



# This World is not My Home

The origins and development of  
dispensationalism



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**MENTOR**





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## Introduction

Almost every evangelical Christian has come across the word dispensationalism at one time or another. Yet the term, and the movement to which it refers, has been defined in a variety of ways. Some will suggest that dispensationalism is a particular belief, or kind of belief, about the Bible's relationship to future events. Others say that it is a philosophy of history, a way of understanding how God relates to and manifests his will in human affairs. Still others claim that dispensationalism is less concerned with a particular theological content or view of the world than a hermeneutical methodology, a way of approaching and interpreting events.

This same diversity of opinion is typical in academic theological circles. Dispensationalism has traditionally been presented, by both its adherents and its detractors, as simply a method of biblical interpretation, or as merely an eschatological option, divorced from other areas of doctrine. I believe this is the case because in the last half century dispensationalism has been virtually ignored by systematic theology. All critical analysis of the system has been carried out under the auspices of biblical theology or church history. Dispensationalism indeed does have a distinctive way of reading the Bible, and eschatology does play a significant role in the thought of dispensationalist thinkers. Yet, to take either hermeneutics or eschatology as the appropriate point of departure for analyzing dispensationalism results in a truncated picture that brings to light only a slice of dispensationalism as a dogmatic system of Christian theology, and by and large ignores it as a world-and-life orientation.

The purpose of this study is not to identify a *sine qua non* for dispensationalist theology as it currently exists. Such would certainly prove an impossible task, for dispensationalist theologians are undertaking a radical rethinking of the movement. A rising progressivist movement within dispensationalist circles has subjected so much of the tradition to revision that any definition of



current dispensationalism is impossible to come by.

The purpose of this study is to look at two key figures in the history of dispensationalist thought who had a very clear vision of the nature and purpose of their theology. Though we may find their theological contributions largely useless for us, or even wrong-headed, we cannot afford to ignore their theology, if for no other reason than that dispensationalism has made an enormous impact upon American evangelical habits of mind and that dispensationalism – and even Christian orthodoxy – has been defined for a vast number of evangelicals largely by the efforts of these two men.

The two most important historical figures in the history of dispensationalism in America were C.I. Scofield (1843-1921) and Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952). Scofield wrote what is undoubtedly the single most important piece of dispensationalist literature, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (1909), and Chafer edited the influential journal *Bibliotheca Sacra* for many years and founded Dallas Theological Seminary, an institution committed to the promulgation of dispensationalist ideas. C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer stand respectively as popularizer and systematizer of dispensationalist theology in North America and as men who constructed institutional structures that would carry on their work and guarantee the survival of their vision after their deaths. Between them, their careers in dispensationalist theology stretched from the time of D. L. Moody (the 1880s) to Chafer's death in 1952. Because several of both men's works are still in print and the institutions in which they were so significant are still in existence, it may be said that their theology lives on even now.

One central, controlling idea informed, conditioned, and directed the theology of C.I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer: an absolute distinction between Israel and the church of Christ. This distinction is not merely historical, as though *Israel* refers to the people of God in the Old Testament and the *church* refers to the New Testament people of God. Indeed the Israel–church distinction is not fundamentally historical at all. Rather, the difference





between them is metaphysical, a difference of nature. Israel was understood as the earthly people of God while the church was conceived of as a heavenly people. As such, the two never mix or touch, and one cannot be confused with the other. They are always qualitatively distinct peoples. The word *Israel* cannot be applied to the New Testament church, and the church is not found in the pages of the Old Testament. The two are discrete, separate peoples in the plan and purpose of God. This metaphysical distinction controls how one is to properly read the Scriptures (Scofield called it *rightly dividing the Word of Truth*), and constitutes the one indispensable tenet of classical dispensationalist theology, for it is the central tenet from which classical dispensationalism sprang and the one tenet that makes proponents of the system dispensationalists.

Though widely associated with a particular set of eschatological beliefs within the theology of Scofield and Chafer, dispensationalism began as a critique of the Church of England by John Nelson Darby in the 1830s. Upon its arrival in North America, it was expanded into a more general critique of the wider secular culture. That which gave dispensationalism force as a critique was its Israel/church distinction, which was itself a product of Darby's critique of the Church of England. The kingdoms of this world cannot be associated with the kingdom of God because the latter is proclaimed by the prophets of the Old Testament to be the last stage of world history, a kingdom in which the Messiah visibly rules upon the throne of David in Jerusalem. Furthermore, this kingdom cannot be effected by human effort but will be inaugurated solely by the eschatological appearance of the Messiah. Nor can the church be associated with that kingdom. Her hope is heavenly. She is a heavenly people, united with Christ in the heavenly places. The church has no stock in the present world. Thus, the dispensationalist theology of Darby, and Scofield and Chafer, inherently contained a double line of cultural critique. The Christian is metaphysically separated from this world and all its structures. He knows that the world is under the dominion of the 'prince of this world', Satan. Thus, dispensationalism critiqued North American culture as (1) an earthly city which is ever at odds with that city which is above, and (2) qualitatively different from that



kingdom that Christ will usher in at his return to this world. Their critique, then, was Augustinian (verticalist or otherworldly: heaven as the negation of the world) at the very same time that it was millenarian (futurist: the future as the negation of present realities). The Augustinian critique is to be found in their ecclesiology, while the millenarian is located in their eschatology.

