on that subject. We can only surmise that they were sympathetic at least, to the realistic way of viewing the origin of ideas. While the Princeton theologians were rigorously exact in their attention to a cogent articulation of realist epistemology, dispensationalism, which arose during a period when Realism was taken for granted, seems to have appropriated a generally realist stance without a great deal of reflection. It tends to accept certain things which are defended by Scottish Realism such as the reliability of sense perception, logical laws, and the intuitions of the mind, without actually developing and defending that system of thought.

### Dispensational Apologetics

Many readers will be aware of the controversy in evangelical circles over the methodology of apologetics. In recent years the so-called “presuppositional” approach, which is associated with Cornelius Van Til and Westminster Theological Seminary, has gained wide prominence.

Van Til argued that one must presuppose God as a condition for rational belief in Him, and that the starting point for apologetic discussion must be the acknowledgment of God. I have argued extensively that Van Til’s approach is not rational in that, by arguing that one must presuppose God as a condition for rational belief, Van Til assumes what he means to prove. In short, his reasoning is circular and his general stance fideistic,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a complete and influential statement of the Scottish Common Sense epistemology, see James McCosh, *The Institutions of the Mind Inductively Investigated* (New York: Robert Carter, 1866).

<sup>6</sup> See R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 212–338.

although he and fellow presuppositionalists deny fideism rigorously and charge “evidentialism” with autonomy.

As an alternative to presuppositionalism, I have argued for the continuing viability of the “classical” approach to apologetics which is associated with the theologians of Old Princeton. I believe that presuppositionalism is not the historic position of the church and that valid, logically compelling reasons for the truth of Christianity can be advanced.<sup>7</sup>

Where does dispensationalism fit into this? As we might surmise from the above discussion of dispensational epistemology, dispensationalism tends to follow the historic or classical apologetic pattern, rather than presuppositionalism, but in a weakened form. By this, I mean that we find here the traditional arguments for the credibility of revelation, but that they are usually somewhat less cogent than elsewhere encountered.

Dispensationalists are not disposed to conscious fideism. They wish to give reasons for their faith. Their “reasons,” however, often leave much to be desired in tight argumentation. Frequently, they are so feeble that one suspects that the debater is resting his case on something other than the arguments he is offering.

Let us use Walvoord’s revision of Chafer in *Major Bible Themes* as an example of a traditional apologetic rather inconclusively argued. Giving evidence for the supernatural inspiration of the Bible, Walvoord mentions the “influence” of the Bible. What is offered, however, is a mere assertion of the excellence of the influence with no effort to show why that requires divine inspiration, nor does Walvoord face any objections to the assertion.<sup>8</sup> Again he thinks that because the Bible’s subject matter deals with man’s past and future it must be supernatural!<sup>9</sup> The fact that the Bible is candid in its description of man is supposed to prove that it came from God, Walvoord not noting that this argument would prove the inspiration of novelists such as Ernest Hemingway and Peter De Vries and Kantian philosophers.<sup>10</sup>

In the next chapter there is evident circularity of reasoning. Walvoord rightly argues that Christ affirmed the inspiration of the Bible. Therefore, he (Walvoord) unjustifiably concludes that the Bible is the Word of God.

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<sup>7</sup> Sproul, Gerstner, Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 3–179. Cf. also Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* in three volumes (Orlando: Ligonier, 1991), Vol. 1, Ch. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 14.

Our dispensational apologist does not notice that he has failed to prove that Christ is divine except on the assumption that the Bible is the Word of God.<sup>11</sup>

Miracles have been the staple of traditional apologetics. In this century the argument received its classic formulation in the first chapter of B. B. Warfield's *Counterfeit Miracles*.<sup>12</sup> The way dispensationalists use miracles in apologetics, however, it is a miracle that apologetics survives. Chafer may devote more than seven pages of his *Systematic Theology* to the miracles of Christ, but he and other dispensationalists can demolish the arguments in one sentence, for as Hal Lindsey puts the matter bluntly: "Satan is a miracle-worker and he has been able to work miracles from the beginning."<sup>13</sup>

Evolution as a subject has always greatly concerned dispensationalists. While this theme is usually considered part of the realm of science, it nevertheless has important philosophical and apologetic implications. Dispensationalists, who are noted champions of creationism, have invariably opposed evolution on the ground of its opposition to the biblical account of creation. Some dispensationalists, such as Norman Geisler who participated in the trial in Little Rock, Arkansas in February, 1982, have attacked the presuppositions of evolution as well as its anti-biblical character, but most have been content to point out that almost all varieties of evolution have been at loggerheads with the first chapter of Genesis. In other words, dispensationalism has, in the main, attacked evolution from biblical rather than philosophical grounds and avoided any deep philosophical involvement in the debate with evolution.

As I noted above, dispensationalists have tended not to embrace presuppositionalism.<sup>14</sup> This is somewhat surprising because presuppositionalists are in the vanguard of contemporary conservative apologetics. Also, presuppositionalists are invariably Calvinistic, and dispensational theology claims to be moderate Calvinism.

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<sup>11</sup> See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1975; rep. ed.), 1:75–77.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976; rep. ed.), 3–31.

<sup>13</sup> Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> One dispensationalist who does make positive comments about presuppositionalism is John C. Whitcomb, Jr. See his "Contemporary Apologetics and the Christian Faith, Part 3: Proof Texts for Semi-Rationalistic Apologetics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134 (1977): 291–98.

Nevertheless, a number of reasons can be advanced to explain the dispensational lack of interest in presuppositionalism. One reason for this has already been noted. Dispensationalists tend to be reflexively though naively realistic in their epistemology while presuppositionalists come out of the idealist tradition.

The second reason is that all presuppositionalists are thoroughgoing Calvinists and they do not think that dispensationalism is an authentic form of Calvinism. The dispensationalists do not so much contest this point as ignore it. One gets the feeling that they do not really want to contest it. There is not much doubt that they do distrust presuppositionalism and, under the surface, are quite opposed to the Calvinism of the presuppositionalist. The extent of this dispensational opposition to Calvinism will be the subject of a later chapter of this book.





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## DISPENSATIONAL HERMENEUTICS

Many proponents and opponents regard the hermeneutics of dispensationalism as more basic than the theology itself. They suppose that the mode of interpretation determines dispensationalism rather than dispensationalism determining it. “The problem of Dispensationalism is its hermeneutical point of departure,” said Daniel Fuller. “It is a theological principle that militates against inductive study and prevents it from seeing the unity in the Scriptures.”<sup>1</sup>

Likewise, almost all dispensationalists maintain that their mode of biblical interpretation is more fundamental than their theology. They view their theology as the result of the simple, literal reading of Scripture. A commitment to literal interpretation is seen as the hallmark of one who “takes the Bible seriously,” but they certainly reject the idea that their theology provides the major impetus toward literalism.

In this chapter I shall scrutinize dispensationalism’s view of the Bible, its literal method of interpretation, and its handling of Biblical quotations. I shall examine its way of “rightly dividing” Scripture, its superficiality in so doing, and its inconsistencies. The interpretation of prophecy comes in for special consideration, in particular as it raises hermeneutical questions for the dispensationalist. What I call *spoof-texting* is also part of dispensationalism’s interpretative style and will receive scrutiny.

### Inspiration

With respect to the Bible, dispensationalists hold undeviatingly to plenary inspiration. They believe that the entire canonical Scriptures of Protestantism are entirely inspired. There is not much said on this subject largely because it is undisputed among them. Dispensationalism’s commitment to the inspiration of Scriptures is well illustrated by the composition of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, many members of which were dispensationalists.

To note just one example of the viewpoint of dispensationalism on the inspiration of the Bible, a viewpoint quite typical of the others, I cite

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 71.

their major theologian, John Nelson Darby. The Holy Scriptures, he says, are “inspired of God” and “authoritative.”<sup>2</sup> The inscripturated Word is a “permanent guide.”<sup>3</sup> Both Old and New Testaments as well are inspired, he affirms, citing Peter’s statement about “other scripture.”<sup>4</sup> It is “not merely that truth is given in them by inspiration. They are inspired.”<sup>5</sup> As for the canon of Scripture, Darby says, “all is now complete, as Paul tells us that he was a minister of the assembly to complete the Word of God.” “The subjects of revelation were then completed.”<sup>6</sup>

Dispensationalists have tended to concentrate on popular biblical exposition and not many have been particularly interested in questions of biblical criticism. Exceptions to this include early dispensationalists E. W. Bullinger, who produced a Greek lexicon of the New Testament, and the outstanding New Testament scholar S. P. Tregelles. More recently, Allan MacRae has made his mark in the field of Ancient Near East studies.

### **Literalism**

Certainly dispensationalists claim to be literal in their method of interpreting the Bible. They pride themselves on this and claim a thorough faithfulness to Scripture. They generally think that other schools of thought are not as faithful, and that they fall into error primarily because of their adoption of a “spiritualizing” hermeneutic. While they will concede that many non-dispensational conservatives affirm the full authority and inerrancy of Scripture, dispensationalists also feel that not all are equally docile before Scripture. The non-dispensationalist tends, in his view, to be more sophisticated and less submissive while dispensationalists, to use the words of Isaiah 66:5, “tremble” more at God’s Word.

This conviction, in turn, can lead to a spiritual arrogance bordering on a feeling of infallibility. Thinking that they see the truth clearly (when others more learned do not because they do not follow the simple method of easy literalism), dispensationalists can feel superior with very little reason for doing so. By a certain naivete they suppose that their

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<sup>2</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 1:187.

<sup>3</sup> John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 3rd ed. rev., 5 vols. (London: G. Morrish, n.d.), 5:196.

<sup>4</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 197.

<sup>5</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 198.

<sup>6</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 199.

method brings them into an immediate apprehension of Scripture as over against the “interpretations” of others.<sup>7</sup>

While we must recognize that the self-understanding of dispensationalists tends to highlight the *differences* between dispensational and non-dispensational biblical interpretation (with the unfortunate psychological consequences noted above), and that dispensationalists *believe* that their theology flows from their literal hermeneutic rather than vice versa, a closer look at the matter reveals that dispensationalists are not as far removed from their non-dispensational conservative friends as they suppose.

In spite of all contentions that dispensationalists are the consistent literalists, they start out in their biblical interpretation pretty much where everyone else does. They follow inductive, grammatical, historical method just as others do. Allan MacRae, for one, insists that the study of Scripture is like the study of any science — one gathers data, studies them, compares, finds their meaning, draws conclusions, and compares them with other data.<sup>8</sup> The great covenantalist Charles Hodge would not differ with this description. What could be more conventional than Hal Lindsey’s directions:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.<sup>9</sup>

James Boice, one of the more scholarly so-called dispensationalists, advises us “to take a passage in the literal sense unless it is demonstrably poetic or unless it simply will not bear literal interpretation.”<sup>10</sup>

We *all* agree that most literature, including the *Bible*, is usually meant to be understood according to the literal construction of the words which

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<sup>7</sup> See: James Snowden, *Coming of the Lord*, 205–219. Floyd Hamilton, *Basis of Millennial Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 38–39, has also commented on this.

<sup>8</sup> Allan A. MacRae, “The Scientific Approach to the Old Testament: A Study of Amos 9,” in *Truth for Today, Bibliotheca Sacra Reader*, 111–122, edited by John F. Walvoord (Chicago: Moody, 1963), 10. Cf. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981; rep. ed.), 1:9–16.

<sup>9</sup> Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*, 40. See also: Blackstone, *Jesus Is Coming*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> James M. Boice, *The Last and Future World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 26.

are used. Even in common speech with one another, we assume the other person is to be taken literally unless it is perfectly obvious that he is using a metaphor, or is allegorizing, or is in some other way alerting us to the fact that the usual meaning of words is not in play at the moment. Then, and then only, will we interpret other than literally. All interpreters do that. The same is true with respect to the Bible. Most of what it says is to be construed, everybody admits, "literally." There are certain parts of it which everyone, including the dispensationalist, admits are not to be construed literally. There is not a dispensationalist living who believes that, when Christ said He was "the Vine," grapes were to be picked from Him.

Finally, there is a small area of Scripture, mainly in the area of prophecy, where there is lively debate as to whether one interprets literally or figuratively. The vast proportion of Scripture is admitted by both sides to be either obviously literal or obviously figurative. It is only in a relatively few disputed areas where we differ with one another. Only there does the question whether Scripture is to be taken literally or figuratively arise. We should not accuse the dispensationalists of being absolute literalists nor should they accuse non-dispensationalists of being absolute spiritualizers. We all are literalists up to a certain point. *At the point where we differ*, there is a tendency for the dispensationalists to be literalistic where the non-dispensationalist *tends* to interpret the Bible figuratively. But to say on the basis of that limited divergence of interpretation that the two schools represent fundamentally different approaches is not warranted.

Many on both sides think that this minor "hermeneutical" difference is a more foundational difference than the theological<sup>1</sup>. I profoundly disagree for I believe that the dispensational literal hermeneutic is driven by an *a priori* commitment to dispensational theological distinctives. To demonstrate this, however, it is necessary to examine the dispensational interpretation of biblical prophecy.

### **Prophecy**

It is necessary to note, first of all, the utter impossibility of a consistently literal approach to the interpretation of prophecy. A few examples of this are sufficient to show that dispensationalists, despite insistent claims to the contrary, are not at all consistent in literal interpretation of prophecy.

Critics of dispensational exegesis have been quick to pounce on the many inconsistencies which are apparent.

Miladin applies utter literalism to the dispensationalist conception of the future and asks:

Is Russia really going to use chariots and horsemen and bows and arrows against the King of the South? According to Ezekiel 39:9–13, there will be seven months that the House of Israel will bury the Russian shields, bows, arrows, etc., and, at the same time, the great tribulation of dispensationalism is to be three and one-half years in duration . . . every time Hal Lindsey assigns modern-day weaponry to Old Testament predictions, he is casting aside the literal canon of interpretation which is almost the “sine qua non” of the dispensational school.<sup>11</sup>

No one has better exposed the inconsistency of the dispensationalists on this literalistic principle as applied by them to history and prophecy than O. T. Allis. He points out that they tend to reverse the usual view and instead of reading history literally and prophecy figuratively, they spiritualize history and literalize prophecy.<sup>12</sup> Israel must mean Israel, *Canaan* must mean Canaan. On the other hand, Eve, Rebecca, and Zipporah may be viewed as spiritual types and *branch* is a symbol.<sup>13</sup>

But if it be argued that the “stars” signify a heavenly seed and the “dust” an earthly seed, then the question arises, What is the difference between dust and sand? Why is Israel of the days of Solomon likened to the “sand” in 1 Kings 4:20 and to the “dust” in 2 Chronicles 1:9 and why are the stars referred to in 1 Chronicles 27:23 in David’s census of earthly Israel? “Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4:2) and “morning star” (Rev. 22:16) are beautiful figures used of the coming of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

Some dispensationalists try to defend their inconsistent procedure. Thus, M. R. DeHaan explains what we could call the spiritualizing of Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of the dry bones. Dispensationalists apply this vision to the revitalization of the Jews in the end-time period. “To be sure, the vision of the valley of dry bones is a figure, but it is a figure of a literal thing and this is certainly not the church, or the nations of the world.”<sup>15</sup> I am not here concerned with the application of the dry bones, whether to the world, to the church, or to Israel. I merely observe that DeHaan is

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<sup>11</sup> G. C. Miladin, *Is This Really The End?* (Cherry Hill, New Jersey: Mack, 1972), 11–12. See also George Murray, *Millennial Studies*, 36–37.

<sup>12</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 23–24.

<sup>14</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 34.

“spiritualizing” the bones and that he justifies this procedure (which he would condemn in others) by saying that “it is a figure of a literal thing.”

Needless to say every “spiritualizer” teaches that the things spiritualized are real, or literal, things. If we say, for example, that the vision of the lamb and the wolf lying down together has a reference to ferocious and docile people dwelling together under the influence of Christ, we consider that a literal thing or a real thing to which the prophecy refers.

DeHaan is not the only literalist who has spiritualized some part of the Bible, though none has done it more ingeniously than he. Darby himself admits that the return of Christ referred to in John 14:18 is not visible and “literal” but an invisible coming through the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup> Kellogg, who was not a dispensationalist but a premillennialist who rested much of his case on literalism, admits that Zechariah’s prophecy that all flesh shall come up every year to Jerusalem is necessarily figurative because of the practical impossibility of literal fulfillment.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, there is a real question as to what is meant by the word “literal”? While some of the illustrations given, by both sides, are literal enough to be absurd, one realizes that the literalist will have something to say by way of defense. Some speak of getting at the literal meaning of a figure of speech. Suddenly we realize that we are all literalists in that sense — the sense that behind every figure of speech there is something which can be expressed literally.

The sheer impossibility of a consistently literal interpretation of biblical prophecy, together with the manifest inconsistency of the dispensational attempt to put it into practice, demands an examination of the possibility that the dispensational self-understanding regarding the priority of hermeneutics, while no doubt sincere, is mistaken. If the usual distinction between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists as literalists and spiritualizers is not a valid one, however, what is the issue here?

The question seems to resolve, at least initially, to a tendency on the part of dispensationalists to see division and separation in Scripture rather than unity. The tendency of the dispensationalist is to see in various periods diverse dispensations rather than a harmonious unfolding of one covenant in different dispensations. In other words, the difference here is not so much in the fundamental hermeneutical approach as in the application of a theological principle.

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<sup>16</sup> John Nelson Darby, *The Jews*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 1:100, 320.

As the dispensationalist approaches prophecy, he does not differ from the non-dispensationalist conservative. They both believe they are addressing the Word of God, both have confidence in predictive prophecy, and both are endeavoring to understand what the Word of God means to convey. But there is a tendency at this point for the two interpretations to diverge drastically. On the one hand, there is a separation of one part of Scripture from another, on the other, an integration of the different parts of Scripture with one another.

The real point of divergence is that dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists have different conceptions of what constitutes a plausible interpretation. The question of what is plausible is, it should be noted, a theological rather than an interpretive question.

Let us take a biblical example. Some of the most controverted words in history are Christ's "this is my body" at the institution of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19). There is no disagreement about the words this, *my*, or *body*. They are construed literally by all concerned. The debate concerns the interpretation of the word *is*. Some say *is* should be taken literally; that is, it is understood to mean literal identity of body and bread, of blood and wine. Others say that *is* should be taken non-literally or metaphorically; that is, to mean "represents." There is nothing in linguistics, per se, that will ever settle that question. There is no non-arbitrary way (nor can there be) of saying that the word cannot mean something other than its usual meaning.

At the Colloquy of Marburg (1529), Luther agreed with that as he defended his principle, "literal wherever possible." His opponents, likewise, agreed with him on that principle. But Luther thought it was necessary to take *is* literally. "*Hoc est corpus meum*," Luther thundered. The Swiss theologians, Zwingli and Oecolampadius, found it palpably absurd that Christ could hold the bread in His hand (His body) and mean that that bread actually was His body. Both interpreters started as always with the literal meaning intending to accept it if possible. One found it necessary and possible in this case; the other found it absurd and impossible.

Is the situation with reference to literalism any different between dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists with regard to prophecy? I think not, but it is necessary to examine this matter more closely.

As we have seen, one of the major differences between the modern dispensational premillennialist and the classical premillennialist is that the latter applies much of prophecy to the church and the former excludes virtually all (they claim to exclude all). The classical premillennialist generally interprets the book of Revelation historically and so finds most

of its fulfillment in the history of the church. The dispensationalist adopts the futurist interpretation and refers everything from chapter 4 onward to the unfulfilled future. In addition, a host of Old Testament prophecies, understood by non-dispensationalists to refer to the church, are thought by dispensationalists to speak of a millennial reign of Christ on earth.

A good example of this is the dispensational interpretation of Isaiah 11:6 which says that “the wolf will dwell with the lamb.”<sup>18</sup> The question now becomes, how does it happen that dispensationalists have come to have the wolf and lamb actually lie down together while the non-dispensationalist sees a figure of speech? Is it a different hermeneutical principle when interpreting prophecy, as often thought? No, they both agree that Scripture should be interpreted literally if possible. Dispensationalists think this is possible and necessary in prophecy. Conservative non-dispensationalists agree that it is quite possible for God to cause wolves and lambs to lie down together but contend that this is not a plausible interpretation here. They note that this passage seems to be dealing with human beings and not animals, and that it seems to refer to the present age and not some future time. They would admit that if it were not referring to humans and was referring to an era still future it would conceivably and probably have a literal meaning. The dispensationalists would admit that if it referred to human beings in this dispensation it could conceivably and probably would have a figurative meaning.

In other words, it is not the hermeneutic of literalism, even in prophecy, that makes the difference or even has any bearing on the interpretation. It is one’s understanding of the context, local and general, of scriptural teaching that determines the literalizing or the spiritualizing. “Whatever can be shown to be in its literal sense inconsistent either with purity of life or correctness of doctrine must be taken figuratively,”<sup>19</sup> was Augustine’s opinion.

Let us pursue this further. Dispensationalists would no doubt generally agree with what has so far been said. Whether we take wolves and lambs literally or not does indeed depend on that understanding of the immediate and general context of the Bible. It is precisely at this point that the dispensational theological system tends to push the hermeneutic in an extremely literal direction. The system will determine whether these

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Saucy, “The Relationship of Dispensationalism to the Eternal Purpose of God,” (Th.D. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1961), 68. See also 152.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *City of God*.



are literal or figurative lambs and wolves. Both agree that one cannot tell from the words alone. Both agree, also, that these words should be construed literally if probable. The question is, is it plausible, given the total teaching of Scripture, to interpret this passage as referring to a literal fellowship of wolf and lamb in a literal millennial kingdom? It is not whether God is capable of achieving such a situation. Both sides agree on the doctrine of divine omnipotence. Rather, it is a matter of the compatibility of such an interpretation with the biblical witness as a whole.

The dispensationalist should, of course, grant that other reasonable persons have a right and duty to consider any evidence against this millennial construction. We might ask, first of all, whether there is clear evidence elsewhere in Scripture that there is to be a thousand years of perfect peace and harmony of nature in this world under the Messiah? We think, in fact, that there is not only no *clear* evidence of a millennium in Scripture, but there is no evidence. I readily admit that many competent Christian scholars disagree with my opinion but the very disagreement over this matter indicates that the doctrine cannot be considered *clear* to all. The Second Coming is accepted by all Christians, but its relationship to a millennium cannot be assumed.

Second, is there clear evidence that this millennial era pertains to the creation in general? On this point even the premillennialists are not agreed. There are many *different* interpretations among them of the nature of the Millennium in this world. They are not even agreed on how it affects men, not to mention animals.

Third, is there evidence that, if there is to be such an era, the Old Testament prophets would *overlook* the thousands of years which, following the first coming of the Messiah, are to precede it? Here even the dispensational premillennialists are disagreed. Many believe that there is a total parenthesis between the First Coming of Christ and the Rapture, that the period of the church is not referred to at all by the Old Testament prophets. Some dispensationalists, on the other hand, see at least the union of the Jews and Gentiles at the First Coming in the formation of the church.

Fourth, is there any evidence that *Isaiah* does totally overlook this earlier messianic era? *Isaiah* is called, above all, the “evangelical prophet.” No one denies that if there is any prophetic vision of the era of the First Coming, it is to be found in *Isaiah*. It is difficult to rule out the *possibility* that *Isaiah* refers to this present dispensation.

Fifth, if there is no evidence elsewhere, is there any evidence in this particular passage that *Isaiah* is here overlooking this earlier messianic

era? Certainly there is nothing here that would rule out the possibility of a reference to the first coming of Christ.

Sixth, does the imagery of wolves and lambs lying down together militate against the millennial interpretation? Perhaps not, but assuming that the reference to wolves and lambs does rule out a metaphorical interpretation would of course be a *begging* of the very question we are trying to resolve.

Seventh, would not such imagery, construed figuratively, be especially *appropriate*? If figurative language is not incompatible with literalism, as I have shown, would not this manner of expression be especially appropriate? Not only would Jews and Gentiles, being one in Christ, be like wolves and lambs lying down together peaceably, but instances of personal reconciliation such as the zealot Simon being in the same apostolic band with Matthew the tax collector are aptly depicted by this imagery.

Eighth, in very fact, would it not be even *more appropriate* than a literal meaning of a literal millennial reign? The predicted Incarnation of Christ is agreed by all. The harmonizing influence of that First Advent is agreed by all. The appropriateness of the metaphor of wolves and lambs to the influence of the First Coming is agreed by all. The certainty of the Second Coming being followed by a millennium is not agreed by all Christians. The nature of the Second Coming's effects on nature is not even agreed upon by all dispensational premillennialists. *Therefore, a figurative interpretation of these passages might well be more appropriate than an interpretation involving a literal millennial reign.*

This exercise should indicate that the question of a literal or figurative interpretation of this prophecy is not really a matter of hermeneutics *per se*, but of the understanding of the larger context of Scripture that one brings to the interpretation of any passage. It will be evident that the dispensational answers to the above questions are founded, not on any allegedly neutral rules of interpretation, but on their own theological system.

### A Typical Dispensational Interpreter

A striking example of the dispensational tendency to smuggle theological assumptions in under the guise of "literal interpretation" is found in the work of Charles Lee Feinberg, whose standing as a former Dallas Seminary professor, dean of Talbot Seminary, and reviser of *The New Scofield Reference Bible* certainly qualifies him as an exponent of mainstream dispensationalism.

Especially interesting is his discussion of what he calls the “well-defined specific laws for the interpretation of prophecy.” According to Feinberg, “For the true force of any prophecy the entire prophetic scheme must be kept in mind, as well as the inter-relationship and interplay between the parts in the plan.”<sup>20</sup> Feinberg is talking about a whole program of revelation and an entire prophetic scheme at the very outset. We are supposed to determine how to interpret prophecy, and we are already confronted with an “entire prophetic scheme.” If we begin with a whole scheme of prophecy, we must already know what the method of interpretation is. In other words, the dispensational theological scheme must be assumed if we are to interpret prophecy.

Another of Feinberg’s principles of prophetic interpretation is more significant and highly controversial.

In interpreting prophecy which has not yet been fulfilled, those predictions which have been fulfilled are to form the pattern. The surest method to know how God will fulfill prophecy in the future is to ascertain how He has worked in the past.<sup>21</sup>

Here he is not proving his point. His point is that we must interpret all prophecy as some prophecies have been interpreted. What he is supposed to be proving however, is not what God has done in the past but that that is a fixed principle to guide us in interpreting other prophecies relating to the future. This Feinberg does not address here or elsewhere though it is of the greatest importance. He merely asserts a conviction.

He next tells us that “a splendid passage to test this canon is Luke 1:31–33.” Feinberg does not even quote the passage but he feels that it clearly shows that the manner of fulfillment for the Second Coming is to be deduced from the manner of the First. For the sake of further elucidation let me at least quote the verses:

And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. (KJV)

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<sup>20</sup> Charles Lee Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” in *Prophecy in the Making*, ed. C. F. H. Henry (Carol Stream, Illinois: Creation House, 1971), 92.

<sup>21</sup> Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” 93.

On the face of it, this passage certainly has nothing to do with the fundamental principle that God will fulfill in the future in the manner in which He has in the past. The question is, what does Feinberg have in mind by citing it at all? Presumably, he feels that the immediate reference is to the birth of Jesus as the Son of the Highest and that the reference to His reigning “over the house of Jacob forever” and of His kingdom there being “no end” is to something future and temporally far removed from the Lukan birth narrative. The passage says no such thing. We know from Feinberg’s general eschatological viewpoint that he hears it distinguishing between the literal birth of Christ and His literal return to establish the literal kingdom. Certainly that does not lie on the surface of the passage which is used as a paradigm for a hermeneutical principle.

On the basis of this non-foundation, Feinberg proceeds to conclude that “if the spiritualizers had their way consistently, then the second coming of Christ would have to be a spiritual coming instead of literal one.”<sup>22</sup> After this stunning *non sequitur*, Feinberg goes on to argue, using Louis Berkhof as a foil, that “the literal fulfillment of prophecy in the past is an obstacle that the allegorizers strive to minimize.”<sup>23</sup>

The quotation from Berkhof, which Feinberg finds so objectionable, is worth citing in full:

But we are told that all the prophecies fulfilled in the past, received a literal fulfillment; and that, therefore, the presumption is that all prophecies will be so fulfilled. However, though it was but natural that prophecies referring to the near future should be fulfilled in the exact form in which they were uttered, this is not to be expected a priori, nor is it likely in the case of prophecies pertaining to the distant future, to a new dispensation with greatly altered conditions.<sup>24</sup>

Berkhof is here proceeding in as rational a manner as Feinberg’s is arbitrary. Berkhof simply observes what no one, including Feinberg, questions that many prophecies in the foreview of the viewer were fulfilled literally. He suggests that it would not be reasonable to assume that the same would be true of things to be fulfilled at a much later date when the circumstances could be quite different. That seems eminently reasonable. God could fulfill things in a given historical sequence in ways which the people of the time the prophecy was made were conversant with. When one is dealing with periods far removed (where the situation

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<sup>22</sup> Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” 93.

<sup>23</sup> Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” 93.

<sup>24</sup> Louis Berkhof, quoted in Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” 93.

may be quite inconceivable from the perspective of the circumstances in which the prophecy was made), it would not be at all natural to assume that the fulfillment would be in exactly the same terms as it was for those in the near future.

Feinberg concludes this paragraph with this statement following his quotation of Berkhof: "Prophecies like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 will not tolerate such handling."<sup>25</sup> He is attributing to Berkhof what Berkhof manifestly does not say. That is, Berkhof does not lay down a principle that must be observed in all prophetic interpretation. He simply notes that, *a priori*, we cannot necessarily anticipate literal fulfillment in all instances where the fulfillment is temporally far removed from the prophecy itself. In any event, we certainly cannot be *dogmatic* about it.

With regard to Psalm 22, a psalm which is usually thought to describe the sufferings of Christ on the cross, it is curious that Feinberg should cite it. While certain prophecies of this psalm were literally fulfilled, others manifestly were not. For example, Jesus did cry out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (22:1), and soldiers did cast lots for His clothing (22:18). Berkhof is not embarrassed by this since he had never asserted that it could not happen as literally described. On the other hand, Christ was not a worm (22:6); many bulls, including the strong bulls of Bashan, did not beset Him round (22:12); His heart was not literally melted in the midst of His bowels (22:14); it was not dogs who encompassed Him (22:16); Christ was not afraid of the power of a dog and the lion's mouth (22:20–21); nor was He on the horns of a unicorn (22:21).

Feinberg goes on to accuse Berkhof and others of employing the method of allegorical interpretation, obviously assuming that allegorical and spiritual interpretation are one and the same. This is a debater's ploy rather than a substantive argument. As anyone who knows the slightest bit about the allegorical method of Origen and the school of Alexandria (with its concern with multiple and simultaneous "senses" and its undue preoccupation with the most minute details of the text) will recognize, there is very little resemblance between the two. The equating of allegorizing and spiritualizing is particularly unfortunate as it incriminates people who are not guilty and misrepresents this metaphorical form of interpretation.

Having stated these principles of prophetic interpretation and established none of them, Feinberg goes on to apply them to a most difficult prophetic passage — Ezekiel 40–48. While I am concerned with

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<sup>25</sup> Feinberg, "The Rebuilding of the Temple," 93.

the dispensational theory of literal interpretation rather than the details of Feinberg's exegesis of this passage, I will examine certain of his arguments in some detail because they illustrate the tendentious nature of the hermeneutic here.

Two arguments advanced by Feinberg against the figurative interpretation of this passage merit more detailed refutation. Feinberg first of all argues that, were this passage to refer to the church, it would have no meaning for Ezekiel and his contemporaries.<sup>26</sup> This is a rather surprising remark inasmuch as it is generally acknowledged and explicitly stated in Scripture that the prophets did not always understand what they were prophesying. Even with respect to the Incarnation itself and details concerning it, they were mystified as we read in 1 Peter 1:10–12:

As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preach the Gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven — things into which angels long to look. (NASB)

If prophets could be mystified about the “sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow,” events which are central to the redemptive work of Christ, it would not be surprising that they could be baffled by minute measurements of a future temple. The one message which would have been unmistakable to every contemporary of Ezekiel, as well as the prophet himself, would be that a great day was coming for true Israel. That day would see a magnificent worship of God in a temple that transcended anything they had presently known.

The dispensational concern for prophetic intelligibility and clarity deserves further exploration, however. The argument that prophecy must be interpreted literally often has intuitive appeal for many people because the well-meaning Christian tends to believe that God gives His Word to enlighten us rather than to confuse. For example, Charles Ryrie writes:

Based on the philosophy that God originated language for the purpose of communicating His message to man and that he intended man to understand that message, literal interpretation seeks to interpret that message plainly.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” 95–96.

<sup>27</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 96.

I must point out, however, that although the central message of salvation through Jesus Christ is abundantly clear, it does not follow that all portions of Scripture are *equally* clear. Scripture teaches in very direct fashion that prophecy, in particular, is often mysterious. Notice these words of God to Aaron and Miriam when they had spoken against His designated leader Moses:

Hear now My words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord shall make Myself known to him in a vision. I shall speak with him in a dream. Not so, with my servant Moses, He is faithful in all My household; with him I speak mouth to mouth, even openly, and not in dark sayings. (Num. 12:6–8, NASB)

Here we see that the very nature of prophetic speech (Moses excepted) is that it is often enigmatic. It is, by scriptural definition, a matter of “dark sayings.” The dispensational insistence here on literal interpretation and clarity flies in the face of the literal teaching of Scripture.

Another argument which Feinberg urges against the more traditional interpretation is that if Ezekiel’s vision does apply to the church, then “since the Church has been in existence for centuries, it should be easy to interpret the figures and symbols.”<sup>28</sup> Our response to this is that it is easy to see that this prophecy applies to the church but how each detail does is something else again. Although genuine allegorical interpretation is concerned with every detail of a text, a spiritual interpretation is not an allegorical interpretation. We do not know what every particular dimension may signify. Many passages in Scripture — and not only prophetic ones either — have been difficult for the church to understand and there is, as we have seen, a lack of unity even among dispensationalists over prophetic interpretation. In addition, Feinberg’s argument assumes that all the minute details of a prophetic passage are equally significant — an assumption which he assumes rather than demonstrates. Thus we see that Feinberg has not given us one substantial argument against the spiritual or figurative interpretation.

When Feinberg turns to defend his own interpretation of the passage, we find that the arguments advanced in favor of his own are no more cogent than those advanced against the figurative. What has already been noted should, however, be sufficient to demonstrate the point that hermeneutics is not determinative of dispensational theology. Rather, the

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<sup>28</sup> Feinberg, “The Rebuilding of the Temple,” 96.

reverse is the case. It should also be evident that the dispensational insistence on literal interpretation of prophecy flies in the face of the scriptural witness to the nature of prophetic language.

### **Dispensational Divisions**

A central proof-text of dispensational theology is 2 Timothy 2:15. Here the Apostle Paul exhorts Timothy: “Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (KJV). C. I. Scofield’s first book had the final phrase of this verse as its title.<sup>29</sup>

From the beginnings of the movement, this verse has been interpreted by dispensationalists as meaning that the Bible is presented in various sharply-divided parts or “dispensations.” Correct interpretation of the Bible, they say, involves the correct separation of these dispensations from one another.<sup>30</sup>

In itself, this is not an erroneous opinion. Paul’s word *oikonomia* means administration and implies a discerning or distinguishing of the differences in the various periods of biblical revelation. The church has always so understood it through the ages. What, then, is peculiar about the dispensational understanding of the matter? It is not in seeing different stages of unfolding revelation but in the way those stages are understood. Unlike traditional interpreters, dispensationalists “divide” these sections sharply such that they virtually conflict with one another rather than unfold from one another. Biblical revelation is developmental, one stage unfolding naturally from another just as the blossom unfolds from the bud of a flower. For dispensationalists, however, these periods are sharply divided from one another rather than integrated with one another. They conflict rather than harmonize. Even the word *divide* is a sharper term than Paul’s original requires but the dispensationalists have made it sharper still. It is a veritable scissor separation of one part from another.

Oswald Allis has noted this feature. As an Old Testament scholar with an intimate knowledge of a wide range of biblical criticism, he was impressed by the analogy between dispensationalism and radical Biblical

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<sup>29</sup> C. I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia School of the Bible, 1928).

<sup>30</sup> Scofield, *Rightly Dividing*, see ch. 8.



criticism.<sup>31</sup> While dispensationalists believe that the Bible is the Word of God and radical critics view it as a purely human product, both divide the Bible into sections which share little or no unity. The radical scholars would divide the Old Testament into different and conflicting documents with varying theologies. Dispensationalists did not go about their job in quite the same way but the unity of the Bible is just as surely lost. As we have seen in our survey of dispensational literalism, this particular theme is foundational to the whole theology.

### Spoof-Texting

I mention, finally, another of the dispensationalists' devices (though they have no monopoly) which I call "spoof-texting." It is simply the cumulative effect of massive citation. The reader is so busy reading or listening to the volume of citations (each text carrying the solemn dignity of being the inerrant Word of God) that he has no time to ponder the meaning. He tends to assume they do teach what the dispensationalist says that they teach. John Nelson Darby himself may have been the pioneer: "I prefer quoting many passages than enlarging upon them."<sup>32</sup>

Bear has noticed this spoof-texting. Dispensationalists, he observes, are content to reiterate the catch-phrases which set forth their distinctive principles, supporting them by reference to Bible passages of which they do not stop to show the validity. They usually do not attempt in their books to follow out their principles to their logical conclusions, and one often wonders if many who call themselves "Dispensationalist" have ever actually faced the conclusion which must flow from the principles which they so confidently teach.<sup>33</sup>

Sandeen, on the other hand, throws out the baby with the wash. He simply indicts dispensationalists for holding the classic orthodox view of inerrancy from which he himself has departed. Dispensationalism, he argues, has "a frozen biblical text in which every word was supported by the same weight of divine authority."<sup>34</sup> Luther, too, had an inerrant Bible, one word of which would "slay" the devil. We should praise the dispensationalists for their virtues and censure them only for their faults.

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<sup>31</sup> Oswald Allis, "Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of the Scriptures," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (1936):22–25.

<sup>32</sup> John Nelson Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, 34 vols., ed. William Kelly (London: G. Morrish, 1867–83): 11:363.

<sup>33</sup> Bear, "Dispensationalism," 289–290.

<sup>34</sup> Sandeen, "Origins," 70.

The vice of “spoof-texting” is not to be confused, as Sandeen and others do, with the virtue of proper proof-texting. Luther is right that one little word (rightly interpreted) will destroy the devil, but a hundred words used only for cumulative effect have no effect on any argument. At the same time, however, those who would interpret God’s Word have the duty to use it responsibly and not to trade casually on the authority of Scripture as a means of endowing dubious arguments with divine sanction.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter we have seen that the literal hermeneutic, upon which so much weight is placed by dispensationalists, is a very shaky affair indeed. Not only is it impossible to interpret Scripture in a consistently literal fashion, but the Bible itself clearly teaches that parts of Scripture, especially prophecy, are not intended to be taken in a consistently literal fashion.

Furthermore, we have seen that, far from determining dispensational theology, the dispensational literal hermeneutic (with all its inconsistencies), is in fact the direct result of that theology. It is appropriate that I now turn to an examination of dispensational theology.

### Part Three

## THEOLOGY AND SYSTEMS

There have been essentially only three theologies in the history of the church. One is usually called Augustinian, Calvinistic, or Reformed. The second is called Semi-Pelagian, Arminian, or (often) evangelical. The third is called Pelagian, Socinian, or liberal (modernist).

Only the first two (Calvinistic and Arminian) can qualify for the terms *Christian* or *Biblical*. Calvinism is consistent Christianity and Arminianism is inconsistent Christianity, while Pelagianism or liberalism (anti-supernaturalism) is not Christianity at all but a counterfeit that has fooled a significant portion of the church in the modern period.

The main Calvinistic branches are the Presbyterian, the Reformed, and the Anglican. The main Arminian branches are the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Methodist. The main liberal denomination is the Unitarian, though liberalism exists primarily as a parasite on the Calvinistic and Arminian churches.

Where can we locate dispensationalism on this theological map? It is rarely denominationally organized, and it tends instead to exist as a theological party within denominations. As a theology, however, it belongs to the Arminian or evangelical branch, though it does not admit to Arminianism, and has a questionable right to the evangelical label. In this part I will endeavor to show that, theologically speaking, it is a spurious form of Calvinism and a dubious form of evangelicalism. Here we face a situation similar to what we saw in the previous chapter. There I noted that the dispensationalist understanding of their literal hermeneutic differs markedly from the actual facts of the matter. Likewise, in this chapter we will see that, while dispensationalism insistently claims to be Calvinistic, careful scrutiny reveals it to be Arminian.



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## SPURIOUS CALVINISM: THE FIVE POINTS REDEFINED

So far as I know, there never has been a study of the dispensational theological system as a whole. Various parts of the doctrine have been studied, many of them in detail. This is especially true of the eschatological part of the dispensational system. As a matter of fact, the dispensational doctrine of future things has been studied so extensively that many people think dispensationalism is nothing but an eschatology. While there can be no doubt that the future looms large in the theology of dispensationalism, it is by no means all that there is to this teaching. It has its own distinctives, of course, which will be duly emphasized, but it also holds to a generally recognized theological form. That form, as we shall see, is what is commonly called Arminianism.

In its views of the creation of man, the Fall, the Atonement, soteriology, and eschatology, this system is a variation of the Arminian system. Adherence to Calvinism is often measured according to the famous “Five Points” which were propounded by the Synod of Dordt in 1619. These five points, stated in response to Arminian error, include total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints (resulting in the well-known TULIP acronym). Of the five points, dispensationalism is thought to maintain four — total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. It specifically rejects the doctrine of limited atonement but generally professes to hold all the other doctrines of TULIP. Thus it would seem, at first glance, to be a Calvinistic system with one element in that system lacking. We will see, however, that the one anti-Calvinistic feature, which seems to be an exception to the rule, is actually indicative of a thoroughgoing departure from Calvinism.

Another strange thing about dispensationalism is that it seems to have had its strongest advocates in Calvinistic churches. It was born in the mind of an Anglican rector John Nelson Darby, was widely popularized by a Congregationalist lawyer (C. I. Scofield), and had its most thorough systematization by a Presbyterian theologian (Lewis Sperry Chafer). As we have seen, it has been widespread in American Presbyterianism during this century. That too would tend to confirm its reputation as a Calvinistic system. It certainly has appealed most extensively to people who are in

churches belonging to the Calvinistic heritage. However, though these persons who have championed dispensationalism often were found in Reformed or Calvinistic denominations, they were not notably Reformed or Calvinistic in their own personal theological commitments — due, perhaps, to a preoccupation with eschatology rather than systematic theological concerns.<sup>1</sup>

Generally speaking, those who are knowledgeably Reformed and Calvinistic in the aforementioned denominations have been quite hostile to dispensational theology. They have never labored under the impression that it was a genuinely Calvinistic system. Charles Hodge, Princeton's most famous nineteenth-century Reformed theologian, certainly looked askance at this theology. Southern Presbyterianism's Robert Dabney had even more trenchant criticisms.<sup>2</sup> B. B. Warfield was another major critic of the dispensational theology from a Reformed standpoint. His most concentrated criticism, which we will examine in more detail later, was an extensive book review of Chafer on the dispensational doctrine of sanctification.<sup>3</sup>

Oswald T. Allis, of Princeton and later Westminster Seminary, was a major opponent of dispensationalism. His Old Testament studies led him to critique the divisive effect of dispensational Bible studies, and he wrote what is still the most definitive expose of the incompatibility of dispensational and Reformed ecclesiology.<sup>4</sup> This consistent trend of incisive Reformed critique of dispensationalism has continued into the present, and it raises strong questions about the accuracy of dispensational claims to be Calvinistic.<sup>5</sup> Having made these general remarks about dispensational theology as being a species of Arminianism, I will now proceed in more detail to demonstrate these serious allegations. Before doing so, however, let us recall the seriousness of this matter. I believe with the

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<sup>1</sup> Many will cite the late great Donald Grey Barnhouse as a staunch Calvinistic dispensationalist. It is true that he held to dispensational doctrines and some distinctively Calvinistic ones as well.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:861ff. Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions*, 3 vols., ed. C. R. Vaughn (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890–92), 1:169–228.

<sup>3</sup> B. B. Warfield, "Review of L.S. Chafer, *He That is Spiritual*," *Princeton Theological Review* 17 (1919):322–527.

<sup>4</sup> Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that Calvinism is just another name for Christianity. The denial of Calvinism is a very grave mistake.

### **Dispensational Total Depravity is Not Total**

Let us begin our exposition of the dispensational theology at this fundamental point of Calvinism. This basic doctrine maintains that man by the Fall became sinful in every aspect of his being. By the Fall he lost the moral image of God; that is, holiness or “original righteousness.” Subsequently, man is motivated purely by self-interest and without any concern whatever for the divine interest. This means that he sins in thought, word, and deed. His understanding, his emotions, and his will are affected. Even his body is rendered liable to suffering and death.

When we come to the dispensationalist doctrine of man, we find an Arminian type of deviation from this teaching. It is, however, Arminian doctrine with some novelties added. The doctrine begins in a characteristically Arminian manner by denying that man can have a created character. Only his own volitions make him a good or bad person. Prior to acting he must be in a neutral condition, a state of moral indifference. The dispensationalists call this neutral state of Adam, as created and before moral actions are taken, the state or “dispensation of innocence.”<sup>6</sup>

J. N. Darby, commenting on Genesis, makes no mention of righteousness and holiness as characterizing the newly created Adam. Only absence of evil distinguishes his character.<sup>7</sup> Again, “man, then, was tried in his innocence by the enemy.”<sup>8</sup> In that statement we note that Adam was merely innocent and that his trial was fundamentally an enticement of the devil rather than ultimately a probation of God. After the Fall, man has a “totally different” kind of nature.

On the other hand, the human nature of Christ is different from that of fallen or unfallen man. According to William Kelly, Christ “alone was born holy.”<sup>9</sup> So, as Wallace observes, dispensationalism has three types

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<sup>6</sup> See *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 5. For a thorough refutation demonstrating the futility and unscripturalness of this notion see Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 1:166, n.3.

<sup>7</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 1:10.

<sup>8</sup> Darby, *Inspiration of the Bible*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> William Kelly, *Christ Tempted and Sympathizing* (London: R. L. Allan, 1906), 6.

of humanity — “innocent” Adam who was neither righteous nor evil, fallen humanity, and the righteous Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> Over against all this, the answer to the tenth question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism affirms that “God created man, male and female, after His own image, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, with dominion over the creatures.”

Another Arminian characteristic of dispensationalism is seen in its view of the imputation of Adam’s sin. According to dispensationalism, Adam was in some sense a representative but, when he fell, his sin was not imputed to his descendants. Oddly enough, dispensationalists come over to an Arminian position again at this point, but for an entirely different reason. Wesleyan Arminians hold that God cannot properly hold a person responsible for repenting and believing the gospel unless he is morally able to do so. Consequently, they deny the doctrine of total inability by saying that Christ’s death removed inability from all persons so that all are morally able to believe the gospel. This is maintained, despite considerable scriptural evidence to the contrary, because the justice of God is thought to require it. That is, Arminians insist that God is not just if He condemns man after the Fall without giving him a chance to be saved. This error puts God under obligation to sinners and makes the gospel a matter of justice due, rather than grace given.

Dispensationalists, on the other hand, reject the imputation of Adam’s guilt outright. They do so by arguing that there was in Eden no law and, therefore, no imputation of a transgression of the law. The law, together with the covenant of works, was not established until Sinai. Though there is original sin and man is subjectively bound, he is not under the guilt of Adam’s sin by imputation.<sup>11</sup>

On the surface, contemporary dispensationalism does seem to teach emphatically the doctrine of total depravity. This is so constantly reiterated by theologians of this school that it seems superfluous to bother with any quotations. One quote from Schuyler English will suffice:

It is true that man may reform, that is, change his habits and even improve them. But at his best he is utterly bankrupt spiritually, that is, in God’s reckoning.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wallace, *Plymouth Brethrenism*, 31f.

<sup>11</sup> See: Darby, *Letters*, 1:314; 2:164, 477, 501.

<sup>12</sup> E. Schuyler English, *Things Surely Believed* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1956), 201. See also Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:233–38; 4:402–03; 7:287–89.



All of these theologians preach salvation by grace and they seem to recognize this state of sin from which no one can be rescued except through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. As we shall see later, there is a sense in which dispensationalism out-does traditional Calvinism on this doctrine. Calvinism teaches that this depravity is ultimately overcome by the redemption of Christ and man's nature is genuinely made righteous. When we consider the dispensational view of sanctification, we will notice that nothing really happens to this nature. It is allowed ultimately to die and be annihilated. This is, of course, a travesty of the Reformed doctrine, but it certainly seems to take the sinful nature so seriously that even God does nothing with it except ultimately to destroy it.

In spite of this, the dispensational view of the totally depraved man is one who is not totally depraved after all. It turns out that he is not totally disabled. According to the Reformed doctrine, total depravity makes man *morally* incapable of making a virtuous choice. While dispensationalism seems to go along with this idea to a degree, this "totally depraved" man is nevertheless able to believe. We shall see that his faith precedes or is at least simultaneous with (and not based upon) his regeneration. As long as that doctrine is maintained, the nerve of total depravity is cut. If total depravity does anything, it renders man totally unable because he is indisposed to respond to the overtures of grace.<sup>13</sup> If the dispensationalist maintains, as he does, that man is *morally* able to respond to the gospel, then dispensationalism does not believe that man is totally depraved after all.

Possibly the best way to illustrate this is by Dwight Pentecost's treatment of *depravity*.<sup>14</sup> Pentecost thinks this doctrine "says that man is as bad *off* as he can be. There is a vast difference between being as *bad* as he can be, and being as bad *off* as he can be."<sup>15</sup> This is, as we shall see, a fatal concession.

According to Biblical doctrine, fallen man is as bad as he can be at the moment but not as bad as he can and will become. There is room for

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<sup>13</sup> See John Murray, "Irresistible Grace," in *Soli Deo Gloria*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976), 63–72. Note also the statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith 6:4, "From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions."

<sup>14</sup> Dwight Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, 9–10.

“deprovement.” Scripture says regarding man that “every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Gen. 6:5, NASB) “There is none righteous, not even one . . . . There is none who does good.” (Rom. 3:10, 12, NASB)

Pentecost himself notes these passages without seeing their conflict with what he had written elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> He explains that depraved man is “under sin,” “spiritually dead,” “under condemnation,” “under the power of Satan,” and “lost.” Still, to our amazement he concludes that this “is what it means to be depraved. Man is *not* as bad as he can be, but man is as bad off as he can be.”<sup>17</sup> If being lost, under sin, condemnation, Satan, and being spiritually dead is not as bad as can be, I, for one, cannot think of what would be worse. Those in hell are no worse.

But Pentecost, like all dispensationalists, can think of what would be worse. What would make it worse would be for man really to be lost, under sin, condemned, Satan-bound, and spiritually dead. It is quite obvious that is not really the case because Pentecost thinks that this lost, condemned, enslaved, dead person is quite able to come, of himself, to Jesus Christ. Corpses live, the dead walk, and Satan’s slaves can break his bonds because “that which accomplishes the new birth is [their, self-generated] *faith* in Jesus Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

Pentecost was true to himself the first time. Depraved men are not “bad,” they are only “bad off.” If he reflected a little more on what he wrote he would realize that men are not even “bad off.” They can spend their whole lives in sin with absolute impunity, because they can walk out free into the arms of Jesus at any moment that they *of themselves* choose to avoid the consequence of sin and inherit eternal life instead. Even after coming to Jesus they may continue to live ungodly lives, although Pentecost would counsel them not to do so.

Dispensationalism’s “totally depraved” man turns out to be neither really “bad” nor “bad off.” When we come to study the dispensational view of sanctification, we will learn that the “totally depraved” remain “totally depraved” *after* being “saved” and made heirs of eternal life.

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<sup>16</sup> Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, 10–18.

<sup>17</sup> Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, 16 (emph. mine).

<sup>18</sup> Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, 37 (emph. mine).

### Dispensationalism's Unconditional Election is Not Unconditional

Here I focus on the second of the five points of Calvinism — unconditional election. Dispensationalists profess to believe in unconditional election, and we are grateful for their approbation of the doctrine. Nevertheless, one can hardly believe a doctrine which he misunderstands. If there is anything which is characteristically associated with Calvinism, it is the doctrine of predestination. Of course, Calvinism believes all the classic, fundamental tenets of the Christian religion. But that which distinguishes it in the popular, and even in the academic mind is its strong adherence to and affirmation of predestinating, unconditional election by an almighty, all-sovereign God. If a dispensationalist wants to be known as essentially Calvinistic, he cannot give any uncertain sound on this doctrine. The very best thing that can be said for the dispensationalist at this point is that his sound is very uncertain.

Let us see what dispensationalists mean by their affirmation of unconditional election. Darby, commenting on Romans 8:29, translates the Greek “whom he foreknew he predestinated to be conformed” and then goes on to say, “No trouble with ‘foreknew.’”<sup>19</sup> The thought is that if predestination may be viewed as dependent on foreknowledge, the offense of the Reformed doctrine is removed.<sup>20</sup>

This line of interpretation continues in the *Scofield Bible*. The reference note on 1 Peter 1:2 says that “election is according to the foreknowledge of God, and wholly of grace, apart from human merit.”<sup>21</sup> So we see what is meant by unconditional election. It is unconditional *justification* that dispensationalists are talking about. One can see by this statement that the Scofield editors view God as foreseeing that the sinner will repent. Because God foresees this repentance and belief of the sinner, He, without any meritorious condition on the sinner's part, chooses him to everlasting life. That is to say, He elects the sinner without the sinner

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<sup>19</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 1:476.

<sup>20</sup> Note that “foreknew” in Romans 8:29, according to Reformed theologians, is one of many instances of the Biblical use of “know” as own, acknowledge, or love. See, e.g., Rom. 11:2; Deut. 33:9; Psa. 1:6; Jer. 1:5; Matt. 1:23; 25:12; 2 Tim. 2:19. It is inconsistent with this text, this context, and general Bible teaching to interpret “foreknew” as mere “had prior knowledge of the certain futurity of events.”

<sup>21</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1311.

having *any condition of virtue* which recommends him for election. This is unconditional salvation, not unconditional election.

It is quite true that God elects the sinner without that sinner having met any condition of virtue, but this is not what “unconditional election” means. That doctrine teaches that God from all eternity elects the sinner without depending on that sinner’s “foreseen faith.” The election is unconditional. If God chooses or elects a person foreseeing his repentance and faith, that is not an unconditional election. God does not foresee any faith in the depraved sinner except as He Himself bestows it on those He *unconditionally* elects.

Reformed theologians have traditionally spoken of a logical order of the eternal divine decrees as a means of clarifying this issue. The decree of God to elect or choose some for eternal life (while at the same time decreeing to pass over others) is carefully recognized as logically prior to God’s foreknowledge of the elect person’s exercise of faith. In addition to their intrinsic importance, the decrees of God are important here as a test of the allegedly Calvinistic character of the dispensational theology. The Arminian theologian, Steele, whose *Antinomianism Revived* claims to trace the Antinomianism of the Brethren to their Calvinism, nevertheless admits a significant absence from Brethrenism of a hallmark of Calvinism — sovereign decrees. “Nothing: is said of sovereign decrees and of unconditional election.”<sup>22</sup> Steele should have suspected the basic Arminian character of this system from this silence on the decrees.

Let us see how dispensationalism’s stance on election relates to the dispensational position on total depravity. The dispensationalist is convinced, as we have seen, that he believes in total depravity. I ask the simple question — how could a person possibly believe that men are dead in trespasses and sins, that they hate God, that they are utterly indisposed to Christ, that they are totally depraved, and that they are morally unable to incline toward any virtue, and then say in the next breath that God foresees these persons as believing and that God elects on the ground of that foreseen faith? Men are either “dead” in sin or they are not. If they are “dead” then, of course, spiritual corpses do not give birth to spiritual effects. They would have to be, as all sound Calvinists say, unconditionally elected to repentance, faith, and the salvation which Christ specifically purchased for them and brings to them by first making them come alive.

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel Steele, *Antinomianism Revived*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Christian Witness, 1899), 94.

What are we to make of the dispensational talk of unconditional election together with the apparent denial of it?

There seems to be, on the part of dispensationalists, a genuine desire to honor the predestinating, electing grace of God. There are so many passages in the Bible which affirm this truth, and dispensationalists are so avowedly Biblical, that it is almost inevitable that they would affirm predestination. On the other hand, the Biblical meaning of the doctrine makes the dispensationalist uncomfortable. He cannot formally deny the doctrine because the words are in Scripture. On the other hand, he cannot accept the substance of it because it is incompatible with his theology.

How does the dispensationalist handle the problem? A number of strategies may be discerned. Some dispensationalists handle it by simply avoiding the matter. That is, they give lip service to divine sovereignty and human freedom, constantly reminding us that both are taught in the Bible, that both must be honored. How they can be in harmony with one another is a mystery. All that is true and wholesome but it does not say what the doctrine actually is. A predestination of some corpses to life and foreordination of some corpses to remain dead is what is meant by the Bible doctrine but dispensationalists refuse to accept that.<sup>23</sup>

The biblical view of the matter is all very plain, but it is not a very palatable doctrine. Dispensationalists, as well as many others, shrink from having to say God lets many persons perish and chooses to save only some of the multitude. That is plainly what God and unconditional election say. While they will not deny the doctrine outright, neither will dispensationalists affirm it.

When dispensationalists feel it necessary to give a more disciplined answer to these questions, the results are usually neither Calvinistic nor coherent. C. H. Mackintosh, the popular Plymouth Brethren teacher says: "The grand truth of election is fully established; the repulsive error of *reprobation*, sedulously avoided."<sup>24</sup> He goes on to explain that this is because the wicked damn themselves and the elect are saved by God. By that remark, he attempts to clear God of any involvement (not merely any guilt) in reprobation. According to true Calvinism, men do damn themselves and God is not the author of their sin. But Calvinism does not stop there and neither can Mackintosh if men are "totally depraved." If they are, when God elects to save some of them, He chooses not to save the

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<sup>23</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 233. H. R. Mackintosh, *Works*, 606.

<sup>24</sup> C. H. Mackintosh, *Works*, 606.

others. He therefore decrees to leave them to their own wickedness by which they damn themselves. God as truly reprobates some wicked as He elects to save others; He permissively reprobates and positively elects.

How does L. S. Chafer interpret this doctrine which he ostensibly favors? Chafer attempts to combine Scofield's position that foreknowledge is prior to election with the assertion that such an election really is, after all, unconditional. He views free-will as self-determination and, as such, it cannot be foreknown, being in its nature unknowable before it occurs. Somehow, however, God is supposed to foreknow it. Foreknowing the sinner's free-will choice of Christ, God (it is supposed) elects him. Chafer claims that this election is not grounded on the sinner's faith because it is an eternal knowledge of that faith — a curious argument indeed.<sup>25</sup>

Harry Ironside is often the most orthodox exponent of unorthodox dispensationalism. This is true with reference to this doctrine also. His erroneous view of free agency makes it easy for him to affirm a true, unconditional election. He says that though man was created a "free agent" he is not such now. In fact, he is a captive and slave of the devil and cannot, as such, possibly choose Christ. Erroneously supposing the sinner no longer has true choice at all, Ironside concludes that God must bestow true choice on man because he (Ironside) thinks that God has to restore any power of choice at all. Having said that, he falls back into the opposite error and views regenerated man as the "captive of Christ," in the sense of still having no true choice.<sup>26</sup>

Ironside does not seem to understand that free agency means that a person of himself chooses what seems "good" to him (however good or evil it may be in itself). That is all there is to free agency, and no human being ever loses it in heaven, this world, or hell. Though a person freely chooses evil only (because he finds only evil "good"), he is a *free* agent. He is thus a free captive of Satan and, if converted, afterward becomes a free captive of Christ. In the first state Satan seems good to him and he willingly (freely) follows him. In the second state, Christ seems good to him and he willingly (freely) follows Him.

What does Charles Ryrie have to say on this crucial biblical doctrine? First, I note his failure to understand the specific meaning of election. He defines election as "God's unconditioned and pretemporal choice of those

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<sup>25</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:231.

<sup>26</sup> H. A. Ironside, *Eternal Security of Believers* (New York: Loizeaux, 1934), 25.

individuals whom He would save.”<sup>27</sup> Election is an *eternal* determining decree and the very words “temporal” and “would” suggest something hypothetical or an expression of mere desire. Especially is that true in the discussion of this doctrine where even some recognized and genuine Calvinistic theologians say that God truly desires what He does not decree. Elsewhere, Ryrie seems to take refuge in the notion of corporate election. The Biblical doctrine has to do with the choice of individuals as well as groups, but Ryrie speaks only of God’s election of classes of people. That is, the doctrine speaks of God’s choice of individuals such as Jacob, but Ryrie speaks only of His choice of a specific class of individuals; namely, believers in general. God, according to Ryrie, does not choose specific individuals to salvation but believers in general to salvation.

Under the topic of election and predestination in his *Ryrie Study Bible*, Ryrie has comments on seven verses (Mark 13:20; Rom. 8:29; 10:14–15; 11:7; Eph. 1:5; 1 Thess. 1:4). The most clear and explicit statement is the comment on Ephesians 1:5 which reads, “God has determined beforehand that those who believe in Christ will be adopted into his family.”<sup>28</sup> This involves a choice on God’s part and faith on man’s part. Thus Ryrie makes election an eternal divine choice of *believers* to be members of God’s family. This is not only not a definition of election (which is a decree to bring sinners to believe in Christ), but it is something of an insult to the intelligence of God. How so? Because it presents God as decreeing that those who are in Christ should be considered in Christ.

In Norman Geisler, the implicit Arminianism of dispensationalism has become explicit. This former Dallas Seminary professor very clearly makes the divine purposes in salvation entirely dependent upon human choice. Geisler writes, “God would save all men if He could. God will achieve the greatest number in heaven He possibly can.”<sup>29</sup> The limitation on the divine will is human will. God will save as many as God can “without violating their free choice.” Divine election is dearly dependent on the human sinner’s “free choice.” No Arminian has ever been more specific in his denial of Calvinistic doctrine than this selfdesignated dispensational Calvinist. Geisler not only denies the fourth point, “irresistible grace,” but

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, ed., *The Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 1948.

<sup>28</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1948.

<sup>29</sup> Norman L. Geisler, “God, Evil and Dispensations,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 102.

unconditional election as well because, emphatically, he makes divine election the result of fallen man's "free will."

Incidentally, the Bible, according to the Reformed understanding, does not teach any divine "violence" to the will of man. *Violence* means compulsion and coercion which Calvinists do not believe any more than do Arminians. Dr. Geisler does not seem to grasp that fact. So the first two of the five points go by the board in dispensational theology. It has neither a true doctrine of total depravity nor a true doctrine of unconditional election. It is at least conscious of its deviation from the doctrine of limited atonement, and I hope I have succeeded in making it aware of its rejection of the first two points also.

### **Dispensationalism's Denial of Limited Atonement Destroys the Possibility of Calvinism**

I come now to a point — the design of Christ's atoning work — where dispensationalists frankly acknowledge their departure from Calvinistic orthodoxy. Reformed theologians have historically argued that, because Christ's death and resurrection accomplish salvation (rather than merely make salvation possible) and because God has purposed from all eternity to save the elect, Christ died with the intention of saving the elect. The term *limited atonement* has been applied to this doctrine. Because this term can be misinterpreted as limiting the value of Christ's atoning work, some have preferred to speak of a "specific" or "definite" atonement.

Before I address the issue of the extent of the atonement of Christ, I will first take a brief account of the dispensational view of the person of Christ — His deity and humanity — which bears on this doctrine.

#### *The Person of Christ*

The major question concerning the Christology of the dispensationalist is not whether they believe in the deity of Christ, but whether they have a sound conception of His humanity. Darby clearly refers John 1:1 to Jesus thereby affirming His deity and equality with the Father.<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere he says, "The great truth of the divinity of Jesus, that he is God is written all through scripture with a sunbeam, but written to faith."<sup>31</sup> Chafer seems injudicious perhaps in using the word *emanation* for the relation of the

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<sup>30</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 3:103.

<sup>31</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 1:28–29; See also 3:103, 266.



Son and Father, but he is clear in his belief that Christ was independently, and not derivatively, divine.<sup>32</sup>

With regard to the reality of Christ's humanity, Darby emphatically states, "His was a true and real human body and soul, flesh and blood, like mine as far as humanity is concerned, sin excepted."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, he makes some statements which raise questions as to the extent to which Christ actually was fully human. Commenting on Hebrews 4:15, which reads that Christ "was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (KJV), Darby remarks that "*choris harmartias* means 'sin apart' namely: He was not tempted by sin as we are."<sup>34</sup> But, if Christ had a true human nature just like ours, why would He not be tempted just as we are? To deny this fact would seem to question whether He did indeed have such a nature as ours. This is what the Monophysite heresy did indeed question and deny.

C. H. Mackintosh makes some statements which raise similar questions. For example, he writes that the "first Adam even in his unfallen condition, was 'of the earth' but the second Man was, as to his manhood, 'the Lord from heaven.'"<sup>35</sup> While this certainly seems to stress unduly the difference between Christ's humanity and the rest of humanity, it would seem that dispensationalism in general wants to affirm fully the reality of the Incarnation. In their desire to stress the full deity of Christ they sometimes appear to do less than full justice to his humanity but this seems due more to a lack of theological care and precision than to heterodoxy.

#### *The Work of Christ*

Moving from the person to the work of Christ, we find a striking divergence from the Reformed tradition at the point of the three offices of Christ.<sup>36</sup> While Reformed theologians have seen Christ functioning in His offices of Prophet, Priest, and King simultaneously, Darby, with his penchant for historical division and separation, viewed these offices as successive rather than simultaneous. Christ was a prophet while on earth,

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<sup>32</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *The Ephesian Letter Doctrinally Considered* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1935), 28.

<sup>33</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 1:279.

<sup>34</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 469.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Henry Mackintosh, *Notes on the Book of Leviticus* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux, 1965), 35.

<sup>36</sup> See: for example, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 23

a priest in heaven, and a king in the kingdom yet to come.<sup>37</sup> The reason for Darby's (and later dispensationalists') denial of Christ's exercise of His priestly and kingly office during His humiliation is no doubt related to their eschatological doctrine of the kingdom as being strictly future.

#### *The Atonement*

With regard to the Atonement, dispensationalists believe that, since man is not totally depraved and is conditionally elected, Christ died to save all men. Here all dispensationalists are explicitly anti-Calvinistic. Lewis Sperry Chafer admits this with something approaching humility, almost contrition. He is firm and certain of his position but, at the same time, he recognizes that his departure from Calvinistic orthodoxy requires explanation and justification. This he endeavors to give in what I feel is perhaps his most competent theological effort.

Chafer not only denies that the Bible teaches limited atonement but insists that the Bible teaches the opposite — a universal design of the atonement. Furthermore, he argues that the notion of a universal atonement is not incompatible with the general Calvinistic system of doctrine. Let us examine Chafer's argument for the consistency of unlimited atonement with the Calvinistic system of doctrine.

In his view the question is simply this: is there any inconsistency between God making "all men savable" by the atonement and actually saving only the elect by effectual calling? Chafer maintains that God does exactly that. He makes all men "savable" by the atonement and actually saves only the elect by calling them. Or, the Son makes all men savable and the Holy Spirit actually saves only the elect.

Viewed in isolation, this construction of the matter is conceivable, but in the Calvinistic context it is quite incongruous. In fact, it is the Arminian who says precisely that and, though wrong, he is at least consistent with his system of doctrine. The inconsistency at work here is not difficult to demonstrate. In the Reformed view, the totally depraved are simply not savable apart from effectual calling. They are dead and no external act (such as Christ's death on the cross) is going to help corpses. Christ could die a thousand deaths: All would be of no avail to dead people.

A significant problem facing Chafer's position is that the atonement does not even make all people "savable." If Chafer were to say that Christ's death purchased the Holy Spirit by whose effectual calling these corpses are made alive, the Calvinist would agree completely. However,

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<sup>37</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 4:518.

an unlimited atonement did not, according to Chafer, secure the Holy Spirit for everyone salvifically. So, according to Chafer himself, the universal atonement does not in fact make all men savable, by their own faith, the faith not forthcoming as a result of the *atonement* alone.

What is it that drives Chafer and other dispensationalists to this desperate theological strategy? The answer is clear they suppose that, on traditional Calvinistic grounds, there is no foundation for the offer of the gospel. “How,” they ask, “can we invite men to receive Jesus when we cannot say that Christ died for them?” With this evangelistic concern all Calvinists deeply sympathize while assuring dispensationalists that their anxiety is unnecessary.

First, all Calvinists and even dispensationalists recognize the principle that inability does not limit responsibility. Chafer acknowledges that the unregenerate cannot believe but holds them responsible and worthy of eternal condemnation for not believing nonetheless. He refers to “spiritual death from which they are impotent to take even one step in the direction of their own salvation.”<sup>38</sup> Yet he considers them guilty sinners notwithstanding.

Second, the evangelical call itself is only to the regenerate. Unfortunately, this point is often poorly explicated by authentic Calvinists. That is, the evangelical call is not to unregenerate people to come into the kingdom but to regenerate, for without regeneration no one will enter the kingdom (see John 3:3). The call is to whomever will (the regenerate), and not to whomever will not (the unregenerate). The call is to those who labor and are heavy laden (see Matt. 11:28), and not to those who are proud in their self-righteousness. The call is to sinners and not to the righteous (see Matt. 9:13). The offer and promise are to the penitent and not to the impenitent (see Acts 11:18). The only ones who do become regenerate are the elect (see John 6:44). So the call is always to the regenerate and never to the unregenerate. It is not even to the elect while unregenerate but only to the elect when regenerate. The elect are the ones for whom Christ died and who are regenerated at the appointed time when they hear Christ calling by the gospel.

Chafer is afraid that we may be calling the undatable nonevent. So he tries to make them the savable non-elect so that the evangelist may be justified in calling them. But calling the elect when non-savable is as unjustified as calling the non-savable non-elect. Unjustified calling is never

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<sup>38</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, “For Whom Did Christ Die?” *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 137 (1980):310–311

authorized or required by the Scriptures. The only biblical call, properly understood, is to the regenerate.

But, the objection comes, are we not commanded to call all men everywhere to repentance? Indeed we are (see Acts 17:30). It is the duty of all human beings who ever lived or shall live to repent and believe the gospel. It is their duty to believe and be saved. The sin of unbelief is the ultimate condemnation. They are not, however, invited to come to Christ as impenitent, unbelieving, unwilling, unconvinced sinners. Rather, they are to come as penitent sinners, believing in the atoning death of Christ.

The calling is as limited and specific as the design of the atonement. It is extended to the whole world of believers to all of them and to no one else. Christ died for His sheep and not for those who are not His sheep. His sheep (and they alone) hear His voice calling them by name. Those choose Him whom He has first chosen. "How blessed is the one Thou dost choose, and bring near to Thee" (Psa. 65:4, NASB).

The traditional Reformed distinction between the internal and external call can be a source of confusion.<sup>39</sup> There are not two different calls. They are one and the same call. The internal spiritual call is to the regenerate. The external audible call is to the regenerate. This one call to the regenerate is heard by the ears of many unregenerate. But what they hear is not a call to them but to the regenerate. "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17, NASB). Christ is not calling those who fancy themselves righteous but those who know themselves to be sinners (the regenerate elect).

Let me illustrate. A church meeting is in progress. The service is interrupted by a call that a car with a specified license plate has its lights on. Everybody in the room hears that call. All but one hearing that call knows it does not refer to him/her. The one owning that car knows that "universal" call is a call to him specifically and not for the others, though they all hear it as a call to Him.

In other words, many unregenerates hear this one call to the many regenerates and know that the call is heard by themselves, but not addressed to them. They would be insulted if it were. They are the "righteous," not sinners. They know what the call is and definitely know that it is not addressed to those who consider themselves as not needing it at all.

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<sup>39</sup> Even the excellent Puritan, Joseph Alleine, has misunderstood this point. See his *Alarm to the Unconverted* (London: Banner of Truth, 1957; rep. ed.).

Chafer's concern for the evangelistic call of the gospel was as misplaced as his solution to the non-problem was disastrous. I move now to his exegetical arguments for the theory of a universal atonement.

Chafer does attempt to address the challenge posed to his position by the numerous biblical texts which clearly delimit the saving work of Christ to the elect. Citing passages such as John 10:15; 17:2, 6, 9, 20, 24; Romans 4:25; and Ephesians 1:11, Chafer contends that, while Christ did die for the elect, this does not imply that Christ did not die for the non-elect also.<sup>40</sup> "He may easily have died for all men with a view to securing His elect."<sup>41</sup> Chafer would apparently have us believe that Christ died to save those He had no intention of saving while aiming at saving those He intended to save.

As we have seen, according to Chafer's view, Christ did not, strictly speaking, die to save all men. In fact, He did not die to save anyone. He died only to make all men "savable." In reality, concrete intentionality seems to be entirely lacking in Chafer's view of the atonement. This is really "hypothetical redemptionism" with a vengeance. Chafer's view compares unfavorably even with traditional Arnyraldianism. Seventeenth-century theologian Moises Arnyraut (from which the name Arnyraldianism derives) argued that, in the logical order of divine decrees, the decree to redeem through the death of Christ was logically prior to the decree to choose the elect. Thus, the decree to redeem was at that point not specific to the elect. For Chafer, however, the atonement is altogether hypothetical to the point of effectual calling, whereas in traditional Arnyraldianism it was hypothetical until foreseen as futile and then it became a limited atonement from start to finish.

In summary, the logic of Chafer's view amounts to this:

1. Christ died to make all men savable.
2. Dead men cannot be made savable without being made alive.
3. Therefore, Christ died for the salvation of no man.
4. So far from Christ's having "died for all men with a view to securing His elect," He has not even died for the elect, not to mention the non-elect.

I must conclude that Chafer's view of the design of the atonement is explicitly Arminian and not Calvinism in any form.

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<sup>40</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:196–99, 201, 242f., 321–22; 5:203f., 248f.

<sup>41</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:322.

*Other Dispensational Views*

Let us consider what more recent dispensationalists have to say on this subject. Charles Ryrie, for example, maintains that the unlimited atonement view does not spell frustration for God. "Christ is not defeated in having died for all even though all are not ultimately saved because personal faith is as necessary for salvation as the death of Christ."<sup>42</sup> Can Ryrie mean that, since Christ knew that salvation was by faith and that unless all people had faith in His death they would not be saved, He consciously ran the risk of not saving all He intended to save? He was not defeated because He knew the possibility of defeat? By contrast, Chafer's view, though quite wrong, is at least coherent. Not only is Ryrie's conclusion wrong, but his route to it is inconceivable. In that he differs from his mentor.

Another dispensationalist, William Evans, states the matter this way: "The atonement is limited only by men's unbelief."<sup>43</sup> Yet if men's unbelief limited the efficacy of the atonement, no one would ever have been saved by the atonement. All men are dead in sin and unbelieving by nature. Therefore, if unbelief could limit the atonement, it would be limited by all and none would have benefitted from it.

