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THE LIFE AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD  
OF LEWIS SPERRY CHAFER  
Part 1 (Introduction and Historical Background)  
*David W. Gunn, PhD*

INTRODUCTION

Although the extent of his contributions is not always acknowledged or appreciated, it would be difficult to imagine a figure more instrumental in shaping twentieth-century American evangelical Christianity than Lewis Sperry Chafer. The influence of dispensational theology and Dallas Theological Seminary played a crucial role in the development of modern American evangelicalism and fundamentalism. In turn, the development of dispensational theology and the legacy of Dallas Theological Seminary owe much to Chafer's efforts. Zachariades lists Lewis Sperry Chafer, John Nelson Darby, and C. I. Scofield as the three most famous and influential propagators of dispensationalism.<sup>1</sup> Walvoord identified Chafer's eight-volume magnum opus, *Systematic Theology*, as the "first consistently premillennial systematic theology ever written," and further asserted of the work, "For the first time modern Fundamentalism has been systematized in an unabridged systematic theology."<sup>2</sup> As the founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, Chafer profoundly shaped DTS's identity and core values. And Chafer's direct influence on American evangelicalism is probably eclipsed by his indirect influence: many of his students—chiefly J. F. Walvoord, J. D. Pentecost, and C. C. Ryrie—imbibed Chafer's theological instruction and then proceeded to contribute significantly to the shape of American evangelicalism at both the popular and

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<sup>1</sup> Doros Zachariades, "Dispensation," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, edited by Chad Owen Brand, Charles W. Draper, and Archie W. England (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 432.

<sup>2</sup> John F. Walvoord, "A Review of Lewis Sperry Chafer's 'Systematic Theology,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105, no. 417 (Ja–Mr 1948): 127.

scholarly levels. In all these ways, Chafer made a profound contribution to the development of American evangelical and fundamentalist thought.

At times, Chafer's influence has been minimized and his motivations misconstrued. Some would cast Chafer as simply a passive recipient and regurgitator of the Darbyite tradition.<sup>3</sup> While Chafer was indeed deeply influenced by the teachings of prominent dispensationalists (chiefly C. I. Scofield), such a linkage of Chafer and Darby is overly reductionistic. This article will argue that Chafer is best understood first and foremost as a Biblicist, not as a defender of any theological system as such.

Joseph Boles takes a slightly different tack in his interpretation of Chafer. He writes, "Chafer's scheme is more rationalistic than biblical."<sup>4</sup> (Strangely, this charge comes only one page after Boles discusses Chafer's self-restriction in the field of Anthropology to intra-biblical sources and his outright dismissal of theological theories based on extra-biblical sources; hardly the perspective of a rationalist.) While Chafer's approach to theology did adopt a foundationalist posture, his thoroughgoing suspicion of human reason in light of creaturely finitude and fallenness strongly undercuts any charge of a commitment to rationalism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Th.D. Dissertation, Northern Baptist Seminary, 1957), 379; Michael D. Williams, "Book Review of 'The Promise of the Dawn: The Eschatology of Lewis Sperry Chafer,'" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 3 (S 1993): 417.

<sup>4</sup> Joe R. Boles, "The Theology of Lewis Sperry Chafer in the Light of His Theological Method" (Th.D. Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1963), 68.

<sup>5</sup> The late R. C. Sproul memorably noted that a commitment to *thinking rationally* should not be equated with a commitment to *philosophical rationalism*: "If I espouse to be human, that doesn't mean I've embraced humanism. If I argue that I exist, that doesn't mean that I am an advocate of existentialism. And just because a woman is feminine, [that] doesn't make her a feminist. We want to be rational. To be rational is to think in a sound way. To be rational does not mean you embrace rationalism. ... The alternative to that is—everything else outside the category of the 'rational' is what? Irrational. We don't want that." [R. C. Sproul, remarks delivered at the 2012 Ligonier National Conference,



In his own time, Chafer was severely criticized by B. B. Warfield for his views on sanctification. According to Warfield, although Chafer's dedication to evangelicalism was beyond question, his views on soteriology were nevertheless overly dependent upon Keswick,<sup>6</sup> Arminian, and Pelagian theology.<sup>7</sup> In response, it should be noted that Chafer's views may have been influenced to some degree by Keswick teaching, but he never identified himself with that movement.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the assertion that Chafer (who insisted "We [Evangelical Theological College] are distinctly a Presbyterian institution. ... Our theology as well as the interpretation of the Scripture in every department is strictly Calvinistic"<sup>9</sup>) held to Arminian soteriology is outlandish.

