

**The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift:
How It Happened, Why It Happened.
Can it be repaired?**

Presented to
the Dispensational Study Group of
the Evangelical Theological Society

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by

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Introduction

The story you are about to hear is true. But it did not have to happen the way it did. It should not have happened the way it did – but it did. Now, what can and should we do about it?

That, in a nutshell, is the case and the question I present in my book, *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936 to 1944* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), regarding the rift between dispensationalists and covenant theologians that culminated in the mid-twentieth century. This afternoon, I would like to present a synopsis of the story told in that book and stimulate discussion among self-described dispensationalists about the rift that continues to exist between yourselves and your covenant theological brethren.

Highlight Reel: Some of the Most Startling Surprises I Encountered in My Research

Surprise #1: “Dispensationalism” was not identifiable as a distinct theological system until the mid-1930s.

The term “dispensation” has a long history, of course – even within Reformed, Covenantal theology (ironically enough). Early “dispensationalists” (noting the anachronism!) like J. N. Darby and C. I. Scofield referred often to dispensations, the importance of recognizing dispensational distinctions, and even referred to “dispensational truth,” or, especially, “premillennial truth” as something like code for the whole system of interpretation and inferences they had in mind behind such phrases. But, prior to the 1930s, their views were affirmed or condemned on an individual, *ad hoc*, *à la carte* basis. It was not until the 1930s that “dispensationalism” was identified as a distinct system of theology.

Furthermore, the term was coined by *opponents* of the system; and at first was vehemently resisted by its adherents.¹ It was not until 1936 that, for the first time, the term “dispensationalism”

¹ Philip Mauro seems to have been the first one to employ the derogatory term, “dispensationalism,” in his book, *The Gospel of the Kingdom with an Examination of Modern Dispensationalism* (Boston, MA: Hamilton Brothers, 1928). O.T. Allis and John Murray appear to have followed Mauro’s lead in using this terminology (see below). At first, “dispensationalists” (i.e., adherents to Scofield’s theology) objected to the phrase “modern dispensationalism” entirely, especially to the adjective, “modern”; see Rollin Thomas Chafer, “‘Modern’ Dispensationalism,” *BibSac* 93 (January-March 1936): 129-30; cf. *idem*, “Dispensationally-Colored Premillennialism,” *BibSac* 95 (April-June 1938): 257-58. That Lewis Chafer would come to refer to the position opposing him by the awkward label, “covenantism” (“Dispensational Distinctions Challenged,” *BibSac* 100 [July-September 1943]: 338), may indicate that this is the first time the positions are consciously polarizing. Both terms seem clearly designed to label in an unflattering manner, as often takes place when ideological lines of demarcation are being defined. Since both terms were politicized from their initial coinings to portray the other side as “extreme” (“dispensationalists” as those who drew “extreme” distinctions between dispensations; “covenantalists”—or “covenantists,” as Chafer called them—as those who proposed “extreme” continuity across the testaments), we can understand why there has been such confusion from the beginning as to their real meanings.

became accepted (more precisely, “suffered with reluctance”) by those who embraced the teachings identified by the label.²

Surprise #2: Before the dispensational-covenantal rift, most American dispensationalists were Westminster-Confession subscribing, Reformed (Covenantal, by definition?) Presbyterians.

It is striking to observe how many of the patriarchs of American dispensationalism were Presbyterians; among them: James Hall Brookes, C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Everett Harrison, Roy Aldrich, John F. Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and S. Lewis Johnson. In fact, Dallas Theological Seminary – the “capital” of dispensational theology – was originally conceived as largely a Presbyterian school (though officially always inter-denominational). When Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, and throughout its early years, Presbyterian students and faculty were predominant. John Hannah, the seminary's church historian (and author of *An Uncommon Union: Dallas Theological Seminary and American Evangelicalism*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), observes:

While the [seminary] was officially non-denominational, the majority of its faculty in the 1920s, the general focus of its teaching, and many of the students were Presbyterian. Speaking of the faculty, Chafer noted in 1925 that they were “almost wholly drawn from the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches.” . . . On another occasion he stated, “The simple fact is that we are teaching the most conservative Presbyterian interpretations here and we include on our faculty now seven Southern Presbyterian ministers.” . . . Perhaps the Presbyterian nature of the institution is most clearly captured in the assertion “it [the Seminary] stands on the great vital truths embodied in that marvelous document, The Westminster Confession of Faith” [Letter, Lewis Sperry Chafer to D. S. Kennedy, editor of the Presbyterian, Dallas, Texas, 23 October 1924; Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, ADTS].³

This early connection between dispensationalism and Reformed, Presbyterian (Covenant [!]) theology helps explain the generally Calvinistic cast of most dispensational theology (and virtually *all* of American dispensational theology originally). It also helps explain why the debate between dispensationalism and covenant theology has sometimes been characterized by such animosity. It is, at root, a family feud.

² Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Dispensationalism,” *BibSac* 93 (October-December 1936): 390-449. Chafer wrote this article in response to articles written by Oswald T. Allis (“Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of the Scriptures,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 [January 1936]: 22-35; “Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 [April 1936]: 272-89) and John Murray (“The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part VI: Modern Dispensationalism,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [18 May 1936]: 77-79; “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part VII—Modern Dispensationalism: The ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ and the ‘Kingdom of God,’” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [17 August 1936]: 210-12).

³As quoted in John Hannah, “The Social and Intellectual History of the Evangelical Theological College,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas at Dallas, 1988), 346.

Surprise #3: The attack on “dispensationalism” came from the most conservative wing of Presbyterianism, not from the liberals like Chafer, Walvoord and others thought.

“Dispensationalism” was deemed heterodox by an official committee of the Presbyterian Church, U.S. in 1944 that consisted of some of the most renowned representatives of the PCUS denomination. The decision focused primarily on the “dispensationalist writings” of C. I. Scofield, author of the notes of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of Dallas Seminary at the time and author of numerous dispensationalist books and articles. Scofield was deceased by the time of this investigation, but Chafer was very much alive; this decision of the PCUS denominational officials impacted him and his ministry at Dallas Seminary significantly. It essentially made Chafer a pariah within his denomination; and, of course, the support, largesse, and good will that he and Dallas Seminary previously enjoyed from the Presbyterian denominations was abruptly cut off.

Chafer genuinely believed that the PCUS decision came as the result of a liberal conspiracy against him (and against views that bolstered a conservative affirmation of biblical authority).⁴ He passed on this view – that covenant theological critiques against dispensationalism were motivated by liberal opposition to conservative theology – to his followers, colleagues and protégés.⁵ It is a view that continues to influence some dispensationalist assessments of covenant theology to this day. It was and is a myth.

The truth is: there were some liberals in the Presbyterian denominations, but liberals did not take much interest at all in dispensationalist theology or dispensationalists. They would not have approved of dispensational theology, of course, but liberals were not the ones to surface dispensationalism for specific scrutiny and critique. It was not liberals who sought to have dispensationalists removed from the denomination – for one thing, they knew full well that any apparatus constructed to oust dispensationalists from the denomination could be used against them, too! So, for a variety of reasons, it was not liberals who took such an interest in critiquing

⁴ Chafer, “Dispensational Distinctions Challenged,” 339-40. As William Robert Glass demonstrates, Chafer’s consistency in sharing this view of the matter both publicly and privately seems to indicate that his linking the attack against dispensationalism to theological liberalism was not merely a rhetorical insinuation; he apparently genuinely believed that the objections to his positions were due to aggressive liberal forces allied against him (“The Development of Northern Patterns of Fundamentalism in the South, 1900-1950” [Ph.D. diss, Emory University, 1991], 241-53).

⁵ John F. Walvoord, interview with the author, Dallas, TX, 11 April 1995. Walvoord’s recounting of Chafer’s perspective was the most explicit, but all the conservative premillennialists who were alive at the time of the controversy whom I interviewed (viz., Allan A. MacRae, J. Dwight Pentecost, S. Lewis Johnson, Donald Campbell) alluded to a similar theory of what happened in this 1930s-40s clash between dispensationalists and covenant theologians; i.e., that the clash was, in large part, a clash between conservative Bible believers and liberals.

dispensationalism. It was the most conservative members of the Presbyterian denominations that did that.⁶

Surprise #4: The rift between dispensationalism and covenant theology did not have to happen.

Of course, the two sides disagreed over some points, and not all of their disagreements were over purely minor, inconsequential points. But I suggest that the rift did not have to happen, particularly when this observation is taken into account: disagreements between premillennialists, amillennialists, and postmillennialists were deemed *by both sides* as failing to rise to a level of necessitating broken fellowship or institutional/denominational separation; nor were these eschatological disagreements deemed indicative of entirely different theological systems needing to be identified and separated.

I am not saying that the rift was caused purely by misunderstanding (though there was plenty of that, too). What I am arguing is that, originally, instead of polarizing and separating, the two sides might have instead started from their *common* ground, their points of agreement, and worked from there to hone one another into better nuanced positions.

What is sad in hindsight is to observe that there were some mediating voices in the discussion on both sides at the beginning that ended up getting drowned out – e.g., J. Oliver Buswell, Alan A. MacRae, Robert C. McQuilkin, Merrill MacPherson, H. McAllister Griffiths, Charles Trumbull, L. Nelson Bell, even J. Gresham Machen. Any one of these (and there are representatives of both sides on this list) might have provided a means of diffusing the controversy. Instead, what happened was that mediating positions got ignored or, worse, got caught in the cross-fire of the most extreme, most partisan representatives of the opposing sides. As often happens, the extremist fringe of each position ended up steering the debate.

The sociological factors and personalities that stoked the controversy, in hindsight, can also make one's head shake. Just to pick an example from each side: John Murray was a good, old-fashioned, Scottish, Puritan, Old-School Presbyterian. He was one of the first, and strongest, to call for the expulsion of “dispensationalism” from the then-newly-formed Presbyterian Church of

⁶ And this was true from the earliest stages of the controversy, too, especially in the Southern Presbyterian Church. E.g., see the concerns raised in the early 1930s by a Southern Presbyterian cleric from Happy, Texas named B. W. Baker, who wondered whether Scofield may have been influenced, even inadvertently, by modernist ideas during his time as Congregationalist minister (i.e., before Scofield transferred his ordination to the PCUS): B. W. Baker, “Is There Modernism in the Teachings of Dr. C. I. Scofield?” *Presbyterian of the South* 109 (28 February 1934): 6-7; *idem*, “Is There Modernism in the Teachings of Dr. C.I. Scofield?: II,” *Presbyterian of the South* 109 (7 March 1934): 7-8; and *idem*, “Is There Modernism in the Scofield Bible? A Reply to Dr. L.S. Chafer,” *Presbyterian of the South* 111 (18 March 1936): 2-4.

America (aka the Orthodox Presbyterian Church [OPC]). Respectably trained but never having earned a doctorate, Murray was a classic scholastic in his style of doing theology. Pious and soft-spoken in person, he could be austere and downright acerbic in his writing – and in his writings against dispensationalism very much so. His motive was to try to establish a true, pure Presbyterian Church in the wake of the fall of the PCUSA to liberalism. Having escaped the ruination of modernism’s destructiveness in the old denomination, he wanted to ensure that the new denomination would get a clean start, unsullied by any other theological impurities, as well – like Arminianism, and . . . dispensationalism.

My guess is that anyone who has been in evangelical theological education for very long knows the type of a John Murray: pious, godly, disciplined – very disciplined, bordering on legalistic; fastidious student of the Scriptures, staunchly conservative, and rigorously logical; but with the downside of tending to believe that the conclusions they derive from their rigorously studied and reasoned theology are incontrovertibly correct, to be enforced with the full backing of God’s Word itself. That was John Murray; and when “dispensationalism” came into the crosshairs of his theological argumentation, he applied a take-no-prisoners approach. It wasn’t personal; it was simply for the sake of the truth of “the Reformed faith.” It had to be done.

Decades later, his friend and, at the time of these debates, sole fellow bachelor on the faculty at Westminster, Alan MacRae, would acknowledge that, yes, John Murray was one of the harshest critics of the premillennialism to which MacRae himself subscribed. (MacRae was also one of the editors of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, identifying him, in the eyes of many, as therefore a “dispensationalist.”) Still, MacRae was willing to excuse the sternness of Murray’s written remarks, and not take it personally – as a personal friend, it was almost as though MacRae could affectionately write off the viciousness of Murray’s written arguments as the charming crotchiness of his Scottish pal, no harm done really.

