

Sunday, January 13, 2013—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 88 Lewis Sperry Chafer and the Founding of Dallas Theological Seminary

Introduction

- While the mid-Acts movement was in its infancy in the 1920s under the leadership of J.C. O’Hair there were also new developments within mainstream premillennial Fundamentalism. One of these was the founding of Dallas Theological Seminary.

Who Was Lewis Sperry Chafer?

- “Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952) was a well-known American premillenarian, dispensationalist, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, writer, and conference speaker. Chafer was born in Rock Creek, Ohio, the second of three children born to a graduate of Auburn Theological Seminary, Presbyterian/Congregational institution in New York. He father Thomas Franklin Chafer, was a Congregationalist Pastor, and Thomas and his wife, Lormia Sperry Chafer, were devoted, caring parents.” (Hannah, 67)
- According to John D. Hannah author of the entry on Lewis Sperry Chafer in the *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* two events from his childhood greatly impacted Lewis’ life. First he was converted to Christ under the tutelage of his parents at the age of six during his father’s first pastoral charge in Rock Creek. Second, in connection with his father’s death from tuberculosis in 1882, Lewis was challenged by an evangelist named Scott, who also was suffering from tuberculosis to peruse a career in Christian service. (Hannah, 67)
- Lomira now a single mother struggled to provide for her family. After at least two moves the family settled in Oberlin, Ohio where Lomira managed a boarding house so that the children could attend school. “Initially, Lewis entered the preparatory school attached to the college (1889) and then the Conservatory of Music of Oberlin College. He studied music in the conservatory for three semesters, fall and spring 1889-90 and the spring of 1891. There are no indications that Chafer took religious studies at Oberlin College or elsewhere. Financial constraints prevented further study. Beginning in the fall of 1889, he associated with A.T. Reed, an evangelist under the auspices of the Congregational Church in Ohio, as a baritone and choir organizer in the meetings.” (Hannah, 67)
- “In 1896, he married Ella Lorraine Case, whom he had met at Oberlin College, and the two formed an evangelistic team (Lewis preaching and singing with Lorraine playing the organ). They briefly settled in Painesville, Ohio, where they served as directors of the music program of the Congregational Church though they continued to travel. . .” (Hannah, 67)
- “In 1899 Lewis became the interim pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lewiston, New York, although in the fall of the year he began a two-year ministry as an assistant pastor in the First Congregational Church of Buffalo. The initial year appears to have been an apprenticeship

with a view to his formal ordination as a minister in the Congregational community, which took place in April 1900.” (Hannah, 67)

- In 1901, Chafer moved to Northfield, Massachusetts where he operated a farm and his wife served as organist at the annual Northfield Conference. In 1904 the Southland Bible Conference was inaugurated in Florida, a counterpart of the Northfield conferences; Chafer was president of that conference after 1909. Through the Northfield conferences, the Chafer’s met an array of prominent evangelicals from both side of the Atlantic, among them G. Campbell Morgan, F. Be. Meyer, A.C. Gaebelein, James M. Gray, and W.H. Griffith Thomas.” (Hannah, 68)
- By far the most important contact that Chafer made in those years was with C.I. Scofield who as then the pastor of Trinitarian Congregation Church, Moody’s home church in Northfield. “Chafer found in Scofield a clear, biblically oriented teacher, and the two were thereafter bound together in ministry for two decades. Scofield led the younger Chafer into his particular understanding of the Scriptures as well as into a change of careers. No longer an itinerant evangelist, Chafer progressively joined his mentor as a traveling bible teacher, increasingly becoming a central participant in the bible conference movement. Gradually, through enlarged exposure in the major Bible and prophetic conferences, the publication of books and articles, and teaching in short-term Bible institutes, Chafer emerge in the early 1900s as a quiet, energetic leaders of one segment of the emrging evangelical movement.” (Hannah, 68)
- “From 1906 to 1910, he taught at the Mount Hermon School for Boys, instructing in Bible and music (his first published book was *Elementary Outline Studies in the Science of Music*, 1907). In 1906, he left the Congregational community to join the Troy Presbytery, Synod of New York, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), reflecting his discomfort with liberalizing trends in the denomination and Scofield’s ecclesiastical sympathies. . . His close identification with Scofield increased in the second decade of the century as Chafer moved to East Orange, New Jersey, to join the staff of the New York School of the Bible, an agency that distributed Scofield’s increasingly popular bible correspondence course, written in 1892, and office for the coordination of conferences activities. . . In 1913, he assisted Scofield in founding the Philadelphia School of the Bible apparently writing the curriculum. Due to his growing southern ministry, Chafer joined the Orange Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1912.” (Hannah, 68)
- “Scofield’s declining health, resulting in increasingly limited itinerant ministry, brought another shift in the sphere and nature of Chafer’s work. Moving to Dallas Texas in 1922, he became pastor of the First Congregation Church, which had been found in 1882 by Scofield (it was renamed Scofield Memorial Church in his honor during Chafer’s pastorate in 1923); Chafer pastured the church from 1922 to 1926 in addition to increased conference speaking.” (Hannah, 68)
- Charles Ryrie, author of the entry on Chafer in the *Baker Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* reports that Chafer moved to Dallas in 1922 with the expressed purpose establishing Dallas Theological Seminary. The school came into existence in 1924 and Chafer served as the president and professor of systematic theology until his death in 1952. (Ryrie, 218)

