

## **Chapter FOUR**

### **The Beginnings of Dispensationalism in America**

In chapter three we considered the vital relationship of dispensationalism to the lordship controversy. Dispensationalism is the theological mother of nonlordship teaching. In this study I wish to give a very brief history of dispensationalism in the United States.

I am taking this little diversion because many if not most people who carry Scofield Bibles and sit under dispensational teachers know very little about the system and its history. They are unaware of how the dispensational theological system differs from historic Reformational theology in general and Reformed, covenantal theology in particular. Not only people in the pews but often the preachers themselves have never seriously compared dispensationalism with covenant theology as it is most clearly expressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Heidelberg Catechism. Covenant theology is the arch rival of dispensationalism.

It is my conviction that many who are presently disposed toward dispensationalism would not be if they were better informed about that system and its history-its theological roots and the doctrinal errors it has spawned.

### **The Roots of Dispensationalism**

Dispensationalism has its roots in the Plymouth Brethren Movement, which began in the United Kingdom. Writers differ as to time and place where the Brethren Movement began. The first "breaking of bread service" I can find a record of was in 1827 in Dublin. The best information points to John Nelson Darby as a key founder and early teacher of the Brethren Movement. There are other names associated very early, such as A. N. Groves, B. W. Newton, W. H. Dorman, E. Cronin, and J. G. Bullett. These men were early leaders in places like Dublin, Plymouth, and Bristol. It is generally agreed that Darby was the energizing and guiding spirit in the movement's beginning, despite many differences and divisions among these men in the early days and thereafter. Some dispensationalists deny a connection with this movement. But their arguments will not survive historical examination. Dispensationalism is indeed a development of the Plymouth Brethren Movement, growing into a theological system and a method of biblical interpretation during the late nineteenth century.

The first record of dispensationalism in the United States is when J. N. Darby twice visited the U.S. in 1864-65. Through two visits to the 16th and Walnut Avenue Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, then pastored by Dr. James H. Brooks, this church became the principal center of dispensationalism in America. For a Presbyterian church to promote dispensationalism was like mixing oil with water. But Dr. Brooks quickly became Darby's most prominent supporter and is said to be the father of dispensationalism in the United States.

Brooks propagated dispensationalism by his own Bible studies with young men. His best-known student was C. I. Scofield. Brooks published many books and pamphlets (this should teach us the power of literature) and edited a magazine called *The Truth*. A line of influence can be traced from Darby to Brooks, from Brooks to Scofield, from Scofield to Chafer, and from Chafer to Dallas.

### **Inroads into Mainline Churches**

To understand Dr. Brooks's conversion to dispensationalism, it may be wise to call attention to conditions in the mainline denominations in the U.S. at the time. In the early 1900s liberalism was beginning to rear its ugly head in mainline churches. This sad condition had a profound effect on the success and inroads of dispensationalism. Initially, liberal Presbyterians were more influenced by dispensationalism than other denominations. Princeton Theological Seminary, once the stronghold of biblical Christianity worldwide, was one of the first places where liberalism surfaced. In 1914 J. Ross Stevenson became president of Princeton Seminary. Dr. Stevenson was more interested in ecumenical goals than the theology of the Westminster Standards. Eventually a group of spiritual and theological giants followed J. Gresham Machen to found a new seminary. On September 25, 1929, Westminster Theological Seminary, with fifty students and a choice faculty, was opened. There has never been a faculty like it since.

Westminster's faculty consisted of articulate Reformed theologians. They were fighting for the fundamentals of the faith, namely, the inspiration of the Scriptures, the virgin birth of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the miracles of Christ, and the substitutionary atonement. Their battle was against liberalism, and similar battles were being fought in most, if not all, the mainline denominations. Those who rejected liberalism and held to the

five fundamentals mentioned above were labeled "fundamentalists."

Their fundamentalism should not be confused with the present-day dispensational fundamentalism. Let me explain. The five fundamentals mentioned above are beliefs of historic Christianity. In that sense every true Christian who embraces those truths is a fundamentalist. *Present-day dispensational fundamentalists, though holding to those five essential truths, often attack many other important fundamentals of the faith that Reformed people have always cherished and have shed their blood to defend.*

Scofield dispensationalism brought a new kind of fundamentalism into many churches, which filled a vacuum created by liberalism. The churches had drifted away from the doctrinal roots expressed in the old confessions and creeds. Many of the best schools and seminaries had been taken over by liberals and modernists. Their influence was felt first in the colleges, then in the seminaries, then in the pulpits, and finally in the pews. Bible-believing Christians had to turn to new teachers who held the Bible in high esteem. The vacuum left by liberalism provided a prime opportunity for the entrance and spread of the new dispensational teaching.

