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WHERE'S THE CHURCH? THE CHURCH AS THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGY

MICHAEL D. WILLIAMS

Paul addressed the church as a concrete assembly, an assembly which functions as the representative of the rule of God within our world. That assembly is an essential constituent of the believer's salvation and subsequent sanctification. The classical dispensationalist distinction between Israel and the church as belonging to different metaphysical realms, however, has worked to the detriment of dispensational ecclesiology. The combination of an overemphasis upon the individual believer and the church as a transcendent, mystical body has tended to view the concrete this-worldly assembling of the body of Christ as relatively unimportant. When the true distinction between Israel and the church is seen to be historical rather than metaphysical, the church, as the historical, visible body of Christ, becomes the centerpiece of God's dealings with the world during the present dispensation.

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INTRODUCTION

DISPENSATIONAL theology has often been depicted by its opponents as an anti-church theology. The liberal theologian, George Ricker Berry, writing in the 1920's concluded that dispensationalism depreciates the church and its relationship to the redemptive purposes of God through an inordinate importance upon Israel in its eschatology and an antithetical mind set that either compartmentalizes biblical magnitudes (Israel/church) or pits them against one another (heaven/earth). Berry wrote that the Jews "continue to keep forever their position as the chosen nation of special privilege. The Christian church thus becomes really subordinate to the Jewish nation."[1]

[1]George Ricker Berry, *Premillenialism and Old Testament Prediction* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1929) 19. Berry claimed that because dispensationalism thinks

This charge did not present a major problem for dispensational theology. The dispensationalist could accept the charge as true, provided that one restricted the church as it is articulated in the charge to a this-worldy entity. Classical dispensationalists such as C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer were no more enamored with the denominational and sectarian realities of modern Christendom than John Nelson Darby had been with the Established Church of his day. They held that the church as an institution in this world cannot help but participate in the ruin of the world-system, and will ultimately be replaced upon the stage of world history by the earthly people of God—Israel. The elevation of Israel, however, was never an end in itself for dispensationalism. Rather, it operated as a foil for ecclesiology, and especially for the explication of the greater heavenly glory of the true body of Christ. The elevation of Israel was not meant to disparage the church. Classical dispensationalists held that the church is heavenly and as such enjoys a heavenly glory as the body and bride of Christ. These blessings are as much greater than Israel's as heaven is above the earth. Chafer did not think that he was denigrating the church at all, but indeed elevating her to her proper heavenly position. Perhaps no one has captured the dispensationist logic here better than the Reformed theologian Oswald T. Allis when he discerningly wrote:

> All the earthly promises are given to earthly Israel, that the heavenly glory of the Church may be rendered distinctive. Times and seasons, human history and its happenings, are given to Israel, or rather to Israel and the professing church, that the expectancy of the any moment rapture may be cherished by the Church without the intrusion of any hampering or hindering events.[2]

The charge that dispensationalism represents an anti-church theology has recently been reprised by Millard Erickson. Erickson's

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of the church as an intercalation, it forms no part of the main redemptive stream which is located in Israel. The emphasis upon the national restoration of Israel and her eschatological redemptive role de-emphasizes the church and the triumph of the cross. The church is a temporary and flawed instrument which is doomed to failure and ultimate judgment. The church will end in failure and be replaced by political Israel, who will succeed where the church could not. Berry, of course, was not alone in making the charge that dispensationalism elevates Israel over the church. Cf. Harris Franklin Rall, *Premillennialism and the Christian Hope* (New York: Abingdon, 1920) 102-3; W. D. Chamberlain, "Dispensationalism," in *The Church Faces the Isms*, ed. by Arnold B. Rhodes (New York: Abingdon, MCMLVIII) 100-107; Clarence Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960) 29-30; William E. Cox, *Biblical Studies in Final Things* (Phillipsberg, N.J.: 1966) 49; William E. Cox, *Why I Left Scofieldism* (Phillipsberg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978) 7-9.

[2]Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Phillipsberg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978) 219-20.

version is not easily dispatched, however, because it directs its criticism at the dispensationalist undertaking of the invisible church. The problem within dispensational ecclesiology, as Erickson sees it, is that it over-emphasizes the transcendent, mystical body of Christ to the ultimate devaluation or neglect of the visible, historical church. Erickson deals with dispensational ecclesiology under what he calls the "pietistic approach to the church." He comments:

> The emphasis here is upon the individual's direct relationship to God through Jesus Christ. It is that and that alone which makes one a Christian. And it is the presence of such believers, regenerate persons, that properly constitutes a group as a church. Note that in this view those who are savingly related to Christ make up the Church, whether or not they are assembled into any visible group. Membership in a visible group is no guarantee whatsoever of justification in God's sight, so the visible organization is relatively unimportant . . . Church membership, as a permanent commitment to a given group of believers, is minimized in this individualistic approach.[3]

Erickson's claim is that dispensationalism has so emphasized the individual believer and the church as the transcendent, mystical body of Christ that the believer's this-worldly inclusion in the visible church is minimized to the point of unimportance.