- Originally founded as Evangelical Theological College in 1924, Chafer's obligations to the Seminary forced him to resign from his pastorate as well as his secretarial duties for Central American Mission, though he continued as a conference speaker. After starting the Seminary his publications mushroomed and by 1948 his advanced age coupled with the burden of carrying on a school without secure financing, the growing turmoil over Scofieldian dispensationalism in his own Presbyterian church, and the death of his wife in 1944 were factors that progressively limited his public ministry. "After 1945, the operations of the school devolved to his executive assistant John F. Walvoord. Chafer died due to heart failure while on a conference tour in Seattle, Washington, in August 1952.

Chafer's Writing Ministry

- Throughout his career, Chafer's writing ministry increased. The following is a brief sketch of his writing ministry.
 - 1909—*Satan* (Scofield wrote the forward)
 - 1911—*True Evangelism*
 - 1915—*The Kingdom in History and Prophecy*
 - 1917—*Salvation*
 - 1918—*He That is Spiritual*
 - 1919—*Seven Major Biblical Signs of the Times*
 - 1921—*Must We Dismiss The Millennium?*
 - 1922—*Grace*
 - 1926—*Major Bible Themes*
 - 1933—*Bibliotheca Sacra*—Dallas Theological Seminary acquired the journal for which Chafer wrote countless articles of the years.
 - 1948—*Systematic Theology* (8 vols.) (Hannah, 68-69)
- In addition to institutionalizing the theology of the Bible conference movement through the establishment of Dallas Theological Seminary, Chafer systematized its unique theological emphases with the publication of his *Systematic Theology* in 1948. This was significant because it was the first major attempt to set forth the teaching of dispensational premillennialism within the framework of traditional systematic. What Scofield's notes delineated in a dispensational approach to the Bible, Chafer's *Systematic Theology* simply enlarged. The work became the definitive statement of dispensational theology. (Hannah, 69-70)
- For the purposes of the *Grace History Project* in tracing the resurgence of Pauline truth and the historical development of the mid-Acts movement in the United States there are some statements in Chafer's 1915 publication *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* that are worth noting.
- The introduction was written by Scofield and bears further proof of the close relationship these men enjoyed. Among other things, Scofield states: "Following the Roman Catholic interpretation, Protestant theology has very generally taught that all the kingdom promises, and

even the great Davidic Covenant itself, are to be fulfilled in and through the Church. . . the great theme of predictive prophecy is that Kingdom. . . The New Testament reveals the present age as a parenthesis in the prophetic program during which the Church is called out from among the Gentiles, a stranger and pilgrim body, belonging to the kingdom of God, but in no sense identical with the kingdom of heaven.” (Chafer, 5-6)

- In Chapter One, titled “The Theme,” Chafer argues that “the kingdom revelation is a distinct body of Scripture running through both the Old Testament and the New. . . In view of these facts, it may be helpful to note some of the essential values accruing from, and conditions governing, the study of kingdom truth.” (Chafer, 9-10) These conditions include the following according to Chafer:
 - 1) Bible interpretation is incomplete without it.
 - 2) Knowledge of prophetic truth qualifies all intelligent Christian life and service.
 - 3) Kingdom and prophetic truths are being falsely represented.
 - 4) Unfulfilled prophecy is as credible as history.
 - 5) Prophetic language is equally as accurate as other Scriptures.
 - 6) Scripture must be rightly divided and applied.
 - 7) There can be but one true system of interpretation.