On the other hand, Lewis Sperry Chafer (founding president of Dallas Seminary), two thousand miles southwestward, could not help but take each and every one of Murray’s arguments personally, as a blistering critique of all his own ministry stood for, as well as the ministry of his beloved mentor, C. I. Scofield. Add to that Chafer’s own foibles and short-comings. He never had much of any formal training; he had never even graduated from college.⁷ Perhaps this is why he seems never to have been comfortable in scholarly debate of any kind. He was a gifted preacher

⁷ Chafer’s formal education consisted of three semesters at Oberlin College (in music). He also was awarded an honorary doctorate. J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., president of Wheaton College, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, president of Dallas Seminary, each, as a token of their friendship, collegiality and mutual respect, invited the other to be the commencement speaker at their respective institutions, and each gave an honorary doctorate to the other when they did so.

and evangelist, but did not take well to intellectual debate or challenge in the academy. He developed a reputation, even among his friends, of being a bit thin-skinned, thick-headed and defensive.

When criticisms against Chafer's views started to mount, he responded not only with defensiveness, but bitterness, making him sound either angry or arrogant – which served only to escalate the tensions. What was worse, he seemed to imagine that the critiques against him all originated ultimately from some vast left-wing conspiracy. His misunderstandings and misconstruals added to the severity of his mistakes (honest mistakes, but still), and sealed the doom of “dispensationalism” within Reformed, Presbyterian circles. Perhaps most stinging: his views were deemed unacceptable within his own (PCUS) denomination.

Had any of the men who succeeded Chafer as president of Dallas Seminary – John Walvoord, Donald Campbell, Chuck Swindoll, or Mark Bailey – been president at the time the dispensationalist-covenantal debate was seething to a boil, I am convinced that the full rift that occurred would never have happened. Each of Chafer's successors (has) had a better track record of scholarly skill, with greater ability to be self-critical, or of having just a more conciliatory, diplomatic manner and/or a more winsome theological agenda.

“It would not have happened, if only” is a thesis impossible to prove, and the very contemplation of a “hypothetical-contrary-to-fact” is frowned upon by professional historians. Even still, this belief does impel some of my own passion for wishing the breach could be repaired after the fact. The whole mess could have been avoided.

Instead, American evangelicalism experienced a rift it could ill afford and which I, for one, believe has not done us much good. The debate between dispensationalism and covenant theology spilled a lot of ink and produced a lot of intra-evangelical rancor throughout the twentieth century, with more heat shed than light, and with half a century passing before the exponents of the sparring views actually talked with one another rather than against one another, at one another, or past one another.

I do not know if the breach can be repaired even today – there is so much water now passed under the bridge. I believe it would be best for evangelical theology, for the church, and for the Kingdom if the breach were mended. We need not paper over disagreements to repair the breach, either. We just need to relegate these disagreements to the realm of differences of doctrinal judgment and opinion where they belong (rather than as points of aberration from central dogma by one side or the other). Of course, I know that that, in itself, is a judgment call, subject to differences of opinion.

What is less subject to simple differences of opinion is what actually happened factually, and why. What we do with that story and how we participate in it from here is a matter for some very interesting discussion – which I hope to stimulate and participate in even today. First, let’s start with what happened; and why.

The Falling Out Between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology – what happened, and why

1. Covenant Theologians drew first blood.

I am fully aware that I am presenting today to the Dispensational Study Group; and, I recognize that dispensationalists may very well take interest in, and perhaps even some comfort from, knowing that it was the other guys who started it. And, that’s the truth. Covenant theologians started it.

The dispensationalists who were originally targeted for criticism were surprised, dismayed, confused, hurt, and appalled by what seemed to them wholly uncalled for and wholly unprovoked attacks. They called for a cease-fire repeatedly when the quarrel was in its early stages. For nearly a decade . . . right up until they returned fire.

Moreover, part of the reason dispensationalists were attacked is because they were so successful in promulgating their views. By 1930, the *Scotfield Reference Bible* had achieved a million sales – the first ever Oxford University Press publication to do so. A little known fact is that it was largely sales of the *Scotfield Reference Bible* that enabled the prestigious Oxford University Press to survive the Great Depression. That notwithstanding, many scholars at the time were galled that the prestigious Oxford Press would stoop to lend its credibility to a work they regarded as less-than-credible, at best. Scholars and professors in the seminaries regularly pilloried it, and urged people not to use it.⁸

But, like a blockbuster movie whose ticket sales continue to climb however much the critics skewer it, the *Scotfield Reference Bible* continued to be bought, used, and cherished by ordinary church folks across denominational, racial and class divides all over the U.S., Canada,

⁸ E.g., as early as 1921, R.C. Reed, editor of the *Presbyterian Standard*, disparaged the *Scotfield Reference Bible* to Southern Presbyterian leaders in such remarks as: “We hope our Sunday School teachers are not using the Scotfield Bible. If so, we repeat our advice, don’t burn them, but put them away where they can do no harm” (“The Scotfield Bible Again,” *Presbyterian Standard* 62 [6 April 1921]: 2). Cf. also the critical assessment of Walter L. Lingle, moderator of the 1920 General Assembly, president of Austin Theological Seminary from 1924-29, and then of the prestigious Davidson College from 1929-41: “Some of Dr. Scotfield’s Interpretations,” *Christian Observer* 124 (21 October 1936): 3,9; likewise, Albertus Pieters, *A Candid Examination of the Scotfield Bible* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1938); James Bear, “Distinguish the Ages,” *Presbyterian of the South* 115 (17 July 1940): 5-6; and *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. The Scotfield Bible,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (19 March 1941): 6-7.

and Great Britain. Many an average pastor or Sunday School teacher found the notes and cross-reference helps of the *Scofield Reference Bible* a true Godsend.⁹

Dallas Seminary was founded in the mid-1920s with the goal of training preachers, teachers, professional clergy and lay leaders in the theology and ministry approach of the Bible Conference movement. (This was the movement from which the *Scofield Reference Bible* and Scofield and Chafer themselves had come.) These schools likewise found a market of students, and began drawing conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist students from numerous denominations – at Dallas Seminary, primarily from the Presbyterian denominations.

This was right at the time when the denominational schools were suffering great financial hardship. It was not long before denominational leaders began to notice that schools with “dispensational” ideas were draining people and resources from their own denominational works.

This is a juicy part of the story. It is not the only part, though. And it may not even be the greater part. Reformed, Covenant theologians also genuinely disagreed with some of the popular tenets of dispensational writings and teachings. They found mistakes (points which even most dispensationalists today would regard as mistaken – more on this below); and they genuinely believed that “dispensationalism” contained errors serious enough to be harmful to the church if left unchecked.

This concern was exacerbated by the embattled context in which it arose. The modernist-fundamentalist conflict of the early 1900s reached its climax in the Northern Presbyterian Church in the early-mid 1930s. Finally, conservatives (or, “fundamentalists”) in the Presbyterian Church, USA left the denomination to form the conservative Presbyterian Church of America in 1936 (later, because of a lawsuit [!], changing its name to the Orthodox Presbyterian Church; with a portion of this group later joining with Southern Presbyterian conservatives to form *another* conservative/fundamentalist Presbyterian denomination: the Presbyterian Church *in* America). Tracking even the names of the separate groups is a challenge. Clearly, it was a context of embattlement and litigiousness.

It is no accident that the defining moment in which covenant theologians came out in force against “dispensationalism” was 1936. That is the year in which the new, “pure” Northern Presbyterian denomination was formed. Up to that point, conservatives in the Northern Presbyterian Church, frankly, were willing to tolerate a lot. It was once they separated that they

⁹ See R. Todd Mangum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009).

became more insistent on a narrower set of doctrinal convictions, and became more intolerant of differences.

Everyone in the new church agreed that the Achilles' heel of the old church was its unwillingness to take hard stands on what naïve persons considered obscure doctrinal points. The conservatives withdrew in order to take those necessary, hard doctrinal stands. As D. G. Hart and John Muether explain:

One cannot understand the OPC's emphasis on doctrine without an appreciation of the doctrinal crisis out of which the OPC arose. For Machen and his supporters, irreconcilable differences in belief lay at the heart of the controversy. The theological views of modernists and Christian orthodoxy were mutually exclusive. For the sake of the purity of the church, separation was necessary. And the struggles in which Machen engaged go far in explaining the character of the church.¹⁰

The founders of the OPC wanted to set the new church on the most solid doctrinal ground. Meanwhile, the fundamentalist movement (of which they were a part) gained its momentum from garnering cooperation cross-denominationally among like-minded theological conservatives.¹¹ These two agendas – pursuit of solid, pure theology, on one hand; pursuit of interdenominational conservative cooperation on the other – came into conflict once conservatives separated from the mainline Presbyterian denominations. They started out together, seemingly in pursuit of common (at least compatible) goals. The devil, one might say, was in the details.

Shortly after the OPC had been formed, in 1936, a dispute over “dispensational premillennialism” erupted. It all began with the publication of three sets of articles, all written by Westminster Seminary professors, all from the perspective of traditionalist Presbyterianism. All three argued that establishing a true Presbyterian Church meant repudiating any intrusion of “anti-Reformed” teachings, specifically Arminian and “dispensationalist” teachings, which were too commonly found in the general evangelical-fundamentalist movement. Taking up a different aspect of this one central thesis, each article sought one common objective: to establish a “truly Reformed,” “true Presbyterian” identity over against a less vigilant one.¹²

¹⁰ D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995), 38-39.

¹¹ Leslie Sloat's 1950 arguments reflect the history of this discussion in the OPC, and provide further confirmation of my point here; see Leslie W. Sloat, “Should Conservatives Cooperate?” *Presbyterian Guardian* 19 (February 1950): 23; and *idem*, “Calvinists Can and Do Cooperate!” *Presbyterian Guardian* 19 (March 1950): 43.

¹² The first set was by Old Testament professor Oswald T. Allis (“Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 [January 1936]: 22-35; and “Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 [July 1936]: 272-89). The second set was by Systematic Theology professor John Murray; his articles had actually begun in late-1935 as an unremarkable defense of Presbyterian orthodoxy over against modernism. Once the church had split, however, Murray apparently decided to raise his sights

The three authors do not seem to have collaborated at all in the publication of these articles. They shared a similar perspective; but it was their common interest in setting the proper pace for the new denomination that seems to best account for their simultaneous timing. Nonetheless, to dispensationalists, the three articles coming out in rapid succession gave the appearance of a coordinated attack against them. Some premillennialists who had sacrificed much themselves to join in forming the OPC thought the articles were really aimed at them, and responded with understandable indignation.

As tempers flared, and the OPC was threatened with a split just as it was getting started, J. Gresham Machen sought to intervene with several articles that tried to clarify the point that premillennialism was an acceptable viewpoint within a “truly Reformed” church, even though the *Scotfield Reference Bible* contained some unacceptable, “un-Reformed” viewpoints and implications. In a series of articles, Machen tried to draw a distinction between “acceptably Reformed premillennialism” and the unacceptable (“heretical”) form of premillennialism represented in some of the notes of the *Scotfield Reference Bible*. Following the lead of O.T. Allis, John Murray, and R. B. Kuiper (the authors of the original three articles), the unacceptable, un-Reformed, heretical form of premillennialism he labeled, “dispensationalism.”¹³

and shoot for a more ambitious form of “orthodoxy”; his later articles argued against Arminianism, then against “modern dispensationalism” (“The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part I,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 1 [16 December 1935]: 87-89; *idem*, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part II,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [3 February 1936]: 142-43; *idem*, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part III,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [17 February 1936]: 163-64; *idem*, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part IV: Limited Atonement,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [16 March 1936]: 200-01, 211; *idem*, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part V,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [20 April 1936]: 27-29; *idem*, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part VI: Modern Dispensationalism,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [18 May 1936]: 77-79; and *idem*, “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part VII – Modern Dispensationalism: The ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ and the ‘Kingdom of God,’” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [17 August 1936]: 210-12; this last article was continued as “The ‘Kingdom of Heaven’ and the ‘Kingdom of God,’” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 [9 January 1937]: 139-41). The third and final article was written by practical theology professor R.B. Kuiper (“Why Separation Was Necessary,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [12 September 1936]: 225-27).

¹³ J. Gresham Machen, “Premillennialism,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (24 October 1936): 21; *idem*, “The Root of the Trouble,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (14 November 1936): 41-42; *idem*, “The Dispensationalism of the Scotfield Bible,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (14 November 1936): 42-43; and *idem*, “The Millennial Question,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (14 November 1936): 43-44; *idem*, “The Dispensationalism of the Scotfield Bible,” 42; *idem*, “The Presbytery of California and the ‘Christian Beacon,’” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (28 November 1936): 71..