It is the atonement which overcomes unbelief and not unbelief which overcomes the atonement. It was by the atonement that forgiveness of sins, including unbelief, and the purchase of the Holy Spirit was secured. By that Spirit unbelief was overcome; that is, in those for whom the atonement was offered and the purchase made.

Unbelief continues in those for whom the atonement was not made. Can it be said that because of their unbelief the atonement was limited in its effect? It is true that, so long as they remain unbelieving, men cannot be saved by the atonement of Jesus Christ. It could also be said that as soon as any man believed he was saved by the atonement of Jesus Christ. Could it not, therefore, be said that unbelief limited the atonement? But, as we have seen, it is the limited design and application of the atonement that limits the unbelief and not the unbelief that limits the atonement.

Robert Lightner also goes beyond Chafer in his view that Christ actually obtained "redemption and forgiveness for all men." In his survey he quotes Arminius as saying that Christ "died for all men and for every man, so that *He has obtained for them all* by His death on the cross

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<sup>42</sup> Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1949.

<sup>43</sup> Evans, *Great Doctrines*, 79.

redemption and forgiveness.”<sup>44</sup> This dispensational theologian should realize the shocking character of that statement. The reader is inevitably going to hear him say that all men are forgiven and redeemed — that all are in fact saved. This is exactly what he says but apparently not what he means to say. He will add that men must exercise faith to make this redemption and forgiveness theirs (though Christ has already “obtained” it for them, not merely made it available to them).<sup>45</sup> He finds biblical analogy for this contradictory pattern of thought in the Old Testament where “The blood of the Passover lamb became efficacious only when applied to the doorpost.”<sup>46</sup> That is what Moses says about the Passover lamb, but it is not what Lightner says about the Passover Lamb of God. According to Lightner, unlike Moses, that blood of Christ “has obtained for them all” “redemption and forgiveness.”

Lightner may protest that what he meant by “obtained redemption” was not redemption obtained but redemption made obtainable. Without Christ’s blood redemption was not possible for anyone. Christ’s blood made redemption possible for everyone. Of course, if we can say this, Lightner is equally capable of saying it. No one considers “obtained” and “made obtainable” equivalent expressions. Lightner defends unlimited atonement with a number of arguments. First, he contends that by “unbiased exegesis, . . . no Scripture says Christ died only for the elect.”<sup>47</sup> On the contrary, I maintain that all texts dealing with this subject, properly understood, teach that Christ died only for the elect. For example, Christ says that He laid down his life for His sheep (John 10:11, 15). Lightner will immediately and correctly observe that even those texts do not say that Christ laid down his life *only* for his sheep. Lightner is correct if he means that, according to technical logic, this is a definite but not an exclusive statement. It says that Christ did die for His sheep, but it does not explicitly deny that He died for those not His sheep.

But, will it not also be granted that the context implies that Christ did not die for those who are not His sheep? Note, first of all, that Christ contrasts His sheep with those who are not His sheep. So His sheep and non-sheep are both before His mind when He says that He died for His sheep (John 10:1–18). Surely, therefore, He is *suggesting* that His death for

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<sup>44</sup> Robert P. Lightner, “For Whom Did Christ Die?,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 160 (emph. mine).

<sup>45</sup> Lightner, “For Whom Did Christ Die?,” 163.

<sup>46</sup> Lightner, “For Whom Did Christ Die?,” 163.

<sup>47</sup> Lightner, “For Whom Did Christ Die?,” 165.

His sheep is not for His non-sheep. Furthermore, His sheep are those who hear His voice and come to Him. The non-sheep do not hear His voice. So it is His sheep for whom He died and whom He calls. Therefore, He is plainly (albeit in a round — about logical way) *implying* that He died only for His sheep.

Consider 2 Corinthians 5, an alleged proof text for a universal atonement, and note that it too teaches that Christ died only for the elect. In verses 14–15 we read “that if one died for all, then were all dead: And that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves.” So, those for whom Christ died are those who live for Christ. Those who become alive in Christ are the elect of God. Therefore, according to 2 Corinthians 5:14–15, Christ died for the elect and only the elect (the alive) and not for the non-elect (those who do not come alive). In verse 19 we read that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” Those to whom sins are not reckoned are the justified elect (Rom. 8:33–34). So God is in Christ reconciling *the elect in the world*.

Next to John 3:16, 1 John 2:2 is the text most often cited in support of unlimited atonement:

He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for our sins only, but also for those of the whole world. (NASB)

First, Christ is here said to be a propitiation for our sins. Clearly “our” refers to believers. This is universally granted. Then it is claimed that the following statement just as clearly + extends that propitiation to everyone (“for those [the sins] of the whole world”). However, this cannot refer to everyone in the world but only those for whom propitiation has been made in the whole world. Why so? Because, if God was propitiated and no longer angry but actually at peace with the world, there would be no more divine wrath upon it now or ever. John 3:36 clearly states that God’s wrath is upon all who do not believe (obey) even now. A wrathful God is not a propitiated God. So the apostle is speaking not of all men in all the world but of the believers in all the world.

The same could easily be shown for the other so-called proof texts for unlimited atonement. But let us conclude by considering more fully the passage considered by many to be the strongest bulwark of unlimited atonement — John 3:16.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. (NASB)



I will first consider the very common misunderstanding of John 3:16. It is supposed to teach that God so loved everyone in the world that He gave His only Son to provide them an opportunity to be saved by faith. What is wrong with this interpretation? First, such a “love” on God’s part, so far from being love, would be the refinement of cruelty. As we have already seen, offering a gift of life to a spiritual corpse, a brilliant sunset to a blind man, and a reward to a legless cripple if only he will come and get it, are horrible mockeries. The reason the dispensationalists do not see this is because, though they profess to believe in total depravity, they are in fact Arminian.

Second, the verse clearly states for whom this love gift was given. “He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in Him should not perish.” John 3:16 says more clearly than probably any verse in Scripture that the atonement was made *for believers only*. God so loved the world that He gave His Son that *believers* should have eternal life.

Third, since even Arminians admit that believers are the elect, even Arminians should see that John 3:16 has in the plainest possible language said that God gave His only Son that the elect (whoever believes) “should not perish but have everlasting life.”

#### *Reformed Views of the Atonement*

There has been an attempt, especially in modern times, to maintain that limited atonement was not a doctrine taught by John Calvin himself.<sup>48</sup> If this *were* the case, it would not prove that the doctrine is untrue but that Calvin was not sound on that doctrine.

However, the doctrine cannot be denied in John Calvin. Granted that he said relatively little explicitly on this subject. Even if he were totally silent this would not prove that he did not believe and teach the doctrine. No one suggests for a moment that he attacked the doctrine or says anything in opposition to it. The greatest charge is that he did not say very much in support of it.

Even if Calvin had been silent on limited atonement, his system of doctrine is not. A system of doctrine speaks louder than explicit statements in that system. When Lightner and others say that it is “highly debatable” whether Calvin believed this truth, they can only be referring

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<sup>48</sup> See: R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (New York: Oxford, 1979); and the reply to Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists: A Reply to R. T. Kendall's Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982).

to the relative paucity of explicit statement.<sup>49</sup> But even had Calvin made no affirmation of this doctrine at all, the logic of his theological position is utterly undebatable. It is rather interesting to observe, in passing, that this point would have been recognized immediately by Calvin scholars at the turn of the century but has to be proven in our day. The reason for this is that seventy-five or more years ago Calvin was caricatured as a logical machine. Today he is made out to be something of a mystic. While scholars at the turn of the century had to be shown that he was not opposed to experience, scholars today have to be shown that he was not opposed to logic.

If we may give John Calvin credit for believing in rational thought it will be a simple matter to show that he believed in the limited atonement. No one has ever disputed the doctrine of particular election in Calvin. Nor has anyone ever questioned the fact that, for John Calvin, Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation. *What other conclusion could he have in his mind except that the Savior of men came to save those whom His Father had chosen to be saved?* A doctrine of universal atonement simply has no place in Calvin's thought. This may even explain why Calvin says so little about the subject of limited atonement. It is so self-evident in his system that the great Genevan probably felt he had more urgent duties than belaboring the obvious.

Some discomfort with the doctrine of limited atonement is evident on the part of even otherwise *solid Reformed* theologians. One way of minimizing this discomfort has been the assertion that the atonement is "sufficient for all but efficient only for the elect." R. B. Kuiper, for instance, says that Christ intended the atonement to be sufficient for the world.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, if God intended an atonement at all He would intend it to be infinitely sufficient (as Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* demonstrated definitively a millennium ago).<sup>51</sup> Christ could not make less than an infinite atonement. So if anyone says that the meaning of unlimited atonement is a divine intention to make it sufficient for the world he is giving a "shattering glimpse of the obvious." Such a strategy, however, will not satisfy those who maintain a meaningful, though erroneous, doctrine of

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<sup>49</sup> Lightner, "For Whom Did Christ Die?," 159.

<sup>50</sup> R. B. Kuiper, *For Whom Did Christ Die? A Study of the Divine Design of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 37.

<sup>51</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo," in *Basic Writings of St. Anselm*, translated by S. W. Deane (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1962).

universal *design* of the atonement, an atonement not only sufficient for the salvation of everyone, but designed to save everyone.

Along similar lines, some solid Reformed theologians argue that Christ's death was infinite so that His ministers could offer it to everyone. Thus Buswell's statement that "Christ died so that the offer might be presented to you."<sup>52</sup> By you Buswell apparently means "everyone." This statement, while it is not untrue, is inaccurate in this context. We have already seen that the offer is not made to everyone but to the conscious sinner. Strictly speaking, it would not have to be infinite in extent (the number of sinners never could be infinite), but only infinite in relation to the depth of guilt (which would be necessary if only one sinner were saved).

The point I am making here is almost trivial. Its only justification is that this is an area where some well-meaning genuine Reformed theologians are trying to stress the unlimited character of the atonement in order to agree, where possible, with their opponents (dispensationists and Arminians in general). The intention is noble but the statements tend to be innocuous at best. More often, such statements are inaccurate and misleading.

We must also sadly admit that the majority of Reformed theologians today seriously err concerning the nature of the love of God for reprobates. I mention this here only because this defect in contemporary Reformed theology makes it all the easier for the dispensationalists to continue in their abysmal error.

Most Reformed theologians also include, as a by-product of the atonement, the well-meant offer of the gospel by which all men can be saved. Some Reformed theologians take a further step still and say that God even intends that they should be saved by this atonement which nevertheless was made only for the elect. For example, John Murray and Ned Stonehouse write: "Our Lord . . . says expressly that he willed the bestowal of his saving and protecting grace upon those whom neither the Father nor he decreed thus to save and protect."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 2:555. A somewhat similar argument is made by Donald A. Dunkerly, "For Whom Did Christ Die?" in *The Presbyterian Journal* (May 12, 1982):9–10.

<sup>53</sup> John Murray and Ned Stonehouse, *The Free Offer of The Gospel* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 26.

One may sadly say that Westminster Theological Seminary stands for this misunderstanding of the Reformed doctrine since not only John Murray and Ned Stonehouse but also Cornelius Van Til, R. B. Kuiper, John Frame, and, so far as I know, all of the faculty have favored it. The Christian Reformed Church had already in 1920 taken this sad step away from Reformed orthodoxy and has been declining ever since. The Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. had even earlier, though somewhat ambiguously, departed and the present mainline Presbyterian church affirms that “The risen Christ is the savior for all men.”<sup>54</sup>

The Presbyterian Church in the United States (now part of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A.) is not far behind, and the separatist Presbyterians such as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America are following in this train. Only the Protestant Reformed Church seems willing to hold to the whole counsel of God on this doctrine.

Serious as this error is, it does not constitute a radical break with the Reformed tradition, though it does lay a foundation for it. For example, Murray and Stonehouse insist that, though God truly desires the salvation of the reprobate, He does not decree that. Rather, He decrees the opposite. They recognize theirs as a very *dangerous* position and appeal to great mystery:

We have found that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfillment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. This means that there is a will to the realization of what he has not decretively willed, a pleasure *towards that which he has not been pleased to decree*. This is indeed mysterious, and why he has not brought to pass in the exercise of his omnipotent power and grace, what is his ardent pleasure lies hidden in the sovereign counsel of his will.<sup>55</sup>

However this is not “mystery” but bald contradiction, as these two fine Reformed theologians well realized. How does one account for Homer(s) nodding? The answer is simple — the exegesis *seemed* to demand it. The two authors “tremble at God’s Word” and God’s Word seemed to them clearly to say that God desired what God did not desire. I certainly agree that if God says that He desired what He did not desire we would have to agree with God. Since we know that God does not

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<sup>54</sup> The Confession of 1967, in *The Book of Confessions* (New York: Office of the General Assembly, 1983), 9–10.

<sup>55</sup> Murray and Stonehouse, *Free Offer*, 26 (emph. mine)

desire what God does not desire, for this is evident on every page of Scripture, as well as in the logical nature of God and man, we know this exegesis is in error, must be in error, cannot but be in error.

But where is its error? It must be that Murray and Stonehouse are taking God literally where He desires to be taken anthropomorphically. Almost everything said about God or by God in Scripture is an anthropomorphism. The “everlasting arms,” His “riding on the clouds,” the “eyes” and “ears” of the Lord — there are literally hundreds of such metaphorical, anthropomorphic expressions describing God. This is, of course, admitted by all. On the other hand, it is rightly contended, God is also described *literally* as loving, rejoicing, happy, thinking, and so forth. Can we say that when God is described in physical or finite terms the expressions are metaphorical, but when He is described ontologically or psychologically the expressions are literal? No, for sometimes that is the case and sometimes not. When God is described psychologically as suffering, frustrated, or grieved, Murray, Stonehouse, and all sound theologians would deny these to be literally true. They know that, in the early church, patripassionism (the teaching that the Father suffers) was a heresy.<sup>56</sup>

The question facing us here is whether God could “desire” that which He does not bring to pass. There is no question at all that He can desire certain things, and these things which He desires He possesses and enjoys in Himself eternally. Otherwise, He would not be the ever-blessed God. The Godhead desires each Person in the Godhead and enjoys each eternally. The Godhead also desires to create, and He (though He creates in time) by creating enjoys so doing eternally. Otherwise He would be eternally bereft of a joy He presently possesses and would have increased in joy if He later possessed it — both of which notions are impossible. He would thereby have changed (which is also impossible) and would have grown in the wisdom of a new experience (which is blasphemous to imagine).

If God’s very blessedness means the oneness of His desire and His experience, is not our question (whether He could desire what He does not desire) rhetorical? Not only would He otherwise be bereft of some blessedness which would reduce Him to finitude, but He would be possessed of some frustration which would not only bereave Him of some

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<sup>56</sup> Thomas Aquinas has an excellent discussion of what experiences are and are not literally possible for the deity. See his *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 2 vols., ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Random House, 1945), 1:70–73.

blessedness, but would manifestly destroy all blessedness. This is clearly the case because His blessedness would be mixed with infinite regret. Our God would be the ever-miserable, ever-blessed God. His torment in the eternal damnation of sinners would be as exquisite as it is everlasting. He would actually suffer infinitely more than the wicked. Indeed, He would Himself be wicked because He would have sinfully desired what His omniscience would have told Him He could never have.

But why continue to torture ourselves? God, if He could be frustrated in His desires, simply would not be God. When, therefore, we read of God's "desiring" what He does not bring to pass, let us not "grieve" His Spirit by taking this literally, but recognize therein an anthropomorphic expression.

Genuinely Reformed theologians such as John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, Jay Adams, R. B. Kuiper, and many others, as well as all dispensationists, have difficulty offering a limited atonement unlimitedly. But what is the problem? The evangelists says, as ever, "Whoever will, let him come." "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." There never was any other offer of the gospel and there never need be any other. Surely, the limited atonement in no way limits *that* offer, and that is the only offer there ever was or will be.

Suppose an unconverted hearer asks, "Did Christ die for me?" The only true answer is: "I do not know. But, this I do know — if you will believe on Him, His blood will wash away your sins." That will satisfy anyone who wants to come to Christ. Suppose the inquirer then asks: "But may I come now?" The Christian will respond, "Of course." The inquirer may then inquire, "But *can* I come?" Our reply is: "What is stopping you?" In response the inquirer says, "I am. I do not find it in my heart." The Christian answers, "Whose fault is that? Do you think that God has put unbelief in your heart? Whose unbelief is it?" The inquirer may persist further and ask, "Is it not His fault for not giving me faith?" The Christian must answer, "I was not aware that God was indebted to you. If He is, salvation is not by grace but by law and justice." End of dialogue.

Before I leave the dispensationalists and their denial of the specific design of the atonement, let us try to locate the source of their disaffection for this biblical doctrine. God is thought by Arminians to love all sinners and send His Son to die for all of them, even though they disbelieve His Son and hate His gospel. If that is the attitude of the God who changes not, why would He come to hate them forever in hell for what He loves them in this world? If God loves men now it must be God who repents when He comes to hate them after their death. Since we

know that “God is not a man . . . that he should repent” (Num. 23:19, KJV), one of two things must be true — either God must hate reprobate sinners now or God must love reprobate sinners forever. It is inconceivable that an unchanging God loves impenitent sinners now and hates these same impenitent sinners after they die.

The problem here is a confusion of the “love of benevolence” with the “love of complacency.” Ethicists speak of the distinction between a love of complacency, based on the excellency of another moral being, and a love of benevolence, which consists in doing some good for another being whether that being is excellent and deserving of that good or not. I know of no Reformed theologian who is aware of this distinction and who believes in a divine love of complacency for reprobates. On the other hand, almost all Reformed theologians recognize a divine love of benevolence even for reprobates in this world. This love of benevolence is usually called “common grace” (non-saving benefits for all mankind such as the sunshine and rain of Matt. 5:45).<sup>57</sup>

God “so loved” (benevolently) the world of the sinful elect whom He hated displacently as sinful. He so loved them that He gave His only Son, that the elect (those who believe in Him) should not perish but have eternal life. Those who believe have this eternal life by having Christ remove their sin so that they become the truly excellent in Christ and objects of God’s complacent love. The non-elect, though in this life they enjoy God’s benevolent love of common grace (sunshine and rain), were never the objects of His salvific benevolent love (intention to bestow eternal life), in this life or the next (where even the benevolent love of common grace is withdrawn in divine wrath because of their sinful, impenitent unbelief, for which they alone are responsible). The fact that “God is love” does not excuse sloppy thinking on our part regarding the nature of that love.

### **Dispensationalism’s Irresistible Grace Is Not Irresistible**

In some ways, “irresistible grace” is the most telltale evidence of the presence or absence of Calvinism. Total depravity is often affirmed

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<sup>57</sup> There are a few Reformed theologians, such as Herman Hoeksema and David Engelsma, who deny that this is divinely intended as any favor or grace at all. It only hardens the reprobate. Since this is what happens, it must have been so intended by God in His providence. It is therefore a mere fattening of the sheep for slaughter and the very opposite of grace, common or otherwise

without being total (because it lacks inability). Unconditional election is commonly confused with unconditional salvation. Even limited atonement is sometimes affirmed by non-Calvinists who confuse limited efficiency with limited design. Perseverance is constantly confused with an antinomian “eternal security.” Irresistible grace, monergistic regeneration, new creation — these are very difficult to acknowledge if one has the notion that he is the ultimate initiator of saving faith and repentance. Difficult as it is to confuse Arminianism and Calvinism here, dispensationalism has succeeded quite well.

I will show by several considerations that dispensationalism does not teach this cardinal Reformed doctrine. First, irresistible grace is implicitly denied by the explicit denial of limited atonement. Second, dispensationalism denies that irresistible grace is taught in the Old Testament. Third, it has no Reformed doctrine of regeneration even in its understanding of New Testament theology. I will conclude by considering various attempted dispensational defenses.

#### *Irresistible Grace and the Atonement*

First, having shown in the preceding section that dispensationalism’s opposition to limited atonement is futile and worse, I now proceed to see what follows from this dispensational denial. Let us suppose that God had intended His Son’s atonement for the salvation of all men. What is the result according to dispensational theology? The answer is obvious — nothing. Man is dead and he remains dead to Christ’s death. In this case, the death of Christ is not the death of death because Christ died not to save anyone but to make everyone savable. Nevertheless this sinner, if he is dead (as total depravity teaches), cannot benefit from any thing outside him. The death of Christ is outside him — on his behalf and able to save him but accomplishing nothing within where it matters.

Of course, the dispensationalist teaches that the blood of Christ is offered to all. All whom? All corpses. It would be just as useful if the atonement was not intended for any, or not made at all. It is no wonder that dispensationalists, in many cases, sense they are at a dead end and shift their doctrinal course. Their corpses show signs of life before they come to life in regeneration.

#### *Irresistible Grace in the Old Testament*

Second, according to dispensationalism’s consensus, the Old Testament people of God were not regenerated. To be a member of the New Testament people of God, one must be born of the Spirit. No matter



how outwardly moral a person is, he is not saved and a member of the true church of Jesus Christ unless he is a new creature. By contrast, the Old Testament saint was not a born-again Christian. For example, Lewis Sperry Chafer contends, “individual regeneration, so far as the testimony of Scripture in general, is a New Testament provision.”<sup>58</sup> Chafer says of Nicodemus that he was a perfected Jew under the Old Testament law although he was not born again. He was a genuine member of the Old Testament people of God though he, at that time, had not entered the company of the New Testament people of God. Dispensationalists see Paul, prior to his conversion, after the same model. Before his conversion, this Jew was as “touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6, KJV). The dispensationalist takes this to mean that he met the Old Testament requirements. In that dispensation he too was a “perfected Jew.” Only when he was born again did he become a member of the church of Jesus Christ.

By contrast, the covenantal view of the people of God sees in both dispensations the same people of God. All are members of the church. All are born again and all are saved by the one mediator between God and man — the man, Christ Jesus. The same church of Jesus Christ comprises both. One is not an unregenerate, earthly people and the other a regenerate, heavenly people. They are both the people of God, born of His Spirit, created anew by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The church, say Chafer and Walvoord, is “the body of Christ, . . . called out of the world and joined together with a living union in Christ. This concept is not found in the Old Testament.”<sup>59</sup> That is to say, the body of Christ did not exist in the Old Testament. A dispensationalist will say that all Old Testament saints are saved by Jesus Christ, though none are in living communion with Jesus Christ.

According to dispensationalists, there are three categories of people — the Jew, the Gentile, and the church of God. The Jews, or Israel, are the descendants of Abraham and Jacob (Israel) who have the earthly promises. Even Abraham is said to have “spiritual” as well as temporal blessings but not regeneration, adoption, and “living union in Christ.” He was the “channel” of such blessing. These Jews are now scattered in the whole world and later will be gathered together. The church consists of those Jews and Gentiles who have been born again and are members of Jesus

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<sup>58</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 6:36.

<sup>59</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 234.

Christ. The Gentiles are the rest of mankind who never had any kind of acceptable relationship to God.

In other words, dispensationalists see three soteriological categories where the Bible sees only two — the people of God and those who are not the people of God. There are those who are born again and those who are not. There are those who are saved and those who are not saved. There are those who are in Christ and those who are not in Christ. But, what God has joined together (the Old and New Testament church), dispensationalists have rent asunder. The church is not only separated in this world, but often (with Chafer and others) even in the world to come.

Abraham himself shows that the dispensational division between Israel and the church is erroneous. In the New Testament, those who are in living union with Jesus Christ are the seed of Abraham. Christ himself says to the Jews, “If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham . . . . Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day; and he saw it, and was glad” (John 8:39, 56, NASB). According to our Lord, these unbelieving lineal descendants of Abraham were not really the seed or children of Abraham at all, since they did not come to living union with Jesus Christ. Those who have a living union with Jesus Christ are the true Israelites. So, we see that not all lineal descendants of Abraham were necessarily the children of Abraham, but only those lineal descendants of Abraham (as well as Gentiles) who came to Jesus Christ. The true children or descendants of Abraham and the Christian church are one and the same.

In Romans 4, Paul says the same thing — the children of faith are the children of Abraham. He himself was an Israelite, but he did not become a true child of Abraham until he became a believer in union with Jesus Christ. As such, he and all believers are in union with the people of God in all dispensations who are the true children of Abraham.

Christ is much more visible in the New Testament of course. Living union is much more apparent there, but there is no denying, even by the dispensationalists, that Christ is the eternal Son of God and was very active in the Old Testament. Even the salvation of the Israelites rested ultimately on faith in Jesus Christ.

Dispensationalists cannot have it both ways. If the Old Testament people of God had no union with Christ, they were not saved by Him. If they were saved by Christ, dispensationalists have to admit that the Israel of the Old Testament and the Church of the New are one and the same body of people, all of them in union with Jesus Christ and, as such, the true sons of Abraham. God has joined the people of God in all dispensations in Jesus Christ. Dispensationalists have divided them.

It is rather sad to see some dispensationalists on the very border of the Promised Land who, nevertheless, hesitate to cross over. For example, H. C. Woodring, Jr., writes:

The godly lives of men like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and the prophets, for instance, would be unthinkable as a product of the old fallen nature alone or as the attainment of legal works. Yet, on the other hand, it would be no contribution to true Biblical study to build a comprehensive doctrine based on speculation when Scripture is silent.<sup>60</sup>

Can this be called silence when the Scripture says, on the one hand, that “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, KJV), and then, on the other hand, gives instances of many Old Testament persons who have obviously entered into the kingdom of the Spirit? Can there be any doubt that the Scripture is teaching that those persons who have entered the kingdom of God have been born of the Spirit of God? If the Scripture says that only those who are born of the Spirit of God do enter the kingdom of God, then it unavoidably follows that “men like Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and the prophets” were regenerate. Here again, we notice a characteristic dispensational hermeneutical hesitation to affirm an undoubted implication of Holy Scripture. What Scripture implies, it teaches as truly as what it explicitly states.<sup>61</sup>

Before I leave this matter of regeneration in the Old Testament, let us notice an interesting difference among some leading dispensationalists on this matter. Dwight Pentecost says, “the fact of new birth had not been revealed in the Old Testament.”<sup>62</sup> On the other hand, his mentors, Chafer and Walvoord, write that “an Old Testament saint who was truly born again was just as saved as a believer in the present age.”<sup>63</sup> This is apparently a puzzling detail in dispensational thought. It is never quite

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<sup>60</sup> H. C. Woodring, Jr. “Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956), 314.

<sup>61</sup> As the Westminster Confession of Faith (1:6) puts it, “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.”

<sup>62</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 126.

<sup>63</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 234.

clear how Old Testament saints can be “saved” without being regenerated.<sup>64</sup>

*Irresistible Grace in the New Testament*

Third, dispensationalism has no sound doctrine of irresistible grace, even in its understanding of the New Testament dispensation. Regeneration, according to this theology, is the implantation of a new, sinless self into the soul. It is not, strictly speaking, a regeneration at all; that is, it is not a rebirth of the old nature or a quickening of the sinner himself. It is the introduction of a new self altogether, a distinct psychological entity. According to the Reformed view, regeneration is the divine implantation of a new principle of behavior which transforms a person though it does not eradicate the sinful principle known as original sin. Not so with the dispensationalist. He makes this experience not a regeneration of the old soul, but a new generation of a different soul.

L. S. Chafer is most explicit. He refers to regeneration as a “structural change”:

This is a change so radical and so complete that there is thus achieved a passage from one order of believing into another. Eventually in this great change the Adamic nature will be dismissed and the ego as a separate entity will represent little else than the stupendous fact of being a son of God.<sup>65</sup>

What is so startling about this dispensational doctrine is its unmistakable pantheism. Such a charge may be indignantly resented and rejected by dispensationalists but it cannot, however, be legitimately denied. Dispensationalism’s doctrine is not Christ in you, but Christ as you.

Before considering dispensationalism’s view of irresistible grace, I need to examine its conception of the nature of faith and its relation to repentance. Dispensationalists contend that, while repentance is required in the kingdom age, only faith is required in this dispensation of grace. Chafer argues, “The one and only requirement on the human side which the Kingdom gospel imposes is repentance; while the only requirement in the gospel of the grace of God is faith or believing.”<sup>66</sup> He maintains that repentance occurs in the “kingdom portions” of the synoptic gospels

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<sup>64</sup> See: John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards, Evangelist* (Morgan, Penn: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), 126.

<sup>65</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 6:106.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (93:7): 336.

but not in the gospel of John which deals with this dispensation and, he thinks it is not in the New Testament epistles.

This position is too obviously incorrect to require refutation. (The reader may consult Acts 17:30; Rom. 2; and 2 Cor. 7:10.) It is interesting, however, to note the dispensational view of the nature of saving faith. Steele remarks that “after a faithful and patient reading, extending through ten years, I can find in these writings no better notion of faith than a bare intellectual assent to the fact that Jesus put away sin once and forever on the cross.”<sup>67</sup> That this endorsement of a rather nominal type of faith is really true to the whole dispensational movement will become clear as I later discuss the Antinomianism of the movement. Curiously, we sometimes find an ultra-Calvinistic doctrine of inability among dispensationalists. An interesting anecdote illustrates this. D. L. Moody once invited J. N. Darby to Farwell Hall, where they had a conversation. Moody said that Darby maintained that man does not will to be saved. Darby confirmed this opinion and proved it, supposedly, by appealing to John 1:13 (“who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” [NASB]). Moody countered with the observation that Christ had said, “Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life” (John 5:40, KJV). He also cited the “whosoever will” passages (see Mark 8:34). At this, Darby shut the Bible and refused to go on with the discussion. From that time on, he warned against Moody as a teacher.<sup>68</sup>

Darby believed that a man must be born again before he could be saved. He believed that this new birth resulted in the impartation of an entirely new nature, a separate ego, a part of the divine nature. This new nature, he taught, did believe in Christ, while the old nature, which was of the flesh and evil, always continued as such. Had he held a Calvinistic doctrine, he would have told Moody that the sinner really does will to believe, though only in consequence of his having been given a new ruling disposition (not a new ego, or psychological entity) in regeneration.

#### *Irresistible Grace in Contemporary Dispensationalism*

I now focus more precisely on the dispensational view of irresistible grace. To do so, let us notice the position of the most famous dispensationalist — Billy Graham. Graham writes that the “new birth is

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<sup>67</sup> Steele, *Antinomianism Revived*, 100.

<sup>68</sup> Ironside, *Historical Sketch*, 81f.

something that God does for man when man is willing to yield to God.”<sup>69</sup> Again, “Any person who is willing to trust Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and Lord can receive the new birth now.”<sup>70</sup> Significantly, he also says that a “person cannot turn to God to repent or even to believe without God’s help. God must do the turning.”<sup>71</sup> One can see from this that Graham is Arminian and not Pelagian.

This could also be said of most dispensationalists. That is, divine “help” is needed, but not divine regeneration. A man cannot believe without help, but he cannot be regenerated without believing. This is precisely the evangelical Arminian order — divine help, then human faith, followed by regeneration. Graham even uses the term *dead man* to refer to the unregenerate sinner, but it is immediately clear that life remains in this corpse. “A dead man can do nothing; therefore we need God’s *help* even in our repenting.”<sup>72</sup> That statement, in its first part, sounds like John Calvin. Before the sentence is over, however, one realizes that this “nothing” that the “dead man” can do turns out to be quite a great deal. That is, he can even repent. Of course, he needs God’s “help.” The very fact that Graham talks about *help* rather than *new life* shows that he does not really believe that this man is a spiritual corpse. As I have said before, the dispensationalist confuses himself. He strongly insists on the new birth but he does not realize that he does not believe that the born again person was *dead* before life was bestowed on him.

Graham goes on to make his Arminian thinking quite clear. Whatever the necessary “help” is, it is not regeneration. “The Holy Spirit will do everything possible to disturb you, draw you, love you — but finally it is your personal decision . . . . Make it happen now.”<sup>73</sup> Billy Graham is not a professional theologian, but the professional theologians whom he follows are just as explicit. “It is entirely a supernatural act of God *in response to the faith of man*,” say Chafer and Walvoord.<sup>74</sup>

Some dispensational theologians can occasionally sound as if they conceive regeneration to be the basis of faith. John Walvoord, for example, writes, “The fact that we need a work of grace before we can

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<sup>69</sup> Billy Graham, *How to Be Born Again* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1977), 150 (emph. mine).

<sup>70</sup> Graham, *How to Be Born Again*, 152.

<sup>71</sup> Graham, *How to Be Born Again*, 157.

<sup>72</sup> Graham, *How to Be Born Again*, 158 (emph. mine).

<sup>73</sup> Graham, *How to Be Born Again*, 168.

<sup>74</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 99 (emph. mine).

believe should make us recognize all the more the inability of the natural man, and should make men cast themselves on God for the work which he alone can do.”<sup>75</sup> One can see, however, in this statement that the dispensationalist takes back with one hand what he has given with the other. It seems as if Walvoord recognizes that regeneration must precede faith. Nevertheless, he concludes that very sentence by saying that these unregenerate men should “cast themselves” on God for the work which He alone can do. That is, man needs to be regenerated in order to exercise faith. But what Walvoord implies by casting oneself on God for the work of regeneration is precisely the exercise of faith. So, he is seeming to say at the beginning of the sentence that regeneration must precede faith, but makes it clear before the sentence is over that the faith, or casting of oneself on God, must precede, or form the basis of regeneration.

So, dispensational corpses come alive. This is the classical theological case of *vigor mortis*. The dead live of themselves; they spontaneously generate their own life. Out of nothing living something comes alive. Dispensationalists may be too embarrassed to admit, or perhaps even realize, that they teach such doctrine. They themselves will call this absurd and accuse the interpreter of grossly misrepresenting dispensational doctrine. Of course, the dispensationalist will say, “God brings the sinner alive.” The sinner does not bring himself alive. Christ effectually called dead Lazarus and then, and only then, new life came into him and then, and only then, did he emerge from the tomb. Many dispensationalists say this again and again, never realizing that it is a contradiction of their whole system.

A. W. Tozer, while a dispensationalist, nevertheless seemed to sense something profoundly wrong in this area of dispensational thought. While he did not put his finger on the precise point, he seemed to feel deeply that the Fundamentalist’s or dispensationalist’s confidence in man’s ability to understand and turn to God of himself was destroying the evangelical heart of that system. He is saying this in a roundabout way but the perceptive reader can see that he is aware vaguely of the problem with which I am dealing here:

Among Conservatives we find persons who are Bible-taught but not Spirit-taught. They concede truth to be something which they can grasp with the mind. If a man holds to the fundamentals of the Christian faith he is thought to possess divine truth, but it does not follow. There is no

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<sup>75</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 122.

truth apart from the Spirit. The most brilliant intellect may be imbecilic when confronted with the mysteries of God. For a man to understand revealed truth requires an act of God equal to the original act which inspired the text.<sup>76</sup>

A couple of pages later comes this statement: "Philosophical rationalism is honest enough to reject the Bible flatly. Theological rationalism rejects it while pretending to accept it and, in so doing, puts out its own eyes."<sup>77</sup> Then Tozer comes to this conclusion:

From this mortal error Fundamentalism is slowly dying. We have forgotten that the essence of spiritual truth cannot come to the one who knows the external shallow truth unless there is first a miraculous operation of the Spirit within the heart.<sup>78</sup>

Because of the dispensational view of nominal faith and the dispensational denial of irresistible grace, Tozer senses that if a person can produce faith of himself before regeneration, then that person is able to understand the gospel savingly and really to convert himself. Such a person, capable of turning to God, is not a totally depraved person. He has it within his power to turn or not to turn to God. Tozer mistakenly calls this *theological rationalism* but, at the same time, there is no doubt that he has placed his finger on an important issue. The very fact that he was himself a dispensationalist makes his awareness here all the more poignant and telling.

When I once asked Dwight Pentecost how theologians who profess to be Calvinists could teach that faith preceded regeneration, he answered that they did not. Then, I cited Article VII of the Dallas Seminary catalogue which states, "We believe that the new birth of the believer comes only through faith in Christ." I will never forget his expostulation: "Is that in the catalogue?" Pentecost went on to say that L. S. Chafer, the founder of Dallas Seminary, when he was alive was constantly saying, "The baby does not cry before it is born." That is, a child of God does not exercise spiritual life, such as faith, until he is born again. That certainly sounds Calvinistic, but as we have seen, the dispensational theological system teaches otherwise. If dispensationalism taught that the new life must

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<sup>76</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Divine Conquest* (Harrisburg, Penn: Christian Publications, 1940), 79.

<sup>77</sup> Tozer, *Divine Conquest*, 81.

<sup>78</sup> Tozer, *Divine Conquest*, 79.



precede every sign of a new life, such as faith, its Calvinism at this point would be unquestionable.

When I have pressed this point with dispensationalists, I usually get this answer. They sense the gravity of my charge and the basis for it, but nevertheless do not admit it. Their explanation is that these two events (regeneration and faith) are simultaneous. They seem to be aware that this is pure Arminianism and they will not plead guilty. Their contention is, therefore, that this is not a case of the priority of faith to regeneration, but the simultaneity of faith with regeneration.

Even though this is so, it does not solve their problems. It may make them sound slightly less Arminian, but it does not make them non-Arminian. Granted that faith and regeneration are simultaneous, the real issue is not the time element but the relationship. The question is whether faith is based on regeneration or regeneration is *based* on faith. That is, is it because a person is regenerated that he believes, or is it because he believes that he is regenerated? There can be no question that the dispensationalists are saying that it is because a person believes that he is regenerated simultaneously. Consequently, it is obvious and indisputable that, according to the dispensationalists, man produces faith out of himself while he is still a spiritual corpse. According to dispensationalists, including Lewis Sperry Chafer, it is because a baby cries that it is a baby — not because it is a baby that it cries.

We do not forget that dispensationalists also say that man will not believe without divine help. Here again, their Arminianism is very much in evidence. The Arminian says the same thing. The evangelical Arminian, at least, maintains that a person who is a sinner cannot believe without the help of the Holy Spirit. That help stops short of regeneration in classic Arminian thought and that help stops short of regeneration in classic dispensational thought. Whatever the help of the Spirit may be, it is not regeneration that leads to the person's faith. That faith is produced by this sinner with the help of God. Both dispensationalism and Arminianism are *synergistic* soteriologies. God and man work together and contribute their share. If there is any difference between

Dispensationalism and Arminianism at this point, it is merely that dispensationalism *thinks* it is Calvinistic — a case of mistaken identity.

Thus, there can be no doubt that dispensationalism, old and new, does maintain the necessity of regeneration and equally clearly maintains that there is a necessity for unregenerate faith prior to regeneration. I know that the dispensationalist insists on the necessity of the new birth. I never said anything other than that. But he also says that man's faith is

what brings the new birth. And if he says that, it means that person who exercises faith is not dead in trespasses and sins. He is able to save himself by throwing himself upon the saving grace of Jesus Christ. That some dispensationalists will claim that I have misrepresented their theological system merely shows that they have failed to understand their own system.

This then is the dispensational caricature of the fourth Calvinistic point — irresistible grace. This Reformed doctrine teaches that the elect person, while totally depraved, is efficaciously regenerated by the *monergistic* activity of the Holy Spirit, and is, in that sense, irresistibly drawn to Christ. Being dead, he is made alive and comes forth believing. Like Lazarus, when the power of Christ's word brings life to him who is dead in trespasses and sins, he responds to the call "Come forth." According to this dispensational travesty of the doctrine, Lazarus comes out under his own steam. It is not the regenerating, life-giving word of Christ that leads to his birth. It is this dead man's faith which brings him to life so that he responds to Christ.

#### **Dispensationalism's Perseverance of the Saints Is the Preservation of the Sinner**

I can touch on this doctrine lightly here because the root of the dispensational travesty of perseverance — Antinomianism-constitutes a major concern of this volume and will be discussed at length later. Here, I simply note that, in lieu of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints (that the new life bestowed by irresistible grace is lived out the rest of the regenerate person's life), the dispensationalist substitutes the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer (that the new life bestowed by regeneration in response to faith may or *may not* be lived out without affecting the "security of the believer"). In other words, a true believer may not persevere in holiness. Reformed theology teaches that such a failure would prove that the person is not a true believer at all and that only those who persevere to the end will be saved.

As an unusually frank example of dispensational thought on this matter, I cite the popular work by J. F. Strombeck entitled *So Great Salvation*. Says this dispensational writer in what amounts to a dispensational classic:

There is much, indeed very much, confused thinking between the old order under the Mosaic law as distinguished from God's order under grace. Under law, because of the fact that the standing before God depends upon what God did, it was possible to lose one's standing, and the blessings that went with it, and in the place of being blessed, one

became cursed. Under that condition, the motive to conduct became one of fear of punishment. That motive to a very large extent underlies human conduct. It is a controlling motive in most lives. The motive to true Christian conduct [by contrast] is love.<sup>79</sup>

I note that in this entire chapter, which is entitled “Salvation and Man’s Conduct,” there is nothing but what a man ought to do, nothing about “must” or “has to” and no corrective to Antinomianism. There is no obligation to good conduct except love, which is considered incompatible with obligation.

This notion of eternal security has its roots in a particular understanding of sanctification. Strombeck, whose Antinomianism is perhaps more obvious than most dispensational writers (except for Zane Hodges), presents a lucid statement of this view of sanctification which is often merely implicit in other dispensational writers: With the new birth there is also a new nature. It is the nature of God, the One by Whom life is given. As the life of one born of the flesh is mortal, because Adam became mortal, so the life of one born of God is eternal because God’s life is eternal.<sup>80</sup>

There, in plain speech, is the dispensational view of sanctification. It teaches the implantation and perseverance of the divine nature (“nature of God”, “God’s life”). Such a nature is eternal, indestructible, and incapable of sin. That being the new nature of the Christian, he is presumably the same — eternal, indestructible, sinless. This is, as I noted above, Christian pantheism — the perseverance of God, not of the regenerated sinner.

I find Strombeck equally candid and lucid about the old nature which he repeatedly says is not really affected by regeneration but is left alone ultimately to be destroyed. The “old nature” (that is, the sinner who is supposed to be saved) simply dies — it is not saved at all. “But how about the old sinful nature of those who are saved? What becomes of that? It still lives on in the individual as long as that person lives in the present mortal body. When at death, the spirit of the saved departs from his body the old nature dies.”<sup>81</sup>

Strombeck goes on to indicate that this old nature is the source of continuing sin: “It is because the old sinful nature survives that those who

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<sup>79</sup> J. F. Strombeck, *So Great Salvation* (Moline, Ill.: Strombeck Agency, 1940), 139ff.

<sup>80</sup> Strombeck, *So Great Salvation*, 79 (emph. mine).

<sup>81</sup> Strombeck, *So Great Salvation*, 79.

have been saved can and do commit sin. This happens when, in the conflict between the carnal and spiritual, the carnal gains the upper hand.”<sup>82</sup>

In other words, the sinful nature produces nothing but sinful acts just as truly as the sinless new nature produces nothing but sinless acts. Here the dispensational propensity to divide and separate has resulted in an anthropology which can only be characterized as bizarre. Such an anthropology is utterly lacking in a principle of the unity of the human person. From this perspective, Strombeck could just as easily have said that there cannot really be any strife between the old nature and the new nature. They are separate from one another, going their separate ways. They are contrary to each other, of course; but they are really, in this type of thinking, separate and apart from each other rather than engaged in direct combat with each other. They agree to disagree.

His concluding point in this discussion confirms our feeling that he does not sense the depth of his deviation from Scripture here. He says,

Salvation, then, includes something vastly more than a restoration of man to the original perfect condition in which he was when created. It includes the new eternal life having a divine nature.<sup>83</sup>

Strombeck here says that salvation is a restoration of man to the original perfect condition in which he was created. But, according to his own view of things, it is “vastly more than” that because it is the implantation of the divine nature. In point of fact, this “restoration” is vastly less than “a restoration of man to the original perfect condition.” That old nature is not made over again. It is simply ultimately displaced by the new nature which is utterly divine.

The relationship of this view of sanctification to the Antinomianism which afflicts dispensationalism is evident in Strombeck’s *Disciplined by Grace*. He writes, “While the believer’s standing is no way conditioned upon his state there is, however, a close relationship between the two.”<sup>84</sup> What he means by this traditional dispensational language is that, when a person believes, he is justified and that standing before God is no way conditioned upon his actual behavior (his *state*). Strombeck is plainly teaching that justification is without necessary works. The faith which justifies, or brings a person into this perfect standing, may be

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<sup>82</sup> Strombeck, *So Great Salvation*, 81.

<sup>83</sup> Strombeck, *So Great Salvation*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> J. F. Strombeck, *Disciplined by Grace* (Chicago: Moody, 1946), 74ff.

utterly devoid of good works because his standing is in “no way conditioned upon his state.”

He goes on to say that this “standing must be perfect in every detail. This excludes all possibility of any fallible human contribution.”<sup>85</sup> I note that Strombeck says “fallible human contribution.” What he implies is a fallible contribution and not human contribution. We remember that this “contribution,” to which he refers, is a product of the new nature, which is not the old human nature changed but actually the newly implanted divine nature in him. Strictly speaking then, it is not only not fallible, it is not even human. In our forthcoming analysis of the dispensational view of sanctification, we will hear dispensationalists continually calling this new nature, “human.” Nevertheless, they are thinking always and expounding constantly in terms of it being the *divine* nature and, therefore, infallible.

Strombeck is interesting also in his comment on 1 Corinthians 3:15:

“All these (wood, hay, stubble) represent human accomplishment; things done in self-will, by human power, for self-gratification and for acceptance by men. . . . To God all are the same, without value, only to be consumed by His fire.”<sup>86</sup>

Again our writer is utterly consistent with his misapprehension. There are, in the converted person, presumably two natures — an old nature which is altogether evil and which produces only wood, hay, and stubble; and a new nature which, being altogether divine, of course produces nothing but gold, silver, and precious stones. In other words, the genuinely human nature produces nothing but useless works which will be consumed by fire. God, dwelling in the “saint,” produces nothing but absolutely excellent, divinely approved works. This Corinthian passage, as misinterpreted by dispensationalists, shows clearly that what they are thinking of is the works of man versus the works of God and not works of the sinful man contrasted with the works of the converted man.

Strombeck has so interpreted the new nature as a divine nature that, to be consistent with that apprehension of the situation, he cannot have anything necessary, however remotely, for this implementation of the divine nature. What he never seems to sense is that it is blasphemy even to suggest that the saint is actually divine.

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<sup>85</sup> Strombeck, *Disciplined by Grace*, 75.

<sup>86</sup> Strombeck, *Disciplined by Grace*, 137.

Given this view of the matter, it is not surprising that dispensationalists view the condition of the “carnal Christian” as a regular, if not normal, state of affairs. Strombeck, with his characteristic candor, says, “For many believers, this may be all their earthly life . . . . How many believers are not like Lot?”<sup>87</sup> He frankly says that many of these persons, who are converted and indwelt by the Holy Spirit and the new divine nature, may yet live like Lot (that is, slandering Lot, in “rejection of God’s Lordship over his life”) throughout their lives. Nevertheless, as Christians they are saved for they have the foundation which is Jesus Christ. This is the typical dispensational misconception of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. As one can see, it is the doctrine of the preservation of the unchanged sinner through life only to be destroyed eternally at death. What perseveres is not the “saint.” The “saint” (a changed sinner) never existed to persevere, or not to persevere. What perseveres is the *divine* nature, which had nothing to do with the sinner (except to dwell alongside him) and was never in any need of persevering grace.

I simply cannot leave this brief discussion of the dispensational caricature of the “perseverance of the saints” without a rather sad footnote. John Walvoord feels himself so thoroughly the champion of Reformed orthodoxy against Arminian heresy on this doctrine that he alludes to and attempts to refute no less than eighty-five texts traditionally used by Arminians against this doctrine.<sup>88</sup> Much of what he writes is sound critique of the Arminian misinterpretations. I regret that the wholesome attack he makes against Arminianism is in defense, not of the orthodox doctrine, but of a travesty of it worse than the Arminian doctrine itself. In summary of this whole section on dispensationalism’s spurious Calvinism, I present on the following page dispensationalism’s defection from Calvinism in a tabular form showing graphically that it is at no point Calvinistic.

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<sup>87</sup> Strombeck, *Disciplined by Grace*, 137–38.

<sup>88</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 220ff.

**CALVINISM**

**DISPENSATIONALISM**

*Total Depravity*

Man is totally sinful in his fallen moral nature which affects all aspects of his inalienable human nature (thought, feeling, and will).

Man is sinful in all aspects of his personality but morally able of himself to receive the gospel offer.

*Unconditional Election*

While all men are totally indisposed to God, God the Father mercifully elects a multitude to eternal life apart from any condition in themselves.

All men being sinful, God elects to eternal life those whom He foreknows will believe.

*Limited Atonement*

The atonement of the Son was designed for the salvation of those whom the Father had unconditionally elected.

The atonement was designed to save every sinful creature

*Irresistible Grace*

The Holy Spirit regenerates those whom the Father chose and for whom the Son died, faith following simultaneously.

Fallen man of himself chooses to believe in Christ, regeneration by God following simultaneously.

*Perseverance of the Saints*

The Spirit of God continues to work faith in the regenerate and they therein persevere in good works, always struggling against the remnants of their original sin whose guilt is pardoned by whose power is decreasingly felt until destroyed at death.

The "regenerate" new nature, being divine, can never sin or perish, while the old nature is unaffected by it and continues to operate sinfully, as before regeneration, until destroyed at death.





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## DUBIOUS EVANGELICALISM (1): “DISPENSATION” DENIES THE GOSPEL

I turn now from the serious to the grave. Dispensationalism has been shown to be nothing less than a travesty on Calvinism. So far from being a moderate form of the Reformed Faith, it is modified beyond recognition. Instead of four-point Calvinism, dispensationalism is five-point Arminianism. This is extremely serious, but the charge I now make, that dispensationalism is dubious Christianity, is grave indeed. I must sadly accuse dispensationalists (of all varieties) of teaching, always implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that there is more than one way of salvation and, in the process of developing that theology, excluding the one and only way even from this dispensation of grace.

It bears repeating that, when I refer to dispensationalism, I am not simply referring to any theology in which the word “dispensation” may appear in a favorable light. Dispensationalists seem to have a penchant for including anybody and everybody in their theology who happens ever to have used the word “dispensation.” I have already noted an egregious example of this in Ehlert’s *Bibliography of Dispensationalism*.<sup>1</sup> Though Ehlert’s work may be the most glaring example of this abuse of the term “dispensation,” it certainly has no monopoly on that practice.

It is very frustrating, of course, when there is disagreement about the very meaning of terms. One must not, however, become weary in well-doing. If we have constantly to be reminding Calvinists what Calvinism teaches and dispensationalists what dispensationalism teaches in order to show people who are going by those names whether they do or do not belong to those traditions, we are just going to have to take the necessary time. If the Lord we serve is the Truth, then we cannot be too painstaking in search for the truth in every area with which we have to do.

What is indisputably, absolutely, and uncompromisingly essential to the Christian religion is its doctrine of salvation. A theologian may depart from the Reformed system and travel at his own peril. To depart from the essential salvation pattern is inevitably to depart from Christianity. Consequently, the doctrine which I now consider is of the essence. If

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<sup>1</sup> Ehlert, “Bibliography.”

Dispensationalism has actually departed from the only way of salvation which the Christian religion teaches, then I must say it has departed from Christianity. No matter how many other important truths it proclaims, it cannot be called Christian if it empties Christianity of its essential message. We define a cult as a religion which claims to be Christian while emptying Christianity of that which is essential to it. If dispensationalism does this, then dispensationalism is a cult and not a branch of the Christian church. It is as serious as that. It is impossible to exaggerate the gravity of the situation.

What then does dispensationalism teach about the people of God and salvation? Let me say happily at the outset that all dispensationalists whom I have ever heard or read maintain with vigor and emphasis that they believe the divine Jesus Christ is the only Savior in all dispensations. The cross of Christ is the way of justification for everyone from Adam to the last saint who will ever be saved. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote “that God has assigned different human requirements in various ages as the terms upon which He himself saves on the ground of the death of Christ, is a truth of Scripture revelation.”<sup>2</sup> Later, in his *Systematic Theology*, he stated still more explicitly:

That the one who is saved will not perish, but is in present possession of eternal life, that he is united to Christ to share His peace and glory, and that he shall, when he sees his Savior, be like Him, could never be accurately appraised by men. Over against this truth that, regardless of His infinite love which would bless the creatures of his hand, the moral restraint on God which sin imposes could not be removed even by a sovereign decree; it was necessary, in the light of this holy character and government, that the price of redemption should be required at the hand of the offender or at the hand of a substitute who would die in the offender's place. By the death of Christ for sinners, the moral restraint is removed and the love of God is free to act in behalf of those who will receive his grace and blessing.<sup>3</sup>

The first statement of Dr. Chafer explicitly affirms that salvation always rests on the work of Christ; and the second implicitly says the same thing by stating that no other possibility existed. John Feinberg argues that “earlier dispensationalism never held multiple ways of

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<sup>2</sup> Chafer, “Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 102 (1945):2.

<sup>3</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 51–52. Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 135, concurs, “All dispensations contain a gracious element.”

salvation. However, various unguarded statements from dispensational works made it appear that multiple ways of salvation were advocated.”<sup>4</sup>

Dispensationalists, whatever they may say about “dispensations,” are also insistent in their claims that they entertain no other method of salvation in any dispensation than by grace. Speaking of the experiences of Israel under the dispensation of the law (the most suspect of all dispensations), Darby says, “But all is grace; God acts in grace, and is glorified where man fails; man too is with God, for redemption brings us to God (Exodus 19:4).”<sup>5</sup>

So, I gladly bear our dispensational friends witness that they emphatically affirm their adherence to the essential Christian way of salvation. Nevertheless, I must sadly say that whatever their intentions may be, they do not carry them out in their theology of “dispensations.” However frequently they affirm their loyalty to the indispensable way of salvation in the blood of Jesus Christ, their system of doctrine relentlessly militates against this.

Of course, dispensationalists have heard the criticisms voiced in this chapter many times before. Clarence Bass wrote that “these assertions of a single principle of salvation simply contradict the basic ideas of the system.”<sup>6</sup> In spite of their denials, Daniel Fuller charges dispensationalism with teaching different systems of salvation and making the cross “an after-thought.”<sup>7</sup> Probably the ablest critique ever written of the heart of dispensational theology remains Oswald Allis’ *Prophecy and the Church*. The sheer persistence of this line of criticism by competent and well-meaning Christian theologians says a great deal about the dispensational lack of success at rebuttal.

In the following sections I will examine dispensational statements which have prompted the charges that the school teaches more than one way of salvation as well as some dispensational attempts to refute the charge. We shall see that for the most part dispensationalists are satisfied to deny without refuting.

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<sup>4</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Systems of discontinuity,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1988), 337, n. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Ironside in his *Historical Sketch*.

<sup>6</sup> Bass, *Backgrounds*, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 144. See also 29, 35, 38, 188.

### The “Scofield Problem”

Scofield sparked strong criticism of dispensationalism with a seemingly unambiguous statement in a *Scofield Reference Bible* note to the effect that salvific grace is a *New Testament* phenomenon. Scofield went on to say that legal obedience to the law was the condition of salvation in the Old Testament while faith in Christ is the condition in the New Testament:

As a dispensation, grace begins with the death and resurrection of Christ . . . . The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as the fruit of salvation.<sup>8</sup>

This view is consistent with Scofield’s definition of a dispensation as “a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”<sup>9</sup>

Dispensationalists have adopted a number of strategies in dealing with the scandal caused by this passage. One tactic has been simply to assert that Scofield did not really mean what he said. For example, Barndollar defends Scofield, but without really spelling out an argument.

Dr. C. I. Scofield, for example, made a very unfortunate statement as follows: “The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ.” There are those who pick up this statement and say: “See, Scofield teaches more than one way of salvation.” As an isolated statement this is unfortunate, for it really is an isolated statement, because if one will study carefully all that Scofield has to say on this subject, it becomes apparent that he made a slip of the pen. His real teaching is his over-all teaching as found in his note on Romans 1:16 where he says that salvation is by Grace through Faith. Therefore, the critic’s charge is not substantiated.<sup>10</sup>

Here, we have another example of the dispensational repudiation without refutation. Barndollar appeals to another “isolated statement” without exegeting either and without demonstrating which more adequately reflects the teaching of the system as a whole.

To look at the Scofield statement more closely, we notice that a covenant theologian could have made it in reference to the Mosaic *ceremonial* law. Observing such law (when it was in effect) was indeed “the

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<sup>8</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1115.

<sup>9</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> W. W. Barndollar, *The Validity of Dispensationalism*, 6–7.

condition of salvation, or rejection of Christ.” It was not the *meritorious ground* but it was the *sine qua non*. The statement thus understood was unobjectionable and true. To deny it would be antinomian. Barndollar’s criticism is instructive, showing something characteristic of dispensationalists. He and they do not understand either what the law does or does not accomplish. Not understanding what it does *not* do, they fall into legalism in the Old Testament. Not understanding what it *does* do, they fall into Antinomianism in the New Testament.

Yet, Scofield undoubtedly did not intend the statement in the Reformed and proper sense because (as we shall see when I discuss his Antinomianism) he did see the law dispensation as providing “legal ground” for acceptance with God in sharp contrast with the evangelical way of that dispensation of grace. So, Scofield’s view of the dispensation of the law really was — as charged — another way of earning acceptance with God; that is, another way of salvation. The Jews did not succeed in that way, according to Scofield, but that was their fault and not any deficiency in the law.

Another dispensational tactic of dealing with the “Scofield problem” here posed is to modify the definition of a *dispensation*. Thus, for Chafer, a *dispensation* is a “specific, divine economy, a commitment from God to man of a responsibility to discharge what God has appointed him.”<sup>11</sup> Ryrie also is very cautious: “A dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God’s purpose.”<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious example of this approach is found in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* of 1967. Essentially the same definition as Scofield gave in 1909 is repeated, but, since the intervening fifty years had raised many questions, the later commentators elaborate on the original definition.<sup>13</sup> Thus, it is now indicated that there are three important concepts implied in the definition: a new divine revelation, the nature of man’s stewardship with respect to it, and a certain time period for it. I note in passing that virtually all three of these are qualified to virtual extinction. It is not really a new deposit because the dispensationalists remind us that these truths overlap. For example, conscience existed before the dispensation of conscience and after it. The third point, the

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<sup>11</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, cited by Charles Caldwell Ryrie, in *Walvoord, A Tribute*.

<sup>12</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 29.

<sup>13</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 3.

time period, is seen as merely approximate. A particular quality is only “dominant” in the given period.

Most importantly, there is no real stewardship here because nothing is accomplished by keeping the commandments and nothing is lost by failing to do so. This is evident in the new definition of a “dispensation.”

The purpose of each dispensation, then, is to place man under a specific rule of conduct, but such stewardship is not a condition of salvation. In every past dispensation unregenerate man has failed, and he has failed in this present dispensation and will in the future. But salvation has been and will continue to be available to him by God’s grace through faith.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of purpose, therefore, the existence of the dispensations is a downright absurdity. A person in a given dispensation would not be saved (this statement says) if he kept the deposit of truth, nor would he be lost if he did not. He may be damned if he did, or he may be saved if he did not. His conduct in a dispensation has nothing to do with his salvation, according to this view of things.

According to this revisionist dispensationalism, the purpose of these dispensations is apparently not salvific. What is it? That question is not answered in this note. It is “not a condition of salvation.” Salvation is available “by God’s grace through faith,” quite apart from the “specific rule of conduct.” The newer dispensationalism is one grand charade, its dispensations signifying nothing. While Scofield said too much, his successors, in their desire to avoid the scandal of the “Scofield problem,” have qualified the term *dispensation* to the point of extinction.

### **The Negative Purpose of a Dispensation**

Some dispensationalists give a negative answer to our question concerning the purpose of the dispensations. According to this view, the purpose of a dispensation is to show that man cannot keep the requirements of God. The note cited above says that in “every past dispensation unregenerate man has failed.” It does not say that it was the purpose of these dispensations to show that man would fail in them but other dispensationalists do express that idea. For example, A. T. Eade writes:

Thus, human history, as studied dispensationally, ends in continuous judgment. Truly we have learned the lesson of the ages, that men’s hearts are “only evil continually”; that unregenerated human nature is not changed from Eden to Gog and Magog — but thanks be unto God”.

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<sup>14</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 3.

... as many as received Him, to them gave He the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name.”<sup>15</sup>

Chafer and Walvoord find the same purpose, negatively speaking, in the dispensations. “Throughout eternity no one can raise a question as to whether God could have given man another chance to attain salvation or holiness by his own ability.”<sup>16</sup> I notice that these two authors have added something to Eade’s statement — something that Scofield had articulated earlier. That is the very significant point that these dispensations are implicitly different ways of salvation. Notice the statement that man’s failure was a failure “to attain salvation or holiness by his own ability.” Presumably, if man had succeeded rather than failed in these different dispensations he would have attained salvation “by his own ability.” There were theoretically various other ways of salvation, at least six of them, but man failed in each one. Had he succeeded in anyone, he presumably would have saved himself by bringing himself onto “the ground of the death of Christ” which he had done “by his own ability.”

Chafer and Walvoord constantly reassert the statement that there is only one way of salvation in all dispensations. What they mean, however, is that there is only one *successful* way of salvation; namely, through Christ. There are other ways of salvation, but man has never succeeded in those other ways. Yet, as I have shown, failure to do so is also failure to bring oneself onto “the ground of the death of Christ.”

How are we to evaluate this dispensational proposal regarding the purpose of the dispensations? Our answer is that dispensationalists have, in their desire to avoid the scandal of heresy, been driven by the nature of their theological system into absurdity. According to dispensationalism, man is a fallen sinner. He is supposed to be totally depraved. He comes into the world under condemnation — the heir of Adam’s guilt. What are the dispensations supposed to do for these dead sinners? They are supposed to show that these dead sinners will fail when they try to save themselves by the particular dispensation’s provisions. The question, of course, is how can dead people possibly save themselves? How can they “do this and live” when they are already dead to begin with?

Suppose the dispensationalist counters this objection by saying, “Granted that we believe men are dead in trespasses and sins; we also believe that they do not admit that. It would serve a useful purpose to

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<sup>15</sup> A. T. Eade, *The Expanded Panorama Bible Study Course* (Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1961), 185.

<sup>16</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 136.

convince a dead man that he is dead. That is precisely what the dispensations do a half dozen different ways. Is that not what evangelism is all about?"

Our first answer to this is a simple one: dispensationalists do not speak this way. I have put this objection into their mouths, but it sounds strange coming out of those mouths. That is to say, if they thought the strategy of God in providing these different dispensations was simply or mainly to convince sinners that they were sinners, then the dispensationalists would be saying so frequently. After all, this question of the purpose of the dispensations is a fundamental point. According to this argument, the dispensations present merely hypothetical ways of salvation, but as we shall see in coming chapters, dispensationalists do not see the dispensation of law, for example, as merely hypothetical in its offer of salvation.

The more substantive reply (which does grow out of this first observation) is that there is nothing new in the dispensations so far as tests of salvation are concerned. Consider the seven dispensations for a moment. The first is the dispensation of innocence in which man was not a fallen sinner and therefore is not relevant. The second is the age of conscience, but conscience was a part of the natural and human endowment. The same can be said about the dispensation of government. As soon as you have two human beings, which in fact you did have at the beginning of the human race, you have a need for human government and this provides no special salvific test. The dispensation of promise, according to the dispensationalists, is unconditional and so, if there is any testing at all, it is about the land and not salvation. Moving on to the dispensation of law, we are informed in Romans 2:14–16 that it is written on the hearts of men. All men have the light of the knowledge of God and a conscience which tells them they have an obligation to follow that light. There is a difference of degree in the Mosaic law, but not a difference of kind. So there is nothing essentially new in principle in the dispensation of the law. I also observe that the dispensation of the kingdom is essentially nothing but a re-enactment of the dispensation of the law.

Coming back to the sixth dispensation (grace), we have something which, according to dispensationalists, has existed as a possibility from the very moment that Adam first sinned. Salvation in all dispensations, according to the dispensationalists, is by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. So, surely there is nothing unique in the sixth dispensation. The promise has been there from the very beginning. The only difference would be a difference of degree. So, I conclude that nothing is proven by these



dispensations, according to the dispensationalists' account of them, except something which is already proven in the very nature of fallen human beings.

Our third objection is that, upon closer examination, the dispensations are incapable of proving what the dispensationalists claim they prove. They are supposed to prove that man cannot be saved by any other way than the blood of Jesus Christ. They do not prove that at all. All that they do prove, if we assume the dispensational viewpoint, is that man never has previously achieved salvation any other way than by the blood of Jesus Christ. Such an argument says nothing conclusive about future possibilities. Anything short of the failure of all possible occasions would not prove the impossibility of success.

In the light of this, the quote from Chafer and Walvoord cited above could be amended to read, "Throughout eternity anyone can always raise a question as to whether God could not have given man another chance to attain salvation or holiness by his own ability." This reminds me of a statement of H. J. Cadbury that Machen's *Origin of Paul's Religion* had proved that every naturalistic theory to date had failed to explain the origin of Paul's religion but had not proved that another naturalistic theory could not come along that would explain it!

A fourth objection to this dispensational view of the purpose of dispensations is that it is an insult to the honor and character of God in that it represents God as holding out false hopes to mankind. He would virtually be saying, "This do and thou shalt live," knowing full well that man cannot do it and, even if he could, he could not live thereby. This is like the second argument but not a mere repetition. It makes it all the more awesome because it involves God in duplicity. Since no dispensationalist would want to do that, I hope that this rationale will be withdrawn. .

It has been frequently observed, as we will see later, that the kingdom offer to the Jews is open to the unavoidable 'charge that it has God presenting something which cannot be a *bona fide* offer. Dreadful as that is, it was only during one dispensation. What we are observing here is that, according to dispensational thinking, God is doing this in *all* generations. Therefore, God not only can lie, but He does so in all dispensations.

Finally, even the dispensation of grace and its way of salvation was not necessarily successful, according to dispensationalism. Even the dispensationalists admit this, empirically speaking. That is, they themselves acknowledge that vast multitudes of people in this age of grace are

refusing the offer of salvation and being damned. So, even this dispensation which *would* save people, if they believed, does not necessarily save them. It is essentially no different from these other dispensations which were, as Chafer and Walvoord put it, fallen men's chances "to attain salvation or holiness by his ability."<sup>17</sup> This, too, is a chance for man to gain salvation by his own moral ability to believe, which ability the totally depraved do not possess.

I think that I have shown that regeneration is not the source of faith in dispensational theology. It is the man acting independently of, though not separate from, simultaneous regeneration who does indeed accept Jesus Christ. Using his own ability, he avails himself of the way of the Cross. Using his own ability, in other dispensations he never availed himself of the ways therein offered. So, the only difference at this point between this dispensation and the others is that some do avail themselves of their "chance" in this dispensation, but none avails himself of his chance in other dispensations with respect to the particular conditions of these dispensations.

The difficulty here, it should be noted, is with the dispensational theological *system*. The sequence of dispensations is seen, as noted above, in Scofield's definition of a dispensation as "a period of time in which man is tested in respect of obedience." The only possible conclusion from this is that faith is a "work." Faith is the one work required of us in this dispensation. If we exercise it we are saved, if we do not we are lost. Faith is our work and it entitles us to Christ and His grace. The orthodox doctrine of justification by grace through faith is not to be confused with the dispensational travesty of that doctrine. In orthodox Protestant Christianity, faith is the instrumental means of union with Christ who alone "justifies the ungodly." By contrast, the dispensational view of faith is, ironically, legalistic.

If the dispensation of grace is not *necessarily* successful, empirically considered, it is not even *possibly* successful, theologically considered. If man is truly dead in trespasses and sins, an enemy of God and a hater of the Light of the World, then he never is "by his own ability" going to accept Jesus Christ as his Savior. This dispensation is no better than any other dispensation as far as possible success is concerned if it depends on man's "own ability." Man by his own ability, as a totally depraved sinner, will reject every offer to come to God in whatever dispensation or whatever manner or by whatever scheme. Dispensational theology is in

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<sup>17</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 136.

the business (in this dispensation and every dispensation) of throwing lifesavers to *drowned* persons who must reach out and take if they would be saved.

It is rather ironic that Ryrie feels that dispensationalism is strong in this area where other theologies, including Covenant theology, are weak. As he sees it, Covenant theology concentrates only on the salvific purpose of God and His glory therein. Dispensationalism is supposed, by contrast, to be concerned with the total glory of God. It is thought that, by viewing the Bible dispensationally, God is seen to be at work in many different ways, manifesting many aspects of His glory and not merely His saving mercy.<sup>18</sup>

Historically, Calvinism has been viewed, in distinction from Lutheranism for example, as being theocentric rather than christocentric. Calvinism's theocentric character compares favorably with the theological absurdity of dispensationalism. Not only does dispensationalism not glorify any of the attributes of God, it does not even glorify the salvific, merciful aspects of God.<sup>19</sup> We see that the stated purpose of the seven dispensations reveals nothing and obscures everything about God and destroys dispensationalism in the process.

### The "Chafer Problem"

With Chafer, as with his mentor Scofield, dispensationalists have a *problem* showing that he taught one way of salvation, not to mention proving it. Chafer writes, "With the call of Abraham and the giving of the Law . . . there are two widely different standardized, divine provisions whereby man, who is utterly fallen, might come into the favor of God."<sup>20</sup> Again, he remarks in the final volume of his *Systematic Theology* that, in the Old Testament men were justified by the law, while in the New Testament faith was without works.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 18.

<sup>19</sup> Craig A. Blaising notes that "John Feinberg acknowledged in a recent debate with John Gerstner that a doxological unity is not a distinctive of dispensationalism and therefore cannot define its essence." "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988):268. Nevertheless, most contemporary dispensationalists seem loyal to the faith of their fathers though Johnson, Geisler, and even Ryrie are tiring of this burden. See Blaising, 264–266.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (1936):93.

<sup>21</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:219.

The effect of these types of statements has led dispensationalists to offer various excuses for the Dallas Seminary founder. When questioned by Daniel Fuller on this point, John Walvoord conceded that Chafer tended to “over-emphasize the legal character” of the law and kingdom periods. More importantly, according to Walvoord, Chafer became “quite indignant when his writings were interpreted as teaching anything other than that salvation was always by grace and by faith.”<sup>22</sup> I myself have no doubt that Chafer was (and Walvoord is) sincere in the desire to teach one way of salvation.

Good intentions are not sufficient however. Here is what Chafer actually wrote:

As before stated, whatever God does for sinful men on any terms whatsoever [being made possible through the death of Christ] is to that extent, an act of divine grace; for whatever God does on the ground of Christ's death is gracious in character, and all will agree that a divine covenant which is void of all human elements is more gracious in character than one which is otherwise. These distinctions apply only to the divine side of the covenant. On the human side . . . there is no exercise of grace in any case; but the human requirements which the divine covenant imposes may be either absolutely lacking, or some so drastically imposed as to determine the destiny of the individual.<sup>23</sup>

Let us analyze what Chafer is saying. First, he asserts that whatever God does on the ground of Christ's sacrifice is gracious. We know from other utterances that Chafer believes that Christ's sacrifice is for all time and this is what leads Chafer to affirm that no one is ever, at any time, saved except by the blood of Christ. Therefore, Chafer concludes, even in the dispensation of the law men were saved by the grace of God in Christ. The death of Christ is apparently thought, by Chafer, to provide the possibility for grace throughout human history which, regardless of other requirements which might be added, allows us to view salvation as “gracious.”

We have already seen that Chafer's view of the atonement as making salvation “possible” functions in this way. In reality, for Chafer, the atonement makes it “possible” for God to offer two different ways of salvation one by works (which has always failed) and one by faith (which succeeds if the sinner generates the necessary faith). That this is indeed the case is evident from Chafer's discussion of the requirements involved.

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<sup>22</sup> Fuller, “Hermeneutics,” 158.

<sup>23</sup> Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” 430.

A covenant may have human requirements — either “absolutely lacking” or so “drastically imposed as to determine the destiny of the individual.”

What we have seen is that Chafer’s dispensationalism, strictly speaking, does not teach *salvation* by works in the dispensation of the law, but damnation by works. Second, because faith is really a “work” for dispensationalists, Chafer does not teach salvation by grace, even in the dispensation of grace.

### The Continuity of Faith

Another problem facing Chafer is demonstrating the continuity of salvific faith that he claims is present in the dispensation of law as well as the dispensation of grace. This is a problem to which one successor of Chafer, Charles Ryrie, has paid particular attention. Replying to Daniel Fuller, Ryrie attempts to vindicate dispensationalism’s claim to teach one way of salvation in all dispensations by making a number of distinctions with regard to faith. “The *basis* of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations.”<sup>24</sup>

Daniel Fuller wrongly criticizes dispensationalism, Ryrie argues, because he does not distinguish between the “basis” of salvation and the “content” of faith.<sup>25</sup> “By comparison with the grace of Christ, all previous revelations of grace were as nothing,” he continues.<sup>26</sup> Waxing triumphant, Ryrie declares that “only dispensationalism can harmonize these two aspects of truth.”<sup>27</sup> Speaking of the law, he explains that “the means of eternal salvation was by grace and the means of temporal life was by law.”<sup>28</sup> “The sacraments were part of the law; the keeping of them did not save; and yet a man could respond to what they taught so as to effect eternal salvation.”<sup>29</sup> They had “ulterior efficacy.”<sup>30</sup> Thus Ryrie maintains, apparently, that the Old Testament sacraments “taught” the salvation that God was to accomplish in Jesus Christ.

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<sup>24</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 124.

<sup>26</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 125.

<sup>28</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 126.

<sup>29</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 126.

<sup>30</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.

Then our theologian starts to hedge his bets. It “cannot be implied that the Israelite understood what that final dealing with sin was.”<sup>31</sup> Ryrie’s whole building begins to totter. “For if he had had sufficient insight to the extent of seeing and believing on the finished work of Christ, then he would not have had to offer the sacrifices annually, for he would have rested confidently in what he saw in the prefiguration.”<sup>32</sup> 32 Finally, the house of cards collapses as Ryrie concludes: “Acts 17:30; Romans 3.25; John 1:21; 7:40; 1 Peter 1:10–11 — These passages make it impossible to say that Old Testament saints under the law exercised personal faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

Instead of Ryrie’s dispensationalism harmonizing the two dispensations, we see that he destroys the graciousness of either. Ryrie’s goal is to prove that salvation is the same in all dispensations. This he attempts by showing that faith is the same in all dispensations. What he actually shows is vastly different — namely, that the *requirement* of faith is the same in all dispensations. He also irrelevantly discusses the basis, object, and content of faith.

Since he discusses these irrelevant matters, I must discuss them too, if only to show that they are not germane before proceeding to the one crucial point. Ryrie distinguishes basis, object, and content of faith. *Basis* means foundation or ground-work, something on which something else rests.

*Object* is that toward which faith is directed. That toward which faith is directed and that on which it comes to rest should be synonymous. We are using two different words for the same allusion. Nevertheless, Ryrie thinks he has a difference here because he differently defines basis and object of faith. The basis is the death of Christ; the object is God. So, faith rests on two different foundations — or are the two one? Surely, Ryrie would not want to claim two different foundations for faith. He will have to plead guilty to redundancy.

In any case, the *faith* is what is necessary, and it is said to remain the same in all dispensations. No, that is not what Ryrie says. He says that the *requirement* of faith remains the same. Faith itself is actually always *changing*. Now faith is one thing that cannot change in different dispensations. If it did, one would not be talking about the same thing — about the same requirement. What is troubling about Ryrie here is that he

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<sup>31</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.