Indeed, Chafer's work cannot be satisfactorily explained by positing any *a priori* commitment to Darby, dispensationalism, rationalism, or Arminianism. Chafer's writings do demonstrate consideration of and appreciation for the works of other scholars and theologians, but he also displayed a stubborn unwillingness to accept any position or conclusion that could not be directly substantiated by Biblical exegesis.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, this article will argue that Chafer was first and foremost a Biblicist, and that his theological system and conclusions developed chiefly from that foundational commitment. The outcome of this Biblicism was a theology characterized by dispensationalist contours and a central preoccupation with the grace of God.

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Orlando, FL. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/conferences/the-christian-mind-2012-national-conference/question-answers2>

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, "Book Review of 'He That Is Spiritual,'" *Princeton Theological Journal* 17 (April 1919): 322–23.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Perfectionism*, edited by Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia, Penn.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1974), 396.

<sup>8</sup> Contra Marsden, who labels Chafer a "Keswick teacher." [George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98.]

<sup>9</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, cited in Stephen J. Nichols, "A Brief Exchange Between Lewis Sperry Chafer and J. Gresham Machen," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 282.

<sup>10</sup> John Walvoord noted this as a strength of Chafer's theology in "A Review of Lewis Sperry Chafer's 'Systematic Theology,'" 119–20.

## CHAFER THE MAN: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

All men and women are, to one degree or another, products of the ages in which they live. Lewis Sperry Chafer was no exception. His theological thinking and articulation were significantly shaped by his upbringing and by various features of the period in which he lived and moved. This section will explore several important links between Chafer's background and the theological methodology he fashioned and employed. But first, an abbreviated biographical sketch of Chafer's life will be helpful.

### **Brief Biographical Sketch**<sup>11</sup>

Lewis Sperry Chafer was born in Rock Creek, Ohio, on February 27, 1871. His father, Thomas Chafer, was a Congregationalist minister who died from tuberculosis when Lewis was only eleven years old. Chafer's mother, Lomira, was a schoolteacher-turned-homemaker. Five years before his father's death, while under the training of his parents, Lewis professed faith in Christ. Then, two or three years after Thomas's passing, Lewis experienced a second spiritual turning point, during which he rededicated his life to God.<sup>12</sup> It was a

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<sup>11</sup>This sketch is a synthesis of germane information drawn from the following sources: Charles Fred Lincoln, "Chafer, Lewis Sperry, 1871–1952," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109, no. 436 (O–D 1952): 332–37; George Gerald Houghton, "Lewis Sperry Chafer, 1871–1952," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128, no. 512 (O–D 1971): 291–99; John D. Hannah, "The Early Years of Lewis Sperry Chafer," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144, no. 573 (Ja–Mr 1987): 3–23; Charles C. Ryrie, "Lewis Sperry Chafer: Apostle of Grace," *Fundamentalist Journal* 2, no. 7 (Jl–Ag 1983): 34–36; and Jeffrey J. Richards, *The Promise of Dawn: The Eschatology of Lewis Sperry Chafer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1991), 11–45.

<sup>12</sup> There has been some confusion over precisely when Lewis Sperry Chafer converted to Christianity. Houghton identifies his age of conversion at seven and mentions Chafer's rededication under the preaching of an evangelist named Scott when Chafer was "a teenager of about fourteen" ["Lewis Sperry Chafer, 1871–1952," 292]. Hannah is in essential agreement with Houghton, but he assigns Chafer's conversion to his sixth year of life while under the instruction of his parents, and

decision he would take seriously, as he eventually spent his life ministering in evangelistic, pastoral, administrative, and academic capacities.

Chafer's formal preparation for evangelistic service took place primarily during his time at Oberlin College in 1888–91. Lest it be thought that Chafer drank deeply from the wells of Arminian theology while at Oberlin (perhaps lending some credence to Warfield's criticisms), it should be noted that his training there was exclusively musical in nature and included no theological curricula.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore unlikely that these college years contributed much to the content or methodology of Chafer's theology. They were important years developmentally, however: at Oberlin, Chafer was equipped for his future work in music ministry. He was also introduced at that time to Ella Loraine Case, whom he would later marry on April 22, 1896.