It is my contention that Erickson's version of the charge is correct. My thesis here is that the church as the concrete assembling of the body of Christ, the body of believers that you or I assemble with as the church, and the churches that Paul wrote his letters to, has tended to be of negligible importance in dispensational theology. That is to say, that which is commonly called 'the visible church' is at best considered a mere convenience for the individual believer during his earthly sojourn, and at worst is looked upon as a theologically impotent human construction. My purpose in this paper is both to quantify that charge and suggest that ecclesiology remains as a primary item of unfinished business for dispensational theology.

THE CHURCH AS AN OTHERWORLDLY ENTITY

The Christian as Heavenly Citizen

Following a metaphysical distinction between Israel and the church which understands the former as the earthly people of God and the latter as a heavenly people, classical dispensationalists contended that the Christian has been translated into the kingdom of God and thus is not a part of this world. "The individual believer is in

[3]Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 1045.

the world," Scofield said, "but not of it. It is a scene through which he is passing and his attitude towards it should be that of his Lord and his apostles." The Christian's true home is in heaven. His citizenship has been changed by regeneration from earth to heaven.[4] As a citizen of heaven, a member of the new creation, the believer is qualitatively distinguished from the world and all things within it. The new creation is a completely "new order of beings," "a new classification of humanity," according to Chafer.[5] The new creation is not creation restored; it is rather a brand new, alternative creation. "Regeneration is a *creation*," Scofield claimed, "not a *transformation*; the bringing in of a new thing, not the change of an old."[6] The new birth is not merely a birth "from above" (ἄνωθεν in John 3:3) for Scofield and Chafer, but is also a birth *for above*. The cross of Jesus Christ has produced "a distinct heaven-borne people." The unfortunate but inescapable conclusion to be drawn here is that Scofield and Chafer thought of grace in primarily metaphysical rather than moral terms.

The Christian is *in* the world, but is not *of* the world. Chafer was extremely fond of this construction and returned to it again and again. Though the believer still exists in the world, he does so merely as a stranger and a sojourner. He is an alien in a foreign polity. Grace separates him from all complicity with the world or the *cosmos*-system. As a "heavenly citizen," the Christian belongs to another sphere of existence.

A decidedly other-worldly strain of religion now becomes apparent in the thought of Scofield and Chafer. That other-worldliness was demanded by their theological commitments. A theology that was built primarily upon metaphysical distinctions made it incumbent upon Chafer to say that the redeemed man is totally otherworldly. "In the sight of God," the nationality of the believer is heavenly. All promises, possessions and positions which pertain to him are likewise heavenly. The Christian possesses no land, no earthly city, no earthly kingdom, and no earthly king.[7]

[4]C. I. Scofield, *Dr. C. I. Scofield's Question Box*, Compiled by Ella E. Pohle (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Assoc., 1917) 35. Darby wrote that the church is "something apart—a kind of heavenly people," quoted in Bass, 130.

[5]Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947) 4.12, 29, 386 (hereafter referred to as *ST*); Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Chicago: The Bible Institute Colportage Assoc., 1922) 354.

[6]C. I. Scofield, *The Comprehensive Bible Correspondence Course* (New York: Francis E. Fitch, 1896) 1.30.

[7]Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes* (Wheaton, Van Kampen, 1926) 207; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Satan and the Satanic System: An Exhaustive Examination of the Scripture Teaching from Genesis to Revelation* (New York: D. T. Bass, 1909) 44; *ST* 1.39-40. Chafer's use of the words "world" and "*kosmos*" are confusing at best. It

Saved *out* of the world, the Christian is brought into the family and life of God. Salvation for Chafer was not a mere restoration to prelapsarian moral purity but an ontic elevation of the redeemed person above his former status. Chafer understood salvation not as restoration but release, elevation above one's former estate. The regeneration of the Holy Spirit does not restore or renew human nature for an existence of service and worship in the world. The new birth does not humanize man under such a view. Chafer proclaimed that by a "mighty transformation," by a birth from above, the believer is metamorphosed into a third order of being. Besides the Jew and the Gentile, both of which are denizens of the earth, there is now the Christian, a "celestial being." Receiving the life of the Spirit of God, the believer, "enters upon a career thereby in the realm of relationship which belongs to another sphere of existence," wrote Chafer. As a citizen of heaven, the believer's "name would, therefore, appear only as among the celestial beings, in any true census of the universe."[8]

