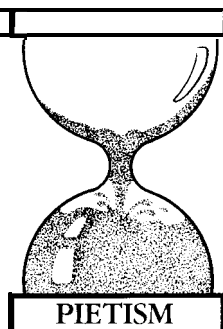


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. 1, No. 3

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March, 1988

THE LATE GREAT THEOLOGIAN LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER, D. D., LITT.D., TH.D. RIP 1948-1988

by Michael R. Gilstrap

A famous entomologist and his student made their way across the busy intersection. The hustle and bustle of the crowd, the noise of passing cars and trucks, and the myriad other sights and sounds of the city made conversation difficult. The student, however, was determined to make the best of the few precious moments he had with his professor.

Suddenly, the professor turned to him and said, "Don't the crickets sound wonderful?"

The young man was mystified. The drone of the city was all he could hear. He replied, "Crickets? All I hear are cars. . . people. maybe the bark of a dog. You don't really hear crickets, do you?"

"You hear what you listen for," the old man replied. He pulled a coin out of his pocket and tossed it into the air. As it landed on the sidewalk with a faint "ping," **twelve** of their fellow pedestrians turned in response to the coin's ring.

"You hear what you listen for," he reiterated.

A dispensational "coin" dropped at the beginning of this year which rang a faint "ping" indeed. To hear this "coin" one had to be listening very carefully. Fortunately, I was preparing for this series of newsletters - I was listening. What I heard is very revealing. The story involves the watershed year of 1948.

The Long-Awaited Promise

April 1948 was the moment of truth for the struggling band of Zionists working toward the re-establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Everyone in the West was against them. Most foreign policy experts expected the Jews to lose the imminent war with the Arabs.

The Zionists surprised the whole world. A pre-emptive first strike sent the Arab forces into such a disarray that they never recovered. Dispensationalists the world over thanked God for the wonderful turn of events. Absolutely pivotal to the dispensationalist's system was the establishment of Israel as a nation.¹

Even more important is that dispensationalists see the 1948 establishment of Israel as the key to interpreting Matthew 24:15-44. The modern dispensationalist believes the "generation of the fig tree" began on May 14, 1948 with the establishment of modern Israel. Because a generation in the Old Testament lasted 40 years, 1988 is a momentous year (1948 plus 40 years). If one reads Matthew 24 as popular dispensationalism suggests, then Jesus has his passage booked during 1988!

To be frank, Jesus should have returned in 1981² (He

must have missed a connection). To stay on schedule, Jesus must return in 1988-or else the dispensationalists are mistaken. As Dr. North writes, "If as little of prophetic significance happens in 1988 as happened in 1981, the dispensationalist movement will begin to unravel."³ The system is beginning to unravel, and nothing points to it more than what you are about to read.

The King is Dead

I first heard the telltale "ping" at Dallas Theological Seminary's bookstore. I went there to pick up some books I didn't have. One of the sets I wanted was Lewis Sperry Chafer's eight volume *Systematic Theology*. DTS bookstore didn't have a set.

I tried a couple of other bookstores in Dallas, but was unable to locate a set. Not particularly worried, I came back to Tyler and decided to order a set from Zondervan along with a couple of Chafer's other books I was unable to locate.

Three weeks later a shipment arrived from Zondervan. I picked it up. It seemed a little light. I opened the package, and two of the books I ordered in addition to *Systematic Theology* were in the package. The computer printout said that Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* was out-of-print.

Horried, I quickly got on the phone with Zondervan and learned that indeed it was out-of-print. **It would not be reprinted by Zondervan.** Immediately I was on the phone to every bookstore in Dallas. **I found one set in the entire Dallas market!**

In a city that houses the bastion of dispensationalism, there was only one set of the "monumental" *Systematic Theology* by Lewis Sperry Chafer. I couldn't believe it. Chafer's *Systematic* had been read by every Dallas Seminary student for the last 40 years! Every dispensationalist pastor in America has a set on his shelf. I really thought the sun would be darkened and the moon turned to blood before Chafer's *Systematic* went out of print.

The king had not only fallen from grace, *he was dead.*

Systematic Theology: 1948

Lest you think I'm making a mountain out of a molehill, let me point something out. Lewis Sperry Chafer's *Systematic Theology* was first published in 1948. That's right, the same year that Israel became a nation and started the old prophetic clock ticking, Chafer's *magnum opus* was released.

Do you really think it's a coincidence that the very year the seamless garment of dispensationalism begins to un-

1. John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), 25.

2. 1948 plus 40 less 7 years tribulation

3. Gary North, "1988: Dispensationalism's Year of Crisis," *Dispensationalism in Transition*. Vol. 1. No. 1: 2.

ravel in earnest, the most influential set of books in the history of the movement goes out of print? Do you really think it's a coincidence that the very year the so-called "generation of the fig tree" comes to an end, Chafer's *magnum opus* is blipped into non-existence? Coincidence? I think not; God has a terrific sense of humor.