Chafer had already begun fulltime evangelistic work while he was a single man, and his union with Ella (who had also been a music major) only served to enhance his music ministry. Later in 1896, Lewis became ill with tuberculosis—the same disease that had taken the lives of his father and of the evangelist Scott whose preaching had so moved Chafer years earlier. Lewis and Ella came to believe that the illness was a sign from God that Lewis should shift his ministry focus away from music and onto gospel preaching. Shortly after they made this commitment, Lewis was suddenly (and inexplicably) healed.

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further explains that it was Scott's preaching that eventually motivated Chafer to enter the ministry ["The Early Years of Lewis Sperry Chafer," 9–10]. Lincoln, on the other hand, lists Chafer's conversion age as thirteen, pinpointing Scott's preaching as the impetus ["Chafer, Lewis Sperry, 1871–1952, 333]. Chafer himself recorded that his conversion took place when he was six years old [Hannah, "The Early Years of Lewis Sperry Chafer," 9n23]. The best explanation seems to be that Chafer first became a Christian at six years old, and later rededicated his life under the preaching of Scott when he was thirteen or fourteen years old. Unfortunately, there has sometimes been a tendency to conflate these two distinct events, resulting in biographical confusion.

<sup>13</sup> Randall C. Gleason, "B B Warfield and Lewis S Chafer on Sanctification," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 2 (Je 1997): 242.

And so, Chafer became an itinerate gospel preacher.<sup>14</sup> He was ordained in 1900 as a Congregational minister,<sup>15</sup> and shortly thereafter moved to Northfield, Massachusetts, where he and his wife began participating in the annual Northfield Conferences. There, Chafer was exposed to the teaching of the nation's foremost fundamentalist thinkers—chiefly C. I. Scofield, who soon became a mentor to Chafer. This relationship, probably more than anything else, shaped Chafer's expositional and theological methodology and emphases. It also paved the way for Chafer's academic pursuits: Scofield felt that Chafer had significant potential as a Bible teacher and challenged him to dedicate himself to such a ministry. Chafer's first two books, *Satan* and *True Evangelism*, were published in 1909 and 1911—both with prefaces by Scofield attached.

In 1914, Scofield founded the Philadelphia School of the Bible. He secured significant involvement by Chafer, who not only signed onto the faculty but also assisted in writing the school's curriculum. Chafer had previously taught music at Moody's Mount Hermon School for Boys while living in Northfield, but it was at the Philadelphia school that he cut his teeth as an instructor in biblical and theological studies. This was a role he would embrace and in which he would excel for the rest of his life. In 1924, primarily through Chafer's efforts, Evangelical Theological College (now Dallas Theological Seminary) was founded, with Chafer serving as the first President and Professor of Systematic Theology.<sup>16</sup> This position required Chafer to clarify and elucidate his positions across a

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Chafer's views on evangelistic methodology stood in sharp contrast to those of American revivalism. For a helpful discussion of this contrast—and the controversy over Chafer's views in the 1940s—see Kevin Bauder and Robert Delnay, *One in Hope and Doctrine: Origins of Baptist Fundamentalism, 1870–1950* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Books, 2014), 313–26.

<sup>15</sup> Three years later, Chafer transferred his ordination to the Presbyterian Church, U. S.

<sup>16</sup> Initially, the position of Theology Professor was intended for W. H. Griffith Thomas. Sadly, Griffith Thomas died the year of the seminary's founding, so it fell to Chafer to fill the role. [Richards, *The Promise of Dawn*, 35.]

significant range of theological subjects and issues. The material that would later constitute his *Systematic Theology* was initially developed as classroom material as Chafer labored to provide his new students with a sound theological curriculum.<sup>17</sup>

During the remainder of his life, Chafer ministered in an impressive number of capacities. Not only did he continue to provide leadership and instruction at the seminary for many years, but he also had an extensive writing ministry and continued speaking in pulpits across the country. The most robust expression of Chafer's theological views was his *Systematic Theology*, which was written from 1937 to 47. The first edition sold out in the first six months of publication, and before the work had been in circulation for two years a third printing was necessary to satisfy the demand.<sup>18</sup> Just five years after the completion and publication of the work, Lewis Sperry Chafer passed away on August 22, 1952, likely from complications following a heart attack in 1935 and a stroke in 1945.