Machen even went so far as to try to explain how some premillennialist Presbyterians, though themselves acceptably Reformed, might still be fond of using the *Scotfield Reference Bible*, despite its errors: “It is quite possible that many persons know and love the Scotfield Reference Bible without really agreeing with the false teaching that is in it. By salutary misunderstanding or ignoring of Dr. Scotfield’s notes they may be prevented from taking into their souls the errors that those notes contain.” Machen also acknowledged that not everything in the Scotfield notes was erroneous; indeed, in Machen’s view, “some of the worst things in the notes are actually contradicted by other passages that the notes themselves contain. By a happy inconsistency Dr. Scotfield is prevented from drawing fully the disastrous consequences of his theory as to the history of God’s dealings with men.”¹³ Machen’s final verdict, though, was the same as Allis’, Murray’s, and Kuiper’s. “But we do mean very definitely that if a man really does accept all the teaching of those notes, according to their real meaning, he is seriously out of accord with the Reformed Faith and has no right to be a minister or elder or deacon in The [OPC].”

Premillennialists themselves, though, never fully accepted this distinction between dispensationalism and premillennialism, so suspicions and animosities continued to escalate. Premillennialists would eventually leave the OPC before any further action was taken against them. OPC amillennialists¹⁴ always insisted that no further action was ever pending, but premillennialists never fully trusted these reassurances.

And so, having failed to advance the premillennial view in the OPC and feeling more and more disenfranchised, premillennialists grew restless and ever more vigilant to gain official recognition for premillennialism in other organizations where they enjoyed prominence. In February of 1937, the Philadelphia Fundamentalists, whose membership included such well-known figures as E. Schuyler English and Merrill T. MacPherson, adopted premillennialism constitutionally as their official doctrinal stance.¹⁵ According to published reports,¹⁶ they adopted this resolution partly in the hope of securing stronger ties with the “World Christian Fundamentalists Association,” a larger, nationally known, and explicitly premillennial organization.¹⁷

This move only heightened animosities between OPC amillennialists and premillennialists and strengthened the impression that the premillennialist brand of “fundamentalism” was inherently at cross purposes with the “truly Reformed” agenda of the OPC. Finally, in June of 1937 several of the Presbyterian premillennialists split from the OPC altogether to form the explicitly premillennial Bible Presbyterian Church.¹⁸

¹⁴ Just a clarification of terminology: I am using the term “amillennialist” throughout as a synonym for “non-premillennialist.” It is purely a short-cut. I am aware of significant differences between amillennialists and postmillennialists and that there are many varieties of each of these, not all of whom would find even the terms “amillennialist” or “postmillennialist” most felicitous. Acknowledging all that, I ask for the reader’s endurance in allowing me to avoid the cumbersomeness of more precise terminology.

¹⁵ See “Fundamentalists Adopt Pre-Mil. View: Philadelphia Adopts Resolution with Little Opposition,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (11 February 1937): 1-2; cf. “Premillennialism Adopted Constitutionally by Philadelphia Fundamentalist Group: Several Premillennialist Members Raise Protests,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (27 September 1937): 214.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Ironically, Glass lists “including premillennialism in it[s] doctrinal statement” among the factors that “hampered” the WCFA, which “never reached its goal of uniting Protestant conservatives under its fundamentalist banner” (“The Development of Northern Patterns of Fundamentalism in the South,” 54-55).

¹⁸ See “Bible Presbyterian Fellowship Formed,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (10 June 1937): 1, 8; “‘Bible Presbyterian Synod’ Organized by Members Withdrawing from [OPC]: New Organization Joined by Fourteen Members and Three Elders,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 4 (26 June 1937): 99-100; “Bible Pres. Church Form of Government,” *Christian Beacon* 3 (18 August 1938): 1-2, 4-5; “Bible Presbyterian Synod Constituted a Church of the Lord Jesus Christ,” *Christian Beacon* 3 (8 September 1938): 1-2; “Bible Synod Adopts Historic Westminster Confession; Form of Government Determined” *Christian Beacon* 3 (15 September 1938): 1-2, 5, 7. See also Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans., 1940), 227-44; Robert Churchill, *Lest We Forget: A Personal Reflection on the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Committee for the History of the Orthodox

While forming a distinct denomination helped ensure the preservation of the premillennial view, this move also had a significant downside: besides encouraging undue emphasis on what was previously acknowledged by *all* as a point warranting legitimate differences of opinion,¹⁹ the separation also created the impression among the “truly Reformed” that the only way to affirm premillennialism enthusiastically was to form a schismatic splinter group to revise the Westminster Standards to accommodate the view. This forms the backdrop for explaining why dispensationalism was viewed with suspicion in the Southern Presbyterian Church, as well.

2. How the Rift Became Official.

The South witnessed the Modernist-Fundamentalist controversies of the North with horror and dismay. Southern churchmen were very concerned that the “trouble” of the North not travel southward. *Troublemakers*, therefore, needed to be suppressed.

One lesson learned by Southern Presbyterian leaders as they scrutinized the Northern controversies was that troublemakers, whether modernist or fundamentalist, could be identified by their attitude toward the church’s doctrinal statement, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Once the “fundamentalists” severed themselves from the “modernists,” Southern Presbyterian leaders took note that it was the *premillennialists* who then had to separate again, and adjust the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to accommodate their view.²⁰ And to make matters worse, these premillennialists seemed to have a nasty habit of splitting Southern Presbyterian churches and carrying off the membership to their “independent” organizations.²¹

Presbyterian Church, 1986), 123-35; Hart and Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight*, 41-57, 105-19; and George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Co., 1974), 237-96.

¹⁹ Even archconservative Carl McIntire commended the “eschatological liberty” afforded to pre-, post-, and amillennialists in the PCUSA. He chastened his amillennialist brethren for threatening this freedom in their attacks on dispensationalism (“Premillennialism,” *Christian Beacon* 1 [1 October 1936]: 4). Cf. the response of R.B. Kuiper, who rebuked McIntire for his commendation of such “freedom”; it was such freedom, Kuiper claimed, that had (inadvertently) permitted the increase of “naturalistic postmillenarians” in the old denomination (“Has the Presbyterian Guardian Attacked Premillennialism?: The Reply of Dr. Kuiper,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 [14 November 1936]: 54-55).

²⁰ This is exactly James Bear’s observation in his article, “Shall We Revise the Standards?” *Presbyterian of the South* 115 (12 June 1940): 3-4. This was also the very impression Northern Presbyterian premillennialist, J. Oliver Buswell, anticipated and wished to *avoid* – the reason he originally opposed revising the Confession (“The Second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of America,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 [28 November 1936]: 83; for Buswell’s entire statement, see “Buswell Speaks on Millennial Issue,” *Christian Beacon* 1 [17 December 1936]: 7). Cf. also J. Oliver Buswell, “Premillennialism and the Reformed Faith,” *Sunday School Times* 76 (5 May 1934): 289-91.

²¹ This is Bear’s greatest complaint. See Bear, “Shall We Revise the Standards?” The “Bible Presbyterians” were not the only “dispensationalists” doing this, either. As Glass recounts, Dallas Seminary graduates were fast gaining a reputation for doing much the same; first, refusing to use Presbyterian materials in churches they pastored (preferring, instead, materials of an “independent” nature), then splitting churches, carrying off large portions of the membership to form independent, premillennial (i.e., dispensationalist) congregations. See Glass, “The Development of Northern Patterns of Fundamentalism in the South,” 130-280, 347-425.

To a Southern Presbyterian, few actions could be considered less Christian (or less Presbyterian). As in the North (though Northern sources are almost never cited by Southern Presbyterian principals), the focus eventually narrowed from premillennialism to that peculiar, troublemaking variety of premillennialism found among adherents of the Scofield Bible: dispensationalism.²²

The spark that lit the powder keg was an inquiry to the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly from the Presbytery of North Alabama, asking “to survey the situation relative to our Theological Seminaries and other institutions from which applicants come seeking ordination to our Presbyteries,” and to appoint a “committee [to] give particular attention to the institutions advocating the type of Bible interpretation commonly known as ‘Dispensationalism’, to discover whether or not this doctrine is in accord with the Confession of Faith, especially with Chapter XIX [*Of the Law of God*].”²³

The Presbytery of North Alabama was a thoroughly conservative presbytery,²⁴ which also gave generously to PCUS educational institutions.²⁵ The General Assembly initially relayed the North Alabama overture to the Committee on Theological Seminaries, consistent with the concern that rival non-Presbyterian schools teaching “dispensationalism” may have been hurting the Church’s own schools. As this concern gave way to the even greater concern that

²² The first Southern Presbyterian to identify the Scofield variety of premillennialism as “dispensationalism” was James Bear (“Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace,” *Union Seminary Review* 49 [July 1938]: 285-307); see also Bear’s articles that would anticipate the decision of the 1944 committee on which he served: *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (19 March 1941): 6-7; *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible: II. The Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (26 March 1941): 5-6; *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (2 April 1941): 7-8; *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible: III. The Mediatorial King and His Kingdom,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (9 April 1941): 5-6; *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible: IV. Divergent Views of God’s Revelation,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (16 April 1941): 5-6; *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible: V. The General Resurrection and the Final Judgement,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (23 April 1941): 5-6; and *idem*, “The Presbyterian Standards vs. the Scofield Bible: VI. Concluding Statement,” *Presbyterian of the South* 116 (30 April 1941): 6-7. In 1944, as the Confessional Revision Committee was about to submit its report to the General Assembly, Bear published two final articles on the subject; viz., “Dispensationalism: I. The Heart of this System,” *Presbyterian Outlook* 118 (26 April 1944): 6; and “Dispensationalism: II. Dispensationalism vs. the Reformed Faith,” *Presbyterian Outlook* (3 May 1944): 5-6.

²³ *Minutes of the Presbytery of North Alabama*, 16-17 April 1940, Florence, AL, 15.

²⁴ While our primary interest is in the third communication to the GA from this Presbytery (just quoted), in point of fact the first two communications provide clear demonstration of the Presbytery’s conservative nature: communication 1 rejects any present plan for reunion with the Northern Church and communication 2 rejects previously proposed changes to the Confession of Faith on the grounds that these proposed changes embrace language that is “Arminian rather than Calvinistic”; *Minutes of the Presbytery of Northern Alabama*, 16-17 April 1940, 14-15.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, *passim*; even a cursory scan of the *Minutes* from the 1920s-1950s reveals this Presbytery’s financial support and its genuine interest in the welfare of the Church’s schools, especially Louisville and Columbia Theological Seminaries.

“dispensationalism” could be compromising the theological purity of the Church, the overture was passed on to the committee working on the Church’s doctrinal standards.

Ironically, another communication to the General Assembly from the North Alabama Presbytery actually called for discharging the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms.²⁶ Further indication of its conservatism, the North Alabama Presbytery did not want revisions made to the Confession at all; they wanted the work of the Confessional Revision committee to cease immediately. It was certainly not their idea to have the investigation of dispensationalism taken up by that committee.

Nonetheless, it was this Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession that took up the investigation and eventually submitted a report to the General Assembly declaring “dispensationalism” out of harmony with the Westminster Confession of Faith. Not only did the 1944 Confessional Committee’s report represent back then the culmination of hostilities that had been building for decades, it remains to this day as close to an official denunciation of dispensationalism by a Reformed-Covenantalist body as has ever been produced.

Just to clarify: this Confessional Committee was an advisory committee to the PCUS General Assembly, not an arm of ecclesio-political power *per se*. The committee could take no official action, nor could it render any official sanction or censure; such measure could be carried out only by the full General Assembly, or, more likely in the Southern Presbyterian Church, by individual presbyteries working under guidelines provided by the General Assembly.²⁷

Nonetheless, as Lewis Sperry Chafer observed at the time, the Confessional Committee’s investigation was “of more moment than its own import would indicate.”²⁸ The Confessional Committee report was significant not so much for what it officially *mandated*, as for what ideological, ecclesiastical, and socio-political dynamics it *manifested* (or even *aroused*). Even before the Confessional Committee reached its unanimous decision, Chafer realized that whatever verdict it rendered could carry great weight, not just in the PCUS, but in other denominations, as

²⁶ *Minutes of the Presbytery of North Alabama*, 16-17 April 1940, 15.

²⁷ As might be expected, the Southern Presbyterian Church, a defender of “States’ rights,” was more reluctant than her Northern counterpart to issue mandates to her presbyteries from one central ecclesiastical authority. The Southern Church preferred to carry out its policies through individual presbytery initiatives. See *The Distinctive Principles of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, commonly called the Southern Presbyterian Church* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871); *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1938), especially “Form of Government,” 1-94, and “The Rules of Discipline,” 97-151.

