

## Excursus: Fundamentalism, Evangelicalism, Dispensationalism

The terms “evangelicalism” and “fundamentalism” in their American context are disputed enough to warrant some brief comment, and the influence of dispensationalism on both is central to this dissertation.<sup>1</sup> Evangelicalism is the oldest and broadest of the terms, encompassing a category of Bible-believing, soul-saving, revival-seeking Christians. From their influence on the colonial period, their leadership role in American society during the nineteenth century and their resurgent participation in American culture and politics in the late twentieth century, evangelicals have played a central part in American history. Under this rubric we find coalitions of Reformed, Baptist, Holiness and Pentecostal groups, among others, both in identified evangelical traditions and as conservative voices within more liberal denominational groups. Certainly evangelical beliefs and practices will vary across this diverse gathering, but David Bebbington’s definition of the movement is helpful for this study. He has described evangelicalism as including any person or group adhering to the following characteristics: *biblicism*, or the belief that the Bible is the unique, supernaturally inspired revelation of God; *conversionism*, or the belief that an individual must make a decision to follow the Christian faith; *activism*, or the emphasis on extending the influence of Christianity; and *crucicentrism*, the focus on the cross of Jesus (i.e., the doctrine of the atonement) as the

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<sup>1</sup> Virtually every monograph on the history of American evangelicalism begins with some statement of definitions. Some examples: James D. Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 3-9; Marsden, *Reforming Fundamentalism*, 10-11, and “The Evangelical Denomination,” in Marsden ed., *Evangelicalism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), vii-xix; Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism*, 1-5, and Noll, David Bebbington and George A. Rawlyk, eds., *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, the British Isles, and Beyond, 1700-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6; Stone, *On the Boundaries of American Evangelicalism*, 1-21.

central theme of Christian preaching and teaching.<sup>2</sup> The attention given to crucicentrism among evangelicals should be seen in contrast to the emphasis on the moral example of Jesus found in more liberal traditions. Bebbington's quadrilateral will serve as the foundation for the use of the term "evangelicalism" in this study.

Fundamentalism represents the more conservative outgrowth of evangelicalism in response to modernizing influences around the turn of the twentieth century. Early fundamentalism was really a call back to what were seen as traditional formulas of orthodox Christian doctrinal positions, often from within established denominations. What might be called middle fundamentalism was the more militant and separatistic variety, attacking those who were perceived as threats to doctrinal orthodoxy and retreating from denominations, schools and other institutions which strayed beyond traditional boundaries. Later fundamentalism broke with the broader evangelicalism in 1957 over the cooperative evangelism of Billy Graham's ministry, a split which largely persists to the present day.<sup>3</sup> In this dissertation fundamentalism will be used only to describe specific individuals or groups which fit into the above categories.

Dispensationalism was overwhelmingly the most dominant and influential system of biblical interpretation among conservative Protestant churches and groups, and is thus significant to the present study.<sup>4</sup> In the dispensationalist model, history is divided into

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<sup>2</sup> David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-19.

<sup>3</sup> This is the central thesis of Farley Butler's dissertation, "Billy Graham and the End of Evangelical Unity" (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> The best short summary of dispensational theology is the first chapter of Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law, Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Pasadena: Fuller Seminary, 1990) 1-17. See also Fuller's "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. diss., Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957). A more recent assessment can be found in Timothy Weber, *On the Road to Armageddon: How Evangelicals Became Israel's Best Friend* (Grand

seven economies, or dispensations, each representing a unique facet of the relationship between God and his people, each providing a distinct matrix for redemption when humankind cannot measure up to the divine standard, and each ending in some form of human catastrophe. The dispensations are not simply periods of time, rather they are individual economies of salvation which demonstrate the complex nature of humankind's dependence upon God. Traditionally, the seven dispensations correlate to the seven days of creation in Genesis, though some proponents have had as few as three or as many as nine. The seventh, or Sabbath, day, in most systems, was thematically connected to the establishment of an earthly millennial kingdom, an aspect of dispensationalism which will be discussed below. In the model championed by C.I. Scofield, by far the most influential dispensationalist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the dispensations were: Innocency, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, Law, Grace, and Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

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Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 19-43. This summary of dispensationalism, unless otherwise noted, is dependent upon Fuller's chapter.

For representative participant descriptions of the traditional dispensationalist system see C.I. Scofield, *Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Findlay: Fundamental Truth Publishers, 1940); Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune: Loizeaux Bros., 1953) and *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965); John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay: Dunham, 1959); Arnold Ehlert, *A Bibliographic History of Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965). For a summary of a newer, slightly more moderate form of dispensationalism see Craig Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993).