<sup>32</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.

<sup>33</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 130.

speaks of the “content” of faith when he is thinking of the “object” of faith. But he has already identified the object of faith as God, who changes not.

What does all this irrelevancy add up to? That God, the giver of Christ crucified, is the basis or object of faith in all dispensations. That is true and truly beside the point. What Ryrie is supposed to do is prove that dispensationalism *teaches* that doctrine and does not implicitly deny it.

In the light of all this, Ryrie enters the arena of debate to answer the charge of Fuller. Fuller’s error (says Ryrie) is that he does not distinguish between basis and content. I will not enter into the discussion between Fuller and Ryrie directly but address myself to Ryrie’s comment here. We have already seen that Ryrie’s distinction between “basis” and “object” is wrong-headed. As we have also seen, he goes on to distinguish between “object” and “content.” Again, Ryrie attempts to divide the indivisible. By any reasonable standard, an object of faith (that towards which faith is consciously directed) is identical with Ryrie’s “content” of that faith. (A more normal usage of the term “content of faith” might be the orthodox Protestant conception of faith as consisting of knowledge, assent, and trust.)

Where does this distinction between “object” and “content” get Ryrie? In essence, it allows Ryrie to maintain that Old Testament believers were saved by faith in God while believers in the dispensation of grace are saved by faith in Christ. Apparently, according to Ryrie, Old Testament believers needed some vague sort of faith in divine benevolence while New Testament believers need faith in Jesus Christ specifically. Ryrie is either speaking about faith in Jesus Christ or he is not. As we have seen, in the case of Old Testament “believers,” he is not.

I originally said that Ryrie was being more profound and sophisticated here than his mentor, Chafer. As I probe I find that his very effort to go deeper has taken him deeper into the mire. The more he struggles the more he sinks. Chafer made a simple, easily refuted statement. Ryrie gives a more complex statement less easily refuted. It is less easily refuted merely because it is obfuscatory, and not because it is profound.

Ryrie’s argument may appear to gain plausibility by the introduction of what, on closer examination, is revealed to be a red herring. Ryrie claims that the question is, “How much of what God was going to do in the future did the Old Testament believer comprehend?”<sup>34</sup> Apparently nothing, according to Ryrie, because the Old Testament sacrifices did not

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<sup>34</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 131.

give a “clear foreview of Christ.”<sup>35</sup> Because Covenant theology maintains that Old Testament believers did exercise faith in Christ, it is guilty of an “historical anachronism” in reading New Testament faith back into the Old (according to Ryrie).<sup>36</sup> Dispensationalism is thus justified in maintaining that the “content” of Old Testament faith was different from saving faith today.

Ryrie’s argument regarding the distinction between the basis of salvation and the content of faith will be examined below. What is crucial to note at this juncture is that the charge of Covenant theology “anachronism” is unjustified. Covenantal theologians have never maintained that the Old Testament sacrificial system gave a perfectly “clear foreview” of all the details of the life and work of Christ. It would not be possible, from an Old Testament perspective, to write one of the four gospels of the New Testament. Nevertheless, covenant theologians have adamantly maintained that the Old Testament in its entirety (see Luke 24:44–47) refers to Christ and that the Old Testament sacrificial system in its entirety (see Heb. 10:1–18) points forward to Christ. Thus, the faith of Old Testament believers, however hazy that may have been with regard to details, can be meaningfully described as faith *in Jesus Christ*. As we have seen, Ryrie would substitute, in the case of Old Testament believers, some sort of vague *faith in God* for faith *in Christ*.

Why does Ryrie think that the believing Israelite could not have exercised faith in Christ? A number of reasons, none of them compelling, are advanced. First, Ryrie suggests that the believing Israelite would not have had to offer the sacrifices annually for “he would have rested confidently in what he saw in the prefiguration.”<sup>37</sup> This resting “confidently in what he saw in the prefiguration” was precisely the reason for offering the sacrifices. Why would he have slain millions of bloody sacrifices if he had not realized that the blood of bulls and goats did *not* take away sin. After all, John the Baptist, who knew very well about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (see John 1:29), continued to offer those sacrifices, as did that Lamb of God Himself!

Trying to prove his point by New Testament texts, Ryrie cites five and concludes that “these passages make it impossible to say that the Old Testament saints under the law exercised personal faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.

<sup>36</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.

<sup>38</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 129.



Since the dispensationalist makes such an astonishing and unwarranted deduction from these portions of the Word of God which teach the very opposite, we will have to look at them one by one.

*Acts 17:30*

“Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent” (NASB). This statement was part of Paul’s famous Mars Hill sermon before the Aeropagus *Gentiles*. The Apostle to the Gentiles was not referring to “Old Testament saints.” Therefore, when he referred to the “ignorance” which God “overlooked,” Paul was not referring to the Jewish believers at all.

*Romans 3:25*

“[Christ Jesus] whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” (NASB). I will not here attempt to prove that “passing over of sins” (*paresis*) was the equivalent of the forgiveness of sins (*aphesis*). I am presently concerned with what the Israelite saw in the prefigurations.

Paul says here that God “displayed publicly” and “demonstrated” His righteousness in Christ Jesus and His propitiation. Christ is now displayed as the antitype of all those ancient types. He is “our Passover” just as the Baptist said: “Behold, the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, NASB). *All those millions of sacrificial lambs were pointing to one — the Lamb of God.* John and all the others could see, as no doubt Abraham did when that ram was caught in the thicket, that all were prefigurations of Him who was to come, for without the shedding of blood (of the Lamb of God) there could be no remission of sins.

*John 1:21*

“And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ And he said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No’” (NASB). One wonders why Ryrie chose this text for his purpose. Presumably because the Israelites did not know who the Christ was and wondered whether the Baptist was claiming to be He. If that is Ryrie’s argument, the passage actually proves our point. The Jews knew the Christ was coming from the prefigurations. Of course, He had to be identified. In other words, they knew from the Old Testament who the Christ would be, but not which person He would be. They would not even have asked John if he were “the Prophet” if they had not known that “the Prophet” was coming. It was just

a few verses later (John 1:29) that John identifies the Lamb of God, saying, “Behold”!

*John 7:40*

“Some of the multitude therefore, when they heard these words, were saying, ‘This certainly is the Prophet’” (NASB). Everything just said above applies here and more so. In John 1:21 it was religious leaders who were asking. Here we see that even some of “the multitude” of Israelites knew, from the Old Testament prefigurations, that the Prophet was coming and were convinced, from the mounting evidence, that Jesus was He. In other words, even the laity could see Jesus Christ was the prefigured One.

*1 Peter 1:10–11*

“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you made careful search and inquiry, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (NASB). I doubt if Ryrie could have chosen five better texts more thoroughly to disprove his point but this one could do it all by itself. The passage shows clearly that the prophets “prophesied of the grace that would come.” So also, Christ had pointed out on the way to Emmaus as he exclaimed:

“O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:25–27, NASB)

So, from the Old Testament the Israelites should have learned clearly of the very grace that was to come — the grace of God in Christ. They knew it was to be in a “person” at some future “time.” They knew from the prefigurations of the prophets that the Messiah in whom they believed was certainly coming in person at the appointed time. They needed only to recognize Him when He came.

The only explanation for Ryrie’s peculiar exegesis here is that he has forgotten that people can very well see a particular person as described and defined before they meet him visibly in person. The Old Testament saints *knew* Jesus Christ although they did not know all about Him. Ernst W. Hengstenberg wrote four volumes sketching the Old Testament

prefigurations of the Messiah.<sup>39</sup> For centuries, they had been looking for Him. To be sure, some misinterpretations had confused and obscured the prophecies (which were plain enough in themselves). Christ rebuked rather than excused the disciples for not believing. It remained only to locate the “person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating” (1 Pet. 1:10).

The only way dispensationalists will clear themselves of the charge of teaching multiple ways of salvation is by resting on the solid rock of teaching that saints in all dispensations do believe in Christ and in Him crucified and that there is *no essential difference* between one dispensation and another. As long as they are going to think of dispensations as they do, they are going to sink into legalism under the law and antinomianism under grace. That means no salvation in any dispensation. Simply asserting one’s intention without eschewing teaching to the contrary harms the church and places souls in jeopardy.

#### **Eternal Life vs. Temporal Life**

Thinking he has justified grace in the dispensation of the law, Ryrie goes on to explain what he thinks the law itself accomplishes: “the means of eternal salvation was by grace and the means of temporal life was by the law.”<sup>40</sup> Here Ryrie is almost sound. If only he had a sound doctrine of grace, his understanding of law or “morality” as being temporally beneficial would be helpful. But, not having grace in his doctrine, he loses what he does have (the law). Temporal benefits are only beneficial if they are the fruits of grace; that is, only if they come to gracious persons. Otherwise, they are only instances of divine forbearance. In point of fact, the dispensation of the law knows no such distinction as Ryrie defends. “This do and thou shalt live” surely does not refer only to temporal life. As a matter of fact, if a person is not made acceptable to God by grace, his temporal “benefits” become curses and not blessings.

#### **Dispensational Prospective Salvation Excludes Actual Salvation**

Dispensationalists teach that men and women in all dispensations are saved by the underlying blood of Jesus Christ. I have shown that the dispensational understanding of a “dispensation” and the dispensational

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<sup>39</sup> Ernst Wilhelm Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament*, 4 vols., 2nd ed., trans. Theodore Meyer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1861).

<sup>40</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 130.

system of doctrine in general contradict this claim. Having demonstrated that dispensationalism does in fact teach a different way of possible salvation for the Old Testament dispensation in that Old Testament believers were *not* saved through faith in Christ, I now proceed to examine further the way in which this Old Testament salvation differs from the New. In this section, I focus on the way persons before the Incarnation are actually related to the sacrifice of Christ. It is, we shall see, by anticipation and not by participation. Dispensationalism teaches prospective rather than participative salvation.

C. I. Scofield himself makes our point here quite clear. In his note on Genesis 1:28, he writes that “before the cross man was saved in prospect of Christ’s atoning sacrifice.”<sup>41</sup> Now there is an infinite difference between being saved by Christ’s sacrifice and living in “prospect” of it! If a dispensationalist replies that I am quibbling with language, he cannot have carefully reflected on this matter. That difference in the ways of salvation is the most crucial difference between the two theologies. If a dispensationalist gives up that distinction, he gives up his dispensationalism!

This dispensational way of conceiving of the Old Testament believers is drastically different from the biblical way. *According to dispensationalists, the Old Testament people are saved by believing in the coming of the Christ while, in the Biblical view, Old Testament people are saved by believing in the Christ who is coming incarnate.* In one system, a person is saved by the anticipation of a coming event. In the other system, a person is saved by the Person in the anticipated event. It is as simple as this — in dispensationalism a person is saved by anticipation while, in the biblical system, a person is saved by Christ.

We have seen that this is no artificial distinction. Because Old Testament people are not saved by Jesus Christ, according to dispensationalism, they do not benefit from what Christ actually achieves when He comes. They are not regenerated, their hopes are not heavenly, and they are an earthly “herd of swine” (Calvin). In point of fact, they are not even saved by hope in the coming of Christ since, according to dispensationalists, their faith was in divine benevolence rather than in a specific coming figure.

The truth will inevitably manifest itself. It has in dispensational soteriology. The truth is that another way of salvation which is somehow connected with Christ but not resting on Christ is a *different* way. The

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<sup>41</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 126.

dispensationalist at this point is, unconsciously perhaps, consistent with himself. He does not regard the Old Testament people of God as second, third, or fourth class citizens of the kingdom of God. They simply are not citizens at all. While dispensationalists roundly assert that Old Testament people were saved by Christ, there is no way *in their theological system* they could be.

### Conclusion

Thus we see that the charge that dispensationalism teaches more than one way of possible salvation is well founded. Not only did the early dispensationalists teach this heresy, but more recent dispensationalists have failed to exonerate their predecessors and have, in more subtle ways, fallen into the same error. The problem here, as we have seen, is the understanding of a *dispensation* as a “period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience” which is central to the dispensational system. As we have seen, dispensational adherence to this definition results in a denial of the gospel. More recent dispensational attempts to correct their theological system at this point are only another pathetic instance of putting on a band-aid to heal a fatal internal wound.



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## DUBIOUS EVANGELICALISM (2): “KINGDOM OFFER” UNDERMINES THE GOSPEL

In dispensational thinking of even the most moderate character, Jesus Christ came to offer an earthly kingdom to Israel. That kingdom, according to dispensational thinking, would have been a full establishment of the Old Testament legal system and its expansion through the whole world under the leadership of a revived Israel and her Messiah. Fortunately for the dispensationalist and all of us, the Jews did not do their duty but sinfully rejected Christ's offer. That spelled Christ's doom on the cross. Christ's death on the cross, which came about only because Israel did not do her duty and accept Him as the king of Israel, is the basis of our salvation in this dispensation of grace and every dispensation. In other words, the gospel was a happy accident. It depended entirely on the faithlessness of the Jews. *Had they responded as they ought to have responded, there would never have been a gospel of Jesus Christ!*

This is the standard dispensational position, and no one states it more clearly than the articulate Donald Grey Barnhouse. “When Jesus came, He made a *bona fide* offer of the Kingdom and power to the people of Israel.” Barnhouse adds, trying to save an unsalvable situation, “He knew before He came that they would refuse it — knew it from all eternity; hence, there are prophets which speak of His coming to die for us.”<sup>1</sup> A little later, he adds: “The essence of Christ's teaching in the first part of His ministry that in which He was offering the Kingdom to the Jews, His own people, is to be found in the Sermon on the Mount.”<sup>2</sup>

Two key dispensational ideas are closely related to this doctrine. The first is a supposed distinction between the “kingdom of heaven,” or the earthly millennial kingdom offered to the Jews, and the “kingdom of God,” or the eternal spiritual kingdom associated with the dispensation of grace. Appealing to the fact that the gospels portray Jesus as using both terms, dispensationalists contend that the distinction between the two is of the utmost importance while non-dispensational exegetes, of all theological

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, *He Came Unto His Own* (New York: Revell, 1933), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Barnhouse, *He Came Unto His Own*, 23.

stripes, maintain that the two terms are virtually synonymous.<sup>3</sup> The second idea is the view of the dispensation of grace as a *parenthesis*; that is, a period that was not predicted by the Old Testament prophets. Because these matters will be discussed later in connection with the dispensational view of Israel and the church, I need not pursue them fully here.

### The Problem

This “kingdom offer” is surely an appalling notion. How a Christian person could entertain it, even momentarily, is very difficult to understand. Needless to say, weighty criticism of this dispensational teaching has been made, and dispensationalists have felt the need to respond. In addition to my critique, I will look at a number of dispensational attempts to vindicate this novel doctrine.

The primary objection is a moral one. A clear implication of the dispensational view is that God was offering Israel a very wicked option. According to dispensationalism, the Lord Jesus Christ was offering something to the Jews in good faith which, had they accepted, would have destroyed the only way of man’s salvation. God is an honest God. He is a sincere God. He, therefore, truly offered to the Jews the setting up of a kingdom which would have made the cross impossible. *Obviously, if God did offer a kingdom which He could not have permitted to be established, He could be neither honest nor sincere.*

I know the way the dispensationalists themselves account for such a concept. They feel that they are absolved from guilt by their view of divine sovereignty. Because they believe in divine foreknowledge, they say that God knew from all eternity that, when the Jews were presented with the kingdom by Christ, they would refuse it. Consequently there was no possibility of Christ setting up His kingdom at that time and making the Cross unnecessary. But this knowledge of God does not make Him honest and sincere. He is doing it safely, as it were, because He knows that this dishonest and insincere offer will never be accepted.

The fact of the matter is He could not possibly have redeemed His promise. If the Jews had embraced Christ’s offer, God would have had to say, “I am sorry, Christ cannot be elevated to the throne at this time. He

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<sup>3</sup> See the *Scofield Reference Bible*, 996. For the more standard scholarly treatment of this question see the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), 1:582.



must die on a cross.” If the Jews expostulated and said, “But you offered us this,” He would have had to say that it was not a sincere offer. He thought they would never accept it. Of course, the dispensationalist in the background says, “No, that would never happen because God knew it would never happen.”

I am granting that it never could have happened. Still, such a divine offer would have been insincere. God was making an offer that He could never have redeemed though He dishonestly said that He would if it were accepted. It is as if I safely offered a million dollars (which I do not have) to a debt-ridden relative who detested me because I knew, his hatred of me being what it was, he would never accept it.

Another objection to the kingdom offer is that it clearly implies, if we take dispensational assertions about the *bona fide* character of the offer with any seriousness, that it implicitly treats the sacrifice of Christ as virtually superfluous. Dispensationalists maintain that all are saved through the death of Christ but, if they are serious about the offer of the kingdom, that sacrifice was not, strictly speaking, necessary. Dispensationalists would not want to argue that the “kingdom of heaven” could have been fully established (that which the kingdom offer allegedly proffered) without there being some way of eternal salvation apart from the death of Christ. If the death of Christ was not necessary, our accepting it in the present time is the acceptance of a gratuitous event.

This, in turn involves a basic conflict with the Christian understanding of the nature of God. Manifestly, if the death of Christ were not necessary, then it is not necessary now because God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is not an arbitrary being who lays down arbitrary regulations in any given time that it pleases Him so to do. He is an immutable being who cannot clear the guilty by arbitrary fiat. Scripture tells us that “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22, KJV). Dispensationalists will concede that, now that Christ has shed His blood, it becomes necessary to be saved by that method. It should be noted, however, that this necessity is not built upon the nature of God but simply reflects an arbitrary fiat of God. The most that the dispensational system can say about the death of Christ is that it was one possible way of making salvation possible. This picture of an arbitrary God and a gratuitous sacrifice can hardly be considered as glorifying God.

A final objection to the dispensational kingdom offer theory is that such a notion cannot be harmonized with the gospel accounts in the New Testament. Particularly problematic for the dispensational view is the following passage:

Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone (John 6:15, NASB).

The problem for dispensationalists is that here the Jews are recorded as asking Christ to accept the very temporal kingship which dispensationalists say the Jews were always refusing. As we see in this text, however, it was Christ who rejected the offer of a temporal kingdom.

While many dispensational works fail to deal with this passage, *The Ryrie Study Bible* has this note: "Jesus had to escape from the enthusiasm of the crowd, which would have forced Him to lead them in revolt against the Roman government. Jesus refused to become a political revolutionist."<sup>4</sup> This note, however, raises another question: How could Christ ever have offered to be King of the Jews without that bringing the wrath of Rome and war? It was this *false* charge (that Jesus claimed to be king) by which the Jewish leaders were literally able to nail Him to the cross (see John 19:19).

There has been some movement on this issue in recent years. For instance, a number of dispensationalists are presently rejecting the spurious distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God and thus obviating this terrible problem. Still, this notion of a kingdom offer remains dispensational "orthodoxy." Mainline dispensationalists, including popular figures such as Billy Graham and Hal Lindsey,<sup>5</sup> are still teaching the kingdom offer and no dispensationalist, to my knowledge, whether accepting or rejecting the kingdom of God/heaven distinction, has acknowledged the awful implications of the kingdom offer. Thus, I continue to indict the theological system and listen to its continued defense.

### Dispensational Defenses of the Kingdom Offer

In my survey of dispensational defenses of the kingdom offer, I will first examine the arguments of Lewis Sperry Chafer and then briefly note defenses of the doctrine offered by Robert Saucy and Charles L. Feinberg.

#### *Lewis Sperry Chafer*

I can consider Chafer's argument as representative since he was one of the outstanding modern dispensationalists and also because he offers

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<sup>4</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1610.

<sup>5</sup> See Jon Zens, *Dispensationalism*, 13, and Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, 20–21.

the two basic “reasons” that are usually offered by way of explanation. His first answer is “that Jehovah’s lamb was in the redeeming purpose slain from the foundation of the world.”<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, basically the appeal to divine foreknowledge and sovereignty which I noted above. Chafer simply *assumes* that a sincere offer is compatible with such foreknowledge rather than demonstrating how it is compatible.

Chafer’s second argument is more substantial. Here he contends, essentially, that the sincere offer must be compatible with such foreknowledge because this situation is analogous to others which are readily accepted. In technical terms, this is referred to as a *tu quoque* argument.<sup>7</sup> All Calvinists are supposed to have the same problem at other points that dispensationalists have at this point. Chafer asks, “Had Adam not sinned there could have been no need of a redeemer. Why did Jehovah tell Adam not to sin? And what would have become of the redemptive purpose had Adam obeyed God?”<sup>8</sup>

Other dispensationalists raise a parallel question, “What would God have done had the reprobate accepted the gospel offer?” The question is essentially the same. Chafer is saying that God had decreed the Fall of Adam and yet He exhorted Adam not to fall. Is that consistent? What would have happened if Adam had done his duty and not fallen? Was God being honest in offering Adam a way of life and a way of death when the way of death was the foreordained way? The assumption is that Calvinists cannot answer that, and the dispensationalists are at no greater disadvantage if they cannot answer the objection to the kingdom offer.

Closer analysis of this alleged parallel shows that the analogy breaks down rather quickly. A number of important differences are evident. First of all, a major problem with the *bona fide* kingdom offer is that it amounts to an ethical indictment of God while the imagined problem that Chafer and other dispensationalists raise concerning Adam poses no ethical problem. In the kingdom offer, God is represented as being dishonest in offering something He could not have honored if accepted. In the case of Adam, if he had persevered, God could have given him the life He had promised. God told Adam no lie.

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<sup>6</sup> Chafer, “Dispensationalism.”

<sup>7</sup> A *tu quoque* argument is a logical fallacy that attempts to discredit an opponent’s position by claiming he fails to act consistently with his own position. It argues that an objection applies equally to the person making it.

<sup>8</sup> Chafer, “Dispensationalism.”

Second, if it be granted that the covenant with Adam did not involve implicit dishonesty in God, can it still be argued that it did involve inconsistency with His eternal sovereignty, omniscience, and foreknowledge? I think not. Will anyone say, least of all a Calvinist as Chafer claimed to be, that God could not have foreknown and even predestined that Adam would violate the command of God and at the same time offer Adam a reward if he did not do so? I am now asking the question only concerning God's eternal predestination and foreknowledge—nothing else. On the surface of it, there is nothing here that involves denial of those two doctrines. Unless, that is, someone can show that God's having decreed what free moral agents will choose makes it impossible for free moral agents to choose. The Reformed have refuted that charge time and time again, and I hardly need to go into any detail here, especially for the benefit of theologians claiming to be Reformed.

The thing that really bothers many people, not only dispensationalists, about this point is not that it implies non-veracity or non-sovereignty in the Deity but that they have a hard time conceiving of responsible human choices which are known or decreed from all eternity. But mystery is no argument against the truth of anything, least of all things pertaining to the eternal decrees of God.

As I noted above, some dispensationalists, in a variation on the above argument, contend that the *bona fide* kingdom offer is analogous to the proclamation of the gospel. Dispensationalists counter-attack at this point with some persuasiveness because this is a difficult point, dealing with the question of hypotheticals in the mind of God. They insist that what they are saying is no different from the usual Calvinistic interpretation of the "offer of the gospel." God knows who will and who will not accept it. The dispensationalist asks the authentic Calvinist whether, supposing a non-elect person had actually chosen to believe, God would have accepted that person's faith. God knows who and who will not accept it, yet He offers the gospel to everybody. If everybody actually did accept it, then God could not actually save everybody because He had already declared that everyone would not be saved. If He saved everybody, He would prove Himself to be ignorant of what was going to happen and frustrated in all of His counsels and purposes. So what difference, the dispensationalist asks, is there between the dispensational idea of a kingdom offer and the Calvinist saying that the gospel is *offered* to all while God designs the atonement only for the elect and hence could save only the elect.

This might be a compelling argument except that the dispensational representation of Reformed theology is a caricature at this point. We do

*not* teach that God invites reprobates to believe and be saved knowing full well that He will not give them a heart of faith. In fact, God does not call reprobates! He calls persons who recognize and admit themselves to be sinners. Those who confess themselves to be sinners, and they only, are called. Anyone of them who comes will be saved. God *never* invited anyone who, if he responded, would be refused. God would never be embarrassed, even hypothetically, by someone coming and being rejected because he was not predestinated and foreknown. Every convicted sinner who has come, would come, will come, has been, would be, or will be accepted.

I have admitted (see chapter 7) that even Reformed theologians sometimes state this “universal call” incorrectly as if Christ were inviting the “righteous” to come. He never invited the self-righteous to Him. Christ specifically said that He did not “call the righteous” (Matt. 9:13). Only the “poor in spirit” inherit His kingdom because only they were ever made welcome or ever will be made welcome. When any of *them* comes, He welcomes them in perfect accord with His eternal election of them.

#### *Robert Saucy*

Another variation on this dispensational theme is offered by Robert Saucy. According to Saucy, those who say that Christ offered a spiritual kingdom and not an earthly kingdom do not escape the problem of the kingdom offer. Note that he is not defending his position here but simply arguing that its critics are just as guilty as its defenders. Saucy writes:

Assuming that Christ was offering a spiritual kingdom, as most objectors to dispensationalism do, is there a satisfactory answer to the place of the cross if this kingdom would have been accepted by Israel prior to the cross? If the nation had accepted His message no matter which kingdom was offered, what of the prophecies that He was to be rejected by His own?<sup>9</sup>

In other words, according to Saucy, if all the Jews had been converted and believed in Christ they would never have crucified Him either! The plan of salvation would have thus been thwarted. The main answer to Saucy is that Christ never offered His true spiritual kingdom to *all* Jews but only to Jews who acknowledged that they were sinners. All those Jews did accept the kingdom offer. In other words, all those Jews to whom

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Lloyd Saucy, “The Relationship of Dispensationalism to the Eternal Purpose of God” (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1961).

Christ offered His kingdom did accept it and those who did not were never offered it. The latter could and did account for the Cross.

Saucy asks, if the offer was a spiritual kingdom and the Jews accepted that, how could it have been true that Christ “was to be rejected by His own?” What he means is that *if* Christ made a universal offer of the spiritual kingdom, that too could not have been fulfilled without destroying the possibility of the Cross. Saucy’s logic is quite correct but his premise is quite wrong. Christ did not make a universal offer of the spiritual kingdom. He voiced the invitation universally (to all who heard Him), but the invitation when heard was perceived to be to sinners only and not to those who considered themselves righteous (see Luke 5:32; Matt. 9:13). Furthermore, even if everyone who heard that call did accept it, that would not have made the cross unnecessary in Reformed thinking. All who had accepted before the death of Christ did so on the basis of that atonement before it had happened. Dispensationalists err at two points: First, that Christ ever offered the kind of Kingdom they imagine; second, that it would have obviated the cross if it had been!

*Charles L. Feinberg*

C. L. Feinberg offers a traditional dispensational defense of the traditional dispensational kingdom offer. In addition to a variety of *tu quoque* arguments, the substance of which I have examined above, he offers a number of other reasons which, in the interests of thoroughness, I will briefly examine.

First, Feinberg argues that Daniel 9:25 “places in juxtaposition the cross and the matter of the Kingdom, Messiah is to be cut off (the cross clearly) and have nothing (the Kingdom).”<sup>10</sup> I reply that even if this is a correct interpretation of Daniel 9:25, the “juxtaposition” is no problem. The Jews could very well have rejected Christ as their rightful king and thereby brought about His crucifixion. That is not saying that Christ offered them a kingdom *in lieu* of the cross.

Against Masselink, Feinberg argues that if there was not a kingdom offer, the “triumphal entry” is “inexplicable.”<sup>11</sup> I would simply note that a king riding on a donkey with children as his heralds and palm branches

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<sup>10</sup> C. L. Feinberg, editor, *Jesus The King Is Coming* (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 88. See also C. L. Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Van Kampen, 1954), 200.

<sup>11</sup> Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism*, 199.

for swords is not exactly the picture of the world-conquering ruler the dispensationalists have in mind.

Feinberg goes on to contend that, if Christ was not offering an earthly kingdom, He would have told his disciples from the beginning.<sup>12</sup> Against this somewhat odd argument I would simply note that Christ never taught error, though He taught truth gradually as the disciples were able to “bear” it (see John 16:12).

Finally, Acts 2:23 is cited to show it was determined of God that Christ was to be crucified, yet sinful of men to crucify Him.<sup>13</sup> But what is the problem? God determines evil *permissively* by leaving men to their wicked devices in His providential setting. Thus they carry out sinfully and culpably what He has decreed virtuously and admirably for the benefit of His people. “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20, KJV) by His gracious, sovereign, and holy decree. How this is supposed to justify a *bona fide* offer which God could under no circumstances have honored is, to us, a mystery. This supposed analogy is, in fact, a matter of “apples and oranges.”

### Conclusion

It would appear, therefore, that devastating criticisms of the dispensational *bona fide* kingdom offer to the Jews remain unanswered. Such an offer is a direct affront to the righteousness of God, involving as it does the implication that God can and did lie. Since God cannot lie, such a kingdom offer makes the cross of Christ *unnecessary*!

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<sup>12</sup> Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism*, 200.

<sup>13</sup> Feinberg, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism*, 200.





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### **DUBIOUS EVANGELICALISM (3): “ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH” ALTERS THE GOSPEL**

Having shown that dispensationalism's view of “dispensations,” its salvation by anticipation doctrine, and its kingdom offer are essentially incompatible with evangelicalism, I will now endeavor to show that dispensationalism's view of Israel and the church denies the gospel in both dispensations. Dispensationalism's opposition to the gospel is no more blatant here than elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is more important because this doctrine is so central in all dispensational thinking and teaching. Before criticizing the doctrine, I will give considerable space to presenting it as the dispensationalists do, so that the reader may understand it and see its centrality in their system.

#### **The Dispensational Doctrine of Israel and the Church**

According to dispensationalism, Israel and the church are different in almost every way. Israel is an ethnic group, the Jews, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. The church is composed of all nationalities. The Abrahamic covenant which made his descendants God's chosen people was absolutely unconditional while the covenant of grace which brings the church into being is conditional in that it requires faith. Consequently, regeneration or the new birth is required, whereas one becomes an Israelite by being born, not by being reborn. Israelites never received a baptism by, or indwelling of, the Spirit which is essential for a member of the church. Israel is national and visible; the church is individual and invisible. Israel is an earthly people, with earthly promises and an earthly destiny eternally. The church is a spiritual people with eternal life in heaven for its destiny. Presently, Israel as God's people is in eclipse, but soon (probably) to be fully restored to the Promised Land and dominion over the earth. The church is now alive, growing, and soon to be raptured to heaven.

Great stress is placed on Israel as an ethnic group descended from Abraham and Sarah. Though it was Jacob who was given the name *Israel*, dispensationalists teach that Israel as God's chosen people began with Abraham. The *Ryrie Study Bible* follows the consensus commentary on Genesis 12:2. “When God made this promise, Abraham had no son. The

reference is to the Jewish nation, i.e., the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob.”<sup>1</sup>

The church, on the other hand, is composed of all nationalities. The church began at Pentecost following Christ’s Great Commission to make disciples of all nations (see Matt. 28:19–20), and His saying to the apostles immediately before Pentecost that they were to be His witnesses “to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NASB). Thus far, the dispensational doctrine is rather obvious.

The covenant with Abraham which made his descendants God’s chosen people was, according to dispensationalists, absolutely unconditional. “The ultimate fulfillment is made to rest upon the divine promise and the power of God rather than upon human faithfulness,”<sup>2</sup> Ironside put this matter very plainly. “His covenant with Abraham was pure grace. He was the only contracting party. Whatever Israel’s failures, He could not break His promise.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, Ironside expressed irritation with a man who had pointed out that Israel (see Acts 2:38) was called upon to repent.<sup>4</sup> That, according to Ironside, had nothing to do with the covenant God made with Abraham. When Israel later broke the law, they did not lose the Abrahamic Covenant which was “unconditional.”<sup>5</sup> Allan MacRae graphically presents this unconditionality:

Even though Israel should fall into sin, and should seem no longer to be a recipient of God’s blessing, it would still be true that God has promised that those who bring blessing to His earthly people will themselves be blessed, while those who curse His earthly people will themselves suffer the results of God’s displeasure. All history is full of examples of this fact. Anti-Semitism is never justified, and never can receive God’s approbation. The fate of the nations that have injured Israel is a terrible warning that God never goes back on His promises. From Haman to Hitler, history shows how dangerous it is to hate His chosen people.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible*, 24.

<sup>2</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 20.

<sup>3</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 116.

<sup>4</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 117.

<sup>5</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 118–19.

<sup>6</sup> Allan A. MacRae, “Hath God Cast Away His People?” in *Prophetic Truth Unfolding Today*, ed. Charles L. Feinberg (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1968), 95. Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 143.

Dispensationalists seek to harmonize their view of the unconditional nature of the Abrahamic covenant with the Old Testament passages which enjoin covenantal sanctions for disobedience. According to L.S. Chafer and John Walvoord, the Abrahamic Covenant to provide redemption for Israel was unconditional but personal blessings were dependent on obedience.<sup>7</sup> Ryrie is also sensitive to the problem of an unconditional or one-sided covenant and, like Chafer and Walvoord, he attempts to solve it by pointing to the conditional features for personal blessings which are also a part of this covenant. Erich Sauer says, “the covenant is a pure gift of divine grace, that man neither works nor co-works therein, that God does all, and that man is simply the recipient.”<sup>8</sup> Thus man’s receiving, believing faith is the non-meritorious condition.

Nevertheless, dispensationalists seem to have a problem at this point. It would seem that title to the land of Palestine is a “personal blessing” which was, in the Old Testament, clearly conditioned upon faith and obedience. Dispensationalists appear to believe that the Jews have an eternal title to that piece of real estate regardless of faith and obedience, and so they contend that the Jews are to come back (as some of them have) to the land in unbelief.

The covenant of grace which brings the church into being is conditional in that it requires faith. Even Jews, as well as Gentiles, must believe if they are to be saved. A Jew may go to Palestine without faith but not to heaven. As Dwight Pentecost puts it, “A man is justified not by works, but by faith. That is why we continually invite men to receive Jesus Christ by faith as a personal Savior, for apart from faith it is impossible to please God.”<sup>9</sup>

Dispensationalists think it crucial to note that membership in Israel is by natural generation only.<sup>10</sup> The church, however, is by supernatural regeneration. “Israelites,” says Chafer, “become such by a natural birth while Christians become such by a spiritual birth.”<sup>11</sup> Later, he comments that Nicodemus, “apparently a most perfect specimen of Judaism was told by Christ that he must be born again, and the Apostle Paul prayed that the

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<sup>7</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Sauer, *The Dawn of World Redemption: A Survey of Historical Revelation in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 99

<sup>9</sup> Pentecost, *Things Which Become Sound Doctrine*, 109–10. See also Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Best is Yet to Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 42f.

<sup>10</sup> See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 137–40.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:30.

Israelites who had a 'zeal for God' might be saved."<sup>12</sup> Israel is national and visible. According to Chafer, Israel is an eternal nation, heir to an eternal land, with an eternal kingdom, on which David rules from an eternal throne.<sup>13</sup>

Dispensationalists generally contrast the earthly, national character of Israel with the spiritual character of the church. The church is individual and spiritual. Every Jew belongs to Israel, but not all Gentiles and Jews by any means belong to the church. The offer of the gospel is to all but only those individuals who believe are saved and become members of the church. Although American dispensationalists are usually members of an organized church, it is the invisible church which dispensationalists have in mind by the term church.

Darby, as we have seen, though an ordained Anglican clergyman, gave up orders as he became convinced the organized, visible church was in ruins. He conceived of the church as local and consisting informally of true believers only.<sup>14</sup> He believed that purity was to be maintained by constant separation from evil. Chafer and Walvoord see no need to belong to any denomination.<sup>15</sup> This tendency to exalt the invisible church at the expense of the visible has been noted by Sandeen and others as an historical feature of dispensationalism.<sup>16</sup>

In line with this, dispensationalists tend to see the organized denominations as apostate, and Walvoord is sure they will be when the Rapture takes the true believers away. "What today is a world church movement with some redeeming features will become totally apostate once the rapture of the church takes place."<sup>17</sup>

Consistent with their view of the Abrahamic covenant as an eternal pact pertaining only to ethnic Jews, dispensationalists view Israel and the church as having distinct eternal destinies. Israel is an earthly people with an earthly promise and an earthly destiny eternally. As we saw, Israel is an eternal nation, heir to an eternal land, with an eternal kingdom, on which David rules from an eternal throne. There will be an endless succession of human generations upon the earth but never the twain, Israel and church,

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<sup>12</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:34.

<sup>13</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:315–23.

<sup>14</sup> See Bass, *Background*, ch. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 240.

<sup>16</sup> Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Walvoord, "Where is Modern Church going?" in *Prophecy in the Seventies*, ed. C. L. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 119.

shall meet. As Darby wrote, “The Jewish nation is never to enter the Church.”<sup>18</sup> Said Scofield, “Comparing, then, what is said in Scripture concerning Israel and the Church, we find that in origin, calling, promises, worship, principles of conduct and *future destiny* all is contrast.”<sup>19</sup>

The church is a heavenly people with an eternal life in heaven for its destiny. Saints, said Louis Talbot (the founder of Biola, from which sprang Talbot Theological Seminary in Los Angeles), when they die, go immediately to be with the Lord. “A true child of God goes immediately to heaven at the time of physical dissolution of body and soul.”<sup>20</sup> J .A. Seiss maintained that, while Israel was the heir of the earth, the church inherits heaven.<sup>21</sup> Ryrie considers this the most important dispensational distinction, and he approves of Daniel Fuller’s statement that the “basic promise of dispensationalism is two purposes of God expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction throughout eternity.”<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to note that dispensational discomfort with this notion of two separate eternal destinies for Israel and the church may be increasing. One possible example of this is found in Charles Ryrie’s *The Best Is Yet to Come* which discusses a glorious millennium with Christ ruling perfectly the whole world but without Ryrie’s especially mentioning the Jews at all.<sup>23</sup> This book ends with an evangelistic appeal to all to believe on Christ and live forever. Nothing about a new earth for Jews separate from heaven above. Is dispensationalism beginning to disavow (at least at the eternal end) this perpetual separation of Israel and the church?

Particularly emblematic of this eternal distinction between Israel and the church is the doctrine of the premillennial, pretribulational rapture of the church. It is difficult to exaggerate the dispensational emphasis on the Rapture since it seems to outweigh all other eschatological matters.

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<sup>18</sup> John Nelson Darby, *The Hopes of the Church of God* (London: G. Morrish, n.d.), 106, cited in Zens, *Dispensationalism*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, 23–25, cited in Zens, *Dispensationalism*, 17. (emph. mine).

<sup>20</sup> Louis T. Talbot, *Bible Questions Explained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1938), 178.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Augustus Seiss, *The Apocalypse: A Series of Special Lectures on the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Sherman, 1881), 3:442f.

<sup>22</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 44–45.

<sup>23</sup> For a focus on Israel’s return to the land, see Walter Kaiser’s “The Promised Land: A Biblical-Historical View,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981):302ff.

Dispensationalists take comfort in the teaching that the church will not have to endure the Tribulation, and rapture speculation has spawned a number of immensely popular books and movies. This popular preoccupation with eschatology is fueled in part by the doctrine of *imminency* — the idea that nothing else need transpire prior to the rapture of the church.<sup>24</sup>

As I noted in previous chapters, another characteristic of this dispensational separation is the contention that the church is, from the perspective of Old Testament prophecy, an unknown entity, a “parenthesis” during which the “prophetic clock” stops ticking. This is indeed a crucial issue for the viability of dispensationalism in that, as we shall see, the criticism of dispensationalism on this matter hinges on the fact that numerous Old Testament passages referring to Israel are applied to the church in the New Testament.

#### **The Traditional Doctrine of the Unity of Israel and the Church**

I have already noted that, historically speaking, this dispensational denial of the unity of Israel and the church represents a surprising novelty. From the earliest period of Christian theology onward, the essential continuity of Israel and the church has been maintained. This historic doctrine of the church is based on both the clear implication of Old Testament texts and the clear teaching of the New Testament.

It will readily be seen that, from an Old Testament perspective, the church was not an unforeseen entity or prophetic “parenthesis” as dispensationalists claim. A cursory comparison of a few prophetic passages with their New Testament fulfillment will illustrate this: Hosea 1:10 (Rom. 9:22–26), Hosea 2:23 (1 Pet. 2:9–10), Amos 9:11 (Acts 15:16).

Likewise, there are many Old Testament passages referring to Israel which, in the New Testament, are applied directly to the church. A few examples will suffice to demonstrate the point: Exodus 19:5–6 (1 Pet. 2:9); Jeremiah 24:7 (2 Cor. 6:16); Jeremiah 31:31–34 (Luke 22:20); Leviticus 19:2 (1 Pet. 1:15).

Finally, there is the clear teaching of the New Testament that true membership in Israel is ultimately a matter of spiritual rather than physical relationship. Paul writes that “those who believe are children of Abraham” (Gal. 3:7, NIV). Later in the same epistle he writes, “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29, NIV). Similarly, Paul teaches that Israel and the church

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<sup>24</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 159–60.

constitute an organic unity. They are the same olive tree with the Gentiles of the church being grafted into the tree that was Israel (Rom. 11:17–21).

### **Dispensational Exegesis in Support of the Israel-Church Distinction**

Nevertheless, this scriptural unity of Israel and the church is directly challenged by dispensationalism, wrongly dividing asunder what God's Word has joined together. I will now examine this attack on the unity of Israel and the church as dispensationalists interpret particular New Testament passages.

#### *The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)*

Without doubt the single most important question for dispensationalists about the Sermon on the Mount is the Lord's Prayer, and the single most important question about the Lord's Prayer is the petition, "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12, KJV). Scofield did not hesitate to call that "legal ground" which is not applicable to the church.<sup>25</sup> L. S. Chafer and virtually all other dispensationalists see it the same way.<sup>26</sup> This dispensational stance has greatly disturbed many other evangelicals. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for example, referred to this interpretation with great distress:

Now take this idea that there was ever a time when men were forgiven on strictly legal grounds, or that there is to be some time in the future when men will be on strictly legal grounds before God, and will be forgiven even as they forgive. Do we realize what that means? It means, of course, that such people will never be forgiven.<sup>27</sup>

Dispensationalists are sensitive to this charge and usually try to anticipate and blunt this criticism. Frank Gaebelin, for example, while regarding the Sermon on the Mount primarily as kingdom legislation for the Millennium, maintains that it has application to the present believer. Charles Ryrie, following the same basic kingdom interpretation, speaks of "secondary application" and he goes on to add:

Dispensationalists believe that anger, lust, divorce, and murder are sin, and they believe it on the basis of the Sermon on the Mount.

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<sup>25</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1002.

<sup>26</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:221.

<sup>27</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 2:75.

Dispensationalists believe that the Golden Rule and the Lord's Prayer are excellent guides.<sup>28</sup>

Dispensationalists criticize those who accuse them of assigning no relevance to the Sermon on the Mount. They maintain that the Sermon has "dispensational" relevance but not the kind of relevance it once had and will have again, according to dispensationalism.<sup>29</sup> This approach reduces these commands of Christ to the status of "suggestions" which the Christian is perfectly free to ignore. Of course, dispensationalists admit that "anger, lust, divorce, and murder are sin," but the fact that they view those commands as the "legal ground" of acceptance in law and kingdom dispensations, but not in the present one is further evidence that the dispensational system of theology presupposes more than one way of salvation.

Before I leave this text, I note a rather unusual interpretation (unusual for a dispensationalist) by Stanley D. Toussaint.<sup>30</sup> He does not see the Sermon on the Mount as for the kingdom age or for the correction of sin in this age. What it does is exhort righteous living in view of the coming kingdom. This idea is fairly common among non-dispensationalists, especially in Britain and Europe, but I have not noticed it before in dispensational circles. In any case, Toussaint's interpretation does not touch the fundamental question — whether it is necessary to obey Christ's commands to be a Christian.

So I must say that dispensationalists, past and present, do indeed take the Sermon on the Mount away from Christians as Lloyd-Jones complained. In so doing, they clearly and wrongly separate Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church at the very point of their forgiveness by God by basing it on two entirely different grounds — legal and antinomian — neither of which is compatible with the Old Testament or the New.

#### *Matthew 16:18-20*

The dispensational interpretation of this passage provides a good example of the lengths to which dispensational exegetes will go to force a passage to teach dispensational "truth." This passage is thought, by

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<sup>28</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 108. See also his *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 81–82.

<sup>29</sup> See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 105–06.

<sup>30</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, "A Biblical Defense of Dispensationalism," in Walvoord: *A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 81–91.



dispensationalists, to refer to a change in kingdom proclamation from a kingdom offer to the Jews to church-age proclamation of salvation by grace.

It speaks of the futurity of the church. Notice the comment of the *New Scofield Reference Bible* on Matthew 16:20:

The disciples had been proclaiming Jesus as the Christ, i.e. the covenanted King of a kingdom promised to the Jews and at hand. The Church, on the contrary, must be built upon testimony to Him as crucified, risen from the dead, ascended, and made "head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:20–23). The former testimony was ended; the new testimony was not yet ready because the blood of the new covenant had not yet been shed, but our Lord began to speak of His death and resurrection (v. 21). It is a turning point of immense significance.<sup>31</sup>

Here again, the so-called *messianic secret* becomes a source of confusion and it is a sheer flight of fancy for dispensationalists to read as much into this passage as they do. There is, first of all, no evidence that the disciples had heretofore been proclaiming Jesus "as the Christ"; that is, as the *political* Messiah who was about to set up an earthly kingdom. On the contrary, the ministry of the disciples was at this time apparently limited to the proclamation of the imminence of the kingdom and to the healing of the sick and demon-possessed (see Matt. 10:7–8). Indeed, there is good evidence that Jesus was very concerned that proclamation of Himself as Messiah was open to misunderstanding by the Jews. Thus, He takes pains to silence the witness of demons and even those whom He healed (see Mark 1:25, 44; 3:12). That such a concern was warranted is evident from the episode where the people sought to make Jesus an earthly king by force (see John 6:1–15).

Every dispensationalist I can ever remember reading has taken Christ's words "I will build my church" (Matt. 16:18) as implying that the church was strictly future and not existing at all when Christ spoke those words. This is notwithstanding the testimony of one of the greatest of Greek scholars, A. T. Robertson:

The future [tense] likewise presents accomplished action which in any case may be either momentary, simultaneous, prolonged, descriptive,

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<sup>31</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1021.

repeated, customary, interrupted, attempted, or begun, according to the nature of the case or the meaning of the verb.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, even the tense of the verb does not require *absolute futurity*. What is more important, the meaning of the verb does not require absolute newness. It can well mean that Christ is building up His church into its new and final form.

*Matthew 21:43*

“The kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (KJV). On the surface of it this is the end of the nation of Israel as the chosen people of God. They have been tried and found wanting. God’s patience has been exhausted. If there were any doubts about that being the obvious meaning of the words, the parable on which they are based would utterly eliminate any lingering procrastination. O. T. Allis spoke for an almost universal tradition when he wrote concerning this text:

Jesus declared to the Jews that the kingdom should “be taken from” them (Matthew 21:41f). The children of the kingdom (the natural and lawful heirs) are to be “cast out” (8:11f). None of those “bidden” are to taste of the marriage supper (Luke 14:24). The vineyard is to be given to “other husbandmen”; to “a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof; men are to come from the “highways,” from “the east and west and north and south,” to partake with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob of the marriage supper.<sup>33</sup>

It is virtually impossible to imagine any other interpretation of this passage. The Greek word for *nation* in verse 43 (*ethnos*) is the word characteristically (although not exclusively) reserved for Gentile peoples. Furthermore, the parable of the tenants (vv. 33–41), which verse 43 explains, clearly refers to the disobedience of the Jewish *nation* throughout its history.

One would suppose that dispensationalists, with their view of Israel, would be at least temporarily embarrassed and hasten to explain that Christ was referring to the *temporary* rejection of Israel instead of the “end of the world” or final rejection. Far from it. Dispensationalists transform this clear statement into a prediction of Israel’s *receiving* — not losing-the kingdom! No less a theologian than Charles Ryrie writes that the word

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<sup>32</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Short Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Doran, 1908), 141.

<sup>33</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 78.

nation in the text refers to Israel. Thus Christ would be saying “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you (leaders of Israel), and given to a nation (Israel) bringing forth the fruits thereof.”<sup>34</sup>

Even the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, which hopelessly distorts the passage, is not quite so bold. Relying on the common but artificial distinction between “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven,” it reads the parable as saying that the impious Jewish leaders are not fit to be in the spiritual domain of God’s kingdom which is given to “any people who will bring forth the fruits of salvation.”<sup>35</sup> Thus it avoids having the Jews rejected without going so far as making this a prediction of their future glory.<sup>36</sup>

Other dispensationalists are not quite so bold. Chafer and Walvoord avoid even a single reference to Matthew 21:43 in a book (*Major Bible Themes*) which has a seven and a half page index of biblical references (in very small print). Arno Gaebelein (considered by Scofield to be interpreter of prophecy par excellence), though he considered many other New Testament texts, was curiously silent on Matthew 21:43 in his *Harmony of the Prophetic Word*.

*Acts 2:1, 16–40; Joel 2:28–32*

The dispensational interpretation of this passage in the book of Acts (which certainly teaches that the New Testament church was foreseen by the prophet Joel) is another example of the penchant for reading dispensational theology into a portion of Scripture which teaches the very opposite.

Dispensationalists teach that the kingdom which Christ came to offer to the Jews was rejected by them, and so He turned to others and offered them the church. Various individuals responded and the church was beginning to take shape. However, it was not formally instituted until Pentecost. Darby, speaking of Acts 2–4, says, “These three chapters present the first forming of the assembly, and its blessed character through the Holy Spirit dwelling in it. They present to us its first beauty

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<sup>34</sup> Ryrie, *Basis of Premillennial Faith*, 72.

<sup>35</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1029.

<sup>36</sup> I am pleased to note that veteran dispensationalist Clarence Mason quietly critiques Scofield on this point while resoundingly critiquing him on his false distinction between “kingdom of heaven” and “kingdom of God.” See his “Two Kingdoms in Matthew?” in *Prophetic Problems With Alternate Solutions* (Chicago: Moody, 1973), 87–109.

as formed of God, and His habitation.”<sup>37</sup> Earlier he had written, “the mission of the Holy Ghost led them [the early church] at the same time, out of the Jewish field of purely temporal promises.”<sup>38</sup>

At the same time that the dispensationalists believe that the church came into formal being at Pentecost, they do not believe that its nature was understood until its revelation to the Apostle Paul (the divinely chosen expositor of the “mystery” of the church which had never before been revealed). Darby was very emphatic on the point that the church had not been foreseen in prophecy before Paul.

The grace that sets us in heaven is not prophesied of at all; prophecy belongs to what is earthly, and so far as it relates to the Lord Jesus, contains the revelation of what He was to be upon the earth at His first coming, and then continues with what He will be upon the earth when He comes again, without alluding to that which should take place in the interval between those two events.<sup>39</sup>

The prophecies of the book of Daniel, and even of the book of Revelation, have nothing to do with the church, except for one feature which I will note later.<sup>40</sup> Only the epistles, especially those of Paul, deal with the church.

The Jews were set aside and the clear and positive doctrine of no difference between Jew and Gentile (by nature alike the children of wrath), and of their common and equal privileges as members of only one body, has been fully declared and made the basis of all relationship between God and every soul possessed of faith. This is the doctrine of the apostle in the Epistles to the Romans and Ephesians.<sup>41</sup>

Acts 2 presents the dispensationalist with an interesting challenge, however. The day of Pentecost is thought by all dispensationalists (except

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<sup>37</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 4:14.

<sup>38</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 4:3.

<sup>39</sup> Darby, *Inspiration of the Bible*, 5. Even Allis has some sympathy for this viewpoint, noting that there were “prophecies which seemed to declare with equal clearness that the pre-eminence of the Jews was to continue without end. Consequently, the statements of the prophets might be regarded as ambiguous, and the carnally minded Jews would naturally interpret them all in terms of their selfish, nationalistic desires and expectations . . . it was not there [in the Old Testament] made known, ‘as it hath now been revealed’ to the apostles and prophets of the Lord.” Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 95.

<sup>40</sup> See Darby, *Collected Writings*, 11:70; 4:70.

<sup>41</sup> Darby, *Synopsis*, 4:100.

the Bullingerites) to mark the founding of the church and the dispensation of grace. In Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, however, he maintains that the giving of the Holy Spirit on this day was foretold by the Old Testament prophet Joel (Acts 2:16).

How do dispensationalists deal with this difficulty? The answer is — with difficulty. *The Scofield Reference Bible* attempts to sidestep the problem by calmly stating that a “distinction must be observed between the ‘last days’ when the prediction relates to Israel, and the ‘last days’ when the prediction relates to the church.”<sup>42</sup> The text that follows in this note goes on to explicate this supposed distinction in great detail without, of course, demonstrating that such a distinction is operative here in this passage.

Allis, commenting on the Scofield note, critiques it neatly. The quotation from Joel, he says, is:

clearly applicable to that mystery Church in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, the nature of which was most fully revealed to and declared by the apostle Paul. Darby and Scofield both admit that the Church was “formed” at Pentecost. So Scofield says of Joel's prophecy as cited by Peter: “A distinction must be drawn between ‘the last days’ when the prediction relates to Israel, and the ‘last days’ when the prediction relates to the church.” This is an admission that Joel's words do concern the Church, and amounts to a confession that the Church is the subject of prophecy. How then are we to understand the statement that “The church, corporately, is not in O. T. prophecy”? What does “corporately” mean?<sup>43</sup>

I add to this that Joel's prophecy being made to Israel and fulfilled in the church shows the identity of the two bodies. His prophecy is not directly related to the Gentiles. The Pentecost sermon itself is addressed by a Jew to Jews. But even dispensationalists consider this the establishment of the church. Consequently, when Joel prophesied and Peter applied, Israel was being identified with the church. Speaking to Israel and to the church was one and the same thing. The promise to Israel was fulfilled in the “formation of the church,” to use Scofield's expression. The “latter days” of Joel were the “last days” of Peter and the Christian church.

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<sup>42</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1151.

<sup>43</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 135–36.

Geerhardus Vos has well shown how this expression “in the last days” refers to the whole era between the first and second advents.<sup>44</sup>

The revised note on this passage in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* is significant. While continuing, with Scofield, to distinguish between the “last days” of the church and the “last days” of Israel, it makes the fatal (to the dispensational system) concession that Joel 2 is applicable to the church. According to this note, the prophecy in Joel apparently refers to both Israel and the Church.

While Acts 2:17 is part of this context and therefore relates to the Church, it should be remembered that it has reference to Israel as well and, therefore, points to a future day (see Joel 2:28, note).<sup>45</sup>

Thus, it would seem that more recent dispensational exegesis of this passage is moving in a covenantal direction. It is interesting that in a recent dispensational work, *Joel and the Day of the Lord*, Walter K. Price does not differ from Allis.<sup>46</sup> He too sees Joel’s prophecy as initially fulfilled at Pentecost, continuously fulfilled in the church age, and ultimately, at the Second Coming.

#### *Acts 15:13–21; Amos 9:11–12*

Here again we see a New Testament application to the church of an Old Testament prophecy to Israel. Because of this, the interpretation of this passage has been a bone of contention between dispensationalists and their critics. The irony is that this passage is cited in support of the dispensational system when it in fact teaches the opposite. If any reader perusing my words is not already aware of the controversy about the meaning of these words of Amos quoted by James, I suggest that, before he reads another line of this book, he look again at Acts 15:13–21 with the obvious question — what is James trying to prove by that quotation from Amos? Try to forget that the verses are controversial and just simply read with that question in mind before proceeding. You may have to read further back into Acts more fully to understand the issue in chapter 15.

I will summarize and let the reader determine what is obvious. The issue before the Jerusalem council was whether to receive professing Gentiles into the church without Jewish rites, especially circumcision.

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<sup>44</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “Eschatology of the New Testament,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

<sup>45</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1164.

<sup>46</sup> Walter K. Price, *Joel and the Day of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1976).

Peter's argument for accepting believing Gentiles without circumcision was that God revealed this duty to him by a vision and confirmed it by the actual pouring out of the Spirit on uncircumcised believing Gentiles. This latter argument was confirmed by the testimony of Paul and Silas about their experiences among Gentiles. James cites Joel's prophecy as having been fulfilled in what these men had described. Therefore, Gentiles were to be admitted as they were, with only a few minor stipulations not at issue. Thus, the church and Israel are essentially identified as the building again of the "booth of David." The building of the "booth of David" and the erecting of the Christian church are one and the same.

What is abundantly clear is that James cites the Amos prophecy as referring to what was then actually taking place. Incredibly, the *New Scofield Reference Bible* sees in James' citation of Amos a reference to the Millennium.

With the exception of the first five words, vv. 16–18 are quoted from Amos 9:11–12. James quoted from the LXX, which here preserved the original text (see Amos 9:12, note). Amos 9:11 begins with the words "in that day." James introduced his quotation in such a way as to show what day Amos was talking about, namely, the time after the present world-wide witness (Acts 1:8), when Christ will return. James showed that there will be Gentile believers at that time as well as Jewish believers; hence he concluded that Gentiles are not required to become Jewish proselytes by circumcision.<sup>47</sup>

The Scofield revisers have James saying that at some future time there will be Gentile believers as well as Jewish believers and therefore Gentile believers at James' time need not be circumcised. Against this bizarre suggestion I simply note the following considerations. First, as I say, this is far-fetched in this context (already nearly two thousand years far-fetched). Second, there had always been some Gentile believers as well as Jewish and that did not prevent their circumcision previously. Third, there is nothing more in the nature of a Gentile being a believer that would preclude the possible necessity of his being circumcised than would prevent the necessity of his being baptized.

Finally, I should note that the traditional interpretation affords a reasonable explanation of James' conclusion. He recognized that Israel (the church) was now becoming really international and that such changes were appropriate "in order that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord"

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<sup>47</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1186.

(v. 17, nasb). Even the less patriarchal character of the new dispensation had a bearing.

*Romans 11:26–27*

This interpretive crux is worth quoting in full:

and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion. He will remove ungodliness from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.” (NASB)

This passage is crucial for dispensationalists, and most of them feel that this verse proves that Israel and the church remain forever distinct. All dispensationalists see this as a prediction of some general conversion of Jews, and they seem to feel that this interpretation is something of a dispensational distinctive.

Interestingly, most Reformed theologians agree that this passage does indeed foretell a general conversion of the Jews. Jonathan Edwards, for example, expresses this view confidently:

Nothing is more certainly foretold than this national conversion of the Jews, in Romans 11. There are also many passages of the Old Testament which cannot be interpreted in any other sense, which I cannot now stand to mention. Besides the prophecies of the calling of the Jews, we have a remarkable providential seal of the fulfillment of this great event, by a kind of continual miracle, viz. their being preserved a distinct nation in such a dispersed condition for above sixteen hundred years. The world affords nothing else like it. There is undoubtedly a remarkable hand of providence in it. When they shall be called, that ancient people, who alone were God’s people for so long a time, shall be his people again, never to be rejected more. They shall then be gathered into one fold together with the Gentiles; and so also shall the remains of the ten tribes, wherever they be, and though they have been rejected much longer than the Jews, be brought in with their brethren. The prophecies of Hosea especially seem to hold this forth, that in the future glorious times of the church, both Judah and Ephraim, or Judah and the ten tribes, shall be brought in together, and shall be united as one people, as they formerly were under David and Solomon; (Hosea 1:11, &c.) — Though we do not know the time in which this conversion of Israel will come to pass; yet thus much we may determine by Scripture, that it will be before the glory of the Gentile part of the church shall be



fully accomplished; because it is said, that their coming in shall be life from the dead to the Gentiles (Romans 11:12, 15).<sup>48</sup>

While many Reformed exegetes view this passage as does Edwards, not all do. Among the Calvinists who do not is John Calvin. In his commentary, he saw “all Israel” as all the elect — the total number of the elect of the ages.<sup>49</sup> Others, especially Dutch Reformed theologians, are more restrictive and interpret “all Israel” as the total number of elect Jews.<sup>50</sup> Still others, more restrictive, limit the expression to the elect remnant of Jews.

Hendriksen, admiring of Calvin and sympathetic with his fellow Dutch Calvinists, wrestles with the exegesis before coming gradually to the national Israel interpretation. Observing that all uses of *Israel* from Romans 9 to 11:26a indisputably refer to Jews distinguished from Gentiles, and the verses which follow likewise, he concludes that Israel in this verse “in all probability does not indicate the church universal. It has reference to Jews, not to Gentiles.”<sup>51</sup> He then asks whether the reference is to the Jews as a whole or to the “entire Jewish remnant.” Based on Romans 11:5, 14, and 31, Hendriksen argues that it is evident that

the salvation of “all Israel” was being progressively realized until “all Israel” shall have been saved. When the full number of the elect Gentiles will have been gathered in, then the full number of elect Jews will also have been gathered in.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, “all Israel” refers to the elect remnant.

It is not my purpose here to adjudicate these various Reformed interpretations. Rather, I simply note that the recognition of a continuing divine purpose for ethnic Jews does not at all imply the eternal distinction between Israel and the church that dispensationalists imagine. The metaphor of the olive tree which immediately precedes the verse in question illustrates the truth well. While most ethnic Jews had been cut off from the olive tree (Israel) because of unbelief (vv. 22–23), they could be grafted back in (v. 24) and so form (with believing Gentiles) the Israel of God.

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Works*, 2:607. See also Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3:792, 805.

<sup>49</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 255.

<sup>50</sup> See William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972).

<sup>51</sup> Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy*, 48–49.

*Ephesians 3:4–6*

This passage, which speaks of the fact that Gentiles “are fellow-heirs and fellow-members [with Jews] of the body” as a “mystery of Christ” (NASB) which had not been made known to previous generations, is considered by dispensationalists to be a bulwark of their view of the church as a “mystery” which was unknown to the Old Testament writers. This doctrine of the mystery has continued to be a major characteristic, if not actual hallmark, of the dispensational school. Thus, the *New Scofield Reference Bible* comments: “The church, corporately, is not in the vision of the Old Testament prophecies (Ephesians 3:1–6).”<sup>53</sup>

John Walvoord continues to defend the doctrine of the mystery church.<sup>54</sup> Commenting on Colossians 1:26–27, he offers five arguments in favor of his doctrine. First, the mystery is said to have been hidden in the past. Second, the content of the mystery, “Christ in you,” was never predicted in the Old Testament. Third, in the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord is outward rather than inward. Fourth, appealing to Colossians 2:9–19, Walvoord says that it represents Christ as the head of the church, while in the old theocracy, God merely dwelt among His people. Fifth, Christ in the heart of the believer is the hope of glory, while Israel was looking for His glorious advent.

Against this “mystery” doctrine of the dispensationalists I submit a number of considerations. First, just as we saw in our examination of dispensational “literalism,” here too the dispensationalist confuses fullness of prophecy with the substance of prophecy. It is one thing to say that all the details of the church were not revealed to Old Testament believers but quite another to say that the church was not in view at all.

Second, I have already noted that many Old Testament prophecies to Israel are applied to the church by the New Testament (Joel 2:28–32) and that the fact that Gentiles were to be included in the worship of God was revealed in the Old Testament (Amos 9:12). While the details of this “mystery” were undoubtedly the cause of great perplexity, this “mystery” was not a complete unknown.

Finally, the meaning of the word *mystery*, both within the Bible and in popular usage, is against the dispensational interpretation. In common usage mystery means something *partly* unknown. For example, the church speaks of the “mysteries of the faith” as articles of belief which she now

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<sup>53</sup> *New Scofield Reference Bible*, 711.

<sup>54</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 240.

sees through a glass darkly. More importantly, the Bible also uses the word in this sense. O. T. Allis wrote:

The word “mystery” occurs 29 times in the New Testament, most of which are in Paul’s epistles, six being in Ephesians. It is important, therefore, to observe how the word is used, especially by Paul. Paul speaks of several mysteries; “the mystery of God and of the Father and of Christ” (Colossians 2:2), “of Christ” (Colossians 4:3), “of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19), “of his will” (Ephesians 1:9), “of the faith” (1 Timothy 3:9), “of godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16), “of iniquity” (2 Thessalonians 2:7). These passages show that to describe a person as a mystery, does not necessarily imply that he or it was entirely unknown. It might be known yet still be a mystery because not fully known: God was known in Israel — that was Israel’s preeminence . . . yet Paul speaks of “the mystery of God.” Christ was God “manifested in the flesh.” He had been on earth and the facts of His earthly life were known. Yet Paul speaks of the “mystery of Christ.” Especially noteworthy is 1 Timothy 3:16 where Paul speaks of the “mystery of godliness”; and then refers to events in the earthly life of Christ which were known too and had been witnessed by Christians who were in Christ before him.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, it cannot be said that the dispensational doctrine of the church as a parenthesis or “mystery” which was wholly unknown to the Old Testament can stand close scrutiny. None of the passages traditionally cited by dispensationalists support the notion. Rather, the dispensational exegesis of these passages is controlled by an a priori commitment to a radical theological distinction between Israel and the church — a theological distinction without exegetical support from Scripture.

#### **Ultradispensationalism on Israel and the Church**

If dispensationalism has failed to recognize the unity of the Bible, Ultradispensationalism (or Bullingerism) has utterly destroyed it. If anything should show a dispensationalist the error of his way, it is the possibilities implicit in his system which are revealed in Bullingerism. Virtually all of the beliefs of this more radical movement are drawn consistently from dispensational principles.

In Ultradispensationalism, the dispensational commitment to a radical distinction between Israel and the church is given full rein. While Scofield regarded Matthew as “Jewish” or “kingdom” teaching up to the rejection

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<sup>55</sup> Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, 90. See pages 90–102 for a full discussion.

of Christ as king, E. W. Bullinger much more consistently regarded all of the four gospels as strictly and purely Jewish. In my earlier criticism of the dispensational teaching, I showed the injustice of drawing the line where Scofield and other dispensationalists do. The kingdom continued to be offered after Matthew 16:21 as well as before, and personal invitations were undoubtedly given before as well as after this passage in Matthew. The dispensationalist is obliged to see the kingdom being offered throughout the gospels and, therefore, must do one of two things — either he must continue to interpret the kingdom as purely legalistic Judaism (in which case he must go with Bullingerism), or interpret it as roughly synonymous with the Christian church (in which case he must return to traditional theology).

If the dispensationalist will go with Bullinger, he should count the cost. For one thing, it means that the great prophecy of the church in Matthew 16:18–20, which he now regards as a prediction of Pentecost, must be abandoned as such and given over to the “Jewish remnant church.” “There was no beginning of a church on that day of Pentecost.”<sup>56</sup> He must say with Bullinger that this is in no way connected with the “mystery” or Christian church. For this future *ecclesia* of the Jews spoken of in Matthew 16 is yet to be built on Christ, the returned Messiah, as the foundation stone. This church is to be built *on* Christ, while the mystery church is now a spiritual building *in* Christ. This church of Matthew 16:18 is to consist of remnant Jews only, while the present church is composed of Jews and Gentiles, predominantly the latter.<sup>57</sup>

Commenting on Acts 26:22–23, Bullinger writes:

This positive statement that Paul was not only *confirming* the word which “began to be spoken by the Lord”; but that, like the Lord’s own ministry, Paul’s was based entirely on the Old Testament prophetic Scriptures, “Moses and the Prophets.” From this it is conclusive that there can be no Dispensation of the Church in Acts of the Apostles, and certainly no revelation of the mystery (or Secret) as subsequently made known in the later epistles written from his prison in Rome.<sup>58</sup>

It is the later epistles which refer to the “riches of grace” and the church.

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<sup>56</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Foundations of Dispensational Truth* (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1931), 34.

<sup>57</sup> Bullinger, *How to Enjoy the Bible*, 3rd ed. (London: Eyre and Spottiswood, 1913), 148.

<sup>58</sup> Bullinger, *Foundations*, 219.

In the same vein, ultradispensationalist John O'Hair writes:

In Acts 10:28 we learned that it was unlawful for the messengers of the risen Christ to have fellowship with Gentiles some seven years after the day of Pentecost. In Acts 11:19 we learned that Jewish disciples preached to none but Jews only. In Acts 11:1–6 we learned that the Christian Jews condemned Peter for preaching to a Gentile some seven years after the day of Pentecost. Therefore, all Christians should know that there was no Joint-Body (Ephesians 3:6) during those years covered by the first ten chapters of Acts.<sup>59</sup>

A second price the dispensationalist will have to pay if he goes with Bullinger is the loss of Christ as a sacrifice. Darby had come dangerously close to that position in his own lesser heresy, when he said that Christ offered Himself as a sacrifice only because Israel had refused Him as a king. Some of the Brethren had actually denied that Christ was a priest while on earth, but this was not unanimous even with them, and non-Brethren have been most reluctant to say this. But, if they will go with Bullinger, they must say that Christ “never was a priest on earth.”<sup>60</sup>

Why is this a necessary step given the radical distinction between Israel and the church? Here Bullinger saw the implications of dispensationalism more clearly than many. Citing Christ's words at the Last Supper, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20, NASB) (which the Christian church has always taken to refer to His sacrifice on Calvary), Bullinger noted that this referred back to the prophecy given in Jeremiah 31:31–33, a prophecy to Israel and not to the church. Bullinger would agree that the cup of the Lord's Supper is the new covenant, but precisely for that reason it has no reference to the mystery church, but to Israel. The Lord's Supper, therefore, should not now be administered to the “mystery” church. It should not be observed except by the Jewish church and it is to be re-established only in the kingdom age.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, Christ is the mediator of the new covenant, but that has nothing to do with the mystery or “body” church. The body church is Christ, and it does not need any mediator-end of Christ's sacrifice!

Third, if the dispensationalist will go with Bullingerism, or consistent dispensationalism, he will pay a heavy price in that there is precious little

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<sup>59</sup> John O'Hair, *W. W.*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Bullinger, *How to Enjoy the Bible*, 128.

<sup>61</sup> John O'Hair, *Pentecostalism, Bullingerism, and the World Wide Grace Testimony*,

left of Scripture which applies to the Christian today. The reason for this is quite simple. As we have seen, virtually all of the New Testament events are implicated in Old Testament prophecies to Israel and, if the Israel/church distinction is to be preserved, none of this can apply to the church. The ultradispensational rejection of the idea that the church began at Pentecost is a case in point. The church could not have begun at Pentecost because the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit was predicted, according to Peter in Acts 2:16, by the prophet Joel!

If there is any point at which the Bullingerites can teach the dispensationalists some lessons in drawing conclusions from principles, it is in their interpretation of the book of Acts.<sup>62</sup> First of all, they show that if the dispensationalists can refuse to let Stephen's use of the word *church* (*ecclesia*) with reference to Israel in Acts 7:38 mean "church," the Bullingerites can, with equal justification, refuse to allow the word *church* in Acts 2:47 mean "church." They take it as a reference to the Jewish church which is assumed to be radically different from the "mystery" church. In exactly the same manner, the dispensationalists take Stephen's "church" as the Jewish church and, therefore, radically different from the mystery church.

Consistent with their interpretations, ultradispensationalists extend the offer of the kingdom to the Jews throughout virtually the entire period covered by the book of Acts. "The public preaching of the Kingdom ends with Acts 19:20."<sup>63</sup> Paul continues privately to preach the kingdom to the very end of the book of Acts and even two years afterwards. In fact, everything prior to the prison epistles of the Apostle Paul has no relevance for the church.<sup>64</sup>

If this is a true view of Acts, what becomes of the other books of the New Testament? James died twenty years before the mystery church was announced. Therefore, he was not in the mystery church.<sup>64</sup> John O'Hair does not hesitate to continue by saying that all the others of his time before the mystery church, as well as James, were not in the mystery church. The epistles of John were written before the prison epistles. Therefore, they were directed to the Jewish church of the book of Acts and not to the mystery church of Christ.<sup>65</sup> The appearing of Christ anticipated by the Apostle John (1 Jn. 3:1–4) is, according to the Bullinger-

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<sup>62</sup> E. W. Bullinger, *Mysteries*, 40.

<sup>63</sup> A. P. Pollock, *The Kingdom and the Church*, 14.

<sup>64</sup> O'Hair, *Pentecostalism*, 22.

<sup>65</sup> O'Hair, *Pentecostalism*, 22.

ites, the appearing of Christ as king for Israel. The book of Revelation was written before Colossians, and therefore, it too is entirely Jewish.<sup>66</sup> Consistently, Bullinger relegates the seven churches of the book of Revelation to the Jewish church. The dispensationalists tend to regard these opening chapters of the book of Revelation as having reference to the time before the end-time and thus as a reference to the mystery church. But, why draw the line at this point? If this was written before the mystery church was revealed, it does not have to do with the mystery church but with the Jewish church as all the rest of the book does.<sup>67</sup>

The fact that many will not accept the dating of New Testament books proposed by the ultradispensationalists should not obscure the central challenge they pose to all dispensationalists. This challenge, quite simply, is that it is impossible completely to disassociate Israel and the church in the New Testament. If one feels that it is a matter of prime theological importance that the two be separated, we cannot be confident that we have thoroughly done so unless we have relegated most if not all of the New Testament to the Jews. This raises the question what relevance the Bible, as a whole, has for the Bullingerite. O'Hair speaks to this point and claims complete relevance:

The World Wide Grace Testimony teaches that every line and word in the Bible is for every member of the Body of Christ, but that every line and word is not about the Body; and therefore, all of the Bible which is not about the Church must be studied, applied and appropriated in the light of the Bible that is about the Body of Christ.<sup>68</sup>

In spite of the pious-sounding flow of these words, one who reveres the Bible senses intuitively an almost complete rejection of the Word of God. It is true that the Christian church has always recognized that some parts of the Bible have been abrogated — such as the ceremonial laws of Moses and Saturday observance as Sabbath. But, with such qualifications, the entire Bible is both *about* and *for* the church of God. To restrict the prescriptive relevance of the Bible to the prison epistles of Paul is surely to make almost all of the Word of God of no effect by the traditions of the Bullingerites.

Thus we see that the ultradispensationalists go to the end of the dispensational line while the more moderate dispensationalists, at the

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<sup>66</sup> O'Hair, *Pentecostalism*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> O'Hair, *Pentecostalism*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> See Ethelbert William Bullinger, *Apocalypse or the Day of the Lord* (London: Eyre & Spottiswood, 1909).

cost of consistency, try to get off at midpoint. Both varieties of dispensationalists believe that there is a qualitative difference between Israel and the church. Ultradispensationalists have no question whatever about it, and Charles Ryrie, as we have seen, considers it the most fundamental difference between dispensational and Covenant theology.

How does the Scofieldian get off the dispensational train? By simply insisting that Christ starts to preach the gospel of individual salvation after the Jews had rejected His kingdom offer. Christ then declares His intention to establish the church which actually took place at Pentecost. Ultradispensationalist John O'Hair states candidly that at this point Scofield errs; that is, at the point that Christ was about to establish His church. As a matter of fact, according to O'Hair, even John 3:16 is not a part of the Christian church message. Not even Pentecost was the beginning of the Christian church for the Bullingerites. People could not be saved merely by being told that Jesus was the Messiah whom they had killed. Even the early teaching of the Apostle Paul was not an articulation of church doctrine. That did not come until Ephesians 2 where Paul refers to the breaking down of the wall of partition between Israel and the Gentiles which marks the beginning of the "body church."