²⁸ Chafer, “Dispensational Distinctions Challenged,” 337.

well. As Chafer suspected, the Confessional Committee decision could impact disagreements between dispensationalists and covenant theologians wherever they might be found.²⁹

Furthermore, this committee's findings against dispensationalism were publicized as an official judgment of officers of the church, both in church papers and in a separate pamphlet published and distributed by the Executive Committee of Religious Education and Publication of the PCUS. Therefore, though technically not a *de jure* mandate for its constituents, the decision of the Confessional Committee was nevertheless treated as an official theological ruling by the church's leadership *de facto*. Ernest Trice Thompson's summarization is well-nuanced.

The Assembly did not recommend that any steps be taken against the teaching of dispensationalism, but some sessions, armed with the Assembly's statement, barred such teaching from their church schools, and one presbytery, at least, indicated that it would receive no more graduates from the Evangelical Theological College of Dallas [i.e., Dallas Theological Seminary] into its membership. Within a few years dispensationalism had ceased to be a disturbing factor in the church.³⁰

The Confessional Committee report also provides valuable insight into how the theological issues between dispensationalists and covenant theologians were framed and understood at this crucial moment in their debate. Its credibility as a representative document is further confirmed when we see that its criticisms of dispensationalism have been maintained by covenant theologians ever since.³¹ Likewise, C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer, whose writings and teachings were the primary focus of the Confessional Committee's investigation, are still today well-recognized as bona fide patriarchs of classical dispensational theology.

For our purposes, it is also worth noting the relationship, similarities and differences between Chafer and Scofield. Chafer was Scofield's disciple; more than that, Chafer's life work expanded, systematized and institutionalized the teachings he first learned under Scofield.³²

In this observation we surface a significant difference between the nature of Scofield's work and Chafer's work, too. Scofield never intended to provide a new, distinctive "systematic

²⁹ Ibid., 337-38.

³⁰ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, Volume Three: 1890-1972* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1973), 488.

³¹ Cf., for example, William E. Cox, *An Examination of Dispensationalism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1963); Jon Zens, *Dispensationalism: A Reformed Inquiry into its Leading Figures & Features* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1980); Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis, TN: Footstool Publications, 1985); Vern Sheridan Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991); Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensational-ism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1995); and Michael D. Williams, *This World is Not My Home: The origins and development of dispensationalism* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor Press, 2003).

³² Lewis Sperry Chafer, "When I Learned from Dr. Scofield," *Sunday School Times* 64 (4 March 1922): 120.

theology.” In fact, he specifically identified his purpose in constructing the notes and helps of the *Scofield Reference Bible* as merely synthesizing general, studied, evangelical interpretive opinion and assessments in a corpus readily accessible to the average Bible student.³³ His focus was more homiletical, pastoral, and practical than scholarly or academic.

Some theological and interpretive reductionism is both understandable and allowable in such a purpose as what Scofield had in mind. It would be helpful for both dispensationalists and covenant theologians to recognize this. In the transfer of Scofield’s homiletical framings to Chafer’s more systematic theological expansion, such reductionisms are less acceptable. In fact, exaggerations made for sake of a homiletical point can easily grow into grander errors when incorporated into a whole line of logic; slight errors grow and are accentuated when they are systematized.

In part because Chafer and his mentor, Scofield, were the focus of the PCUS Confessional Committee investigation, Chafer took the whole thing personally. He also claimed to the end that his views were misconstrued and that the Confessional Committee report was a libelous attack³⁴ (a charge we will look at in just a moment, below). When one examines the work of the Confessional Committee, however, their motivation does not seem at all personal. Rather, the committee focused attention on Chafer’s views because it recognized him as a viable representative of the dispensationalist position. While it is important to determine whether or not the Confessional Committee succeeded in discerning Chafer’s views correctly, the committee’s choice of Chafer as a dispensational prototype (alongside Scofield) does seem sound, even in historical hindsight.

As for the members of the committee, they may be less familiar than Scofield or Chafer to us today, but they were highly prominent in the Southern Presbyterian Church at the time: four were past or future Moderators of the General Assembly of the PCUS;³⁵ three were past or future

³³ “The Editor disclaims originality. Other men have laboured, he has but entered into their labours. The results of the study of God’s Word by learned and spiritual men, in every division of the church and in every land, during the last fifty years, under the advantage of a perfected text, already form a vast literature, inaccessible to most Christian workers. The Editor has proposed to himself the modest if laborious task of summarizing, arranging, and condensing this mass of material” (C. I. Scofield, “Introduction,” *Scofield Reference Bible: 1917 edition*, iv).

³⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding,” *BibSac* 102 (January-March 1945): 1-5.

³⁵ They were, in chronological order of their election, Samuel Sibley (1934), James Green (1946), Benjamin Lacy (1950), and Frank Caldwell (1966).

moderators of state synods;³⁶ two were sitting presidents of PCUS seminaries;³⁷ another was founder and headmaster of one of the most prestigious all-male prep schools in the South;³⁸ three were seminary professors, each at a different PCUS school.³⁹

The illustriousness of these committee members was no accident. This committee originally was appointed to revise the Church's doctrinal standards. Especially in light of the then-very-recent fundamentalist-modernist controversies, a more sensitive theological task can hardly be imagined. Southern Presbyterians would have regarded the work of this committee as holding the essence of their Church in its hands. Its decision regarding the (in)compatibility of Scofield's and Chafer's dispensationalist views with the Presbyterian Church Standards could not help but be of decisive, historic importance.

Significantly, the Confessional Committee declared "dispensationalism" an aberrant theological system, not because of its premillennialist eschatology, but because of its deviation from the covenant theology of the Westminster Standards. And, just to underscore how careful the Southern Presbyterian Church was in drawing this distinction: before the PCUS General Assembly would accept the Committee's final report, they added two known premillennialists to the Committee to ensure that there was no bias against the premillennial view inadvertently allowed into the report.⁴⁰ (The Confessional Committee of seven that submitted its unanimous report against dispensationalism in 1944 included three premillennialists on it: Samuel H. Sibley, J.P. McCallie, and L. Nelson Bell.) In short, the PCUS General Assembly took elaborate measures to ensure that the premillennial view and its implications were represented and understood accurately and fairly on the Confessional Committee; and the Confessional Committee, in turn, took pains to clarify that premillennialism *per se* was not a problem.

³⁶ They were, in chronological order of their election, Benjamin Lacy (Moderator of the Synod of North Carolina, 1934), Frank Caldwell (Moderator of the Synod of Kentucky, 1948), and Eugene McLaurin (Moderator of the Synod of Texas, 1949).

³⁷ Benjamin Lacy was President of Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA; Frank Caldwell was President of Louisville Presbyterian Seminary in Louisville, KY.

³⁸ James P. McCallie directed the McCallie School for Boys in Chattanooga, TN.

³⁹ James Bear was Professor of the Literature and Interpretation of the New Testament at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, VA; Eugene McLaurin was Professor of New Testament Language and Exegesis at Austin Theological Seminary in Austin, TX; James Green was Professor of Doctrinal Theology at Columbia Seminary in Columbia, SC (then Decatur, GA, where it is today). A Chair in Green's honor was established in 1946 (which Green also filled until he retired).

⁴⁰ Henry B. Dendy and L. Nelson Bell, "Meeting of the General Assembly," *Southern Presbyterian Journal* 2 (June 1943): 9; "Saturday, May 29: 'Dispensationalism'[sic] Report Recommitted," *Presbyterian of the South* 118 (2 June 1943): 3. When the General Assembly mandated this appointment of two more premillennialists, Benjamin Lacy and Frank Caldwell resigned; the moderator accepted their resignations, provided that they chose their successors; Lacy chose James Bear (of Union Seminary, Richmond, VA) as his successor; Caldwell chose Felix Gear (then of Southwestern College, Memphis, TN). For those keeping mathematical count: the Confessional Committee consisted of five (5) members in 1943; of seven (7) members in 1944, but with two (2) of the original members replaced – accounting for my mention of nine (9) members altogether who served on this committee, above.

Though Chafer never accepted the distinction between dispensationalism and premillennialism, he did finally accept the distinction between dispensationalism and covenant theology. Once this distinction between “dispensationalism” and “covenant theology” was firmly drawn and officially accepted by both sides, the gulf between the two theological systems was fixed.

3. Covenant theologians may not have been completely right in every respect in their critiques against “dispensationalism,” but they at least had a point.

There were many misunderstandings in this debate as the rift between dispensationalism and covenant theology emerged and widened. Among them: Reformed (Covenant) theologians tended to treat the *Scotfield Reference Bible* as though it served for dispensationalists what the *Westminster Confession* did for them; viz., as a creedal statement to which they all subscribed. Several “dispensationalists” at the time claimed that those of their number who actually held the errors identified by their covenantal brethren were few and far between.⁴¹ We may never know who was most correct in their differing estimates of how many held what positions.

In any case, for our purposes this afternoon, I want to focus on the errors that covenant theologians identified and objected to of which classical dispensationalists (C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer, in particular) may actually have been guilty and to which dispensationalists to this day have never fully owned up. I want to focus on these points not to play “gotcha” on anyone, and not to rub the errors in the face of anyone (dead or alive). I raise these points because, until dispensationalists actually recognize and own the mistakes as mistakes (rather than claiming these are misunderstandings or misrepresentations on the part of those raising the objection), these issues in the debate between dispensationalists and covenant theologians will never be clarified and overcome.

The heart of covenant theologians’ objection to the position they described as “dispensationalism” was threefold: 1) dispensationalism taught two ways of salvation (one way [a system of legal merit] in the Old Testament, and a diametrically different way [grace through faith alone] in the New Testament); and thus 2) misconstrued the Old Testament Law as detrimental to

⁴¹ E.g., Allan A. MacRae, “Dr. Allan A. MacRae Resigns Seminary: Founder of Westminster Opposes Its Present Stand,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (29 April 1937): 2; Merrill T. MacPherson, “Why I Am Pastor of an Independent Church,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (12 August 1937): 3-4, 7; H. McAllister Griffiths, “Eschatological Freedom,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (4 May 1936): 44, 52; *idem*, “The Character and Leadership of Dr. Machen,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (2 September 1937): 2; Arthur J. Dieffenbacher, “The Faith of a Dispensationalist,” *Christian Beacon* 2 (9 September 1937): 1, 8; Wilbur Smith, “Israel and the Church in Prophecy,” *Sunday School Times* 87 (24 November 1945): 927, 940; and, especially, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., “Premillennialism and the Reformed Faith: Has the ‘Pre’ a good standing?” *Sunday School Times* 76 (5 May 1934): 289-91; *idem*, “A Premillennialist’s View,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (14 November 1936): 46-47 and *idem*, “Buswell Speaks on Millennial Issue,” *Christian Beacon* 1 (17 December 1936): 7.

Christian faith and life; and 3) failed to recognize implications of Christ's current reign, by failing to recognize Christ's inauguration of the Kingdom through His life, death and resurrection.

If I were to summarize in broad strokes the development of dispensationalism since this watershed point in the relationship between dispensationalism and covenant theology in the 1940s, I would say this: 1) normative dispensationalism (the dispensationalism of Walvoord, Ryrie, Toussaint, et al.) clarified and corrected the mistakes of classical (Scofieldian/Chaferian) dispensationalism on the first point (regarding "two ways of salvation"); 2) progressive dispensationalism tried to provide a more nuanced framing of Christ's reign and the Kingdom, but met with resistance from normative and classical dispensationalists, leading to intramural tensions among self-described dispensationalists to this day; and 3) all dispensationalists since Chafer have tried to be more careful in how they speak of the Old Testament Law, but there is inherent to dispensationalism *qua* dispensationalism a discomfort with embracing the Law portion of Scripture as useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, or for training in righteousness as wholeheartedly as the New Testament portion (such as, say, the Pauline epistles).

At the close of my remarks, I will come back to this. There is lots of room for discussion here, to say the least. First, however, let's look in more detail at what covenant theologians detected in their official investigation of dispensationalism. In particular, let us assess their findings with a view to asking, self-critically, where they might have had a point. Limitations of time require that we address in detail only the first point mentioned above (which was the main objection covenant theology originally raised with dispensationalism): did classical dispensationalism teach "two ways of salvation" (and, if so, what difference does it make)?

I submit to you this historical-theological observation and thesis:

In places, C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer really did sound like they taught "two ways of salvation"; they weren't just incidental, careless "slips of the pen," either – even though Chafer genuinely resented and vigorously objected to the charge.