The Church as Transcendent, Mystical Organism

Scofield and Chafer were as unequivocal regarding the heavenly nature of the church as they were of the essentially heavenly nature of the believer. "Called-out" from the world, the church is "a unique body, segregated from the mass into a distinct group, the mystical body of Christ, called into organic union with him." The church as an institution or assembly of believers in the world is not what is being referred to by Chafer here. "There are organized churches in the world with their memberships, but they should not be confused with the one church of which Christ is the Head and all members in

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frankly seems at times as though he is finessing the problem of dualism. Even though he can say that "no material or physical thing is evil in itself," and that "Satan's deceptions affect merely the human element in the *cosmos*," he can also lapse into a simple identification of the evil *kosmos* with the physical world. Satan is not only "the god of the world," but also "the god of this earth." Satan has laid claim to "the earth" (see *Satan*, 54, 76, 146). In his book *Grace* Chafer writes: "The Christian is not of this world. He has been translated into the kingdom of Christ. He is a citizen of heaven, and his only relation to this world is that of an ambassador and witness. He is in the enemy's land; for Satan is the 'god of this world';" *Grace*, 324–25. The antithesis here is not a moral one that transpires within the world, that is, a tension between God's intended norms for human life and culture as it is actually produced under the misdirection of sinful humanity, but is rather one of metaphysic, one of heaven and earth. Satan is here seen as monarch over more than simply misdirected human culture.

[8]Chafer, *ST*, 4.109. Cf. 4.89; *Satan and the Satanic System*, 139; *Major Bible Themes*, 85.

particular."[9] Chafer claimed that Paul did not think of the church as an "organization," but rather as an "organism." When Paul used the word ἐκκλησία he was not thinking of people organized into an historical congregation but "the whole company of the redeemed who have been saved in the present age."[10] Thus the true church is a mystical body. The *corpus Christi mysticum* is equally as otherworldly as its individual members. Chafer claimed that "the Church is foreign to the earth and related to it only as a witnessing people. They are strangers and pilgrims, ambassadors whose citizenship is in heaven."[11]

What we see in the dispensationalism of Scofield and Chafer is a fully spiritualized notion of the church as the body of Christ. The "true" church is conceived of strictly as a mystical organism. It is not to be thought of as an organization or institution within our world. In fact, the Bible knows almost nothing of the church as a this-worldly reality, according to Chafer.[12] As an organized reality within our world, the church is not bound under the headship of Christ, and thus lacks any organic unity because it is held together by nothing more theologically significant than "articles of agreement on certain religious topics." "In its simplest conception," Chafer wrote, "the local church is *no more than* the assembly of *professed* believers in one locality" (emphasis mine).[13] At root, then, Chafer thought of the ἐκκλησία as a transcendent entity. It is the "invisible" church.

Darbyist Background of Classical Dispensationalist Ecclesiology

The view of the church as the heaven-born body of Christ as put forward by Scofield and Chafer was amazingly consistent with the ecclesiology of dispensationalism's first theologian, John Nelson Darby. In the 1820's Darby was a deacon in the Church of England, but he grew increasingly disillusioned with the church as he witnessed the crown's political manipulation of the church and the church's own spiritual laxness.[14] By 1828 when he published his first tract on ecclesiology he had already began to think of the true church as qualitatively different from the Church of England. Darby later wrote in his *Letters*:

> I came to understand that I was united to Christ in heaven, and that, consequently, my place before God was represented by His own. . . . It

[9]Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, 204-5.

[10]Ibid., 207.

[11]Chafer, *ST*, 2.213. Cf. *Satan and the Satanic System*, 143.

[12]Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, 205. Cf. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959) 81.

[13]Chafer, *ST*, 4.146. Cf. 144.

[14]Bass, 48-51.

> then became clear to me that the Church of God, as he considers it, was composed only by those who are so united to Christ, whereas Christendom, as seen externally, was really the world, and could not be considered as 'the church'.[15]

Speaking of the church as an institution in this world, Darby proclaimed that "the Church is in ruins" and "without remedy."[16] It should be noted that Darby's first and most basic dissent from the Established Church was not on the question of eschatology, but concerned the doctrine of the church. His opposition to the institutional church acted as the catalytic agent for the rest of his theology.

