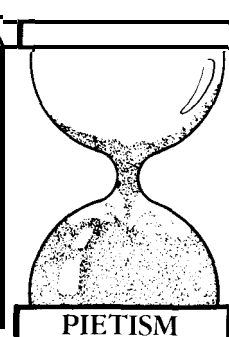


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "wale of Silence"



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DISPENSING DISPENSATIONALISM

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A New Innovation

Though not heretical, dispensationalism is definitely an aberration in Church history, as even some of its brightest scholars admit. When pushed, even Charles Ryrie has admitted that "it is granted by dispensationalists that as a system of theology dispensationalism is recent in origin."¹

Alan Patrick Boyd confesses in his Dallas Theological Seminary master's thesis that "he originally undertook the thesis to bolster the [dispensational] system by patristic research, but the evidence of the original sources simply disallowed this. . . This writer believes that the Church rapidly fell from New Testament truth, and this is very evident in the realm of eschatology. Only in modern times has New Testament eschatological truth been recovered."² He continues: "it would seem wise for the modern [i.e., dispensational] system to abandon the claim that it is the historical faith of the Church."³

How did dispensationalists pull it off? In answer, let us first set forth some historical background that illustrates that such success is not distinctive to dispensationalism.

Strike While the Iron is Hot

The nineteenth century witnessed the promulgation of a great variety of successful, though aberrant, theologies. Many emphasized eschatology; several were outright heretical. Ail of these – whether born in our land or not, whether heretical or not – were thrown into direct competition with historic Christianity for the minds of Americans, thereby ultimately eroding the influence of reformed theology in our land.⁴

In 1823, Joseph Smith claimed to have been visited by the angel Moroni, who later (in 1827) directed him to some golden plates. He translated those plates by looking into a hat, thereby giving the world *The Book of Mormon* (1830). From these alleged experiences he created what has to be one of history's most incredible prophecy movements: The Church of Jesus Christ, Latter-day Saints, better known as the Mormons. They number several million today, despite their absurd history.

In the late 1820s William Miller began teaching that Christ would return in 1843. After an initial disappointment with their literal mountain-top experience of "anxiously awaiting the blessed event," the date was recalculated to be in 1844. When this failed, a few of his die hard followers re-

interpreted his prophecy, proved that it happened *in heaven*, and, under the leadership of Ellen G. White, started the Seventh Day Adventist Church in the 1850s.⁵ Today they number in the hundreds of thousands.⁶

In 1875, Mary Baker Eddy published her *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*. This book eventually led to the establishment of the First Church of Christ, Scientist (1879) and the Christian Science movement. This group literally believes in the maxim: "See no evil; hear no evil; speak no evil." They are so absurd as to deny the reality of pain, death, and evil.⁷ Another thing they do not believe in is the publication of membership statistics, so we do not know how many there are, although they publish the widely read (though declining) *Christian Science Monitor*.

In 1879, Charles Taze Russell started a small magazine entitled *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*. This anti-trinitarian, last-days magazine eventually grew into the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society and, ultimately, the religious cult known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. They are classic date-setters: 1914 was the date of the "Second Presence of Christ," which is so prominent in their last days preaching.⁸ Their numbers approach one million worldwide (though they recently lost androgynous singer Michael Jackson to a Pepsi Cola contract).

Come On In, the Water's Fine!

Likewise, it was in the 1800s that dispensationalism got its origin. Although there is some dispute as to whether its origin is traceable ultimately to the teachings of Edward Irving (1828), or to a charismatic vision by a young Margaret Macdonald (1830), or to John Nelson Darby (1830). Certainly Darby, who founded the "Plymouth Brethren"⁹ in Plymouth, England, was the key figure in the systematizing of the distinctive of dispensational eschatology, from wherever he got the fundamental idea. His views were most fully set forth in his *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* (5 vols.).

From Darby's loose-knit, separatist following arose the beginnings of dispensationalism. Today American evangelical Christendom is broadly influenced by dispensational the-

1. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), p. 67.

2. Alan Patrick Boyd, "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (Until the Death of Justin Martyr)" (unpublished master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977), p. 91 n.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 92.

4. The Itching Ears Syndrome mentioned in last months' newsletter was just as rampant in the 1800s

5. Please do not reform Edgar C. Whisenant of this. His second book recalculating the date of the rapture was bad enough; how would you like another new denomination?

6. Ironically the 1989 *World Almanac* puts their U. S. population at 666,000. I imagine they don't like that figure!

7. This has led to the joke that on Mrs. Eddy's gravestone may be read: "Here lies Mary Baker Eddy, who thinks she's dead."

8. There are a great number of theological correspondences between the heretical JWS and the evangelical dispensationalists. See: Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *House Divided The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology* (Tyler, TX: I C. E., 1989), pp. 327-340

9. See: James Grant, *The Heresies of the Plymouth Brethren*, originally volume 2 of *Religious Tendencies of the Times* (1869).

ology. The wide-spread influence of dispensationalism in the past seventy-five years is largely traceable to one major influence:

The So-Filled Bible

The publication of Cyrus Ingerson Scofield's *The Scofield Reference Bible*¹⁰ in 1909, was not the first Bible published with interpretive notes. Nevertheless, it has indisputably been the most influential, even spawning successful imitations, such as *The Criswell Study Bible* and *The Rylie Study Bible*.

The publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* put in the hands of average, Bible-believing Christians the most influential dispensational tool imaginable. Its influence seems to be traceable to several factors.

First, by putting his interpretive theories in footnotes on the very pages of an edition of the Bible, eventually many would unsuspectingly assume that Scofield's notes were accompanied with a "thus saith the Lord." How tempting would it be to argue, "My Bible says. . .", and then point to Scofield's notes! Though technically not "adding to" God's Word (Deut. 12:32), the subtle danger is most definitely there.

In fact, the testimony of William E. Cox is a case in point: "My spiritual tutors knew the footnotes and headings placed in the Bible by C. I. Scofield as well as they knew the Bible itself. Indeed, the two had become almost synonymous in their minds even as they were destined to become in my own mind."¹¹ Such a possibility was obviously recognized by the editors of the *New Scofield Reference Bible* in 1967, for they wrote of their sub-headings in their introduction: "they are printed in type that is smaller than the text so that they will not be confused with the inspired Scriptures."¹²

I myself have even experienced actual instances of such inadvertent arguments from devout Scofieldians, while I attended Tennessee Temple University and worked at Lanham's Bible Bookshop in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I even had one zealot complain to me while I was working the Bible counter at the Bookstore that the *New Scofield Reference Bible* was tampering with Scripture, because it changed some of Scofield's original notes!¹³

Second, owners of the *Scofield Reference Bible* automatically carry around not only the Bible, but a theology book wherever they go. They are strong believers in Malden's Maxim: "Don't leave home without it." The convenience of such would greatly increase exposure to dispensationalism during devotional times or any theological encounters that might arise during the day. Scofield's view would be the first to be checked for theological discussion. Thus, the *Scofield Reference Bible* prospered also by adherence to Paladin's Principle: "Have theology; will travel."

10. An interesting, meticulously documented expose of the life and work of C. I. Scofield may be found in Joseph M. Canfield's, *The Incredible Scofield and His Book* (Vallecito, CA: Ross f-louse, 1988). Order from: Ross House Books, P. O. Box 67, Vallecito, CA 95251. \$22.00, including postage. The book suffers from scores of typos and several unnecessary innuendos, but overall its research is quite impressive and enlightening.

11. William E. Cox, *Why I Left Scofieldism* (by author, n.d.), p. 3.

12. E. Schuyler English, Chairman, Editorial Committee, *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford, 1967), p. vi.

13. I am sure he had never seen Scofield's original 1909 edition. It is extremely difficult to find, having been totally replaced by a 1917 edition.

For the life of a new product, Madison Avenue is well aware of the advantages of quick and constant exposure. In a way, the same is true of the effect of publishing a theology book in a Bible. To open the Bible means immediately to open Scofield's notes. Scofield becomes "the first-est with the mostest" (I cannot remember whose maxim that was!).

Third, users of the *Scofield Reference Bible* always have before them the notes of Scofield, even if they were attempting to prepare lessons by using other materials. Consider this: they might not pick up the best commentary on a particular passage due to a mere oversight when searching their shelves, but Scofield would always have his say first. According to George Murray, the famed T. T. Shields of Toronto once wrote: "From a point of entire ignorance of Scripture to the position of oracular religious certainty, especially respecting eschatological matters, for some people requires from three to six months with a Scofield Bible."¹⁴

The temptation to look to Scofield would be facilitated and the habit ingrained due to there being no extra effort required. Just open your Bible! What could be easier? In a day of instant breakfast drink, freeze-dried coffee, and microwaves, what could be more desirable for a lazy or busy Christian Sunday school teacher?¹⁵ The dumbing-down of theological literature in our century should not go unnoticed. Compare the commentaries and theological works of earlier days with the present. Americans like their religion — but they like it cheap, and "to go." Scofield's approach fits right in with this situation.

The best Bible study methods encourage considering the biblical text by itself, before consulting commentaries and other tools. Such is virtually impossible when the interpretive notes are intermingled with the Bible itself.

Fourth, the distinctive and blatant dispensational theology would not even be escaped by those who might try to avoid it by not looking "below the line" at the notes. Even the marginal cross-references would send the searcher on a carefully plotted trail of references that would lead to the appropriate dispensational conclusion. Text headings would predispose the reader to think dispensational thoughts. The entire text of *The Scofield Reference Bible* has been "rightly divided," right down to the margins!

Conclusion

There is no doubt that *The Scofield Reference Bible* has helped to solidify and advance the dispensationalist cause. Through the sales of millions of these Bibles by one of the world's largest publishing companies (Oxford University Press), dispensational thought has been projected into virtually every Christian bookstore in America and even into such secular bookstores as B. Dalton's, Waldenbooks, and others.

Scofield would be excited to know that in the era that is destined to proceed from bad to worse with the spread of infidelity and liberalism in Christendom, his Bible is the most popular edition available.

14. George Murray, *Millennial Studies: A Search for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1948, p. 14).

15. Comedian Steven Wright says that he once put instant coffee in a microwave oven and almost went back in time. He also has a microwave fireplace, so that he can sit in front of the fire for the evening in eight minutes.