I know that good dispensationalists have grown accustomed to objecting vehemently to the suggestion that classical dispensationalism taught "two ways of salvation." Lewis Sperry Chafer, specifically, denied the charge that he taught "two ways of salvation" with great vigor and with great umbrage. And most every dispensationalist since 1965 has followed the lead of Charles Ryrie:

It must be remembered that this statement [of Chafer's, denying that he taught two ways of salvation] was made in direct answer to the charge that Chafer taught two ways of salvation, and Chafer himself said that the others statements so often quoted to show he taught two ways of salvation had no bearing on that subject. May we not take him at his word as being his own

best interpreter, especially when he is speaking to the specific point on which he was being attacked?⁴²

The problem with just “taking him at his word” on the point, though, is that the portion Ryrie quotes is actually not the most direct answer to the charge of teaching two ways of salvation that Chafer provided. In point of fact, Chafer never did face squarely what was the primary objection to his theological ideas.

It is true that Chafer railed against those who accused him of teaching “two ways of salvation.”⁴³ Nevertheless, even his most poignant attempts to relieve himself of the charge seem actually to justify the accusation. For example, here is his response in an article entitled, “Are There Two Ways to Be Saved?”:

What they [dispensationalists] teach, if at all, is that Judaism had its requirements summed up in works of the Law of Moses, which system, or religion, is not now in effect, and that Christianity has its requirements summarized in faith and is now the one and only basis of acceptance before God. Those are the clear teachings of the Scriptures, to which men do not it seems always give sincere heed. . . .

When talking to an individual and in respect to the present provision for the salvation of lost men, the Savior said to Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Likewise, when talking to an individual respecting the securing of eternal life as it was promised in the Jewish kingdom expectation, Christ held the following conversation with the lawyer (i.e., a teacher of the Mosaic system): “And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live” (Luke 10:25-28).

There is no question to be raised about these words or their precise meaning. “This do, and thou shalt live” is far removed from the words found in John 3:16 or even Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Are there, then, two ways to be saved today? The dispensationalist says No, because he recognizes Judaism to be in abeyance at the present time, and this text of Luke 10, which might be called the *John 3:16 of Judaism*, does not apply to believers today. But the Covenant theologian, who must include well-nigh everything in his system of teaching, is faced with both statements on the lips of Christ.⁴⁴

And so the article ends.

Several points capture our attention. First, the addition of the word “*today*” in the question that begins the final paragraph is curious. It suggests that Chafer believes that the covenant theologians’ charge is against classical dispensationalism’s advocating “various plans of salvation”

⁴² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 114.

⁴³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding,” *BibSac* 102 (January-March 1945): 1-5 (emphases original).

⁴⁴ Lewis Sperry Chafer, “Are There Two Ways to Be Saved?” *BibSac* 105 (January-March 1948): 1.

today (a charge that Chafer easily refutes as a misrepresentation). Yet the Confessional Committee Report had specifically clarified, “Dispensationalism, magnifying the distinction which is made between law and grace (*which dispensationalists hold to be mutually exclusive* – Chafer, *Grace*, p. 231 ff.), agrees that men are NOW saved by grace through faith, but teaches that in other dispensations men have been saved by ‘legal obedience.’”⁴⁵ Chafer’s argumentation concerning there being only one plan of salvation in effect *today*, therefore, really misses the point.

What is perhaps even more striking is the impression Chafer gives that he has uncovered an example that is “clear” (his word), in which “there is no question to be raised” (his terminology) about the Bible’s presenting (indeed, of *Jesus’* presenting) two different, mutually exclusive methods of salvation in the two different ages, “Mosaic” and “Christian.” So confident is he that the two sets of passages he quotes are irreconcilable that he ends the article on this point – with the insinuation that covenant theology is untenable just because it demands a reconciliation of passages that are obviously impossible to reconcile.

While there is no shortage of terms like “clear,” “without question,” and “no argument can be raised” in Chafer’s treatise, one can detect hints here and there that even Chafer may recognize he is on precarious ground. He qualifies his claim that “dispensationalists teach” his view with the phrase, “if at all.” Perhaps most tellingly of all, he flatly refuses to concede forthrightly to the charge that he does, in fact, believe that the Bible’s two testaments present two different, mutually exclusive ways of salvation, despite that being the definite implication of his argument.

Here is one instance in which the two sides seem consistently to have talked past one another in this debate. Chafer clearly in his own mind did not teach “two ways of salvation.” When he was permitted to use his own terminology and provide his own framing of issues, the phrase

⁴⁵ “Report of the 1944 Confessional Committee,” 125 (emphases original). Committee member, James Bear, had also made this point in an earlier article. “Of course it might be said that since the Dispensationalists believe that all men in *this dispensation* are saved by grace through faith, no great harm will be done by their preaching. Certainly they will not mislead men as to how they may be saved *now*. It is because they are preaching salvation by grace to their living hearers that their preaching is blessed. But it is not this preaching of salvation by grace *now* that makes them Dispensationalists. All of the evangelical churches are preaching salvation by grace. But the Dispensationalists declare that their great contribution lies in the fact that ‘Dispensational truth’ is the key to the understanding of God’s Word and His dealings with men. They alone ‘rightly divide the Word of truth.’ It is because they offer to give a truer insight into the Bible that they attract many. They do give a *new* insight, but much that is new is not true, especially in theology. The new insight they give in the meaning of covenants and dispensations leads to the ‘truth’ that those in the Mosaic dispensation were saved by ‘legal obedience’ in contrast to us who are saved ‘by the personal acceptance of the finished work of Jesus Christ’ [cites dispensationalist William Evans, *Outline Study of the Bible*, p. 34]. We are not here arguing whether this ‘truth’ is Scriptural or not. But we do say that their teaching is radically different from the accepted view of our Church” (“Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace,” 301-02 [emphases original]).

“two ways of salvation” did not appear. It was a phrase he would not even approve of apparently – he vigorously objected to this and similar phrases being used to describe his view.⁴⁶

Nonetheless, once one gets beyond the salvos of vigorous objections, one finds reason to question the denials (sometimes even in the very arguments employed in those denials). That is, there are elements in his teaching that sound exactly like the doctrines deemed anti-Confessional by the PCUS Committee, which *they* identified by the description, “The Rejection of One Way of Salvation.”

Of course, this raises the question as to whether *they* should have been allowed to use terminology that the exponent of the view objected to. With this question comes a series of other tedious questions. What if Chafer really did espouse the tenets described by the Confessional Committee Report, but he nevertheless was sincerely opposed to the *terminology* used to describe his views? Who has legitimate final say in determining what terminology is appropriate?

If the PCUS Confessional Committee misrepresented Chafer’s view, then of course Chafer had a legitimate complaint. If, however, the PCUS Committee *accurately* represented Chafer’s view, but Chafer simply disliked the unflattering *terminology* and *labels* which they attached to that (accurate) presentation, then his complaint should have been more nuanced. In that case, Chafer could object to the *terminology*; he could suggest a more felicitous set of terms to use. All this would be legitimate, so long as the objection to *terminology* is *not* mistaken for a *refutation* of the charge itself.

Close analysis of Chafer’s responses to the PCUS Committee Report suggests that this was in fact one mistake he made.⁴⁷ He apparently disliked the connotations of the description “various and diverse plans of salvation for various groups,” and he engaged these connotations as points of libel; viz.: 1) “various plans of salvation” made it sound, in Chafer’s mind, like he denied that salvation was always by grace (i.e., including in the Old Testament);⁴⁸ 2) similarly, it made it

⁴⁶ We should also point out that it was not just Chafer’s *detractors* that “misunderstood” his teaching so as to employ such phrases to describe the view. An *exponent* of Chaferian dispensationalism wrote in to the *Christian Beacon* in 1937, asserting, “While all salvation is of Jesus Christ, yet there are two salvations: Jewish, or General, administered by Messiah and the saints during Judgment – Millennium – Resurrection. The salvation of the Church is unto spirit-being and heavenly . . .” (“Questions and Answers,” *Christian Beacon* 2 [8 April 1937]: 4).

⁴⁷ In the nomenclature of formal and informal logic, what we are describing is the fallacy of “quibbling.” See Gerald Runkle, *Good Thinking: An Introduction to Logic* (Philadelphia, PA: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 54-55: “When a party to a discussion gives a different meaning (lexically or stipulatively) to a word that has already been used and whose meaning is clear, he is quibbling. He may by his ill-advised action produce a disagreement that is merely verbal. The parties to the dispute, if they are not alert, may as a result believe that they are in genuine disagreement (when they are not). Or they may become so confused they fail to recognize the nature of whatever genuine disagreement may be present.”

⁴⁸ “Are there two ways by which one may be saved? In reply to this question it may be stated that salvation of whatever specific character is always the work of God in behalf of man and never a work of man in behalf of God.

sound like he denied that the blood of Christ was always the efficacious means of Divine atonement (including for Old Testament saints).⁴⁹ Chafer was *not* guilty of holding either of these erroneous positions; this he makes abundantly clear.

The problem is: the Confessional Committee actually did not charge him with holding *these* positions. Their critique was directed toward something *else* that Chafer actually *did* teach, which was what *they* had in mind by the phrase, “various and divergent plans of salvation for various groups in different ages”?⁵⁰ The importance of this point for understanding the rift between dispensationalism and covenant theology can hardly be overstated.⁵¹

I suggest that at the heart of the impasse on this point is the two sides’ actually talking about two different *kinds of causes* in salvation. (Thus, the confusion stems from what was meant by the term “ways,” in the phrase, “two **ways** of salvation.”) We are helped by the distinctions in terminology provided by (Reformed) scholasticism, in its suggested distinction between the *meritorious cause* of salvation and the *instrumental cause* of salvation.⁵² For example, using this nomenclature in regard to New Testament salvation: the meritorious cause is Christ’s (past) blood atonement provided on the cross (which merit was confirmed by God the Father in resurrecting His Son, Jesus, from the dead); the instrumental cause – that is, the cause that God uses to actually make that merit effective for the individual – is faith.⁵³ Both classical dispensationalism and covenant theology agreed on these points in New Testament salvation.

This is to assert that God never saved any one person or group of persons on any other ground than that righteous freedom to do so which the Cross of Christ secured. There is, therefore, but one way to be saved and that is by the power of God made possible through the sacrifice of Christ” (Chafer, “Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding,” 1).

⁴⁹ Ibid. Also see Chafer, “Dispensational Distinctions Denounced,” 258-59. “To this [i.e., the charge of teaching multiple ways of salvation in various ages] it is answered, as answered before, that the Editor has never held such views and that he yields first place to no man in contending that a holy God can deal with sin in any age on any other ground than that of the blood of Christ.”

⁵⁰ “Report of the 1944 Confessional Committee,” 124.

⁵¹ Craig Blaising’s summary is accurate: “It did not matter to his detractors that he [Chafer] viewed the death of Christ as equally foundational for both systems, law and grace, a fact which he himself believed exonerated him from the charge” (“Lewis Sperry Chafer,” in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993], 93). The question we want to pursue is *why* did it “not matter to his detractors”? Also, *why* did Chafer believe that this point “exonerated him from the charge” when “his detractors” did not? Likewise, Blaising’s summarization is accurate when he says, “That he [Chafer] saw in the Bible two substantially different religions (Christianity and Judaism) which entailed different and opposed rules of life and different eternal destinies (heavenly vs. earthly) was sufficient in the minds of many to make stand the charge that he believed in two different kinds of salvation and thus two ways of salvation” (93-94).

⁵² See Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), s.v. “causa instrumentalis” and “causa meritoria,” 62-63.

⁵³ See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1696, reprint edition, translated by George Musgrave

Concerning the *instrumental cause* in the Mosaic age (and in the future kingdom age), however, there appears to be some significant disagreement. Covenant theologians insist that the instrumental cause (as well as the meritorious cause) is consistent: viz, salvation is always *sola fide*;⁵⁴ to a great extent, this consistency is what underlies their model's positing one covenant of grace from the Fall to the close of history.⁵⁵ For Chafer, however, the instrumental cause seems to fluctuate from dispensation to dispensation, between law-keeping (which he sometimes clarifies may be prompted by faith⁵⁶) and faith alone.

Specifically, Chafer seems to use the phrase, "human terms of salvation," for what the scholastics had termed "instrumental cause." If this correlation be correct, Chafer's argument in his article, "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding" (which was written in response to the PCUS judgment), yields an intriguing point.

Are there two ways by which one may be saved? . . . God never saved any person or group of persons on any other ground than that righteous freedom to do so which the Cross of Christ secured. There is, therefore, but one way to be saved and that is by the power of God made possible through the sacrifice of Christ.