Why do I say that this is the necessary implication of traditional dispensationalism? Well, if Scofieldians will not acknowledge that the dispensation of the law is simply the covenant of grace in a legal dispensation, then how can they insist that Pentecost is the beginning of the dispensation of grace without actually extending that terminal point? The Scofieldians have arbitrarily tended to focus on Matthew 11:28 where Christ invites persons individually to come to Him and find their rest, as the beginning of the church age. But Christ does not use the word "church" there and, as even the traditional dispensationalist insists, when He does use the word in Matthew 16:18, He uses the future tense. So if there is no basis for saying that the church exists at Matthew 11:28 or 16:18, the question is on what basis would the Scofieldians say that it originates in Acts 2? How can they refute O'Hair's contention that there was no preaching of the gospel explicitly on that occasion but a mere indication that Israel had sinned in crucifying its Messiah? There is still no reference to the word *church*.

Traditional dispensationalists will not grant that Stephen in Acts 7:38 is using the word *ecclesia* (translated "church" in KJV) with reference to ancient Israel as part of the church. So once again I join with the ultradispensationalists and ask how the Scofieldians can say the church is in existence in Acts 7? How are they going to stop the Bullingerites who



insist that the “body church” of Ephesians 2 is the very initiation of it and only the prison and post-prison New Testament literature is immediately relevant to this church age?

The moral of all this for the Scofieldian dispensationalist is that if he will not build on the covenantal continuity of the earlier dispensations, there is simply no way by which he can make room for the church at a later stage. The ultra dispensationalist has been pointing this out for a century. Covenant theologians have been showing it for millennia. Modern dispensationalism is halting between two opinions. It must either come to a fundamentally covenantal theological basis which it sometimes senses and vaguely articulates or it must take the consequences of its refusal to do so and embrace the very unwelcome invitation of the Bullingerites.

One option is not open to it. Dispensationalism cannot continue to vacillate between the two. We say with Elijah to those Israelites who were halting between two opinions — “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him” (1 Kgs. 18:21, NASB). This analogy is not too extreme. Bullingerism is surely another gospel, as even dispensationalists sense, and sometimes say.

### Conclusion

The dispensational distinction between Israel and the church implicitly repudiates the Christian way of salvation. I have already discussed this problem with more than a hint of its implication. As we have seen, dispensationalists make a qualitative distinction between Israel and the church. They are two different peoples. They are not the same people of God. They have a different relationship in this life and, as we shall see later, a different future.

If these are two different types of people, how can they have the same salvation? If, as dispensationalists maintain, Israel as well as the church is saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, how can there be this qualitative difference between them as peoples? Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His salvation is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It may be administered in somewhat different ways and in different contexts, to be sure, but that which is administered is the same — redemption by the blood of Jesus Christ. If that is the case, as the whole church has taught down through the centuries and as even the dispensationalists profess to believe, how can there be two different categories of people? How can those who are saved in the same way by the same Savior, through the same redemption, be a different people?

How can Israel be reduced to an earthly, temporal people and at the same time be the spiritual beneficiaries of the same blood of Christ from which Christians benefit?

It will not do to say that Israelites were the beneficiaries of the same redemption when they obviously benefit in an entirely different manner. According to dispensationalists, the Old Testament people are not the heirs of the Holy Spirit, are not regenerated by Him, and are not grafted by Him into Christ in the same way that the New Testament people are. If Christ purchased the same thing for the Old Testament saints before He came that He did for the New Testament saints after He came, there cannot be a qualitative difference between them. There being clearly that difference, as the dispensationalists *vigorously maintain*, then there must be what the dispensationalists *vigorously deny* — a different basis of their acceptability with God.

The Bible teaches that the people of God are the same in all dispensations. They are, as Ephesians 2:20 says, built on the same foundation, “the apostles and prophets.” The prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament are together a foundation for the church of God. There is no difference between prophets and apostles in the role which they perform. The church which is built on them is built on prophets as well as on apostles, apostles as well as on prophets. Just as the Apostle Paul recognizes the identity of the Old and New Testament peoples of God, so the Apostle Peter uses the same language for the New Testament church of God which was used for the people of God in the Old Testament. “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people, that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you” (1 Pet. 2:9, KJV; see Exo. 19:6; Deut. 7:6; 10:15; Isa. 61:6).

In Paul's famous metaphor, the Jews were the original olive tree into which the Gentile believers were grafted (see Rom. 11:17). They are the same plant; they have the same source of life; there is no difference between them except a temporal one. The early form of organization was displaced by the present form of organization, but the living source of their lives, Jesus Christ, is the same in all periods. The Bible says this because it maintains what the dispensationalist only claims, namely that Christ is the one and only Savior of all time. It does not split the church, as dispensationalists do, but unifies it in all ages, because it sees that all members are saved by the same undivided Lord Jesus Christ.

The dispensationalists may object, saying that the covenantalists recognize some differences between Israel and the church. I grant that

there are temporal differences of administration between the Old and New Testament dispensations, but there is no essential or qualitative difference. The Old Testament church was restricted largely to one land, one ethnic group, an agricultural society, a theocratic organization, a childhood state of development, and a preparatory stage. But if it had the one and only basis of salvation, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only name ever given whereby men must be saved, it is one with the New Testament church. We are all one in Christ Jesus. If we are not one, we are not in Christ Jesus.

In addition to the serious theological error involved in the dispensational distinction between Israel and the church, there are very unfortunate practical consequences as well. One result is a powerful tendency to obliterate the distinction between Jews today as unbelievers in desperate need of Christ for salvation and their possible future status as redeemed. Events at a 1982 conference of evangelicals and Jews show how dispensationalism is breaking down the theological barriers between Christian belief and Jewish unbelief. Joint worship services (with Jewish rabbis, John Walvoord, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other dispensationalists present) were held. One paper at this conference:

identified both groups as “descendants of Abraham” and “chosen under the terms of [God’s] covenants.” It concludes by saying “we are prepared to walk together as God’s covenanted people because we are agreed on important fundamentals of our faiths.”

It is some slight relief to read that Homer Heater apprehensively remarked, “You can’t get around the fact that salvation is through Jesus alone. Sure the Jews are God’s people, but they are in unbelief.”<sup>69</sup>

The dispensational distinction between a completely temporal, earthly people (Israel) and a completely spiritual, heavenly people (the church) has also yielded bitter fruit in dispensationalism’s attitude toward the organized Christian church. Dispensationalists often evidence intense suspicion toward the organized, visible church. Darby, for example, wrote that “the Year-books of Christianity are the year-books of hell.”<sup>70</sup> Another Plymouth brother wrote of organized Christianity, “It is worse, by far, than Judaism; worse by far than all the darkest forms of Paganism.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Beth Spring, “Some Jews and Evangelicals Edge Close on Israel Issue,” *Christianity Today*, December 17, 1982, 33–34.

<sup>70</sup> See Steele, *Antinomianism Revived*, 15.

<sup>71</sup> See Steele, *Antinomianism Revived*, 15.

Such examples could be multiplied almost endlessly. The root of the problem is the Israel/church distinction which assumes that Israel is an entirely temporal matter and the church an entirely spiritual affair. As a result, dispensationalists retreat into a hyper-spiritual Gnosticism which spurns the structures of the visible church which God has graciously given to His people.

I am glad to see one noted dispensationalist admit, however qualifiedly and inadequately, the error of the dispensational distinction of Israel and the church. Robert Saucy writes that the “earlier” dispensational view that divided the people of God into an earthly and heavenly people (i.e. the Church and Israel), with fundamentally no continuity in the plan of God on the historical plane, must be rejected.<sup>72</sup>

Yet how can this error be restricted to “earlier dispensational teaching” when it is found in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* and Charles Ryrie’s *Dispensationalism Today*. The tone of its rhetoric aside, the new dispensationalism still sounds very much like the old.

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<sup>72</sup> Robert Saucy, in *Prophecy and the Church*, ed. C. L. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 239–40.

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## TROUBLING ANTINOMIANISM (1): Evidence of Antinomianism

In this crucial chapter I will show that all traditional dispensationalists teach that converted Christian persons can (not may) live in sin throughout their post-conversion lives with no threat to their eternal destiny. The following chapter will examine the underlying dispensational teaching regarding the “two natures” of the Christian (carnal and spiritual) which gives rise to this fatal Antinomianism. After a brief glance at historic Antinomianism, I will examine the teachings of a number of prominent dispensationalists, past and present, showing that there is essential continuity and agreement within the movement on this fatal error.

### Historic Antinomianism

This phenomenon of Antinomianism, which seems to be an integral, though disavowed, part of dispensationalism, has been with the church down through the centuries, especially since the Reformation. William K. B. Stoevers gives an apt definition of this heresy:

The label “antinomianism” derives from the syndrome’s distinctive mark, namely the denial of the relevance of the moral law to true Christians because of the ability claimed for the Holy Spirit to separate persons directly and radically from the obligations of ordinary worldly existence.<sup>1</sup>

One factor contributing to Antinomianism is a misunderstanding of the Reformation doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Luther and Calvin staunchly opposed any hint of the Roman Catholic doctrine of merit in justification with its complex of doctrines such as the treasury of merit and works of supererogation. At the same time, they insisted on the inseparability of faith and works, of justification and sanctification, for the simple but profound reason that all of salvation is to be found only through a genuine union with Jesus Christ. Thus, good works may be said to be a condition for obtaining salvation in that they inevitably accompany genuine faith. Good works, while a necessary complement of true faith,

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<sup>1</sup> William K. B. Stoevers, *A Faire and Easie Way to Heaven: Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 161.

are never the meritorious grounds of justification, of acceptance before God. *From the essential truth that no sinner in himself can merit salvation, the antinomian draws the erroneous conclusion that good works need not even accompany faith in the saint.* The question is not whether good works are necessary to salvation, but in what way are they necessary. As the inevitable outworking of saving faith, they are necessary for salvation. As the meritorious ground of justification, they are not necessary or acceptable.

Another historic factor contributing to this heresy is an ontological dualism which denigrates the created order and places total reliance upon the direct and unmediated work of God. It is crucial to understand the point at issue here. The question is not divine monergism in salvation — whether salvation is entirely a work of God. Rather, the issue at stake is whether God works through the created order and whether God truly effects positive changes in the created order. Stoeever notes that Antinomianism typically:

exalted the unconditioned, unmediated operation of the Spirit in the application of redemption, to the point of seriously minimizing, if not altogether overruling, the Christian's continuing rootedness in the ontological and moral orders of creation. From the antinomian perspective the agency and instrumentality of creatures are incidental to the Spirit's gracious work, which renders the Christian, morally and ontologically, a veritable "new being."<sup>2</sup>

This is to be contrasted sharply with the historic position of Reformed theology which maintains that God, in His saving work, instills the principles or "habits" of sanctified life which then become truly part of that person's being.<sup>3</sup> For the Reformed theologian, good works, while the *result* of divine grace, are genuinely human actions. For the antinomian, good works *are* divine actions, the direct action of God within the human person.

This dualism leads in turn to an odd, but understandable juxtaposition of licentiousness and Perfectionism — sometimes in combination. Because the direct agency of God is all that really matters and because God does not really change created human nature for the better, the actual conduct of the Christian may be seen as a matter of little importance. On the other hand, the presence and direct action of the uncreated deity within a person renders that person at least implicitly perfect — no

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<sup>2</sup> Stoeever, *A Faire and Easie Way*, 162.

<sup>3</sup> See the helpful discussion of Stoeever, *A Faire and Easie Way*, 170–174.

matter how he actually behaves. We shall see, especially in the treatment of the dispensational doctrine of sanctification, that dispensationalism fits this model of classical Antinomianism virtually to the letter.

The magisterial Reformers were very sharply opposed to Antinomianism. While they recognized that justification by faith alone was the article by which the church stands or falls (Luther), and the very hinge of the Reformation (Calvin), they never for a moment granted that the faith which justifies could be sterile. As a matter of fact, the formula was *Sola fides iustificat, sed fides non est sola* (faith alone justifies, but faith is not alone). Luther strongly opposed antinomians such as Johann Agricola and Nikolaus Arnsdorf, who went so far as to say that good works are harmful. Luther wrote two treatises against the antinomians.

Calvin stoutly defended the Protestant doctrine of justification by grace through faith against Roman Catholic charges that it would destroy good works.<sup>4</sup> He even went so far as to treat the doctrine of sanctification prior to the doctrine of justification in his *Institutes*, contending that the inseparability of the two is best understood in this way.

For when this topic is rightly understood it will better appear how man is justified by faith alone, and simple pardon; nevertheless actual holiness of life, so to speak, is not separated from free imputation of righteousness.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, Calvin never tired of stressing the indissoluble connection between justification and sanctification — this bond being none other than the person of Jesus Christ.

Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ's righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God. Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also. For He "is given unto us for righteousness, wisdom, sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify. These benefits are joined together by an everlasting and indissoluble bond, so that those whom He illumines by His wisdom, He redeems; those whom He redeems, He justifies; those whom He justifies, He sanctifies.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the opposition of Reformation leaders, Antinomianism was a recurring phenomenon in the Reformation and post-Reformation period.

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<sup>4</sup> See John Calvin, *Reply to Sadolet* in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 234–37.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:3.1.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3:16.1

The Anabaptist debacle at Münster in 1532 discredited Antinomianism in the eyes of many but the tendency remained. A tradition of English Antinomianism is associated with John Eaton, Tobias Crisp, and John Saltmarsh, and this thinking was brought to seventeenth-century Massachusetts by Anne Hutchinson, her advocacy of the heresy resulting in the so-called “Antinomian Controversy” of 1636–1638.

In Scotland, the Sandemanians were antinomians with a vengeance. All so-called “good works” were considered bad works. They almost sensed the fact that all works of the Christian are works of the created nature, and they consistently called for inactivity. They seemed to feel that the good works would have to come from God alone, as the dispensationalist is constantly inferring though seldom recognizing. These Sandemanians were the original champions of “Let go and let God,” and the “deadliness of doing.” Sanctification, consequently, was seen as no evidence whatever of justification, but, if anything, the opposite.

### **Dispensational Antinomianism**

In both historic and contemporary dispensationalism, we see both of the factors mentioned above at work. Dispensational theologians fail to understand the Reformation doctrines of justification and sanctification, and this misunderstanding is rooted in a dualistic conception of the relationship between God and the Christian.

The classic dispensational distinction between “standing” and “state” is evidence of a persistent misunderstanding of the doctrines of justification and sanctification. According to the dispensationalist, man in innocence sinned, and he and his progeny have become totally depraved. That is man’s present nature. At his so-called “new birth,” nothing in nature changes. His *standing*, which is his legal relationship to God, is supposed to change. His *state*, which is his own condition, does not necessarily change at that time or even thereafter. The error of the dispensationalist lies, not in the *distinction* between “standing” and “state” (for justification and sanctification cannot be reduced to the same thing), but in the denial that there is any necessary connection between the two.

The dualism noted above is evident in the dispensational doctrine of regeneration. Here the old fallen nature remains untouched by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit regenerates and indwells the person — his temple or body, but He does not indwell his old nature — the old man. The regenerate man is made a partaker of divine nature, but this divine nature is not *his* nature. Quite literally, it is the *divine* nature.



In a certain sense, never the twain do meet. That is, the old sinful nature and the new sinless nature are poles apart in the same person. There is a real psychological schizophrenia here—an absolute and antithetical split between the finite, created, sinful, old human nature and the divine, uncreated, infinite, sinless, new divine nature. In a profound sense, the person is not changed at all. He is not regenerated; he is counter-balanced. Consistent with the underlying dualism, these two natures never meet. Neither influences the other. They go their separate ways — the old nature ultimately being destroyed and the new living forever.

These ideas give rise to the dispensational doctrine of the two kinds of Christians—the “spiritual” and the “carnal.” The spiritual Christian is one who, for some reason, is controlled by the indwelling divine nature. The “carnal” Christian is one controlled by the old nature. There is no necessary reason why a Christian should not continue to be “carnal” all his life. Kraus, in his *Dispensationalism in America*, recognizes this as characteristic of American dispensationalism. According to dispensationalism there are two classes of Christians:

Those who “abide in Christ” and those who “abide not”; for those who are “walking in the light,” and those who “walk in darkness”; those who “walk by the Spirit,” and those who “walk as men”; those who “walk in newness of life,” and those who “walk after the flesh”; . . . those who are “spiritual” and those who are “carnal”; those who are “filled with the Spirit,” and those who are not. All this has to do with the qualities of daily life of saved people, and is in no way a contrast between the saved and the unsaved.<sup>7</sup>

This is classic, historic Antinomianism.

In the rest of this chapter, I examine the teachings of numerous dispensationalists, past and present, with special focus on their persistent teaching that the Christian need not, and may never, forsake sin.

#### *J.N. Darby*

Darby taught this Antinomianism in its crudest form. Turner, in his biography of the Brethren leader, tells of an episode in his life that illustrates our point graphically. He was once asked about 1 John 1:7 (“But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin”,

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<sup>7</sup> C. Norman Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America: Its Rise and Development* (Richmond, Vir.: John Knox, 1958), 62, 121.

KJV). He explained that the text deals with where you walk, not how you walk. Dr. Steele, who had asked the question, was somewhat perplexed by such an antinomian reply and asked further, "Suppose a real Christian turned his back on the light (meaning deliberately and permanently)?" Without hesitation, Darby replied, "then the light would shine upon his back."<sup>8</sup>

The question may arise whether there are more "carnal" than "spiritual" Christians. I suppose that dispensationalists think that there are vastly more carnal than spiritual Christians and that, therefore, this type of living is more common "Christian" behavior than the other. Nevertheless, the old man, Darby taught, is not crucified daily. He is now growing worse all the time. Steele tells of having asked him if he felt that he had been growing in grace since becoming a Christian. "In response to a question we once put to Mr. Darby, he said, his nature, or old man, had been growing worse and worse ever since he believed in Christ."<sup>9</sup>

### *C. I. Scofield*

In Scofield, we see the basic pattern of dispensational thought on the relationship of works to salvation clearly articulated. I have already noticed the Scofield note on the forgiveness petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matt. 6:12, KJV). According to Scofield, "Under the law forgiveness is conditioned upon a like spirit in us; under grace we are forgiven for Christ's sake and exhorted to forgive because we have been forgiven."<sup>10</sup> Scofield then refers his reader to a note where this theme is enlarged upon, "The sin of the justified believer *interrupts his fellowship*; it is forgiven upon confession, but always on the ground of Christ's propitiating sacrifice."<sup>11</sup>

One can see from this note that forgiveness is not necessary for a person's salvation; it is necessary only for fellowship. I may refuse all my life to forgive. God will, however, forgive this and all my other sins in which I may choose to persist. I will lose fellowship with Him and fellow Christians, but my salvation is an accomplished fact because I once professed faith in Christ. It is obvious that one could go on lying, blaspheming, fornicating, and murdering for a lifetime with no threat to one's

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<sup>8</sup> W. G. Turner, *John Nelson Darby* (London: Hammond, 1951). 23.

<sup>9</sup> Turner, *John Nelson Darby*, 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1002.

<sup>11</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1039 (emph. mine).

salvation. The Christian's "disobedience does not affect his salvation, but fellowship, peace, and growth," he wrote in his *Question Box*.<sup>12</sup>

The Christian, in other words, is a carnal person. He was born so, and he may remain so after regeneration, according to C. I. Scofield. I know that many dispensationalists will rally to Scofield's defense here, saying that he is simply defending the Calvinistic doctrine of perseverance of the saints. In an earlier chapter, I have shown that he is not defending the Calvinistic doctrine of perseverance of the saints (whatever he may have intended). In any case, that is not the point here. Whatever Scofield's motivation, he emphatically and dogmatically teaches that a Christian may be carnal all his life and yet be a Christian. These statements alone—and his writings are full of statements like them would prove that America's most famous and influential dispensationalist was an arch-antinomian.

#### *Harry Ironside*

Harry Ironside is especially interesting, for surely no classical dispensationalist has tried more strenuously to avoid Antinomianism (unless it is John MacArthur, who has succeeded). He wrote:

It is not easy in attempting to steer clear of the Scylla of legalism to keep from running into the Charybdis of license. In the effort to avoid Jewish legality, it is most natural to fall into antinomianism.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, even Ironside does not avoid the "Charybdis" of Antinomianism. He acknowledges here, as elsewhere, that the Christian in this age of grace has the power to overcome or be delivered from the power of indwelling sin as well as from its penalty. There is no excuse, in his opinion, for a Christian not overcoming indwelling sin. He even goes as far as to insist that, "when you receive a new life, you love to follow Christ, and, if you do not, you are not a Christian. Take that home. Examine your own foundations a bit."<sup>14</sup> He says that the answer to the claim that it does not make any difference what you do if you are a true believer is: "It makes a tremendous difference what you do. If you do not behave yourself, it shows that you are not a real Christian."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> C. I. Scofield, *Question Box*, ed. Ella E. Pohle (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Association, 1917), 13–14.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Ironside, *Sutherland's Last Will, a Revelation of our Inheritance in Christ Jesus Being Also a Scriptural Answer to the Error of Seventh Day Worship*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 18.

Nevertheless, if Ironside were truly anti-antinomian, why would he write the following:

Backsliding there may be — and, alas, often is. But the backslider is one under the hand of God in government. And He loves him too well to permit him to continue the practice of sin. He uses the rod of discipline; and if that be not enough, cuts short his career and leaves the case for final settlement at the judgment-seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:14; 11:30-32; and 2 Corinthians 5:10).<sup>16</sup>

If the Christian had the principle of holiness in him, he could not “continue the practice of sin” until God actually “cuts short his career” because he has nothing but bad works.

On the next page, Ironside shows that the virtue the Christian inalienably has is his “standing” in Christ: “It is the believer looked at as characterized by the new nature who does not sin.”<sup>17</sup> Still again, he contradicts himself without being aware of it:

True, he still has the old, carnal, Adamic nature; and if controlled by it, he would still be sinning continually. But the new nature imparted when he was born again, “not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible,” is now the controlling factor of his life. With this incorruptible seed abiding in him, he cannot practice sin.<sup>18</sup>

How could this man be an incorrigible sinner and unable to “practice sin”? Thus we see that Ironside does allow for the possibility that a genuine Christian will continue callously to live in sin with no threat to his eternal destiny.

*Alva J. McClain*

Former Grace Theological Seminary president Alva McClain has produced one of the ablest defenses of the antinomian doctrine that the Christian is in no sense under obligation to the law of God.<sup>19</sup> McClain (one of the editors of *The New Scofield Reference Bible*) argues that the New Testament expression “under the law,” could only have one of two meanings. Either it referred to being under the law as the basis of salvation or as a way of life. Since no one was ever, in any age, saved by

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<sup>16</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 124.

<sup>17</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Ironside, *Eternal Security*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Alva J. McClain, *Law and Grace* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Brethren Missionary Herald, 1954), see ch. 7.

keeping the law, the former possibility is excluded and the expression can only refer to being under the law as a way of life. So, when the New Testament says, as in Romans 6:14, that the Christian is not “under the law,” it means that he is free from it as a way of life or standard of duty.

What is McClain’s mistake? The problem lies in McClain’s failure to recognize that, *although the Bible never taught that the law was the basis of salvation, the Jews did so misconstrue the Bible*. The Pharisees and Jews generally trusted in their own righteousness as keepers of the law (see Luke 18:9; Rom. 10:3). That “righteousness” is what, as a Christian, Paul found to be “dung,” though he had cherished it before (Phil. 3:8).

In Romans 6:14, Paul is saying that we are not “under the law” precisely in that sense. He said that, when the Galatians had sought to be “justified by the law,” they had, by putting themselves under the law, “fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4). Consequently, Paul meant that his doctrine “established” the law *as the way of life, not as the meritorious ground of salvation*. What Paul’s doctrine of grace established, McClain’s doctrine of grace destroys. “Do we then make void the law through faith?” asks Paul. McClain’s answer is, “Precisely!” What is Paul’s answer? “God forbid!”

*Lewis Sperry Chafer and John Walvoord*

Chafer and Walvoord, in *Major Bible Themes*, reveal themselves to be hesitating antinomians. After a long discussion of sanctification, they conclude lamely: “It is therefore *fitting* for us to ‘abstain from every appearance of evil.’”<sup>20</sup> Once again, I note that the word *fitting* is no substitute for “mandatory” or “necessary” or “indispensable.” *There is never a question that dispensationalists recommend virtuous living*. It has its rewards in this world and in the world to come. On the other hand, not to live godly in Christ Jesus spells misery here and loss of reward in the world to come. So, it is indeed “fitting” for Christians to live godly. But, is it necessary? That is the question. If it is not *necessary*, we have Antinomianism.

Chafer and Walvoord not only recommend virtue, at times, they seem emphatically to demand it as essential. Consider this from Chafer: “There can be no such thing as a Christian who is not indwelt by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> Walvoord writes, “Never in the dispensation of grace are Christians warned that the loss of the Spirit will occur as a result of sin.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 210 (emph. mine).

<sup>21</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 6:122.

<sup>22</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958), 151.

Chafer is saying that every Christian is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and Walvoord that he never loses the Holy Spirit. Most non-dispensationalists would think that such affirmations would guarantee Christian, spiritual conduct as inseparable from being a Christian. But that is never asserted, to our knowledge, by Chafer and Walvoord or any other dispensationalist. The Holy Spirit may indwell throughout a Christian's life without that Christian ever acting accordingly. He may, perhaps even *probably* will, behave as a Christian should. But the *dispensationalist* refuses to say that he is not a Christian if he does not.

If there were any doubt about the Antinomianism of these definitive dispensational authors, it is dispelled a few pages later:

A carnal Christian is as perfectly saved as a spiritual Christian; for no experience or merit or service can form any part of the grounds of salvation. Though but a baby, he is, nevertheless, *in* Christ (1 Corinthians 3:1).<sup>23</sup>

These dispensational writers seek to avoid the embarrassment posed by the "carnal Christian" by appealing to "*normal* Christian experience." "It is of fundamental importance to understand that a normal Christian experience is realized only by those who are Spirit-filled."<sup>24</sup> There never is any question among dispensationalists that *some* converted persons do live the Christian life. Nevertheless, as long as it is not the universal Christian experience, it is possible, though not "fitting," advisable, desirable, or rewardable for a true Christian not to live godly in Christ Jesus. *If total Christian carnality is a possibility, Antinomianism is a certainty.*

A close reading of dispensational writers reveals a recognition on their part that this "normal" Christian life is, in fact, the *exception* among dispensationalists. Chafer and Walvoord begin to hedge their case by appealing to "ordinary conditions." "Salvation which is of God will, under ordinary conditions, prove itself to be such by its fruits."<sup>25</sup> Add to this Chafer's own acknowledgment of "the great mass of carnal Christians" and one begins to sense the dimensions of this frightening tragedy.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 214.

<sup>24</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 214 (emph. mine).

<sup>25</sup> Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 223.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1922), 345.

Charles C. Ryrie

Before I analyze Dr. Ryrie's thought, let me note his appreciation of the crucial nature of the issue before us. In his *Balancing the Christian Life* he sharply focuses the point at stake:

The importance of this question cannot be overestimated in relation to both salvation and sanctification. The message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel; therefore, one of them is false and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).<sup>27</sup>

In that appalling statement, Ryrie is saying that the orthodox, biblical doctrine of Christian sanctification is "another gospel" under a divine curse.

In *The Ryrie Study Bible*, we have alongside each other two conflicting statements. First, "James 2:14–26. Non-working faith is not faith that saves in the first place."<sup>28</sup> Second, however: "Christ's personal Lordship over the individual's life is not a condition for salvation." Thus: "non-working faith" is not faith; but then Ryrie goes on to say that a person may deny Christ's Lordship and yet have salvation, which we know Ryrie thinks, comes only by faith. So, non-working faith is not faith but, nevertheless, it may bring salvation, which is supposed to be by faith. Ryrie cannot have it both ways. Ryrie ends up where virtually all dispensationalists always do end up: "It *should be a consequence* of salvation and is a condition for dedication in full discipleship."<sup>29</sup>

Charles Ryrie is hesitant about being labeled an antinomian but he is somewhat more outspoken on this subject than most others. "Carnal believers whose lives will not merit reward will, nevertheless, be saved (1 Corinthians 3:14)."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Ryrie seems to go out of his way to see how little a person must do in order to be saved. Continuing, Ryrie asks, "Are there not examples of uncommitted, unsundered, though genuine believers in the Bible? Yes, there are. Lot, who the New Testament calls 'righteous' (2 Pet. 2:7), is an example of life-long rejection of God's Lordship over his life."<sup>31</sup> Even "life-long rejection" of God's will is no bar to salvation according to Ryrie.

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<sup>27</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 170.

<sup>28</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1950.

<sup>29</sup> *Ryrie Study Bible*, 1950 (emph. mine).

<sup>30</sup> Ryrie, *Study of Bible Doctrine*, 135.

<sup>31</sup> Ryrie, *Study of Bible Doctrine*, 136.

The allusion to Lot, who is a common example cited by dispensationalists, makes Ryrie's Antinomianism clear enough. He and other dispensationalists who cite Lot, take courage because they know that the New Testament calls Lot "righteous." So, the dispensationalist feels comfortable that he has a prime illustration of a godless person who is nevertheless godly, an unrighteous person who is nevertheless righteous. They think they have a perfect illustration of their distinction between a good standing and a bad state. However, they never prove what Ryrie says here about Lot — that his life was a constant "rejection of God's Lordship." That is not demonstrated, and it cannot be. Admittedly, he made a foolish choice and lived in a bad location, where his righteous soul was constantly vexed. Yet, he was rescued before destruction set in upon his city. None of these facts add up to a "totally godless life" in which the Lordship of God is always rejected. He committed incest to be sure, but his daughters had to trick him into drunkenness to make him unconsciously do it.

The "Lordship Salvation" controversy has apparently hardened Ryrie in his Antinomianism. In a recent volume, he maintains that a Christian *may even cease to believe in Christ and still be saved*.

Normally one who has believed can be described as a believer; that is, one who continues to believe. But . . . a believer may come to the place of not believing, and yet God will not disown him, since He cannot disown Himself.<sup>32</sup>

Apparently for Ryrie, it is asking too much of a person even to require belief in Christ as a condition of salvation. Few dispensationalists have carried their Antinomianism to this obvious indubitable dead end.

#### *Hal Lindsey*

Hal Lindsey, too, believes that Christians should behave as Christians, but may not do so. He reveals his Antinomianism by his denial of the necessity of confession. Commenting on Hebrews 10:35–39 (a passage with a message rather different than Lindsey imagines), he writes, "The Lord warns us that to shrink back in unbelief, even under persecution, is displeasing to Him. He encourages them to put their thoughts on the imminent possibility of the Messiah's return."<sup>33</sup> We can see that Lindsey is following the usual dispensational pattern of recommending faithful-

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<sup>32</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1989), 141.

<sup>33</sup> Hal Lindsey, *The Terminal Generation* (Westwood, N. J.: Revell, 1976), 182.



ness under persecution but preparing to excuse the Christians who do not practice it. He continues:

These believers had started out well, but had taken their focus off their hope and centered on their persecution. They were about to throw their eternal rewards away. We can “shrink back” far enough to lose our rewards, but not so far that we lose salvation.<sup>34</sup>

Lindsey, unlike his Lord, is telling us that we may refuse to confess Him before men, but He will never refuse to confess us before God (see Luke 12:8).

*M. R. DeHaan*

DeHaan is clearly dispensational but just as clearly and emphatically seems to repudiate Antinomianism. On the one hand, in his Galatians, he strongly censures those who teach that

because we are saved by grace it makes no difference how we live and behave. One book of the New Testament is devoted to answering this Satanic error. It is the Book of James, summed up in James 2:17, “even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.”<sup>35</sup>

This statement of DeHaan sounds like a genuine rejection of Antinomianism and is, if *one correctly interprets James 2:17* which DeHaan does not. This erroneous understanding of James 2:17 becomes evident near the end of his volume:

You ask me, “Do not Christians who are under grace have to keep the law?” No, there is no compulsion, but the truly born-again believer desires to keep the law, not because he must, but because he wants to, and goes far beyond the law itself. . . . If we love as we ought to love, we need no one to tell us what to do — for the grace of God will teach us through His Word and His Spirit.<sup>36</sup>

The one part of this expression that, if taken as verity, does condemn Antinomianism is that the true Christian’s work “goes far beyond the law itself.” That statement is an extreme denial of Antinomianism because it actually asserts the opposite, the Romish error of “works of *supererogation*.” These are not merely perfect works but works beyond perfection. When this dispensationalist really did deny Antinomianism, it was only by affirming its absolutely opposite error. It is quite clear from his writings

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<sup>34</sup> Lindsey, *The Terminal Generation*, 182.

<sup>35</sup> M. R. DeHaan, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), Introduction.

<sup>36</sup> DeHaan, *Galatians*, 160.

that DeHaan did not mean to assert the Romish error but as a true dispensationalist simply could not deny Antinomianism without falling into the opposite error of Perfectionism.

DeHaan's problem here is with the use of the word *must* and the idea of compulsion. He categorically rejects compulsion in sanctification, and reduces "must" to "want." Like McClain, DeHaan fails to understand that the law of God is a "must" law. The law of God consists of commands, not suggestions that we may take up if and when we *want* to. The Reformed and biblical faith says that one *must obey from his heart voluntarily*. One is *commanded* to love God and his neighbor and himself with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. That is not optional. It is *absolutely necessary*. DeHaan does not acknowledge that, or even understand it. Simple as it is, the little ditty — "Free from the law, oh, blessed condition, we can sin as we please and still have remission" — is the motto of dispensationalism. The dispensationalist will immediately protest that the Christian *will not be pleased* to sin. But all he can and ultimately does say as a dispensationalist is that the saint *ought not* to be pleased to sin.

#### Harold Barker

Barker provides an illustration of the lengths to which antinomian exegesis will go to avoid the clear teaching of Scripture. Commenting on John 15:2 ("Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away" NASB), he writes:

The phrase in John 15:2 would be better translated, "every branch in Me that beareth not fruit he lifteth up." There is no implication here that the branch is cut off and taken away. Rather, it is lifted up, evidently from trailing on the ground, that it may receive more sunlight, and thus become more fruitful.<sup>37</sup>

Of course, this is desperation exegesis. It is perfectly clear that this is a dead branch, that it is taken away, and that it is cast into the fire.

Barker comments on 1 John 1:9 ("If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" KJV). He hurries to prevent us from thinking that, if we do not confess our sins, we will not have our sins cleansed, which is quite clearly the implication of this didactic passage. John's epistle is saying that we *must* go on confessing our sins and that makes Barker very uncomfortable. Why? Because Barker believes that, *once* a person confesses his sin, all his

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<sup>37</sup> Harold Barker, *Secure Forever* (Neptune, N. J.: Loizeaux, 1974), 131.

sins — past, present, and future — are forgiven forever whether he ever confesses again or not. So, how does he handle the problem? He hastens to add that “confession is a condition of fellowship and communion, not of salvation from the eternal penalty of sin.”<sup>38</sup> Here is our constantly recurring dispensational Antinomianism once again. Barker is insisting that, if we once profess to believe, then, though we never for the rest of our lives again profess to believe, our salvation will be in no jeopardy, though our fellowship will be in ruins. That is, faith without works is not dead after all but very much alive, bringing everlasting life.

I need not continue with Barker here. He handles other verses in the same free way that he disposes of the two I have noticed. It is sad to see him saying, after commenting on 1 John 5:18, “that God will not let a Christian continually practice sin, and He may even call him home (to heaven).”<sup>39</sup> Once again, we have the notion that a converted person may be so incorrigibly wicked that there is nothing that God can do with him except take him to heaven! According to dispensational theology, the quickest way to heaven is by continually engaging in horrible wickedness after having believed in Jesus Christ! If heaven is your destination, crooked living is the straightest route.

*W. W. Howard*

Most dispensationalists will contend that confessing Christ before men and the ongoing confession of sin are not necessary for salvation, but W. W. Howard goes even further. Speaking of confessing Christ and its consequences according to Matthew 10:32, he remarks, “This teaching is not in any way related to the salvation of men in this age. Can this be the same Savior who in 1 John 2:1 is described as our Paraclete when we sin?”<sup>40</sup>

Howard does not hesitate to go on to the point of denying the propriety for praying for forgiveness:

To be propitiated to me is the cry of the publican. It is a pre-Calvary petition that no longer is befitting the sinner, for Christ has made propitiation with the Father by means of His blood (Heb. 2:17). To pray for salvation is an admission of

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<sup>38</sup> Barker, *Secure Forever*, 132.

<sup>39</sup> Barker, *Secure Forever*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> W. W. Howard, “Is Faith Enough?” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1941), 35.

ignorance that salvation stands finished. God's solitary command is to take it by simple faith.<sup>41</sup>

This is a step beyond most dispensationalists. We have already seen that classic dispensationalists do not believe that the prayer "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" belongs in this dispensation. Scofield has called it "legal ground." But there are very few dispensationalists hardy enough to go beyond that statement and say that we should no longer ask for forgiveness at all. Such a prayer is no longer fitting, because it has already been permanently answered in the Cross. To pray for forgiveness now is an act of unfaith rather than faith, according to Howard.

*R.. B. Thieme*

This gentleman may have the distinction of being the frankest antinomian on the American scene today. Many examples of his totally unambiguous views could be produced, but one utterly typical statement should suffice. Addressing professed evangelicals he asks, "Do you know that if you were a genius, you couldn't figure out a way to go to hell?"<sup>42</sup>

*Zane Hodges*

In 1981 Zane Hodges wrote his *The Gospel Under Siege*. This volume states and argues the dispensational case for Antinomianism. In fact, as I shall show, the book should be entitled, "Antinomianism Under Siege." Because Hodges' book may be one of the most important dispensational volumes of this century, I will give it a more extended criticism. I stress this book's crucial importance though other, more recent volumes such as Charles Ryrie's *So Great Salvation* have replaced it on center stage.

At the very beginning of chapter 1, Hodges quotes those whom he thinks have the gospel under siege as saying, "Unless you persevere in good works, you cannot be saved," and "Unless you yield your life to the Lordship of Christ, you cannot be saved."<sup>43</sup> We will grant that is an accurate statement of our contention.

Yet, on the very next page the author shows that he does not understand what we are saying. There, he states that they insist that "to faith are added other conditions, or provisos, by which the essential

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<sup>41</sup> Howard, "Is Faith Enough?," 37.

<sup>42</sup> R. B. Thieme, *A New Species*, 9.

<sup>43</sup> Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), 3.

nature of the Gospel is radically transformed.”<sup>44</sup> Hodges fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the issue when he thinks that works are some sort of addendum, something beyond faith itself. We maintain that it is implicit in the faith from the beginning. It is merely an expression of the nature of that faith. The expression lacking, the faith is lacking. What we are saying is that justification is by faith alone, but not by the faith that is alone. It is a *working faith*. Nothing is added to the faith, but this is a part of the definition of the faith; namely that it is genuine, authentic, true, saving, and therefore a working faith.

So we see at the very beginning of the book (and this will persist throughout) that Hodges simply does not critique the traditional orthodox position accurately or respond to its critique of the antinomian position relevantly. Hodges, and’ virtually all dispensationalists, do not see the elementary difference between *non-meritorious* “requirements,” “conditions,” “necessary obligations,” “indispensable duties,” and “musts,” as the natural outworking of true faith, in distinction from faith in the Savior plus meritorious works as the very basis of salvation. If it is a true faith, it is a working faith, and it will endeavor to meet these requirements, conditions, obligations, and necessities. Having done all, it will still say, “I am an *unprofitable* servant.” At the end of a lifetime of discipleship (inevitably a very imperfect discipleship), it will still sing, “Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.”

In his fear of any “conditions” for salvation, Hodges is very hesitant to require very much of faith itself. This is quite evident in the following sentence: “To assert that a man may profess faith in Christ without knowing whether or not he has truly trusted Christ, is to articulate an inconceivable proposition.”<sup>45</sup>

This proposition is not as inconceivable as Hodges thinks. There are two problems: the first has to do with the object of faith and the second with the nature of the faith itself. First, it is by no means self-evident that the person who claims faith in Jesus Christ has necessarily believed in the Christ of Scripture. There are many popular definitions of Jesus Christ in circulation, but most of them are woefully inadequate. For example, if a person thinks of Christ as a sublime, but purely human teacher along the lines of Buddha, that person can hardly be said to have believed in the Christ of the Bible. If a person is aware of these divergent understandings of Christ and has not made a thorough examination of the matter, he may

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<sup>44</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 13.

not know whether he is trusting the true Christ or one of the false ones who go by that name.

Second, even if a person has an intellectual understanding of the person of Christ which is formally correct, the nature of that person's faith still must be examined. The Bible knows of at least five different meanings of the word *faith* — *historical*, temporary, miraculous, symbolic, and salvific.

For example, the individual may have what is commonly called "historical faith." That is, he may believe that Jesus is the Second Person of the Godhead, who was born of the Virgin Mary and became incarnate for the redemption of mankind, was delivered up for our offenses, and raised again for our justification. He may also be aware of the fact that the devils know that even better than he does. Ask this nominal Christian pointedly, "What is your trust in Christ? Is it a mere confidence that this Jesus, thus described, did indeed, and does exist? Or, are you really trusting in Him for your salvation?" How will he answer? We are not denying that some people *do* know that they do have saving faith in Jesus Christ. What we are denying is Hodges' contention that no person professing faith in Christ could be uncertain about the kind of faith which he actually has. I have known hundreds!

It is necessary to say something about Hodges' exegesis of a number of biblical texts. Here we see both the tendentious character of his interpretation and the startling implications of his antinomian theology. In support of his position, Hodges cites the words of Christ in John 5:24:

"Most assuredly I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." Anyone who takes this statement at face value should be able to say, "I *know* I have everlasting life. I *know* I will not come into judgment." But if assurance arises from a simple promise like this, it can have nothing to do with works.<sup>46</sup>

This shows that Hodges conceives of faith as possibly existing without works. Here he is citing Christ's promise that whoever hears His word will be saved and can know it. We, of course, could not agree with him and our Lord more. We only note that, when Christ uses the words *believe*, or *faith*, or *trust*, He means "believe" or "faith" or "trust." That is, He means the real thing, a working faith and not a merely nominal faith. In fact, the

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<sup>46</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 10.

faith that Christ speaks of has everything to do with works. The faith that Christ is talking about is a genuine, that is, a working faith.

Commenting on the episode of the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4–42), Hodges insists that Christ simply promises her everlasting life. “There is no effort to extract from the woman a promise to correct her moral life. If she wants this water, she can have it. It is free!”<sup>47</sup> Then Hodges forthrightly declares that *had this woman continued to be the immoral person she had been up to that point, she would nonetheless have been a truly saved person*:

If the mind of man recoils from so daring an expression of divine generosity, it recoils from the Gospel itself. If it should be thought necessary to add some intrinsic guarantee that the woman would not continue her illicit liaisons — and according to Jesus she was currently engaged in one (4:18!) — that guarantee would add to the words of our Lord himself. The result could only be a false Gospel.<sup>48</sup>

That we are not misunderstanding Hodges’ appalling doctrine is evident from the following statement:

Did the woman therefore simply return to her former sinful lifestyle? The Scripture does not tell us. It is not at all the point of the story! . . . The bestowal of a superlatively valuable gift as an act of unconditional generosity was *precisely the kind of action most likely to woo her from her former ways*. It is more likely by far to have accomplished this result than any legalistic undertaking into which she might have entered . . . her assurance did not rest on what she might later have done. It rested instead upon the uncomplicated promise of the Son of God Himself.<sup>49</sup>

We turn, finally, to Hodges’ treatment of the Bible’s locus classicus against Antinomianism — James 2. His reading of this passage is, to put it mildly, rather peculiar. We should also note that here the extremes of Hodges’ Antinomianism become fully evident. Referring to James 2:26 (“For as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead” KJV), Hodges comments:

No one who encountered a dead body whose vitalizing spirit had departed, would ever conclude that the body had never been alive. Quite the contrary. The presence of a corpse is the clearest proof of a *loss* of

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<sup>47</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 14.

<sup>49</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 14.

life. If we allow this illustration to speak for itself, then the presence of a dead faith shows that this faith was once alive.<sup>50</sup>

A number of comments are in order here. It is apparent that Hodges has missed the obvious meaning of this passage because he is fascinated by the expression of faith which, with his minimalistic understanding of faith, he always assumes is a live faith. The text says simply that faith without works is dead. It certainly says nothing about a faith which was once alive and then later died. Hodges has, in fact, made an allegory out of the word *dead* (an odd move for a professed literalist like Hodges) and thus compared it to a human corpse. James 2:26 makes the point of the passage perfectly dear. All that James says is that, just as you cannot have a man without a body and spirit together, so you cannot have a Christian without works and faith together.

On a more general level, we notice Hodges here seems to concede what he elsewhere denies. Elsewhere he teaches that faith has “nothing to do with works,” that saving faith need not issue in any fruit at all. Here he at least concedes that the lack of works is the evidence of a totally dead faith. The second thing we notice is that Hodges states that this non-working but saving faith, which is now dead, was once actually alive. Now many readers might conclude from this that this loss of faith would result in spiritual death, that Hodges has abandoned the dispensational doctrine of “eternal security.” Nothing could be further from the truth. That Hodges has not abandoned the dispensational doctrine of “eternal security” is evident in his treatment of James 2:14. In fact, the doctrine is radicalized. Hodges writes concerning James 2:14, “James’ point is quite simple: faith alone cannot save.”<sup>51</sup> He then attempts to show that the word *saved* there means “saved from physical death.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, Hodges contends that James is concerned with the relation of dead faith to physical life rather than eternal life. It is definitely fatal to physical life, but not at all to eternal life!

Hodges is actually defending the proposition that a dead faith may be fatal to temporal existence, but not to eternal life. What Charles Ryrie only suggests, Zane Hodges boldly proclaims. We can hardly believe what we are reading. Roman Catholicism ultimately teaches salvation by works; evangelicalism teaches salvation by working faith; Hodges teaches salvation by dead faith — by what is really no faith at all. Rather than the

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<sup>50</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 23–27.



“perseverance of the saint,” this is the “preservation of the sinner” in its most odious form.

There, in plain and candid speech, is the gospel according to Zane Hodges. We must also say that it is the gospel according to dispensationalism. Hodges is, as we have said, nothing but a consistent, if rather outspoken, dispensationalist. Our survey in this chapter has revealed that the “reasonable” dispensationalist (Ryrie) agrees with the “outspoken” dispensationalist (Hodges) that good works need not accompany faith for a person to be saved. Even more shocking, both agree that a person’s faith can totally die and he will still possess eternal life. Horrible as this theology is, we cannot help but be grateful to Hodges for his candor. If this is the gospel according to dispensationalism, it proclaims “another gospel” which is, in fact, no gospel at all.

### Conclusion

Bad theology inevitably issues in bad consequences. We will conclude this general discussion with A. W. Tozer’s lament — perhaps we should say dirge — regarding the tragic character of Antinomianism in so much of contemporary evangelicalism.

Large assemblies today are being told fervently that the one essential qualification for heaven is to be an evil person, and the one sure bar to God’s favor is to be a good one. The very word *Righteousness* is spoken only in cold scorn and the moral man is looked upon with pity. “A Christian,” say these teachers, “is not morally better than a sinner. The only difference is that he has taken Jesus, and so he has a Savior.” I trust it may not sound flippant to inquire, “*a savior*” from what? If not from sin and evil conduct and the old fallen life, then from what, and if the answer is, from the consequences of past sins and from judgment that comes, still we are not satisfied. Is justification from past offenses all that distinguishes a Christian from a sinner? Can a man become a believer in Christ and be no better than he was before? Does the gospel offer no more than a skillful Advocate to get guilty sinners off free at the day of judgment?<sup>53</sup>

In this chapter, we have seen that dispensationalism clearly teaches Antinomianism. That is to say, it begins by teaching that men may be saved without the good works which bear witness to a living faith. It concludes, when pressed to its logical conclusion, by teaching that men

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<sup>53</sup> A. W. Tozer, *Divine Conquest* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Christian Publications, 1940), 35–36.

may be saved with non-faith, with dead faith, with no faith, without faith. Justification without faith, and salvation without grace is its false gospel. It is ironic that dispensationalism prides itself on its claim to exalt the free “grace” of God. The “grace” which allows the sinner to wallow endlessly in his sin on his way to heaven is certainly not grace at all.

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## **TROUBLING ANTINOMIANISM (2)**

### **The Doctrine of Sanctification**

I have shown at length that dispensationalism is antinomian. Antinomianism has been seen to be constantly maintained both yesterday and today by representative writers. To depart from it is to depart from dispensationalism. In this chapter, we will examine the dispensational roots of this heresy — its doctrine of sanctification.

Those who study theology for even a brief amount of time quickly learn that all of theology is interrelated. This issue is no exception. Because this chapter builds on material previously discussed, the reader may wish to review chapter 7 (which deals with the dispensational doctrine of salvation) as well as the description of historic Antinomianism at the beginning of chapter 11.

#### **Sanctification and Justification**

We begin our study of dispensational sanctification, which underlies Antinomianism, with justification which underlies sanctification. This doctrine is the crux of the Christian religion. Antinomianism is its counterfeit or caricature. It would seem, therefore, that if dispensationalism teaches Antinomianism, it cannot consistently teach justification by faith alone. We have seen that dispensational justification is made to apply only to the “new nature.” The best way to understand the dispensational view of justification (and sanctification as well) is to understand its view of regeneration. According to the latter doctrine, a distinct ontological entity or new self, which indeed appears to be a part of the divine nature, is implanted in the soul. This results in two distinct natures in the Christian. Nothing actually happens to the old nature at all except that it has an entirely different new nature placed alongside it.

This is to be contrasted with the traditional orthodox Reformed view in which a new foundation for action, a new disposition is implanted in the old ego, and, accordingly, the Christian is one person with two struggling principles, the new one destined to conquer the old. This is quite a different conception from the dispensational conception of two utterly distinct natures or selves.

We can see immediately that this view of regeneration has profound implications for the doctrine of sanctification. The old nature continues

as before throughout earthly life only to be annihilated at death. C. H. Mackintosh illustrates this conviction well:

Flesh is flesh, nor can it ever be made aught else but flesh. The Holy Ghost did not come down on the day of Pentecost to improve nature or to do away the fact of its incurable evil, but to baptize believers into one body, and connect them with their living head in Heaven.<sup>1</sup>

The new nature, on the other hand, is understood to be the actual indwelling divine nature of God. We have already seen that this new nature really *cannot be justified* because, being the very nature of God Himself, it could not possibly need justification.

A corollary of this is the total separation of justification from sanctification. This total separation is presupposed by dispensational Antinomianism with its conviction that one who has exercised faith in Christ may never show fruit. A person may be justified and not sanctified. Chafer speaks for the entire dispensational tradition when he says that the experience of sanctification is “absolutely unrelated to position in Christ.”<sup>2</sup> It is one thing to say that sanctification is not the meritorious ground of justification and quite another to say that the two are “absolutely unrelated.”

### Sanctification and Assurance

We have seen that the issue of assurance is involved in dispensational Antinomianism. Many dispensationalists will contend that sanctification and Christian experience play no role in the assurance of the believer. It was especially this doctrine of Darby that first influenced C. H. Mackintosh so greatly and decisively. Mackintosh found peace when he did not have to look for it as in any way connected with his own life, that is, in Christ’s living in him, but only in the belief that Christ died for him.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Scofield stated, “His own works can never be to the believer his own ground of assurance.”<sup>4</sup> While some dispensationalists will admit that the changed life can provide some assurance that one is saved, none will concede that the lack of a changed life is positive evidence that one is not a Christian.

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<sup>1</sup> Steele, *Arminianism Revived*, 16–17.

<sup>2</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:279–84. See also Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 99.

<sup>3</sup> See Noel, *History*, 1:64–65.

<sup>4</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 1083.

This provides further evidence of our theme in the previous chapter — that dispensationalism has radically abstracted justification and sanctification from each other. If faith is union with Christ and union with Christ communicates both justification and sanctification, this dispensational insistence that only one's justification can alone provide assurance would seem to miss an important dimension of biblical teaching.

The Scriptures teach that Christian experience and assurance are related. There is, first of all, the direct witness of the Holy Spirit to the Christian (see Rom. 8:16). The believer's behavior also provides an important indication of the presence or absence of God's grace (see 1 John 2:3). For this reason, Reformed theology has placed a good deal of emphasis upon sanctification as evidence of the reality of one's faith. The Reformed view is summed up in the following statement often attributed to Luther and Cromwell: "The only way I can know I am saved is by knowing that I am being saved" (that is, sanctified).

It also reveals something further about the dispensational view of faith. We suppose that, when dispensationalists insist that experience is not necessarily involved in justification and salvation, they refer to a *sensing* of the presence of Christ. But, if faith is union with Christ, how is faith possible without sensing Him? I will not press this point at the moment, though it is important. The dispensationalist tends to conceive of faith as merely intellectual fact. One trusts in Christ for his salvation. That is, he recognizes himself to be a sinner and Christ to be the proffered Savior and believing that fact he is thereby justified. If that is what dispensationalism believes about faith, it is seriously defective. Such a non-experiential faith would be no faith at all but the kind of conviction that even devils can and do have (see Jms. 2).

### **Sanctification and the Holy Spirit**

Dispensationalists believe in the third person of the Trinity, but differ fundamentally from the orthodox churches with regard to the nature of His activities in different periods. They all seem to hold that the Holy Spirit was not active among the Old Testament saints in the same way that He was active among saints of the New Testament dispensation.

No one has stated the dispensational doctrine of the Holy Spirit more fully and completely than Lewis Sperry Chafer. His well-known book, *He That Is Spiritual* (which I will discuss below), is devoted to it, but we will follow here the later treatment in his *Systematic Theology*. First of all, we note the denial of any work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament similar to that in the saints of the New Testament. "Especially to be observed is

the fact that there was no provision for, and no promise of, an abiding presence of the dispensational Antinomianism, Part Two 271 Holy Spirit in the life of any Old Testament saint.”<sup>5</sup>

We have seen that the Holy Spirit regenerates. What does He then do, according to dispensationalists? It seems that the Holy Spirit thereafter forever indwells the Christian believer. Unger writes, “God’s dynamic to live the Christian life is the indwelling Holy Spirit, whom every regenerated soul possesses.”<sup>6</sup> The Holy Spirit may be grieved and He may be quenched, but He will never, ever leave the Christian.

One would suppose that every Christian indwelt by the Spirit of God would be to some degree, at least, holy or spiritual. However, as we have seen, this is not necessarily the case. The Holy Spirit may indwell yet have no influence whatever on the Christian’s life. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit does not insure that the Christian will be a spiritual person in any degree.

Kenneth Peterson spelled this out thoroughly in his thesis, “The Doctrine of Carnality.” “Christians should not grieve or quench but walk in the Spirit.” But, he continues, “since the man who is carnal does not comply with these conditions, he is not filled with the Spirit.”<sup>7</sup> Six definite effects of this follow:

First, there is no spirituality and the person remains a babe in Christ. Second, there is no growth. Third, there is no godly walk. Fourth, there is no fellowship. Fellowship with God is literally “impossible.” Fifth, there can be no fruit. Sixth, there is no victory but, instead, the distress of Romans 7.<sup>8</sup> These effects are seen in the church in the form of envy, strife, discord, ineffectiveness, and a miserable effect on the world.<sup>9</sup> Because of this there is no separation, no power, no witness, no intercession, no service.<sup>10</sup> How can this deplorable situation be rectified? Peterson’s answer is that the Spirit must be recognized. He must be “permitted” to fill the person. “That the Spirit cannot undertake in this ministry until the

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<sup>5</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:71.

<sup>6</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 17.

<sup>7</sup> K. N. Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1943), 44–45.

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 48.

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 55.

<sup>10</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 59f.

conditions of filling are met is obvious.”<sup>11</sup> The “believer must open his life.” “The believer is to depend upon the Spirit, and then to engage in certain positive activity himself.”<sup>12</sup> Peterson goes on to assert that “it lies within his personal power to turn the battle over to the Spirit for solution.”<sup>13</sup> The believer must drop things pleasing to the flesh from his life. He must feed the “Spirit nature” with the Bible. Finally, Peterson remarks, “when, such practices become the all-absorbing interest of the Christian, carnality will be again the cast off and discarded thing, right where it belongs!”<sup>14</sup>

So to live the life of sanctification one must yield to the Holy Spirit. We have seen that regenerate Christians — all Christians — are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s indwelling, however, does not imply the Spirit’s outworking. According to Paul, the Spirit is working in us “to will and to do” (Phil. 2:13, KJV), but the Holy Spirit of dispensationalism may remain — does remain in some cases — indwelling without ever leading the saint to “will and to do.” In other words, the Christian may have Christ as Savior without His being Lord. The Christian may be justified without being sanctified. This is not “natural” but it may happen. It *should* not be but it *may*. Indeed, as I have shown in footnote 13, it *must* happen according to dispensational hagiology.

So, strictly speaking, what is usually called sanctification may not occur in the Christian, according to dispensationalism. Sanctification has been called “the Christianizing of the Christian.” If this doctrine be true, a dispensational Christian may — really must — exist without being Christianized.

### The Mysterious “Third Nature”

Being fruitful depends, apparently, on being Spirit-filled. But being Spirit-filled depends on what? It does not depend on being Spirit-indwelt. Though one cannot be Spirit-filled without first being Spirit-indwelt, he

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<sup>11</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 63.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 64.

<sup>13</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 64. I may remark here that according to this view, the sinner controls the Holy Spirit. He must turn the battle over to the divine Spirit. “He” being the “flesh” will never do that (Gal. 5:17). So sanctification depends on the fleshly, fallen, human nature (not the Holy Spirit), and he will never choose it. This is not merely possible Antinomianism, but certain Antinomianism.

<sup>14</sup> Peterson, “The Doctrine of Carnality,” 64.

may be Spirit-indwelt without being Spirit-filled. Again we ask, on what does being Spirit-filled depend? If it is not on the Spirit Himself, it must be on the person himself. Who is the crucial person himself? Let us examine this more closely.

On the dispensational view, a distinct ontological entity, or new self, which indeed appears to be a part of the divine nature is implanted into the soul. This results in two distinct natures in the Christian. Nothing actually happens to the old nature at all, except that it has an entirely different new nature placed alongside it. The old nature, as we noted earlier, is not sanctified; it is counterbalanced by the new. In chapter 7, we noted the irony involved in this dispensational doctrine of regeneration. This allegedly totally depraved old nature is, nevertheless, able of its own accord to exercise faith in Christ. A similar problem arises in connection with the doctrine of sanctification. Although the regenerate person is really the old, completely unrenovated nature, he is, nevertheless, supposed to yield to the Holy Spirit and become spiritual.

The problem with this is quite simple. There is simply no way for the dispensationalist to account for the phenomenon of spirituality using this model of psychology. There is, first of all, the old nature, which is really the person and which is supposed to yield to the new nature but cannot because it remains untouched. The new nature need not yield to itself for it is, in actuality, divine Spirit. The result is a stand-off with no motion toward spiritual improvement. One way of accounting for spirituality is to say, with Reformed theology, that the Spirit begins to effect real and positive changes in the human nature of the regenerate person and that, because of this miraculous grace, the Christian is enabled to grow spiritually. Dispensationalists, as we have seen, do not say this. The only other way to account for spirituality would seem to be the positing of a third entity within the person, a mysterious "third nature" which mediates between the old and the new natures and somehow makes the crucial choice to yield or not to yield to the new nature. We should note that dispensationalists do not explicitly adopt this theory, incoherent as it is, although their system seems to demand such.

So we have seen that dispensationalists make it impossible for the person to become spiritual even though he has an obligation to be spiritual. We now come to an even more paradoxical statement. That is, in spite of the fact that the saint cannot become spiritual, he actually does become spiritual. This does not seem to bother the average dispensationalist because, when he is talking about the subject of actual spirituality,



he does not think about its theoretical foundation which he has undermined.

There are some dispensationalists, however, who are aware of the problem we have noted here. Sidlow Baxter, a very moderate dispensationalist, is most interesting here. He shows sensitivity to the weaknesses of dispensationalism and to the strength of Reformed theology, but never quite breaks with the one or embraces the other. He aptly critiques Scofield and dispensational sanctification in this astute observation:

A regeneration which does not regenerate me, but only transplants into my being a so-called “new nature” which is not really “me,” and which is always distinct from what I am in myself, is not regeneration at all.<sup>15</sup>

Unfortunately, most dispensationalists simply go on asserting the necessity of yielding to the Spirit without any real recognition of the problem that their theology poses at this point. Reginald Wallis is a case in point. I cite it partly because it is a sort of straight line articulation of the viewpoint, but also because it is especially lucid:

The flesh can only be reckoned dead by the power of the new life. Such life is imparted by the Holy Spirit when the whole being — that is, spirit, soul and body — is surrendered to Him (Romans 8:13). If your will is unyielded all your reckoning will be futile.<sup>16</sup>

As we say, this simply restates the dispensational position that the person is supposed to yield to the Holy Spirit if sanctification is to be produced. Wallis views the person as spirit, soul, and body, to be sure. Nevertheless, it is the will which is crucial and which does, if anything does, the yielding which is required. How a will which is totally carnal and unregenerate can actually choose to yield goes totally unexplained. The problem is apparently unrealized.

Charles Ryrie fails, in a similar manner, to address the real problem. Using the curious metaphor of “two tapes,” Ryrie maintains that the Christian has two capacities — the power for doing evil and the power for doing good. These powers, as it were, are taped out on two recorders. “It is I, in pushing the button on each action, who determines from which tape it comes.”<sup>17</sup> Elsewhere, he writes that “the believer, through the action of his will, pushes the button which determines which nature is

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<sup>15</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter, *Christian Holiness Restudied and Restated* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 241. See also 103f.

<sup>16</sup> Reginald Wallis, *The New Life* (New York: Loizeaux, 1932), 63.

<sup>17</sup> Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, 35–36.

permitted to act.”<sup>18</sup> We see in this that the believer is the invisible man who pushes the tape which releases one nature or the other.

What this third nature is, which determines the first and second nature’s activity, is nowhere explained. Nor is it, in fact, capable of explanation. This dispensational theory of sanctification is seen to be utterly incapable of making any sense of the phenomena of spirituality.

### **Dispensational Perfectionism**

We have already seen that, according to dispensational hagiology, the regenerate person cannot be spiritual but he must be spiritual. Though he cannot be spiritual, he nevertheless does yield and becomes spiritual. Now to cap the climax, this turns out to be an instantaneous event. That the dispensationalist would think so should not really surprise us. It is a logical deduction from his view of regeneration and its relationship to faith and sanctification. We have noticed that dispensationalists believe that regeneration is an implantation of the new, divine nature. This implantation is within the person and not in his old corrupt fallen nature. This new divine nature never does choose to do anything except what is divine or perfectly excellent. Just as truly as the old nature sins and does nothing but sin, this new nature does nothing but virtue.

Going along with this gratuitous assumption of theirs, let us suppose that the new nature does spring into action. If that action were to happen it would be instantaneous. There would be no struggle, no progress, no eradication. This is the new nature acting of itself and of itself alone. Being utterly divine, it always and invariably acts divinely. So its behavior is, in the nature of the case, instantaneous and perfect.

The dispensationalist may respond that there is, in fact, struggle in the Christian life. To this we simply note that the struggle of the Christian life, for the dispensationalist, is the struggle to yield to the divine nature. Once this struggle (which we have seen cannot be accounted for) is completed, the divine nature is then free to act. To the extent that the new nature acts at all, it acts divinely and perfectly.

In the previous chapter, we noted that historic Antinomianism often tends, because of its pantheistic tendency, toward implicit perfection in tandem with actual Antinomianism and its attendant licentiousness. Here we see that dispensationalism fits this model of historic Antinomianism exactly. The actual Antinomianism proceeds from the fact that the old nature is utterly unchanged and therefore acts invariably in a sinful

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<sup>18</sup> Ryrie, *Survey of Bible Doctrine*, 107.

manner. This is considered, however, not to be inconsistent with a person being a Christian in whom the new nature actually dwells, in this instance passively. On the other hand, if the new nature is said ever to spring into action, then, to the extent that it acts, it acts instantly and perfectly. So the born-again Christian, according to the dispensationalist, is at any given moment either perfectly sinful or perfectly virtuous and instantaneously so in each instance. It all depends on which button the invisible man pushes.

It can be shown that the very words of the dispensational teachers, once they are examined, weighed, and carefully interpreted, do teach Perfectionism explicitly, just as they teach Antinomianism explicitly.

*J. N. Darby*

That this perfectionist tendency has been present in dispensationalism from the very beginning is evident from the work of the founder of the movement — John Nelson Darby. Speaking of the ideal Christian life, Darby says:

No one in the Christian state but has this life; and all this belongs to whomsoever is quickened now; but till he is sealed with the Holy Ghost, his state and condition, as alive in Christ, is not known to him, he has not got into that state in relationship with God. It is his, no doubt, but he has not got it.<sup>19</sup>

This is Darby's basis for a slogan that was to be oft repeated in Brethren teaching — the difference between “standing” and “state.” A man's standing is perfect before God, though his state may not be. This might seem to be only the traditional distinction between justification and sanctification but it is not. In Reformed teaching this difference is one of fact; in dispensational teaching it is one of knowledge only. That is, according to the Reformed view, the justified person is not perfectly sanctified; according to the other view, the justified person is implicitly perfectly sanctified but he does not know or feel it. That is the point of Darby's remark, “till he is sealed with the Holy Ghost, his state and condition, as alive in Christ, is not known to him.” When he is sealed then he becomes aware of the fact. Sealing does not create the fact. Just as an unconscious man is alive but does not know it, when he regains consciousness, he knows he is alive. His regaining of consciousness does not

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<sup>19</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 2:408.

make him alive, it only enables him to recognize himself as alive all the while he was unconscious.

All of this is implicit, as we have seen above, in the dispensational doctrine of regeneration. Thus, Darby could say that “conduct is the display of the divine nature in Christ.”<sup>20</sup> Naturally, if conduct is the display of the divine nature in us, it must needs be perfect. What better statement of sinless perfection could be found than this by Darby?

He that is born of God does not practice sin. The reason is evident; he is made partaker of the nature of God; he derives his life from him. . . . This new nature has not in it the principle of sin, so as to commit it. How could it be that the divine nature could sin?<sup>21</sup>

#### *L. S. Chafer*

Lewis Sperry Chafer is as clear as anyone on this implicit Perfectionism. We are fortunate in having a review of his book, *He That Is Spiritual*, by the Princeton theologian, B. B. Warfield, which demonstrates the perfectionist commitment of Chafer.<sup>22</sup> Warfield argued that, in Chafer, two traditions were struggling for expression — the evangelical Presbyterianism in which he was reared and the “Higher Life,” or Keswick movement thinking of the coterie of Bible teachers with whom he had come in contact. The former was Reformed, the latter Arminian. In line with the latter, Chafer maintained that becoming a spiritual man was at the option of the individual, a mere claiming of the blessing is all that there is to it.<sup>23</sup> He speaks of “letting God” and “engaging” the Holy Spirit, and “making it possible for God” to do things. The spiritual life was accomplished “not by trying but by a right adjustment.”<sup>24</sup> By this an “unbroken victory” was altogether possible.<sup>25</sup> “The Christian may realize at once the heavenly virtues of Christ.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Darby, *Letters*, 2:478.

<sup>21</sup> Darby, *Collected Writing*, 5:403–04.

<sup>22</sup> B. B. Warfield, “Review of L. S. Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, Princeton Theological Review 17 (1919):322–27; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual* (New York: 1918).

<sup>23</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 129, 146.

<sup>24</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 39.

In spite of all these statements, Chafer ostensibly repudiated Pentecostalism second blessing theology, and sinless perfection.<sup>27</sup> Chafer's indictment of sinless perfection is tantamount to a rejection of the claim that sin can be completely eradicated in favor of the notion of suppression (called "control"). But Dr. Warfield rightly concluded that his teaching was indistinguishable from what is ordinarily understood as the "second-blessing," and other hall-marks of Perfectionism. Warfield contends that this belief in possible complete suppression is of the essence of Perfectionism, which has always maintained that a fall from a state of sinless perfection is possible.

That Chafer did not benefit from the salutary criticisms of Warfield is apparent from his later writing, indeed his last writings. We now consider Chafer's response. In a later edition of Chafer's book, he gives a detailed response to Warfield's criticisms, and so today we enjoy the benefit of a major work, articulating the dispensational view, a major critique from a Reformed theologian, with an extensive reply by Chafer himself.

The first thing Chafer notices in Warfield's criticism is that the latter says that Chafer, "subjects the gracious working of God to human determination."<sup>28</sup> What Warfield was saying at that point was in reference to the control of the new nature by the mysterious "he" in dispensational sanctification. We have already presented that thinking in considerable detail — as a matter of fact, in much more detail than Warfield ever enters into in his review. Warfield, not having probed the matter as deeply as we have necessarily had to do, simply notices that the Chaferian thought has the Christian himself determining the Spirit's activity in sanctification. When Warfield wrote that, Ryrie had not yet coined his metaphor about the two tape recorders, with its assumption of a third entity. But the thought was already present, without that metaphor, in Chafer also. Warfield is simply taking Chafer at face value on this matter, though not without considerable doubt about the identity of this controlling human agent.

What is Chafer's reply? First, he insists that he believes with Warfield that God determines everything and that He realizes everything that He determines. Chafer insists that he is as Calvinistic as Warfield on this matter. But, he adds:

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<sup>27</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 47, 31, 107, 139.

<sup>28</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68–69, note. Note the discussion of the Chafer-Warfield matter in Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool, 1985).

there is equal emphasis in the Scriptures upon the fact that lying between these two undiminished aspects of His sovereignty — His eternal purpose and its perfect realization — He has permitted sufficient latitude for some exercise of the human will. In so doing, His determined ends are in no way jeopardized. There is difficulty here, but what, in Scripture, is difficult for the finite mind to harmonize is doubtless harmonized in the mind of God.<sup>29</sup>

Chafer misses Warfield's point. Warfield never denies the reality of human choices. He is simply teaching the Reformed doctrine that God works grace into the soul before the soul works grace out. We work out because He is working within. He accuses Chafer of reversing the process, thus subjecting the gracious working of God to human determination. We have noted this repeatedly in the writing of Chafer and other dispensationalists.

The situation is even worse than Warfield realized. This human determination is either by the corrupt human, fallen, depraved nature, which would never make such a choice as that, or by this invisible, nonexistent human person. In other words, it is a human sinner or else a nonentity who actually determines the gracious working of God. Chafer's reply, that he believes in the reality of Christian choices, does not touch Warfield's point, which is that genuinely human Christian choices follow, rather than precede, God's gracious working.

As Chafer goes further in his reply to Warfield, he sinks deeper and deeper into error:

Though it is revealed that God must impart the moving, enabling grace whereby one may believe unto salvation (John 6:44, cf. 12:32), or whereby one may yield unto a spiritual life (Philippians 2:13), it is as clearly revealed that, within His sovereign purpose and power, God has everywhere conditioned both salvation and spiritual life upon these human conditions.<sup>30</sup>

This is a flat contradiction. Chafer is saying in the first part of the sentence that he acknowledges Warfield's point, that God does initiate faith unto justification and grace unto sanctification. Having genuflected at the Calvinistic shrine, Chafer then goes on to contradict what he has said by his concluding remark, that God has "everywhere conditioned both salvation and spiritual life upon these human conditions." How can the divine activity be conditioned upon human activity and human activity

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<sup>29</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68.

<sup>30</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68.

be conditioned upon divine activity at the same moment in time? (It is agreed by Warfield and Chafer that God's working in leads to the saint's working out which in turn leads to God's working in etc., but that is not what is being debated here.) It has to be one or the other. It cannot be both. In the first part of the sentence, Chafer is talking as a Calvinist. In the end of the sentence he is a pure Pelagian. He has the option of being a Calvinist or a Pelagian, but not of being both. Next, Chafer addresses himself to the charge, discussed above, that the dispensational theory of sanctification involves instantaneous change from carnality to spirituality:

The same reviewer objects to the teaching that there is any sudden change possible from the carnal state to the spiritual state. To quote: "He who believes in Jesus Christ is under grace, and his whole course, in its process and in its issue alike, is determined by grace, and therefore, having been predestined to be conformed to the image of God's Son, he is surely being conformed to that image, God Himself seeing to it that he is not only called and justified but also glorified. You may find Christians at every stage of this process, for it is a process through which all must pass; but you will find none who will not in God's own time and way pass through every stage of it. There are not two kinds of Christians, although there are Christians at every conceivable stage of advancement towards the one goal to which all are bound and at which all shall arrive."<sup>31</sup>

Here the reader can see that Warfield is objecting to this notion of the two natures which alternately are in operation in perfect sinfulness or perfect spirituality. As a Reformed theologian, he sees instead a gradual struggle toward conquest of the remaining corruption, with a mixture of good and evil in all of the actions of the regenerate person.

What is Chafer's reply to this fundamental criticism? In the light of Chafer's teaching, the first part of his reply is incredible: "Doubtless there are varying degrees of carnality as there are varying degrees of spirituality."<sup>32</sup> We are fully aware of the fact that Chafer and others are constantly saying this but, as I have pointed out more than once, they have no basis in their view of sanctification for saying it. As we have seen, the carnal nature is counterbalanced rather than changed by the spiritual. Thus, Chafer's claim that the carnal nature is subject to "varying degrees" is, in terms of his system, an incoherent statement.

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<sup>31</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68.

<sup>32</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68.

Chafer is not yet finished. He believes that the matter may be clarified by resorting to a distinction between “spirituality” and “growth.” He remarks with reference to Warfield, “In this reviewer’s mind, the change from carnality to spirituality is evidently confused with Christian growth.”<sup>33</sup> Chafer goes on to write:

Christian growth is undoubtedly a process of development under the determined purpose of God which will end, with the certainty of the Infinite, in a complete likeness to Christ; but spirituality is the present state of blessing and power of the believer who, at the same time, may be very immature. A Christian can and should be spiritual from the moment he is saved. Spirituality, which is the unhindered manifestation of the Spirit in life, is provided to the full *for* all believers who “confess” their sins, “yield” to God, and “walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.” When these conditions are complied with, the results are immediate; for no process is indicated. Jacob, an Old Testament type, was completely changed in one night.<sup>34</sup>

These sentences simply make no sense. Their incoherence is easily seen by asking a simple question — what is it that “grows”? Certainly it is not the old carnal nature, for this nature remains as it was although it may possibly be counterbalanced. Certainly it is not the new nature for this new nature is the indwelling Spirit of God and the divine nature is certainly not subject to “growth.” The only thing which might be said to grow is the mythical “third nature” which again seems to be implied by the dispensational system but is, alas, nowhere to be found.

The speciousness of Chafer’s distinction between “growth” and “spirituality” is also evident when one examines the true nature of Christian growth. Chafer’s distinction implies that spiritual immaturity is generally a state of childishness, innocent and undeveloped. But the acts of the old nature are not innocent and undeveloped; they are acts of wickedness. If Chafer was really trying to talk about a process of “spiritual growth” he would talk about a person growing out of his sensuality or sinfulness into greater and greater spirituality. That is exactly what Warfield is saying, and that is what spiritual growth does mean. There is no confusion in such a statement. But for Chafer, that is not the way sanctification operates. Men do not daily die more and more to sin and live more and more to righteousness. Corrupt human nature is not changed for the better by the miracle of God’s grace. Rather, a man

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<sup>33</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68

<sup>34</sup> Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual*, 68.



bounces back and forth between dominion by the carnal nature and control by the spiritual nature. He momentarily lives totally to sin or totally to righteousness.

