

Sunday, November 3, 2013—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 113  
The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift

### **The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift**

- In 2007, Dr. R. Todd Mangum wrote a book titled *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936 to 1944*. On November 19, 2010, Dr. Mangum presented a lecture to the Dispensational Study Group of Evangelical Theological Society of Atlanta, Georgia titled *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: How It Happened, Why It Happened, Can it be Repaired?* In this lecture Mangum address the issues that led the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS hereafter) to formally renounce dispensational theology in 1944.
- Toward the beginning of his lecture Dr. Mangum points out that many of the patriarchs of American dispensationalism were Presbyterians, also noting the connection the denomination had with Dallas Theological Seminary at the time of its inception.
  - “James Hall Brookes, C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Everett Harrison, Roy Aldrich, John F. Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and S. Lewis Johnson. In fact, Dallas Theological Seminary – the “capital” of dispensational theology, was originally conceived as largely a Presbyterian school (though officially always interdenominational). When Dallas Theological Seminary was founded in 1924, and throughout its early years, Presbyterian students and faculty were predominant.” (Mangum, 2)
- Mangum quotes the work of John Hannah, the author of *An Uncommon Union: Dallas Theological Seminary and American Evangelicalism*, and the seminary’s church historian to prove this point:
  - “While the [seminary] was officially nondenominational, the majority of its faculty in the 1920s, the general focus of its teaching, and many of the students were Presbyterian. Speaking of the faculty, Chafer noted in 1925 that they were “almost wholly drawn from the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches.” . . . On another occasion he stated, “The simple fact is that we are teaching the most conservative Presbyterian interpretations here and we include on our faculty now seven Southern Presbyterian ministers.” . . . Perhaps the Presbyterian nature of the institution is most clearly captured in the assertion “it [the seminary] stands on the great vital truths embodied in that marvelous document, The Westminster Confession of Faith” [Letter, Lewis Sperry Chafer to D. S. Kennedy, editor of the Presbyterian, Dallas, Texas, 23 October 1924; Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, ADTS].” (quoted in Mangum, 2)
- “This early connection between dispensationalism and Reformed, Presbyterian (Covenant [!]) theology helps explain the generally Calvinistic cast of most dispensational theology (and virtually *all* of American dispensational theology originally). It also helps explain why the debate

between dispensationalism and covenant theology has sometimes been characterized by such animosity. It is, at root, a family feud,” according to Mangum. (Mangum, 2)

- Dispensationalism was deemed heterodox (not in accordance with established or accepted doctrines or opinions, especially in theology; unorthodox) by an official committee of the PCUS in 1944. This committee of renowned scholars within the PCUS reached their decision primarily by investigating the writings of C.I. Scofield (*Scofield Reference Bible*) and Lewis Sperry Chafer then president of Dallas Theological Seminary. (Mangum, 3)
- Chafer, who was still alive during the investigation and verdict, believed and maintained that the PCUS’s decision was the result of a liberal conspiracy against him when, in actual fact, it was the most conservative members of PCUS that were responsible. (Mangum, 3-4)
- Mangum reports that the Covenant wing of the PCUS started the confrontation, thereby taking the dispensationalists by surprise. A major reason why the dispensationalists were attacked was because they were so successful at propagating their views.
  - By 1930, the *Scofield Reference Bible* had achieved a million sales – the first ever Oxford University Press publication to do so. A little known fact is that it was largely sales of the *Scofield Reference Bible* that enabled the prestigious Oxford University Press to survive the Great Depression. That notwithstanding, many scholars at the time were galled that the prestigious Oxford Press would stoop to lend its credibility to a work they regarded as less than credible, at best. Scholars and professors in the seminaries regularly pilloried it, and urged people not to use it.

But, like a blockbuster movie whose ticket sales continue to climb however much the critics skewer it, the *Scofield Reference Bible* continued to be bought, used and cherished by ordinary church folks across denominational, racial and class divides all over the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain. Many an average pastor or Sunday school teacher found the notes and cross-reference helps of the *Scofield Reference Bible* a true Godsend.” (Mangum, 7-8)

- According to Dr. Mangum, financial pressures caused by general trends within Fundamentalism may have raised tensions between Dallas and the PCUS: “Dallas Seminary was founded in the mid-1920s with the goal of training preachers, teachers, professional clergy and lay leaders in the theology and ministry approach of the Bible Conference movement. (This was the movement from which the *Scofield Reference Bible* and Scofield and Chafer themselves had come.) These schools likewise found a market of students, and began drawing conservative, evangelical and fundamentalist students from numerous denominations – at Dallas Seminary, primarily from the Presbyterian denominations. This was right at the time when the denominational schools were suffering great financial hardship. It was not long before denominational leaders began to notice that schools with “dispensational” ideas were draining people and resources from their own denominational works.” (Mangum, 8)