Giger, edited by James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1994), "Sixteenth Topic: Justification," 2:633-88; William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1629, reprint edition, translated and edited by John D. Eusden (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1968), 162; also Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1873, reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 3:118-212. Cf. also John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, reprint edition, Library of Christian Classics, XX, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, edited by John T. McNeil, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book III, Chapter XI, pp. 725-54.

⁵⁴ See Charles Hodge, *Justification By Faith Alone*, 1841, reprint edition, ed. John W. Robbins (Hobbs, NM: Trinity Foundation, 1995); cf. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter XI, "Of Justification," especially section II: "Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and his righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification . . ."; and section VI: "The justification of believers under the old testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the new testament"; cf. Chapter VII, "Of God's Covenant with Man" and *The Westminster Larger Catechism*, Questions 31-36. Cf. also John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1953), 3-30.

⁵⁵ This is exactly how this point was framed against classical dispensationalism by Bear ("Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace," 288-305). Using Charles Hodge's explication of the Covenant of Grace as a reference point, Bear asserts what covenant theology (as affirmed by the Westminster Standards) means by one plan of salvation: "Dr. Hodge by the word 'same' emphasizes four aspects of the Covenant of Grace. (1) There is *one* plan of salvation, offered in a central covenant-promise made to the human race, a promise re-affirmed by many covenants, but still 'the same promise of deliverance.' (2) There is *one* Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ. (3) There is *one* condition on *man's* side for participation in the blessings of redemption. That condition is faith. [Cites Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:371.] (4) There is *one* common destiny for all men who qualify by the one condition of faith" (289, emphases original). This point was reiterated by Eugene W. McLaurin, *A Suggested Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms with Regard to the "Question as to Whether the Type of Bible Interpretation Known as 'Dispensationalism' is in Harmony with the Confession of Faith* (Austin, TX: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 1942), 8.

⁵⁶ "Faith in the Old Testament saint led to works which are to be the ground of his future acceptance or rejection. Faith in the Christian leads to the finished work of Christ and to good works in daily life after he is saved which result in a reward. The Old Testament saint will be saved by faith expressed in works; the Christian is saved by faith apart from works" (letter, Lewis Sperry Chafer to Charles G. Trumbull, 30 March 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary).

The far lesser question as to the precise human terms upon which men may be saved is quite a different issue. . . . The Bible indicates three different requirements as the human terms upon which man has been, or now may be, saved.

First, God imputed righteousness to Abraham, which righteousness is the foremost feature of God's salvation, on the sole ground that Abraham believed or amened [*sic*, from "amen"] God. Abraham believed God respecting a son whom he would himself generate. The passage – Genesis 15:2-6 – should be considered with worthy attention. By divine design, Abraham was the pattern of salvation by grace and the great Apostle draws his illustrations regarding grace almost exclusively from the life of this one Old Testament character.

Second, God imputes righteousness to those in this age who believe, which righteousness is the foremost feature of salvation, on the one demand that they *believe*; but this belief is not centered in a son which each individual might generate, as in the case of Abraham, but in the Son whom God has given to a lost world, who died for the world and whom God has raised from the dead to be a Saviour of those who do believe. . . .

Third, the salvation of Israel . . . is unique in every particular. . . . It yet remains to be seen that the salvation of the nation of Israel, though the precise character of that salvation has not been fully disclosed, extends to every individual. . . . [I]t is disclosed that the salvation of an Israelite, who lived in the Mosaic age, which age will be completed in the coming Tribulation, was guaranteed by covenant; yet the individual could, by failing to do God's revealed will as contained in the Mosaic Law, sacrifice his place in the coming Kingdom and be cut off from his people (cf. Lk. 10: 25-28; 18:18-21; Matt. 8:11, 12; 24:50, 51; 25:29, 30). Jehovah's salvation of Israel will be on the ground of Christ's death. The human terms, because of the covenant promise regarding their salvation, are not the same as that required of Abraham or of any individual in this age, whether Jew or Gentile.⁵⁷

If the point at issue was whether the *instrumental* cause may change from dispensation to dispensation, then Chafer's adamant insistence on the singularity and consistency of the *meritorious cause* misses the point – nor does his vigorous defense of this single meritorious cause relieve his view of the charge of teaching "two ways of salvation" the way he thinks it does. On the other hand, his explicit affirmation of changes in instrumental cause from dispensation to dispensation establishes the very point of his detractors' objection.

This is one place where the poisoning effect of the rift between dispensationalists and covenant theologians has really clouded the discussion ever since. When later dispensationalists assessed this question of "two ways of salvation," they did so with defensiveness; and also engaged in some revisionist history when recounting how the debate with covenant theology unfolded. In truth, it is really remarkable how thoroughly Chafer's construction was abandoned by dispensationalists in the generation that followed him. Even those dispensationalists who would affirm most tenaciously the impetus behind Chafer's Mosaic-age soteriology (viz., his denial of any aspect of "law" in the New Testament age of grace) still refused to defend his articulation of soteriology in the Mosaic age.

⁵⁷ Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding," 1-5.

Rather, Chafer's "clarifications of himself" were used by later dispensationalists to reverse his teaching on the point entirely; normative dispensationalists were sometimes even willing to concede that, on this point, Chafer and Scofield had made a (minor) mistake, a "slip of the pen" that they did not "really mean."⁵⁸ Tellingly, when normative dispensationalists revised *The Scofield Reference Bible*, they made adjustments (improvements) to each and every one of the notes identified as problematic by covenant theologians in the debates of the 1930s and 40s.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The exact phrase, "slip of the pen," is used by W.W. Barndollar (*The Validity of Dispensationalism* [Johnson City, NY: Baptist Bible Seminary Press, 1964], 6-7); the gist of this explanation – that Scofield and Chafer "misspoke" in occasional, unfortunate statements that made them sound like they advocated positions they did not *really* hold – was an explanation commonly offered by normative dispensationalists. E.g., see Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1965), 120; also H. Chester Woodring, "Grace Under the Mosaic Covenant" (Th.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1956), especially 208-09. In personal interviews, John F. Walvoord summarized what appears to have become the standard dispensationalist recounting of this revision in dispensational theology: that arguments presented by later dispensationalists, e.g., as in Woodring's dissertation, finally articulated what dispensationalists before then had *meant*, but had failed to articulate. What earlier dispensationalists (e.g., Scofield, Chafer, Feinberg) had actually said, admittedly, were overstatements, which they did not really mean (John F. Walvoord, personal interview with the author, 11 and 18 April 1995, Dallas, TX). Walvoord's response to John Murray's (1936) critique of dispensationalism was instructive. Murray had honed in on two quotations from Charles Feinberg's book, *Premillennialism or Amillennialism* (1945): "God does not have two mutually exclusive principles as law and grace operative in one period" (126); and "The principles of law and grace are mutually destructive; it is impossible for them to exist together" (175). Walvoord observed, "Feinberg is just quoting or borrowing from Chafer there," and then said, "Well, I see Murray's point . . . but Murray really misunderstood Chafer. They [Chafer and Feinberg] said this, but they didn't really mean it." I then asked Dr. Walvoord if my supposition was correct, that dispensationalists in the generation after Chafer had reversed Chafer's position on salvation in the Old Testament; specifically, I asked, is it proper to suggest that "revised dispensationalists" changed "classical dispensationalism" on at least one of the points originally at issue with covenant theology? He replied, "I object to the word 'change.' . . . We softened the distinction between law and grace, but we really didn't disagree with them [i.e., classical dispensationalists]." Throughout, Walvoord was more candid about pointing out errors in the Scofield Bible than about discussing potential errors in Chafer's theology. (E.g., "On some points, Scofield was just flat wrong or in error. Scofield made some blunders. . . . But saying this is not saying the system is wrong. Dispensationalism is broader than Scofield and Chafer. . . . There has always been diversity in dispensationalism.") This perspective is consistent with J. Dwight Pentecost's contention, as early as 1967: "In the generations since the Scofield Reference Bible originally appeared, there have been many clarifications, expansions, and refinements of the dispensational interpretation of Scripture. They have been included in the new [1967] edition [of the *New Scofield Reference Bible*]. This present work is not so much a revision of Scofield's work, suggesting that this represents a new or changed position, as it is an expansion and refinement of his position, representing development in the system Scofield taught" ("Book Reviews: *The New Scofield Reference Bible*," *BibSac* 124 [January-March 1967]: 170). In the current context, one clash between essentialist-revised-normative dispensationalists and progressive dispensationalists is over what sort of change constitutes "development" and what sort of change constitutes "abandonment"; cf. Craig Blasing, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *BibSac* 145 (April-June 1988): 254-80; and Charles Ryrie, "Update on Dispensationalism," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994), 15-16.

⁵⁹ E.g., see E. Schuyler English, "The New Scofield Reference Bible," *BibSac* 124 (January-March 1967): 130. Committee member John Walvoord also acknowledged that he and others on the committee were "very conscious" of criticisms that had been previously raised (e.g., by the PCUS investigation) in the process of their revising certain notes, such as the note on John 1:17 (often quoted by critics of dispensationalism). Interestingly, Walvoord also disclosed that, even though the committee varied as to their vigilance in affirming classical dispensational tenets (e.g., varying from the very mild dispensationalism of Allan A. MacRae and Wilbur Smith to the very strong, classical dispensationalism of Charles Feinberg, Alva J. McClain and Clarence Mason), revisions in the notes were all voted on and had to be approved unanimously in order to actually be included in the *New Scofield Reference Bible* (interview by the author, 2 May 1995, Dallas, TX). Cf. also the survey of changes in the notes from the "Old Scofield Bible" to the "New Scofield Bible" by Herbert W. Bateman IV in the chapter, "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

(N.B. these revisions were accomplished by *normative* dispensationalists.) One searches in vain, after 1952 (the year of Chafer's death), for a dispensationalist affirmation of Chafer's soteriological construction of the Mosaic age, in which Israelite salvation allegedly was gained "under an unyielding meritorious basis."⁶⁰

Is this a case in which dispensationalism has simply capitulated to covenant theology? Not exactly. Distinctions between the dispensations are emphasized in post-1952 dispensationalism in ways that would doubtless still make covenant theologians uncomfortable. Nonetheless, there is no question that normative dispensationalism "corrected" some of the errors that covenant theologians were most concerned about. And, when later dispensationalists voiced concerns about the "misstatements" of earlier dispensational constructions that they wished to clarify (or revise), their concerns look very much like the concerns shared by covenant theologians in the original debate.⁶¹ And yet, hostilities between the two camps – the camps of "dispensationalism" and "covenant theology" – during the era of "normative," "essentialist dispensationalism" remained, and ardently so. Why?

We get a hint as to the explanation in Charles Ryrie's framing of the issue in his (1965) work, *Dispensationalism Today*. Ryrie concedes that earlier dispensationalists had made several careless misstatements concerning differences in the terms of salvation between Old Testament and New Testament (some of which we have just observed). He then goes on to articulate what is the dispensationalist position "today" regarding what fluctuates and what stays the same over time in the provision of salvation. "The dispensationalists' answer to the problem is this: 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."⁶²

⁶⁰ Chafer, "Dispensationalism," 440.

⁶¹ E.g., in 1982, dispensationalist Kenneth L. Barker, in his presidential address to the Evangelical Theological Society, gave a presentation that would effectively open up the discussion between dispensationalists and covenant theologians on this and other points. Among the points he listed as "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," was this: "The third false dichotomy (actually the first major one) is that the OT is the Testament of law while the NT is the Testament of grace" ("False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," *JETS* 25 [January 1982]: 6-10). Barker's point here is indistinguishable from the exact point being made by covenantalist critics of this point in Chafer's and Scofield's theology some forty years earlier.

⁶² Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 123. The seminal origins of this framing of issues may be detected in the course notes of Ryrie's teacher, C. Fred Lincoln. Lincoln was stridently opposed to even the very rubric of covenant theology; it is simply impossible to conjecture that Lincoln had any conscious inclination toward moving dispensationalism in a direction more favorable to that system. E.g., in his systematic theology course notes, in the section titled, "Covenant, Dispensational, and Related Studies," he describes the covenant theologian as one who "slyly and without foundation or reason accuses the dispensationalist of teaching more than one way of salvation" (p. 8). He describes the "covenant premillennial" view of "J. Oliver Buswell" as being a view that "comes from those who have lightly accepted the truth of the second coming of the Lord, but who have never realized its implications nor the fact that the second coming of the Lord is properly related to a distinctive truth as set forth in a well rounded

Let me say here that I believe Ryrie’s contribution to the discussion on this point is a brilliant one. This framing of distinctives has been found helpful to dispensationalists and non-dispensationalists alike – even though dispensationalists arguably were by their approach to the issue put in best position to make such an insightful observation. The breakdown of “basis of salvation,” “requirement of salvation,” “object of faith,” “content of faith” is a contribution made to theology of which dispensationalists can rightly be proud.