- Regarding the first condition listed above, “Bible interpretation is incomplete without it,” Chafer stated:
 - “It stands to reason, since one-fourth of the bible is in prophetic form, and five-sixths of the Bible is addressed to one nation to whom the kingdom promises are given, that any plan of study which avoids prophecy and ignores, or “spiritualizes,” God’s covenants with His chosen earthly people will be incomplete, misleading and subject to more human assumptions.” (Chafer, 10)

- In this same section Chafer, admits that there are two distinct features of the revelation given to Paul.
 - “It has been pointed out that two distinct revelations were given to the Apostle Paul. In Arabia he received directly from God the gospel of grace (Gal. 1:11-12) which he has presented, in the main, in the Rome and Galatian letters. This is a revelation of a new order, a new relationship to God, which is neither a perpetuation of Judaism, nor a modification of that system. Judaism remains intact and follows its predicted course, according to Scripture, to the end. The new revelation of “the grace of God which hath appeared,” and which is made possible by the cross, should not be colored by the Judaic teaching. It is a complete system in itself and, like Judaism, continues intact to its predicted end. For what else is Paul contending in Galatians if it is not that these two distinct systems shall not be mixed . . . The second revelation came, in the main, from Paul’s two years of imprisonment. This body of truth embraces the plan of the ages, the whole doctrine of the Church and the present out-calling of a heavenly body and bride as

recorded in the Ephesians and Colossian letters. It is they advance body of truth which is never comprehended apart from the exact lines of distinctions laid down in kingdom revelations.” (Chafer, 10-11)

- In his comments on the second condition stated above, “knowledge of prophetic truth qualifies all intelligent Christian life and service,” Chafer indicates that he understood grace to the governing principle of the current age:
 - “In it a serious mistake to press law-observance in the face of repeated revelations that he believers of this age is not under the law as his rule of life (Rom. 6:14; 10:4-5; Gal. 5:18; 2 Cor. 3:11,17). So also it will be found that at present, service is the accomplishment of divine undertakings never before revealed, and its motives are alone the mighty governing principles of grace.” (Chafer, 13)
- Expounding on point six, “scriptures must be rightly divided and applied,” Chafer argued the four gospels have no application to the church but comprise specific instruction to Israel:
 - “It has been said, “All Scripture is for us, but all Scripture is not about us.” It all bears a message to us, but is not all our rule of life. It will not do for Gentile believers to read themselves into the great portion of the Bible which treats distinctly of a chosen nation, still a separate people in the earth, under the special unbroken purpose of God and exactly where God intended them to be at this very hour. . . A right division and application of Scripture demands that a portion of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus be recognized as belonging to the divine covenants with one nation in which Gentiles have no part (Eph. 2:11-12). During these ministration Gentiles were not in view (Matt. 10:5) nor can they be made to so appear by any fair method of interpretation.” (Chafer, 16-17)
- The final paragraph in Chapter V, titled “The Kingdom in History and Prophecy” clearly states that Israel’s earthly blessings have not been transferred to the church because of Israel’s unbelief.
 - “To conclude that these literal earthly blessings for Israel were transferred into spiritual blessings for all nations because Israel rejected and crucified her King at His first appearing, compels one to ignore the bulk of Old Testament prophecies and the plain promise and teachings of the Jesus. The oath of Jehovah still stands, and He know no defeat. His plan has not been changed. To speak of the kingdom as postponed is to consider it within the perspective of Israel’s final glory.” (Chafer, 62)
- In Chapter VI, “Present Truth” Chafer says much about the current dispensation with which a mid-Acts dipsensationalists would agree. Please consider the following statements:
 - “These new unfolding of “grace and truth,” it will be seen, are in no way related to or a part of, those earthly kingdom revelations which had been previously recorded by the sacred writers. Much is in contrast between these two bodies of truth; but it is even more important to see that a great difference lives in the fact that one treats of a celestial sphere

of spiritual reality which is a much about temporal, earthly covenants of the other as heaven is higher than the earth. . . Christianity is totally opposite of Judaism and any mixture of the two must result in the loss of all that is vital in the present plan of Salvation. One made its appear to the limited resources of the natural man and conditioned his life on the earth; the other sets aside the natural man, secures a whole new being in Christ Jesus, and counsels that new being in his pilgrim journey to his heavenly home.” (Chafer, 64)