This development produced the independent church movement, the independent Bible conference movement, and the Bible school movement. Their members were almost all carrying Scofield Bibles, and their leaders were predominantly dispensational in their views.

The major training center for evangelical and Bible-believing churches was Dallas Theological Seminary, founded in 1924, with Lewis Sperry Chafer as its first president. In that desperate hour, when the crucial battle between modernism and historic Christianity was being waged, sincere, Bible-believing people turned to Dallas, the mecca of dispensationalism, for teaching on God's Word. Subsequently, many dispensational Bible schools and colleges were born during this period—all unreformed.

The late Robert K. Churchill, a respected Presbyterian minister, wrote a little paperback, *Lest We Forget* (Philadelphia: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986), reflecting on the first fifty years of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Churchill confirms what I have said about dispensational inroads into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) (pp. 29-40). He tells of his personal experience in two Presbyterian churches: the First Presbyterian Church of Tacoma, Washington, where he was converted, baptized, and called to the ministry,

and a congregation in neighboring Seattle. Churchill explains how in these two great churches the notes in the Scofield Reference Bible became more and more prominent in the preaching. He laments, "These notes, and the interpretation of Scripture upon which they were based, were contrary to our Presbyterian and Reformed heritage" (p. 28).

Churchill (p. 32) tells of Dr. Chafer's delivering a series of lectures on the subject of grace (the same material now in Chafer's book entitled *Grace*).

But Chafer's treatment of the subject of grace never arrives at the right view of the law of God. According to Dr. Chafer, the law was a condition of salvation placed upon the people of God in the Old Testament during a special and limited time period—the Dispensation of Law. This condition, Chafer contended, no longer has application to the New Testament believer since we relate to God under a new dispensation, the Dispensation of Grace. Since, as he put it, "we are no longer under law, but under grace," Chafer argued that there is no necessary relationship between law and grace. Here is law without grace, and grace without law. Always and in every sense, law and grace are opposed to each other.

This teaching appears to be scriptural, but in reality it was the ancient error of antinomianism (anti-law) which denies that the law has application to the Christian. Chafer defended this view by means of a radical reinterpretation of the Scriptures.

### **Not a Return to Historic Truth**

How could dispensationalism be welcomed and embraced in strong Presbyterian churches whose Confession of Faith teaches Reformed, Calvinistic, covenant theology? Though there is no simple answer, one thing is certain. The churches were no longer teaching these doctrinal distinctives of their own Confession.

All honest dispensationalists would agree that the dispensational system of theology has a different view of the grace of God, the law of God, the church of God, the interpretation of the Word of God, and the salvation of God --different from the tested, respected, historic creeds and confessions. Likewise, dispensationalism has a different view of living the Christian life, that is, of sanctification, and of how justification and sanctification are inseparably joined together in the application of God's salvation.

We cannot overlook the accomplishments of dispensationalism. It has given rise to Bible colleges and independent churches all over the land. It has spawned numerous independent missions, independent preachers, and missionaries. If we apply the pragmatic test and ask, "Does it work?" the answer is yes; it has seen much growth and success. If we apply the same test and ask the same question of:

1. the Watchtower, the answer would be yes, it works;
2. Mormonism, the answer would be yes, it works;
3. Roman Catholicism, the answer would be yes, it works;
4. the charismatic movement, the answer would be yes, it works.

They all have numerous converts and followers. They build schools and churches, and have missionaries and great accomplishments. But, there is another, more important question that needs to be asked. Are they true? Is what they teach biblical? This question will bring a different answer.

Dispensationalism represents no minor difference from historic Reformed teachings. It is not just a difference in end-times theories. It is a whole system of theology that touches every major doctrine of Christianity. What is at stake is the saving gospel of Jesus Christ and the sinner's assurance that he is living according to God's plan for history.

\*Source: *Lord & Christ, The Implications of Lordship for Faith and Life*, by Ernest C. Reisinger.