That acknowledged and due appreciation offered, we must also observe: there is no question that Ryrie’s framing here represents a significant “refinement” (his term) of the classical dispensational construction. There is also no question that this refinement moved dispensationalism toward a view more compatible with covenant theology (*not* to the view covenant theologians held all along, but toward a “dispensational” view that even covenant theologians could possibly find acceptable). The chart below identifies points of agreement and disagreement between 1) Ryrie’s framing of issues; 2) the view of Lewis Sperry Chafer; and 3) covenant theology.

Ryrie’s Position	Chafer’s Position (Agree/Disagree?)	Covenant Theology’s Position (Agree/Disagree?)
The <i>basis</i> of salvation in every age is the death of Christ;	Agree	Agree
the <i>requirement</i> for salvation in every age is faith;	DISAGREE	AGREE
the <i>object</i> of faith in every age is God;	Agree	Agree
the <i>content</i> of faith changes in the various dispensations.	Agree	Ambiguous (See below)

dispensational system of interpretation”; i.e., it “attempts to reconcile the error of ‘covenantism’ with premillennial truth. . . . They fail to comprehend, therefore, that the Scripture shows that the systems of law and grace are completely in contrast and irreconcilable” (p. 10). Their opposition to classical dispensationalism, he says, “repeats the groundless fallacy that the dispensationalists teach that there are two or more ways of salvation” (p. 10). In Lincoln’s description of the “distinctive responsibility” of the age of grace, he makes a key qualification, however, which even he himself may not perceive is a significant refinement of Chafer’s position: “It must constantly be remembered that God has always been gracious and that Christ’s shed blood and man’s faith have been at all times the basis of man’s salvation in every age” (p. 33); C. Fred Lincoln, “Covenant, Dispensational, and Related Studies,” course notes, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947; I am grateful to Donald K. Campbell, who gave me these course notes from his own files.

It is not difficult to imagine that Ryrie, Lincoln’s student, put the various strands of what Lincoln says here into a more organized format. Like Lincoln, Ryrie preserved the hostility with covenant theology, even though the real point of contention with covenant theology was one they themselves largely removed.

What we notice first of all is that Ryrie has moved the dispensationalist position from disagreement to agreement with covenant theology (and likewise from agreement to disagreement with Chafer's position) on what had been the exact watershed point of difference between the two theological systems as defined in the PCUS investigation of dispensationalism. The issue in that dispute, as we have surveyed above, was the classical dispensationalist variation in instrumental cause (or, to use Ryrie's term, "requirement for salvation") from dispensation to dispensation. Ryrie eliminates this variation, making his "essentialist dispensationalism" consistent with covenant theology on this point.

All the more curious, therefore, is what Ryrie says in the line that follows his four-fold (basis/requirement/object/content) framing: "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."⁶³

The problem with this statement is that what Ryrie singles out as being the focal point of disagreement had actually *not* been a point at issue at all up to then. Up to then, the question as to what was the "content of faith" required of Old Testament saints had not even been a question raised by covenant theologians;⁶⁴ nor was this the reason for the charge of "two ways of salvation."⁶⁵ Ryrie's point, as framed in this context, therefore, may raise a *different* point worthy of consideration, but it does not address the *original point at issue* as he suggests.⁶⁶

⁶³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 123-24.

⁶⁴ With this in mind, the intensifier, "of course," in Ryrie's framing is especially intriguing. Why this straining for emphasis on a point, which, in actuality, covertly shifts the focus of discussion? Perhaps the firmness with which his teacher, C. Fred Lincoln, taught him the dispensational basis of contention with the "sly," "unwarranted" covenant theological position (even though he had re-framed the points of contention) misled Ryrie into a false confidence that this *must* be the "real" point of contention? (Cf. Lincoln, "Covenant, Dispensational, and Related Studies"); also see note 27, above.

⁶⁵ For instance, when James Bear originally forwarded against dispensationalism the charge of teaching two ways of salvation (1938), he quotes Hodge (and, in fact, surfaces the same quotation from Hodge that Ryrie does in *Dispensationalism Today* to prove that covenant theology denies any increase in the content of faith required from Old Testament to New Testament [122]), but he never once mentions a problem with the "content of faith." Rather, using Hodge as the reference point, he says in the section titled, "THE SAME CONDITION REQUIRED FOR PARTICIPATION [in the benefits of redemption]": "Doubtless it has already become evident from the quotations given that Dispensationalists seem to hold that there are *two ways on man's side* by which man may come into living relation to God. Of course, the Church holds that there is but one. It has declared that man is not saved by his obedience, nor by what he does. He is saved through *faith*, which is not a work of merit, but an attitude, a relationship. He is saved by his humble reliance upon the grace of the living God as it is revealed in His Word and in His Son"; Bear, "Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace," 299 (emphases original).

⁶⁶ In terms of logic and rhetoric, the fallacy committed here is *ignoratio elenchi* – which literally means "to disregard, ignore or be unaware of what is really at issue" (and thus to argue something else instead, which is actually not at issue). It is part straw man (in that it mischaracterizes what is at issue) and part red herring (in that what is argued is actually beside the point, a distraction from what issue is actually in view).

Interestingly, it is the same fallacy that Chafer committed, as noted above. Ryrie, like Chafer before him, goes on to argue for a difference between "man's side" and "God's side" in salvation; arguing that once this is

If Ryrie was deliberately trying to change the focus of discussion, his strategy would prove successful. In fact, this change of focus (whether deliberate or indeliberate) allowed him and other dispensationalists to explicate more fully the “content of faith” question, placing dispensationalism in its discussion with covenant theology on a much more favorable plane, while they ironed out wrinkles elsewhere in the dispensationalist system.

For instance, one of these wrinkles was the dispensational understanding of the role of animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. Safe behind the lines from their battle with covenant theology, dispensationalists refined this point in their system. The classical dispensationalist explanation of *how* the animal sacrifices provided an efficacious atonement made it seem like the blood of bulls and goats could, *ex opere operato*,⁶⁷ provide a genuine, *temporary* propitiation, the one significant short-coming of these sacrifices being merely their lack of permanency.⁶⁸ Such a construction is possible if one is willing to affirm a purely nominalist connection of instrumental

understood, the charge of “two ways of salvation” should be removed (see Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 124-25). Ryrie also suggests that covenant theologians “confuse the tests of a dispensation with a way of salvation” (126). This appears to again add a touch of revisionist history, in behalf of the classical dispensationalists, in order to further distance the dispensational position from the charge of “two ways of salvation.”

⁶⁷ To the extent that classical dispensationalism maintained an *ex opere operato* efficacy for the Mosaic animal sacrifices, it was similar in its construction of Old Testament soteriology to that of Roman Catholic models; the efficacious nature of the *sacrifices* in the classical dispensationalist structure sounds virtually identical to the efficacious nature of *sacraments* in Roman Catholicism (in both cases, they are efficacious *ex opere operato*). Concerning the meaning and implications of the phrase, *ex opere operato*, see Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, s.v. “ex opere operato,” 108; cf. “The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” *De Sacramentis in Genere*, Canons V-VIII, 1563, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, Volume Two: The Greek and Latin Creeds*, 1889, reprint edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 120-21. The theological idea denoted by the phrase, *ex opere operato*, is affirmed in these canons, though the phrase itself is not actually used there. The phrase apparently originated with Augustine, who, in battling the Donatists, used this phrase to describe his own position in opposition to their *ex opere operantis* view; for a good summary of the developments of Roman Catholic sacramental soteriology, with reference to this Augustinian origin and its development by medieval scholastics, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984), especially *Volume 3: The Growth of Medieval Theology (600-1300)*, 190-214; and *Volume 4: Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)*, 291-302. Calvin, in 1559, explicitly condemned what would be officially affirmed by the Council of Trent four years later (in 1563). In his explication of the mystical benefits to which faith joins the believer in the Eucharist, Calvin says, “It is good that our readers be briefly apprized of this thing also: whatever the Sophists have dreamed up concerning the *opus operatum* is not only false but contradicts the nature of the sacraments, which God so instituted that believers, poor and deprived of all goods, should bring nothing to it but begging”; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics, vol. XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Book IV, Chapter XIV, section 26, p. 1303. The battle lines drawn over this point in the mid-16th century between Protestants and Catholics have largely remained to the present day.

⁶⁸ See the *Scofield Reference Bible: 1917 Edition*, note on Lev. 16:6, p. 148. This distinction between the temporary “covering” of sin in the Old Testament vis-à-vis the permanent “taking away” of sin in the New Testament remained popular in dispensational treatises for many years; cf. John Feinberg, “Salvation in the Old Testament,” 71-72. Cf. also Ryrie, who says, “The writer of the book of Hebrews does not say [in Heb. 10:4] that sins were not forgiven, but he says that those sacrifices were inadequate to remove absolutely and finally the spiritual guilt of a person before God” (*Dispensationalism Today*, 129). In this explanation, Ryrie seems to qualify Heb. 10:4 with the words “absolutely and finally” (i.e., “permanently?”). The reading that results, then, would be: “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins [*permanently*; implication: they *could* take away sins *temporarily*].” In this explanation, Ryrie seems to be following the classical dispensational construction.

cause(s) to Christ's meritorious provision of saving benefits (which classical dispensationalism does, in fact, seem to affirm).⁶⁹ Such a nominalist connection, likewise, would allow for a fluctuating instrumental cause, including an instrumental cause that put salvation on a legalistic, unyielding meritorious basis, as Chafer imagined the cause of salvation in the Mosaic era to be.

Seemingly unnoticed in such explanations, however, is the point that, if Old Testament sacrifices were even temporarily efficacious *ex opere operato* (or, if, to use Ryrie's words, they provided "a genuine atonement for sins . . . simply because they were offered"⁷⁰), then the instrumental cause of salvation, in that case, would be the ceremonial law. It would not be salvation by faith (*sola fide*), but salvation by *works* of the ceremonial law. Such a construction was not consistent, however, with the revised dispensationalist demand that the requirement of salvation from dispensation to dispensation be always the same (*viz.*, faith). Ryrie himself seems to recognize this, at least vaguely; one can detect some flinching at the prospect of bringing his argument to its full conclusion when he says: "the offerings . . . could point a believing worshiper to a better sacrifice which would deal finally with the entire sin question. This might be called an ulterior efficacy in the sacrifices which did not belong to them as sacrifices but as prefigurations of

⁶⁹ The classical dispensationalist position, as articulated by Chafer and followed, to an extent, by Ryrie, seems to follow a nominalist logic similar to that of late medieval theologians; for further explication of medieval nominalism, see the very helpful article by Heiko Oberman, "Some Notes on the Theology of Nominalism, with Attention to its Relation to the Renaissance," *Harvard Theological Review* 53 (1960): 47-76; also Paul Vignaux, *Nominalisme au XIV^e Siècle* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1948). That is, for Chafer and the classical dispensationalists, the "conditions" God attached to the reception of salvation's benefits were genuinely nominalist – they were not actually linked in a realist (*i.e.*, genuinely ontological) cause-and-effect relationship. Because the connection between the receiver of atonement and the atonement provided was merely nominalistic anyway, the issue, for Chafer, "as to the precise human terms upon which men may be saved" was a "far lesser question" (Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding," 1). This could also be why "Chafer couldn't understand how anyone could think he taught two ways of salvation" even though he "contributed to this confusion" (John F. Walvoord, interview by the author, Dallas, Texas, 18 April 1995). This nominalist understanding of the terms of salvation seems to be what Chafer is asserting (*via ignoratio elenchi*) when he says, "The colossal error which supplies any point to the contention of those who accuse others of believing that there are two ways by which the lost may be saved is just this, that neither works nor faith of themselves can ever save anyone. It is God's undertaking and always on the ground, not of works or faith, but on the blood of Christ" (*ibid.*).

The Westminster Standards do not explicitly address the points at issue between nominalists and realists (or those whom Heiko Oberman calls "ontologists"), but the direction of its covenant theology seems more in line with realism than with nominalism. The PCUS Confessional Committee, for its part, surfaced some of this in a footnote in the 1943 Report (see 124, n. 7), but dropped it from the 1944 Report; perhaps it was just too arcane and philosophical a point. Some implications of the point were surfaced by committee member, James Bear, outside the Report ("Dispensationalism and the Covenant of Grace," 298-99, 302-05; *idem*, "The Presbyterian Standards vs. The Scofield Bible, Part II," *Presbyterian of the South* 116 [26 March 1941]: 5). Likewise, committee chairman, Felix B. Gear, briefly addressed this point as well, in "The Covenants," and "Covenant Theology" in "Theology 303 Course Notes," in Felix B. Gear Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Montreat, NC. Gear also says, partly in reference to this point perhaps, that dispensationalism "has its own metaphysics," ("Lecture IV: Dispensationalism and Historic Christianity," transcript, 1945, Felix B. Gear papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Montreat, NC).