- “It is never said of any Old Testament saint that he was “a member fo the body of Christ,” or that he was “accepted in the beloved”; but the New Testament saint is all this, and has been made the righteousness of God in him (Rom. 3:21-22; 10:3-4; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; Eph. 1:6).” (Chafer, 67)
- “As truly as the Christian is a new creature and a heavenly citizen, so every condition within the new life is supernatural. The human limitations has been perfectly anticipated and provided for in the fact, that the all-sufficient Spirit indwells every saved person (Rom. 5:5; 8:9; Jhn 3:6; 7:39; 14:16-17; Gal. 6:4; 1 Cor. 6:19). This universal abiding presence of the Spirit in a saved person, providing nothing short of the sufficiency of God for the least of His children, is a vastly different relationship than had been known before.” (Chafer, 67-68)
- “The Epistles of the New Testament present a distinct heavenly rule of life which is gracious in contrast to law. They instruct a heavenly citizen in his normal walk and life. Attempted obedience to these precepts will never make a heavenly citizen: they are rather set before him because he is already a heavenly citizen through the power of God. Therefore they do not carry a legal imperative; but are presented as “beseeching,” and under the suggestive phrase, “as it becometh saints” . . . a new governing rule of lie is given to those who are looking back in saving faith to Calvary. Obedience to the new principle of life under grace would not save one. It only suggests the normal manner of life for those who have already become heavenly in being through the alone sufficient power of God. The new principle of life through grace is superhuman; but according to the purpose of God it is to be perfectly fulfilled by the power of the indwelling Spirit.” (Chafer, 68-69)
- Chapter Six, “The Church Which is His Body” bears witness to the standard Acts 2 arguments about the formation of the body of Christ and the revelation of the mystery. Chafer begins the chapter by stating, “the new purpose of God in this age is seen to be the out-calling of a heavenly people. They form a part of the kingdom in its present mystery form (Mt. 13); but are in no way related to the Messianic earthly kingdom of Israel other than that they, as the bride of the King, will be associated with Him in His reign.” (Chafer, 71) Not only does Chafer argue that the church began in Acts two on the day of Pentecost, but he also states that Christ spoke of the yet future church three times during his earthly ministry. However, in the very next paragraph Chafer speaks of the church which is his body as a sacred secret committed to the Apostle Paul and fully set forth in the books of Ephesians and Colossians.

- “The fuller revelation of “the church which is his body” (Eph. 1:22-23) was committed to the Apostle Paul. Her formation, being and destiny is the theme of the prison revelation and forms the basis of the prison epistles, especially Ephesians and Colossians. The Apostle, writing of this special revelation given to him concerning the purpose of God in this dispensation of grace, records that there was a mystery, or a sacred secret, not made known to other ages, but revealed to himself and the other Apostles that Gentiles were to become fellow heirs with the Jews in one body. A Gentile blessing had been a foreview of the Old Testament and was associated with the earthly kingdom glories of Israel; but Paul’s revelation is of a new formation, into a new body, a new creation, “partakers of his promise in Christ by the Gospel,” which is not found in the Old Testament.” (Chafer, 75)
- The totality of Chafer’s comments reveals the following inconsistencies. First he says that Christ spoke of the Church three times in the gospels at time when he has previously argued extensively that the kingdom of God was being offered to Israel. Second, he states that the church was a mystery not revealed until God caused the Apostle Paul to understand it. How then could Christ have spoken about the church the subject of the mystery before it was revealed to Paul? If Christ spoke of the church “which is his body” in the gospels than it was not a mystery when God revealed it to Paul. In addition, on pages 76-77, Chafer argues using Ephesians 2:11-18 that the body of Christ could not be formed until the middle wall of partition was broken down yet he does not explain how this happened prior to Acts two thereby allowing Acts two to be the birthday of the church.
- In conclusion it should be noted that much that Chafer says in *The Kingdom of God in History and Prophecy* about grace being the operative principle of God during the current dispensation is expanded in his 1922 book *Grace*.

Works Cited

- Chafer, Lewis Sperry. *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy*. Chicago, IL: The Bible Institute Colportage, 1915.
- Hannah, John D. “Lewis Sperry Chafer,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1996.
- Ryrie, Charles C. “Lewis Sperry Chafer,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001.