Scofield and Chafer's metaphysical distinction between Israel and the church, with the church as a distinctly heavenly organism, resulted in a dichotomistic understanding of the Word of God in history and the way in which mankind relates to and appropriates salvation and spiritual fulfilment. The dually dichotomistic reading of the Bible (Israel–church and church–world) provided a method of articulating Darbyist cultural critique, while eschatology and ecclesiology supplied the language.

Dispensational theology provided evangelicals with a clear method and program with which they could effectively oppose the theological liberalism and the modernist tendencies of the early twentieth century. The theology of Scofield and Chafer was not only aimed at denouncing the flaws that they thought they saw in modern culture, but was also meant to present an alternative vision of the world and man's place in it. A key element of that alternative understanding of the world was a notion of historical process that saw all change, except that which is initiated by divine and supernatural agency, to be retrogressive and even demonic, rather than progressive. By saying that Scofield and Chafer were opposed to the prevailing tendency of modern culture is not to say that they were thereby opposed to all culture. They not only affirmed a yet-future millennial ideal for human society, but also sought to conduct their lives and shape their environment according to their interpretation of biblical norms for human society. They did not withdraw into isolated monastic communities, but rather stressed a separation from the mainstream of society in order to construct and preserve the social structures required to sustain their beliefs and their own purity within an increasingly sinful world.

They were not anti-culturalists or even counter-culturalists





so much as they were social reactionaries. Scofield and Chafer strove to hold on to a world they felt was slipping away from the clear and imperative laws of God laid down in the Bible. To the extent that the world has fallen beyond redemption, however, they also sought to provide a theological framework by which the believer could affirm his own salvation from a hostile and deceptive world. Thus we find that the dispensational theology of Scofield and Chafer heightened the otherworldly strain in evangelical religion. If the world is indeed under the dominion of the Wicked One then the only course open to the believer is to flee the world. The believer is, at one and the same time, a warrior who denounces the sins of modern culture and a pilgrim who walks through the world without becoming involved in its life. Thus the dispensationalist agenda was twofold: (1) culturally, to try and hold on to a cultural primordium, a traditional even primitivistic time-honored Christian culture, by vocally attacking those forces which undercut the status quo of Bible-believing Protestant America, and (2) to provide a theology by which the believer could lay claim to his salvation within the midst of an increasingly demonic polity.

Although different emphases and peculiarities do appear in the thought of dispensationalism's primary exponents, the theology of the movement maintained an amazing degree of uniformity. It has been an essentially monolithic system of theology. In 1960, eight years after Chafer's death, Clarence Bass was rightly able to say that 'the lines of continuity from Darby to the present can be traced unbroken'.<sup>1</sup> While the immediate successors of Chafer found it expedient to modify his theology at points, they basically played the role of apologetes and fine tuners of the tradition as it had been passed down to them from Scofield and Chafer.

Today, however, the old dispensationalist certainties are far less certain. While many wish to retain the designation 'dispensationalist', and seek to theologize from the tradition,

1. Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960), 17.





there is nevertheless a genuine rethinking of dispensationalism as a theological system. This re-evaluation is taking place on two fronts, the exegetical and the theological. Exegetically, dispensationalist theologians today are far more willing to re-think the hermeneutical groundings of the system, and – even more crucially – appear willing to modify, change, or even scrap those elements of the system which do not proceed from sound exegetical inquiry. The question is no longer, ‘Does it agree with dispensationalist thought?’ but rather, ‘Does it agree with Scripture?’ Theologically, dispensationalists are willing to ask whether the worldview of their dispensationalist parents and grandparents was indeed the understanding of reality under which Moses or Paul operated.

This study will focus primarily upon the theological rather than the exegetical. This selected approach is not meant to slight the importance of exegetical determinations, but simply to hold Scofield and Chafer’s theology up to the light in order to see whether its theological conclusions make sense and to ask what sense they make of our world and our lives. We will not be charting how and when Scofield and Chafer’s theology (which we will often refer to as ‘classical dispensationalism’) has been called into question by the current generation. Rather, we will address our questions to Scofield and Chafer. We will be seeking to understand the contours and internal theological logic of classic dispensationalism. We will not only be seeking to discern the shape of their theology but want also to understand something of its historical environment, for it is my contention that classical dispensationalism was a child of its time and, as such, presents us with a masterpiece of historical contextualization.