### **The Impact of Chafer's Historical Background On His Theological Method**

There are at least two major intersections between Chafer's historical background and the details of his theological method. First is his extensive service as an itinerate evangelist, and the prominent place that evangelism and soteriology occupied in his theological system. Second is the far-reaching effects of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy (including, among other things, Chafer's association with Scofield).

#### *Evangelistic Background*

Chafer *Systematic Theology* represents not only the perspective of a demandingly precise theologian, but also of a passionate evangelist. In his introductory comments on

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947–48), 1:xxxviii.

<sup>18</sup> DTS Mosher & Turpin Libraries, "Celebrating 80 Years: Highlights from the History of Dallas Theological Seminary," <http://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/80th.shtml>.

Soteriology, Chafer implored ministers to grant evangelism a central place in their pulpit ministries:

God's message includes the whole human family in its outreach, and since the great proportion are unregenerate, and since the gospel of salvation is the only word addressed to the unsaved, it is reasonable to conclude that, in a well-balanced ministry, gospel preaching should account for no less than seventy-five percent of the pulpit ministry.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, it is worth noting that the themes of human fallenness, the atonement, redemption, and regeneration are not restricted to Chafer's treatment of soteriology, but feature prominently throughout all ten divisions of his systematic theology.

Chafer saw a critical connection between theological work and evangelistic work. According to Charles Ryrie, Chafer once said to his students, "Would that theologians were also evangelists, and would that evangelists were also theologians."<sup>20</sup> These words were not empty platitudes coming from Chafer, as he had carved a niche for himself in fulltime evangelistic work long before he turned his attention to exposition and theology. One also wonders if these evangelistic priorities were not further reinforced in Chafer's mind by his recurring brushes with tuberculosis. By all accounts, the loss of his father to tuberculosis deeply affected young Chafer,<sup>21</sup> and the evangelist Scott under whose preaching Chafer dedicated his life to Christian ministry died of the same disease quite soon after his encounter with the teenaged Chafer.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, as mentioned above, it was his own contraction of tuberculosis that motivated Chafer to become a preacher. It may be that these incidents impressed upon Chafer the fragility of human life and the

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<sup>19</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:9.

<sup>20</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie's Practical Guide to Communicating Bible Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Pub., 2005), 28–29.

<sup>21</sup> Hannah, "The Early Years of Lewis Sperry Chafer," 9.

<sup>22</sup> Lincoln, "Chafer, Lewis Sperry, 1871–1952," 333.

inevitability of death, igniting in him a passion to preach the gospel to unbelievers before it was too late. That passion extended beyond Chafer's evangelistic ministry, and exerted a powerful influence on his teaching and theologizing as well.

Another possible connection between Chafer's years as an evangelist and his theological work may be seen in his commitment to the perspicuity of Scripture. Although Chafer held that rigorous study was necessary to produce a sound and effective exposition of the sacred text,<sup>23</sup> he also felt that its basic meaning was clear and accessible due to the simplicity of expression employed throughout: "No unaided human writer has ever been able to imitate the simplicity of the Bible language. The greatest truths God has spoken to men are couched in the language of children."<sup>24</sup> This may reflect an evangelist's perspective, for whom the most vital truths of God's word are also the most straightforward and to whom the task has been entrusted to preach the gospel to all, regardless of their educational achievements or intellectual sophistication.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy*

The Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy was the single most significant issue gripping American Christianity in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Many of the most important dates in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy synchronize quite closely with the major dates in Chafer's life, particularly during his most personally and theologically formative years.<sup>26</sup> That being the case, these issues

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<sup>23</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:vi.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:33. Cf. also 1:vii on the importance of English Bible study for spiritual edification as over against limiting oneself only to in-depth exegetical studies in Hebrew and Greek.

<sup>25</sup> That Chafer held to perspicuity also dovetails with his commitment to biblicism, given the connection between perspicuity and biblicism. See James Patrick Callahan, *The clarity of Scripture: History, Theology & Contemporary Literary Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 158.

<sup>26</sup> Note the following date overlaps:

being debated by Christians all across the country would have invariably colored Chafer's experience and understanding of Christianity.

Chafer's theological views on the fundamentals of the faith are all in precise alignment with those of the fundamentalist movement (specifically, with the more widespread premillennial wing of fundamentalism).<sup>27</sup> This is not unexpected, given the nature of Chafer's relationship to Scofield.

