

Sunday, September 9, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 70 The Decline of the Niagara Bible Conference

### **Introduction**

- In lessons 61 and 62, before our discussions on the history of the doctrine of inerrancy (Lessons 63 and 64) and the recovery of Pauline truth from 1870 to 1900, we were studying the impact that dispensational theology had on the Christian mainstream in the United States. This was clearly seen by looking at the formation and popularity of the Niagara Bible Conference movement.
- In this lesson we want to look at the impact of dispensational thinking upon some other meetings as well as consider the decline and breakup of the Niagara Bible Conference.

### **International Prophecy Conferences**

- During the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, premillennialism was surging in popularity largely due to the success of the Niagara Bible Conference. “Following the example of their fellow believers in England they opened an all-out campaign by sponsoring an international prophecy conference. The leadership for such a conference naturally fell to the men who were prominent in the Bible conference movement. James H. Brooks himself apparently acted as chairman of the “self-constituted committee. . . Gaebelein says that the idea for such a conference was suggested by Nathaniel West, a Presbyterian minister and scholar from Cincinnati, Ohio.” (Gaebelein, 32)
- According to Nathaniel West, the purpose of the conference was to “listen to a series of carefully prepared papers on the pre-millennial advent of the Lord Jesus Christ and connected truths, and to participate in such discussions as the topics may suggest. . . It seemed desirable that those who are looking for that blessed hope, should meet together in conference, as our honored brethren in England had recently done.” (West, 12)
- The men on the committee which issued the call for the first conference represented at least six denominations: Presbyterian, Episcopal, Reformed Episcopal, Baptist, Dutch Reformed and Anglican. The First International Prophecy Conference held in the United States convened on October 30, 1878 in New York City in the Church of the Holy Trinity, a Protestant Episcopal congregation. (Kraus, 81-82)
- The format of the conference was straight forward; prepared papers were read followed by open discussion. Besides these written essays a number of “addresses” were given, most of which were not published in the report of the conference. (Kraus, 82)
- This first conference concluded with the passing of the following five resolutions:
  - The absolute authority of Scripture
  - The literal fulfillment of Old and New Testament prophecy

- The imminency of the second coming of Christ
  - The progress of evil purging this age
  - The duty of the Church to pray, watch, and work (West, 8)
- “In analyzing the elements of dispensationalism present in the papers read at the conference, it is necessary to remember that the main thrust of the conference was toward establishing the premillennial advent. Therefore, the unity of the group against a common opponent, postmillennialism, was stressed.” (Kraus, 83)
  - The most striking example of full-fledged dispensationalism at the 1878 conference is found in the closing speech given by W.P. Mackay:
    - “Before, through God’s grace, I saw these blessed truths, my reading of Scripture was considerably mixed up. Awkward texts, ever and anon, would come up, for which I could make no place. . . Thus it is with much of our ordinary eschatology. Text after text is found for which there is no place. Entire dispensations are lost sight of. Jewish truth gets hopelessly mixed up with Gentile truth, and the Church’s hope gets sadly crushed out by both.” (Mackay, 474-475)
  - “The real impact of dispensationalism upon the men at this conference can be judged better by examining their definition of the Church and the Kingdom and their relation to each other. Historic premillennialism made a clear, sharp distinction between the two, in contrast to postmillennialism which more closely identified them. The difference between historic and dispensationalist premillennialism on this point does not lie in the careful distinction made between the Church and the Kingdom as two separate distinct parts of God’s plan for history. Rather it lies in the dispensationalist attempt to associate the Kingdom entirely with the Jews, and to make a qualitative distinction between the two dispensations. . . The distantly dispensational addition to this doctrine was that the new covenant made with Israel in the Kingdom was not to be identified with the covenant which Christ made with the Church.” (Kraus, 85)
  - The Second International Prophetic Conference was held in Chicago Illinois between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of November 1886. George C. Needham, who served as the secretary for the second conference, said that it was called in response to many requests that had come to the men who planned the first conference. Thirty-four millenarian either spoke at the conference or signed the call. Of these, nineteen had been associated at the Niagara conference, twenty had participated in the 1878 conference and twenty-one would remain active in future conferences. (Sandeen, 157) In his preface to the essays presented at the conference titled *Prophetic Studies of the International Prophecy Conference*, Needham says that hundreds of men, including some postmillennialists, endorsed the call. (Kraus, 90)
  - According to Kraus, dispensationalism played a more significant role at the second conference than it did at the first. Two distinct dispensational schemes were set forth by one A.J. Frost and another by W. E. Blackstone. (Kraus, 91)

- A.J. Frost, presented the following dispensational outline:
  - Paradisiacal or Edenic
  - Antediluvian
  - Patriarchal
  - Mosaic
  - Christian
  - Millennium (Ehlert, 73-74)
  