For critiques of dispensationalism see Curtis I. Crenshaw and Daniel R. Morse, *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool, 1985); Keith A. Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1995); George Eldon Ladd, *The Blessed Hope* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956); Paul B. Fischer, *Ultra-Dispensationalism is Modernism: Exposing a Heresy Among Fundamentalists* (Chicago: Weir Bros., 1936) Fischer was an attorney in Chicago and a charter member of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship. For mediating positions from outside the dispensationalist tradition see Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America* [Mennonite]; and Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [Reformed] (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994).

For comparisons of the various millennial positions see Millard J. Erickson, *Contemporary Options in Eschatology: A Study of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977); Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*; and Robert G. Clouse, *The Meaning of the Millennium: Four Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977) Clouse's collection consists of essays and responses by George Eldon Ladd (historic premillennialism), Herman Hoyt (dispensational premillennialism), Loraine Boettner (postmillennialism), and Anthony Hoekema (amillennialism). See chapter six.

<sup>5</sup> Ehlert, *Bibliographic History*, 83.

But beyond the divisions of human history, one key characteristic of modern dispensationalism is the total separation between Israel and the Church. The number of dispensations can vary, as long as there is one for Israel (or, “the Law”), one for the Church (or, “Grace”), and one for the future earthly millennial kingdom; Dallas Theological Seminary, the intellectual centre of American dispensational thought, only requires these three dispensations in its doctrinal statement.<sup>6</sup> The “parenthetical” nature of the Church is a component of this dispensational system. If God’s plan is primarily focused on his chosen people, and the final act of this drama will be a second redemptive gesture to those people, then the Church functions only as a bridge or “parenthesis” amid the true purpose of history, the redemption of Israel. This separation of Israel from the Church is a key to understanding the interpretative model of dispensational theology, as it requires the faithful reader to approach biblical texts according to their relationship to one or the other. This separation of “Law-texts” from “Grace-texts” is called, in dispensational terms, “rightly dividing the Word of truth,” and is the key to any examination of dispensational hermeneutics.<sup>7</sup>

Central to dispensationalism is its literal interpretation of the Bible, especially the prophetic writings. Indeed, some early premillennialists did not refer to themselves as such, but rather as “literalists.”<sup>8</sup> In the face of increasing skepticism about the claims of Christianity, and as the religious landscape diversified through immigration and the rise

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<sup>6</sup> Fuller, *Gospel and Law*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 3-4

<sup>8</sup> Roger Robins, “*American Millenarian and Prophetic Review*,” in Mark Fackler and Charles Lippy, eds., *Popular Religious Magazines of the United States* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1995), 48.

of home-grown new religions, the dispensationalist model sought to reassert the primacy of Christianity—and the Bible—in American culture, though with a pessimistic twist. In the midst of political, economic and religious chaos, the dispensationalists proclaimed that God was actively involved in human history, and that he would soon bring it to a violent close. God had a plan, the dispensationalists argued, but it could only be discerned if one were willing to abandon what they perceived as the modernist tendency to allegorize the prophetic teachings of scripture, and instead interpret them literally. Literalism became a battle cry for dispensationalists in twentieth-century America, and certainly functioned as a litmus test for inclusion in their vision of the true church. And as dispensationalists became virtually indistinguishable from the slightly broader fundamentalist movement, their emphasis on the literal interpretation of scripture provided a foundation for the inerrancy debates of the twentieth century.

Biblical literalism has not been the only source of conflict for dispensationalists. The relegation of the Church to second-tier status effectively created an ecclesiology which has proved to be problematic, if not inherently destructive. Since the Church is really only an “in-between” institution, and thus not a permanent part of redemptive history, and since the Church will be a major source of evil according to dispensational eschatology, dispensationalists often brought with them a radically low view of organized religion. John Nelson Darby, the most important figure in the translation of dispensational views to America from Great Britain, argued that the true believer should have nothing to do with the institutional church.<sup>9</sup> This emphasis on separation did not endear the movement to denominational leaders, though many of their followers were

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<sup>9</sup> Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 38.

adopting dispensational views. Further, in dispensational eschatology one of the signs of the end will be the rise of apostasy within the Church. This created, for those who were longing for the consummation of history, a built-in need to find infidels among the brethren not only in churches, but in colleges, seminaries, and other Christian organizations as well. The result was, and has remained, a seemingly endless series of divisions and conflicts among dispensationalists in the conservative Protestant movement.