Chafer's Place in History

Lewis Sperry Chafer will be remembered as the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary. He was the first president of DTS, and served in that capacity until his death.

In addition to his administrative and educational responsibilities, Chafer was a prolific author. Along with his *Systematic Theology*, Chafer authored eight other books.

Chafer died in 1952 after an eight week illness, but his legacy lived on. More than any other man, Lewis Sperry Chafer shaped the direction of dispensationalism in this century. But on January 1, 1988, Chafer's legacy was put to death; in all likelihood, never to be resurrected.

The "Old Man" Systematic

Chafer's *Systematic Theology* was like an old man who had outlived his usefulness when it died. The younger professors and heirs of the dispensational legacy were embarrassed by him. A number of years ago he had been quietly put into the dispensationalist's home for the aged. The same thing happened to *Systematic* that happened to the original Scofield Reference Bible and the original edition of Chafer's *Major Bible Themes*: it was put away, far out of sight.

You see the problem was that Lewis Sperry Chafer was an **unadulterated** dispensationalist. He became an embarrassment to the next generation for that very reason. Chafer, consistent with his understanding of history, believed in two *different* ways of salvation. He argued that the system of salvation in the Old Testament and the millennium was based on a meritorious system of works. It is only in the New Testament that men are saved by grace.

In commenting on the differences between Israel and the Church, Chafer writes that though there are obvious similarities, these do not set aside the differences. He goes on to say,

The fact that revelation concerning both Israel and the Church included the truth about God, holiness, sin, and redemption by blood, does not eliminate a far greater body of truth in which it is disclosed that Israelites become such by a natural birth while Christians become such by a spiritual birth: that Israelites were appointed to live and serve under a meritorious, legal system, while Christians live and serve under a gracious system.⁴

Chafer is consistent. He recognized that the way of salvation as clearly taught in the New Testament is a way that involves union with Christ and membership in His body. Chafer knew that the NT taught that unless an individual is "in Christ," he cannot be saved.

But he also believed that there was such a dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments as to make it impossible for the OT saints to be "in Christ."⁵ He was forced to argue that the OT saints were saved through their merits,

It was all very embarrassing to the younger generation.

4. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 volumes (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press/Zondervan Publishing House, 1948), 4:30. See also 4:211-215, 247; 7:219.

5. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:248-249

The position was entirely untenable, even though the dispensational system demanded it.

His **followers tried** to cover up for Chafer. Charles Ryrie, who studied under Chafer, writes, "Neither the older nor the newer dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation, and it is not fair to attempt to make them so teach."⁶

Dr. Ryrie is an intelligent man, but denying his mentor taught two ways of salvation is a lot of smoke. He was embarrassed by what was written, and tries to dismiss it with a pass of the hand. Now, I must admit that Chafer seems to have been embarrassed by his system at the end of his life as well. He certainly backpedaled when called to task by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.⁷ It is also the case that Chafer seemed **confused** about his position at times – with a system like that I'd be confused too. Nevertheless, there are just too many places in his writings that Chafer argues for two ways of salvation.

Chafer held some other positions that were embarrassing to later dispensationalists as well; most notable among them was his doctrine of two New Covenants. Again, the bottom line is that Lewis Sperry Chafer became an embarrassment to his followers.

If anything, Chafer was **too consistent**. He hadn't learned to adapt and adjust his theology in light of changing times. The later keepers of the prophetic clock were trying to preserve **the system**, and here comes Chafer skewing their well-planned adjustments! Something had to be done!

The Hitch

Most of the younger men would have put Chafer's writing out of commission long ago. At DTS, where his books were required reading for over 40 years, interest in his thinking began to wane.

What was the hitch then in axing Chafer's work? He was too popular! Zondervan Publishing House published most of his books. They didn't care one whit about any system. Lewis Sperry Chafer made them money, and regardless of what anyone said, they were going to keep him in print.

That all changed a few years ago. The layperson is not going for the bait any longer. No one is interested in Lewis Sperry Chafer's work. He is an anachronism of another day – just as dispensationalism is an anachronism of another time.

Dispensationalism will soon be just one more junker added to the scrap heap of antiquated theological systems. It's not on pile yet, but it will be one day soon -- say about January 1, 1989?

Conclusion

I said earlier that Chafer's *Systematic Theology* would not be brought back into print. That's true, but I need to qualify it. According to a source at Zondervan, it will not be reprinted ever again by Zondervan. Dallas Seminary Press, however, is planning a reprint in two years. Quite understandably, it will be thoroughly revised. The DTS dons are going to take Chafer's *magnum opus* of 2,863 pages and cram it into a 2 volume edition of 600 to 800 pages. Talk about an abridgement! It seems that dispensational theology gets smaller and smaller with each passing year. One day it will simply disappear.

6. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1965), 207.

7. See Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 113ff.