We have seen that the later dispensationalists examined above, such as Ryrie and Peterson, operate with precisely the same conceptual schema as Chafer. Whether one speaks of a carnal and a spiritual nature or of Ryrie's "two tapes," the basic idea is the same — a carnal nature which is never really changed for the better and a spiritual nature which is, in reality, the infinite being of God.

### **The Historical Context of Dispensational Perfectionism**

The perfectionist strain in dispensationalism that we have considered is, in fact, super-perfectionism. It imputes the perfection of God to the Christian. The new nature, as we have seen, is the divine nature and that never needed perfecting, but has always, everlastingly, in and of itself, and immutably, been perfect. When that nature acts, it cannot act any other way than perfectly. So when the action of the new nature is attributed to the Christian person, that Christian is perfect with the perfection of deity.

This perfectionist element in dispensationalism is what led Warfield to identify it with that type of movement. As we have seen, however, dispensational theologians do not take kindly to such a label. Chafer, as we saw, took pains to distinguish his own views from Wesleyan and Keswick Perfectionism. This repeated charge has created a problem for the dispensational self-understanding. They know that Protestantism, generally, is anti-perfectionist. Claiming to be four-point Calvinists, they think of themselves as Reformed, and Reformed theology is always anti-perfectionist. Consequently, when dispensationalism lapses into the perfectionist heresy, it is bound to be somewhat unconscious of it. That being the case, it is going to be very reluctant to use the word *perfection* favorably. So one must listen carefully for synonyms for the same idea and for tendencies that indubitably imply that conclusion.

Nevertheless, recent historical research has confirmed the existence of a genetic link between dispensationalism and Perfectionism. George Marsden has noted the wave of interest in holiness and in the work of the Holy Spirit which characterized American evangelicalism in the late nineteenth century. This had been preceded by over a century of complex interaction between the Wesleyan perfectionist groups, which stressed the possibility of actual freedom from known sin and viewed sanctification as a single event or "second blessing," and Reformed thinkers who

dismissed the possibility of actually attaining to a state of sinless perfection and who viewed sanctification as a process. Marsden writes:

These two opposed views clashed at first and were then synthesized during the evangelical revivals of the first half of the nineteenth century in America. Charles Finney brought the two views together and by 1840 was introducing something very similar to the Methodist holiness teaching into Reformed circles.<sup>35</sup>

The addition of British elements to this American matrix of holiness concerns eventually gave birth to the so-called “Keswick Movement.” As Marsden notes, the Keswick theory of sanctification involved the notion of the “counteraction” of the sinful nature by the “filling of the Spirit”:

The rest of Keswick teaching follows from these concepts of sin and counteracting grace. There are two stages of Christian experience: that of the “carnal Christian,” and that of the “spiritual.” To move from the lower to the higher state takes a definite act of faith or “consecration,” the prerequisite to being filled with the Spirit. This consecration means an “absolute surrender,” almost always described by the biblical term “yielding.” Self is dethroned, God is enthroned.<sup>36</sup>

The similarities of Keswick sanctification theory to the dispensationalism described above are patently obvious. This is entirely understandable in that Charles Trumbull, Scofield’s protégé, was a central figure in the Keswick movement and Scofield “eventually more or less canonized Keswick teachings in his *Reference Bible*.”<sup>37</sup> Marsden is undoubtedly correct in saying that “Dispensationalist and Keswick teachings were two sides of the same movement.”<sup>38</sup> (Though, of course, its opposite, dispensational Antinomianism, must never be forgotten.)

Although there are some slight differences of emphasis, dispensational and Keswick sanctification theories reduce to the same basic set of concerns — the counterbalancing of the sin nature by the indwelling divine Spirit, the necessity of yielding to the divine presence within, the possibility of living without sin when controlled by the Spirit, and the division of Christians into the categories of carnal and spiritual. Thus, it is clear that dispensationalism teaches a form of Perfectionism and that it has clear historical connections to explicitly perfectionist movements.

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<sup>35</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 78.

<sup>37</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 79.

<sup>38</sup> Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 80.

There is, therefore, little reason to deny dispensationalism the label of Perfectionism — however loathe dispensationalists themselves may be to accept it, and however inconsistent their undeniable Antinomianism.

### **The Cost of Error**

The cost of theological error is often high and the dispensational doctrine of sanctification has exacted a particularly heavy toll on the church. This doctrine of sanctification has contributed to the desiccation of the personal spirituality of many Christians. Furthermore, the Antinomianism which inevitably attends this doctrine has severely compromised the witness of the church before a watching world. Perhaps most tragic is the false assurance given by dispensationalism to many who have no valid reason to consider themselves Christians.

#### *Personal Spirituality*

We have seen that the dispensational theory of sanctification is utterly incapable of accounting for the phenomenon of true Christian spirituality. Instead of a steady pattern of genuine spiritual progress and growth through dependence upon divine grace, dispensationalism offers the Christian an endless pattern of vacillation between the poles of carnality and spirituality. Instead of growing personal wholeness and inner healing, dispensationalism offers the believer a schizophrenia of two mutually exclusive natures.

Dispensationalism implicitly counsels the Christian to “let go and let God,” but it cannot empower him to do so. The Pauline formula for sanctification is very different. Rather than counseling passivity and nonresistance to an indwelling new divine nature, the Apostle urges the positive action of obedience. Paul understood that it is only as we actively obey that we recognize our dependence on God’s grace. His words to the church at Philippi illustrate this truth well:

So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. (Phil. 2:12–13, NASB)

This point cannot be overemphasized. After all, dispensationalism is a popular movement and people live their lives by these formulae. I am myself one of those who, at one time assuming this view of sanctification to be correct, can remember the psychological anguish I went through trying to cultivate spirituality by such a fallacious theory of sanctification. There are many people in the dispensational school of thought, including,

I am afraid, most of the teachers, who simply do not see the error of this teaching. They endeavor, undoubtedly in great agony, to live out its impossible principles.

#### *Antinomianism*

Probably the most pernicious error to spring from this dispensational theory of sanctification is its Antinomianism. It is the most pernicious because it immediately affects a person's very behavior, and it makes it possible for a person to be considered a true Christian while acting in a way that would make Satan proud of him. It also allows a person to have false assurance of salvation in spite of adultery, murder, or other crimes as part of his standard behavior.

Even if a person does not fall into the grosser forms of sin, dispensationalism offers little incentive for total commitment. When I stressed Christian discipleship on a certain Christian campus, a student asked me in utter earnestness, "Are you trying to say that to be a Christian one must follow Jesus Christ?" Undoubtedly, this person and thousands and thousands of others have learned from dispensationalism that there is no need to fear the judgment seat of Christ.

Antinomianism springs from the dispensationalists' view of sanctification because it supposes sanctification to be merely the manifestation of the perfect, divine, new nature by the agency of the Holy Spirit. It is apparent that, if sanctification is but the manifestation of the divine nature within, there is no need of holding by the law which is fundamentally negative. This new nature has no inclination to do the things forbidden in the law, therefore it is irrelevant for the new nature. We have seen that dispensationalists view the Christian as not under the law in any sense at all even as a rule of life.

All of this is bad enough; what is worse is that dispensationalists consistently proceed to regard violations of the commands of the law as not related to one's salvation by grace. This horrible error may appear inoffensive because it is sometimes stated as if it were a proper corollary of the doctrine of justification by faith. If one is justified by faith, it is true that no infraction of the law can destroy that justification. "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17, KJV). Having begun in faith, Christians know that they cannot be perfected by the flesh (see Gal. 3:3). Their righteousness came "apart from the law" (Rom. 3:21) in the sense of not being based upon their perfect keeping of the law. Believers in perfect justification also believe in imperfect sanctification in this life.

All this may resemble the dispensational doctrine superficially, but only superficially. In substance, dispensationalism is radically different. It believes that regeneration brings a new divine nature that is separate from the old nature and unaffected by it, and that justification applies only to this new nature. The old nature continues to sin, and indeed, does nothing but sin, because it is utterly unaffected by sanctification. But since the dispensationalists do not really believe in the salvation of the sinner (who desperately needs it), but only of the saint (who as a part of God does not need it), he does not care what this old nature does.

How the old nature behaves does not affect the “salvation” of the new nature at all. The old nature may violate the law of God all the day long, but that does not affect the new nature. A person may actually have the old nature operating all the time in the business of sin and nothing but sin, but, since it is the old nature, it does not affect his salvation. Therefore, a person may be a murderer, adulterer, thief, blasphemer, hater of God and man all the moments of all the days of his life, without ever “losing his salvation” or being in the slightest danger of doing so. That all this is a frightful travesty on the biblical doctrine of being saved by grace apart from the works of the law is manifest.

The Reformed doctrine, which recognizes that the man himself is regenerated (that is, that the old nature is given a new principle of life and this new principle, though it does not eradicate the other, becomes dominant over it), states that this regenerated person will strive after holiness without which no man shall see the Lord (see Heb. 12:14). If he does not do so, it is manifest that he has not had the new birth at all. He does not rest his new birth or his justification on the excellence of the life he lives, but he rests the ascertaining of the presence of a new nature on the life he lives. He does not establish his election on his works, but by them he makes it sure to himself. He does not work out his justification, but he does work out his sanctification if God is working in him to will and to do. If he is not working out, he knows that God is not working in. There is no possibility, on the one hand, of legalism; nor, on the other hand, of carnal security. As Luther, Calvin, the Reformation, and all sound teachers, we are justified by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone.

We notice, with relief, that many dispensationalists are better Christians than their theology allows. Mercifully, many have not worked out their principles in life with the consistency that logically should have been. Nevertheless, there is a definite degree of approximation in life to what is held so tenaciously in thought. There is no question that dispensationalism has been relatively indifferent to strict morality and

usually indifferent to reform activities. Its preaching has always been very lopsidedly balanced in favor of their notion of grace with a conspicuous absence of moral stress. As a matter of fact, in some of their circles it would be assumed that a man is a liberal if he preached on humility or self-discipline.

Let it be noted that we are not simply hanging up in public view some of dispensationalism's dirty laundry. Every movement in every branch of the Christian church has its dirty clothes, and to speak of it publicly would not tend to advance the interest of the kingdom of God in most cases. Nor is it denied, on the other hand, that dispensationalism has some good features that are worthy of commendation. For one thing, these men are notably zealous — but alas for an unsound system of doctrine and practice. For another, they make an attempt to ground their positions on the Scriptures. But, we mention the above faults because they grow directly out of their faulty doctrine of sanctification. They illustrate their Antinomian teachings, and dispensationalists cannot properly point to these things as deviations from their teachings.

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### **TROUBLING ANTINOMIANISM (3): The Lordship Controversy**

The last chapter of this book deals with current history. The church is presently faced with a struggle equal in importance to the fourth-century Nicene battle for the deity of Christ and the Reformation struggle for the doctrine of justification by faith. In both of these previous controversies, the very gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake. The situation is no different today. I have shown throughout this volume that dispensationalism teaches a different gospel. The gospel of dispensational Antinomianism declares that a person may have Christ as Savior but refuse to accept Him as Lord of one's life. This battle has been called the "Lordship Salvation" controversy.

#### **The Historical Context of the Controversy**

This controversy is especially important because of the historical context in which it occurs. In the last decade of the twentieth century, mainline "Christianity" is in decline both theologically and sociologically. Liberal theology is "another gospel," and the mainline churches which espouse it are increasingly becoming the "sideline" churches as their memberships vote with their feet. Liberalism, secularism, and "post-Christianity" dominate the scene, especially in Europe and America. Only those denominations out of the mainstream and fighting against its heavy flow are spreading a gospel that bears any resemblance to the biblical original.

Among these would-be-faithful, dispensationalists have, in the twentieth century, been the most numerous, though they bear a twisted gospel. In the historical section of this volume, we saw that this prominence is due to an accident of history, to the fact that dispensationalists were able to market their theology as a viable alternative to the theological modernism or liberalism which swept into the major denominations during the early part of this century. It is perhaps not surprising that the Lordship controversy erupted during a period in which the decline of the mainline churches became evident and during which evangelicalism has turned its attention somewhat from a discredited external enemy to the task of getting its own theological house in order. The evangelical world

is gradually realizing that, in spite of its great zeal, dispensationalism really lacks the biblical wisdom it claims so uniquely to possess.

All this dispensational defection from the gospel has come to a head in the Lordship controversy. Indeed, the debate itself has hardened many in their Antinomianism. Of course, dispensational Antinomianism has been pointed out since the earliest days of the movement, but there has been a veritable explosion of it in recent years. The fact that the antinomian tendencies of dispensationalism were previously held somewhat in check is due to the fact that, early in its history, dispensationalism was grafted on to theologies and church traditions, such as Calvinism, where the law of God and obedience to it were held in high esteem.

The parallel between the present situation and the Reformation period may be extended. Luther and Calvin undertook the Reformation struggle because of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, even though the Roman church held to many other indispensable verities of the Christian religion. Why so? They recognized that the doctrine of justification was central to God's grace and that justification is only through the faith which unites the believer with Christ. All the truths of the Roman faith were of no value if redemption could not reach perishing sinners. Luther was willing even to keep the papacy if only the pope would let God's people have a completely gracious salvation. When he would not, the pope had to go.

The situation is the same today. Scofield and his followers exercise a kind of papal infallibilism over thousands and thousands of evangelicals. In spite of numerous contemporary fringe changes, dispensationalism in America is still essentially Scofieldian, and teachers with the imprimatur of dispensational "orthodoxy" wield tremendous power and influence over many Christians. That they have not exercised that authority wisely is abundantly evident.

#### **The Terms of the Debate**

As early as 1969, Charles Ryrie had called attention to differences within evangelicalism over this issue in his *Balancing the Christian Life*. When I was lecturing on church history at Campus Crusade's conference grounds in Fort Collins, Colorado in the late seventies, I called attention to the various appearances of Antinomianism in the church through the centuries. After a class a student asked me to read Dr. Ryrie's book and tell the class whether it was antinomian. I did read it and regretfully reported to the class of some four hundred crusaders that, in fact, it was. Later I spoke and corresponded with Dr. Ryrie and published my little



*Primer on Dispensationalism* in 1982, where I noted this fundamental and fatal error of Antinomianism.

Without question, the most serious and effective attack on dispensational Antinomianism has come from within dispensational ranks. Though many others had said the same things before him, when John MacArthur, almost universally recognized as a respected dispensationalist himself, wrote *The Gospel According to Jesus*, the fat was in the fire.<sup>1</sup> A brief summary of MacArthur's epochal book as it applies to the Lordship controversy is in order. The essential declaration of *The Gospel According to Jesus* is that Jesus Himself insists that if a person does not take up Christ's cross and follow Him that person does not have saving faith in Him and will be disowned and damned by Him at the day of judgment. That is shown through parable after parable, teaching after teaching, and illustration after illustration. The appendix adds insult to injury against dispensationalism's antinomian teaching by showing that the church's historic understanding of the gospel has always recognized the necessity of obedience. The question in the mind of the non-dispensational reader is why would such an obviously sound book cause the flicker of an eye, not to mention an ecclesiastical earthquake.

But a controversy of enormous proportions has resulted none the less. Since then there has been an explosion of materials written on both sides of the question. The evangelical journal *Christianity Today* aptly referred to the Lordship controversy as a "volcanic issue" and the controversy shows little signs of dying down.<sup>2</sup> It is possible to mention only a few of these works although a very lengthy list could be compiled. Notable dispensational statements have been written by Charles Ryrie, Zane Hodges, G. M. Cocoris, and Livingston Blauvelt, Jr.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the other effects of the controversy may be, it has forced such dispensationalists to be much more baldly explicit in their Antinomianism.

Recent materials critical of dispensationalism on this issue have not been lacking either. Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn III made a

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> *Christianity Today* (Sept. 22, 1989): 21.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*; Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege; Absolutely Free* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989); G. M. Cocoris, *Lordship Salvation — Is It Biblical?* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1983); *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 1984); Livingston Blauvelt, Jr., "Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (1986):37–45.

notable contribution in 1985 with their *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow*.<sup>4</sup> Coming from two scholars who knew dispensationalism from the inside as students at Dallas Theological Seminary, this volume is a thorough study of crucial biblical passages with an especially fine examination of eschatology and a masterful defense of the Reformed faith.

Vern Poythress, professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary, has continued the tradition of O. T. Allis and B. B. Warfield with his incisive Reformed criticism of dispensationalism. His irenic yet penetrating *Understanding Dispensationalists* is well worth reading — especially the treatment of dispensational hermeneutics.<sup>5</sup>

*Christianity Today*, sensing the significance of the Lordship controversy, gave us the responses of three well-known dispensationalists — S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., Charles C. Ryrie, and Zane Hodges. Uninformed readers would hardly realize the momentous significance of the controversy from Dr. Johnson's low-key survey article, which tended to emphasize commonalities rather than differences. Johnson explained the battle as largely a failure to communicate: "The problem of definitions accounts for the fact that persons holding the same theological views debate and disagree with one another."<sup>6</sup> The reality of the matter is that Johnson is about half right — this is not a two-sided but a one-sided fault. Lordship teachers generally have defined the issue correctly while the dispensational antinomians have routinely failed to grasp the basic issues at stake. Johnson should have so ruled rather than give the impression that the whole affair is a logomachy.

Let me illustrate this striking failure to comprehend the issues by briefly examining the responses of a number of noted dispensationalists to the controversy.

#### *Charles Ryrie*

In his book, *So Great Salvation*, Ryrie is feeling the pressure of his Antinomianism more keenly than ever before in his long-term opposition to Lordship teaching. Indeed, the book itself is curiously double-minded.

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<sup>4</sup> Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, III, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

<sup>6</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, "How Faith Works," *Christianity Today* (Sept. 22, 1989): 21–25

On the one hand, he is virtually driven to the wall of the deathbed convert. The only believer who didn't follow the Lord he says, didn't because he didn't live to do so! He "never had time to show he was a disciple."<sup>7</sup> Ryrie is virtually admitting that believers immediately follow Jesus Christ in this world unless death prevents them.

Every Christian will bear spiritual fruit. Somewhere, sometime, somehow. Otherwise that person is not a believer. Every born again individual will be fruitful. Not to be fruitful is to be faithless, without faith, and therefore without salvation.<sup>8</sup>

"Somewhere, sometime, somehow." That is not enough, Dr. Ryrie. The Holy Spirit never leaves or forsakes the saint, and the Holy Spirit always bears the fruit of the Spirit.

Ryrie goes on to show that he has missed the point, contending that "learning and obeying are not *prerequisites* for believing, they are *products* of believing."<sup>9</sup> What Lordship teacher ever said otherwise? Does this champion of Antinomianism not understand that the issue is the *immediacy* of that product? Obedience is not prior to faith; neither is it subsequent in time. If faith came at the very minute of death, obedience would come with it. Of course, the dying individual would not be able to show it or even say it before he dies, but the Lord knows it and so do we because the Lord tells us so.

That Ryrie cannot grasp the distinction between a necessary condition and a meritorious condition is apparent in the following passage:

The question is not whether believers will sin, or whether they will bear fruit. They will sin, and they will bear fruit. The question is whether commitment . . . is a necessary part of faith and thus of the gospel.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, in spite of all of his concessions, Ryrie simply will not give up his Antinomianism or understand the biblical doctrine of sanctification. To the statements cited above must also be added his suggestion that it is possible for one who has truly believed, not only not to show fruit, but to cease believing in Christ altogether and still to receive eternal life.<sup>11</sup> This is Antinomianism of the most radical sort.

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<sup>7</sup> Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 103.

<sup>8</sup> Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 105.

<sup>10</sup> Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 141, critiqued above.

Instead of the perseverance of the saint, this is the preservation of the sinner.

*Zane Hodges*

I dealt with this chief figure in the Lordship controversy more extensively in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, a few comments are in order here. The title of Hodges recent volume, *Absolutely Free*, points graphically to the extent of his misunderstanding of the matter. He extends his finger into the light for a moment by granting that a true believer does become an obedient disciple. But he quickly draws back that timid finger by saying that true Christians *can drop out of Christ's school but not out of Christ*. Obedience is still an elective course in Christ's academy — not required. Antinomianism is still the gospel.<sup>12</sup>

Salvation is “absolutely free” but not in the way Hodges imagines. It is absolutely free because Christ has fulfilled all the meritorious requirements for it. It is, however, not *absolutely free from good works*. If the gospel is free from good works, it is not the gospel. Salvation is God's great gift whose very purpose is to produce good works. The words of Christ cannot be more clear on this matter: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21, NIV).

*Livingston Blauvelt, Jr.*

Blauvelt remarks that MacArthur's teaching regarding Lordship salvation “is false because it subtly adds works to the clear and simple condition for salvation.”<sup>13</sup> Again, this fundamental failure to comprehend is evident. Lordship teaching does not “add works,” as if faith were not sufficient. The “works” are part of the definition of faith. It is a working faith which unites the believer with Christ, not a mere nominal or dead faith.

*J. Dwight Pentecost*

Pentecost writes, “Good works in the believer's life are the result of salvation; they are not the cause.”<sup>14</sup> Here, in a principal disputant, is the loose use of the word salvation. We have seen that Christ repeatedly

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<sup>12</sup> Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, see chapter on “Dropping Out.”

<sup>13</sup> Blauvelt, “Does the Bible Teach,” 38.

<sup>14</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, “A Christian Perspective,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Winter, 1988):11.

makes good works a condition for salvation (see Matt. 7:21). “Salvation,” in the broadest sense, includes good works. “Salvation” is more than salvation from the penalty of sin; it is also salvation from the misery of sinful practices. The “work” of Philippians 2:13 and elsewhere is *identified* with “salvation” and is not merely a “result” of it.

I could hope that what Pentecost means is that “good works” are an immediate corollary and not a cause of justification. This is exactly what Lordship advocates teach, but Pentecost thinks he is defending anti-Lordship teaching by making his observation.

*Ray A. Stanford*

Antinomians typically misunderstand the relationship between faith and repentance, and this is especially evident in this statement by Stanford: “Notice that the Bible states here that we are to proclaim repentance toward God. Nothing here about turning from sin.”<sup>15</sup>

How does one “proclaim repentance” without thereby proclaiming a hatred of sin and a turning from it? If there is “nothing here about turning from sin,” there is nothing here about repentance. Repentance (*metanoia*) is mentally and spiritually turning from sin (implying outward action). This is precisely what repentance does proclaim.

I occasionally see a practicing homosexual who understands this issue far more accurately than the antinomians. He believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and only Savior of mankind. This man knows that if he ever came to saving faith in Christ, Christ would have saved him instantly. This person also knows that if he does not repent and believe he will certainly go to hell forever — and deserve it. This particular perishing sinner is utterly orthodox, convicted of the wrongness of his sin, but unwilling to repent and forsake it. He is unsaved and he knows it. He knows that if he were born of God he would enter the kingdom of God — something which practicing homosexuals do not do (see 1 Cor. 6:9–10).

### **What is at Stake**

This is no mere ivory tower concern. It is not an esoteric debate among theologians; the antinomian threat is everywhere. Antinomianism has penetrated, and in many cases permeated, many evangelical churches in America. This false gospel is even spread by missionaries in foreign lands. A Reformed lawyer friend now serving with our military in a foreign land has given me permission to use here a letter he recently wrote to me.

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<sup>15</sup> Ray A. Stanford, *Handbook of Personal Evangelism*, 87.

Dear Dr. Gerstner,

I am a lawyer serving with the U.S. Air Force in Madrid, Spain . . . .  
My beliefs are now firmly in the Reformed camp.

Living in Madrid, I have made the acquaintance of several missionaries. They are fine Christian people fighting a tough battle here in Spain. One of them is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary. We often get together and study the Bible and discuss theology. We were studying Hebrews and as you can guess, "easy believism" reared its head.

His position is as follows: 1) You can have Jesus as Savior and not Lord. 2) Salvation and discipleship are not the same thing. 3) Repentance means to change your mind about Jesus, not about sin. 4) Christians can fall away and not come back, and if they then die they will go to heaven. 5) He keeps telling me that if I believe as I do (that repentance does lead to a changed life and a changed mind about sin, and that a true Christian will not abide in sin), I cannot have assurance because I sin every day. 6) Calvin and Luther have an "insane" view of sin and, besides, they were "bad" people.

My own study of Galatians and the Reformers has strengthened my belief in *sola fide*. Are we now Judaizers adding conditions to the pure gospel? Paul says that we can only live right with God by faith in Him and by His empowering presence. On some of your tapes you have spoken out against the "dispensational" heresy. I seem to remember on one of your tapes stating that these people failed to make a distinction between necessary and meritorious works, but you moved on rather quickly. What's the deal?

Ryrie and Hodges are conservative theologians. It seems to me that they are trying to change their theology to fit reality (many so-called Christians don't live holy lives) rather than trying to change reality by their theology.

Any help or insight would be sincerely appreciated.

Respectfully yours,  
John W. Gunderson

I have shown by this survey of history, past and present, that dispensationalism is another gospel. The stakes are indeed high, for the church faces a direct challenge from within Protestantism to the integrity of the gospel message. If Luther had to proclaim to the church of the sixteenth century that justification is by faith alone and not by meritorious works, we must protest to the church, as she approaches the twenty-first century, that justification is by a living and not by a dead faith!

### Conclusion

I have now examined the dispensationalism of yesterday and today. We have found that dispensationalism is virtually the same today as

yesterday. There have been some variations, of course, but none are essential. There are many varieties (to use an expression from natural science), but no new species.

We have seen that, although dispensationalism claims to be four-point Calvinism, it is, in reality, consistent Arminianism. This spurious Calvinism denies all five points of Calvinism. Its “total depravity” is not total because this allegedly depraved person is, nonetheless, able to exercise faith. dispensational “unconditional election” is actually an election conditioned on foreseen faith. The dispensational denial of “limited atonement” (to which it admits) destroys the possibility of any true Calvinism. dispensational irresistible grace is, upon examination, nothing of the sort. Finally, and perhaps most important, dispensationalism rejects the Calvinistic and scriptural doctrine of the perseverance of the saints in favor of an utter travesty — the “eternal security” of the sinner.

We have also seen that dispensationalism is, at best, dubious evangelicalism. All of its distinctive doctrines undermine, either explicitly or implicitly, the salvation which is to be found only in Jesus Christ. Its understanding of a “dispensation” undercuts the biblical doctrine of grace in any dispensation. Its notion of “prospective salvation” in the Old Testament is very different from salvation in Jesus Christ, and the alleged kingdom offer to the Jews dishonors the Lord whom the dispensationalist claims to serve. The dispensational distinction between Israel and the church, rather than distinguishing law and grace, denies grace completely, maintaining as it does that there is more than one way of salvation. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the Antinomianism inherent in dispensationalism places souls in jeopardy by teaching that a man may have Christ as Savior but not as Lord, that good works are an option for the Christian, even that a person may totally cease to believe in Christ and still be saved.

Charles Ryrie concluded his well-known book, *Dispensationalism Today*, with an appeal to fellow Christians to recognize the validity of dispensationalism alongside their own interpretations. Anything other than that seems ungracious to Dr. Ryrie. Dispensationalists consider their theology Christian, and other Christians should concur in that judgment. People, including dispensationalists, should be taken at face value, their views accepted as what they say they are.

Consider the illustration he cites. “Neither the older nor the newer dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation, and it is not fair to attempt

to make them so teach.”<sup>16</sup> If I have shown anything in this present volume, it is that dispensationalism does teach more than one way of salvation — and that in doing so it teaches no salvation at all. If that is true it is fair so to charge. Indeed it is absolutely imperative precisely because I love dispensationalists and value their souls and the souls of those they reach.

I do not wish to be ungracious. Neither do I wish to be naive. What Dr. Ryrie overlooks here is the crucial difference between utterance and intention. There may be a great difference between the two, as everyone recognizes. What Ryrie or anyone says and what he intends to say may be poles apart. I will believe that dispensationalists do not intend to teach two ways of salvation until it becomes clear that individual dispensationalists do understand the criticism, that they cannot answer it, and that they still go on, for whatever reason, teaching the doctrine.

On the other hand, the church is not called to spare false doctrine and false teachers because of the possible intentions of those who teach such doctrines. Any student of church history is quite aware that many heretics have been very sincere in their error. The standard of judgment is fidelity to God’s inerrant Word. The Apostle Paul’s charge to Timothy expresses this well:

Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage — with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:2–4, NIV)

My plea to all dispensationalists is this — show me the fundamental error in what I teach or admit your own fundamental error. We cannot both be right. One of us is wrong — seriously wrong. If you are wrong (in your doctrine, as I here charge), you are preaching nothing less than a false gospel. This calls for genuine repentance and fruits worthy of it before the Lord Jesus Christ whom we both profess to love and serve.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

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<sup>16</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 207.



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## SYSTEM CONFLICTS: Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology

### Introduction

Dispensationalists like to contrast themselves with covenant theologians. They seem to view these two systems as the two available alternatives. Covenant theologians, on the other hand, have been among the most trenchant critics of dispensationalism. For this reason it is necessary to pay some more attention to the dispensational case against Covenant theology.

The two systems are substantively very different, although there are some surface similarities. Both systems make much of the covenants in Scripture. What dispensationalism means by a dispensation is, in a formal sense, what covenant theology mean by “covenant.” Dispensationalism numbers seven or so, while covenant theology commonly refer to only two (with the covenant of redemption in the eternal background). Beneath this formal similarity lie deep differences. Covenant theology recognizes two overarching covenants which frame God’s dealings with man — the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The covenant of works was established between God and Adam in the Garden and promised eternal life on condition of obedience. That covenant of works was broken in the Fall and is no longer in effect, being replaced by the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is between Christ and the believer who accepts (believes) His salvation. Covenant theology traces this single covenant of grace throughout Scripture. Although it was administered in various ways throughout the Old and New Testaments, covenant theologians agree on one crucial point — there is one covenant of grace (although a number of administrations) and thus only one way of salvation.

Charles Lincoln attempts to prove the correctness of dispensational versus covenantal theology. His work on the covenants is the best dispensational presentation of the subject I have seen.<sup>1</sup> It contains the fullest array of arguments against the unity of the covenant of grace, the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Fred Lincoln, “The Development of the Covenant Theory,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 100 (1943):134–63.

so-called “all time covenant.” They are impressive, well articulated, and as cogent as the material permits. If this attack on Covenant theology can be successfully refuted, Covenant theology ought, in the process, to be vindicated in the minds of dispensationalists. I will examine all sixteen of Lincoln’s arguments in some detail.

### Interaction

First of all, Lincoln asserts that there is no Scripture that sets forth such a covenant. I concede this point only as I admit that no Scripture sets forth the Trinity explicitly. When the Jehovah’s Witnesses makes this charge against the truth of the Trinity, the dispensationalist joins the covenantalist in proving that Scripture does implicitly, and most emphatically, teach that doctrine. If the dispensationalist would follow the same method here, he would join with the covenantalist on this point also and maintain that the concept of the covenant of grace is spread throughout Scripture. It is true that the term “covenant of grace” is not used and the precise definition of Reformed theologians not articulated. But, is that the same thing as saying that “no Scripture sets forth such a covenant”? Does the Scripture not set forth the idea that God gave His Son to die as a sacrifice for our sins and that, when we accept that sacrifice, we are saved by that grace? When the dispensationalist says that there is no way of salvation in any dispensation except the way of the blood of Jesus Christ, is he not affirming the “all-time covenant of grace”? Is he not therein showing that the covenant of grace is not only not untenable, but is absolutely indispensable? Does the dispensationalist, in other words, have any objection to the covenant of grace except the absence of the very expression itself? As Van Harvey writes, “all Biblical Theology is, in a loose sense, ‘Covenant Theology.’”<sup>2</sup>

Lincoln’s second argument is that such a covenant of grace has not been recognized in the history of the church. With this second argument I also agreeably disagree. Just as the Bible does not use that type of phraseology, so also the church, until modern times, has not generally used that type of terminology. Just as truly as the Bible teaches the covenant of grace without using that particular language, so also the church has always held to the covenant of grace, even when it has not employed that language. If the dispensationalist is sincere in saying that

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<sup>2</sup> Van Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 61.

Old Testament believers are saved in Jesus Christ, then he does so, implicitly, as well.

Third, Lincoln contends that there is no teaching about it in the Protestant confessions until a century after the Reformation. This is both somewhat correct (in a formal sense) and historically misleading. There can be no doubt whatsoever that John Calvin (1509–64) strongly affirmed the unity of the covenant of grace.<sup>3</sup> Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) was virtually a covenant theologian proper (his argument for infant baptism presupposes the unity of the covenant of grace), and his successor, Heinrich Bullinger, indubitably was.<sup>4</sup> Bullinger, indisputably a covenant theologian, does not use the word “covenant” in his *Second Helvetic Confession* of 1566. Anyone reading the fifteenth chapter of this confession nevertheless would never doubt that it expressed Covenant theology. Thus, there can be no doubt that the unity of the covenant of grace was strongly affirmed by Reformed theologians from the earliest period of the Reformation. It is implicitly taught in the earlier confessional documents and explicitly mentioned in the later confessions. Fourth, Lincoln contends that covenantalism leads to the ignoring of the church covenants which occupy a large place in the Bible. Admittedly, there are many covenantal enactments in the Bible that are not especially developed in Covenant theology. The reason for this is that they do not represent fundamental theological concepts but specific agreements on particular occasions. Covenant theology is in no way opposed to these.

Here again, Lincoln has failed to do his historical homework. As a matter of fact, where Covenant theology has been most widely accepted, covenants of this character are most in evidence. The Scots, for example, are famous for their Covenanters. They were called “Covenanters” because of the church and national religious covenants which they made. It is not coincidental that they were covenant theologians in the sense in which we are discussing that term here. Seventeenth-century New England Congregationalism is an even more notable illustration of the propensity of covenant theologians to make church covenants.

Fifth, Lincoln contends that Covenant theology leaves no place for Israel’s national hopes. This is a more significant argument. Some

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<sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:10:1–6.

<sup>4</sup> See Ulrich Zwingli, “Of Baptism” in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, ed. G. W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 129–75. On Bullinger, see Leonard J. Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20 (1951):37–57; and J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1980).

covenant theologians do believe that Israel will return to the land God had promised her. Many covenant theologians believe in a general conversion of Israel in the end-time in accordance with their understanding of Romans 11:26. Many covenant theologians do not believe in either of those future hopes, but the point is that their belief or disbelief in Israel's future hopes of land and/or salvation does not grow out of their Covenant theology. It depends upon their understanding of the Biblical teaching and promises about the future of national Israel. It is an exegetical matter and not a theological implicate.

Dispensationalists do believe, of course, in both these future hopes of Israel. They think that any covenant theologian who thinks otherwise is in error. What I am saying to Lincoln here is that, even if these covenant theologians are in error, it is not because of their Covenant theology, which is the point he is attempting to make, but because of their exegesis.

The sixth reason, that Covenant theology does not allow any place for the distinctive position of the church, is ambiguous and therefore not cogent. Its ambiguity lies in the words "distinctive" and "church." If Mr. Lincoln means that Covenant theology has no distinguishing position for the present-day church, he is speaking incorrectly. Covenant theology maintains that there is a great *modal* difference between the church in this dispensation and the church of the older dispensation.

This difference was stated most sharply in the words of Jesus regarding the greatest member of the church in the old dispensation — John the Baptist. Our Lord said that, though John the Baptist was the greatest born of woman, he was less than the least in the kingdom of heaven (see Matt. 11:11). That did not mean that he was not in the church. That did not mean that he was not a spiritual person. All that it does mean is that, positionally speaking, his benefits as the greatest of all in the old dispensation were incomparably less than the benefits of the least in this much richer dispensation. Covenant theologians stress the theme of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 where he emphatically states that the church in this dispensation is in a much more glorious condition than she was in the dispensation of the law. In Galatians 3, Paul sees Old Testament church members as children; in this dispensation, those same children have grown up.

Dr. Lincoln, being a dispensationalist, probably means "unique" or "qualitatively different" by the word "distinctive." It is perfectly true that Covenant theology has no place for the notion that the church in this age is distinctively unique — that she never existed before Pentecost. Since

it has been proven that that is also the biblical doctrine, this is an argument in favor of and not against Covenant theology.

Seventh, Lincoln maintains that Covenant theology's spiritualizing hermeneutic vitiates the truth of God. Against this favorite dispensational argument I need only refer the reader back to chapter 6 of the present volume where the matter has been treated in great length.

Eighth, Lincoln alleges that Covenant theology errs in making the church the covenant people of God, whereas Scripture attributes that designation only to Israel. Here, I admit the criticism as a form of praise. Covenant theologians do believe that Israel is the only covenant people of God. But Israel, as we have seen, is not an earthly "herd of swine" — she is the church of God in the earlier dispensation. The church today is the Israel of God in this dispensation in which we live. "Israel," in the sense in which dispensationalists mean that term, is not the covenant people of God in any dispensation. The true Israel of God is indeed the church and the people of God in all dispensations.

Ninth, Lincoln contends that Covenant theology "applies a false definition of the word dispensation, making it to mean a mode of administering the covenant of grace."<sup>5</sup> I have no quarrel with this statement except for the word *false*. If that word were deleted and the word *true* put in its place, I would have an accurate statement of what a dispensation actually is. This I have shown in great detail above.

Lincoln's tenth allegation, that Covenant theology obliterates the distinctions of each dispensation, is simply false. Covenant theology does recognize and set forth the "distinctives of each dispensation." The difference is simply that the covenant theologians call these "distinctives" "modal" but not "substantive differences."

The very form of the eleventh argument against Covenant theology, that it "mixes" law and grace, is another argument in its favor. Covenant theologians recognize that law and grace exist side by side in both the Old and New Testaments. It also recognizes that law and grace must be *distinguished* in both dispensations. Dispensationalism, on the other hand, *separates* law and grace rather than distinguishing them. By separating the two along testamental lines, the dispensationalist fails to recognize the proper role of both in both Testaments. Dispensationalism not only does not "mix," but actually divorces law and grace so as to make the separated law an implicit form of legalism and the separated grace an explicit form of Antinomianism.

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<sup>5</sup> Lincoln, "The Development of the Covenant Theory," 136.

Twelfth, Lincoln states that covenant theologians fail to recognize the dispensations for what they are, and so accuse dispensationalists of teaching more than one way of salvation. I have proven at great length in the body of this book that dispensationalists do teach more than one way of salvation. Here I simply refer the reader back to Scofield's definition of a *dispensation* as "a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God."<sup>6</sup> If the word "testing" is to have any meaning at all, it is involved in the way of salvation.

Lincoln's thirteenth point is that Covenant theology misconstrues Ephesians 3:2, which passage allegedly makes the "present the exclusive time of grace stewardship."<sup>7</sup> I cannot believe what I am reading. Surely Dr. Lincoln does not want to suggest that, because the word *oeconomia* has the definite article, the Apostle Paul had a monopoly on the stewardship of grace?

Here we see that Lincoln's dispensationalism forces him to assume that there is more than one way of salvation, whether he admits to it or not. At this point, Lincoln seems to have more in common with the consistently dispensational Bullingerites than with more moderate dispensationalists. Covenant theology maintains (and most dispensationalists claim to believe) that there has only been one way of salvation in all dispensations. We all agree, furthermore, that that one way has been by grace. If we all agree that there has been only one way, and that the way of grace is in all dispensations, then certainly it is obvious that, whatever Paul means by Ephesians 3:2, he is not claiming that he alone was a proclaimer of the only way of salvation from the time the first saint was redeemed until the last.

Lincoln's fourteenth point, that Scripture mentions at least an "old" and a "new covenant" (which roughly correspond to the two Testaments) as proof that there are at least two contrasting covenants, is a heavy point but it does not help Lincoln's cause. Sufficient to say here, by way of refutation, that whatever lingering problems in reconciliation there may yet be, the old covenant by which Israel was saved was the blood of Jesus Christ and faith in it, which technically is nothing less than the covenant of grace. The way we are saved in the new covenant is by the covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ and faith in that blood. Whatever the differences are, they are not differences in essence. Rather, they are nonessential or

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<sup>6</sup> *Scofield Reference Bible*, 5.

<sup>7</sup> Lincoln, "The Development of the Covenant Theory," 137.

modal. So Dr. Lincoln is quite wrong in saying that there are “at least two *contrasting covenants*” of *grace*.

The fifteenth reason that John 1:17 shows that after Christ came, “grace is so manifested as to come the only way of approach to him,” is essentially the same as the sixteenth, so I consider them together.<sup>8</sup> It was the grace of Jesus Christ, the dispensationalist and covenantalist alike affirm, that saved people in the Mosaic era, just as it is the grace of Jesus Christ which saves people in the Christian era. If dispensationalists are going to insist that there is one way of salvation in all dispensations, then we are going to have to hold them to that claim. If they do hold to their own claim, then they cannot say (as Lincoln is suggesting here) that this *new* way is “the only way of approach to him,” as if it were essentially a different way from other dispensations. Lincoln himself seems to recognize that we cannot say that. Consequently, he qualifies the statement by indicating that it is a *clearer* way and a more open way, but not really a different way after all. It is almost as if, with the final argument of this array, Dr. Lincoln himself lets the covenantal truth out.

### Conclusion

In summary, let us say that, in spite of all his many arguments, Lincoln has not shown that the “all-time covenant of grace” is untenable. The speciousness of his many contentions shows that a true concept of the covenant of grace, whether by that name or any other, is lacking in Dr. Lincoln (and in dispensationalism generally). To talk about one, two, or three covenants is almost academic when it is noticed that dispensationalists do not have the one indispensable covenant of grace — the only way of salvation.

It is not merely that they reject the proper Reformed way of formulating this concept of salvation, but that they lack this concept of salvation in any formulation. In spite of all the dispensational protestations to the contrary, dispensations (if they mean what their definition says) have to be testings for salvation. If persons met those tests, then presumably they would be acceptable to God. Since they were sinners, this must imply that they were saved from their sins thereby. That does indeed make an all-time or any-time covenant of grace untenable.

That there is no covenant of grace in dispensational theology is most evident when it is lacking even in their dispensation of grace. The covenant of grace (because it is a covenant) does require something of

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<sup>8</sup> Lincoln, “The Development of the Covenant Theory,” 137–38.

man. This non-meritorious requirement is the same in both dispensations — a working faith. Since dispensationalism is demonstrably antinomian, it does not require anything of man for salvation — even faith. Call it covenant of grace or not, the only way of salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ, and dispensationalism does not require genuine faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. All it asks for is a “profession” of faith — which is hardly the same thing as Biblical saving faith in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I am aware that dispensationalists are asserting, more and more commonly today, that they do not teach merely nominal faith. However, assertion is not proof. When dispensationalism does truly give up mere nominalistic faith for a working faith, dispensationalism will be dispensationalism no more.



## **Part Four**

### **DEFENDERS AND RESPONSES**

An Answer to Dispensational Critiques of  
*Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth:*  
*A Critique of Dispensationalism*



## Introduction

I consider this addition to the book more important than *Wrongly Dividing* itself. Not that there has been any significant change, though important elucidations and corrections have been made.

The value of this volume is that the critics have been able to make their contributions. Perhaps they are more important than the author's. They certainly make a contribution the author could not make. They make the contribution that only futile criticism can make: they establish a book as only a critic — trying his best to destroy — can do. The critics of *Wrongly Dividing* have made it significant in dispensational bibliography. Surely dispensationalists who have perused the attacks on *Wrongly Dividing* here or elsewhere must conclude that if this is all our best attackers can do, the book must be essentially sound and dispensationalism must be essentially indefensible as this book and many others, argue.

This addition I dedicate to the critics because they have made it what it is. They have embellished it as I or its endorsers, never could. They have put a pedestal under it and I am genuinely grateful for their unintended generosity by way of comment.

Since *Wrongly Dividing* was concerned primarily with the theology of dispensationalism, and cites something of the historical background only for context, I will generally ignore that here and go directly to the theological issues.

Again, I will touch lightly on the philosophical background and positioning of dispensationalism since that is of lesser importance in the stance of this theology.

My two main points are the spurious Calvinism and the dubious Evangelicalism of dispensationalism. It became clear in the original volume that “dubious” was a euphemism. If consistently and unflinchingly held, dispensationalism is anti-evangelical. I hasten to add that now, as then, I *feel* that individual dispensationalists, especially lay individuals, *intend* more evangelicalism than their theology, faithfully propagated, allows.

I noted something at the very onset of *Wrongly Dividing* that has been almost completely ignored by reviewers. However, it is extremely important — especially for those who fancy my criticism of dispensationalism is extreme and severe. That is that classic dispensationalism is equally severe in its criticism of traditional Christian theology. On Page 2

I cite Zane Hodges' and Charles Ryrie's charge of "legalism" against all who maintain the necessity of "good works."

Legalism is as fatal a heresy as any with which I charge dispensationalism. In other words, knowledgeable and candid dispensationalism views orthodoxy as another gospel and anathema. I have refuted that charge in *Wrongly Dividing* and many other writings and addresses. My charges against dispensationalism have not been refuted, and this volume is primarily dedicated to show the futility of the efforts — a refutation of "refutations."

In the light of these reviews of the reviews, it ought to be clear what my comparison of dispensationalism to Calvinism signified. Though a member of the dispensationalists falsely accused me of basing faith and life on *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, it is surely clear to them (and all readers) by now that Westminster has no significance to us except as we judge it to be an accurate interpretation of the Word of God. The Bible evaluates Westminster, not vice versa, as was crystal clear in the original *Wrongly Dividing*, and should be even clearer, if that is possible, in *Wrongly Dividing* "Wrongly Dividing." I think I can consider the other allegation a slander on the basis of *Wrongly Dividing*. With *Wrongly Dividing* "Wrongly Dividing" a repetition of this by a dispensationalist must be a slanderous slander.

Another reason for the focus on Calvinism is that traditional dispensationalism had considered itself basically Calvinistic, not Arminian. It has never put as much stress on creeds as traditional orthodoxy does, but, since no school of interpretation can avoid recognizing relationships to various creeds, it is almost inevitable that any new school will tend to define itself in established historical patterns. Dispensationalism has always had its distinctives, of course, within, it thought, the basic pattern of Calvinism.

I have shown in *Wrongly Dividing*, and repeat here, that, in general, dispensationalism does not belong within the Calvinistic family as it fancies, but in the one it fancied that it opposed — Arminianism — generally.

Most of my critics tend to avoid this point, but Dr. Turner charges that my charges of spurious Calvinism are themselves spurious. He considers himself in agreement with all five points and finds no strain with dispensationalism, not to mention the incompatibility which I charge. Zane Hodges thinks he has Calvin himself on the side of dispensationalism. While Calvin does argue that Christian faith carries assurance with

it, Calvin does not eliminate the “works” between the faith and the assurance as Hodges incorrectly infers.

Many of those who took issue with the original version of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* have done my book a great service by providing vital interaction with its ideas. I will return the favor by responding to three of those critics: Zane Hodges, John Witmer, and Richard Mayhue. I hope I will be able to demonstrate how some of my dispensational critics have wrongly divided *Wrongly Dividing*.



A RESPONSE TO DISPENSATIONALIST  
ZANE C. HODGES

CALVINISM EX CATHEDRA:

A Review of John H. Gerstner's  
WRONGLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH:  
A CRITIQUE OF DISPENSATIONALISM

(Dr. Hodges' review appeared in the Autumn 1991  
*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*)

John H. Gerstner is a well-known and prolific writer/ theologian from the Reformed tradition. His recent book, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, is a trenchant assault on dispensationalism in general, and Grace theology in particular. The latter he flatly labels as Antinomianism.

My only comment here is to assume that Dr. Hodges, when he says that Gerstner "flatly labels Grace theology in particular . . . as Antinomianism," understands that I do not consider a *sound view* of "Grace theology" as Antinomianism. I try to prove that dispensationalism's view of "Grace theology" amounts to Antinomianism. That, in fact is my greatest argument against dispensationalism. It perverts the grace of God into antinomian "Easy Believism," Dr. Hodges himself being a prime example of so doing.

I welcome this book. The issues are sharply drawn and the author has largely avoided pejorative rhetoric and harsh verbal abuse. Some readers may not think this is so, but this reviewer would differ with them. Gerstner's criticisms of Dispensationalism are certainly severe. But given his own position, they must be seen as his frank and candid assessments of an opposing theology.

Perhaps the last paragraph of his conclusion expresses his spirit as well as anything else that he says:

My plea to all dispensationalists is this — show me the fundamental error in what I teach or admit your own fundamental error. We cannot both be right. One of us is wrong —

seriously wrong. If you are wrong (in your doctrine, as I charge), you are preaching nothing less than a false gospel. This calls for genuine repentance and fruits worthy of it before the Lord Jesus Christ whom we both profess to love and serve.

*Soli Deo Gloria!*

Fair enough! Who could object to such an attitude? We have no quarrel with Gerstner himself, therefore. Our quarrel is with his theology. Within the obvious limitations of an article like this, we will examine that theology as best we can.

Thank you Dr. Hodges. You are a most worthy opponent. I could not desire a better and fairer attitude. If we are both sincere in our attitudes toward one another as persons, we simply cannot remain as far apart theologically as we now are.

#### **I. What Gerstner Presupposes**

Gerstner rejects the apologetic presuppositionalism which is associated especially with the name of Cornelius Van Til and Westminster Seminary. Yet the theological approach of Gerstner's book seems to this reviewer to be essentially presuppositional. Accordingly, on just the fourth page of his section on "Theology" (Part III of his book) we read this:

We believe with the great Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, that Calvinism is just another name for Christianity. The denial of Calvinism is a very grave mistake.

This is an odd little criticism. One can see that Hodges considers that presuppositionalists go around making assertions without any proofs. So he sees me as a presuppositionalist, in spite of my disavowals, because he sees me as affirming that Calvinism is "just another name for Christianity" without any proof. This definition of Presuppositionalism would amuse most presuppositionalists, nor does such a view fit my citation of Spurgeon's famous remark. I have spent most of my life trying to *prove* that the Bible is "Calvinistic." I do not do much in this book because dispensationalism has generally considered itself, and been considered by others, to be moderately Calvinistic — four-point Calvinism rather than the usual five-point Calvinism. The first major theological part of *Wrongly Dividing* shows that dispensationalism is "spurious Calvinism." So far from being four-point Calvinism, it is five-point Arminianism. It does not usually realize that or admit it today.

This very review is entitled, you will notice, Calvinism *Ex Cathedra* maintaining that I pontificate infallibly, irreformably, and *semper idem* that Calvinism is the truth of God. If I sometimes sound like a pope it is



because I am trying to prove that a particular dispensationalist who professes, for example, the Calvinistic doctrine of “unconditional election” neither understands, nor believes, nor can legitimately claim to hold it.

It is the dispensationalist, when he claims Calvinism, who must be speaking from some papal throne that gives him immediate revelation from heaven. There is certainly no significant documentary evidence of such a theology. That is what I am proving, and not the Calvinism with which our two theologies are supposed to be in basic agreement except on “limited atonement.” It is true that “Gerstner is committed to five-point Calvinism,” because I think it has been proven to be the theology of God’s Word, as dispensationalism has also tended to claim, however without justification. So I am being criticized for not doing what I am not trying to do and not answered on what I am doing, namely proving that dispensationalism is “spurious Calvinism.”

To be sure, Gerstner does interact with, and seeks to refute, dispensational arguments against his theological stance. But this is not the same as establishing the case for “Classical Calvinism” from the Bible. Of course, to do that, Gerstner would have needed to write another book, if not a series of books. That would have been impractical.

But the overall effect of Gerstner’s approach is unsatisfactory. The grid out of which he works (“Classical Calvinism”) becomes, in effect, the arbiter of dispensational exegesis and theology. His outlook is not much different than that of a committed Roman Catholic polemicist who takes the authoritative doctrines of his church as his starting point.

Dr. Hodges simply does not get it. The absence of any quotations from *Wrongly Dividing* confirms that. He still assumes that I am trying to argue for Calvinism without arguments when I am primarily trying to show that dispensationalism is wrongly claiming to be Calvinistic and I show she has no right to do so. It is true that I, incidentally, after showing dispensationalism’s “spurious Calvinism” do try inevitably, as a kind of corollary, to show that Calvinism, properly understood, is biblical, as non-Calvinistic dispensationalism is not.

It gets worse: My classical Calvinism “becomes, in effect, the arbiter of dispensational exegesis and theology.” No, no, no! I do not say there that dispensationalism is false because it is not Calvinistic, but that its claim to be Calvinistic is false. I do not in this book, or any I have ever written before or after it, maintain that the truth of the Bible must be tested by Calvinism; but that Calvinism, dispensationalism, or any theology must be tested by the Bible, the inerrant Word of God. Hodges works more in the exegesis of the Bible, and Gerstner *works* more in the

theology of the Bible; but, Hodges also works in theology and Gerstner also works in exegesis. Our division of labor is somewhat different, but our principle of labor is identical: truth is tested on the teaching of the whole Bible alone.

This misunderstanding leads Dr. Hodges to what I am sure is an unintended slander of me:

In other words, here we have *Calvinism ex cathedra*! Dortian theology is Gerstner's starting point as well as his only goal. Whatever contradicts his "Classical Calvinism" is of questionable orthodoxy for this author. We are not saying that Gerstner is not entitled to his convictions. He surely is. But his approach will hardly be persuasive to those who wonder whether "Classical Calvinism" is a biblical form of theology at all.

"In other words, here we have Calvinism *ex cathedra*! Dortian theology is Gerstner's starting point as well as his only goal." That is not only a lie, it is a slanderous one. My starting point, as well as my only goal since I learned that the Bible is the Word of God and was converted nearly sixty years ago, has been the Bible and the Bible only. Zane Hodges, you have slandered me, but I am absolutely certain you didn't mean to do so. You simply do not understand *Wrongly Dividing*. Somewhere, somehow, you fixed on this false notion that Calvinism, not as a nickname for Biblical Christianity, but as some kind of substitute for it, is actually my religion, my hope of salvation, my standard of criticism for dispensationalism, and anything and everything also.

The next section of the review is entitled:

## II. What Gerstner Ignores

Strikingly, Gerstner passes by in silence one of the most significant theological issues of our day. This issue touches close to the core of the dispensational/Reformed debate. The issue is the relationship between Calvin himself and "Classical Calvinism" in regard to the nature of saving faith and the grounds for the assurance of salvation.

Again, for purposes of clarity, we shall refer to "Calvin's Calvinism" as over against "Classical Calvinism."

The two are not identical. As R. T. Kendall has so effectively shown, Calvin himself held to *unlimited* atonement and to the doctrine that *assurance is of the essence of* (i.e., an integral part of) *saving faith*. Kendall's book on this subject (1979) is based on his D.Phil. thesis done at Oxford. Kendall told this reviewer in person that one of his readers was J. I. Packer, a well-known "Classical Calvinist," and that Packer told Kendall that he thought Kendall had demonstrated his case concerning Calvin's beliefs. So also M. Charles Bell agrees with Kendall in *Calvin and Scottish*

*Theology* (1985). Another Calvin scholar, A. N. S. Lane, took much the same view independently of Kendall.

Gerstner refers only once to Kendall's work, and that in a footnote referring to the subject of the atonement. (Strangely, Kendall's name is omitted from the index of Gerstner's book, perhaps because it does not appear in Gerstner's text.) So far as the reviewer has noticed, there is no reference at all to Bell or Lane.

It is a very interesting and informed discussion of some of the differences between the teaching of John Calvin and some later Calvinists past and present. Dr. Hodges is quite correct in saying that I tend to ignore such internal Calvinistic debates. The reason I do that is the purpose of *Wrongly Dividing*, which is a detailed study of the dispensational system of doctrine, not of the Calvinistic system of doctrine. Not all Calvinists agree on every doctrine anymore than every dispensationalist agrees on every doctrine. A system or school of thought has a general consensus. What I try to prove in my book is that the *general* consensus of dispensationalism is not in harmony with the general consensus of Calvinism as it has usually claimed. Consequently, I do not take the time to go into the kind of Calvinistic debates for ignoring which I am criticized. Where these Calvinistic, intramural debates, in which Hodges seems especially interested, become relevant to my main task I do try to mention them.

There are two points Hodges mentions which are relevant. One of these I do discuss and the other I do not because this doctrinal position of John Calvin among Calvinists is truly distinctive. Hodges himself mistakenly relates it to dispensationalism. Because of that mistake he thinks I am ignoring something relevant, which I ignore because it is irrelevant, as I will show below.

But, first, consider Kendall's contention, and others, past and present, that John Calvin denied "limited atonement." Hodges' inference is that if John Calvin denied limited atonement himself, then dispensationalism which virtually universally denies that doctrine, is not uncalvinistic at that Calvinistic point.

To keep matters as brief as possible, and yet show that dispensationalism is anticalvinist even at that point, let me cite a few undisputed facts. First, though Kendall and many others think they have proven that Calvin denies limited atonement, that is a moot point. Probably far more, as I for one maintain that Calvin never explicitly and unambiguously denies limited atonement, but only says far less about it than most Calvinists have said and would have been expected of the great Calvin himself.

Second, though Calvin is one of the greatest Calvinists, he alone does not determine the system. Third, classical Calvinism emphatically teaches the limited design of the atonement, so that it is without question an integral part of the Calvinistic system. Most, though not all, of those who think John Calvin did not so teach agree with the consensus. Fourth, this is specially relevant to Hodges' critique because he charges me with using "Classical Calvinism" as the standard for testing dispensationalism's claim to being moderately Calvinistic.

So I "ignored" this detail in Calvinistic history because it was irrelevant to my critique, as Hodges himself implicitly admits, who charges me with virtually deifying Classic Calvinism. The second point I "ignore" is for the same reason Hodges should have ignored it. It does not have the bearing in the dispensational critique that Hodges imagines that it does have. Since my critic feels quite elated with what he thinks is a specially telling point let me quote it:

But a scholar of Gerstner's stature cannot possibly be ignorant of the discussion about the nature of faith in "Calvin's Calvinism" vis-a-vis "Classical Calvinism." Perhaps he would have found it awkward to admit that "Classical Calvinism" no longer holds *Calvin's* view of faith and assurance, whereas many dispensationalists do! And that includes this reviewer.

Such an admission by Gerstner would indeed be necessary. Even in the last century, the distinction was forthrightly admitted by Robert L. Dabney, a Reformed theologian and scholar. Dabney wrote two articles entitled (in his collected writings) "Theology of the Plymouth Brethren." There he says this:

The source of this [Plymouth Brethren] error is no doubt that doctrine concerning faith which the first Reformers, as Calvin and Luther, were led to adopt from their opposition to the hateful and tyrannical teachings of Rome . . . . These noble Reformers . . . flew to the opposite extreme, and (to use the language of theology) asserted that the assurance of hope is of the essence of saving faith. Thus says Calvin in his Commentary on Romans: "My faith is a divine and spiritual belief that God has pardoned and accepted me" [*italics in Dabney*].

Later he adds these telling comments:

It is very obvious. . . that these views of faith and assurance . . . ground themselves in the faulty definitions of saving faith which we received from the first Reformers. They, as we saw, defined saving faith as a belief that "Christ has saved me," making the assurance of hope of its necessary essence. Now, the later Reformers, and those learned, holy and modest teachers of the Reformed Churches, whose influence the

Plymouth Brethren regard as so unhealthy for true religion, have subjected this view to searching examination, and rejected it (as does the Westminster Assembly) on scriptural grounds [*italics in Dabney*].

Here, then, is a facet of the discussion *which Gerstner has completely suppressed*. According to him, Dispensationalism has its roots in the Plymouth Brethren movement. A Response to Zane C. Hodges The Gospel proclaimed by both, he charges, is antinomian in character. But we are never told by this writer that the dispensational/Plymouth Brethren view of saving faith has its roots in Reformation theology! This is a little bit like trying to explain the World Series competition to someone without ever mentioning the baseball season which led up to it. In tracing the roots of the contemporary debate on the Gospel, Gerstner stops digging just before he hits pay dirt!

Let me try to summarize Dr. Hodges' four paragraphs into one so that the reader may be able to focus on his argument (with which he is obviously well pleased) against my position in *Wrongly Dividing*. On the inseparability of faith and assurance Calvin is seen to agree with the dispensationalists against us classical Calvinists. Hodges cites the testimony of the great Southern classical Calvinist, Robert L. Dabney, who also claims the Westminster Confession of Faith on his (our) side. I am then charged with *suppressing* this telling argument against my position, namely that the dispensationalist doctrine of faith came right out of Calvin, and classical Calvinism deviated from Calvin at this fundamental point. I quite understand why Hodges crows on this one. Having accused me of virtual idolatry concerning Calvinism, Hodges, the genuine dispensational Calvinist, can now utterly crush me using John Calvin as his club, first dragging me out from where I was hiding in dread fear that someone would someday discover this club!

I not only knew, but have often written and spoken about this point where Calvin was not a Calvinist. It may even have been in my manuscript of *Wrongly Dividing* (half of which was eliminated in editing because the publisher was having financial difficulties). I have not bothered to check my original because the point of which Hodges makes so much doesn't diminish my argument or enhance his in the slightest. I am mentioning it now not because I was suppressing anything, but because a dispensationalist has come along who wrongly suspects he has John Calvin on his dispensationalist side against the Calvinists.

First, it wouldn't prove anything if Hodges were right about Calvin and his doctrinal agreement with dispensationalism at an important point. As my critic insists, I was showing that dispensationalism as a system is not in line with the Calvinistic *system* as it thinks it is.

Second, John Calvin does not agree with the dispensational doctrine of assurance. He did maintain that true faith brought assurance with it; but it also brought “good works.” Dispensationalism maintains, as I have shown repeatedly in *Wrongly Dividing* and in this sequel, that faith can be without works while still having assurance or “security,” which amounts to carnal security. John Calvin vehemently opposed any such Antinomian notions which are integral to dispensationalism. Zane Hodges may be its best-known thoroughgoing Antinomian. John Calvin was utterly anti-Antinomian. Calvin’s assurance is inseparable from — good works, which are optional in the assurance (security) doctrine of Hodges. We will see this even more clearly below.

The absurdity of the statement: “But we are never told by this writer [Gerstner] that the dispensational/Plymouth Brethren view of saving faith has its roots in *Reformation theology*!” ought to be evident even to Zane Hodges, who is quite “Plymouth Brethren” at this point.

The next part of my critique must be followed very carefully, because here Hodges is quoting me quoting Hodges and I am now commenting on that! It will be well worth the reader’s effort to follow, because here the Reformed theologian, Gerstner, and the dispensational theologian, Hodges, charge each other with being lost in the theological woods. Certainly at least one of us is lost in the woods. I believe first that I have already proved it to be Hodges; second, that Hodges shows even here that he does not understand what he is critiquing, and third, that he shows here once again when he tries to show that I am lost in the woods that he thinks that because it is he who is lost in the woods.

### **III. What Gerstner Believes about Faith**

The reviewer confesses that he is displeased with Gerstner’s claim that “Hodges fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the issue when he thinks that works are some sort of addendum, something beyond the faith itself. We maintain that it is implicit in the faith from the beginning” [*italics added*].

Gerstner has just quoted a statement I made in *The Gospel Under Siege* to the effect that “to faith are added other conditions or provisos, by which the essential nature of the Gospel is radically transformed.” I doubt that Gerstner would deny that some theologies do exactly that.

But Gerstner should have read on. In the next few sentences I state exactly what Gerstner has claimed I don’t understand:

Often, in fact, a distinction is drawn between the kind of faith which saves and the kind of faith which does not. But the kind of faith which does [*italics in my text*] save is always seen to be the kind that results in some form of overt obedience. By this means, the obedience becomes at least *an implicit part of the transaction between man and God*. “*Saving*” *faith has thus been subtly redefined in terms of its fruits* [*italics added*]. Isn’t this precisely what Gerstner has claimed I do not comprehend? Reformed theologians are fond of asserting that those who oppose their theology do not understand it. This implies that, if their opponents did understand, their objections would be null. But that is not the case.

Many contemporary Grace writers understand the Reformed position perfectly well. But they charge that such theology is doing a semantic dance around the biblical concepts of faith and works. Thus Reformed writers like Gerstner want to have it both ways — salvation by faith alone, but no salvation without works! In this way they affirm Pauline orthodoxy and subvert it at the same time.

I think we can cut through all of this by going directly to the lucid last sentence that dazzlingly reveals that Zane C. Hodges is still in the woods. He simply doesn’t understand what I am saying throughout the whole book, and what the whole Reformed or Calvinistic tradition has been saying for centuries (even for millennia though less clearly, prior to the Reformation).

“Thus Reformed writers like Gerstner want to have it both ways — salvation by faith alone, but no salvation without works.” Let me show first what that expression means in Reformed (and biblical) theology before showing how Hodges fails to understand it and then interprets it as Antinomianism. “Salvation by faith” (as I use it here and in the book), does not mean salvation based on the merit of faith. This would mean salvation earned by faith as a work of sinful man, the crassest conceivable form of legalism. Even most avowed legalists would despise this.

“Faith” here refers to *the non-meritorious act of union with Christ resulting from His prior union with the elect soul for whom He had purchased redemption, by which that soul is simultaneously regenerated and brought to active union with Christ bringing simultaneous justification*. To put it more simply (while still showing Hodges’ failure to understand): “Faith brings salvation (justification) by Jesus Christ” means, when that soul is united with Him or has faith. As Rom. 4:5 especially clearly teaches, the soul is “*ungodly*” until the moment it is justified. And justification follows logically — not chronologically — faith. This is what I and Reformed theologians generally believe the Bible to teach about faith and justification. Justification is by Jesus Christ alone in the action of union with Him (faith).

Hodges gives no evidence of understanding what has just been stated as the Reformed view. In the second part of his sentence (“but no salvation without works”) he totally misunderstands and (honestly, I believe) totally misrepresents. He thinks I (Reformed theologians) mean by that statement that “works” (unlike faith) do earn salvation. He thinks that I rightly recognize grace when I say “salvation by faith alone” and then contradict myself hopelessly and fatally by adding “but no salvation without works.” He is taking me to mean: “no salvation without [meritorious] works.” I labor to prove that is not the meaning according to any truly Reformed theologian, including myself. The necessary works earn or merit zero. They are an immediate and indispensable evidence of true faith or union with Christ.

What I said repeatedly in the book, I obviously have to repeat for Hodges and dispensational theologians: A faith that justifies must be a *living* faith. Knowing what the gospel is and recognizing that it is true is essential to living faith, but is not living saving faith. *True faith is not only recognizing as true, but receiving experientially, savingly, fruitfully, sanctifyingly salvation.* There cannot be a microsecond between saving faith and its fruits. One is not in a justified, saved condition at all if there is any lapse at all. Faith without works is DEAD, DEAD, DEAD! All “works” of saved persons considered in themselves alone apart from the ever-present, ever-interceding Savior and Lord are nothing less than eternally damnable. We are His workmanship. We are *His* branches. We are *acceptable in Him*. *From start to “finish” for eternity we are saved by grace alone!* As one of the greatest of reformed theologians, Augustine, put it, even our “rewards” are “rewards of grace”!

Nowhere is this clearer in Gerstner’s book than when he writes as follows:

“Again, this fundamental failure to comprehend is evident. [Again, this charge!] Lordship teaching does not ‘add works,’ as if faith were not sufficient. *The ‘works’ are part of the definition of faith* [italics added].”

L. Blauvelt here has the same fault as Hodges, and virtually all dispensationalists. Here, too, I must say: Again, this fundamental failure to comprehend is evident. Hodges still doesn’t get it. He still rejects “Lordship teaching” without understanding what he is rejecting, and therefore without refuting it.

Faith and works are inseparable. Works cannot be “added on” even a microsecond later, because “faith without works” is not faith. Nor can such works be works without faith. Anyone who can think clearly can see



that. Even though he should hate Christianity and believe it totally false, he could see that is what it teaches.

One statement quoted from me here does need explanation unless one is concurrently reading *Wrongly Dividing*, which I cannot assume. It is: “*The works are part of the definition of faith* [italics added].” That means that the saving faith discussed is a living faith, not a dead faith. It is the initial act of faith. The Christian goes on without break ever from faith to faith. He walks by faith. He lives by faith “from start to finish.”

The continuing series of acts of faith are also called “works” because unmerited, gracious rewards are associated with them, which is not true of the first act which occurs while the regenerate person has not yet (logically, not chronologically) been justified and made acceptable, but is “ungodly.” Immediately after (logically speaking) his being justified, all of his subsequent acts are made acceptable in the Beloved. This includes the initial act of faith itself, which is now viewed as in Christ, and therefore “rewardable” (though extremely imperfect), because “in Jesus Christ.” That is the sense in which I present, in its context, the observation: “The works are part of the definition of faith.” The works are a continuous and organic part of the endless flow that follows.

Zane Hodges continues with his dirge, citing Scripture which he thinks supports his critique:

Exactly! And this is precisely the error of Reformed thought about faith. Reformed theology teaches a synergy of faith and works which is blatantly at odds with Paul and with the Reformers.

Thus the Apostle wrote: “And if by grace, it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Rom. 11:6).

Compare this with: “Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace. . .” (Rom. 4:16).

Reformed theology has created a theological hybrid which abandons the Pauline antinomy between faith and works. From the Pauline perspective, the “grace” of which Reformed thinkers speak is no longer grace at all. Once “works are part of the definition of faith,” faith has been redefined in non-Pauline terms.

The Jews, whom Paul is here criticizing, had come, contrary to the Old Testament, to fancy that *they earned* their salvation by their works. They sought to establish their own righteousness. But the “grace” of God, or God’s righteousness as a gift to the receiver or believer, is the divinely revealed way of salvation. So if Jews or any others think that they merit salvation they are rejecting the divine way of grace. Hodges sees the

classically reformed as falling into the same fatal error of legalism. If Hodges' error is not clear by now what more can I say?

But Hodges continues to beat me with what he is sure is my own club, John Calvin:

John Calvin knew nothing of any such definition of faith either. Indeed, his own definition is justly famous:

"Now, we shall have a complete definition of faith, if we say, that it is a steady and certain knowledge of the Divine benevolence towards us, which, being founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ, is both revealed to our minds, and confirmed to our hearts, by the Holy Spirit (*Institutes* III. ii. 7).

"Note that for Calvin faith is 'knowledge.' Elsewhere Calvin 'describes faith as illumination (*illuminatio*) [*Institutes* III.i.4], knowledge as opposed to the submission of our feeling (*cognitio, non sensus nostri submissio*) [*Institutes* III. ii. 2], certainty (*certitudo*) [*Institutes* III. ii. 6], a firm conviction (*solida persuasio*) [*Institutes* III. ii. 16], assurance (*securitas*) [*Institutes* III.ii.16], firm assurance (*solida securitas*) [*Institutes* III. ii. 16], and full assurance (*plena securitas*) [*Institutes* III. ii. 22]."

The Reformed "definition" of faith as including "works" is utterly alien both to Calvin and to Paul. Insofar as such a definition depends on Reformed theology's standard treatment of Jas. 2:14–26, it is resting on a foundation of sand.

Before I show that Dr. Hodges does not understand John Calvin here either, let me remind the reader again that it would not make any difference if he did. Calvinists draw up no brief for the absolute consistency of all Calvinists, but only the basic soundness of the system of doctrine called Calvinism. And that because, and only because, it is demonstrated to be a sound interpretation of the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

What Hodges is doing here is correctly noting that Calvin identifies "faith" and a "certain knowledge" and does not mention "works." Hodges even becomes negatively explicit when he concludes: "The Reformed 'definition' of faith as *including* 'works' is utterly alien both to Calvin and to Paul. Insofar as such a definition depends on Reformed theology's standard treatment of James 2:14–16, it is resting on a foundation of sand."

Let me first state what I think are Hodges' two errors here, and then attempt to prove them. The first error is this: Calvin's "knowledge" in this quotation implies the "works" which he does not explicitly state. Hodges, missing the implication, concludes that the lack of the explicit is a denial,

which is not logically necessary nor confirmed by Calvin's general teaching. His second error is in saying that the "Reformed" and well nigh universal interpretation (he may add) of James 2:14–16 is based on sand. I will show that it is Hodges' rejection of the standard interpretation that is based on dispensational sand. Here he rushes in where most dispensationalists fear to tread. I admire him here for the consistency of his false convictions.

But this second point is better focused in the section of Dr. Hodges' critique where he deals precisely with the even more crucial James 2 statement in verse 26. Here he responds to my evaluation of his exegesis in *The Gospel Under Siege* which is more fully treated in *Dead Faith — What Is It?*

To his credit, Gerstner seeks to address my argument from Jas. 2:26. There James states: For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

I have urged that this simile clearly implies that a dead faith was once alive, just as a dead body that has lost its spirit was once alive.

But what is Gerstner's own reading of Jas. 2:26? It is this: "James 2:26 makes the point of the passage perfectly clear. All that James says is that, just as you cannot have a man without a body and spirit together, so you cannot have a Christian without works and faith together."

What impartial reader would ever get *this* idea out of the text of James? In no way does James say that one does not "have a man" without body and spirit being together. Is a man non-existent simply because his spirit has left his body? Has he *never* existed? But Gerstner implies that a Christian has *never existed as a Christian* if his faith is not accompanied by works!

James is manifestly comparing a dead faith to a dead body from which the spirit has departed. Gerstner's exegesis is a transparent case of reading into a text what one wants to get out of it.

I will not defend my interpretation of James 2:26 first, but rather consider Dr. Hodges'. Says he: "I have urged that this simile clearly implies that a *dead* faith was *once alive*, just as a dead body that has lost its spirit was once alive." I will admit that the very word translated "dead" normally implies once being alive. Usually that is what the word means in and out of the Bible. But Dr. Hodges will not deny that the word is often used metaphorically in and out of the Bible. We all agree that when the father of the prodigal said that his son before he returned home was "dead" he did not mean literally dead. We often use the expression "dead to the world."

A context is usually necessary to determine the meaning of a word with more than one definition. Will anyone deny that James 2 is talking about a person who has true faith versus one who has only nominal faith? Does even Dr. Hodges say that this context is talking about a person who once had faith and then lost it? I'm afraid he does, incompatibly with his whole Antinomian system.

Let me refresh the reader's memory:

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that — and shudder. You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.

And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (Jms. 2:14–26 NIV)

Is there any reference in the whole section to anyone having and losing faith? Does Abraham? Do the demons? Does Rahab? Just the opposite. It is the presence of Abraham's works that showed his faith, and Rahab's works that showed hers. And the demons lack of them showed their lack of (real) faith. And a man's claiming faith is belied by his having no deeds. "In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead."

Finally, "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." In a context like this, what can this mean but that faith never was alive because there were no works to show it? Furthermore, if Hodges held to his interpretation here, what would become of his (and virtually all dispensationalists') doctrine of the security of believers? The

faith was once alive and it died. Hodges' saints in James do not persevere in faith or works.

Of course, Gerstner would also say to me (as in fact he does) that I am overlooking a significant distinction when I discuss "works." Gerstner writes:

"So we see. . .that Hodges does not critique the traditional orthodox [!] position accurately . . .Hodges, and virtually all dispensationalists, do not see the elementary difference between *non-meritorious* 'requirements,' 'conditions,' 'necessary obligations,' 'indispensable duties,' and 'musts,' as the natural out-working of true faith, in distinction from faith in the Savior plus meritorious works as the very basis of salvation." Here I plead guilty. I admit that I "do not see the elementary difference" Gerstner is talking about. In fact, I deny it. Not only is it in no way "elementary," it is not even biblical!