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- 1880–93: The controversy over C. A. Briggs's teachings in the Presbyterian Church. Chafer converted to Christianity and dedicated his life to God during these years.
  - 1895: The "five points of fundamentalism" were formulated at the Niagara Bible Conference. One year later, Chafer was married.
  - 1901: C. I. Scofield and A. C. Gaebelein discussed the need to publish a study Bible and began work on what would become the *Scofield Reference Bible*. This is the same year that Scofield began mentoring Chafer.
  - 1910–15: During this time, Chafer's denomination adopted the five points of the 1985 Niagara Bible Conference (modified to remove the emphasis on premillennialism), and *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, edited by A. C. Dixon and R. A. Torrey, was published. These years coincided with Chafer's time at Northfield.
  - 1925: The Scopes Trial, at which (in the eyes of many) fundamentalism as a serious viewpoint was dealt a death blow. This occurred the year after Chafer founded Evangelical Theological College, during the period when Chafer was settling into his new position as college president and theology professor and was formally putting his theological views to paper with systematic rigor.

<sup>27</sup> It should be noted that although Chafer agreed with the foundational doctrinal viewpoint of the fundamentalist movement, he did not view himself as a member of that movement. In a 1930 letter to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., Chafer wrote, "While we [Evangelical Theological College] stand for all the fundamentals of the Word of God, we are not identified with the fundamentalist movement as such. I have not been in sympathy with the movement from the beginning." [Letter, Lewis Sperry Chafer to James Oliver Buswell, Jr., Dallas, TX, 14 February 1930 (Dallas, TX: Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers), cited in John D. Hannah, *An Uncommon Union: Dallas Theological Seminary and American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 92.]



Additionally, several apparent influences of the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy on Chafer's theological methodology and presuppositions are noteworthy. Principal among them are Chafer's conception of the Church's relation to the world and the surpassing superiority of revelation over reason for plumbing the depths of ultimate truth.

Chafer conceived of the world as:

[A] vast system and order over which Satan is the prince ... and into which all unregenerate humanity is federated with its educational and entertainment programs, its governments, its jealousies, its armaments, and its warfare. Out of this world the believer when saved is rescued ... and from it he is to be preserved, though he, as a witness to it, must remain in it.<sup>28</sup>

So, the evangelical theologian, whose task is "the noblest aim of human understanding,"<sup>29</sup> finds himself in the disadvantageous position of living and working in enemy-occupied territory. The very system that surrounds him and determines his context for theological expression, and with which he must interact as he sets out on the theological enterprise, has already declared war on him and all for which he stands.

This mindset will certainly affect one's outlook at he performs the task of systematic theology! It supplies a framework for conceiving of theology as both a defensive and an offensive task—defensive in that the world seeks to pollute the pure doctrines of the faith, and the theologian must withstand that polluting influence with all his might; offensive in that the theologian, as he expositis theological truth to the world around him, is launching an assault on the world system, which is intent on resisting God's revealed truth.<sup>30</sup> This conception of the Church-world relationship was very common in the thinking of

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<sup>28</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:358.

<sup>29</sup> John Dick, *Lectures on theology* (Philadelphia: Whetham, 1841), 6. Quoted in Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:16.

<sup>30</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 6:180.

fundamentalism,<sup>31</sup> and can only have been exacerbated by cultural trends in the aftermath of the Scopes Trial, in which it seemed American society (an expression of the world system) had chosen to reject Christian fundamentalism.

Relatedly, Chafer displayed an attitude of extreme dubiety toward the competence of unaided human reason to grasp theological truths.<sup>32</sup> This aspect of Chafer's method will be explored in more detail later; for now, it suffices to point out that this tendency, too, likely bears the imprint of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. The religious outlook of American modernism tended to be highly naturalistic, elevating the contributions of human reason and the process of intellectual discovery over reliance on special revelation from a transcendent God.<sup>33</sup> It was this very naturalistic, anthropocentric conception of religion that fundamentalists fought against so vigorously. As a result of this dimension of the conflict, fundamentalism began to be viewed as anti-intellectual.<sup>34</sup>

And yet, for all his negativity toward the reasoning capacities of fallen humanity, Chafer was no anti-intellectual. He spoke highly of the efforts of scientists to uncover truth in their respective fields, tended to couch the theological task in scientific terminology,<sup>35</sup> and seems to have held the Baconian method in high regard. On the other hand, he also held that human reason alone, no matter how clever or ingenious, was not

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<sup>31</sup> Ralph W. Hood, Peter C. Hill, and W. Paul Williamson, *The Psychology of Religious Fundamentalism* (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 52.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Lewis Sperry Chafer, *He That Is Spiritual: A Classic Study of the Biblical Doctrine of Spirituality*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967), 15–16; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *True Evangelism: Winning Souls Through Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 22; Chafer, *Grace*, 339; Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:134.