- William E. Blackstone articulated his dispensational outline as follows:
  - *Eden*, the aion of Innocence, terminating in the expulsion.
  - *Antediluvian*, the aion (conscience the only restraint), terminating in the flood and reduction of the race.
  - *Postdiluvian*, the aion of government (man put under civil authority, Gen. 9:6), terminating in the destruction of Sodom.
  - *Patriarchal*, the pilgrim aion (Heb. 11:8-16), terminating the overthrow of Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea.
  - *Mosaic*, the Israelitish aion, terminating in the crucifixion of Christ and the destruction of Jerusalem.
  - *Christian*, the aion of the mystery, terminating in the great tribulation, the coming of the Lord, the “Judgment of Nations,” and another great reduction of the world’s population.
  - *Millennium*, the aion of manifestation, terminating in Satan’s last deception and the Judgement of the great white throne. (Kraus, 33-34)
  
- “W.E. Blackstone’s outline is practically identical to Scofield’s with its seven “aions.” Further, and more important, he has picked out what he considers to be the distinguishing feature of each dispensation. A statement made in his speech also suggests that he held the view later espoused by Scofield that there are different methods of salvation in each dispensation. . . “We believe there is no key to Scripture more potent than this (recognition of dispensations).” (Kraus, 91)
  
- A.T. Pierson, later one of the consulting editors on the *Scofield Reference Bible*, stated the following at the 1886 prophecy conference:
  - “The careful student of Scripture . . . finds dispensation succeeds dispensation in human history, all marked by seven features essentially the same. First an advance in fullness and clearness of revelation; then gradual spiritual declension; then conformity to the world ending with amalgamation with the world; then a gigantic civilization, brilliant but Godless; then parallel development of evil and good; then apostasy, and finally a catastrophe.” (Kraus, 92)
  
- Many other teachers, such as H.M. Parsons of Toronto, Ontario, J.S. Kennedy from Abingdon, Virginia, and J.G. Princell espoused distinctly dispensational beliefs in the speeches they presented at the conference. Princell clearly taught the Darbyite doctrine of the pretribulation

rapture, while others did not explicitly teach this doctrine it is clear that it influenced their thinking. (Kraus, 93)

- For example, G.S. Bishops stated:
  - “Focalize the Scriptures, and they teach that all the lines of God’s eternal purposes as to the future blessing of the world meet their fulfillment—not mystically in Christianity and figuratively through the church, but literally after the church has been caught away into heaven—in the restoration of the Jews, God’s chosen earthly people to their original and promised land.” (Kraus, 93)
- As we will soon see when we discuss the breakup of the Niagara Bible Conference, it should not be assumed that all the men who participated in the 1886 conference enjoyed one hundred percent doctrinal agreement. Many were already beginning to question the pretribulation rapture of the church.
- Before we leave our discussion of the impact of dispensational theology on the 1886 International Prophecy Conference it is interesting to note that Revell, the publishing house that printed the notes from the meetings, included advertisements for the following books by dispensational authors:
  - *Eight Lectures on Prophecy* by W. Trotter and T. Smith
  - *Plain Papers on Prophetic Subjects* by W. Trotter
  - *Papers on the Lord’s Coming* by Mackintosh
  - *Lectures on the Book of Revelation* by Darby
  - *Notes on the Pentateuch* by Mackintosh (Huebner, 19)

### **Breakup of the Niagara Bible Conference**

- “At the moment of its greatest success and near triumph, the millenarian movement ironically fell victim to an irreparable loss of leadership and a crisis of internal dissension that eventually turned hopes to ashes. An alliance of conservatives and millenarians was apparently achieving considerable success in stemming the flood of critical views and holding the churches to more specific and rigid statements of faith. . .” (Sandeen, 208)
- As we have already seen, a small but stable group of men dominated the late nineteenth-century Bible and prophetic conference movement. These men were close contemporaries, most of them ranging from thirty-five to forty-five years of age in 1875 when the Niagara conference was beginning. All of these men remained active in the movement until the last decade of the century when, beginning with A.J. Gordon in 1895, the great majority of them died within ten years. That the two foremost leaders of the movement, Gordon and Brookes, should be the first to pass away certainly added to the difficulties of the remaining millenarians. (Sandeen, 208)