- The defining moment in which covenant theologians came in force against dispensationalism was in 1936. This was “the year in which the new, “pure” Northern Presbyterian denomination was formed (Orthodox Presbyterian Church). Up to that point, conservatives in the Northern Presbyterian Church, frankly, were willing to tolerate a lot. It was once they separated that they became more insistent on a narrower set of doctrinal convictions, and became more intolerant of differences.” (Mangum, 8-9)
- “Shortly after the OPC had been formed in 1936, a dispute over “dispensational premillennialism” erupted. It all began with the publication of three sets of articles, all written by Westminster Seminary professors, all from the perspective of traditionalist Presbyterianism. All three argued that establishing a true Presbyterian Church meant repudiating any intrusion of “anti-Reformed” teachings, specifically Arminian and “dispensationalist” teachings, which were too commonly found in the general evangelical-fundamentalist movement. Taking up a different aspect of this one central thesis, each article sought one common objective: to establish a “truly Reformed”, “true Presbyterian” identity over against a less vigilant one.” (Mangum, 9)
- Contained within this fight was an attempt to separate “truly Reformed” viewpoints from “un-Reformed” view points. J. Gresham Machen, along with others, tried to delineate from “acceptably Reformed premillennialism” and the unacceptable or “heretical” version of premillennialism typified by the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In the end, this “unacceptable” brand or “un-Reformed” brand of premillennialism was labeled dispensationalism. Tensions mounted within the OPC between the amillennialists and premillennialists until June of 1937 when several Presbyterian premillennialists split from the OPC altogether to form the explicitly premillennial Bible Presbyterian Church. This separation between the OPC and the BPC fostered the impression among the “truly Reformed” that the only way to maintain premillennialism was to redefine the Westminster Confession to accommodate the view, thereby creating a splinter group. (Mangum, 10-12)
- “One lesson learned by Southern Presbyterian leaders as they scrutinized the Northern controversies was that troublemakers, whether modernist or fundamentalist, could be identified by their attitude toward the church’s doctrinal statement, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Once the “fundamentalists” severed themselves from the “modernists,” Southern Presbyterian leaders took note that it was the *premillennialists* who then had to separate again, and adjust the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to accommodate their view. And to make matters worse, these premillennialists seemed to have a nasty habit of splitting Southern Presbyterian churches and carrying off the membership to their “independent” organizations. To a Southern Presbyterian, few actions could be considered less Christian (or less Presbyterian).” (Mangum, 12-13)
- In the estimation of Southern Presbyterians watching the fighting of their Northern brethren, dispensationalism was viewed as the cause of these splits. It was the Presbytery of North Alabama that lit the powder keg when they asked the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly to investigate whether or not “dispensationalism” was in accord with the Westminster Confession. In response, an Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession was formed to investigate the matter. (Mangum, 13-14)

- It was this Ad Interim Committee on Changes in Confession that reported to the general assembly that dispensationalism was out of harmony with the Westminster Confession of Faith. To this day, this action remains as close to an official denunciation of dispensationalism by a Reformed-Covenantalist body as has ever been produced. While the Confession Committee was merely advisory to the PCUS General Assembly, their findings were published as an official judgment of officers of the church both in church papers and in a separate pamphlet published by the Executive Committee of Religious Education and Publication of the PCUS. The credibility of the Committee's report is witnessed by the fact that its criticism of dispensational theology has been maintained by Covenant theologians ever since. (Mangum, 14-15)
- “Significantly, the Confessional Committee declared “dispensationalism” an aberrant theological system, not because of its premillennialist eschatology, but because of its deviation from the covenant theology of the Westminster Standards. And, just to underscore how careful the Southern Presbyterian Church was in drawing this distinction: before the PCUS General Assembly would accept the Committee's final report, they added two known premillennialists to the Committee to ensure that there was no bias against the premillennial view inadvertently allowed into the report. (The Confessional Committee of seven that submitted its unanimous report against dispensationalism in 1944 including three premillennialists: Samuel H. Sibley, J.P. McCallie, and L. Nelson Bell.) In short, the PCUS General Assembly took elaborate measures to ensure that the premillennial view and its implications were represented and understood accurately and fairly on the Confessional Committee; and the Confessional Committee, in turn, took pains to clarify that premillennialism *per se* was not a problem.” (Mangum, 17)
- “The heart of covenant theologians' objection to the position they described as “dispensationalism” was threefold: 1) dispensationalism taught two ways of salvation (one way [a system of legal merit] in the Old Testament, and a diametrically different way [grace through faith alone] in the New Testament); and thus 2) misconstrued the Old Testament Law as detrimental to Christian faith and life; and 3) failed to recognize implications of Christ's current reign, by failing to recognize Christ's inauguration of the Kingdom through His life, death and resurrection.” (Mangum, 18-19)