Here is the moment of truth. Zane Hodges admits that he does not see the truth of mine which he states with my very terminology, and then, with honest and sublime consistency, goes on to deny that there is any truth there to be seen. That is, he states my, our, truth with precision and then denies that it is true or biblical. Here is where the ultimate debate about the heart of the gospel itself ends. There is no place now to appeal but to the Judgment Seat of Jesus Christ. Gerstner will maintain that if this Reformed interpreter is right, Zane Hodges is wrong and Hodges will admit it. Hodges will maintain that if this dispensational thinker is right, John Gerstner is wrong and Gerstner will admit that. And each of us will bow his head before the indisputable verdict of the Son of Man, which Gerstner anticipates will vindicate him, and Hodges is equally certain will vindicate him.

Then at this point I can only speak for Gerstner, not for Hodges. If Hodges is right in his understanding of the gospel and is vindicated by the Lord, Gerstner is so fundamentally wrong as to be guilty of preaching another gospel, and must and will be damned. And the opposite is the case if Gerstner is right, as he believes himself to be. Paul said the same thing: if Paul or an angel from heaven preaches any other gospel than he had preached let Paul or an angel be accursed! We are here concerned not with a few days in this world, but with endless ages to come in the world to come. And so, reader, it is with you also.

We must note that Paul did *not* say, "Now to him who works *meritoriously*," though that is what he infers because he is critiquing the Jewish rejection of the gospel in favor of meritorious law keeping.

So “Reformed theology” does not “make a shambles of the Pauline contrast between faith and works.” Gerstner’s “elementary difference” is really not “a *non-existent* difference”!

This type of typical dispensational thinking and critiquing I critique in the book, but must repeat here. First, dispensationalists agree with the Reformed that biblical teaching does not contradict itself. Second, if the Bible does seem to contradict itself we must examine its meaning more carefully because the error must be ours. It cannot be God’s. Third, on the term “rewards,” the Bible seems to contradict itself. It seems to teach that “works” *earn* rewards, which grace contradicts; but, on the other hand, God does “reward” His saints for their works such as giving a cup of cold water. Rewards given for works as a debt owed to their merit denied and then affirmed would be a contradiction. However, they cannot be because the God of truth is the author of both statements and never contradicts Himself. Fourth, the harmony must be this: Nothing man does that God commands can deserve any reward because it is their duty (Luke 17:10). So since a saint is never even perfect, which is his duty, he certainly cannot deserve an eternal reward for a faulty act of common decency such as giving a drink to a thirsty person. It must be, as Augustine said, a “reward of grace.”

Nevertheless, legalists say that the works they do in obedience to divine commands deserve divine recompense; namely heaven itself. These “meritorious works” Paul denies. He is arguing with the legalists for whom works always mean deeds of men that deserve rewards. The legalists are wrong, says Paul, and their religion is false because they are resting on the presumed merit of their works, which merit simply does not exist. Hodges says, “For Paul, ‘works’ always implied ‘debt’ — i.e., they were meritorious!” This is a total missing of Paul’s point. Paul is arguing that all fallen men do is sin, and their so-called “good works” are bad works (there is none that does good, no not one — there are no meritorious works of men). But the legalists (not Paul!) not only consider their bad works good, but as obligating God, as putting Him under obligation to them for remuneration or reward. What Hodges has Paul always recognizing, Paul always repudiates.

It isn’t Reformed theology that “makes a shambles of the Pauline contrast between faith and works. Gerstner’s elementary difference is really a *non-existent* difference!” It is Zane Hodges (and dispensationalism too) that “makes a shambles of the Pauline contrast between faith and works.”

Section IV is entitled: **What Gerstner Says on Other Matters** (pp. 66–69). Hodges has to be briefer here, and so will I in my response. I will try not to take the time and space to restate the positions I have taken in the book, but simply show the fallacies of Hodges found in his critiques of them.

On page 67 we read: “But can one say that if God ordains the existence of immortal beings for whom He makes no provision at all that they should escape torment, that this too is ‘a refinement of cruelty.’” I am being criticized here for saying that God *owed* no sinner even an opportunity to be saved. First, if it is injustice in God, then God is guilty in His dealing with fallen angels also for whom “He makes no provision at all that they should escape torment.” Second, if it is, then God *owes* sinful men the sacrifice of His Son. It is no more grace, but a debt. If He did not provide it, God would have been guilty not of ordinary injustice, but of “a refinement of cruelty.” Third, note that Hodges’ very statement of the actual situation is false. He represents me as teaching that “God ordains the existence of immortal beings for whom He makes no provision at all that they should escape torment.” Rather, God ordains these “immortal beings” to be created upright and holy in Adam. Only when they sinned and fell in Adam did they become deserving of the wages of sin which is eternal death? As such *sinful* immortal beings, they are entitled to nothing but hell as the fallen angels were (to which they were immediately assigned as they deserved to be). It was common *grace* only that spared *all* humankind momentarily, and special grace that redeemed *some* of humankind eternally.

“Is it not also a ‘horrible mockery’ for God to send His temporal blessings (Matt. 5:45; Acts 14:17) on the ‘unjust’ whose fate is eternally sealed and whose creation had no other possible outcome in view except everlasting damnation?” (p. 67). Here Hodges’ unbelief in biblical providence is clear. Does Hodges not believe that God at least knows all things from eternity? Does God not therefore at least know what humans will be in hell as well as in heaven eternally? Is their “fate” (a very pejorative term usually meaning destiny without chance or responsibility), not “eternally sealed” (another pejorative term that in biblical meaning here is better stated as “eternally certain”)? Dr. Hodges, if you do not believe that God has omniscience and perfect foreknowledge, say so and let the world see that you do not believe in God (in even the dictionary definition), not to mention the sovereign all-wise Trinity of Holy Scripture. Or, if you do so believe, then stop saying that the future heaven and hell are uncertain.

“With its total rejection of any and all capacity in man to respond to God’s love and favor, ‘Classical Calvinism’ leaves itself with a cruel God who is only a caricature of the generous and loving Creator of the Bible” (p. 67). There are no less than eight errors in this one sentence. First, this statement does not refer to “man,” but to fallen, enslaved man. Second, even fallen man has not lost his “capacity” or natural ability, but all inclination. Third, he has not even lost the inclination to “respond to God’s love and favor,” but to respond favorably, believingly, penitently, lovingly. He “will not” have God *thus* in his mind or his heart. Fourth, what Hodges represents as “Classical Calvinism” is nothing less than a gross caricature. A few “Hyper-Calvinists” have been known to entertain such horrible distortions.

Fifth, God is not “cruel,” meaning overly severe, but inexorably holy and just who will not and can never clear the guilty. Sixth, calling the biblical God of “Classical Calvinism” a “caricature” is perilously close to an unpardonable sin. Seventh, we are said to “caricature,” not confess the “generous and loving Creator.” Even Hodges knows that the Reformed doctrine of the Creator is that He made man perfectly upright under most ideal circumstances with the “covenant of works,” which graciously offered eternal life to all humankind upon a specified time of obedience. That was super-generous and loving. Eighth, “Classical Calvinism” teaches that the Creator in the Second Person added a perfect human nature to this divine Person, and in it suffered, by humiliation and death, an infinite satisfaction for the sins of His people so that the words “generous and loving” cannot contain anything but GRACIOUS.

“Sanctification” next comes in for a rather full review:

#### **Sanctification**

As is characteristic of “Classical Calvinists,” Gerstner charges that dispensationalists hold to a “total separation of justification and sanctification.” But this is a manifest distortion of our convictions.

Just because a dispensationalist does not hold that a high-degree of present sanctification is an “inevitable result” of justification, does not mean that his theology views them in “total separation.” An astute theologian like Gerstner should know better than to say so.

In fact, most dispensationalists (including the reviewer) hold that some measure or degree of sanctification *will* indeed result from justification. Moreover, we hold that final sanctification is an inevitable result of justification (“and whom He justified, these He also glorified” Rom. 8:30). What we do not believe is that *assurance of salvation* is dependent on the measure or degree of one’s sanctification in this life.



Here I am charged with “manifest distortion.” What is my manifest distortion? It is alleged to be my charging dispensationalism with “total separation” of faith and sanctification because it does not teach that “a high-degree of present sanctification is ‘an inevitable result’ of justification.” Now that is a manifest distortion of my book. *Reformed* theology teaches a low degree of sanctification in the greatest of saints. And I justly charge Dispensationalism with “total separation” at the beginning when faith standing alone totally separated from works is said to justify and can only justify when totally separated from works. Works may or may not follow. Any works that do follow in dispensational theology are optional, separate from the faith-that-justifies, and of themselves worthy of the rewards they will receive.

Dispensationalism is teaching the double error (1) that “faith alone” totally apart from works justifies and (2) that “works,” totally apart from justifying faith, actually earn eternal heavenly rewards.

The final paragraph above of Dr. Hodges’ is very significant. There he is claiming that the Reformed charge of dispensational Antinomianism is simply false. He and some others do maintain that they teach the necessity of works as evidence for true faith. But you will notice that even in this crucial paragraph he does not state it that way. He states simply, but strongly, that “some measure or degree of sanctification will indeed result from justification.” In the footnote he refers not to *Gospel Under Siege*, where I couldn’t detect a trace of such teaching, for that book was essentially a vigorous protest against it. But let me examine what Hodges does cite, pages 213–15 of *Absolutely Free* his response to MacArthur’s *Gospel According to Jesus*.

Returning to “Calvinism Ex Cathedra” let me consider where “Gerstner makes perhaps the most wildly inaccurate statement in the entire book:”

It is in his discussion of sanctification that Gerstner makes perhaps the most wildly inaccurate statement in the entire book:

Its [dispensationalism’s] preaching has always been very lopsidedly balanced in favor of their notion of grace with a conspicuous absence of moral stress [*italics added*].

To anyone who has moved for years in dispensational circles, as this reviewer has, this claim is absurd. Evidently the author has heard very few dispensational messages indeed. Either that, or he has heard the wrong kind!

I admit that this statement of mine sounds harsh, and is harsh (taken out of its context). I know and have been around dispensationalists

enough to know that they take their duty seriously, and are very zealous for the Christian faith as they wrongly understand it. Even Paul admitted the zeal of his Jewish friends, but it was not according to wisdom.

Zane Hodges may explode at that remark, reminding me that the Jews rejected the Trinity, the deity of Christ, were opposed to grace, and were crassly legalistic. Theirs was another religion altogether. But I show in *Wrongly Dividing* and here that the dispensationalists, while affirming the ontological Trinity, deny the economic Trinity in which the Father allocates redemption, the Son accomplishes redemption for those to whom the Father allocates it, and the Spirit applies it to those for whom it was allocated by the Father and accomplished by the Son. Which is worse, denying the Trinity altogether or acknowledging the three divine persons and then denying what they do? Which is worse, denying grace altogether, or praising it and then using it as a license to sin, which is what dispensationalism does?

Returning to this matter of an absence of moral stress in the behavior of dispensationalists, I explain repeatedly that I do not deny that dispensationalists are zealous in doing what their distorted Christianity teaches. But that very distortion distorts their zealous “morality” into a zeal without wisdom. Their morality (“works”) is *not integral* to faith. It is separate from saving faith. It is not *necessary*. And, it is meritorious *earning* eternal rewards. Their salvation is *supposed* to be by grace; rewards *are* by merit.

I need say no more here because we are coming to Dr. Hodges’ direct facing of the Reformed charge of Antinomianism near the end of the review, and in it he proves (so plainly that he who runs may read) that he is an antinomian. After *Gospel Under Siege*, *Absolutely Free*, and this review, Hodges remains still, I am very sorry to say, an Antinomian, and thereby denies the gospel of the Bible which he thinks he zealously preaches.

### Antinomianism

Gerstner makes liberal use of Reformed theology’s favorite theological “cuss word” — Antinomianism. According to him, both the Plymouth Brethren and consistent dispensationalists (such as John F. Walvoord and Charles C. Ryrie, for example) preach an antinomian gospel. He even states that my book, *The Gospel Under Siege*, “should be entitled, ‘Antinomianism Under Siege’” — an amusing suggestion which I have no plans to act upon!

But the meaning of the term, *Antinomianism*, is notoriously slippery. Gerstner holds this view: “*From the essential truth that no sinner in himself can merit salvation, the antinomian draws the erroneous conclusion that good*

*works need not accompany faith in the saint.* The question is not whether good works are necessary to salvation, but in what way they are necessary. As the inevitable outworking of saving faith, they are necessary for salvation” [italics in Gerstner].

This statement is preceded, two sentences earlier, by this:

Thus, good works may be said to be *a condition for obtaining salvation* in that they inevitably accompany genuine faith [italics added].

This is precisely the issue. In Reformed thought good works *are a condition* for salvation. A deft Reformed thinker, like Samuel Logan, might add that good works are not a cause of salvation, while faith is both a *cause and a condition* for this. But the bottom line is that, for Reformed Theology, there are *two conditions* for final salvation — faith and works!

This articulation of things is clearly foreign not only to the Apostle Paul, but also to Calvin and Luther, who confronted essentially the same theology in Roman Catholicism. No doubt Gerstner would argue that the NT teaches the necessity of good works for final salvation; and, if it did, they *would* be a condition for that. But the NT does not teach this, not even in James 2.

The real issue is not quite what Gerstner appears to think it is. One can hold (as I do) that some good works, at least, *are* inevitable — unless the Christian dies immediately after believing in Christ. But one can equally hold that the presence or absence of good works would not at all determine the validity of a person’s faith. With Calvin I can affirm that “my faith is a divine and spiritual belief that God has saved me,” “which is founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ.” Since assurance is of the essence of saving faith, such confidence in God’s Word is self-authenticating and does not need further confirmation by works. Whether works are present or absent is irrelevant. Faith in Christ saves and the believer has assurance at the moment of faith.

It is the Reformed effort to verify and authenticate faith by works which leads to a redefinition of faith in which “‘works’ are a part of the definition of faith.” Thus “works” logically become a co-condition with faith for final salvation. The result is not reformational or biblical orthodoxy at all, but a full-scale retreat toward Roman Catholic synergy. Though expressed in theological categories quite different from Catholicism, the results of Reformed and Catholic thought about final salvation are not fundamentally very different at all.

We *could* define “Antinomianism” in the way the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2nd College Edition, 1985) does as “holding that faith alone is necessary for salvation.” If that were what was meant by the term, I would be quite comfortable with it. Unfortunately, because “Antinomian-

ism” implies to many minds a disregard for moral issues, I must reject this designation. I urge my Reformed counterparts to drop this term because of its pejorative, and often unfair, connotations and overtones. But I will not hold my breath waiting for them to do so!

I will move through this whole very important section as rapidly as possible though the final paragraph tells it all and admits it all.

The first paragraph is a fair statement of what I attempt in *Wrongly Dividing*. Dr. Hodges simply rejects it without argument here. I don’t care for terms like “cuss word” in something that deals with eternal salvation. Also, I think this volume and my present response show that my serious joke is justified: *The Gospel Under Siege* ought to go under its true title “Antinomianism Under Siege,” for that is what Hodges has been advocating and continues to defend, even here.

The next two paragraphs are mere quotations from me followed by a critique in the next paragraph on which I must focus. Noting that I maintain that all virtues are a “condition,” a *sine qua non*, of salvation my critic does not state (as he ought when he is critiquing my viewpoint), that I stress that these virtues are *non-meritorious* conditions. They contribute nothing to the salvation which is by Jesus Christ alone. But on to the criticism.

The next paragraph is still not really a criticism, but a statement of what will be criticized in the next paragraph. Here Hodges merely notes that Dr. Samuel Logan, expounding Jonathan Edwards, explains that works are a condition, but *not a cause*, which I have been saying all along. But even then Hodges cannot resist ending with “for Reformed theology, there are two *conditions* for final salvation — faith and works!” Why will Hodges not say that the reformed insist that there is only one meritorious condition, foundation, basis or whatever, which is neither faith nor works but Jesus Christ alone? If he did that, his criticism would collapse.

But on to the so-called criticism.

“This articulation of things is clearly foreign, not only to the Apostle Paul, but also to Calvin and Luther, who confronted essentially the same theology in Roman Catholicism.” I do not have indefinite time, so I will simply say that this is wrong, wrong, wrong without bothering to prove it because when Hodges tries to prove his statement concerning Paul (which means the Word of God) it will be soon enough to refute — again — our deep-dyed dispensationalist errorist. Then Hodges censures “Gerstner” on something I have answered dozens of times so I will continue to wait. The Hodges argument really comes in the next paragraph.

“The real issue is not quite what Gerstner appears to think it is. One can hold (as I do) that some good works, at least, are inevitable — unless the Christian dies immediately after believing in Christ.” That sentence alone, in its context, and the context of Hodges’ over-all theology demonstrates that he is an unsound teacher of the Christian religion.

First, “inevitable” is not a synonym for necessary or integral or inseparable from true faith in Jesus Christ. And if — as shown above — works are not inseparable, then such a faith without works is DEAD. This is deep Arminian error, but worse than Arminianism. Arminians teach that faith can die and come alive again, which dispensationalists, with their security doctrine, cannot admit. Arminians maintain they can lose their salvation because their faith can die. Dispensationalists, with their pseudo-Calvinism, neither consistently maintain their Arminian error or their ostensibly Calvinistic truth of the perseverance of the saints. True Calvinists and true Arminians admit that they are teaching contradictory interpretations of Scripture at this point. We admit that if Arminians are right we are wrong. They admit that if we are right they are wrong. Both of us look on dispensationalists as those who don’t even understand the war, and ought to get lost and let a true battle go on to the finish. But Hodges will not get lost so we must continue.

Second, Hodges does expressly say that good works are not strictly “inevitable” because a saved believer may die before he has an opportunity to do any good works. So such persons (Hodges admits) are saved without any works. And, if some, why not all, as more consistent and blunt antinomians proudly claim? Some dispensationalists even say that some believers die as atheists and go to heaven.

Third, the supposition that a work must be done visibly and outwardly in order to be a “good work” shows that Hodges does not even understand the definition of a good work. The apostle Paul teaches that works, to be good work, have to locate in the heart. Even a merely outward work of martyrdom (1 Cor. 13:3) is vain and is no good work if done without love. Obviously, on the other hand, if the love of Christ is in the heart, God who searches the heart, accepts it even if that person (the thief on the cross) died the instant he was converted.

Fourth, it is one thing to say that some good works are inevitable, but how does Hodges, or any dispensationalist, prove that? They sometimes (Ryrie, for example) say that it is natural; but if it is *natural*, as long as that faith is alive it is always producing works — not sometimes yes and sometimes no. Since we are dealing with a figure of speech, Dr. Hodges will be tempted to remind me that living plants are sometimes blighted

in some branches, though not all. But we are referring to living persons in whom fruit always lives and never dies (according to dispensationalism), and therefore *always* bears some fruit. If it only, sometime or other, bears the fruit of good works, then it must be, as the Arminian says it is, capable of dying and of coming alive again. And the person's state when he dies determines heaven or hell. But I have never heard a dispensationalist utter such a doctrine.

Fifth, and finally, if good works do inevitably occur in every believer, except the very rare one who would die immediately after believing, then dispensationalists would have to admit that works are necessary — *some* works, at least one work is necessary or a person does not have saving faith. If anyone who survives the first hours after conversion never, before he dies, does one good work, he would not have faith — he would be lost. The Reformed are right after all. They err only in insisting that good works *never* cease. But they are right that faith without any works is dead. Justification is impossible without them. They are an absolutely necessary condition of salvation.

Nevertheless, this does not prevent Hodges from saying: "But one can equally hold that the presence or absence would not at all determine the validity of a person's faith." The real Hodges stands up again after his slide into a Reformed theology. He had just said that good works would be certain to occur in a person of faith. *Sometimes* good works would appear if a person has faith. That was far from an adequate statement because whenever and wherever true faith is present it always bears its fruit. A good tree does that. A good man out of a good heart does that. A person who really loves Christ keeps His commandments. Hodges yields to that fundamental truth utterly inadequately, but he did grant, for one inconsistent moment, that some fruit was inevitable.

But no sooner said than retracted. Dispensationalist Hodges reverts to his basic mentality: "But one can equally hold that the presence or absence would not at all determine the validity of a person's faith." One's faith can be valid whether good works were present or absent. Works could be absent, absent, absent forever to death when they would appear in perfection at glorification, if never, ever before. So the only time in a believer's life when good works would certainly appear and not be absent would be at *death*. So, even that one, hopeful, slightest lapse into orthodoxy must be denied. The only inevitable moment when a good work inevitably occurs is at death. Faith could appear at a person's twentieth birthday and a good work never follow until he/she dies at one hundred years of age. But don't jump to any conclusion about dispensa-

tionalism being Antinomian. No, all it says (a few sentences later) is: “Whether works are present or absent is irrelevant (sic).”

In the intervening statement, Hodges claims Calvin for his position on the irrelevance of good works to faith. That this is without any justification the reader can see without reading one of the 59 volumes (in *Corpus Reformatorum*) which Calvin wrote. Nevertheless, let me quote Hodges’ Calvin quote: “With Calvin I can affirm that ‘my faith is a divine and spiritual belief that God has saved me, which is founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise in Christ.’ “

Does Calvin say there anything about good works? Does he say that they may be present or absent? Does he infer any such thing as Hodges attributes to him as sharing Hodges’ conviction about the irrelevancy of works to faith? Certainly not. All Calvin is saying is that his faith is a divine and spiritual belief that God has saved him. He simply does not comment on the presence or absence of good works. Calvin says that his faith is founded on the truth of the gratuitous promise of Christ. Calvin is simply saying: “Jesus saves and that by grace!” What Calvinist ever said that a Christian is saved by his works? We all say that our faith rests on the grace of God in Christ. Can you not see Hodges’ total lack of understanding? Good works only show the reality of our faith in the grace of God in Christ. Hodges cannot get out of his mind that perennial slander that “Classical Calvinism” teaches that Christians are saved by some fancied merit in their very imperfect works of obedience. Because John Calvin doesn’t even mention good works here, Hodges slanders him for saying that he personally is saved totally devoid of good works (which Calvin denies throughout his whole system of doctrine).

The next paragraph of Hodges’ (once again incorrectly, in spite of repeated corrections by *Wrongly Dividing* and literally thousands of Reformed expositions) interprets our doctrine as legalistic. Here Hodges tries to identify it with Roman Catholicism, which is also misunderstood and made into an even worse heresy than it is. Also, once again, “condition” is not seen as the *sine qua non*, which the Reformed say it is. It is made into a meritorious foundation which we (and the Bible) always deny it to be.

I cite the paragraph:

It is the Reformed effort to verify and authenticate faith by works which leads to a redefinition of faith in which “works’ are a part of the definition of faith.” Thus “works” logically become a co-condition with faith for final salvation. The result is not reformational or biblical

orthodoxy at all, but a full-scale retreat toward Roman Catholic synergy. . . .

Since I have already, several times in this chapter alone, critiqued Hodges' misinterpretation of "verify," "condition," "co-condition," "legalism" in the reformed teaching I will only add something on the Roman Catholic issue. Rome, "infallibly and irreformably" at the Council of Trent (1546– 63) defined faith as the root (*radix*) of justification, or (leading to justification) which justification comes by the infused righteousness following faith. This infused righteousness ultimately entitles the person of faith (unless he falls away into mortal sin and impenitence) to justification. The Reformed utterly oppose such doctrine. Hodges sees virtual identity. Once again he is led astray by a superficial resemblance. The superficial resemblance is that Rome also teaches that true faith leads to good works, as do the Reformed. The absolute and diametrical difference is that Rome teaches that these good works which come from faith (by grace, *sola gratia*) are meritorious and when perfect and free of all remaining guilt entitle to heaven. In that *indirect* way Rome is ultimately, utterly legalistic. The sinner (through grace by faith) achieves the personal merit that saves him. By absolute and diametrical contrast, the Reformed teach no merit whatever in the necessary "good works" of every true believer. Even his "rewards," as I must keep repeating, being, in Reformed theology, "rewards of grace."

In the last paragraph of this section Hodges again confesses his Antinomianism, but, alas, still does not see it:

We could define 'Antinomianism' in the way the *American Heritage Dictionary* (2nd College Edition, 1985) does as 'holding that faith alone is necessary for salvation.' If that were what was meant by the term, I would be quite comfortable with it. Unfortunately, because Antinomianism implies to many minds a disregard for moral issues, I must reject this designation. [Hodges as the White Knight] I urge my Reformed counterparts to drop this term because of its pejorative, and often unfair, connotations and overtones. But I will not hold my breath waiting for them to do so!

In that paragraph Hodges is admitting he is an antinomian. He does not like the term, however, because of what seems to him an abuse of it because "it implies to many minds a disregard for moral issues." I can only hope, if Dr. Hodges ever reads this response to his critique, that *he* can see that he does have "a disregard for moral issues." First, he does not regard them, as the Bible does, as necessary to faith. Regarding them as optional, dispensable, irrelevant to faith and salvation is a far greater



disregard for morals than crass sinners (among whom Dr. Hodges is *not*), exhibit. Second, when Hodges engages in optional moral activity he overestimates it grossly as actually deserving or meriting the rewards Christ promises to it. How a person can have a greater disregard for Christian morality than proclaiming it *totally* unnecessary on the way to eternal life but, if indulged in, so good that it deserves a reward, I cannot imagine. Third, though Hodges does not choose to practice, as some of his fellow dispensationalists do, every conceivable form of immorality, and even positive disbelief, he dares not deny that they are true Christians who will be saved “so as by fire” because they profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

### V. Conclusion

Although this review has been primarily negative, the reviewer does not mean to leave the impression that everything in this book is wrong. That is certainly not the case.

Gerstner is correct in perceiving a theological drift by some dispensationalists in the direction of Reformed thought. Dallas Seminary is his major illustration of this (47–49). Gerstner is also right, I believe, in his claim that dispensational theology and Reformed theology are essentially incompatible. In Gerstner’s view, no one can be a true dispensationalist and a Calvinist (= “Classical Calvinist”) at the same time. Rather effectively he shows that dispensationalists have normally rejected or modified all of the so-called “5 points of Calvinism.” The reviewer wonders why anyone would wish to plant his foot in both theological camps. The doctrinal divide between them is enormous and essentially unbridgeable. Thus, overall, Gerstner’s book has the effect of sharply and clearly delineating the two camps which are the primary participants in the debate over “Lordship Salvation.” Gerstner clearly dispels the myth that this debate is largely semantic and does not represent a significant cleavage in evangelical thought. We appreciate this result and commend Gerstner for his effectiveness in bringing this deep cleavage to light. For that reason alone, if for no other, every serious student of Grace theology ought to obtain this book.

And for responsible leaders in the Grace movement, Gerstner’s volume is not optional — but mandatory — reading.

I agree that Hodges’ review is “primarily negative” (as mine is), as it had to be, he being a classical dispensationalist unreached by my critique in *Wrongly Dividing*. What saddens me is that he simply does not grasp the critique, though I honor him for trying. Many critiques of *Wrongly Dividing*

don't struggle with it, as Dr. Hodges does, but simply reject it *because* it is anti-dispensational.

I also deeply appreciate Hodges' agreement that "dispensational theology and reformed theology are essentially incompatible" with an "unbridgeable" "doctrinal divide," and also appreciating my making this "cleavage" unmistakable. By contrast, as you can see throughout this addendum to my first volume, some who have far more agreement with Reformed theology than does Dr. Hodges censure me for pointing out these differences when, they feel, they are presently being overcome.

Hodges and I are old men. Some younger scholars think my Reformed mind is still living with the situation a generation ago. They (probably) think Hodges is an out-of-date dispensationalist as I am an out-of-date Calvinist. "Let these old-timers fight it out while we get on with the relevant current agenda," they may be saying.

I genuflect to a fine adversary, Zane Hodges, as he does to me, as we both say to these Johnny-come-latelys who think they have advanced far beyond us, "You scholars must catch up with us before you can go beyond us. We hope you do and we hope you discover who of us is right and then proceed in the name of the Lord of Hosts." Amen.



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A RESPONSE TO DISPENSATIONALIST  
JOHN WITMER

In the April–June 1992 issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Dr. John Witmer has published as the lead review article a critique of some historical details, and of my bitter, hostile, woefully ignorant attitude in my *Wrongly Dividing The Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*. There is a second and final Witmer article on this theme in the following issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra*. This first article does not even address the heart of my book charging dispensationalism with being “spurious Calvinism” and “dubious Evangelicalism.”

The Witmer article made such an unfair judgment of the author before the real critique began that I felt obliged to respond to it immediately with a one-page statement before this full reply was published.

I did say that Reuben Torrey was first president of Biola when he was the second, and that Wheaton College was established at the turn of the century when the date was in the 1850’s. These are petty matters that have nothing to do with the accuracy of my critique of the dispensational theology which I call “spurious Calvinism” and “dubious Evangelicalism.” (Incidentally, I show that dispensationalists generally see Reformed theology as “Legalism,” which is also “another gospel.”) Nevertheless, *I have no excuse for inaccuracies.*

However, when Witmer makes the criticisms of my character that are offered without proof, he is guilty of slander. Witmer says that I write with bitterness. As God is my witness, I have never felt a drop of bitterness toward any dispensationalist who I have ever known or criticized, including Dr. Witmer. I have loved and do love them all, including Dr. Witmer.

My criticism of their theology is very severe. *I will not tone down my criticism* until I am shown to be in error, because I love these advocates and do not want them to perish. I can understand Dr. Witmer’s thinking that I am in grave error because he thinks that I am attacking nothing less than the truth of God. He undoubtedly believes that I am so wrong that I must not *want* to understand. I must rebuke him here because he has no right (no matter how justifiably angry he feels himself to be) to make such a charge without first endeavoring *to show* that an argument is so devoid of all merit that it could only proceed from a desire not to understand the

truth. If Dr. Witmer can, in his subsequent articles, show objective criticisms (dispensational or others) that I could only have written with a desire not to understand the truth. I will then bow to his and their judgment about my mind though still testifying that my heart was never moved by such a spirit of *wilful* ignorance. If not, an apology from him is in order.

Dr. Zane Hodges is not convinced of my critique either. But his argument discussed in the previous chapter of this volume is free of anything approaching deliberate slander. It is well-tempered devastation! He thinks that I am dead wrong on the heart of the controversy (as I think he is dead wrong in his dispensationalism and attempted refutation of *Wrongly Dividing*). But it is obvious to me, and I think to any reader of my book and his critique, that each of us is *trying to do good for the soul of the other*. One of us is grossly mistaken.

May the same be true of Dr. Witmer and me. I have given him a root-and-branch criticism of the theology to which he has devoted his whole life (I assume). In the light of his first article I could only anticipate that the second would attempt to prove that dispensationalism is without fundamental fault. I was disappointed. *I do not believe that Dr. Witmer, or anyone else, has proven or can prove that. But, I guarantee them an absolutely honest and respectful hearing and a joyful willingness to admit it, if they do do what I do not now think that they can do — prove me fundamentally wrong!*

Now on to my criticism.

### The Nature of My Analysis

The first criticism Professor Witmer makes against my book is its very title, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism*. He thinks that a “diatribe” describes it better than “critique,” describing diatribe as “a bitter or abusive harangue.”

This is my first critique of Witmer’s critique, namely calling my work “bitter or abusive harangue.” It is my language, and I did not feel “bitter” when I wrote it nor do I feel bitter now. I admit that some of my language was severe, but not a whit more than I showed dispensationalism to deserve.

His paragraph is not yet finished. “The work is a caricature of dispensationalism in the sense of a ‘distortion by exaggeration of parts or characteristics.’” I think that saying this before a word of attempted proof is unfair. If my book is a caricature it is a colossal failure since I did not intend a caricature, but a sober analysis. I admit that theoretically, hypothetically, my book could prove to be a caricature, though I never so

intended. Certainly some evidence ought to be offered before such a stricture at the very beginning of a long review article. The reader may assume, without ever reading my book, simply because he trusts Witmer's judgment, that it is guilty as charged. Even if this stricture is never proven, and even if I succeed in proving that the book is no caricature, the original stigma never completely washes away. Furthermore, the reader may see, after reading the Witmer comments, that they are inaccurate. One thing certainly seems necessary in order to be fair: that is, try to prove your point before claiming it is true. Witmer simply makes these scurrilous condemnations before the slightest justification is offered.

The utter condemnation of my "attitude" is given in the very next paragraph. I am "antagonistic, confrontational, denunciatory, and polemic" (p. 132). What is wrong with being such if dispensationalism calls for such? I try to *prove* that it does.

The next list of intended condemnations is like the preceding except for one item: "angry, bitter, derogatory, inflammatory, judgmental, and at times even sarcastic." Only one term, "bitter," is by definition inexcusable. The other items depend entirely on whether their use is justified in context or not. It is not necessarily a bad thing to be angry, derogatory, inflammatory, judgmental or sarcastic. It depends entirely whether one is justifiably angry, etc., or not. So Witmer is censuring me for using certain language, but not noticing the possibly proper (in the sense of legitimate or moral) use of the very terms. He should be ashamed of these statements *here*, and I will be ashamed of my words if he proves that I actually do use them without justification in *Wrongly Dividing*. Even being sarcastic is not necessarily sinful since the Bible generally, and even the Lord, is so on occasion (For example, "I came not to call the *righteous*, but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32)).

"Gerstner resorts to name-calling with its concomitant guilt by association." What he means by "name-calling" I do not yet know until I see what he so designates. Surely our Lord called the scribes and Pharisees names in Matthew 23, and Dr. Witmer would never censure any speech of the Lord. So here I am being censured for something, I know not what. Then the next sentence explains what he does mean and that sentence is downright absurd. "Antinomianism" attributed to dispensationalism in two chapters makes me guilty of "name-calling with its concomitant guilt by association."

Likewise, Gerstner also identifies Dispensationalism as Arminianism (p. 107 and elsewhere), Gnosticism (p. 208), pantheism (pp. 136, 143), Pelagianism (p. 243 and elsewhere), and perfectionism (p. 246 and

elsewhere). A5 a capstone Gerstner identifies Dispensationalism as “heresy” (pp. 1, 231 and elsewhere) and a “cult” (p. 150).

All the errors of which I accuse, and I believe prove, dispensationalism to be guilty (“spurious Calvinism” and “dubious evangelicalism”) is merely “name-calling”!

Because I am guilty of “name-calling,” I believe “that Christian courtesy and love need not be extended to exponents of what I call heresy” (p. 132). Dr. Witmer, I trace my conversion to a heretical dispensationalist because through him I first heard of the “crimson stream” that flows all through the Bible. I hope you and all dispensationalists can sometime, someday realize that *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* is an attempted returning of the favor. When you have stopped laughing you may say to yourself, “I think Gerstner really means that, and crazy as the statement sounds to me, he is not being sarcastic!”

Believe it or not, I am motivated by 1 John 5:16, “If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that.” Again, “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins” (Jms. 5:19–20).

I and my work were contrasted with Vern Poythress and his *Understanding Dispensationalists* as reflecting a different attitude. *Continuity and Discontinuity* is also contrasted. Those authors and books are very deserving of study. I assume the authors are all loving persons, but I am sure they don’t love dispensationalists more than I do. I am also sure that Dr. Witmer’s attributing an unchristian “attitude” to me is not only false, but slanderous. Paul shows that a person can be considered an enemy because he tells someone an unwelcome truth. You will say that Paul was inspired and Gerstner is not, with which I could not agree more. I believe, nevertheless, that I am telling dispensationalists the truth, and even they can admit two things: one, that that is theoretically, however remotely to your minds, possible; and two, that I certainly could, however stupidly, think I am telling you critically needed truth. That should bring pity for me on your part, rather than slander.

Witmer tells me how one should behave when engaged in controversy with dispensationalists: “irenically as brothers in Christ” (p. 132). One is to grant that opponents are “brothers in Christ” when that is the very topic of debate. When one writes a book to prove that a theology which

considers itself Christian is “spurious Calvinism” and “dubious evangelicalism,” the status of its adherents *has* to be in doubt.

I must admit here that “dubious evangelicalism” is a euphemism. I think that dispensationalism is anti-evangelical and that I (and many others) have proven it. I never charge that dispensationalists intend to be anti-evangelical *unless they really understand the dispensational theology and knowingly and deliberately adhere to it*.

In the very opening pages of *Wrongly Dividing* I point out that dispensationalists traditionally argue that the Reformed insistence on “works” being absolutely “necessary” to salvation makes us guilty of “legalism,” which means that we are resting on the merits of our own moral conduct for salvation. That implies that if we understand what we are teaching, and knowingly and deliberately adhere to it, we, too, are not Christians. I agree with that hypothetical charge and have proved a thousand times that that is not what we believe and teach.

#### **The Necessity of a Response**

It is incumbent on dispensational readers of my book to answer my charge that dispensationalism teaches Antinomianism (and a number of other fatal errors) before claiming that they are innocent of charges against their doctrine. Witmer does not, so far, grasp the nature of the book he is reviewing because he is so busy calling me a string of names, anyone of which, if true, would prove me unconverted. It is *likely* that it is his own Antinomianism that blinds him to the severity of his charges against me which, I suspect and hope, he does not really intend.

Witmer has not yet begun to point out some inaccurate statements of fact of which I am admittedly guilty before he makes one of his own and infers sinful behavior on my part:

A significant sidelight is the Dispensational Study Group, a group within the Evangelical Theological Society. Organized in 1985, it has met annually since 1986. Poythress has attended some of the sessions and participated in the discussions, as have other amillennialists, whereas Gerstner has not attended even one session, which makes one wonder whether his intent is to understand dispensationalism or simply to attack it. A presentation of the Dispensational Study Group appears in the Fall 1989 issue (vol. 10) of *Grace Theological Journal*.

I suppose I am still a member of the Evangelical Theological Society since I have received no notice of my dismissal. From that fact I suppose Dr. Witmer has assumed that I have attended meetings and received our *Journal* and known of the “Dispensational Study Group.” If Witmer had



thoroughly researched this matter he could have found out that somehow Gerstner had never received copies of the *Journal*, notification of dues or meetings, or attended any of them for years and never ever learned of the existence of the Dispensational Study Group until Witmer censured him for showing no interest in it. Then he proceeds to slander based on his gratuitous assumption: all this “makes one wonder whether his [Gerstner’s] intent is to understand dispensationalism or simply to attack it.”

Growing out of that slander comes another. “The approach Gerstner takes is that of a debater.” Of course, calling a person a debater is no slander; but when I am suspected of not wanting to understand dispensationalism, but simply to attack it, this is no compliment.

### The Superficial Reply

The next several paragraphs are several instances of “silliness” for which word and the like I am censured by Witmer. All these terms are common everyday expressions not inherently good or evil, but dependent on whether they are properly used. I say here and now Dr. Witmer is being silly in censuring me for such language without showing that I abuse the terms. He is really even malicious when he deduces from my mere use of such terms that I am censuring unfairly simply because I censure. Then in the midst of such silliness he introduces what could be an indictment, namely that I censure the “Brethren” for divisive when such an “indictment” could be made false for the Reformed.

This whole subject is so silly that I feel it a waste of time, except that throughout the article Witmer’s thinking — I am sorry to have to say this — tends to be puerile (as will be noted). But since he has called into question my competence by his puerility that has affected some others because in the midst of all this he puts his finger on a few real slips.

Again, according to Witmer it is wrong for me to praise others because, after all, I did censure some dispensationalists. This proves to Witmer that I can only see faults in dispensationalism and perfections in the covenantalists. To be fair, if I fault dispensationalists I must fault covenantalists, and if I praise Covenantalists I should praise dispensationalists also!

Now Dr. Witmer (pp. 134–136) begins really to fault *Wrongly Dividing*. He mentions, after making several mistakes of his own, a number of mine for some of which I am guilty and ashamed and have corrected in this new edition of my work. There are others that are errors on Dr. Witmer’s part. None of mine, though inexcusable, vitiates any argument in my book.

As I said, I admit a number of historical slips that Dr. Witmer has pointed out, and regret them. I will comment on a few of these mistakes. On referring to William Pettingill as a “Plymouth Brethren” dispensationalist (134) I did not intend to mean an official ecclesiastical affiliation, but a certain theological viewpoint in early dispensationalism. This is no excuse, but I was once told that Lewis Sperry Chafer was — as I was — a United Presbyterian (U. P. N. A.). I never forgot that piece of misinformation.

Witmer says the errors he points out reflect “a lack of concern for accuracy” (138) on my part. If the word “adequate” is put before “concern” I will confess that fault. I’ll try to be more detailedly accurate in the future. I have never seen any book except the Bible which is totally without error. Certainly Witmer’s article, as we shall see, is no exception.

Note the conclusion of Witmer’s couple pages of listing mistakes several of which I have admitted. “These errors place Gerstner’s treatment of dispensationalism and his charges under a cloud” (136). Now that is a colossal error probably greater than the little errors of mine that have been substantiated. I could have made fifty errors of that sort and left every argument against dispensationalism standing. Slight misquotations, wrong pages, wrong dates, and the like couldn’t possibly even raise questions about the soundness of charges such as “spurious Calvinism” and “dubious evangelicalism,” false distinction of Israel and the church, and Antinomianism. That is the reason errata are usually put at the end of a book review rather at the very beginning, where their occurrence could cause superficial minds to suspect the fundamental message of a book.

As I have regretfully observed, much of Dr. Witmer’s writing is puerile and does not deserve serious answer. So I am merely going to indicate such paragraphs and let the reader judge for himself without further comment by me. Paragraphs three and four on pp 136–37 are such.

The first paragraph on p. 137 is a case of non-cogent thinking. When I cite a “kind of papal infallibilism” in Scofield I am presumably inconsistent. Why? Because I agree with Spurgeon and others that Calvinism is orthodox biblical Christianity, “therefore suggesting that anything other than Reformed theology is unorthodox.” Papal infallibilism means that the pope, when he speaks from the chair (throne) to the whole church on faith or morals, is infallible. That is the way Scofield sounds where cited. Spurgeon and others argue that Calvinism is the sound biblical system, with which argument I agree. Virtually all inerrantists believe that the Word of God teaches only one system of truth. If that is Roman Catholi-

cism, then all other systems are unorthodox where they depart. If it is dispensationalism, all other systems are unorthodox where they depart. If it is Reformed theology, all other systems are unorthodox where they depart.

Paragraph two on p. 137 begins with a lie that I feel certain Dr. Witmer does not intend to tell. “Dispensationalists’ citations of scriptural proof texts to support their teachings Gerstner sarcastically dubs ‘spoof-texting’ (pp. 83, 99, 200).” Let me cite from my p. 99 and let the reader answer whether this justifies the solitary sentence above quoted:

We mention, finally, another of the dispensationalists’ devices (though they have no monopoly) which I call “spoof-texting.” It is simply the cumulative effect of massive citation. The reader is so busy reading or listening to the volume of citations (each text carrying the solemn dignity of being the inerrant Word of God) that he has no time to ponder the meaning. He tends to assume they do teach what the dispensationalist says that they teach. John Nelson Darby himself may have been the pioneer: “I prefer quoting many passages than enlarging upon them.

Bear has noticed this spoof-texting. Dispensationalists, he observes,

are content to reiterate the catch-phrases which set forth their distinctive principles, supporting them by reference to Bible passages of which they do not stop to show the validity. They usually do not attempt in their books to follow out their principles to their logical conclusions, and one often wonders if many who call themselves “Dispensationalist” have ever actually faced the conclusion which must flow from the principles which they so confidently teach.

Sandeem, on the other hand, throws out the baby with the wash. He simply indicts dispensationalists for holding the classic orthodox view of inerrancy from which he himself has departed. Dispensationalism, he argues, has “a frozen biblical text in which every word was supported by the same weight of divine authority.” Luther, too, had an inerrant Bible, one word of which would “slay” the devil. We should praise the dispensationalists for their virtues and censure them only for their faults.

The vice of “spoof-texting” is not to be confused, as Sandmen and others do, with the virtue of proper proof-texting. Luther is right that one little word (rightly interpreted) will destroy the devil, but a hundred words used only for cumulative effect have no effect on any argument. At the same time, however, those who would interpret God’s Word have the duty to use it responsibly and not to trade casually on the authority of Scripture as a means of endowing dubious arguments with divine sanction.

In the third paragraph on p. 137, I err in taking “church” in Acts 7:38 as evidence that the Church existed in the Old Testament when the word there and in the New Testament is “assembly,” “congregation,” or “called out group.” Using the same methodology I would call the mob at Ephesus the church also. Actually Stephen was talking about the Old Testament people of God when he used the word, which, in that context, would mean church just as in the context of a mob it would not.

I make a second error in this paragraph in taking the “prophets” in “apostles and prophets” (Eph. 2:20) as prophets of the Old Testament. “Though its occurrence following ‘the apostles’ indicates it refers to New Testament prophets.” Why does it have to refer to New Testament prophets? Because it is mentioned *after* apostles in a half dozen New Testament texts! New Testament prophets played no such role as the foundation of the Church as the prophets of the Old Testament, but this more numerous listing after apostles rules out my interpretation of Ephesians 2:20. The reader can see here a difference between a dispensationalist and a non-dispensationalist on the relation between the Old Testament and New Testament people of God. This is a fine point. I fault Witmer here (though I do not claim to have proved my point), because he fancies he has refuted my point by an observation that proves no such thing.

The last paragraph on p. 137 is another big issue to bring up in a single paragraph, but since Witmer refutes his own refutation of me I can be brief:

Gerstner accuses dispensationalism of exalting the invisible church at the expense of the visible (p. 184) and states that Chafer and Walvoord see no need to belong to any denomination.

Witmer says:

Chafer and Walvoord are discussing whether a person must be a member of an organized local church in order to be saved. They give the obvious answer, “no,” pointing out that a person should be saved before joining a local church. They add that if saved, it is normal for the individual to choose the fellowship of the people of God in one form or another.

Witmer, citing the dispensationalists in question, gives three arguments to support my charge “of exalting the invisible church at the expense of the visible.” 1. It is not necessary to be a member of a local (visible) church to be saved. So the visible church is not *necessary*, while no dispensationalist I have heard of will say or infer that of the invisible church. 2. A person could be saved *before* joining a visible church. This is

really a repetition of #1, but reiterates that the local visible church is not necessary. 3. *If one joins a local visible church it is the “normal” not the necessary thing to do.*

Paragraph one on p. 138 charges me with a questionable judgment because I differ with Dr. Ryrie’s judgment on the subject. When Witmer moves to the next paragraph he cites Crutchfield, whose Ph.D. dissertation deals more closely with the relation between Darby and Scofield. Crutchfield says there was little evidence to “connect Scofield directly to the works and influence of Darby,” which I did not claim when I said the “resemblance . . . between Scofield is deep and systemic,” and can be called Darbyite. Crutchfield grants that “Scofield benefitted from Darby’s labors.”

Since Witmer mentions that Crutchfield’s “chart shows an almost complete identity between the systems of Watts and Scofield (as affirmed by Ryrie and denied by Gerstner),” it becomes incumbent on me to show that Crutchfield as well as Ryrie (and Witmer) are in deep historical error here. To do this all I need do is quote what I wrote about Watts in *Wrongly Dividing* which Witmer simply overlooks:

While premillennialism in the eighteenth century was becoming more prominent, it was free of the modern dispensational theology. Unfortunately, this point has been missed by those who seek to enlist eighteenth-century figures such as Isaac Watts as dispensationalists. Ehlert, commenting on Watts’ *The Harmony of all the Religions which God ever Prescribed to Men and all Dispensations Toward Them*, remarked that here we find “exactly the outline of the first six dispensations that have been widely publicized by the late Dr. C. I. Scofield in his notes. Ehlert does not show, however, that the dispensational *theology* of Scofield underlay the divisions of Watts. Dr. Ryrie quotes similarly from Watts. He also notes that, except for the Millennium, it is exactly like *The Scofield Reference Bible*. Ryrie concludes, “This was a period of developing dispensationalism.”

Rather than proving Watt’s alleged dispensationalism, the work in question shows how pure a covenant theologian Isaac Watts was. Thus, it is not surprising that Watts calls the “Mosaical dispensation, or the Jewish Religion” nothing less than “a fourth edition of the covenant of grace.” Writing as if he were forewarning of John Nelson Darby and his Dispensationalism, Watts observes about our present “Christian dispensation” that “this is the last *edition of the covenant of grace*.”

The second paragraph on p. 139 citing “Gerstner’s questionable judgment” is my discussion of Calvin’s teaching on the extent of Christ’s atonement:

Another example of Gerstner's questionable judgment is his discussion of Calvin's teaching on the extent of Christ's atonement, that is, limited versus unlimited atonement. Gerstner dismisses the growing body of scholarly discussion of the issue as "an attempt . . . to maintain that limited Atonement was not a doctrine taught by John Calvin" (p. 125). He acknowledges that Calvin "said relatively little explicitly on this subject" (p. 125), but he insists that "even had Calvin made no affirmation of this doctrine [limited atonement] at all, the logic of his theological position is utterly undebatable" (p. 125). The whole point of the current discussion of the issue is that Calvin's position is debatable, especially in light of statements like the following in reference to Christ's death: "all he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race." A number of similar statements occur in Calvin's commentaries.

The Calvin student will recognize that Witmer is simply citing again a common statement in Calvin that does not prove universal atonement doctrine. It is true that scholars have been appealing to such statements for a century, never noting that, in Calvin, they are only collectively and not distributively universal. Gary Crampton's statement in *What Calvin Says* (1992) is sufficient to justify my "questionable judgment."

### The Antinomian Problem

Next comes "Gerstner's Charges" (140–142) followed by "Gerstner's Exaggerations" (142–143), "Gerstner's Misinterpretation" (143–144), and "Gerstner's Stance" (144–145). Gerstner now has the opportunity to justify Gerstner's "charges, exaggerations, misinterpretations and stance." I will then want to see Witmer *justify* his charges, exaggerations, misinterpretations, stance and worse.

First, my charge of Antinomianism:

The primary charge Gerstner levels against dispensationalism is antinomianism. Sproul mentions this in his foreword (p. x). Gerstner states this in the second paragraph of his introduction (p. 1), and then devotes chapters 11 and 12 to a discussion of what he calls "Dispensational Antinomianism" (pp. 209–50). It is repeated *ad nauseum* throughout the book, including the final paragraph on the last page (p. 272). Concerning this charge Gerstner concedes, "We notice, with relief, that many dispensationalists are better Christians than their theology allows" (p. 250). This concession helps explain how a theology supposedly so heretical could produce such exemplary Christians as Brookes, Scofield, Gaebelien, Chafer, Pettingill, Trumbull, Ironside, DeHaan, and a host of others including many dispensational leaders living today. In fact the daily Christian living of most dispensationalists is indistinguishable from

that of most followers of covenant theology. This clearly raises the question as to whether dispensational theology is as antinomian as Gerstner claims, since he would certainly agree with Jesus' observation that "the tree is known by its fruit" (Matt. 12:33; cf. 7:15–20).

This paragraph for most people — especially those weary of controversy — will be most welcome. Witmer and Gerstner seem to agree on the all-important point that both sides are agreed on doing the Lord's will whatever the doctrinal differences. Isn't that all that matters? Let us sing "Rock of Ages" together and get on with carrying out the Great Commission and forget these petty disagreements in details. Let's be different units in the same salvation army and concentrate on fighting the "enemy." Why exhaust ourselves in little skirmishes while the principalities and powers run the battle against all of us? You fight under Calvin's banner and I'll follow Chafer's, while we both march onward under the cross of Christ! Witmer seems to suggest that and asks, "Don't you agree, Gerstner, when you say that dispensationalists themselves are better than their theology?"

No, I don't agree, and my statement that "many dispensationalists are better than their theology allows" does not so imply. Nor do I agree with Witmer that this statement proves that the dispensational "tree" is good and produces good fruit. Probably I should have been more explicit. I should have explicitly said that many alleged dispensationalists are better than their alleged dispensationalism. Certainly if dispensationalism is Antinomian, dispensationalism does not produce good fruit from the bad Antinomian tree. If the fruit is good it is not dispensational. If the fruit is dispensational it is not good. I especially pound out that error of so thinking in *Wrongly Dividing*.

Let me repeat this much of the argument here. If dispensationalism is Antinomian it is against the necessity of good works as a fruit of faith. But if good works do not follow faith, the faith is dead and there is no justification or salvation for such persons. If they, apart from faith, say "Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?" Christ will say to them at the Day of Judgment: "I never knew you; *depart from me, you who practice lawlessness*" (Matt. 7:22–23). These Antinomians will have prophesied, cast out devils, and done many "miracles." If the Lord does not recognize their "good works," but calls those who do such things those "who practice lawlessness," we can do no other. Out of an Antinomian tree usually comes obviously bad fruit; but sometimes it

produces seemingly “good” fruit — which is even worse because it *seems* to be good — “nor can a bad tree produce good fruit” (Matt. 7:18).

But some will say, maybe dispensationalism is a good tree and not Antinomian. That is what Dr. Witmer thinks, and therefore considers this to be the major false “charge” of Gerstner. So far he has not proven that. He has simply shown that some who call themselves “dispensationalists” are good trees (not Antinomian) producing good fruit. I have answered that by saying that such persons are either not Antinomian or their fruit, which looks good, is bad.

Witmer has yet to refute my charge that dispensationalism is Antinomian. He attempts that in the next paragraph:

Related to the charge of antinomianism is Gerstner’s rejection of dispensationalists’ teaching concerning carnality among Christians. He seems to forget that identifying Christians as “carnal” began not with dispensationalism but with the Apostle Paul (1 Cor. 3:1–4). The same is true of the distinction between Christians designated as “spiritual” and those called “carnal” (v. 1). Paul also implied that a Christian’s carnality can be more or less persistent, because at the judgment seat of Christ “if any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire” (3:15). Paul certainly suggested that the carnality among the Corinthians continued for some time (1 Cor. 3:2–3), as did the writer to the Hebrews regarding some of his readers (Heb. 5:12–14).

The reader may notice that Witmer is about to try to rescue a drowning person, but be pulled down to drown with him. He first says that I “reject” dispensationalists’ teaching concerning carnality among Christians, when that is exactly what I use to prove my point. dispensationalist teaching about carnal Christians is Antinomian.

But Witmer, as do most dispensationalists, thinks he has Paul on his side. I am supposed to have forgotten that the apostle first used the word “carnal” of Christians. What I do in *Wrongly Dividing* is argue that Paul’s use of that word and the dispensationalist’s use are two different doctrines. Then Witmer gets cagey as he says that “Paul also implied that a Christian’s carnality can be *more or less persistent*” (later: “for some time”). But Paul is not here talking about more or less, but *all* carnality or *all* spirituality — “wood/hay” versus “gold/silver.” Paul does sound like an Antinomian, and Ryrie and other dispensationalists so read him. Witmer cites another text, Heb. 5:12–14, which is a “spoof-text” not dealing with a difference of kind as in 1 Cor. 3:15, but of degree (babies on milk versus the more mature).



The reader will have to pay close attention here to follow the involutions of the argument. Perhaps it will be clearer if I itemize the points:

1. Witmer's paragraph is written to show that Gerstner's charge of Antinomianism in dispensationalism is false because it opposes Paul's doctrine of the "carnal" Christian.
2. But in developing Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15, Witmer changes Paul from speaking of a difference of kind into a difference of degree between the "carnal" and "spiritual" Christian.
3. I agree that this is the *meaning* or *doctrine* of Paul, but it is not the way he is *speaking* in 1 Corinthians 3:12–15, especially 3:15.
4. Moreover, dispensationalists generally (unlike Witmer here), following the textual language more carefully wrongly find Antinomian doctrine here *in Paul* himself.
5. Recognizing Paul's infallibility they dutifully reject *their* misinterpretation of him.
6. Witmer escapes the Antinomian trap by not following the usual *dispensational* interpretation.
7. He avoids that dispensational misinterpretation by something worse: changing the difference of kind language of Paul into difference of degree language.
8. It is ironic, therefore, that Witmer faults me for not remembering Paul's teaching (which I have preached for 60 years) without basing it on a violent manipulation of his language.
9. If this is confusing it is because Witmer is deviating from dispensational interpretation to the standard reformed understanding, and doing that by getting a correct interpretation by an incorrect manipulation of the text.
10. If the reader asks how do I explain the matter, he can read it in chapter 11 and 12 of *Wrongly Dividing*.

Gerstner attempts to refute biblical examples of more or less persistent carnality among believers by taking up the case of Lot mentioned by Strombeck and Ryrie (pp. 220–21). Lot is called "righteous" (2 Pet. 2:7), and yet he chose "all the valley of the Jordan" (Gen. 13:11) and lived his life in wicked Sodom (13:12–13). Gerstner admits that Lot "made a foolish choice and lived in a bad location" (p.220), but he insists that "his righteous soul was constantly vexed" (p. 221) and that his living in Sodom does not prove "that his life was a constant 'rejection of God's Lordship'" (p. 220). He admits that Lot "committed incest . . . but his

daughters had to trick him into drunkenness to make him unconsciously do it" (p. 221), as though that excuses the sin. One might ask who made Lot offer the men of Sodom his daughters to "do to them whatever you like" (Gen. 19:8), when they demanded his angelic guests (19:5). The fact remains that Lot demonstrated little of God's lordship in his life.

The first sentence here is incredible: "Gerstner attempts to refute biblical examples of more or less persistent carnality among believers." This is exactly what I believe the Bible does teach. Let me explain what is plain enough in *Wrongly Dividing*. There are essentially three views of sanctification that have been found in the historic Christian church. One is the biblical doctrine of more or less carnality/ more or less spirituality. One extreme is Perfectionism: all spirituality, no carnality. The other extreme is Antinomianism: all carnality, no spirituality. Witmer, by his language here, is defending the biblical doctrine and inferring that that is the dispensational doctrine and that I err in attributing Antinomianism to dispensationalism. He complicates our argument by (unconsciously) substituting his interpretation (generally, Reformed) for the standard dispensational interpretation of crucial passages.

So here Witmer trickily deals with the case of "righteous" Lot. The real issue between the reformed and dispensationalists is that the reformed say Lot was a godly man with great faults, and the dispensationalists say he was utterly carnal with great salvation. What does Witmer say? "The fact remains that Lot demonstrated little of God's lordship in his life." I agree. The reformed agree. Almost all Christians agree.

All I am observing in the Genesis account is that Lot was not a no-lordship, carnal Christian. He demonstrated "little of God's lordship," but more than Witmer acknowledges. I don't excuse his incest or his drunkenness, but I do show that he didn't give himself over to either. According to standard dispensationalism, Lot was devoid of spirituality, or, in any case, *if* he was totally devoid of all spirituality he would still be "righteous" Lot, a saved soul. That is damnable heresy. As Paul says "I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things *shall not inherit the kingdom of God*" (Gal. 5:21).

Other examples of comparatively persistent carnality and lack of God's lordship in a person's life exist in Scripture. Samson certainly comes to mind. He married a Philistine woman of Timnah (Judg. 14–15) in violation of God's prohibition against such unions (Deut. 7:3). Then he visited a harlot in Gaza (Judg. 16:1) and consorted with Delilah (16:4–20). Samson in reality died a suicide, even though he slew many of the lords of the Philistines in his death (16:21–31).

Israel's first king, Saul, is another example. When Saul was anointed king by Samuel, "God changed his heart" (1 Sam. 10:9) and "the Spirit of God came upon him" (v. 10). Yet he soon acted in such self-will that God rejected him as king and "the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord terrorized him" (16:14). Like Samson, Saul died a suicide (31:4) not long after he consulted the witch of Endor in violation of God's commandment (Deut. 18:9–14). If God changed Saul's heart and gave him the Spirit of God, certainly he was a saved man. As a result either Saul lost his salvation — a possibility a Reformed theologian like Gerstner would reject out of hand — or he persisted in carnality and demonstrated little of God's lordship in his life. Even Israel's great king Solomon, who began his reign so well (1 Kgs. 3:5–15), was led into idolatry by the many foreign wives he took for political reasons (11:4–13).

These paragraphs are filled with weasel words, which insinuate everything, but say nothing. They obviously are supposed to be a refutation of reformed doctrine, but nowhere in the whole section do they say so. They are supposed to defend dispensationalism, but nowhere in the whole section do they say so. So it is made necessary for me to refute an insinuation that the critic does not articulate.

How, then, are these paragraphs supposed to be a critique of *Wrongly Dividing*? Apparently they are supposed to show that "Antinomianism" "carnal Christianity" is biblical contrary to reformed teaching. Nevertheless, all Witmer does say is that "examples of *comparative* persistent carnality and lack of God's lordship in a *person's* life exist in Scripture: Samson. I never deny that "comparative" degrees of carnality exist in *Christians*. I condemn dispensationalism because it teaches that total carnality may exist in a saved soul.

So far as the three men cited are concerned the general Reformed consensus seems to be as follows. Samson was probably a true believer who: first, sinned in going to a prostitute, which seems not to have been his habit (practice of fornication); second, he married a Philistine who he may have incorrectly believed was a convert because she professed to love this great enemy of the Philistines; third, he certainly sinned in allowing his hair to be cut, but a particular, heinous sin does not prove a person to be unregenerate; fourth, to accuse Samson of "suicide" when he gave his life in the destruction of a horde of God's enemies is to make a sinner out of a repentant hero of the faith!

Saul is generally considered by the Reformed to be a man who had great, but non-saving, experiences of God. His subsequent pattern of disobedience to God, leading ultimately to his explicit rejection by God,

showed that the Spirit's work on him did not include divine regeneration. His early experiences sometimes must have applied to his original resolution to follow God, which resolution he later abandoned, revealing that he never had a "new birth."

The Solomon case is a hard nut to crack. Most of the Reformed seemed convinced that this king was a true convert. Two comments may be made about his multiple "wives." First, God did not tolerate or promote polygamy ever in the Bible. Monogamy is its only doctrine of marriage. However, God apparently did not reject men for having multiple wives and concubines. The harmfulness of the practice (which the Lord Jesus sharply condemned) is evident everywhere in the Old Testament. We know that polygamist David was much beloved by God in spite of his polygamy, which polygamy caused him divine chastening. Second, therefore Solomon was not proven unconverted or totally carnal by his multiple wives as a Christian today most certainly would be. Furthermore, it is possible that his thousand wives were there for matters of state and not matters of sex.

So Witmer has tried four cases: Lot, Samson, Saul, and Solomon, and failed miserably in each. The Reformed say Saul was not only carnal, but habitually so in his persistent deliberate disobedience to God. The other men were not shown to have been deliberately, persistently opposed to and acting against the clear commands of God. Only one — Saul — can be shown to have been persistently carnal; and the Reformed generally agree that he was a reprobate and not a saved soul. Even if Witmer had been correct in his charges, he would not have saved himself, but only damned the Reformed along with him. As it is, he has vindicated the Reformed while condemning himself and his dispensational Antinomianism.

### **The Exaggeration Problem**

We come now to "Gerstner's Exaggerations." The first is a grim joke that does not amuse Dr. Witmer. I say that "according to dispensational theology, the quickest way to heaven is by continually engaging in horrible wickedness after having believed in Jesus Christ!" (p. 224). I am accused of giving no citation. Then Witmer admits that "Gerstner draws that conclusion from dispensational teaching concerning 'sin unto death' (1 Jn. 5:16)." One can't expect dispensationalists to put it as I did: "crooked living is the straightest" dispensational route to "heaven." Witmer then quotes Chafer's magnificent understatement of the very position: "God reserves the right to remove from this life a believer who

has ceased to be a worthy witness in the world.” In plain speech, a “believer” may be so incorrigibly wicked that even God can do nothing but take him out of the world to heaven. When a better evidence of Antinomianism is provided I would like to see it.

I am asked how I would interpret “sin unto death.” I interpret it as a form of unpardonable sin for which prayer is forbidden. “There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it” (1 Jn. 5:16). This is in contrast to James 5:20 where “he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death.” The one who has committed “a sin unto death” is not even to be prayed for because he will never be converted. Sinners who have not committed a sin to death may be prayed for and may be saved “from death.” Certainly a person who sins to death is not then going to be translated to life in heaven.

The next charge of exaggeration attributed to me is that I maintain that “among dispensationalists ‘none will concede that the lack of a changed life is positive evidence that one is not a Christian.’” Then Witmer points out that I cite Harry Ironside as one dispensationalist who did just that.

I simply must cite my whole discussion of Harry Ironside to show how unfair Witmer is in not admitting that I show Ironside to be hopelessly inconsistent in his teaching here:

It is not easy in attempting to steer clear of the Scylla of legalism to keep from running into the Charybdis of license. In the effort to avoid Jewish legality, it is most natural to fall into antinomianism.

Backsliding there may be — and, alas, often is. But the backslider is one under the hand of God in government. And He loves him too well to permit him to continue the practice of sin. He uses the rod of discipline; and if that be not enough, cuts short his career and leaves the case for final settlement at the judgment — seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:14; 11:30–32; and 2 Cor. 5:10).

True, he still has the old, carnal, Adamic nature; and if controlled by it, he would still be sinning continually. But the new nature imparted when he was born again, “not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible,” is now the controlling factor of his life. With this incorruptible seed abiding in him, he cannot practice sin.

Incidentally, on this point, Witmer cannot show himself to be even as inconsistent a dispensationalist as Ironside was. All he can say on this point is: “Actually dispensationalists recognize that ‘the believer is appointed to judge himself as to whether he is in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5)’” (citing Chafer and Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes*, 213). First, the “believer”

is only judging himself, not others. Second, it is not claimed that he judges even himself on the basis of his behavior.

Among other exaggerated and unsubstantiated statements is Gerstner's assertion that "the dispensational doctrine of sanctification has exacted a particularly heavy toll on the church. This doctrine of sanctification has contributed to the desiccation of the personal spirituality of many Christians" (p. 247). Later, after mentioning "the psychological anguish I went through trying to cultivate spirituality by such a fallacious theory of sanctification," he says that dispensationalists "endeavor, undoubtedly in great agony, to live out its impossible principles" (p. 248), again without substantiation.

"Without substantiation." Yet, I give one "substantiation" — myself, when I was a dispensationalist. I also refer to other "dispensationalists" unnamed to be sure, but dispensationalists I have known to suffer as I did.

But since Witmer wants more "substantiation" I will give it to him, though he must know it better than I. Now onto "Gerstner's Misinterpretations." Witmer says, "Gerstner's obvious desire to attack and condemn dispensationalism rather than understand it."

It is true that I "attack and condemn dispensationalism," but to warn my dispensational friends of the deep errors of their ways in the very spirit of the above cited James 5:20. Paul became the "enemy" of the Galatians because he told them the truth, and I think I became the enemy of unheeding dispensationalists because I am telling them Pauline truth. I can hear Witmer breaking out with, "Such arrogance!"; but he can't call it slander. And as for arrogance, I can't doubt that he is as confident that he understands Paul correctly as I am of my interpretation of the inspired apostle.

I am again accused of "many misinterpretations and subsequent misrepresentations," while still waiting to find the first one to survive critique. Let me consider the current allegation: My charge that dispensationalism teaches "an absolute and antithetical split between the finite, created, sinful, old human nature and the divine, uncreated, infinite, sinless, new divine nature (p. 213)." Here again I give pages of proof and Witmer thinks that mere denial is a refutation. He "refutes" me with a mere assertion and charges me on that basis with "misinterpretation" and "misrepresentation."

Having dismissed my whole critique of the dispensational doctrine of sanctification, Witmer now goes on the offensive against my doctrine. Witmer must believe that an offense is not only better than defense, but that it makes the latter unnecessary.

Unlike Witmer, I do not feel free to “refute” by mere rejection. I feel obliged to admit a criticism or prove it wrong. So let me hear Witmer’s criticism. I listen, but I hear no criticism at all. Only “unless” I think such and such, I am “prone” to fall into a certain error! This non-criticism is followed by an equally bland dogmatic observation.

I will simply quote the paragraph and let the reader see if he can detect somewhere a critical argument lurking somewhere in this verbiage:

Gerstner describes “the traditional orthodox Reformed view” as teaching that “the Christian is one person with two struggling principles, the new one destined to conquer the old” (p. 232). Unless Gerstner recognizes that the old principle of indwelling sin is not conquered until the believer’s physical death or transformation at the Lord’s coming, Gerstner is prone to fall into the perfectionism of which he accuses dispensationalists. What Gerstner describes as “the traditional orthodox Reformed view,” when safeguarded against slipping into perfectionism as indicated, is actually what dispensationalists believe, not Gerstner’s misinterpretation of “two utterly distinct natures or selves” (p. 232).

In the next paragraph I am accused of “failure to grasp the distinction between positional sanctification and experiential sanctification as presented by Chafer and others.” But this time he goes on to serious critique. I charge that dispensationalism teaches that “the Christian may be justified without being sanctified.” Quite so. Where do I err? I err because:

According to the dispensational teaching of positional sanctification, that statement is untrue, because the believer is positionally sanctified as a result of God’s imputing to him the righteousness of Christ, which is his justification (Rom. 4:23–5:1). As a result a Christian is positionally in God’s sight as righteous and holy as Christ Himself, with whom he is united by faith.

That attempted refutation proves my point perfectly. No real, active, actual sanctification in the living of the Christian is even claimed. His is a “positional sanctification” — the imputation of Jesus Christ’s righteousness to him — none at all in his living. The Christian’s justification is his sanctification. Witmer cannot see that he is expounding my criticism, fancying that it is a defense against it. He goes on to describe the Corinthian Christians “as less than sanctified experientially in their daily living” (1 Cor. 3:1–4). It must be clear to the reader that it isn’t that “Gerstner misunderstands” the dispensational distinction, but that the dispensational distinction affirms justification and denies necessary Christian living by identifying the imputed righteousness of justification

with “sanctification.” This is incidentally another evidence of a dispensational, naked antinomian idea covered by the fig leaves of a different phraseology.

And now the end of Part One: “Gerstner’s Stance” which is represented as “a rigid and extreme form of Reformed theology.” If Witmer can’t follow a critique of his own dispensationalism, I am not surprised that another theology — in this case, Reformed theology — eludes him. Even at that, the first paragraph is really inexcusable. He actually gives the impression that I consider all but the small Protestant Reformed denomination to have departed from total Reformed orthodoxy.

As anyone can see who reads the section of *Wrongly Dividing* discussed, it is on one particular point in Reformed orthodoxy that I charge a general slippage at this present time. That point is what is called the “well-meant offer” of the gospel. Classic Reformed theology (from Paul through the Puritans) maintained that God never intended or desired the salvation of the reprobates. I mentioned that genuine reformed theologians such as even John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, and The Orthodox Presbyterian Church have turned away from orthodoxy on this detail. I knew I would receive criticism from fellow-reformed on this matter. The Reformed Baptist Publishers have commended *Wrongly Dividing*, but charge me with straying from Calvinism in this area. I asked the dean of Westminster Theological Seminary what its faculty thought. He said they didn’t think I had strayed, but that my language was no better than the reformed theologians I criticized.

I felt obliged to bring in this point to answer a dispensational charge by the able dispensationalist polemicist Charles Lee Feinberg.

Witmer’s making me rigid and extreme and holding a view of Calvinism shared by only four thousand others is as absurd as it is false. It is even unfair to the Protestant Reformed who share general reformed doctrine, but its distinctions make it denominationally separate.

The next paragraph is Witmer’s best. I quote it in full:

Gerstner takes a similar monolithic view of dispensationalism, insisting that current dispensational theology is the same as an earlier dispensationalism, even though dispensational theology traditionally as well as currently represents a broad spectrum and is continually being refined. Gerstner in effect acknowledges this when he refers to Toussaint’s interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount (p. 189) or MacArthur’s espousal of lordship salvation (p. 253) or Tozer’s criticisms (pp. 139, 230); and yet efforts by current dispensationalists to refine and develop their theology are described by Gerstner as “tiring of this burden” of loyalty “to the faith of their fathers” (p. 159, n. 19). According



to Gerstner, dispensationalists are wrong whether they remain the same or attempt to refine their position.

I do admit, and rejoice in, current changes going on among dispensationalists. All of them, to my knowledge, are for the better. I state that in *Wrongly Dividing*, but perhaps I should have been more appreciative. I take exception to my fellow reformed theologian, Vern Poythress, as being overly appreciative. And Witmer should have noted the reason for my not being enthusiastic. The changes are not departures from the dispensational *system*. I know the system is not monolithic neither is the reformed *system*. But both are systems and they are in systematic conflict. If one of these *systems* is correct the other is false.

The next to last paragraph reiterates mostly what I have already answered. Mention is made of the lack of biblical references in the index, which is brief in other ways also. I did not do as much establishing my position as refuting the dispensational, for it was a polemical work and so titled. I assumed a general understanding of reformed and evangelical terminology. Undoubtedly, however, the work leaves much to be desired. The criticism that I am critiquing a somewhat obsolete older form of dispensationalism is thoroughly refuted by this volume, which shows almost all of the *current* criticisms to be along traditional dispensational lines.

In the last paragraph Witmer returns to slander, accusing me of not “listening seriously to what scholars on the other side of the issue are saying.” For Witmer, listening seriously means listening “irenic”(ally). I have also to be polemic about that, or else deny the inspiration of the Bible. Let me look now at Part Two of “A Review of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (*Bibliotheca Sacra*, July– Sept. 1992).

As noted in part 1 of this series, John H. Gerstner in his book *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* condemns dispensational theology as being antinomian (repeatedly in pages 1 through 272) among other things and denounces it as “heresy” (pp. 1, 201, 231). He does so from his personal theological perspective of an extreme Calvinism and a rigid covenant amillennialism, which he considers to be “just another name for Christianity” (p. 107). As a result of this stance Gerstner does not deal at length with the biblical evidence for and against the doctrines of either dispensationalism or his own theology, a fact reflected in the lack of any Scripture index to the book, which has only an inadequate two-page index of persons and subjects.

Gerstner does “condemn dispensational theology as being antinomian . . . among other things and denounces it as heresy.” But Witmer’s next

sentence (“He does so from his personal theological perspective of an extreme Calvinism and a rigid covenantal amillennialism which he considers . . . ) contains three errors: first, it is not my “personal” Calvinism; second, mine is not an extreme Calvinism, but quite traditional infralapsarian, five-point Calvinism; third, there is nothing especially “rigid” about my “covenant amillennialism”; fourth, I do not say that all this, but only that “Calvinism” in general is “another name for Christianity,” citing the famous statement of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, with which virtually all Calvinists agree. Witmer criticizes me for inaccuracies, for some of which I was guilty. I could wish that he would state my very stance accurately.

### **The Deficient Exegesis Problem**

From this severely twisted presentation of my “stance,” my maligner then draws seriously false deductions. “As a result of this stance Gerstner does not deal at length with the biblical evidence for and against the doctrines of either dispensationalism or his own theology.” It was not as a result of my stance for traditional Calvinism, but because that was not an issue. It is generally agreed that when dispensationalists claim moderate Calvinism they are professing to hold four of the traditional five points. Sometimes, they specify questions about some other details also. What I am contending in *Wrongly Dividing* is that dispensationalists generally are mistaken in their claim. They do not usually hold any of the points of Calvinism, but are (unconsciously) five-point Arminians. We do not basically disagree on the meaning of the five-points, but on dispensationalism’s adherence to them. Hence I did not have to “deal at length with his [my] own theology,” that not being the issue, but whether it was compatible with dispensationalism.