<sup>33</sup> Bernard L. Ramm, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 68.

<sup>34</sup> Robert H. Krapohl and Charles H. Lippy, *The Evangelicals: A Historical, Thematic, and Biographical Guide* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 124.

<sup>35</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 1:7–8.

up to the task of theology. After all, the rationalistic approach of the modernists had already utterly failed, in his view, to do Christian theology justice. This failure stemmed from the modernists' low view of Scripture, which Chafer felt was a wholly unsuitable foundation for one's theological system.<sup>36</sup> For Chafer, revelation is not unreasonable, but it takes epistemological priority over reason.

Furthermore, the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy by its very nature pointed up the need for a comprehensive systematic theology faithful to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, which need Chafer sought to fulfill with his eight-volume *Systematic Theology*. In Chafer's day, the dearth of emphasis upon systematic theology was palpable and, in his opinion, lamentable.<sup>37</sup> The reasons for this dearth are many, but at least two would seem to relate to the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy. First, among modernist seminaries, there was a tendency to, in Chafer's words, "substitute philosophy, psychology, and sociology for theology."<sup>38</sup> Second, where fundamentalists were concerned, the controversy demanded a narrowing of focus and of theological emphasis. Since the fundamentals of the faith were perceived to be under constant attack, it was not the right time to squabble over non-essentials of the faith. (This is why amillennialists like J. Gresham Machen and T. T. Shields could make common cause with premillennialists in the struggle against modernism.)

But while such a narrowing of focus may have been necessary for a season, Chafer held that it was dangerous over the long term, as it resulted in a sort of theological anemia. That is why he frequently decried not only the lack of emphasis upon systematic theology so prevalent in his day, but also the tendency, when systematic theology was taught, to settle for abridged studies of the subject.<sup>39</sup> Anything less than an unabridged, comprehensive course of theological study, in

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1:12.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 1:v.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1:viii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1:x-xi.

Chafer's view, opened the door to theological defection and disaster:

In his years of classroom discipline, the theological student should be taken over the entire field of doctrine that he may be prepared to continue his research in every portion of the Bible throughout his ministry, being prepared to proceed intelligently in every phase of the divine revelation. Apart from such a complete introduction to doctrine, no preacher will be able to hold truth in its right proportions, nor can it be assured that he or his auditors will not drift into the errors of unscriptural cults, or into modernistic unbelief.<sup>40</sup>

The result of Chafer's work in systematic theology was an expansion of premillennial fundamentalist doctrine to a comprehensive, unabridged scope. Walvoord wrote of Chafer's eight-volume work, "For the first time modern Fundamentalism has been systematized in an unabridged systematic theology."<sup>41</sup>

### **Chafer the Black Sheep Presbyterian**

Before proceeding to an analysis of Chafer's theological methodology, one more item of a historical nature warrants mention as it has direct bearing on his foundational convictions. Since Chafer's soteriological positions were generally in harmony with Calvinistic Reformed theology, it is not surprising that he maintained membership and ordination (via transfer of credentials from the Congregational Church) in the Presbyterian Church in the United States. However, on at least two major points, Chafer believed he was forced to choose between his commitment to Biblicism and his denomination's commitment to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Those two points concerned the scope of the atonement and the relationship between Israel and the Church.

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 1:viii.

<sup>41</sup>Walvoord, "A Review of Lewis Sperry Chafer's 'Systematic Theology,'" 127.

On the scope of the atonement, Chafer raised several theological arguments in favor of unlimited redemption over against limited redemption.<sup>42</sup> First, the limited redemption view is built on the false premise that the cross itself accomplishes salvation. Since the elect individual will spend some (or possibly even most) of his life in an unregenerate state, Chafer reasoned that the provision and application of salvation should be viewed as separate events.<sup>43</sup> Second, Chafer felt it was “perilously near to contradiction” to acknowledge Christ’s command for the Church to engage in universal gospel preaching while holding that He died only for the elect.<sup>44</sup> And third, Chafer explained that unlimited redemption did not undermine the sovereignty of God since it conceived of Christ’s payment as being *provided for* yet never *applied to* the sins of the non-elect.<sup>45</sup>