The eschatology of dispensationalism has become its most widely known feature.<sup>10</sup> In the dispensationalist model, the Church age will close with a series of clearly identifiable events, announcing that the final stage of human history has come. With some variation, this order of events is predicted as follows: first, in the Pretribulational Secret Rapture all believers will be “taken up” to meet with Christ in the air, leaving behind all who rejected the offer of faith in their lifetimes. Second, in the Great Tribulation, the Antichrist will join forces with the apostate Church to rule the world for seven years. The Tribulation itself is divided into two equal periods of three and a half years, the second of which will be a horrible time of suffering. Third, Christ and the saints will join to crush the Antichrist and his army at Armageddon, ending the Tribulation and ushering in the next chapter, Christ’s millennial reign on earth. During the millennium, Satan will be bound and rendered powerless until he is released for one final revolt at the end of the thousand years. Once he is permanently defeated, the dead will rise in a great resurrection, and human history will end after the Last Judgment. Interest in this futuristic component of dispensationalism is largely responsible for the

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<sup>10</sup> This summary is dependent on Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 87-88.

spread of the system as a whole. The conferences and publications which made dispensationalism such an influential factor in American evangelicalism did not achieve their dominance by emphasizing minutiae regarding the Age of Innocency. Rather it was this futurist element of dispensationalism which caught the attention of evangelicalism in America and beyond.

C.I. Scofield produced the most influential work of the dispensationalist tradition, a widely read edition of the King James Bible. Scofield consolidated his interpretation of prophetic detail into an elaborate system of Bible notes, and more than any other published work, the Scofield Bible is credited with the spread of dispensationalist views.<sup>11</sup> First published in 1909, with revisions in 1917 and 1967, the Scofield Bible sold over 5 million copies between 1909 and 1967, plus an additional 2.5 million copies of the 1967 revision.<sup>12</sup> Considering that virtually all ministers and Bible teachers in the dispensational tradition, as well as many of their followers, would have used the Scofield notes to interpret the Bible, its influence is impossible to determine with any accuracy. It is also impossible to overstate. One such preacher, Leander Munhall, preached, on average, two sermons per day for 50 years, and was heard by an estimated 17 million people.<sup>13</sup> For generations of dispensationalists, the interpretative scheme in the Scofield notes became inextricably connected to the text of the Bible itself; for many dispensationalists, it came as a surprise for many to learn that there was any other method

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<sup>11</sup> James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: SCM Press, 1981), 191; Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 222; Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 97-98.

<sup>12</sup> Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 97-98. Boyer claims that this is a conservative estimate, and that the true figure was between 5 and 10 million.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

of interpretation.<sup>14</sup> A parody of a popular hymn pokes fun at the widespread influence of the Scofield Bible, saying: “My hope is built on nothing less than Scofield’s notes and Moody Press.”<sup>15</sup> The consulting editors of the Scofield Bible mirrored the leadership roster of the prophecy conferences, and included such dispensationalist luminaries as Arno Gaebelein, James Gray, William Erdman, A.T. Pierson and W.G. Moorehead.<sup>16</sup> The participation of these leaders in the development of the Scofield Bible served to communicate their views to an even wider audience than the conferences had been able to achieve, and played a major role in the spread of dispensationalist theology.

George Eldon Ladd’s career as a scholar must be seen in the context of the history of American evangelicalism. He was certainly influenced by the general sense of loss within his movement: loss of prestige, loss of influence and loss of intellectual vigor. It is the contention of this dissertation that much of Ladd’s career was spent trying to reclaim for evangelicalism the qualities and status which it had once enjoyed. But there is more to Ladd than simply a nostalgic desire to recover some faded glory. The image of the table, then, becomes an appropriate image for that which Ladd strove during his career. Certainly it works within the Christian frame of mind, both in the solemnity of Communion and the joyous celebration of the various feast days. But for Ladd it meant more than that. The table represented inclusion in the broader discussion regarding the crucial theological issues of the day, and Ladd wanted to sit there. But Ladd was above all an evangelical, and certainly would have described himself as a fundamentalist, at

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<sup>14</sup> Barr, *Fundamentalism*, 191.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 98. The melody is from the hymn, “On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand.”

<sup>16</sup> Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 224.

least until the breach over Billy Graham in 1957. As such his goals must always be seen through the filter of his desire to win converts to the Christian faith; Ladd himself subordinated his own quest to the priority of world evangelization, as we shall see. The personal and professional ambitions which drove George Ladd rest—however imperfectly—in his identity as an evangelical Christian, whose life was devoted to seeing the gospel preached “in all the world for a witness unto all nations. . .”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 24:14 (KJV).