Witmer’s other point that I do not “deal at length with the evidence” for dispensationalism is relevant, though false. My original manuscript, though reduced greatly by the publisher, still contains enough to prove my charges as this current refutation of Witmer and other dispensationalists shows. Admittedly *Wrongly Dividing* could be a longer and fuller critique, but it can’t be said to deal at insufficient “length” unless it fails to prove what it claims to prove.

The latter part of the preceding sentence reads: “a fact reflected in the lack of any Scripture index to the book, which has only an inadequate two-page index of persons and subjects.” This, I admit, is a deficiency

which I had hoped to correct [Dr. Gerstner passed away before this was completed — Ed.] .<sup>1</sup>

Also noted in part 1, an examination of the charges Gerstner makes against dispensationalism shows either that he misunderstands and misrepresents dispensational teaching or that he has either oversimplified or exaggerated the issue involved. Gerstner attacks the classic American dispensational teaching of Brookes and Scofield and their generation and insists that more contemporary dispensational teaching has changed only superficially and remains the same as classic dispensationalism. This is not correct. Despite Gerstner's insistence to the contrary, *The New Scofield Reference Bible* and Ryrie's *Dispensationalism Today* refined classic dispensational teaching considerably. Furthermore, since that time dispensational scholars, under the impact of advances in the field of biblical theology, have been and are continuing to refine their system of theology. As a result even *Dispensationalism Today* no longer represents dispensationalism today in some respects.

This first sentence needs no further comment here. Witmer claims to have shown in part 1 of his review article that I have either misunderstood, misrepresented oversimplified or exaggerated "the issue involved." I claim to have shown in my review of part 1 that I am not guilty as charged. The reader of both writings will have to judge.

### The Obsolete Problem

Witmer's next point is interesting partly because it appears in virtually every dispensational review which *Wrongly Dividing* has received. These reviewers like to say that I am critiquing a virtually obsolete system, though none dares state it that bluntly. MacArthur in *Faith Works* reduces dispensationalism to a theology which sees a difference between Israel and the church, thus dissolving dispensationalism altogether for *all* Bible students see that. Witmer is not so bold, but he does come close. Notice: "Gerstner . . . insists that more contemporary dispensational teaching has changed only superficially and remains the *same* as classic dispensationalism. This is not correct." Witmer is saying that classical dispensationalism and contemporary dispensationalism are not the same system. He does use the word "same," not "identical." I don't think that Witmer means to deny the continuation of the dispensational system, but this is strong language — though not as indubitable as MacArthur's.

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<sup>1</sup> The reader should note that we are including a substantial index in this new edition.

It is to be remembered that I do not deny changes in dispensationalism. I simply contend that contemporary dispensationalism is the same system of theology as “classic” Dispensationalism. All systems of thought have minor differences within the system. But if the system changes, then what is still called “dispensationalism” in the last decades of the twentieth century is a different theology from that which went by that name until about 1980 (Mayhue). This kind of thinking is making the historic dispensationalists uneasy, as anyone can see.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the “contemporary” dispensationalists may feel themselves between a rock and a hard place. If they radically differ from Darby, Scofield, Chafer, they will have trouble with non-“contemporary” contemporary dispensationalists (the overwhelming majority, I believe). If they do not differ they will have trouble with the whole Reformed and much of the generally evangelical tradition.

This continuing study and refinement of dispensational theology does not constitute a “tiring of this burden” of “the faith of their fathers” by contemporary dispensationalists, as Gerstner concludes (p. 159, n. 19); it is simply an effort to understand and interpret God’s infallible revelation better. It is expressed in the activity of the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society, which held its first public meeting November 20, 1986. At its annual meetings since then it has attracted nondispensationalists as well as dispensationalists to interact on issues of mutual concern. The 1989 meeting considered *Understanding Dispensationalists* by Poythress, who was present and responded to the two papers evaluating his book and also participated in the general discussion that followed. The proceedings are published in *Grace Theological Journal*.

I have already in this volume explained that I did not even know of these meetings. Also, amicable discussions between differing systems does not mean that differences have been resolved. I am no way opposed to such meetings as, I hope, this sequel to *Wrongly Dividing* demonstrates.

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<sup>2</sup> Note from Nicene Council editor (2009): Though *academic* dispensationalism is moving on and leaving behind the obsolete form of original dispensationalism, this in itself is significant: (1) The “plain and simple” hermeneutic of dispensationalism was unable to produce a system that would not need major changes. (2) The vast majority of *popular* dispensational writers still hold to the old school. Thus, the continuing need for its critique.

A similar program of continuing study and refinement is being pursued by contemporary covenant theologians under the same impact of developments in biblical theology. Poythress's book and Hoekema's *The Bible and the Future* are examples of this refinement. They discuss issues that distinguish covenant from dispensational theology in a spirit of mutual Christian concern, as illustrated also by *Continuity and Discontinuity*, which includes essays by both covenant theologians and dispensationalists. As a result of this development in covenant theology, *Prophecy and the Church*, by Allis, is no longer the ablest critique ever written of the heart of dispensational theology," as Gerstner asserts (p. 152).

This paragraph is sheer propaganda in a critical review. Witmer likes the approach of Poythress, Hoekema, the writers in *Continuity and Discontinuity*, and the devaluation of Allis as the spirit of "mutual Christian concern." Whether it is the sounder evaluation of dispensationalism is the issue. A preference is not an argument, but an appeal to prejudice when unaccompanied by argument. This is poll taking, not critique. If these writings produce information relevant to our debate, let it be mentioned if Witmer wants to avoid mere name-dropping, which otherwise seems to be the name of the game. True peacemakers who will be called the children of God build rational bridges; seeming peacemakers may call evil good and good evil. All of this is said without any insinuation that the work of Poythress, Hoekema, and others alluded to, may not be of the highest quality, but merely a protest of the partisan way it is here cited.

In view of the current dialogue between covenant and dispensational theologians, both Allis and Gerstner are out-of-date, and Gerstner's book contributes little to the contemporary discussion. For the sake of the Christian public, however, the issues he raises need to be discussed and a biblical case for teachings associated with dispensationalism presented. As a result this article considers issues raised in Gerstner's book even though some have been at least partially resolved by refinements in both covenant and dispensational theology.

Journalism in lieu of argument continues. All of this "dialogue between covenantalists and dispensational theologians" puts Allis and Gerstner "out-of-date." That may or may not be a fact; but, in any case, the question in debate is whether it is a good or a bad fact. Many writers say that the modernist-fundamentalist debate is out-of-date. That, too, is a moot point, but the question in debate is whether it is a good or a bad fact that the debate be out-of-date.

I remember a reviewer in another field once saying that a new book was "significant but not useful." What he meant was that the book did speak to current debates, but that the book and the current debates

weren't dealing with the real issues, and therefore were "significant but not useful." At last, Dr. Witmer gets to the point: "For the sake of the Christian public, however, the issues he [Gerstner] raises need to be discussed and a biblical case for teachings associated with dispensationalism presented." Finally, my "issues" are to get some attention, but very condescendingly. It is "for the sake of the Christian public." The scholars have settled these so-called "issues" some time ago. However, the general public needs to be informed lest, in their less knowledgeable condition, they be misled into thinking that Gerstner's "issues" may be relevant and, alas, even cogent. This illusion must not be allowed to penetrate the public mind.

### **The Israel Problem**

The last sentence is downright uncharacteristically generous. There it is stated that only "some" of my issues "have been at least partially resolved by refinements in both covenant and dispensational theology." I do not believe that even "some" of them have been "partially resolved," but I am glad that for Dr. Witmer at least some of them have to be answered, and that he will now, presumably, attempt to do so. I remind the anticipating reader that my basic issues are two: Dispensationalism is not Calvinistic, as claimed, but basically Arminian, and that it is, at best, only dubiously evangelical. Let us listen for Witmer's response to those charges:

Gerstner recognizes that a key issue distinguishing dispensational theology from his position is the relationship between Israel and the church. He holds to "the essential continuity of Israel and the church" (p. 186), insisting that the two groups "constitute an organic unity" (p. 187). In support of his idea that Israel is the church in the Old Testament, Gerstner twice refers to Acts 7:38, which uses the word *ecclesia* of Israel (translated "church" in the King James Version), as evidence that "ancient Israel" is "part of the church" (p. 205; cf. p. 202). The word *ecclesia* literally means a "called-out group" or "assembly" and is used properly of the church as the body of Christ (e.g., Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:18). Though *ecclesia* is also used in Acts 19:32, 39, 41, Gerstner does not consider the Diana-worshipping mob of Ephesians as part of the church. Gerstner endorses Bear's criticism of dispensationalists for the reiteration of "catch-phrases" without showing their validity (p. 100), but Gerstner is guilty of this error in his use of the word *ecclesia*.

This first paragraph shows that Witmer is not going to attack my critique comprehensively, but piece-meal. So be it. The reader will have

to keep in mind that my argument is comprehensive as we follow the details Witmer will present.

First, is my alleged incorrect use of *ecclesia* which “literally means a ‘called-out group’ or ‘assembly’ of Israel.” My first insinuated error here is that if *ecclesia* means church I should “consider the Diana-worshipping mob of Ephesians as part of the church” because it is so-called in Acts 19:32, 39, 41. My answer to that clever joke, that even a child would see, is that an assembly would have to be related to its object of worship. An assembly worshipping Diana would not be the same as an assembly worshipping the Lord. But an assembly worshipping the Lord in the Old Testament would be the same as an assembly worshipping the same Lord in the New Testament. So I am not really guilty of using a catchphrase (*ecclesia*) to equate an assembly worshipping Diana and an assembly worshipping the Lord.

Ryrie identifies “the essence of dispensationalism” as “the distinction between Israel and the Church,” which Gerstner interprets to mean that “Israel and the church are different in almost every way” (p. 181). This is an unwarranted exaggeration. In his discussion of contrasts between Israel and the church Chafer recognizes that “there are similarities between these two groups of elect people.” Chafer cites at least a dozen similarities, and more could be listed. This is important, because Gerstner’s arguments for “the unity of Israel and the church” (p. 186) rest on these similarities. But similarities do not nullify differences. Two children can be the same age and size and have the same color hair, eyes, and complexion; but they can be from different families. Differences make the church as the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27–28; Eph. 4:12) distinct from Israel, each group of elect people having its own divine program.

The first point here is trivial. I wrote in *Wrongly Dividing* that Ryrie sees Israel and the church to be different in “almost every way.” Witmer refutes me by showing that Chafer pointed out many similarities between them!

The second matter is important. Witmer maintains that the “Differences make the church as the ‘body of Christ’ (1 Cor. 12:27–28; Eph. 4:12) distinct from Israel, each group of elect people having its own divine program.” The two texts cited here, plus an analogy mentioned above (to which we will turn later,) are given as proofs for this fundamental dispensational error. The two texts describe the church as the “body of Christ,” but it does *not* reject Israel as the body of Christ. Witmer seems to assume the texts do separate Israel and the church, probably because

they are separated in Witmer's mind. He is begging the question without realizing it.

If, as I (and thousands of Reformed theologians) have shown, the true Israel of the Old Testament is trusting in Christ (the Lord) just as the true church in the New Testament is doing, both are the same "body of Christ." Can anyone not see that the wife of the Lord in the Old Testament is identical with the bride of Christ in the New? I turn now to Witmer's argument from analogy. "Two children can be the same age and size and have the same color hair, eyes, and complexion; but they can be from different families." Indeed so. But consider Paul's analogy: "For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman" (Gal. 4:30, 31). According to Paul the true church of the New Testament is born of the same "free woman" (Sarah) as Isaac in the Old Testament. Israel and the church are not from "different families," but from the same one. They are both human beings alike in many details with other human beings; but, as Israel and the church, they are redeemed human beings belonging to the very same family of God.

Furthermore, if Israel were not of the same "mother" as the church (as dispensationalists insist), then she was not in Christ and she was not saved. If she was the child of God, as the Bible surely teaches, then she was in the Son of God. She too is the "body of Christ," one with all who today and forever are in the body of Christ, the church of the ages.

Gerstner opposes the dispensational teaching that God has two distinct elect peoples — Israel and the church — both redeemed and brought into relationship with Him on the basis of Christ's redemptive sacrifice but with different divine programs. This is understandable, because his view of the covenant of grace demands a single group of redeemed people without distinctions, a view no longer held by many covenant theologians. Under Gerstner's view of the covenant of grace, Israel must be the church in the Old Testament and the church must be the new Israel that inherits all the promises to Israel. Recognizing the dispensational distinctions in God's dealings with the human race, the distinction between Israel and the church in particular, is a more consistent biblical position. This view recognizes that in the one flock of God's redeemed people under the one Shepherd Jesus Christ, more than one fold exists (John 10:16), following the pattern of ancient shepherding.

If these two peoples are "both redeemed and brought into relationship with Him on the basis of Christ's redemptive sacrifice," what essential difference can there be between Israel and the church? If they are not in



the same “body of Christ,” who can be? Yes, they have some differences but not at this point!

Then Witmer lapses again, saying falsely that my covenantal view sees these two “without distinctions.” The next statement is only partly false: the church “inherits *all* the promises of Israel.” It is true that I, and a probably minority of covenantalists, believe Rom. 11:25–26 does not refer to Israel in ethnic distinction from the church. Many, if not most, covenantalists agree with dispensationalists on this point of distinction. The exegetical difference here is a mole hill that Witmer would make into a mountain.

The conclusion of the paragraph turns on making differing “folds” of sheep into different sheep!

In Scripture Israel’s distinctiveness rests in God’s choosing the nation as a special people for Himself (Deut. 7:6). The choice had numerous purposes such as being the vehicle for God’s revelation to mankind (Rom. 3:2) and the ethnic line of the Lord Jesus Christ (9:5). This choice was based on God’s oath to the forefathers (Deut. 7:8), which oath is the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:1–8), the token of which is circumcision of every male Israelite (vv. 9–14). Since this covenant, confirmed through Isaac (vv. 19, 21) instead of Ishmael, was “an everlasting covenant” (vv. 7, 13, 19), God’s choice of Israel ethnically as a special people also is everlasting. This truth is confirmed by God’s promise through Jeremiah that Israel will continue as a nation as long as the sun, moon, and stars endure (Jer. 31:35–37; 33:19–26); in fact it will be a reunited nation (Eze. 37:15–28), healing the division that occurred under Rehoboam (1 Kgs. 12:16–24).

I have discussed this error at various points in *Wrongly Dividing* and in *Wrongly Dividing Wrongly Dividing*. Is it not sufficient here just to place Paul’s words in Romans alongside what Witmer has cited above?

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Rom. 2:25–29

In the Old Testament and New, and forever, it is not circumcision of the flesh, but of the heart (regeneration) which makes a person a “Jew,”

a believer, a member of Israel, a member of the church. Outward circumstances never change that one “body of Christ.”

This separate identity of Israel in distinction from the Gentiles and from “the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:32) continued in the New Testament. It was recognized by Paul (Rom. 3:1–2; 9:3–5; 10:1–3), who insisted that “God has not rejected His people” (11:1–2a). Paul supported this conclusion of God’s continuing choice of Israel with two arguments: (a) “At the present time [there is] a remnant according to God’s gracious choice” (v. 5), including Paul himself, that becomes part of the body of Christ, the church (Eph. 2:13–18). (b) Later after “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in . . . all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:25–26) because “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29). This final salvation of Israel is seen at least in part in the “one hundred and forty-four thousand sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel” (Rev. 7:4–8) and in the repentance of Israel at the Lord Jesus’ return to earth (Zech. 12:9–13:1, 9).

Note the three distinct entities: Gentiles, Israel, and church. The “Gentiles” are simply unredeemed non-Jews. The “church” is redeemed Gentiles. The Jews remain “separate” from the church. So they are not in the body of Christ. A remnant of them are redeemed, apparently without being in the body of Christ. If redeemed, that has to be by Christ. Yet redeemed Jews are not with redeemed Gentiles in the body of Christ.

The conception of anyone being saved without being “in Christ,” in the “body of Christ,” in the vine, in the building, among the sheep, is unimaginable. So a “remnant” of Israelites which is separate and distinct from the church is unimaginable. A saved “Israelite” outside of the church simply cannot and does not exist unless Jesus Christ is *not* the only Savior of mankind.

Though Paul speaks of Jews, Gentiles and the church he is simply recognizing empirical differences. He could have said that there are males and females. Or there are black, brown, white and yellow human beings. He referred to human beings as once saved (Jews) now saved (church) and never saved (Gentiles). Certainly Paul would never say that there are two groups of saved humans and one unsaved. There is a heaven-bound group and a hell-bound group — none between. People are on the broad or narrow road: they are sheep or goats, wise or foolish virgins, saved or lost.

The very fact that Witmer and other dispensationalists can classify mankind this way absolutely proves that they do not understand Christian salvation, all their incessant protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

ing. One is in the body of Christ or he is lost, be he Jew or Gentile. What can be plainer in Scripture than that?

What, then, asks Witmer, is the “remnant” of the Jews to whom Paul refers in Rom. 11:25, 26? These were those *among the Jews* who were elect and regenerate as *all* the Jews never were. Paul cites himself among the present few born Jews who were snatched as brands from the burning of the Jewish state, comparable to the 7,000 in Ahab’s time who also never bowed the knee to Baal. The 7,000 were in the body of Christ before the incarnation, as he and other Jews were after the incarnation. It is a matter of debate whether 11:25–26 refers to a future general conversion of lost Jews (“Israel”) or merely to the total of redeemed Gentiles and Jews who make up the true “Israel” or chosen of God. God finds no fault in Jacob at any time. All this is spelled out in *Wrongly Dividing*. Witmer seems to refute all this criticism by saying that the “remnant” “becomes part of the body of Christ, the church (Eph. 2:13–18).” In fact, this correct statement only aggravates his error, for he is here insisting on the “separate identity of Israel in distinction from the Gentiles and from ‘the church of God’ (1 Cor. 10:32) continued in the New Testament.” So in the same paragraph Witmer is saying that the Jewish remnant is a “separate identity” from the “church of God,” with which it becomes a part. Let the real Witmer stand up. Let the real dispensationalist stand up. Will they have one people of God or two separate ones? If they say there is one people of God, they join the faith of the whole Christian church. If they say there are two, they refuse to join the Christian church because they “wrongly divide the word of truth.”

Witmer’s interpretation of the difficult Rom. 11:25–26 passage also shows the fatal dispensational error. It may be difficult to see what this text does mean but it is not difficult at all to see that it cannot mean what Witmer says. Painful as it is, let me lay his error bare before Witmer’s eyes. He writes: “Later after ‘the fulness of the Gentiles has come in . . . all Israel will be saved’ (Rom. 11:25–26) because ‘the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable’ (v. 29).” I will not add the other verses Witmer savages.

Remember that, for Witmer, Israel is not identical with, but ever distinct from, the church of God. So Paul had to be, and the 7,000 who did not bow their knees to Baal had to be, plus any Jews who earlier or later were saved apart from the church of God had to be. At the very end, *all* the Jews will be saved apart from the church of God. Many saved Gentiles will constitute the church of God and all Jews will be saved apart from the church of God. This is the grand climax of human history: many lost

Gentiles, many saved Gentiles in the church, and all Jews saved apart from the church which has the one God, faith, baptism, etc. This is nothing less than grotesque, and Witmer and millions of other dispensationalists call it Christianity and “rightly dividing the word of truth.”

I fear that Witmer and his fellows will be beside themselves with anger against *my* grotesque misrepresentation. No, they will exclaim, there are *not* two different saved bodies. This Jewish remnant, small and later universal, will ultimately be one with Christ in one body that you may even call the church. Better late than never? No, but if late (after the end) then never. The saved of Christ cannot be two “separate” and “distinct” groups throughout this age and then united in eternity. It is now or never. The dispensationalist rejecting “now” chooses “never,” though it seems that he will never admit it (in this age).

Because of God’s everlasting covenant with Israel as His chosen ethnic people, the nation has title to “all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8; cf. 13:14–17; 15:7–21). Possession obviously does not mean occupancy, because Israel was removed from the land during the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests and following the Roman destruction of Jerusalem. In fact God had forewarned Israel of her dispersions from the land (Deut. 28:36–37, 49–50, 64–67), but He had also promised her restoration (30:1–6). Possession means ownership, a God-given title that will finally result in occupancy. That final return and occupancy is mentioned repeatedly (Isa. 11:11–12; 14:1–3; 60:21; Jer. 16:13–16; 23:5–8; 30:1–11; 32:37–44; Ezek. 11:14–20; 20:42; 34:13; 36:16–28; 37:21–28). At the risk of Gerstner’s charge of “spoof-texting,” which he defines as “the cumulative effect of massive citation” (p. 99), these verses are cited simply to show the extensiveness of this promise. They indicate that God will restore His people Israel to their land to which He gave them title, especially when tied with Acts 3:20–21, which identifies the fulfillment of these things with the return of Jesus Christ from heaven.

Witmer rightly anticipates my charge of “spoof-texting” here. He lists a number of texts to show that God has given merely “ethnic” Jews a title to “all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8). Genesis 17:8; 13:14–17; 15:7–21 are cited as biblical proof of that assertion.

Look at them, reader, and point out to me where any of them specifies merely “ethnic” Israelites. Certainly, the foundational text, Genesis 17:8, refers to Jews as those of whom God says: “I will be their God.” True they are “descendants” of Abraham, but these are no *mere* genealogical descendants, but those who keep the same religious

covenant as did father Abraham. “This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you” (17:10). This is no ethnic Israel, but Jews who profess the religion of Abraham, which is the one covenant of grace, as Paul plainly indicates in Romans and Galatians especially.

Witmer also cites Genesis 13:14–15, which is essentially the same promise to Abraham’s “descendants.” Is Witmer going to say, “See, this text does *not* mention that Abraham’s ‘descendants’ will profess Abraham’s faith?” True, this text does not mention that these are religious descendants. May we therefore assume that they are merely ethnic here and religious elsewhere? Do we have two separate groups of Jews attended to? To which group does the promise apply? Or is it to be divided between them? Is the Abrahamic covenant more secular than religious? Is God’s promise divided between those who affirm Abraham’s faith and those who repudiate and despise it?

Then there is Genesis 15:7–21. Here the “descendants” are historically located. They are Abraham’s offspring who were to suffer enslavement 400 years (in Egypt). They are those who were to be delivered from Egypt and possess the land from the “river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (the historic Israel of the Old Testament). Religion waxed and waned with them, but to the time of Christ they considered themselves, and were considered by others (including Christ until He rejected them for their inward unbelief in the faith of Abraham), as the religious as well as ethnic descendants of Abraham.

Witmer will not recognize our Lord’s rejection of the merely ethnic Jews nor Paul’s. He gives us another group of spoof-texts (dozens of them) to prove a “final return and occupancy” of the land promised to religious Jews by merely ethnic Jews. Sampling just a few will show that, if we didn’t know how serious Witmer is, he really is deliberately spoofing. Take Isaiah 11:11–12:

Then it will happen on that day that the Lord will again recover the second time with His hand the remnant of His people, who will remain, from Assyria, Egypt, Pathros, Cush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and from the islands of the sea.

And He will lift up a standard for the nations, and will assemble the banished ones of Israel, and will gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

If this prophecy is not accepted as a specific prediction of Pentecost or some other past event, one thing is absolutely certain: it does not

teach what Witmer suggests. There is no reference here to a *merely ethnic Israel* to prove which it is cited. Take Jeremiah 16:13–16 (NIV):

So I will throw you out of this land into a land neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you will serve other gods day and night, for I will show you no favor.

“However, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when men will no longer say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ but they will say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives, who brought the Israelites up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ For I will restore them to the land I gave their forefathers.

“But now I will send for many fishermen,” declares the LORD, “and they will catch them. After that I will send for many hunters, and they will hunt them down on every mountain and hill and from the crevices of the rocks.”

Here is a clear reference to the dispersion of the people of Israel into the world through their various captivities and regathering of them to their center in Jerusalem and Israel, where they were when Christ was born in Jerusalem and reared in Nazareth. There the great blessing of redemption was brought to many of them by the Messiah Himself who came for the “lost sheep of Israel.”

If you wish to debate this particular interpretation, it does not matter because all we are focusing on here is that this is another spoof-text as far as Witmer’s contention is concerned. There is no way it can be made to apply to an exclusive ethnic, non-religious Judaism past or future. Note Ezekiel 11:14–20 (NIV):

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, your brothers — your brothers who are your blood relatives and the whole house of Israel — are those of whom the people of Jerusalem have said, ‘They are far away from the LORD; this land was given to us as our possession.’

“Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.’ “

”Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again.’

“They will return to it and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of

flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”

This is a wonderful promise to captive Israel of their geographical restoration to their land and spiritually to their God. What it has, even remotely, to do with some future return to the land of Israel by merely ethnic descendants of Abraham utterly eludes me.

The reader will have to realize that these are mere random glancings at numerous such spoof-texts. They have not been selected as especially egregious examples. This is run-of-the-mill dispensational exegesis of Old Testament prophecy supposedly underlying Romans 11:25–26.

But Witmer is not yet finished. These texts “indicate that God will restore His people Israel to their land to which He gave them title, especially when tied to Acts 3:20–21, which identifies the fulfillment of these things with the return of Jesus Christ from heaven.”

First, the Jews ceased to be “His people Israel” when Jesus Christ said, “Look, your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). They became a merely ethnic people repudiating the religion of Abraham who rejoiced to see Christ’s day (John 8:39). So there is no “His people Israel” (meaning unconverted Jews). Nor is the land of Palestine “their land to which He gave them title.” That title is to the “meek” (Christians) who inherit the whole earth. And this is especially clear from Acts 3:20–31. That text (“and that He may send Jesus, the Christ, appointed to you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient times”) is applied only to Jews who “repent . . . and return that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord” (verse 19), something which ethnic Judaism has never done. That it *may* yet do so, I do deny not. But until that time comes, there is no text in the Bible that promises merely ethnic Jews (or merely ethnic Gentiles, for that matter, if someone tries to call me antisemitic) anything but divine judgment.

In addition to Israel’s continuation as God’s chosen people and her continuing title to the promised land is her continuation as a political entity, a nation. This involves God’s covenant with David concerning the everlasting establishment of David’s house (lineage), kingdom, and throne (2 Sam. 7:16; cf. vv. 24–25; Ps. 89:19–37). Confirmation and fulfillment of this covenant are predicted by the prophets in conjunction with Israel’s final regathering from the ends of the earth (Jer. 33:14–26; Eze. 37:20–28; Hos. 3:4–5; Amos 9:11–15). Christ will institute the fulfillment of all those promises to Israel and David (Luke 1:32–33) in His

return to earth to establish His messianic kingdom (Acts 3:20–21; Rev. 19:11 — 20:10). (p. 263)

Of course, if what I have been writing here is correct it is simply incorrect to say “In addition to Israel’s continuation as God’s chosen people.” Even in Witmer’s dispensationalism that would be incorrect. In any evangelical theology it would be incorrect. What happened to the Jews after their rejection of Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ’s rejection of them as a chosen people, was not “*Israel’s* continuation.” We have shown that the Israel that was once a chosen people of God was a religious society professing the faith of Abraham. It was when they ceased to do that that they were rejected by Abraham’s Lord and became a mere Jewish nation, today called “Israel,” a Jewish ethnic state in Palestine, with other Jews around the world. If some or all in this state call themselves Abraham’s *religious* descendants, they are liars if Jesus Christ is the “Truth.” John Witmer does not want to call his Lord the liar, I am sure; but, if he persists in this language here used, he succeeds without trying.

If the Jews are no longer “God’s chosen people,” they have no “continuing title to the Promised Land,” though she be in “continuation as a political entity, a nation.” Nor do the ethnic Jews have anything to do with “the everlasting establishment of David’s house (lineage), kingdom, and throne.”

The next sentence of Witmer ought to waken even Witmer: “God stated that sin by David’s descendants would bring divine chastisement (2 Sam. 7:14; Ps. 89:30–32), but that His mercy would not depart from them as He had removed it from Saul.” Saul not only sinned, but he apostatized, and God’s mercy was removed from Saul altogether. That is precisely what happened to the Jews in Jesus’ day they apostatized and received the fate of Saul, said Jesus but not John Witmer. He continues God’s mercy after God removes it, just as the Jews still claim it too when they no longer have it. Apart from “messianic Jews,” they have no right to that claim, nor does Witmer have any right to bestow it on them. This is the opposite of the unpardonable sin — not denying the Spirit’s mercy where it is, but affirming it where it is not.

The rest of the paragraph needs no further comment. It is a mere repetition of the same error (that is supposed to be refuting my errors) with all the appropriate spoof-texts. The reader must keep his eye on the constant reiteration of this same underlying mistake of identifying merely ethnic Jews with biblical Israel lest the constant repetition of error with spoof-texts makes it seem like truth undergirded with proof texts.



In rejecting the literal interpretation of Isaiah 11 for his spiritualization of the wolf and the lamb (pp. 88, 90–91), Gerstner writes, “We might ask, first of all, whether there is clear evidence elsewhere in Scripture that there is to be a thousand years of perfect peace and harmony of nature in this world under the Messiah? We think, in fact, that there is not only no clear evidence of a millennium in Scripture, but there is no evidence” (p. 91). This not only flies in the face of the repetition of the phrase “thousand years” six times in Revelation 20:1–7 (which Gerstner obviously also spiritualizes), but ignores the repeated teaching of Scripture concerning the future kingdom for Israel and its character (e.g., Isa. 2:1–5; 4:2–6; 9:6–7; 11:1 — 12:6; 14:1–3; Zech. 8:1–8; 14:1–21; Acts 1:6–7; 3:20–21; 1 Cor. 15:20–26). (p. 263)

Here again we have Witmer fulminating against my argument rather than dealing with it. Thus he repudiates my “spiritualizing” of Isaiah 11, but does not demonstrate that I err, or even attempt to do so. Likewise, when I find no evidence for a literal millennium in Scripture, how does Witmer show me, from Scripture, to be mistaken? He cites Revelation 20:1–7, which six times uses “thousand years.” Had I overlooked that manifest contradiction of my contention? No, he says, I didn’t over look it; rather I spiritualized it — that is, took that expression metaphorically, not calendar-wise. That would explain why Gerstner did not consider Rev. 20:1–7 as a contradiction of his contention. How does Witmer prove Gerstner to be wrong in that exegesis? He doesn’t. He does not even attempt to do so.

Witmer ends the sorry paragraph with a lie followed by a dozen or more spoof-texts. That is, he says that I ignore the teaching of these Scripture texts, which I do not do, but, on the contrary, show in *Wrongly Dividing* and here that dispensationalism misinterprets them. And I show it without refutation, repudiation alone being considered sufficient.

The distinctiveness of the church rests in its identity as the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:12; cf. Rom. 12:5; Eph. 1:22–23; 5:23–30; Col. 1:18, 24). The formation of the church as Christ’s body is based on the Lord Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to heaven (Eph. 1:20–23; 4:7–16; Col. 1:18). As a result no redeemed person before Jesus’ ascension to the right hand of God in heaven could be a member of that body. Furthermore entrance into the body of Christ is accomplished by the baptism of or by the Holy Spirit’s “mighty undertaking by which He joins the individual believer to Christ’s Body and thus to Christ Himself as the Head of the Body.”

The Lord Jesus was identified as baptizing “with the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). In turn, just before His ascension to heaven, Jesus told the apostles, “You shall be baptized with the Holy

Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5), with obvious reference to the day of Pentecost. That day the apostles received "what the Father had promised" (Acts 1:4) and were "clothed with power on high" (Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 2:1–4; 10:44–47). The baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ first occurred on Pentecost, as seen in Peter's justification of his actions in the house of Cornelius. Peter explained that "the Holy Spirit fell upon them [the Gentiles who believed], just as He did upon us at the beginning" (11:15), obviously referring to Pentecost. Then Peter quoted Jesus' promise concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit (1:5) and said, "If God therefore gave to them the same gift as he gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I should stand in God's way?" (11:17). As a result Peter's questioners "quieted down, and glorified God, saying, 'Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life'" (v. 18). (p. 263)

The first sentence here is interesting. It is correct as it stands, but incorrect in Witmer's mind. His context makes the attentive reader construe it: The "distinctiveness" of the church as the body of Christ is surely shown by these proof-texts. But we know that Witmer sees more than "distinctiveness." He sees exclusivity of the church from Israel. These texts do not show that along with distinctiveness. Thus they become spoof-texts. For what Witmer says, they are proof-texts. For what Witmer means, they are spoof-texts.

The second sentence follows the model of the first. It is correct as it stands, but not as Witmer understands. It is true that "The formation of the church as Christ's body is based on the Lord Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and ascension to heaven." But it is not true that this formation did not take place until the Lord Jesus' death, burial, resurrection, and ascension into heaven" took place historically, as is in Witmer's mind and, indeed, in his following sentence: "As a result no redeemed person before Jesus' ascension to the right hand of God in heaven could be a member of that body." Also, the same wrong inference follows in the next sentence: "Furthermore entrance into the body of Christ is accomplished by the baptism of or by the Holy Spirit" (followed by proof-texts of the sentence which are spoof-texts of Witmer's inference).

What is Witmer's wrong inference? Witmer's wrong inference is that because something happened at a particular time the same thing could not have happened before that time. That is not necessarily true. Because Christ historically formed His body, the church at that calendar time does not prove that He did not form it spiritually before that time. Witmer himself believes that Christ saved sinners by His death and resurrection, but also saved sinners thousands of years before that *by His death* (and

only by His death *not yet historically experienced*). Witmer would never say that Abraham was saved by anything except this very death of Christ, by which he himself is saved thousands of years later.

Could salvation mean being out of the body of Christ in Abraham's time, and in it at the time of the crucifixion, and not in it again after the crucifixion? Salvation is always and forever: being in Jesus Christ thousands of years before Jesus was born or thousands of years after. Salvation does not depend on the calendar, though the death that accomplished it occurred in calendar time, and on a wooden cross at Golgatha.

What the Bible does is explain the rationale of salvation most fully at its historical date to show why it had happened before and why it happens today. What Witmer does is try to make a difference between the beneficiaries, depending on whether they were living before the event, at the time of the event, or after the event (though he does not state this last implication).

Abraham was in the "body" of Christ Jesus. So Paul was *in* the "body" of Christ Jesus. So the living Christian is *in* the "body" of Christ Jesus. That communion was usually called Israel in the Old Testament. That communion is usually called "church" in the New Testament. And that communion is usually called "church" today. Christians are all one whether living in 1800 B. C., in A. D. 29 or in 1996. Let no one, John Witmer, rend asunder what God in Christ has joined together.

The last sentence of this paragraph *as it stands* is excellent, but the reader must remember that it describes all the history of the elect from the redemption of Adam to the last sheep for whom the Great Shepherd lays down His life: "Furthermore entrance into the body of Christ is accomplished by the baptism of or by the Holy Spirit's mighty undertaking by which He joins the individual believer to Christ's Body and thus to Christ Himself as the Head of the Body."

The second paragraph is entirely correct, if Witmer would eliminate one word: "first." The sentence in the middle of the paragraph reads: "The baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ first occurred on Pentecost." Texts are cited which show, indeed, that that baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, but nothing about Pentecost being its first occurrence. Peter's quoting of Joel shows the real significance of Pentecost, that the Spirit was poured out generally in anticipation of the world evangelism by the Holy Spirit who alone can make His People (everywhere) willing.

The full significance of what occurred in Cornelius' house is explained by the Apostle Paul when he identified "the mystery of Christ" (Eph. 3:4) as the fact that "the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (v. 6) and explained that Christ was in Himself making "the two into one new man, thus establishing peace" and He was reconciling them "in one body to God through the cross" (Eph. 2:15–16). The Jews always knew that Gentiles would come into relationship with God in the end times, but only through the mediatorial ministry of Israel (Isa. 2:15; 19:18–25; Zech. 14:16–21). Otherwise Gentiles had to become proselytes of Judaism, and even then were not given equal standing with Jews. The church, however, constituting all individuals "in Christ," where "neither is circumcision anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation" (Gal. 6:15), was never envisioned in the Old Testament" (p. 264).

This is an interesting paragraph. One reads along with refreshing biblical truth after biblical truth. If you know dispensationalism, and know that the writer above is a dispensationalist, you know he will sooner or later run off the biblical track. You only wonder when and where it will happen.

Before I point it out, I suggest that the reader stop reading this and turn back to Witmer and see for himself. Especially let any dispensational reader do that and see for himself.

Did you notice? How could you not notice it? The line that contains "Christ was in Himself making 'the two into one new man, thus establishing peace,' and He was reconciling them 'in one body to God.'" "

Do you see where Witmer goes off? You say, "He *isn't* 'going off.' Why, he is quoting the very Word of God, which *can't* 'go off.' What is wrong with *you*?" When dispensationalists quote such a text, they read into it: "for the first time," and fall headlong into their great error about Israel and the church with the Word on their tongues. All Paul says is that Christ was making believing Gentiles and believing Jews into one body in Him.

But this was not the first time, and Paul does not say that it was. In fact, perhaps the first time was when the Gentile Abraham was called to be a Jew or his grandson Jacob was actually called "Israel." From that time on, from time to time, the Spirit of Christ added one Gentile after another, quite a number of them, but still relatively very few. When these Gentiles were converted they became one in Christ the common Savior, received circumcision, and other rites, and were "one body in Christ," thus "making peace" between the believing Jew and the previously unbelieving Gentile.

What is the significance of the cross, resurrection, Pentecost, etc., and the texts Witmer is citing? It is not a qualitative difference (as Witmer fancies), but a quantitative shift. Christ came to His own, and those who were previously generally “His own” received Him not, but those who did (generally Gentiles) were then given the right to be called the children of God (John 1:12).

The one “new body” is the same old body in Christ with this vast ethnic shift in its membership. This is a perfect parallel to the famous words of the Lord, “I will build My church.”

### **The Salvation Problem**

The rest of the Witmer paragraph makes me despair. The obvious point I have just made he simply cannot see because he is blinded by his dispensational fixation. The Jews kept Gentiles as second-class members, but that was *their perversion of biblical truth*, against which Christ, and especially the Apostle Paul, so mightily contended.

Generally speaking, the New Testament was not a qualitative, but merely a quantitative shift. Christ did not come to destroy the Law or the Prophets which bore witness to the same gospel and church, made so much more shinningly clear in the New Testament. Consequently, so many of Christ’s “but I say to you,” and Paul’s preaching of the law as the tutor who always brought Jews and Gentiles when “the commandment came.”

In all likelihood Peter and his associates did not fully understand what had occurred in Cornelius’ house. It became clear to him and the others, however, when “certain ones of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed” demanded that the Gentile believers from Paul and Barnabas’ missionary ministry must be circumcised and required to “observe the Law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). At that point Peter reviewed what had happened in Cornelius’ house, indicating that God “made no distinction between us” (v. 9) and concluded “that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are” (v. 11), not “*they* shall be saved even as we,” a nice touch emphasizing Gentile equality. The council agreed with James that Gentile believers should be accepted without having to become proselytes of Judaism (v. 19), asking only that they avoid practices that would offend Jews (vv. 20–29). (p. 264–65)

Marking this momentous shift from Jewish preponderance in the church to Gentile preponderance, associated with the historic accomplishment of redemption by Jesus Christ, God made certain other shifts simultaneously. Thus, Sunday Sabbath replaced Saturday, baptism replaced circumcision, the Lord’s Supper replaced the Passover, and worship was centered in the whole world and no longer in Jerusalem.

I am presenting things off-kilter here because I am following a specific discussion. Speaking more comprehensively, it was the actual accomplishment of redemption by the Son of God that brought all these profound attendant changes to call attention to the *supreme* event of all time and eternity affecting the entire creation, and the triune God Himself, for all three divine persons themselves were Involved in it along with the incarnate Son of Man.

As a result of the baptism of the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, the church, each believer is “in Christ,” a characteristic Pauline phrase (e.g., Rom. 8:1; 12:5; Gal. 3:27–28; 5:6; Eph. 2:10; 1 Thess. 4:16), and is identified with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection to “newness of life” (Rom. 6:3–11). Once again this position “in Christ” could not occur until after the death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, thus constituting something not possible in the Old Testament. Another result of the baptism by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in each believer (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19; Gal. 4:6; 1 John 3:24; 4:13) as the seal of God on that individual (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13; 4:30) and the earnest or down payment of the glory to come (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). This indwelling of the Holy Spirit as the seal and earnest of God is permanent (Eph. 1:14; 4:30) despite sinful deeds by the indwelt believer (1 Cor. 6:19–20) that grieve the Spirit (Eph. 4:30). The ascended Lord Jesus Christ also indwells the believer (John 14:20,23; 15:4–5; 17:23,26; Col. 1:27; d. 1 John 4:15–16). As Ryrie wrote, “This relationship was unknown in Old Testament times.”

Instead of recognizing the differences between the church and Israel, Gerstner sees “in both dispensations the same people of God. All are members of the church. The same church of Jesus Christ comprises both. They are both the people of God, born of His Spirit, created anew by the Lord Jesus Christ” (p. 133). If this view is accepted for the sake of argument, in light of the material presented above about the believer being “in Christ” as a member of the ascended Lord’s body and being indwelt by both Christ and the Holy Spirit, how does Gerstner explain God’s removal of His Holy Spirit from King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) after God had given him “another heart” (10:9, KJV)? Either Saul lost his salvation — an idea anathema to a Calvinist like Gerstner — or God was dealing differently with His people Israel in the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 51:11) than He is with the church in the present dispensation.

For several paragraphs Witmer has been describing the conversion experience as depicted by many New Testament texts. All of his statements are generally accepted in themselves, though one knows that what

Witmer is envisioning in his statements goes far beyond and differently from what he is stating and what he is citing.

Principally, I have been wondering how Witmer was going to bring this to bear against my position. The point is made clear in the last sentences of this second paragraph: “If this view is accepted for the sake of argument, in light of the material presented above about the believer being “in Christ” as a member of the ascended Lord’s body and being indwelt by both Christ and the Holy Spirit, how does Gerstner explain God’s removal of His Holy Spirit from King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) after God had given him “another heart” (10:9, KJV)? Either Saul lost his salvation — an idea anathema to a Calvinist like Gerstner — or God was dealing differently with His people Israel in the Old Testament (cf. Ps. 51:11) than He is with the church in the present dispensation.”

This criticism is quite important for two reasons: It doesn’t touch me, at whom it was directed, and it destroys Witmer, who aimed it at me.

First, let me note the criticism aimed at me. According to my covenant view, one of two non-covenantal positions must be taken. Either I must say that Saul fell from salvation, which our doctrine of perseverance precludes, or there was a different economy of salvation in the Old Testament economy. The reply to this would-be criticism is evident: The statement that God gave Saul “another heart” (variously translated) need not mean regeneration, but could indicated merely that God led Saul to another intention on a given occasion, as in the comparable statement in Proverbs 16:1.

The language does not require that God gave Saul a new ruling disposition or made him a “new creation.” And it does not necessarily mean that God’s ultimate rejection of the king is in any way inconsistent with the doctrine of perseverance of regenerate persons. We need not, therefore, be forced to the alternative that in the Old Testament God’s salvation allowed falls from grace.

Though the criticism does not destroy Gerstner, it does destroy Witmer. Here is Witmer’s position on King Saul and John Gerstner. 1. Either Saul was regenerate and could not, therefore, fall from grace. 2. Or Saul was regenerate, but could fall from grace. 3. Gerstner, the Calvinist, cannot accept #1. 4. Gerstner, the anti-dispensationalist, cannot accept #2 (which would acknowledge a dispensational difference between Old Testament salvation and New Testament salvation). 5. Therefore, Gerstner must die on one horn or the other of his dilemma.

Here is Gerstner’s reply: 1. #1 is a tin horn, not a real one for the reason stated above, and one does not die on a non-horn. 2. But Witmer

makes these real horns and, if so, they kill. 3. Witmer interprets Saul as regenerate, and in that case both of Witmer's horns are fatal: either to have a regenerate person be so disobedient as to be rejected by God, or to have a regenerate person be so disobedient as to be rejected by God and yet not rejected by God (Antinomianism).

Dispensationalists do not deny that believing Israelites in the Old Testament were a people of God; in fact they insist on it, as the earlier discussion on the distinctiveness of Israel shows. Dispensationalists also do not deny that in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit ministered to God's people, including both Israelites and Gentiles; they also insist on that. Dispensationalists recognize, however, that the Holy Spirit ministered to God's people in the Old Testament in some ways that differed from His present ministry to members of the church, the body of Christ. These new and different ways of ministry by the Spirit make the church a people of God distinct from Israel. (p. 266)

As if my foregoing criticism were not painful enough, Witmer masochistically tortures himself with the same criticism. "dispensationalists do not deny that believing Israelites in the Old Testament were a people of God; in fact they insist on it." Very well, if the Israelites were "a people of God," and they were saved by the blood of Christ (the only way people can become a people of God), they are essentially like the present people of God. Therefore, "dispensationalists also do not deny that in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit ministered to God's people, including both Israelites and Gentiles; they also insist on that." And that would have to include regeneration and sanctification!

### **The Rule of Life Problem**

"Dispensationalists recognize, however, that the Holy Spirit ministered to God's people in some ways that different from His present ministry to members of the church, the body of Christ." But whatever these differences may be, they cannot be non-regeneration and non-sanctification if Israel are a "people of God" saved by the blood of Jesus Christ, as the dispensationalists insist is the only way any Jew or Gentile has ever been a saved member of the people of God. "These new and distinct ways of ministry by the Spirit make the church a people of God distinct from Israel" — but not in essential nature if they are a people of God saved by the blood of Christ! Dispensationalists must choose between their separating Israel and the church essentially and their professed *belief* in the universal necessity of the blood of Christ for salvation!



If the Holy Spirit is not working in new and different ways with members of the church, why did Jesus tell the 11 apostles that “the Spirit of truth . . . abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:17)? If the Holy Spirit is working in essentially the same way in both Old and New Testament times, why did Jesus have to leave in order for the Spirit to come (John 16:7; cf. 14:16, 26; 15:26)? Why did the Apostle John quote Jesus’ promise that from the believer’s “innermost being shall flow rivers of living water” (John 7:38) and then explain, “But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified” (v. 39). Also why did Jesus speak of the Holy Spirit as “the promise of My Father” (Luke 24:49), if the Spirit was already fulfilling all His ministries? Even the Old Testament predicts that the Holy Spirit will minister to Israel in the end times in ways different from what He was doing then (Ezek. 36:25–27; 37:14; cf. 11:19–20; Jer. 31:33–34). Such passages show that the Holy Spirit ministers to members of the church, the body of Christ, and will minister to ethnic Israel in the end times, in ways different from His ministry in the Old Testament, thus making the church a distinct people of God. (p. 266)

Let me answer Witmer’s questions, and then ask him some that he cannot answer without destroying his dispensationalism. No one denies that the Holy Spirit is working in “new and different ways” as a matter of intensity and extensiveness, but not in new and different ways of regeneration and sanctification. Witmer asks, “Why did Jesus tell the 11 apostles that ‘the Spirit of truth . . . abides with you, and will be in you’ (John 14:17)?” I repeat, because there was about to be a new outpouring of God’s Spirit that would intensify the apostles’ experience of His indwelling at the time Christ made that prophecy.

Again, “Why did Jesus have to leave in order for the Holy Spirit to come?” Because the Holy Spirit could not appropriately come to apply more intensely than ever the finished work of Christ until that work was finished in the historical atonement, resurrection, and ascension. How could the greatest events ever to occur in redemptive history take place without appropriate ratification of them in the souls of their beneficiaries, and how could that be done without a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit? So we explain also John 7:38–39.

“Also, why did Jesus speak of the Holy Spirit as ‘the promise of My Father’ (Luke 24:49), if the Spirit was already fulfilling all His ministries?” Because this was a new outpouring and intensification of the Holy Spirit’s ministry of applying the work of the Son of God. The same principle applies to the promise of a future conversion of “all Israel,” if that is to be so interpreted (Rom. 11:25–26).

Witmer's grand conclusion: "Such passages show that the Holy Spirit ministers to members of the church, the body of Christ, and will minister to ethnic Israel in the end times, in ways different from His ministry in the Old Testament, thus making the church a distinct people of God."

I must repeat myself because Witmer is repeating himself. Our whole and only difference here is his maintaining differences and distinctions between Israel and the church (about which there is no debate) and my insisting on no *essential* difference and distinction, which Witmer cannot quite accept — though he doesn't apparently want to deny it. He recognizes that if he grants essential identity in salvation by the blood of Jesus Christ of both Israel and the church his dispensationalism is gone. But if he denies it he can no longer cling to the doctrine that Christ's blood is the only basis of salvation in all dispensations.

A large part of Gerstner's charge of antinomianism against dispensationalism centers on its teaching that the Christian is not under the Law. Referring to this view, he speaks of "the antinomian doctrine that the Christian is in no sense under obligation to the law of God" (p. 217). Later he writes, "We have seen that dispensationalists view the Christian as not under the law in any sense at all — even as a rule of life" (p. 249). Like many of his conclusions about dispensational teachings, these statements exaggerate as well as misunderstand the dispensational view of the Christian's relationship to the Mosaic Law. Gerstner is correct, however, that dispensationalists do not consider the Mosaic Law, even the Ten Commandments separated from the ordinances and statutes, as the rule of life for the Christian as it was for Israel in the Old Testament (p. 218). According to dispensationalists, the rule of life for the Christian is living in submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and in His power (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25) manifesting His fruit (vv. 22–23), a higher rule of life than the Law (pp. 266–67).

Here, as often in this review, Witmer does not hesitate to charge that I "exaggerate" and "misunderstand," without feeling any obligation to offer any proof of such a serious indictment. He does, however, grant the important part of my charge about dispensationalists and the Ten Commandments: they are not, he concedes, "the rule of life for the Christian."

What is the rule of life for dispensationalists? "According to dispensationalists, the rule of life for the Christian is living in submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and in His power (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25) manifesting His fruit (vv. 22–23), a higher rule of life than the Law."

As that stands it is pure Antinomianism. However, before Witmer is finished discussing this issue, he will find all of the Ten Commandments

(except the Sabbath) included in the New Testament. When we come to that point I will show that the way Witmer views that does not relieve his Antinomianism. Meanwhile, he goes ever deeper into the dispensational Antinomianism he is loathe to acknowledge.

In this paragraph, three items constitute the Christian's "higher rule of life than the Law." First, "living in submission to the indwelling Holy Spirit." But Witmer does not teach that the indwelling Spirit tells us what we are to do. That would be continuing revelation, which dispensationalists strongly deny. So we are given no "higher rule of life" by the indwelling Spirit.

Second, the Christian is to submit to the Holy Spirit's "power." This also does not tell the Christian what to do or how to behave.

Third: "manifesting His fruit" Galatians 5:22–23 is cited. These verses, however, are not properly a code of behavior, but a spirit, attitude, accompaniment of certain behaviors. Love, joy, peace, patience, and the like do not tell us so much what to do as how to do it. Undeniably, they do call for a certain way of life, but it is more implicit than explicit. When Paul here tells Christians (v. 25), "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit," he is inferring that if the very spring of our life is in the Holy Spirit we should walk in the paths of righteousness that He has commanded in His Holy Spirit-inspired Holy Scriptures.

What Paul and Witmer are admirably focusing on here is the spirit of the Christian's Spirit-motivated life, but not a Christian rule of conduct! What Witmer admits is that the Spirit has inspired the repetition of at least nine of the traditional Ten Commandments for Christians in the New Testament to obey just as Christians in the Old Testament were commanded. But that is the Law from which Witmer is trying to deliver us.

Dispensationalists base their teaching that Christians are not under the Law on the direct statement of Scripture, "you are not under law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14; cf. v. 15). Paul related that fact to the Christians' deliverance from the dominion or lordship of sin, because he knew that "the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. 15:56). He explained that "the law had jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives" (Rom. 7:1) and that Christians, because of their union by faith with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (6:3–10), "were made to die [aorist tense] to the Law through the body of Christ," and are "joined [lit., 'married,' also aorist tense] to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God" (7:4). As a result, Christians have been "released [also aorist tense] from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter" (v. 6). (p. 267)

Witmer devotes four paragraphs to the crucial text, Romans 6:14, without a hint that I give even more space to the interpretation of that passage or attempting to refute my interpretation. It is affirmed that dispensationalists base their teaching that Christians are not under the law on Romans 6:14. I say the same thing, mentioning that they base it on an incorrect interpretation of 6:14. This incorrect interpretation Witmer proceeds to repeat here, making it necessary for me to repeat my critique in *Wrongly Dividing*.

But first, Witmer's incorrect interpretation of Romans 6:14: "Paul related that fact" [Christians are not under law] "to the Christians' deliverance from the dominion or lordship of sin because he knew that 'the power of sin is the law' (1 Cor. 15:56)" This is as opposite to Paul's meaning as one can be. Witmer is construing Paul as arguing that the law is the actual *locus* of sin's power. Sin is the snake and the law is its venom. So the Christian, being delivered from sin's deadly poison, is delivered from the law. The law of God, which is "holy, just, and good," has become the devil's poison. Paul means no such thing! What he means in his teaching and context is that the law is the power that *exposes* sin. Sin is altogether evil and the power that shows it to be such is altogether good. The Christian is delivered from the *sin* that destroyed him, but not from the law that revealed and reveals what he needed to be delivered from. The Christian is "under the law" in that sense or use of the law. If he gets out from that subjection, then he will be destroyed by sin as Antinomians are.

Having distorted 1 Corinthians 15:56 beyond recognition, Witmer is ready for a similar assault on Romans 7:1. Paul explained that "the law had jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives" (Rom. 7:1) and that Christians, because of their union by faith with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (6:3–10), 'were made to die [aorist tense] to the Law through the body of Christ,' and are 'joined [lit., "married," also aorist tense] to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God' (7:4). As a result, Christians have been 'released [also aorist tense] from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter' (v. 6)."

Let us note the difference between what Paul is saying and what Witmer is saying that Paul is saying. Paul is saying that a person, before faith in Christ, is under the wrath of God because the law to which he is "married" condemns him. When that relationship is dissolved by death, as the person becomes married to Christ by faith and has life in Him, he

is never to return to that fatal union with the law and the death it reveals. The Christian is no longer “under the law” as the way of damnation, but under Christ as the way of salvation. For Witmer, this whole grand picture of the apostle means that because the person was damned by the law as a way of damnation *out* of Christ, he is not “under the law” as a way of life *in* Christ. The Jews were damning themselves by making the law the way of salvation; therefore, Christians were to save themselves by rejecting the law as a way of salvation in Christ Jesus. Paul, try not to roll over in your grave!

The truth that Christians are not under the Law is supported by other Scriptures. Paul said that Christ made believing Jews and Gentiles one group “by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances” (Eph. 2:15) and that He blotted out “the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). Peter called it “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). (p. 267)

The apparent master of spoof-texts has more “wrongly dividing” to do. Christ did indeed abolish “the enmity which is the law of commandments contained in ordinances.” The law is indeed man’s enemy as long as he is a sinner out of Christ. But once that sinner is in Christ, the law becomes the redeemed person’s greatest friend because it tells him how he may serve the Savior he loves! “Oh, how I love Thy law,” sing the redeemed of the Lord. “If you love Me, keep My *commandments*,” commands the Lord.

Peter’s text is slightly different. The law was, as he said, “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear.” He is apparently speaking of many tedious details and ordinances appropriate (as Paul says in Galatians) to an heir in his childhood from which he was delivered in maturity. This onerousness has been removed in this dispensation, but not the moral law, which is Christ’s yoke, which though more severe than Moses, is “slight and easy to bear.”

This does not mean that the Mosaic Law is wrong. After stating that Christians have died to the Law (Rom. 7:4–6), Paul asked the question, “Is the Law sin?” and answered vehemently, “May it never be” (v. 7), explaining that through the Law is the knowledge of sin (vv. 7–14). As Paul wrote, the Law is “holy and righteous and good” (v. 12). The Mosaic law gave the character and authority of law to God’s moral standards, which had been revealed at least in part from the time of Noah (Gen. 9:4–6), if not from the time of Cain and Abel (4:8–15). However, as Paul explained, “Until the Law sin was in the world, but sin was not imputed

where there is no law" (Rom. 5:13; d. 4:15). God's moral standards were incorporated in the Mosaic Law, therefore, "because of transgressions" (Gal. 3:19) so "that the transgression might increase" (Rom. 5:20) with the result that "every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God" (3:19). The purpose of the Law, consequently, was to be "our tutor [not teacher, but slave who escorted the children to school and home] to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24; cf. v. 23). Paul concluded, "But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor" (v. 25), that is, the Law. (pp. 267–68)

Generally a fine paragraph, but Witmer always manages to let his slip show. That tell-tale little, fine-point of exegesis: "our tutor [not teacher, but slave who escorted the children." Yes, children needed a slave, a nanny, a someone to watch over them, get them on the bus, wash behind their ears, bandage their cuts. Those burdensome *details* of the law! But the *fundamental* role of the law was to teach men their sin, not blow their noses! By the law is the knowledge of sin. "I was alive apart from the law once, the commandment came, sin revived and I *died*."

Dispensationalists also recognize that, except for the commandment to keep the Sabbath, all of the Ten Commandments are included in the New Testament instruction for believers (e.g., Rom. 13:13; Eph. 4:25–32; 5:3–7; 6:1–3; Col. 3:5–8; 1 John 5:21), and "it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Rom. 13:9), because "love therefore is the fulfillment of the law" (v. 10). As a result dispensationalists are obviously concerned about following New Testament standards of ethics and morality, especially about fulfilling the Lord Jesus Christ's "new commandment . . . that you also love one another" (John 13:34–35; cf. 15:12, 17). All this, however, does not nullify the biblical truth that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). (p. 268)

Now we come to the important paragraph we have anticipated. We may call it Witmer's response to the charge of dispensational Antinomianism. He has already repeatedly freed the Christian from being under the law, including obedience to the Ten Commandments, which defines Antinomianism. Nevertheless, he feels he can exonerate dispensationalism from Antinomianism, and here is how he tries to do it.

First, the paragraph tells us that dispensationalism realizes that nine of the Ten Commandments are "included in the New Testament." However, we notice that they are not called "commandments," but "instructions," which are not the same thing. Instructions are "how to"; commandments are "must do." One is a counsel, the other an order.

Instructions are optional, commandments are mandatory. If you do not follow instructions, you may not be wise; if you do not follow commands (of God), you are sinful.

But, in the very next sentence, Witmer does speak of commands and commandments and looks, for a moment, as if he is going to avoid Antinomianism. He cites Romans 13:9 as saying, “you shall love,” which is a command. But how is this received by the Christian? “As a result, dispensationalists obviously are *concerned* about following New Testament *standards*.”

The dispensationalists are “concerned” about following “standards,” and we are concerned about the dispensationalists not talking about obeying commandments with the fatal consequences of not doing so. Not only is there no such language found here, but the concluding sentence confirms our fears that Witmer is deliberately *not* going to avoid the *fact* of Antinomianism as much as he tries to avoid the appearance. “All this however, does not nullify the biblical truth that ‘Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes’ (Rom. 10:4).”

Once again, a text of Scripture is savaged to make it teach what it does not teach. Witmer tries to make Rom. 10:4’s “Christ is the end of the law” mean that Christ delivers us from being “under the law,” even in non-meritorious obedience. Christ is supposed to be the termination of that Old Testament teaching that makes Israel radically different from the church.

What Paul means is the exact opposite. Christ achieves the goal of the law (righteousness) which the law could never reach because of the sinfulness of man which it revealed, and thus necessitated the redemption of Jesus Christ. He develops this doctrine fully in Rom. 8:1–4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

So here, where Witmer is supposed to refute me and deliver dispensationalism from Antinomianism, he stands neck deep in that fatal error. He presents the New Testament ethic as higher than the decalogue, but presents the Christian, nonetheless, as free of any *necessary obligation* to keep it. It concerns him. He is *instructed* in it. Obviously he ought to obey it, but one thing Witmer the dispensationalist will not and cannot (as

a dispensationalist) say is that the Christian must keep the law of the decalogue and of Jesus Christ or he is not a Christian, but rather a perishing sinner! Like so many others, Witmer still has Christ saving people in their sins, but not necessarily saving them *from* their sins as I charged throughout *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*.

Please note carefully: I am not stating legalism. There is not *one iota* of merit if a regenerate person lived a hundred years perfectly righteous!

Returning to Gerstner's point of view, he insists that in Galatians "Paul meant that his doctrine 'established' the law *as the way of life, not as the meritorious ground of salvation*" (p. 218, italics his). In drawing this conclusion, Gerstner presents the exact opposite of what Paul taught in Galatians. Paul did write that "a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus . . . since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified" (Gal. 2:16). He was writing to Christians, however, of whom he asked, "Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (3:3). Later Paul wrote, "But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?" (4:9). It is obvious that he was condemning their return to the Law as the way of life. Since the Galatian believers had received "the adoption as sons" (4:5) and the indwelling Holy Spirit (v. 6) as a result of trust Christ, to return to the Law as their rule of life was inappropriate. As a result Paul urged the Galatians, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (5:1). (p. 268)

Now, Witmer applies all he has been saying to a refutation of Gerstner. Obviously, if all he has been saying is essentially false, as I have been trying to show, it cannot refute me; but I will carefully listen to Witmer try to do so.

One thing must be clear to the reader by now. Witmer and Gerstner have two fundamentally different interpretations of the inerrant book of Galatians. If Witmer is correct, I fundamentally misunderstand one of the most important writings in the New Testament. If Gerstner is correct, Witmer fundamentally misunderstands one of the most important writings in the New Testament. Furthermore, Witmer represents a whole school of conservative interpreters of the Bible, who believe the Bible to be the inerrant Word of God, as does Gerstner. No observer can fail to see how serious and fundamental this difference is that concerns a most definitive divine statement of the Christian way of salvation.



There is one thing on which we are both agreed. We have mutually exclusive interpretations. We cannot both be right. One of us is wrong, fundamentally and fatally wrong. Yes, I say “fatally wrong” because we are differing about the very way of salvation, the heart of the Christian religion, which teaches the one and only way of salvation. And one of these Christian teachers is actually opposing and condemning it! I’m glad we both see there the absolute gravity of the situation. This controversy concerns the very nature of Christianity.

Witmer is clear enough, but let me, nevertheless, show the reader against what he hears Gerstner teaching as the message of Galatians. He quotes me as writing: “that in Galatians ‘Paul meant that his doctrine “established” the law *as the way of life, not as the meritorious ground of salvation.*” Witmer does grant that I was right to a point — “Paul did write that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus.”

What, then, is my error? I overlook the fact that “Paul was writing to Christians.” No, I don’t “overlook” that fact. I deny that fact! Paul was not writing to Christians. Paul was writing to *professing* Christians. All Paul’s letters are to professing Christians, some of whom are genuine and some of whom are not. In 2 Corinthians 13:5 he asks these professing Christians to examine themselves to see which they are, and he regularly does the same in his other letters.

This seemingly slight error throws Witmer totally off course. He thinks that it is my error that throws me off course. The reader can see the simple point that Paul never assumes that all his readers are truly converted persons as they had to *profess* to be to become church members. If the reader can see that it is not Gerstner who errs here but Witmer, he can see at the same time that only error, not truth, throws off course. Witmer’s error not only throws him off course, but the reader can see that it also makes Witmer thinking erroneously that it is Gerstner who is off course.

Witmer’s subsequent sentences show how this fundamental error leads to a string of associated errors. He says (consistently, but wrongly) that Paul’s question of the Galatians — “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” — must mean that all the Galatians had begun by the regeneration of the Spirit, and therefore were not trying to be perfected by the flesh. Witmer does not say that in so many words, but the reader sees that that is in his mind. He no doubt assumes this because of his erroneous assumption that all Galatian church members were “Christians.” If they were Christians, he, assuming the

security of believers, assumes they would not make the fatal mistake of trying to perfect grace “by the flesh.” But mere nominal Christians make that mistake all the time. That does not come to Witmer’s mind because he keeps wrongly assuming that all Galatians were secure believers. So his fatal mistake is this: these Galatians were not trying to perfect themselves by the flesh, but were merely falling back into a mistaken lifestyle, and not a wrong basis of salvation.

The next sentence: “Later Paul wrote, ‘But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?’” That, I may say, is *exactly* what the Galatians had been enslaved to, and by which they sought salvation vainly in paganism or in Judaism, and were starting to revert to again. But not for Witmer, who confidently follows Paul’s teaching with, “It is obvious that he was condemning their return to the Law *as the way of life*” (Witmer means by “way of life” here not meritorious basis of life or salvation, but lifestyle). He is sure of that for one reason: his erroneous assumption that all Galatians were true believers. “Since the Galatian believers had received the adoption as sons” (4:5) and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (v. 6) as a result of trusting Christ, to return to the Law as their rule of life was inappropriate. ‘It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.’ “

This last statement shows again that Witmer is profoundly mistaken. The law was burdensome for the Old Testament saints, but it was not a “yoke of slavery.” The devotional Psalms extol the law of God. The unbelieving Jews made it into a “yoke of slavery” because they tried to save themselves by the merit of their law-keeping, which was burdensome indeed, and futile as well as utterly contrary to the purpose of the law, which was to bring us to a gracious salvation by divine mercy.

Paul indicated that the rule of life for the Christian is summarized in the words, “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (5:16). In verse 18 he wrote, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law,” and after listing the virtues that constitute “the fruit of the Spirit,” Paul concluded, “against such things there is no law” (vv. 22–23). Elsewhere he explained, “For what the law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3–4). (p. 268)

Witmer displays a marvelous consistency. He consistently twists the most obvious Scriptures to affirm what they are denying and deny what they are teaching. First, he cites two texts without distorting until he comes to the third. “Paul concluded ‘that against such things there is no law’ (vv. 22–23).” There is no law against the fruits of the Spirit because they are the fulfilling of the law.

Then Witmer concludes quoting a text which utterly buries his whole misinterpretation. “Elsewhere he [Paul] explains, ‘For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:3–4).” How can Scripture more plainly teach that Christians are under the law as a requirement which, by the Spirit, they are able to meet in principle? So far from the “requirement” being removed from the Christian, it is fulfilled by him!

In Galatians Paul concluded his discussion of the believer's relationship to the Holy Spirit by writing, “If we live by the Spirit [the protasis of a first-class condition in Greek is assumed to be true, a fact Paul stated in 3:2–3], let us also walk [the verb *stoikomen* does not mean ‘walkabout,’ as does *peripateite* in v. 16, but ‘walk in step with’] the Spirit” (5:25). This means that the Holy Spirit is controlling the believer's life so that the believer not only is fulfilling “the righteousness of the law” but is also producing “the fruit of the Spirit,” a lifestyle on a higher plane than that of the Law. Obviously when the believer's actions — and attitudes as well — transgress the standards of the Law, it condemns those actions and attitudes as sin, which is why God's eternal moral standards codified in the Law are reiterated in the New Testament. That, however, does not make the Mosaic Law the believer's rule of life. Gerstner's position that the Law is the rule of life for the Christian runs the risk of being confused with the Judaistic legalism Paul condemned in Galatians, rather than being the doctrine he established (p. 218). (269)

This paragraph amounts to a virtual confession of error by Witmer. “This means that the Holy Spirit is controlling the believer's life so that the believer not only is fulfilling “the righteousness of the law” but is also producing “the fruit of the Spirit,” a lifestyle on a higher plane than that of the Law.” The believer is indeed fulfilling the righteousness of the law, which certainly does not mean freedom from it. And the Holy Spirit is the One who is working in what the Christian is working out. How did any believer at any time in any place ever fulfill the law but by the indwelling Spirit? And how did anyone indwelt by the Spirit do anything but rejoice

in the law toward which the Spirit inclined him? Witmer is admitting my constant contention, fancying that he rises above it by referring to “a lifestyle on a higher plane than that of the Law.” Of course it is a higher plane — indeed, an extremely different plane — where the law alone, which reveals sin and leads to the Savior, whose Spirit alone can achieve the glad submission to and fulfillment of the law of God.

But Witmer still thinks that it is I, not he, who misunderstands. “Obviously when the believer’s actions — and attitudes as well — transgress the standards of the Law, it condemns those actions and attitudes as sin, which is why God’s eternal moral standards codified in the Law are reiterated in the New Testament.” Then follows a plain *non sequitur*: “That, however, does not make the Mosaic Law the believer’s rule of life.” It certainly does make it “the believer’s rule of life” if its violation condemns the Christian’s “life” in Christ. I think Witmer reveals a consciousness of his *non sequitur* here by introducing the word “Mosaic.” We have been discussing the *moral*, ethical part of the “Mosaic Law” (the Ten Commandments specifically, at least nine of them). Witmer has admitted they are still present and “codified” in the New Testament. Most of the “Mosaic Law” includes much that has been fulfilled and abrogated. But the *moral* law of Moses and the Old Testament is the law of this dispensation as much as that of the allegedly drastically “different and distinct” dispensation of the law.

The last sentence is the cry of a man on the ropes. “Gerstner’s position that the Law is the rule of life for the Christian runs the risk of being confused with the Judaistic legalism Paul condemned in Galatians, rather than being the doctrine he established (p. 218).” I am glad he admits that I am not teaching legalism (Judaistic). I am also glad that he only alludes to a “risk” of being misinterpreted, which is unavoidable for anyone who ever opens his mouth or writes a sentence. On the other hand, I charge Witmer not with the risk of seeming, but actually *teaching* legalistic Judaism in the Old Testament by his teaching that the Old Testament way of salvation is so drastically different from that of the New that Christians are in no sense “under” the moral law.

This is the end of Witmer’s defense of dispensationalism against the charge of Antinomianism. It is clear by now that he not only has not succeeded, but surprisingly he has not really tried. We have not even read a ringing declaration that dispensationalism demands strict moral obedience. Nowhere does he insist that faith without works is dead, dead, dead!

Nothing like that. What we do hear is that dispensationalism has morality on a higher plane. Dispensationalism teaches that the indwelling of the Spirit yields His fruit. It is Gerstner who has insisted on morality so strictly that he runs the risk of being mistaken for a legalist.

In other words, Witmer has done nothing more than refute my charge by merely insisting on what I never denied, but gladly attributes to all dispensationalists; namely that it *encourages* moral living and promises a reward for it in heaven. Dispensationalism teaches that Christians *ought* to live godly in Christ Jesus. But nowhere does Witmer even say weakly that dispensationalism demands moral living, or else that a professed Christian is no Christian at all. An Antinomian, after all, is a person who is “against the law” as *necessary*. I proved that, in that sense, dispensationalism is Antinomian, and John Witmer never really even denied it, much less justified a denial.

### The Kingdom Problem

Witmer writes:

Gerstner devotes chapter 9 of his book (pp. 171–179) to arguing against the dispensational teaching that in His first coming “Jesus Christ came to offer an earthly kingdom to Israel” (p. 171). This is not surprising, since as a strict amillennialist, Gerstner rejects the doctrine of a millennial messianic kingdom. To do this he must spiritualize the angel Gabriel’s announcement to the virgin Mary that her Holy Spirit-conceived Son would be given by “the Lord God . . . the throne of His father David; and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever” (Luke 1:32–33) in fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises of a messianic kingdom (cf. 2 Sam. 7:16; Isa. 2:1–5; 9:6–7; Jer. 33:17, 20–21). Gerstner must also spiritualize the question of the wise men, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matt. 2:2), and the response of the Jewish religious leaders.

Note the absence of literalism from the texts that John Witmer himself recognizes. One, it is not the literal “throne” of David. Two, the Lord does not rule over the literal “house” of Jacob. Three, in any case, He does not rule on that “throne” over that “house” *forever*. Four, the Messiah’s “kingdom” is not literal, not being “of this world” (John 18:36). Five, the wise men’s “King of the Jews” is not for they did not know the “King” was the Son of God. Six, nor did the “Jewish religious leaders.”

According to the view Gerstner accepts, the message of John the Baptist and of Jesus that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17) is

not the gospel of the messianic kingdom (4:23) but the Christian gospel of the grace of God. If that is so, why did Jesus instruct the Twelve to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” preaching that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (10:5–7)? Is not the Christian gospel for Gentiles as well as Jews? And why did Jesus test the woman of Canaan’s faith by telling her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (15:24; cf. vv. 21–28)? If Jesus did not offer to Israel the promised messianic kingdom, why did He tell the Twelve that “when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (19:28)? The apostles understood that this promise related to the kingdom, because on the day of Jesus’ ascension they asked, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). In His response Jesus did not disavow the establishment of the kingdom but said, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (v. 7).

I am asked why Jesus instructed the Twelve to go only “to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” It was because He wanted His about-to-be-greatly-enlarged kingdom to be announced first to His true “sheep” of the “house of Israel,” which included a minority of believing Gentiles (whom the Jewish believers did not adequately acknowledge). And Christ tested the Gentile woman’s faith by her rejection/ acceptance of the “house of Israel” as the name for the chosen people of God (which did not identify with mere ethnic Jews).

Why did Jesus tell the Twelve that “when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel?”

1. Israel is a name for church.
2. In the Old Testament era it was divided into twelve areas named for the twelve tribes of Jews.
3. In the New Testament era it became world-wide, but still divided into geographic areas.
4. Christ with His twelve apostles rules or governs the world church after all authority was given Christ to rule the world-wide Church founded on Him (the chief Cornerstone) and His apostles.
5. The twelve tribes organization of converted, plus merely ethnic Jews, was displaced by unbelief before the Son of Man sat in His glorious world throne, where He now is with His apostles.

The apostles may have had erroneous ideas in their minds at various times about the Messiah’s kingdom, but He never confirmed such. As

Charles Hodge once noted, what apostles may have thought and inspiredly taught could have been two different things.

According to Gerstner, if Jesus' offer of the kingdom was a bona fide offer and the Jews had accepted it, that "would have destroyed the only way of man's salvation" and "would have made the cross impossible" (p. 172). The Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated His divine ability to reveal what might have been (Matt. 11:20–24), but that ability has not been given to any man. To conclude that the Jews' acceptance of the offer of the kingdom which did not happen — "would have made the cross impossible" is presuming to know what God would have done, a presumption of the highest order.

The other horn of the dilemma on which Gerstner tries to impale dispensationalists is that an offer of the kingdom to the Jews — since in the sovereign plan of God they would reject it — "would have been insincere" (p. 173). He writes, "Obviously, if God did offer a kingdom which He could not have permitted to be established, He could be neither honest nor sincere" (p. 172, *italics his*). (p. 270)

At the point where dispensationalism teaches that Christ offered a material kingdom to Israel which, if they had accepted, Christ could not and would not have given, dispensationalism, according to my charge, touched moral bottom. Dispensationalism, I declare in *Wrongly Dividing*, made God a liar. It must recant blasphemy.

If a dispensationalist does not admit my grave charge here, one would expect that he would be provoked by it and would respond with great indignation. Witmer doesn't even raise his voice. Rather calmly he analyzes my awful indictment and, just as coolly, tries to trace it to my amillennialism. In the end he thinks he has smoothly calmed me down by a more enlightened understanding. Even if this refutation were correct, it would still remain incredible that it could be so cool. (I realize that Witmer is probably saying to himself as he reads this, "You don't become enraged at the ravings of a mad man, but merely put the strait-jacket on and lead him calmly to his cell and give him a pacifier.")