But Chafer’s final and most cogent argument was more expository than theological in nature. He argued that limited redemption proof-texts (John 10:15; 15:13; 17:2, 6, 9, 20, 24; Rom. 4:25; Eph. 1:3–7; 5:25–27), when carefully interpreted, did not really preclude unlimited redemption, while a host of unlimited redemption proof-texts (John 3:16; Acts 10:43; Rom. 5:6; 2 Cor. 5:14, 19; 1 Tim. 2:6; 4:10; Tit. 2:11; Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:1; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 22:17) could only be reconciled with the limited redemption view by committing serious exegetical errors.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Chafer seems to have viewed his motivation for rejecting his denomination’s position on this subject as a matter of giving priority to the careful interpretation of Scripture rather

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<sup>42</sup> Chafer did not particularly care for this terminology since the debate entailed implications for reconciliation and propitiation as well as redemption, but he used the customary terms anyway for the sake of convenience. [Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:190–93.] In our day, this terminology has usually been replaced by other expressions, such as *definite atonement* or *particular redemption* on the one hand, and *general atonement* or *universal atonement* on the other.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:193–94; Cf. Lewis Sperry Chafer, “A Love Story Infinitely True,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105, no. 418 (Ap–Je 1948): 139.

<sup>44</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 3:194–95.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:195–99.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:201–5.

than to a cherished theological system or philosophical framework.

The second issue proved even more problematic than the first for Chafer's fellow Presbyterians. The clear dispensational distinction between Israel and the Church was a very important element of Chafer's theology. This he established on primarily inductive grounds: an analysis of Israel and the Church as they were presented in Scripture led to the conclusion that they were fundamentally dissimilar in terms of compositions, rules of life, divine purposes, and divinely-ordained destinies (Israel comprising God's "earthly people" and the Church comprising His "heavenly people").<sup>47</sup> This teaching was widely regarded in Presbyterian circles as incongruous with the Westminster Confession of Faith, which upheld an essential continuity between Israel and the Church based on the unifying Covenant of Grace.<sup>48</sup> The pushback began in 1936 with an article in *Evangelical Quarterly* by Oswald T. Allis that attacked the dispensational approach, mentioning Chafer by name.<sup>49</sup> Several other articles, similar in content and purpose, emerged from Presbyterian writers shortly thereafter.<sup>50</sup>

Chafer did not deny that his view departed from Presbyterian doctrinal distinctives on this point, but he defended himself by appealing directly to the Bible. Since the authority of the Westminster Confession of Faith was subordinate to Scripture's authority, and since Scripture (as he understood it) overwhelmingly supported the dispensational view on this point, Chafer argued that the confession should be amended. Chafer's opponents were disinclined to engage him in an exegetical debate over the relative merits of the covenantal and dispensational systems, preferring instead to make adherence to the confession the litmus test of Presbyterian

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:xiv–xx; 4:33–35, 47–53.

<sup>48</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.1–6.

<sup>49</sup> Oswald T. Allis, "Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture," *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 (1936): 22–35.

<sup>50</sup> Craig A. Blaising, "Lewis Sperry Chafer," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, 85–96 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 93.

orthodoxy.<sup>51</sup> This sparked a call for an official statement on the unacceptability of dispensationalism within the Presbyterian Church in the United States. During the general assembly of 1940, a proposal for a formal investigation into the orthodoxy of dispensationalism was made, and the issue was referred to the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms (though Chafer's own good standing in the denomination was not directly threatened). Four years later, the committee submitted its report to the general assembly categorically rejecting dispensational premillennialism, as the committee found it to be incompatible with the Presbyterian Church's confessional standards.<sup>52</sup>

Of all the historical intersections between the history of Chafer's life and the main features of his theological system, this controversy most clearly demonstrates Chafer's unwillingness to put ideological or denominational commitment ahead of a straightforward, inductive reading of the Scriptures. Chafer wrote, "It is a bad indication when, in any period, men will so exalt their confessions that they force the Scriptures to a secondary importance."<sup>53</sup> Many evangelicals would undoubtedly voice agreement with this sentiment, but Chafer, in publicly criticizing his own denomination's confession of faith, proved that he really meant it.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>52</sup> Hannah, *An Uncommon Union*, 123.

<sup>53</sup> Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:262. See also similar remarks in Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93, no. 372 (O–D 1936): 395–96.