- A few years before his death in 1897, Brookes complained that “it is a sad fact that pre-millennialists, notwithstanding their knowledge of the truth, are going to pieces.” Ernest R. Sandeen author of *The Roots of Fundamentalism* says, “that controversy did not break out with the Niagara leadership before Brooke’s death seems due only to the reverence in which he was held by his friends.” (Sandeen, 209-210)
- “The immediate cause for the decline of the Niagara Conference was the death of A.J. Gordon in 1895 and of J.H. Brookes in 1897. Brookes had been the president of the conference for years, and had held the movement together even though there was a growing divergence of opinion.” (Kraus, 99)
- “Perfect agreement has never been the rule among theologians, but the millenarians put a special premium upon unity . . . the most serious crisis among America millenarians involved the acceptance of the crucial point of Darby’s eschatology, the any-moment coming or secret rapture.” (Sandeen, 210)
- The catalyst in this controversy was Robert Cameron, a Canadian Baptist who had become a member of the executive committee of the Niagara group in the early 1880s. Cameron was troubled in 1884 by frequent reference in Niagara addresses to the possibility of Christ’s imminent return—“before the morning dawned, before the meeting closed, and even before the speaker had completed his address.” (Sandeen, 210)
- Kraus reports that Cameron had possessed certain reservation about the pretribulation rapture for some time before he came into contact with the writings of B.W. Newton, S.P. Trengelles, and George Mullers—leaders of the Plymouth Brethren who had rejected Darby’s teachings regarding the timing of the rapture. (Kraus, 100)
- Armed with information gleaned from Darby’s critics, Cameron took his objections to Nathaniel West who was respected among all the Niagara leaders for his theological acuity. Cameron recounts the results of his late night Bible study with West in his book *Scriptural Truth About the Lord’s Return*. According to Cameron, at about two o’clock in the morning West turned to Cameron and said, “Cameron, I begin to think you are right. I will give these matters careful and exhaustive attention, and if I find that the Scriptures teach contrary to what is taught in this conference, I will reverse myself and boldly defend the truth.” (Cameron, 145-146)
- “The results of that review began to appear in the nineties when West attacked the theory of the secret rapture in a series of pamphlets and articles.” (Sandeen, 210) “In 1892 he published a twelve-page pamphlet entitled *The Coming of the Lord in the “Teaching of the Twelve Apostles,”* and in 1893 a thirty-four-page pamphlet, *The Apostle Paul and the “Any-Moment” Theory*. In both of these he repudiated the teaching, attacking it on both historical and Biblical grounds.” (Kraus, 101)
- West’s actions were devastating, the leaders of the Niagara Conference began to take sides, thus dividing the testimony of this influential agency, and—which was worse—many become

convinced that they had been mistaken and that the Niagara Conference had been teaching error for twenty years. (Sandeen, 211) In addition to West and Cameron, at least W.J. Erdman, James M. Stifler, William G. Moorehead, and Henry W. Frost changed their minds during the next few years. (Cameron, 148)

- “Brookes knew about this disaffection and discussed the problem with his Niagara colleagues, but he never budged in his belief that the Second Advent might come before his life ended. His firm conviction was not all academic, moreover, for Brookes felt the strongest aversion to death. He had suffered intensely through the deaths of two young daughters and had preached about death as a hideous ogre and the king of terrors.” (Sandeen, 210)
- “The Niagara group met as usual after Brooke’s death, although the conference site was moved away from Niagara-on-the-Lake. That Brooke’s influence was essential soon became evident, however, and talk of disbanding the conference began to be heard.” (Sandeen, 212)
- “The attendance at the meetings began to fall off from 1898 on. In 1900 Cameron noted that there was a ‘marked absence of young people,’ and further that ‘the number of evangelists and pastors did not seem so great as in former years.’ More serious yet, he felt that there was ‘an evident absence of fervor and depth of conviction which marked the teaching of former years.’ ” (Kraus, 103) Cameron did not allude to the doctrinal disagreements confronting the group but called for a conference of Niagara leaders to diagnose and solve the problems. (Sandeen, 212)
- “Such a meeting was held in Brooklyn in the fall of 1900, with W.J. Erdman presiding. After a discussion of the variation in prophetic interpretation which existed among them, some agreement seems to have been reached. It was decided to hold two smaller Bible study conferences the coming year instead of a single large one. The first conference was planned for the coming winter, and was to be held in some large centrally located city. The second one was to be held at a resort during the following summer. The winter meeting apparently was held as scheduled, but the following May (1901), instead of issuing a call for the summer conference, the committee announced its decision not to send out a call. Their only explanation was that many smaller local and more specialized Bible study conferences had come into existence and had drawn interest away from the larger meeting. With this explanation the Niagara Conference expired.” (Kraus, 103-104)
- In actual fact, the reason given by the committee was only part of the story. Tensions caused by doctrinal disagreements play a major role in the committee’s decision to terminate the conference. Scofield himself admitted that this disagreement was one of the causes contributing to the closing of the conference. (Gaebelein, 40-41)
- One final attempt was made to keep the Niagara flame burning bright. A group of men who had been active in the Niagara movement took steps to found a new conference that would be the worthy successor of the Niagara Bible Conference. In December 1901 a meeting was held in Boston at Claredon Street Baptist Church, the former church of A.J. Gordon. Millenarians from both sides of the any-moment rapture dispute were represented. The pretribulationists were

represented by Scofield, Munhall and Gray, while the posttribulationists included Cameron, Moorehead and Erdman. (Sandeen, 214)

- Meetings such as this in which contending factions simply ignore their differences for the sake of appearances, seldom fool the public and rarely solve anything. Within a few weeks of the Boston conference, the strife flamed up more hotly than ever and premillennialism was torn apart. (Sandeen, 214)

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