⁷⁰ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 128.

a final dealing with sin.”⁷¹ We see the “wrinkles,” apparent in such vacillations, therefore gradually being ironed out in dispensationalism, as Ryrie and other dispensational writers contemplate the implications of the requirement of salvation in every dispensation being *sola fide*.⁷²

In *Dispensationalism* (1995), as in *Dispensationalism Today* (1965), Ryrie suggests that the problem of the efficacy of Old Testament sacrifices might be solved with a distinction between eternal life and temporal life under the Law. “Therefore, it is entirely harmonious to say that the means of eternal salvation was by grace and that the means of temporal life was by law. . . . This has to be the case, contradictory as it may seem to some. The law could not save, and yet the law was the revelation of God for that time.”⁷³ This revises Chafer, in that Chafer suggested that extended “temporal life” (on the “new earth”) was all the “earthly people” (Israelites) could hope

⁷¹ Ibid., 129.

⁷² In fact, Ryrie’s own development on this point is extremely instructive. In *Dispensationalism Today*, Ryrie declares: “Unquestionably the Old Testament does ascribe efficacy to the sacrifices. Again and again the Scriptures declare that when the sacrifices were offered according to the law ‘it shall be accepted for him to make an atonement for him’ (Lev.1:4; 4:26-31; 16:20-22). In none of these passages is there any indication that the effectiveness of the sacrifices depended on the spiritual state of the person offering them. Neither do the Scriptures imply that the offerer had to have some glimmer of understanding of the prefigurative purpose of these sacrifices for them to be effective for him. The face value interpretation of these passages assigns a genuine atonement for sins to the sacrifices simply because they were offered” (127-28). As we have observed, Ryrie was the key figure in refining classical dispensationalism and revising its “two ways of salvation” construction. Concerning the efficacy of the OT animal sacrifices, however, vestiges of the older construction seem to remain.

Even in this explanation in *Dispensationalism Today*, development can be detected, however. Ryrie has moved some from the position he had articulated in *The Grace of God* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1963), in which he had said, “Although any individual Israelite could be related to God directly, all were related theocratically. Thus the sacrifices which were brought were efficacious in restoring the offender to his forfeited position as a Jewish worshiper and in thus reconciling him to God as Head of the theocracy. . . . To sum up: the sacrificial system did have a particularized efficacy in restoring the offerer automatically [*ex opere operato*?] to his theocratic governmental privileges” (121). In *Dispensationalism Today*, Ryrie revises this explanation in two ways: first, he expands the distinction between the theocratic position of the Israelite and the *spiritual* position of the Israelite: “Under the law the individual Israelite by birth was related to God through the theocratic state. He sustained this relationship regardless of his spiritual state . . . All Israelites were related to God theocratically; some were also related spiritually. The bringing of the sacrifices restored the offender to his forfeited position as a Jewish worshiper and restored his theocratic relationship” (128). This refined position presumably would leave room for the suggestion that the sacrifices restored the offender to a right theocratic state *ex opere operato*, but to a right spiritual state only through faith. Significantly, however, Ryrie never explicitly draws this conclusion – neither in *Dispensationalism Today*, nor in the updated (1995) edition, *Dispensationalism*. His position as stated here, therefore, is as far as Ryrie ever goes. Secondly, though Ryrie *does* preserve the “simply because they were offered” language concerning what level of faith and understanding was required of the Israelite for the sacrifices to be efficacious, and though he does not explicitly deny that the efficacy of the sacrifices in restoring the *theocratic* relationship of the Israelite was “automatic,” he does explicitly deny such “automatic” efficacy in regard to restoring the Israelite’s *spiritual* relationship: “[T]hose sacrifices were inadequate to remove absolutely and finally the spiritual guilt of a person before God. This was done only by the death of Christ and not by Levitical offerings. The offerings themselves could not automatically effect spiritual salvation” (*Dispensationalism Today*, 129).

In the final analysis, what we observe is that Ryrie’s earlier works manifest the earlier (i.e., classical) dispensationalist construction, while his later works demonstrate a more “revised dispensationalist” understanding. The revisions in his own works would actually make his own position more consistent with the soteriological framing he himself had articulated (i.e., the basis of salvation, requirement of salvation, object of faith, content of faith framing).

⁷³ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 117.

for.⁷⁴ Dispensationalists before Ryrie had suggested other refinements of Chafer's construction, which Ryrie seems to build upon; e.g., that the *sacrifices* (considered "ceremonial law" by covenant theologians) should not be considered "law" at all.⁷⁵ This made for a mediating position, albeit a somewhat unstable one perhaps, between Chaferian classical dispensationalism and covenant theology.

Thus, Chafer's construction was clearly being refined by essentialist/normative dispensationalists, which refinements would in turn be refined by later dispensationalists.⁷⁶ In other words, in the case of at least some dispensationalists, there was throughout the twentieth century a gradual but unmistakable movement away from a sharp dispensational contrast between Mosaic-Age Law and Church-Age grace through faith, and toward a construction that, like covenant theology, acknowledged a difference in the way salvation by grace *sola fide* was administered, but that nevertheless insisted that salvation, in any age, is *sola gratia, sola fide, soli Christo*. Likewise, the number of qualifications and clarifications of this point by these dispensationalists seemed over time to decrease – gradually, circumspectly perhaps, but no less unremittingly.

The classical dispensational view of the temporary, *ex opere operato* efficacy of animal sacrifices eventually gave way, in the revised/essentialist/normative dispensationalist era, to a construction that made offering animal sacrifices an expression of the individual Israelite's faith in God's mercy, which faith, so expressed, was the actual instrumental cause of salvation.⁷⁷ This revision did not make the dispensational soteriological construction of the Mosaic-age identical with the traditional covenantalist construction, perhaps, but it certainly made the two views much

⁷⁴ See Chafer, *Grace*, 152-243.

⁷⁵ E.g., see Alva J. McClain's explanation: "1. Hypothetically, the law could give life if men kept it. . . . 2. But this keeping of the law had to be perfect. . . . Furthermore, this perfection of obedience included the inward attitude as well as the outward act, the thought as well as the deed (Matt. 5:28). The question has been raised: Did not the law provide for failure to keep it? The answer is: Yes, in a certain sense, through the ritual of animal sacrifice. But here we must be careful to remember two things: First, the smallest failure meant that the law was broken. Second, the blood of animal sacrifices could never take away sins. The sacrifice prescribed by the law did indeed bear witness to a way of salvation, but that way was wholly outside and apart from all law (Rom. 3:21). 3. Certainly no man (Christ excepted) ever kept the law in a complete sense. . . . 4. Actually, then, the law can save no sinner" (*Law and Grace* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1954], 17-18).

⁷⁶ E.g., Allen P. Ross, "The Biblical Method of Salvation: A Case for Discontinuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 161-78. Ross agrees with Ryrie that the content of faith increases from dispensation to dispensation, but Ross also insists that salvation (temporal or eternal) is ultimately always grounded in faith alone. Similarly, see Ken Barker, "False Dichotomies Between the Testaments," 6-10.

⁷⁷ The first clear dispensationalist affirmation of this construction seems to have been set forth by Hobart E. Freeman, "The Problem of the Efficacy of the Old Testament Sacrifices," *GTJ* 4 (January 1963): 21-28.

more compatible. Meanwhile, by focusing attention on the “content of faith” question, Ryrie and the essentialist dispensationalists focused the point of discussion on an aspect of covenant theology that was ambiguous.

Some covenant theologians had, it seems, been loathe to admit any distinction in the degree of understanding required for saving faith to be effective for the one being saved in Old Testament times.⁷⁸ Some covenant theologians would even “take the bait” Ryrie offered in his framing of issues in *Dispensationalism Today*, and engage dispensationalism at this point, as though willingness or unwillingness to acknowledge an increase in understanding within saving faith was, indeed, the foundational point of difference between them.⁷⁹

In truth, however, there had never been unanimity demanded by covenant theologians on this point.⁸⁰ In any case, before Ryrie focused the discussion here, covenant theologians had not forwarded *this* point against dispensationalism as the foundational area of disagreement between the two theological systems.

This is but one major example of a point where hostilities between dispensationalists and covenant theologians have caused them to miss an opportunity. That is, they had an opportunity to come to agreement, acknowledge their agreement, and proceed *together* to refine their understanding of some difficult biblical questions and theological concepts. But, sadly, both sides have pretty much squandered the opportunity up to now.

I would further add that some of the questions at issue in the historic debate between dispensationalists and covenant theologians are some of the most difficult questions in all of theology, such as: what is the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament?, and “how did faith work” in the Old Testament, and how does that compare with how faith is supposed to work in the New Testament? What is the proper understanding of the relationship

⁷⁸ E.g., Charles Hodge: “It was not mere faith or trust in God, or simple piety, which was required, but faith in the promised Redeemer, or faith in the promise of redemption through the Messiah” (*Systematic Theology, Volume II* [London: Nelson, 1872], 368.)

⁷⁹ E.g., John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 161-64; Curt Daniel, *The History and Theology of Calvinism* (Dallas, TX: Scholarly Reprints, 1993), 63-64.

⁸⁰ E.g., J. Barton Payne states, “That, to satisfy God, God must die, that men might inherit God, to be with God, was incomprehensible under the Old Testament seminal knowledge of the Trinity, the incarnation, and the crucifixion followed by the resurrection” (*An Outline of Hebrew History* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1954], 222). Ryrie quotes Payne as demonstrating an “obvious fallacy” in covenant theology (*Dispensationalism Today*, 123), since Payne, as a covenant theologian, cannot possibly believe (in Ryrie’s understanding of covenant theology) that the “content of faith” could increase from Old Testament to New Testament. In truth, the problem is not in Payne’s nuance, but in Ryrie’s portrayal of covenant theology; covenant theology does not *inherently* preclude the content of faith changing from Old Testament to New Testament, even though Ryrie is correct in his pointing out that *some* covenant theologians historically have taken that stance.

between “law” and “grace”? How and why did David find the law to be a means of ensuring he would not sin against God, a gift from God good for restoring his soul, sweeter than honey to his mouth, while Paul found the law to be something that in his experience incited “coveting of every kind”?

Dispensationalists and covenant theologians might have been assisted by one another in answering these questions with greater insight, and engaged in mutual refinement and sharpening. Instead, even when they have actually arrived at positions closer to one another, their interactions have been clouded by their straining to show where they still are in disagreement with “the other side,” lest they be mistaken by their peers as espousing the view of their historic “mortal enemy.”

Is this kind of partisanship necessary? Is it helpful to our task of understanding God’s Word better? Is it Christian?

Conclusion: A Suggested Path Forward From Here

As a path forward, I would like to propose the following five points as key to establishing better ground for discussions between covenant theologians and dispensationalists from here:

1. **Covenant theologians should be made aware that dispensationalists have fixed the mistake that they were originally most concerned about in “dispensationalism.”** (Dispensationalists are going to have to be the ones to make them aware of this – by first of all admitting the mistake in how “dispensationalism” was originally constructed.)
2. **All sides in this (and related) debates should recognize that some of the “tensions” being contemplated and debated as to how best to resolve them are actually biblical tensions.** (Perhaps we should ask even whether the tensions are *supposed to be* resolved.)
3. **All sides in this (and related) debates should recognize and admit that the question of how the Old Testament is properly related to the New Testament is a difficult question, which historically has only prompted further difficult questions, which no theological system, to date, has answered in a fully satisfactory way.**
4. **Dispensationalists (especially) should recognize that their original debate with covenant theology was not over eschatology. Especially in light of this historical fact, my recommendation would be that dispensationalists reallocate their eschatological proposals from the realm of “doctrine” or “dogma” and relegate them to the realm of “opinion,” “model” or “suggestion” where they belong.**
5. **Especially once the above four points have been contemplated, both sides in the “covenant theology-dispensationalist” debate should take fresh stock of the debate, and ask themselves whether its costs to the church, to the Kingdom, and to the evangelical movement, are worth it. In an era in which our culture is moving at an alarming rate to a European-style post-Christian culture, can we afford any longer to divide over these issues and invest our energies in a debate that may not have been necessary and may have been ill-advised in the first place?**