### **Controversy Continues**

- C.R. Stam's *The Controversy* chronicles the ongoing controversy faced by members of the Grace Movement through the 1940s and into the 1950s. It is not our intention to rehash here the totality of these controversies when they are outlined in Pastor Stam's book. Our purpose is just to summarize some of them to round out our summary of the 1940s. Page numbers have been provided for those interested in reading more about each controversy.
- 1944, August 4—John R. Rice from Wheaton, IL and editor of *Sword of the Lord* periodical openly attacks the “hyperdispensationalism” of O'Hair and Stam. (Stam, 132-159)

- Disputes with John R. Rice continued into the 1950s. O’Hair’s *The Dispensationalism of Dr. E.W. Bullinger, Dr. C.I. Scofield, and Dr. John R. Rice: O’Hair Answer to Rice’s Answer* is evidence of this fact.
- 1945—Herrmann Braulin, Pastor of Hawthorne Gospel Church (a man Stam knew since childhood) tried to “rescue” a group of believers from “heresy” by giving them a copy of *O’Hairism!* (86-89)
- 1946, January—Dr. Keith L. Brooks editor of *Prophecy Monthly* runs an article misrepresenting both the *Berean Searchlight* and Stam: “1) That we are "The exponents of the Bullinger extreme dispensational ideas." 2) That we teach that the Lord's supper is not for this age. 3) That we teach that “'Church truth' is to be found only in the prison epistles of Paul." 4) That we teach "that miracles are ... confined to Peter's ministry as distinct from Paul's." 5) That we teach that "The Great Commission is Jewish." (Stam, 90-131)
- 1946, January—O’Hair writes *Some Comments on Recent Magazine Articles by Dr. William L. Pettingill, Dr. J. Oliver Buswell, Dr. Arthur F. Williams, Rev. James R. Graham Concerning Water Baptism*. As the title suggests, this booklet addresses the ongoing struggle between the Grace Movement and the Fundamentalists over the subject of water baptism.
- 1946, October—Stam writes an article for the *Searchlight* addressing the publication of a book titled “The New Higher-Criticism” by Dr. James R. Graham. Graham referred to Stam and O’Hair as “O’Hair-Stam-Neo-Tubingens” and “antinomian teachers.” (Stam, 160-193)
- 1947, June—Stam writes *The Twofold Purpose of God*.
- 1947, October—*The Voice*, the paper of the IFCA, runs an article written by the Religion Analysis Service (RAS) titled “Bullingeristic Ultra-Dispensationalism.” This article openly criticized both O’Hair’s message *The Most Wonderful Truth in the Bible* and the doctrinal platform of the GGF. O’Hair responded by writing, *Are Members of the I.F.C.A. Responsible For the Disgraceful Fanaticism of the Snake-Hugging Fundamentalists?*
- 1947, November—Stam responds to the October article in *The Voice* by the RAS with an article in the *Searchlight* titled “Religion Analysis Service, Inc. Is It Worthy of Our Confidence?” According to Stam, The Advisory Council of the RAS was comprised of the following notable Bible teachers: Arthur I. Brown, Lewis Sperry Chafer, R.V. Clearwaters, Charles L. Feinberg, W.S. Hottel, Harold S. Larism, R. McCarrel, William Pettingill, and Louis T. Talbot among others. (Stam, 194-224)
  - 1961—RAS analyzed of the Grace Movement again in the July-September issue of the *Discerner* the magazine of the RAS. In this article, O’Hairism was characterized as “a new garment for the old heresy of Bullingerism.”

- 1950, June—Stam runs an article in the *Searchlight* titled “It’s Time to Stop It” in which he speaks of having received a syllabus from a course on False Cults being taught at Omaha Bible Institute. Included on the syllabus was a lesson that dealt with the Grace Gospel Fellowship and Pastors J.C. O’Hair and C.R. Stam as propagators of Bullingerism under a new name. (Stam, 225-240)
- A common complaint repeatedly made by both O’Hair and Stam in their response to detractors was that they were being misrepresented. These men are constantly depicted as teaching “Bullingerism” despite their constant attempts to explain how they differed from EWB. Consequently, both O’Hair and Stam viewed their position as never having been fairly and straightly answered by their critics. Any attempt to answer their teaching devolved into accusations of “hyperdispensationalism” and personal attacks.

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