So I will now calmly answer this very cool response to an extremely hot issue. First, the cool response: "To conclude that the Jews' acceptance of this offer of the kingdom — which did not happen — 'would have made the cross impossible' is presuming to know what God would have done, a presumption of the highest order." To call this presumption when I actually quoted dispensationalists who themselves make that very presumption is presumptuous. It is dispensationalism which makes this a choice of kingdom or cross. They themselves feel the gravity of this situation and go into great detail to try to show God's sincerity, though

He makes an offer He could not have kept. Witmer calmly makes the charge merely an instance of *Gerstner's* presumption! For the dispensationalist, the cross is the divinely-appointed way to the kingdom. Therefore, if the kingdom is achieved some other way, the cross would not be necessary. I am shocked every time I read such a pernicious idea, and so are most dispensationalists who know they must prove our charge wrong or die of shame. But not Witmer.

Dispensationalism teaches a divine offer of a kingdom which, if accepted and given, would have made the cross unnecessary. That statement is nothing less than blasphemy when it says God could have allowed the cross to be avoided or, to prevent its avoiding, could have told a lie. I argue for pages in *Wrongly Dividing* with Charles Lee Feinberg, who tries to escape by saying God knew that the offer would not be accepted. As I tried to show, first, Christ would have committed a crime in making a promise He could not keep. Second, in the dispensational system it would have been an even greater crime if He had not kept it. And, third, it would have been the greatest crime of all if Christ had kept such a promise. And Witmer tells me that I am being presumptuous when I call triple blasphemy a crime!

Gerstner seeks to avoid the issue of a parallel with God's prohibition to Adam (Gen. 2:16–17) by, in effect, denying that a parallel exists (p. 176). "In the case of Adam," Gerstner writes, "if he had persevered, God would have given him the life He had promised" (ibid.). However, this would have made the eternally decreed sacrifice of Christ unnecessary, the very thing Gerstner claims the offer of the kingdom does. Later he claims that Adam's situation involves "responsible human choices which are known or decreed from all eternity" (p. 176), which is exactly what is involved in the Jews' rejection of the kingdom offer. The same is true of the nonelect individual's rejection of the gospel, though Gerstner against insists that the situation is different (pp. 176–177). Dispensationalists maintain that an invitation can be genuine even though the person giving it is sure the invitee will not respond positively. God's sincerity in offering salvation to the nonelect or the kingdom to Israel rests in His own mind and does not depend on the hearer's response." (p. 270)

No horror expressed, Witmer will now lay bare the falsity of my grotesque accusation. How so? First, my dealing with the dispensationalists' traditional defense of pointing to a parallel in God's offering eternal life to Adam for obedience, which promise God could not have kept. Before I shatter this, let us notice the *nature* of this defense. It is a *tu quoque* reply: "If we are guilty of blasphemy, so are you reformed people!" That is a defense? Showing that the accuser is as blasphemous as the



accused? That is almost an admission of guilt, and requiring me to share the same.

But I plead innocent. God could have delivered on His promise in the Adam offer as He could not in the kingdom offer. God need not have defaulted on His promise that if Adam had endured his probation he and his progeny would have received eternal life. Why does Witmer think there is a parallel in the Adam case? Because “this would have made the eternally decreed sacrifice of Christ unnecessary, the very thing Gerstner claims the offer of the kingdom does.” That is, I am accused of teaching that God could not have kept His promise of eternal life to Adam if he were obedient because that would have made it unnecessary for Christ’s sacrifice. Do you not see the ridiculous absurdity of this line of thought? It does not even deal with this issue *at this point*. That issue is whether God is a liar in His promise to Adam as dispensationalism makes Him a liar in the kingdom offer case. Witmer thinks there is a parallel because both of these cases would have made Christ’s sacrifice unnecessary. But there would have been no necessity for Christ’s sacrifice if Adam and his progeny had been given eternal life as a result of the “covenant of works.” But if God said He would accept *fallen sinners* without the sacrifice of Christ He would have been a liar, because without holiness no one shall see God. God’s promises in one case could have been delivered and God would be no liar. God’s promise in the other case could not have been delivered and God would be a liar.

The next sentence is equally irrelevant: “Later he [Gerstner] claims that Adam’s situation involves “responsible human choices which are known or decreed from all eternity” (p. 176), which is exactly what is involved in the Jews’ rejection of the kingdom offer.” Of course it is. This is what I am pointing out as being irrelevantly cited by dispensationalists. All human actions are decreed by God, but that does not render God irresponsible in any case for making unredeemable promises Himself. Here Witmer does not miss the point so much as not “getting” it at all. Little differences like that from time to time never, however, disturb his self-confidence.

Let me show the difference between the promise to Adam and the promise to the Jews more detailedly. At that time, it was true and moral that if Adam had persevered he and his progeny would have received eternal life without the sacrifice of Christ. At the time of the kingdom promise, it was not true and moral that if the Jews had accepted the promise they would have eternal life without the sacrifice of Christ. At his time, Adam was a moral, sinless man. At their time, the Jews were fallen,

sinful people. Adam would have met the terms of eternal life. The Jews would have met the terms of eternal death (for all that sinners do is sin, and the wages of sin is eternal death from a just and holy God). In fact, the Jewish sinners never would have accepted the promise sincerely, for apart from the cross and its purchased redemption no one is ever inclined to God or His kingdom. Still, if they had accepted, God would have had to give eternal life as the wages of sin! (Incidentally, dispensational Arminianism views unregenerate depraved sinners as capable of accepting God and the gospel.)

To be sure, God's foreknowledge and decrees meant that God knew eternally that Adam would not persevere and that the Jews would not accept. Such pre-determination in no way prevents the responsible choices of mankind or of God. As a moral God He could never make dishonest promises to the Jews. Nor would He have planned the satisfaction of Christ if He had not eternally known that Adam would fail. (Again, I must remind the reader that *Wrongly Dividing* shows that Dispensationalism is Arminianism in its view of the decrees. This means that the dispensational God cannot even foreknow, for the dispensational view of "free will" logically excludes any divine foreknowledge, including what unfallen Adam would choose or what the Jews would choose.)

The end of the paragraph is important because Witmer here gives his understanding of the dispensational viewpoint, and not his irrelevant observation about the conflicting viewpoints. "Dispensationalists maintain that an invitation can be genuine even though the person giving it is sure the invitee will not respond positively." Who ever denied that? Certainly not I! What is the point? "God's sincerity in offering salvation to the nonelect or the kingdom to Israel rests in His own mind and does not depend on the hearer's response."

This dispensationalist's viewpoint is confusion confounded. First, "offering salvation to the nonelect or the kingdom to Israel" are not equivalent statement. God could and would give salvation to any nonelect who chose salvation because He promises salvation to anyone who repents and believes. No nonelect person, precisely because he is nonelect, will ever repent and believe and be saved; but that honest offer still stands.

One may ask why God does make the sincere and true offer for those He knows will never accept it. In *Wrongly Dividing* I conjecture that one purpose is to show how wicked the fallen sinner is in that not even such an offer will ever appeal to him, and how thoroughly he deserves the damnation he brings upon himself. Nevertheless, in this case, God is no

liar. He will give to *anyone* who accepts His offer the eternal life He promises to such persons.

But, second, in the case of the kingdom offer to Israel, God would be making a lying offer. He cannot give eternal life to impenitent sinners (which the Israelites, apart from a sacrifice of Christ, would have been) because God gives eternal life only to those who repent and believe in Jesus Christ and Him crucified. God would be a liar if He ever said that He would give eternal life in His kingdom to anyone who did not repent and believe the gospel.

So the horrendous error that I attribute to the dispensationalist Witmer not only does not answer or explain, but actually repeats for himself in the name of the “dispensationalists.” In plain speech, he is saying, “You’re right, Gerstner, we *glory* in our shame.”

### The Atonement Problem

Witmer argues that:

Both covenant theologians and dispensationalists agree that “Christ could not make less than an infinite Atonement” (p. 126). In a real sense, then, the issue that divides them is not the extent of the atonement in the sense of its value or sufficiency, but God’s design or purpose in it. Gerstner, with his extreme Calvinism, believes the atonement was designed only for the elect, to whom alone the call of the gospel really goes. Other Calvinists and most dispensationalists believe the atonement was designed to be sufficient for all in order that a genuine offer of the gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus could be proclaimed to all. Many, however, again including most dispensationalists, believe that the atonement will be *efficient* only for the elect, because only the elect will respond to the effectual call of the Holy Spirit and believe in Christ. (p. 290–91)

First, let me state what will sound like a quibble. It is true that dispensationalists, as well as the reformed, state that the atonement is of infinite value. Strictly speaking, however, the dispensational *theology* denies the atonement altogether.

Let me explain. Dispensationalists do not teach that Christ made an *actual* atonement for *anyone*. He made a possible atonement for everyone. A possible atonement that merely makes atonement available is no atonement at all. Worse than that, it doesn’t even make the atonement really available to anyone. No one, without repentance and faith, will ever be morally able to accept the atonement. No one without repentance and faith will ever acquire repentance and faith if it has not been purchased for him by an actual atonement which dispensationalism denies. Thus

dispensationalism self-destructs. The atonement which it says has infinite value for everyone, according to its theology has no value at all for anyone!

Witmer, not seeing the above point at all, goes on to a point he does see. We differ on the design or purpose of the atonement. “Gerstner, with his extreme Calvinism” [which Witmer never proves to be extreme, and which I claim to be classic Calvinism] “believes the atonement was designed only for the elect” [this is true of Calvinism in general also], “to whom *alone* the call of the gospel really goes” [this is denied by virtually all Calvinists]. Witmer is trying to make classic Calvinistic theology into a peculiarity of mine. This will be discussed more fully later. But, as said above, Witmer does state truly that Calvinism teaches that Christ’s atonement was made for the elect only, but he then falsifies his account by saying that I teach that the *call* is only to the elect. Ironically, I have spent sixty years giving this call to all (elect or nonelect) who will hear me. And so have virtually all Calvinists. There is a debate among us about the “well-meant” nature of the call, but no debate about the call itself. I would be more lenient with Witmer than he is with me about these relatively small historical mistakes, which it is rather easy to make.

The next sentence may be true for “most dispensationalists,” but it is fundamentally false. “Other Calvinists and most dispensationalists believe the atonement was designed to be *sufficient* for all in order that a genuine offer of the gospel of God’s grace in Christ Jesus could be proclaimed to all.” Christ’s atonement is *sufficient* for all by its very nature — not in order to be “proclaimed for all.” Christ’s sacrifice was by the second person of the Godhead in His human nature so that it is by its very being *infinitely* valuable. The last sentence is true, but the perceptive reader will realize that Witmer is overlooking this: that according to dispensational theology the atonement would not be efficient even for the elect.

Let me explain again. According to Witmer, and dispensationalism in general, Christ did *not* die for the elect or for the nonelect. He died only to make salvation possible for everyone. And that, as I say, would make salvation *possible for no one* because all humankind is born dead in trespasses and sins and quite *unable morally* to respond to any invitations to any possible salvation. If Christ did not die for any particular person or persons, and thus secure those persons’ salvation by purchasing their repentance and faith, to be wrought in them by the Spirit of God’s producing the disposition to it within (by regeneration), not one single soul would ever be saved or divinely intended to be saved (unless God and Christ are fools). That is to see at the same time that Christ would never

have died at all knowing that it would save no one, but succeed only in making the whole damned world more damned than ever.

As a result, as Kuiper, whom Gerstner recognizes as a Reformed theologian (p. 126), writes:

“In perusing the universalistic passages of Scripture one may never forget that certain fruits of the atonement, short of salvation, accrue to men indiscriminately and, of course, were designed by God thus to accrue. Prominent among these fruits is the so-called universal and sincere offer of salvation. A great many of the universalistic passages teach that God makes a perfectly sincere offer of eternal life to all whom the gospel comes.”

Gerstner rejects this idea, insisting that these passages refer only to the elect, not to all men or to the world of mankind (pp. 123–25). Significantly, one verse on this issue Gerstner does not attempt to interpret, in fact he does not even mention it. This verse makes it clear that Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient for all. It warns believers that “there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them” (2 Pet. 2:1). These false teachers certainly are not saved, and yet “the Master . . . bought them,” that is, the redemptive price was paid, thus making the atonement sufficient for all” (p. 271)

In this paragraph of twelve lines I find at least a dozen errors. First, I do not reject what (R. B.) Kuiper wrote as quoted above. Second, pp. 123–25 in *Wrongly Dividing* do not say that all universalistic passages apply only to the elect. Third, I may not have mentioned 2 Pet. 2:1, but I did deal with and explain parallel statements in Scripture. Fourth, Witmer remarks that the above Petrine passage makes it clear that Christ’s sacrifice is sufficient for all, as if it were ever questioned by me. That Christ’s sacrifice is *infinitely* sufficient is misleading. Fifth, just as I have shown above that Paul addresses himself to *professing* believers, so does Peter. Such persons claim and are viewed as being “bought by the Master.”

Sixth, if these false teachers were “bought” by Christ, they could not be lost unless Christ’s death is not sufficient, which even Witmer represents it as being, though, seventh, he does so inconsistently. That is because, eighth, in his view Christ’s death is not sufficient for a single person unless that person makes it sufficient by accepting it, which the unregenerate do not do. So, ninth, Witmer cannot say that the “redemptive price was paid” for sinners because in his view the sinner alone can make it redemptive by accepting it. Tenth, even if a “redemptive price was paid,” that mere fact would not make the price efficient, and, eleventh,

*sufficiency* of an infinite price is never in question. Twelfth, the theme of the paragraph is supposed to be “The *design* [specific] of the atonement,” but this is not addressed.

### **The Historic Premillennial Problem**

Witmer complains that:

Though he does not accept it, Gerstner makes much of what he calls “historic premillennialism” or “nondispensational premillennialism” (p. 65) as distinct from dispensational premillennialism. It is true that many patristic and pre-19th-century premillennialists were nondispensational because they understood the church to take the place of Israel and its promises, which quickly led to historic amillennialism. Gerstner rejects the dispensationalist claim that “a consistent premillennarian will logically be a dispensationalist” (p. 66), insisting that premillennialism is merely an eschatology” (p. 68). Both Gerstner and non dispensational premillennarians fail to recognize that eschatology does not exist in isolation from other areas of biblical doctrine but is part of an integrated system of theology. To be consistent, a premillennial eschatology should be a part of dispensational theology. Most covenant theologians recognize that fact, as Gerstner acknowledges. He mentions Murray, Boettner, Rutgers, Masseling, Berggraff, and Kuyper (pp. 66–67) as covenant theologians who “make this mistake of confusing the two systems” (p. 67) of premillennialism and dispensationalism. (p. 271–72)

Witmer faults me in this paragraph for something of which I claim innocence. My alleged error is denying dispensationalism’s claim that consistent premillennialism will be Dispensationalism because “premillennialism is merely an eschatology.” Because of this statement I am said to “fail to recognize that eschatology does not exist in isolation from other areas of biblical doctrine.” Of course, I am not unaware of that, but what I am saying in *Wrongly Dividing* is that premillennialism as such is not a part of anyone system of doctrine, but is found among Calvinists, Arminians, Neo-Evangelicals, Romancists, dispensationalists, Charismatics, and virtual every known system of Christian theology. All dispensationalists are “premillennarian,” but by no means are all premillennialists dispensationalists. And Witmer does not prove his dogma: “To be consistent, a premillennial eschatology should be a part of dispensational theology.”

Again, in Witmer’s following sentence (“Most covenant theologians recognize *that* fact, as Gerstner acknowledges. He mentions [George] Murray, Boettner, Rutgers, Masseling, Berggraff, and [Abraham] Kuyper

(pp. 66–67) as covenant theologians who “make this mistake of *confusing* the two systems” (p. 67) of premillennialism and dispensationalism.”), I have italicized the two words which show a fundamental misunderstanding and misrepresentation of what I wrote. I did not and do not acknowledge that the named reformed theologians confirm Witmer’s contention that consistent premillennialism *should* be dispensational. So far as I remember, they do not even discuss that matter. I criticize my brother theologians for “confusing” premillennialism with dispensationalism, lumping them together as if they were one and the same. I personally warned my friend, the late George Murray, of this mistake, but to no effect. These men were disinclined to both viewpoints (premillennial and dispensational) and found it almost natural to lump them together.

I am sensitive to this matter because I know that premillennialism, though relatively uncommon, is accepted in reformed theology, which is not true of dispensationalism. In *Wrongly Dividing*, I cite J. Gresham Machen and John Murray welcoming premillennialists to their church (originally “Presbyterian Church in America”), while determinedly refusing dispensationalists.

In demonstrating that premillennialism is logically a part of dispensationalism, the basic issue is determining the purpose of the millennium and Christ’s return to establish it. Dispensationalists identify that purpose as being the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel of a messianic reign of righteousness and peace with Israel as “the head, and not the tail” (Deut. 28:13; cf. 30:1–5) of the nations. The fulfillment of these promises to Israel also provides a consummation to this present world system begun with the creation of Adam and Eve, which is now controlled by Satan (see John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 2:2; 1 John 5:19). On the other hand most nondispensational premillennialists would describe the millennium as Ladd does, as “a glorious manifestation of God’s power as Christ exercises his mediatorial rule over the world during the millennial age.” Elsewhere Ladd wrote, “The millennial kingdom is not Jewish so much as it is mediatorial.”

It is true that both Israel (Rom. 11:26) and the Gentiles entering the millennial kingdom (Matt. 25:31–40) will be saved, but that does not nullify nor minimize the messianic purpose of the millennium as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel. Ladd acknowledges that “Israel as a nation is to be saved (Rom. 11) and is to become an instrument in the hands of God for the fulfillment of the divine purposes. The prophecies of God to Israel in the Old Testament which have never been fulfilled will then come to realization.” At this point Ladd sounds like a dispensationalist.

Furthermore dispensationalists would point that if Israel is saved as a nation distinct from the Gentiles entering the millennium, Israel must also be distinct from the church, the body of Christ. Interestingly nondispensational premillennarians teach that the church, the body of Christ, is resurrected and translated at the close of the tribulation period just before the coming of Jesus Christ and that the church will return with Him to the earth in transformed bodies. The church then is distinct from the saved Israelites and Gentiles who will enter the millennial kingdom in mortal bodies. This obvious distinction between Israel and the church, the body of Christ, even in the millennium shows that a logically consistent premillennialism is dispensational premillennialism. (p. 272–73)

In these three paragraphs Witmer attempts to prove his point that consistent premillennialism will be dispensational. Let me itemize his arguments:

1. The non-dispensational premillennialists (Ladd, for example) teach that ethnic Israel will be saved in the millennium (fulfilling Old Testament prophecies). This makes Ladd *sound* “like a dispensationalist.”
2. “Furthermore,” if Israel is thus saved distinctly from the Gentiles being saved, “Israel must be distinct from the church.”
3. Non-dispensational premillennarians share the rapture views of the dispensationalists.

These three “arguments,” Witmer contends, “obviously” prove his point that “logically consistent premillennialism is dispensational premillennialism.”

Argument 1, that premillennialists who believe in the coming conversion of ethnic Israel must be dispensational, proves no such thing because Dispensationalism is a system of theology and many premillennialists, postmillennialists, and amillennialists who positively oppose that system agree with the doctrine that ethnic Israel will be saved. All Christians also agree with the “dispensational doctrines” of the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ, the incarnation, the bodily resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus Christ, and of heaven and hell, which, by such reasoning, would prove far more overwhelmingly that they are dispensational in their thinking (if consistent)!

Argument 2 is that, if a person believes that ethnic Israel as a whole is born again at the same time in the millennium, he must admit that Israel is distinct from the church and therefore, implicitly, must be a dispensational premillennialist.



Answer: No one denies that ethnic Israel is distinct from the Christian church. That does not mean, however, that if ethnic Israelites are converted they are *then* distinct or apart from the Christian church.

Argument 3, that nondispensational premillennialists accept the dispensational “rapture” view and are therefore dispensational premillennialists, is made in the face of the historical fact that such “rapture” theology was unknown as a part of premillennialism for eighteen centuries, and is denied by many premillennialists living today.

As a footnote to this contention that logically consistent premillennialists *must be* dispensational premillennialists, I may add that *Wrongly Dividing* and hundreds of other books have argued that a logically consistent premillennialist *cannot* be a dispensational premillennialist.

Gerstner accuses dispensationalism as teaching “always implicitly and sometimes explicitly, that there is more than one way of salvation” (p. 149). He devotes chapter 8 to this charge, though it is made elsewhere in his book as well. Gerstner recognizes that dispensationalists insist “that they believe the divine Jesus Christ is the only Savior in *all* dispensations” (p. 150, italics his). Later he acknowledges that “Chafer and Walvoord constantly reassert the statement that there is only one way of salvation in all dispensations” (p. 155). He does not accept such protestations as valid, however, because dispensationalists do not accept the teaching of covenant theology that “the faith of Old Testament believers, however hazy that may have been with regard to details, can be meaningfully described as faith *in Jesus Christ*” (p. 164, italics his).

It is interesting that Gerstner admits that the Old Testament believers’ faith in Christ was “hazy . . . with regard to details” (ibid.). How, then, can it be “meaningfully described as faith in Jesus Christ,” especially since Gerstner elsewhere states, “It is generally acknowledged and explicitly stated in Scripture that the prophets did not always understand what they were prophesying. Even with respect to the Incarnation itself and details concerning it, they were mystified” (p. 96)? He then quotes 1 Peter 1:10–12, the same Scripture passage he insists “shows clearly that the prophets prophesied of the grace that would come” (p. 166). The coming of that grace was future to the prophesying of it, and the prophets did not fully comprehend all they were prophesying.

As Gerstner wrote, “If the prophets could be mystified about the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow, events which are central to the redemptive work of Christ, it would not be surprising that they could be baffled by minute measurements of a future temple” (p. 97). Not only did the prophets — to say nothing of the Old Testament saints — not understand “the grace that would come,” but even the apostles could not accept the statements of the Lord Jesus “that He must go to

Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Matt. 16:21; cf. 17:22–23; 20:17–19). In light of this evidence, how could the Old Testament saints consciously have had faith in Christ and His redemptive death and resurrection (cf. 1 Cor. 15:1–4)?

Gerstner faces another problem in his insistence that the faith of Old Testament saints was explicit "faith in Jesus Christ"? Both dispensationalists and covenant theologians agree with Paul that Abraham is "the father of all who believe" (Rom. 4:11). Moses, however, recorded that God promised Abram (as his name then was) that "this man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4) and that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars (v. 5). The Scripture then records that Abram "believed in the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (v. 6). Abram was justified on the basis of his faith in God's promise of a son, not a conscious, explicit faith in Jesus Christ. This is confirmed by the Apostle Paul, who said that Abraham "did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform" (Rom. 4:20–21). Paul concluded that, as a result of Abraham's faith in God's promise of a son, "therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

It is significant that Paul said that Abraham's justification by God in response to his faith occurred before the requirement of circumcision as the sign of the covenant for ethnic Israel (Rom. 4:9–17; cf. Gen. 15:6; 17:9–14). Paul said this was done so that Abraham "might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised" (Rom. 4:11). Faith is also required of ethnic Israelites (vv. 13, 16a) since Paul said that "they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel" (Rom. 9:6; cf. 2:28–29). Since God's purpose was that Abraham should be "the father of us all" (4:16b) who believe, members of the church, the body of Christ, as well as ethnic Gentiles in the end times (Isa. 2:3; Zech. 14:16), "are blessed with Abraham, the believer" (Gal. 3:9) and are properly called "the sons of Abraham" (v. 7) and "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (v. 29).

Gerstner ridicules Ryrie's dispensational explanation of the one way of salvation in all dispensations (pp. 161–65). Ryrie writes, "The *basis* of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations." This review would change this only slightly — "object of faith in every age is the promise of God; the content of God's promise changes in the various dispensations." This takes into account the distinction between God's promise to Abram

accepted by faith and God's promise to believers in this age of grace (cf. Rom. 4:23–25).

The whole section entitled “The Way of Salvation” (pp. 73–75) is merely a summary statement of Witmer's critique. Since I have already refuted these contentions as they have come up in this critique (and in the other two chapters that make up this addendum to the original book), it seems unnecessary to do so again here. My silence does not, therefore, mean “consent,” but “already answered.”



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**A RESPONSE TO DISPENSATIONALIST  
RICHARD L. MAYHUE**

WHO IS WRONG?  
A REVIEW OF JOHN GERSTNER'S  
*WRONGLY DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH*  
by  
Richard L. Mayhue  
Dean of the Master's Seminary

(Dr. Mayhue's review of Dr. Gerstner's book appeared in  
*The Master's Seminary Journal*, Volume 3, Spring 1992)

Dr. John H. Gerstner, a recognized scholar with impressive credentials, has issued a call for dispensationalists to admit the glaring gaps between their system and orthodox Christianity. However, his presentation of dispensationalism contains shortcomings that necessitate this special review article to point out some of these and to challenge dispensationalists to publicize a greater clarification of their position. Many of the assumptions that undergird Dr. Gerstner's case against dispensationalism are in error. These faults are magnified by a number of major weaknesses in his argument. A review of the book shows how the author's treatment of his subject deteriorates even more through ten representative theological misstatements. The work is of such a misleading nature that a retraction of some kind seems to be in order.

Dr. Richard L. Mayhue is Dean of The Master's Seminary, of which this periodical is the *Journal*. The whole complex, including seminary, college, and church, has as its well-known President, John F. MacArthur Jr. Dr. Mayhue, after graciously crediting me as "a recognized scholar with impressive credentials," indicates the gravity of my charge against dispensationalism, but assures his readers that they are so fundamentally misleading that "a retraction of some kind seems to be in order." After reading this critique I did write to Dr. Mayhue that I would be glad to submit a response to this article in the same *Journal* indicating why I felt no "retraction" was necessary, that I felt would satisfy even his own readers. To that offer I have received no response. I need not here answer the charges in this opening paragraph since they are spelled out in the

body of the essay. Among the numerous anti-articles, this one is especially appreciated for its stress on my alleged logical blunders in *Wrongly Dividing*.

General Anthony C. McAuliffe, commanding officer of the 101st Airborne Division at Bastogne, found his troops surrounded by the Germans early in the famous World War II Battle of the Bulge (December, 1944). The opposing Nazi general, sensing quick victory, sent word to surrender immediately. McAuliffe replied with what is now one of the most famous one-word responses in military history, “Nuts!” In love, that also is our response to Dr. Gerstner’s call for the surrender of “dispensationalism.”

This strong retort, borrowed from WW 2, answers R. C. Sproul’s (President of Ligonier Ministries and a disciple of Dr. Gerstner) initial comments in the Foreword (p. ix):

“This bomb-unlike missiles that suffer from dubious guidance systems and are liable to land on civilian populations wreaking havoc indiscriminately — is delivered with pinpoint accuracy into the laps of dispensational scholars.”

According to Sproul, Gerstner would prefer torture or death to intentionally distorting or misrepresenting anyone’s position. . . . If Gerstner is inaccurate — if he has failed to understand dispensational theology correctly — then he owes many a profound apology. But first he must be shown where and how he is in error. This is the challenge of the book. If Gerstner is accurate, then dispensationalism should be discarded as being a serious deviation from Biblical Christianity (p. xi).

Dr. Gerstner delivers his “Surrender!” demand in the Introduction and elsewhere in the book:

“Dispensationalism today, as yesterday, is spurious Calvinism and dubious evangelicalism. If it does not refute my charges and the charges of many others, it cannot long continue to be considered an essentially Christian movement” (p. 2). “Dispensationalism . . .” is in constant deviation from essential historical Christianity . . .” (p. 68). Since Gerstner believes so strongly that soteriology determines eschatology, one could expect that the President of The Master’s Seminary, John F. MacArthur, Jr., would be the first to wave a white flag. Gerstner affirmingly quotes him (without documentation or obvious connection to his point) as saying, “There is no salvation except Lordship Salvation” (p. 2). Gerstner finds this strongly reformed view of salvation incompatible with his understanding of dispensationalism. This convincingly illustrates the most obvious *non sequitur* in the book, i.e., Dr. Gerstner’s assertion throughout his book that Reformed soteriology necessarily

eliminates dispensational ecclesiology and eschatology. He labors for more than half the book chapters 7– 13 — to prove that dispensationalism should surrender because it is unbiblical (pp. 105– 263).

He seems to debate from the following basic syllogism, though he never states it so succinctly as this:

Premise 1: Calvinism is central to all true theology.

Premise 2: Dispensationalism does not embrace Calvinism.

Conclusion: Dispensationalism is a “spurious” and “dubious” expression of true theology (p.2).

Thus, he strongly calls for dispensationalism’s quick surrender.

No one will charge this introduction with understating my position vis-a-vis dispensationalism. If anyone can outdo R. C. Sproul (a former student who shares the Reformed faith with me, but is too much his own man to be called a “disciple”) in graphic language it may be Richard Mayhue, whose Battle of the Bulge imagery and “nuts” vocabulary is a lively prelude to a charge against me of “ten” *non sequiturs*. This is like a man getting out of his tank to play chess. But on with the Battle of the Syllogisms.

“The most obvious *non sequitur* in the book, [*Wrongly Dividing*] that Reformed soteriology necessarily eliminates dispensational ecclesiology and eschatology.” (74, 75) Mayhue, when he charges me with a *non sequitur*, should first show that I consider that “Reformed soteriology necessarily eliminates dispensational ecclesiology and eschatology”; second, why I, if I do that, consider it a *sequitur*; and third, show that what I argue is a *non sequitur*. He does none of these. One does not prove something to be a *non sequitur* by calling it such.

Dr. Mayhue then proceeds to say that I seem “to debate from the following basic syllogism” without any evidence of a *non sequitur* being offered. I could comment on the alleged syllogism but I will overlook it until my reviewer shows that I do argue *non sequitur* and that I do follow such or such a syllogism. It is better to show some evidence first and then make the charges. However, I will follow on with Mayhue waiting for my first of ten alleged *non sequiturs*.

Before getting down to the argument, my critic gives a very generous estimate of my career, and also notes J. I. Packer’s and the publisher’s strong endorsement of the case against dispensationalism in *Wrongly Dividing*. My hair is well and courteously combed before the decapitation.

There follows a brief, but most fair, fine and comprehensive summary of my book (pp. 76– 79). Mayhue has done his homework for the critique that is to follow and is the kind of dispensationalist whose criticisms I welcome, appreciate, and intend to listen to as carefully as Mayhue has listened to me (without his seeing any cogency in the argumentation, however). Dr. Mayhue's criticism now begins with:

#### EXAMINING THE AUTHOR'S ASSUMPTIONS

Presuppositions and assumptions undergird all reasoned thought. At times they are enumerated explicitly in the introduction to a subject while in other cases, such as this book, assumptions make their appearance somewhat randomly throughout the discussion, either in implicit or explicit fashion. This review suggests that at least ten of Dr. Gerstner's major assumptions are in error and thus seriously damage the validity of his conclusions.

This contention that "at least ten of Dr. Gerstner's major assumptions are in error and thus seriously damage the validity of his conclusions" is certainly a masterpiece of understatement plus at least a half-dozen works of supererogation. Without reading further I will say that if half of my alleged "major assumptions are in error" they do not "seriously damage," they *destroy* the "validity" of my "conclusions" in *Wrongly Dividing*. I will repent in sackcloth and ashes before God that I ever wrote that book and beg owners of it to burn it before any child of God should be caused to stumble.

Let us consider my ten "major assumptions that are in error" :

1. Dr. Gerstner is perceived to assume that he is right and thus speaks on this subject *ex cathedra*. One only needs to ponder the book's title, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* to sense the author's confidence. Implicitly, one gains the idea throughout the book that the author believes he stands in the theological gap at the eleventh hour as the champion of covenantalism and thus the destroyer of dispensationalism.

I cannot deny that I may be "*perceived*" to *assume* that I am right. That does not *prove* it to be a fair perception. Being a person who "argues" and invites criticism to which I try to listen objectively is evidence to the contrary. Having "confidence" in *Wrongly Dividing* may be misplaced but when one gives years of reflection and almost a thousand pages to the subject (the publisher had to abridge the manuscript) hardly shows a person to be "dogmatic" in the bad sense of that term. Most dispensation-



alists are confident of their views. I do not fault them for that if they offer arguments (even bad arguments).

2. Dr. Gerstner seems to assume that he is factually, logically, and theologically decisive. Both R. C. Sproul's mild acknowledgment that Dr. Gerstner could be wrong (p. xi) and the author's own challenge to be corrected (p. 263) are more like a challenge than a humble invitation to their brothers in Christ "to come let us reason together" (cf. Isa. 1:18).

I admit that I think *Wrongly Dividing* is essentially correct. If that makes a person "seem to assume" that he is "decisive," I do not know how anyone can avoid being vain. I also think I (and many, many others) can prove that God exists, that the Bible is God's Word, that Jesus Christ is His Son and that He is the only way of salvation. I never realized how vain I have been the last sixty years. I must call attention to Dr. Mayhue's begging of the question by assuming that people are "brothers in Christ." I have tried to prove that dispensationalism has essentially departed from evangelical Christianity. If that is true, those who call themselves Christians, while adhering to a departure from the gospel, must prove that they are brethren. If my judgment is shown to be wrong I will humbly and immediately beg my brothers' and sisters' forgiveness.

3. When Dr. Gerstner writes, "that Calvinism is just another name for Christianity" (p. 107), one senses that he presumes to be the spokesman for all Calvinists. His own discussion of the atonement, which highlights varying approaches to the subject in the Reformed community, evidences that this is not altogether true (pp. 127–28).

Dr. Mayhue gives us here a true *non sequitur*:

Major premise: Calvinism is another name for Christianity (Spurgeon quote).

Minor premise: "Dr. Gerstner writes . . . that Calvinism is just another name for Christianity."

Conclusion: Therefore, "he presumes to be the spokesman for all Calvinists."

Agreeing with Spurgeon that Calvinism is a "nickname" for Christianity would not *prove* that I consider myself "to be *the spokesman* for all Calvinists." The basis of Mayhue's charging Gerstner with a *non sequitur* is Mayhue's *non sequitur*.

4. One gets the distinct impression that Dr. Gerstner's view on soteriology, as expressed by the Synod of Dort (1619), serves as the canon by which other people's doctrine is judged as true or heretical (p. 105). Yet,

much later in the book he writes, “The standard of judgment is fidelity to God’s inerrant Word” (p. 262). A noticeable lack of biblical discussion throughout the book, plus the obvious appeal to a “dogmatic” approach in his own theology, leads the reviewer to suggest that the author frequently seems to espouse the latter (Scripture) but employ the former (Dortian doctrine) to authenticate truth.

Here again I cannot deny that “someone” (like Mayhue himself) “gets the impression that Dr. Gerstner’s view on soteriology, as expressed by the Synod of Dort (1619), serves as the canon by which other people’s doctrine is judged as true or heretical (p. 105).” What I do deny is that I either affirm or infer any such idolatrous folly as the “impression” in Mayhue’s non-logical mind.

5. Dr. Gerstner further narrows the field of those who understand and hold to Scripture correctly regarding the atonement by limiting this group to the Protestant Reformed Church (p. 128). This reviewer challenges this assumption and so do some of his covenantal brethren. In a letter dated September 12, 1991, the Elders of Trinity Baptist Church in Montville, NJ, pastored by Al Martin, himself a staunch proclaimer of Reformed doctrine, disavow Dr. Gerstner’s teaching on the atonement beginning on p. 118 and continuing through p. 131. They write that, “Dr. Gerstner strays from the mainstream of historic calvinistic teaching regarding the free offer of the Gospel.” This disclaimer letter comes with every copy of Dr. Gerstner’s book that they distribute.<sup>3</sup> A review of Dr. Gerstner’s work by Reformation Today seriously questions his discussion of total depravity, election, and irresistible grace as it relates to his analysis of dispensational thought.

I am now charged with making a preposterous statement, as in #4 I was falsely charged with an idolatrous statement. When one makes charges like that he must cite statements or prove inferences, which Mayhue does not do or, as here, even attempt. What I credited to the tiny Protestant Reformed denomination was a better *statement* on the “universal offer” than even some reformed creeds and genuine reformed theologians. That I think is true, and the fact that only a *few* so state it does not prove it wrong. I tried to explain it in a letter to the Elders of Trinity Baptist Church in Montville which they have yet to refute [a copy

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<sup>3</sup> The pertinent portion reads, “While much of the book is solid and biblical, we cannot endorse his treatment of the subject of the Atonement as it relates to the free offer of the Gospel. We in fact commend the writing of Stonehouse and Murray on the free offer of the Gospel, as it may be found in Murray’s *Collected Writings*.”

of this letter can be found at the end of this chapter]. Dr. Mayhue could have mentioned that Al Martin's elders did recommend *Wrongly Dividing* as a sound criticism of dispensationalism ["we support Dr. Gerstner's principal line of argument and are glad that this book has been written on dispensational theology"]. The *Reformation Today* review was also generally favorable, though it did offer important criticism.

6. Throughout the volume one receives the strong impression that Dr. Gerstner believes that Dallas Theological Seminary speaks representatively for all dispensationalists. He refers to "Dallas Dispensationalism" (p. 47). While this reviewer would not want to take away from DTS's contributions to furthering dispensational thought, dispensational thinking extends significantly beyond Dallas, especially in its theological formation. While Grace Theological Seminary, Capital Bible Seminary, and Western Conservative Baptist Seminary are mentioned (p. 52), numerous other schools such as Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, The Master's Seminary, Talbot School of Theology, and a host of Christian colleges, not to mention scholars and pastors who do not teach at dispensationally oriented schools, swell the ranks of institutions and individuals who claim to be "dispensational" in their ecclesiology and eschatology.

I did not say or think that Dallas Theological Seminary "speaks representatively for all dispensationalists," though it may be of greatest over-all influence. I do refer to most of the other institutions mentioned and generally to Bible schools. I certainly meant no put-down for other institutions as advocates of dispensationalism. In fact, I wrote the book because of the vast influence of dispensationalism and its innumerable outlets around the world. This theology, I fear, penetrates 80–90% of the conservative ("Bible-believing") Christian world. I can't help believing that most dispensationalists are true sheep of Christ needing shepherds.

7. Dr. Gerstner identifies dispensationalism with a certain view of soteriology. "Dispensationalism is another gospel" (p. 259). "When Dispensationalism does truly give up mere nominalistic faith for a working faith, Dispensationalism will be Dispensationalism no more" (p. 272 n. 9). R. C. Sproul says of the author's view, "For Gerstner, when a dispensationalist eschews Antinomianism, he is, in effect, eschewing Dispensationalism" (p. x). Nothing could be further from reality or better illustrate the meaning of non sequitur. Both Zane Hodges and John MacArthur consider themselves dispensationally oriented in their ecclesiology and eschatology, and yet see a great gulf fixed between their views on soteriology. One could be both "a five-point Calvinist and

dispensational without being biblically inconsistent. D. G. Hart has recently written about the Westminster Seminary faculty of Machen's day being explicitly Reformed, yet having dispensationalist Allan A. MacRae as Professor of Old Testament."

Here is the item in which a specific *non sequitur* is charged (to a Sproul quotation which I accept though I would state it a little differently). I consider Antinomianism the worst theological fault in dispensationalism and absolutely fatal to the gospel by inevitable implication. Here is how Mayhue charges me with a *non sequitur*. "Both Zane Hodges and John MacArthur consider themselves dispensationally oriented in their ecclesiology and eschatology, and yet see a great gulf fixed between their views on soteriology." Let us see how Mayhue's logic works:

- Gerstner says dispensational Antinomianism is a part of dispensationalism and fatal to its evangelicalism.
- Hodges and MacArthur differ on Antinomianism, but agree on the ecclesiology of dispensationalism.
- Therefore, Gerstner is wrong.

8. Dr. Gerstner assumes that dispensationalism is in a theological rut and has brought no essential change to its thinking: "A pressing question today is whether dispensationalism has changed in any significant ways in recent years. I think not" (p. 72). "In spite of numerous contemporary fringe changes, dispensationalism in America is still essentially Scofieldian" (pp. 252–53). He does not acknowledge the Dispensational Study Group that has been meeting since 1985 just prior to the Evangelical Theological Society's Annual Meeting. Nor does he interact with several recent, major works such as *Continuity and Discontinuity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1988) where John Feinberg, the editor, brings together both sides of the debate on key issues. Robert Saucy has recently contributed several important articles: "The Crucial Issue Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Systems," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/1 (Fall 1986):149–65, "Contemporary Dispensational Thought," *TSF Bulletin* (Mar–Apr 1984):10–11, "The Presence of the Kingdom and the Life of the church," *BSac* 145/577 (Jan–Mar 1988) 30–46. Dr. Saucy is now completing a full-length volume tentatively entitled *The Interface Between Dispensational and Covenantal Theology* to be published by Zondervan in 1992. In all these, dispensational spokesmen have moved rapidly and significantly beyond Scofield, Chafer, and Ryrie.

Once again, I am said to "assume" something on which I have written extensively in *Wrongly Dividing* including some of the items Mayhue

mentions though not all. On almost any subject on which a person writes today he/she can hardly keep up with the bibliography. Of all that I have read before and since *Wrongly Dividing*, I have not yet seen one *essential* part of the dispensational system changed.

Dr. John Witmer criticized me for not attending and being indifferent to the Dispensational Study Group and Mayhue for not acknowledging it. The truth is that I never knew of it until Witmer censured me for being indifferent to it. For years, somebody has stopped sending me *The Evangelical Theological Student*, or my dues, and I have been too busy to track the negligence down. I have been aware of rapprochement discussions that assumed the common Christianity of dispensationalism and Covenant Theology. Those of which I was aware were not at all disposed to debate my charges against dispensationalism. I have read and mentioned *Continuity and Discontinuity* and once debated John Feinberg for three days. Incidentally, that volume was quite similar in format to many Roman Catholic/Protestant dialogues which were or are between Roman Catholics who are not really Roman Catholics and Protestants who are not really Protestants. They usually result in perfect “reconciliations.”

9. Dr. Gerstner assumes that dispensationalism is a theological system much like the Calvinistic system. He refers to the “dispensational theological system” (pp. 105, 158). Then he erroneously tries to equate dispensational thinking with the Arminian system of theology (p. 103). Earl D. Radmacher makes the point that dispensational thought comes more from a hermeneutical approach to Scripture than from any theological system.

Once again, I am charged with *assuming*. I seem to Mayhue never to argue or even try to offer evidence which of course frees him from answering it. He cites Dr. Radmacher who does not assume, but “makes the point,” that hermeneutics is the issue while I “assume” (for many pages) that “literalism” is a “non-issue.”

10. Dr. Gerstner continually assumes that because he thinks he has proven dispensationalism wrong, therefore covenantalism is demonstrated to be a correct expression of truth. Nowhere does the author adequately demonstrate the biblical correctness of his own beliefs. Until he does so, his brand of covenantalism is just as suspect as the dispensationalism he sets out to discredit. And, let this reviewer and all his dispensational friends be alert to remember the need to do the same in the debate with covenantalists. Relief at last: Gerstner “*thinks* he has *proven* Dispensationalism wrong.” At least and at last, my critic admits that I *think* that I have *proven* something. Nevertheless, the old refrain:

“Dr. Gerstner continually assumes.” I will be glad if the time ever comes that I can say: “Mayhue thinks he has refuted me by the following argument,” rather than, “Thus saith Professor Mayhue.”

Professor Mayhue’s next area of critique deals with my “flaws”: “WEAKNESSES” (84 f):

1. My book “does not generally reflect the writings of dispensationalists since 1980 as illustrated above.” (85) I see nowhere “above” where Mayhue has illustrated such a deficiency and I specifically cited Chancellor Walvoord’s recent statement to the contrary.

True, that particular statement refers only to Dallas Theological Seminary, but I assume that Professor Mayhue will agree that Dallas is one of, if not the most, influential sources of contemporary dispensationalism.

2. Dr. Gerstner frequently cites certain men as representative of dispensational thought. To current dispensationalists, most of these men represent anachronistic referencing and/or a giant caricature of dispensational spokesmen. Examples include Jim Bakker (p. 54), Harold Barker (p. 223), M. R. DeHaan (pp. 54, 88), Jerry Falwell (p. 54), Norm Geisler (p. 75), Billy Graham (pp. 54, 137, 174), Zane Hodges (pp. 225–230), W. W. Howard (p. 224), Rex Humbard (p. 54), Hal Lindsey (pp. 175, 221), James Robison (p. 54), Jimmy Swaggart (p. 54), R. B. Thieme (p. 225), and A. W. Tozer (p. 139). Throughout this volume Dr. Gerstner has presented “strawman” arguments, among which this is his masterpiece.

Note the last sentence especially where I am accused of being a master of “strawman arguments” because many of the men I list as dispensationalists are not in step with some “current dispensationalists.” When I sketch the whole history of dispensationalism and concentrate on its systematic development since its master theologian, Darby, and discuss major Americans in that system such as Brooke, Moody, Scofield, Grace Seminary, Chafer, Ryrie and Walvoord and cite the Scofield Reference Bible revision of 1967, C. L. Feinberg, and *Continuity and Discontinuity*, all the names I mention became “strawmen” because Mayhue does not *apparently* consider them among “current dispensationalists” of the last decade. Did I hear someone call *me* a master of strawman arguments when he allows persons who call themselves contemporary dispensationalists if they are *contending* for some changes around the edges of the system while the famous names I mention above are now anachronistic or giant caricatures?

3. Dr. Gerstner resorts in places to a “guilt by association” form of argumentation. R. C. Sproul (p. x) in the Foreword associates dispensationalists with Joseph Fletcher, father of modern “situational ethics.” Gerstner puts dispensationalists alongside cults like Mormonism and Jehovah’s Witnesses (p. 69). Dispensational thought is equated with Arminian theology (p. 103). Gerstner calls John Nelson Darby the “major theologian” of dispensationalists (p. 84). Trivialization and dispensationalism are equated (pp. 69–70). He even implies that dispensationalism is more deceptive than liberalism and the occult (p. 2).

Now, I and R. C. Sproul are charged with “guilt by association” argumentation. Why? Because, Sproul once and I many times show certain doctrines in dispensationalism are commonly used in ways similar to positions taken by persons in entirely different schools of thought. I clearly indicate these are different from dispensationalism in their basic nature and disavowed by dispensationalists. It is perfectly clear from *Wrongly Dividing* that dispensationalism is orthodox with respect to the ontological Trinity, Virgin Birth, deity of Christ, atonement, resurrection, etc. as these non-Christian groups are not.

Arminianism is a Christian group which I do not “equate” with “dispensational thought.” At great length, I recognize that dispensationalism has a tendency to identify itself with “moderate Calvinism” and that that is a great mistake because its system is essentially Arminian though dispensationalists do not seem to recognize it. In my opinion, there is no “guilt by association.” I have spent most of my life trying to show the Christian church that where Arminianism differs from Calvinism it is in error. Dispensationalism I try to prove is guilty of a triple error here: first, teaching an essentially Arminian system; second, not recognizing that; and third, supposing their system is essentially Calvinistic. Apparently, Mayhue thinks I am wrong on all three points. If so, it is neither academic nor fair to dismiss a major argument with a mere allegation and no refutation whatever.

In the early part of this review, I am charged with *non sequitur* reasoning without any evidence. Here the reviewer charges me with “guilt by association” insinuation and cites many supposed instances, but not a one of which is a “guilt by association” case. For example, I do *not* suggest that dispensationalists are like those who attack the deity of Jesus Christ because one feature is common to both systems.

4. Mayhue charges me with “pejorative language and sarcasm” (p. 85), which language abounds in the prophets, Christ, and Paul. In the footnotes, he refers to other works which he assumes demonstrate my

guilt in this area freeing him from the necessity of proving my “inflammatory rhetoric.”

I will put the matter bluntly: Mayhue is guilty of “inflammatory rhetoric” when he accuses me of “inflammatory rhetoric” — e.g., charging dispensationalism with being a cult (p. 150), with pantheism (pp. 136, 143), and as a “departure from Christianity” (p. 150) — for I give arguments for those indictments.

Admittedly, my charges are very severe but they are given as reasoned arguments which force me and many others so to indict the dispensational system. To put my statements down as “inflammatory rhetoric” and not even try to answer them does make me rightfully *indignant* (inflamed, if you prefer).

5. Here I am fairly criticized for not doing enough with Alva J. McClain, George N. H. Peters, or Erich Sauer, especially since a volume claiming to be “the most extensive and systematic study of Dispensational Theology ever published” would surely interact with these indispensable works (p. 86).

Let me respond briefly. *First*, I do not consider my work the “most extensive” work on the subject ever written. I cite Allis’ *Prophecy and the Church* as more thorough and extensive on that subject, and Bahnsen and Gentry’s *House Divided* as a more thorough Calvinistic critique especially related to Dominion, Reconstructionist issues, and that others concentrate on other, especially eschatological details, far better. My work’s only claim to distinction is in examining dispensationalism as a *system* of doctrine. *Second*, the [original] publisher, with my consent, for practical and financial reasons reduced my manuscript to half. *Third*, when I cite Sauer, for example, briefly it is to show that he is breaking promisingly from certain generally accepted parts of the dispensational system. This includes some of “current dispensationalism.” *Fourth*, much of what these men write is general Fundamentalism with which dispensationalists and covenantalists all agree.

6. I deal with Dr. Witmer’s thorough going critique of *Wrongly Dividing* at some length in this volume. I refer the reader to that chapter for my detailed response to him.

7. Here my “flaw” is that I did not use one dispensational book rather than another. Mayhue may be right. As usual, he does not prove it. He needs only to assert it. It seems to be enough generally, *in the view of Richard Mayhue*, to establish the existence of a “flaw” in another’s writing for that writing not to have used another writing considered to be better for the purpose *in the view of Richard Mayhue*. Were that way of evaluation



followed by John Gerstner (using deviation from Gerstner's preference as the litmus test for the presence of a "flaw"), that undoubtedly would have been considered a "dogmatic" flaw on the part of Gerstner judging from the indisputable litmus test of a flaw, which everyone should know instinctively, is deviation *from the view of Richard Mayhue*.

8. Again, Mayhue says that I, in *non sequitur* fashion, teach that soteriology determines ecclesiology and eschatology. Of course, there will be some inter-relation in a system, but, I never say that dispensational soteriology will necessarily determine a specific eschatology. Covenantalists, including me, have almost always recognized postmillennialism, amillennialism and premillennialism as possibilities in the reformed system. I argue that dispensational eschatology is consistent with its soteriology, not that its soteriology "determines" that particular eschatological pattern.

That my "discussion of dispensationalism is notably out of proportion with the real issues" is Mayhue's inherently authoritative judgment. He sees the "real issues" differently. Ergo (Mayhue is a stickler for logic), anyone else (not only Gerstner for there is nothing personal here), *anyone* audacious enough to differ with the flawless view of Richard Mayhue must suffer from a flawed judgment.

9. Once again, thus says Professor Mayhue: "The right hand column (on p. 147) inaccurately labeled dispensationalism should be more accurately titled 'modified Arminianism'" (p. 87). Why my labeling is incorrect is, of course, because Professor Mayhue says it is. Gerstner gives arguments for charging dispensationalism with Arminianism. Mayhue needs only one argument to refute any and all of mine: "Thus saith Richard Mayhue."

Richard Mayhue not only refutes me with his indisputable authority but he adds a couple falsifications of my arguments as well; that is, if it can be imagined that a person with inherent, indisputable authority who could not possibly err in judgment, could, theoretically, err in fact. Assuming, precariously, that a person with ultimate infallible judgment could, conceivably, err in fact, I, with temerity suggest that Gerstner has not "led his readers to equate dispensationalism with Arminianism" as could be easily seen if the readers would still dare to read *Wrongly Dividing*. Furthermore, becoming very bold, Gerstner with consummate arrogance, in the view of Mayhue, says that he could not even imagine much less think, not to mention write that "Arminian soteriology" is "synonymous with dispensationalism." With this Olympian god frowning

down upon me I dread the possibility that such a disclaimer on my part is nigh to blasphemy.

This whole section ends with this grand, dramatic description of *Wrongly Dividing* (lacking absolutely nothing but one shred of proof): Resembling “The maiden voyage of the Titanic,”

This supposedly “unsinkable” book seems to have sustained severe damage below the water line at the hands of its own self-imposed icebergs of specious reasoning, fallacious assumptions, incomplete and outdated research, inaccurate data, distorted characterizations, and seemingly premature celebrating of victory (p. 88).

ASSESSING THEOLOGICAL VALIDITY (pp. 88f). In the first paragraph, Mayhue expresses modestly that

in this reviewer’s opinion . . . dispensational thought entered a new era somewhere in the late 70s or early 80s. Because no one person or single institution speaks for all dispensationalists and because it is not a theological system like Calvinism (but rather tends to result from a consistent hermeneutic applied with exegetical skill to particular texts whose individual conclusions comprise a macro-summation of a biblical truth), no designated person speaks for the movement. Scores of individual scholars and schools are involved in formulating dispensational thought. (p. 88)

No institution or individual can tell us *what* this new dispensational thought is. Nevertheless Mayhue can tell us that it is not a “theological system like Calvinism.” He explains the *difference* from Calvinism by something which is the most fundamental, inherent part of all *Calvinists’* claim: “Our doctrine results from a consistent hermeneutic applied with exegetical skill to particular texts whose individual conclusions comprise a macro-summation of a biblical truth.”

Next, I am criticized for not accurately identifying “the current makeup or movement of dispensationalism” which Mayhue told us no *individual* or institution could identify except as a literalistic way of dealing with Scripture, which unique “way” all Calvinists claim for themselves. I paint an “almost unrecognizable image.” Mayhue cannot tell us what that new dispensational image is; but, he knows that mine is not it. Then he goes on to recognize that Robert L. Saucy and John F. MacArthur Jr. “might well” be “leading spokesmen” for this unidentified image of “current dispensationalism.” MacArthur’s book on *The Gospel According to Jesus* “opposes the wrong equation of a soteriological position with the distinctive feature of dispensationalism.” (p. 89) What I argue in *Wrongly Dividing* is that Antinomianism is the *most fatal* error in dispensationalism,

not that it is “the *distinctive* feature” which dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists would surely consider to be its eschatology. Again, I never maintained that Master’s Seminary denies “its dispensational roots” if that is what Mayhue is suggesting here. I did find, when I spoke there a few years ago, at least one professor, speaking for others, and a number of students, holding to “limited atonement.”

The rest of this paragraph I will ignore feeling that I have already dealt with its main point though not some of its phrasings.

Mayhue next takes up “a series of selected theological mis-statements of Dr. Gerstner in his discussion of philosophy, hermeneutics, apologetics and theology.” (p. 89– 90)

1. In his brief discourse on dispensationalists and philosophy, Dr. Gerstner charges, “It [dispensationalism] is almost impatient in its desire to get to Holy Scripture” (p. 75). Dispensationalists consider this a great compliment consistent with their high view of Scripture’s sufficiency as outlined in such classic passages as Psalm 19, Psalm 119, and 2 Tim. 3:14–17. Therefore, to dispensationalists logic and philosophy are secondary to Scripture and serve as a means to an end, not the end itself. (p. 90)

Here is the Mayhue footnote (number 24) comment on my “charge”:

McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom* 527–31, lets some air out of Dr. Gerstner’s over-inflated charge that dispensationalism is “almost anti-philosophical” (p. 75) with his chap. 28, “A Premillennial Philosophy of History.”

I will simply record what I wrote which seems, for some reason I cannot grasp, to offend Dr. Mayhue and needs deflating as if I had said dispensationalism had no philosophically concerned people. I will let the reader make his own judgment:

Methodism has its personalism, Old Princetonians Realism, and Roman Catholicism its Thomism, but it would seem that Dispensationalism has no philosophy of its own. Indeed, Dispensationalism is almost anti-philosophical in that it tends to de-emphasize philosophy. It has always been sympathetic to apologetics, as we shall see a little later, but it has not been inclined to philosophize beyond the immediate needs for Biblical verification, and it is almost impatient in its desire to get to Holy Scripture. (p. 75)

This was not written as a negative criticism so much as a general description. Dispensationalism, as I do say, is “almost” anti-philosophical (because most professional philosophy past and present tends to oppose Biblical revelation) but is not anti-empirical or anti-metaphysical. It tends

to leave that field to other Christians whose general theological conservatism it trusts. It has inclined to Scottish Realism rather than Idealism in the past, against Existentialism and toward a Francis Schaefer type of philosophy more recently. It is definitely pro-traditional apologetics (including mine).

In “2” (p. 90) it is noted that “this reviewer is amazed that Dr. Gerstner personally favors the ‘classical’ approach in common with most dispensationalists (p. 79).” I frankly don’t know what causes Dr. Mayhue’s amazement. When I express my surprise that more dispensationalists are not presuppositionalists, my critic makes the statement: “Those dispensationalists who are presuppositionalists are so because they think it is taught in the Scripture, not because they believe it is Calvinist.” So do the presuppositionalists. My point is that dispensationalists generally, historically, consider themselves “moderate Calvinists.” However, they don’t visibly favor (nor do I), the same apologetics that the vast majority of fellow Calvinists today see in the Bible.

Mayhue concludes: “There is no necessary connection other than consistent biblical thought and conclusion between theology and presuppositional apologetics” (90–91). This is not an important point, but I am surprised that if dispensationalists claim to find essentially the same Calvinism taught in the Bible and biblical revelation as the source of their apologetics that they would not tend to agree on the apologetics taught in the Bible. Dispensationalists think they agree on four out of five points of Calvinism in the Bible but differ very generally on the apologetics most contemporary Calvinists think is in the Bible. It is *only surprising*, not at all impossible or defective. I deviate from the majority myself and most of my fellow Calvinists do find it very surprising. Some of them even wonder if it is possible to be a real Calvinist and not a presuppositionalist! But, then, they stress apologetics as most dispensationalists do not.

3. On hermeneutics Mayhue makes the statement that my “eclectic discussion of older and/or ‘pop’ dispensationalism such as Darby, M. R. DeHaan, Feinberg, Scofield, and Lindsey is, at best, inadequate” (p.91). I think the “pop” term is misleading. I don’t consider these men “pop” dispensationalists. I presume it is Mayhue’s opinion that they are. The reference of that pejorative term ought to be made clear or deleted.

Next I am criticized for saying that some dispensationalists are sometimes guilty of “spoof-texting.” This is called an “unfair caricature of dispensationalists who have a legitimate desire to allow Scripture to interpret Scripture.” I am not “caricaturing” all dispensationalists or dispensationalists in general doing this spoof-texting as a life-style.

Mayhue does not prove that I do. He is being “unfair” to me, not I to dispensationalists in general especially when I cite John Nelson Darby as admitting that he sometimes did just that.

Nor am I demeaning proof texts or the citing of a series of such. One truly interpreted text of Holy Scripture absolutely establishes, as beyond peradventure of a doubt, whatever it affirms. Many Bible teachers, dispensationalists among them, often cite a palpably falsely or dubiously interpreted text and then try to give it a weight it does not possess by citing a dozen other texts which give a superficially sounding harmonious ring. Often in my preaching I warn people of the peril of memorizing the Word of God *wrongly* interpreted and then fortifying it by a string of other wrongly *interpreted* texts. I think the “dispensational” Rapture would never have gotten off the ground except by this highflying exegesis. Mayhue doesn’t refute me, only rebukes me.

4. “Here he [Gerstner] attempts to discredit dispensationalists historically by associating them with F. E. Raven, a Brethren figure of the late 19th century, who, according to Gerstner, denied the full humanity to Christ” (p. 90). Later, the review says this discussion “serves no logical purpose in Dr. Gerstner’s discussion, other than trying to portray dispensationalists as guilty of the same heresy” (p. 91).

All I am doing here is sketching the history of the Brethren and noting Raven’s unorthodoxy. The Brethren were people among whom dispensationalism did develop, among whom Raven’s unorthodoxy did appear and was generally rejected, as it was by later dispensationalism. Many have appeared as part of reformed history who were not reformed and who were rejected because the reformed consensus did not recognize them. This was true of Arminianism and Hypercalvinism. “Black sheep” appear in all traditions. The interesting thing is whether that tradition rejects the black sheep or changes its own colors. Dispensationalists rejected Ravenite black sheep. And I reject Dr. Mayhue’s violation of the ninth commandment when he says that I attempt to “discredit dispensationalists” and try “to portray dispensationalists as guilty of the same heresy” by citing such historical data.

5. This brief reference to my section showing that mainline dispensationalists do not teach “unconditional election” does not even state my argument or deal with my basic contention but with a very remote detail which itself is dealt with only in a footnote reference to a 1976 book and a 1976 article. This is characteristic of the Mayhue method of “ASSESSING THEOLOGICAL VALIDITY,” “LOCATING “FLAWS,” “EXAMINING THE AUTHOR’S ASSUMPTIONS,” etc.

In this case I am going to the trouble of ordering the old book from Zondervan and getting my copy of the periodical article from my shelves and reading it once again, and the other for the first time, to see if they show what Mayhue says they show, namely, that dispensationalists and Calvinists may argue not only on unconditional election but “double predestination.”

6. Dr. Gerstner questions the orthodoxy of dispensationalism concerning the full humanity of Jesus Christ. He asserts that regardless of whether it comes more from a lack of theological care than heterodoxy, dispensationalists have an unusual conception of Christ’s full humanity (pp. 116–17). The author’s discussion is altogether too brief for such a major charge, being limited to Darby, Chafer, and C. H. Mackintosh. Regarding Christ’s humanity, covenantalists and dispensationalists agree that it remained without sin throughout His earthly life (2 Cor. 5:21). The theological discussion still goes on as to whether the impeccability of Christ’s human nature meant that He was susceptible to temptation like humanity, yet without sin or whether He could not be tempted at all. After everything is said and written, the issue at hand is not really germane to the discussion of dispensationalism.

*My point* about a defective dispensational view of Christ’s human nature is inadvertently illustrated here by my reviewer. “The theological discussion still goes on as to whether the impeccability of Christ’s human nature meant that He was susceptible to temptation like humanity, yet without sin, or whether He could not be tempted at all.” One would expect a fellow inerrantist to recognize that Christ could be and was tempted (Heb. 4:15). There cannot be any question whatever about that by inerrantists even if they could not deduce it from Christ’s theanthropic person. The only debate is whether Christ, being tempted, could have succumbed. It would be good for Dr. Mayhue to understand the issue before saying it “is not really germane.”

It would seem to be extremely obvious to a child that it made all the difference in this world and the next whether the Son of God was capable or was not capable of succumbing to the temptation to sin. If Dr. Mayhue did not see that before reading *Wrongly Dividing* it defies my comprehension that he could miss it there. He must be convinced prior to and in spite of anything he could think or read that “the issue at hand is not really germane.” If the Son of God could have succumbed to Satan’s temptation, recorded in Matt. 4 and its parallels, since He is the same yesterday today and forever He could yet sin and there could *never* be any rest for the weary with an ever-ready hell always at hand with its

consuming fire waiting for them to fall when their unpredictable Savior failed to save to the uttermost.

7. Dr. Gerstner's own view that one must be regenerated before becoming an object of God's call to salvation is stated but never defended biblically (p. 119).

Can Mayhue never even state what I have written correctly? I couldn't say under hypnosis that a person "must be regenerated before becoming an object of God's call." He will not be a spiritual hearer of God's Word before regeneration. More seriously, Mayhue says that what I contend here is "never defended biblically."

Here again I must quote myself to show that the above is a false accusation:

When I turned to *Wrongly Dividing*, Page 119, and located the paragraph which developed the point Mayhue is criticizing for its lack of cited biblical texts, I found no less than five texts (John 3:3; Matt. 11:28; Matt. 9:13; Acts 11:18; and John 6:44). The then Dean of the Master's seminary may question my exegesis, of course; but may not say that I do not appeal to Scripture. In fact, I do not think anything can ever be proven by anything other than the Word of God revealed in nature, or in Scripture.

I am glad that Mayhue does *implicitly admit* that dispensationalism does err if I can prove biblically that my charge is correct. I am glad I have gained Mayhue on at least one not unimportant psychological point.

Mayhue adds, "Furthermore, his [Gerstner's] own view is seriously questioned by others who like Gerstner are strong Calvinists." Mayhue notes that the Reformed Baptists in Montville, N. J. did disagree with my statement of the universal call (while endorsing the book generally). I wrote a brief explanatory note to the Reformed Baptist elders who found me straying from Calvinism on the universal call, but they have not yet acknowledged receipt of, much less refuted, my further elucidation of what I had written.

One doesn't settle points like this by one or two comments. However, just to balance matters while we are at it, let me quote Academic Dean William S. Barker of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia:

I have now examined the section on pages 126–131 and find your first full paragraph on page 130 a fascinating picture of how you would deal with an unconverted hearer of the gospel. While our faculty today would probably still stand by the position of John Murray and Ned Stonehouse's booklet *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, I certainly cannot fault your

approach in the paragraph on page 130 mentioned above. (dated December 10, 1991, page 2. Cited with permission from Dean Barker).

I now resume my response to Dr. Mayhue:

8. Here I am accused of erring when writing that the “Dispensational Understanding of ‘Dispensation’ Denies the Gospel (pp. 149– 69).” . . . this reviewer cannot understand why Dr. Gerstner does not inform his readers of and then interact with one of its [*Continuity and Discontinuity*] contributors, Allen P. Ross . . . (pp. 92– 93).

Though, as indicated, I gave twenty pages to that charge, I will oblige Dr. Mayhue and respond to Allen P. Ross “The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Discontinuity” (*Continuity and Discontinuity*, 161– 178) which Mayhue advised me to notice. It is another perfect example of dispensationalism’s hopeless theological confusion.

For space’s sake, I will ignore the circuitous and ultimately circular way Ross arrives at his contradictory conclusion in the chapter. I will say one thing before I examine his conclusion, Ross is trying to show that Charles Ryrie’s analysis of salvation in each dispensation *is* essentially sound:

The *basis* of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations. It is this last point, of course, which distinguishes dispensationalism from covenant theology, but it is not a point to which the charge of teaching two ways of salvation can be attached. It simply recognizes the obvious fact of progressive revelation (emphasis mine).

I showed in *Wrongly Dividing* (pp. 161–169) that Ryrie’s series of definitions are essentially meaningless. Since Ross uses this statement as a guide to salvation in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament his thinking is as confused and contradictory as his guide’s. I will use Ross’ last few sentences to show this essentially contradictory and meaningless exposition.

It is interesting to note the title of Ross’ article, “The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Discontinuity” which is exactly what it is — a case for *discontinuity*. This is what I and covenantalists in general have always charged to dispensationalism. Ross, apparently one of the “new current” in dispensationalism, continues to the “old” dispensational teaching.

Why, then, is this article included in this volume which is meant to show an essential similarity between dispensationalists and covenant-



alists especially on the salvation doctrine? Apparently because, in spite of the title, it attempts to show that this discontinuity is in a sense continuous.

The essay does show that dispensationalists still teach discontinuity, and Ross' attempt to show it is continuous is not only unsuccessful but incoherent.

The last sentences of the Conclusion read:

That there is one method of salvation for every age is clear, for salvation by the grace of God through faith is necessitated by the universal problem of sin and is consonant with the unchanging nature of God. But a clear analysis of Scripture indicates to us that the content of faith was progressively revealed, so that OT believers would not have had the specific revelation about Jesus Christ. They believed what God had revealed about himself and his covenant, and their faith found expression in obedience to the law and worship through the sacrifices. In the fullness of time God's Son came to make the perfect sacrifice for sin, in fulfillment of the eternal decree of God and as the antitype of Israel's sacrifices. Consequently, the expression of NT faith takes a different form, because in Christ the sacrifices found their end and the Israelite law ceased to be the mode of administering the lives of the people of God. Accordingly, the content of faith for salvation is now very specific, and the enablement by the Spirit of God is direct.

The first sentence is utterly sound. The second sentence is perfectly unsound. The first sentence says that "there is one method of salvation for every age" and the second says that "OT believers would not have had the specific revelation about Jesus Christ." It goes without saying that the "one method" was the faith in Jesus Christ but this was not the way in the OT. "The OT believers did not know," says Ross, the "specific revelation of Jesus Christ." So they must have had another way of salvation. But hardly any dispensationalist has ever been willing to admit that though, as here, that is an essential to dispensationalism.

So now that Professor Ross has dug his pit and climbed into it, let us see how he tries to get out. He continues that OT believers "believed what God had revealed about himself and his covenant and their faith found expression in obedience to the law and worship to the law and worship through the sacrifices." This OT faith is not in Jesus Christ because they had no specific revelation about Jesus Christ. Ross stops trying to get out of his self-dug pit by admitting that "the expression of NT faith takes a different form." Realizing that he is now pouring the dirt on himself that he had dug to make his pit, he brings on his extinction. I can hear him gurgling as the dirt comes higher and higher — NO! NO! "in

Christ the sacrifices found their end” is his last gasp as he remembers that he had said the OT way of salvation did not even see, much less receive, Christ in the sacrifices. Just then John Feinberg (the editor) jumps in with his friend saying consolingly, that though OT believers did not see Christ in the sacrifices, *God* did. Ryrie now joins in the suicide pact saying after all “the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations.” When asked how he can distinguish “content” of faith from its “basis” and its “object,” he gives up the ghost.

9. Yes, praise God, John MacArthur did repudiate, with great vigor, Antinomianism. I meant to infer that others did not agree with him though I should have stated that fact more clearly. I am and was aware that there was a debate within the dispensational school called “The Lordship Controversy,” and the epochal character of it because it was generally seen as a revolt by one of the most famous dispensationalists and others. Dr. MacArthur was asked to appear before the International Fundamentalists and answer questions especially about his stand on sanctification. It was clear from the questioning, which I heard from tape, that his questioners were concerned especially about his sanctification views. When he was asked, near the end of the interrogation, whether he considered himself “reformed,” he affirmed that he was vis-a-vis sanctification but that he was dispensational in various other areas, especially eschatological.

Mayhue’s criticism of me here is that I first say that “all traditional dispensationalists teach that converted persons can (not may) live in sin throughout their post-conversion lives with no threat to their eternal destiny” (p. 93). Then I am supposed not to have proved my point because 1) I admitted that Harry Ironside tried to avoid Antinomianism (though I inferred that he failed); 2) that MacArthur caused a major controversy when he repudiated Antinomianism; and 3) that I failed to mention that there were others on his side. The fact that MacArthur et al caused a *controversy* does show that they were considered by some or most “traditional” dispensationalists to be attacking dispensationalism when they attacked Antinomianism. When Mayhue offers three so-called arguments like these, one easily understands why he usually prefers to be dogmatic.

10. “There is no question that Dispensationalism has been relatively indifferent to strict morality and usually indifferent to reform activities” (p. 250). Here Dr. Gerstner labels dispensationalists by making a universal statement about them without any documentation or real substance (documented or otherwise). The statement is false and

damaging to dispensationalism's reputation. This defamatory caricature alone brings Dr. Gerstner's objectivity in his critique of dispensational teaching into serious question (p. 93).

I did not think documentation was necessary for two reasons. I believe I had already proved Antinomianism in the dispensational system. Also, it is constantly stated that dispensationalism emphasizes the prime urgency of saving souls. Compare the D. L. Moody story of knowing the world was a sinking ship and feeling that God was saying to him, "here's a boat, Moody, save as many as you can." Was it Vernon McGee who was the source of the oft-cited "You don't polish the brass when the ship is sinking."? Bahnsen and Gentry's *House Divided* develops this in detail.

But the main point is the Antinomianism. If dispensationalists are guilty of that fatal doctrine, as I try at length to prove, then they are far more than relatively indifferent to morality — they are fundamentally opposed to the necessity of morality. Compare the Zane Hodges chapter especially for my development of this indictment in debate with him. Also, I remind the readers here as I reminded the readers of *Wrongly Dividing* at the very outset, that Charles Ryrie and other dispensationalists accuse those who maintain that morality is absolutely necessary, if one has true and saving faith, as guilty of legalism (salvation based on the merit of one's personal morality). Legalism is "another gospel" which leads to one's damnation. *So if I and other covenantalists are warning people (who think they may have saving faith while devoid of works) that they are Antinomians and are lost, Ryrie and others are telling us that if we think works are necessary for salvation we are legalists and legalists are lost.*

"A CLOSING WORD" (P. 93)

Dr. Mayhue says that he is responding to my request to evaluate *Wrongly Dividing*. That he has done and I am grateful for his response, mistaken as it is throughout. He goes on in this closing word to evaluate me quite negatively. However, he is only summarizing what he had already spelled out. Its total lack of cogency I have demonstrated throughout this essay. More comment would now be redundant.

My reviewer calls for my "profound apology" which Dr. Sproul promised if and when I received anything that proves that I have been generally inaccurate or unfair. As God is my witness, I believe Dr. Mayhue has not given me one sound argument proving my essential inaccuracy or unfairness. I couldn't help breaking out in laughter when, after studying and responding to Dr. Mayhue's critique, I read him calling on me — emphatically — to apologize! Then I said to myself: This man really and

honestly thinks that he has demolished *Wrongly Dividing*. Then I had to hold back the tears.

### A Letter to the Trinity Book Service

(all page numbers refer to the pagination in the original edition)

The Trinity Book Service says, regarding pages 118–31 of my *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* that “Dr. Gerstner strays from the mainstream of historic calvinistic teaching regarding the free offer of the gospel.”

“Strays from,” I assume, means that I reject and oppose the mainstream of historic Calvinism on this doctrine. I reexamined the cited pages. This is what I write on page 119 that (apparently) makes our Reformed Baptist friends uncomfortable: “the evangelical call itself is only to the regenerate.” If the reader will peruse pages 119 and 120, he will see my reason for saying that. It is clear that I am using the word “call” in the sense of *invitation* and not as *command*. I make clear that God *commands* everyone to repent and believe. No Reformed Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, or whatever, *really* disagrees with what I wrote in the censured pages.

God does not call (invite) any who do not repent and believe. If I came “just as I am without one plea — even that Thy blood was shed for me,” I would — being without the wedding garment — be cast out. Christ does not call (invite) the (self-)righteous even to repentance, much less to Himself (Matt. 9:13).

I admit that not all genuinely Reformed theologians (such as, I suspect, my Reformed Baptist critics) express this fairly fine doctrinal point exactly. Even our creeds can be misleading if one does not read between the lines a little.

I knew when I wrote this that it could cause some of my Calvinistic brethren (paedo-baptistic and baptistic) to take offense and also be distracted from the point I am charging about dispensationalism. The Trinity Baptist review generally endorses that critique, as I was sure it would, knowing their own critique tends to follow similar lines.

Dispensationalism’s sharp defender, Charles Lee Feinberg, attacks covenant theology at this point. It is charged with teaching that God invites the non-elect unregenerate, whom He would not accept if they did come. So it is a kind of false offer that God makes safely because He *knows* that these invitees will never accept the invitation! In response, I have to grant Dr. Feinberg that some genuine, Reformed, covenantal theologians do sometimes speak and write as if they entertained such a morally repulsive notion. Their general position shows that they *intend* no such idea.

So I hope that my fellow Reformed friends of baptistic persuasion will ponder their criticism again. If they ever want to have a one-on-one,

leisurely, unhurried, *private* discussion of the matter of some adequate length, I should be happy to confer at a mutually feasible time.

May the Lord continue to bless our dear Reformed Baptist brethren in their overall excellent service to His wonderful name!

John Gerstner

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