Darby claimed that "the church is properly heavenly," and thus forms "no part of the course of events of this earth."[17] We cannot speak of any theological connection between the believer and the church as a congregation in this world. No mere body of professors can claim identity to Christ because it is predicted in scripture that the church will become no better than heathenism and will be judged by Christ. There is no organic connection between Christ and the church as a society of believers within the world.

Earl Radmacher admits that Darby's proclamation of the ruin of the institutional church led to an expression of the transcendent invisible church that worked to the minimalization of the church "as a physical assembly characterized by a distinctly Christian unity"[18] in subsequent dispensational reflection on ecclesiology. Radmacher offers an important qualification here and it is one that we ought not to ignore. While the theological children of Darby followed him in his ecclesiology, they were still churchmen. While their emphasis upon the invisible church "tended to cause some to neglect the local church," they were nevertheless committed participants in the ministries of the church.[19] Radmacher is correct. Dispensationalists have always been very active in such activities as church planting ministries and the erection of educational institutions to train leaders and workers for the church. Accepting and appreciating Radmacher's qualification we must nevertheless seriously consider the effect of the ecclesiologies of Darby, Scofield and Chafer. Their emphasis upon an otherworldly, mystical body lost sight of the concrete, visible church.

[15]J. N. Darby, *Letters of J. N. Darby*, 3 vols. (London: Stow Bible and Tract Depot, n.d.) 3.298.

[16]Quoted in Bass, 100.

[17]Quoted in Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 94.

[18]Earl D. Radmacher, *What the Church is all About* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 139.

[19]Ibid., 22–23.

The Church as Visible Community

If we accept the thesis that the real distinction between the church and Israel is historical rather than metaphysical, one of *then* versus *now* rather than heavenly versus earthly, we have opened the door to a return to the church as a concrete community as the starting point for ecclesiology. The New Testament does not attempt to remove the church form historical existence. It is not seen as some ethereal reality that lives its life far removed from time and space. Quite the contrary, the church is the one great, tangible, observable truth of the Christian religion. Of course, we may still say that the church in its fullness surpasses visible reality, that there is a great multitude of saints from every nation and every age from Pentecost until now who make up the church.[20] But it is still the case that this is not what the New Testament commonly means by the word ἐκκλησία. The vast majority of occurrences of the word refer to concrete local gatherings of Christians.[21] Paul wrote his letters to specific local gatherings: "to the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1), "to the churches of Galatia" (Gal 1:2), "to the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1). Likewise Luke in the book of Acts makes frequent reference to the church as concrete community (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 11:22; 12:1,5). Several New Testament texts speak of the church without reference to locality or appear to speak of the church (singular) as a collective term for all assemblies (e.g. Acts 9:31; 1 Cor 12:28; 10:32). These inclusive references do not serve in the least to separate the church from this-worldly realities. Certainly, Paul was able to speak of the church as an extended reality to which all who are ἐν Χριστῷ belong (Matt 16:18; 1 Pet 2:19; Eph 1:22–23), but that "invisible" church appears to be an extension of, or theological extrapolation upon his primary understanding of the ἐκκλησία as an observable community.[22] Paul thought of these congregations not as societies of people united by mere profession, but the very church of God (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:2). The church belongs to the one who has brought it into existence. Paul did not think of the "visible" church as a religious club or a group of mere professors, but a divinely created entity.

[20]See P. T. O'Brien, "The Church as a Heavenly and Eschatological Entity," in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, ed. by D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 88–119.

[21]Ibid., 318. Radmacher claims: "An examination of the New Testament reveals that out of one hundred and fourteen occurrences, *ekklesia* refers to the local church at least ninety times." Cf. Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972) 16.

[22]Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Historical Setting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 44–47; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon: Word Biblical Commentary* 44 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1982) 58–61.

The Reformed theologian, John Murray questioned the idea of the church as a society of mere professors. He rightly noted that the definition of the visible, "particular" church as a body of professors has arisen from the observed reality of the presence of unregenerate people within the church. Defining the church merely as the sphere of profession allows us to make sense of the discrepancy between the church as it realistically exists and our idealizations of it. Under this view the *ekklēsia* is nothing more than a quality of relationship possessed by a portion of the individuals within the membership of the local assembly. Murray's own understanding of the church could not be more dissimilar. While he did not reject the idea of the "invisible" church, he clearly articulated a view that sees the church primarily as the concrete congregation:

> The church may not be defined as an entity wholly invisible to human perception and observation. What needs to be observed is that, whether the church is viewed as the broader communion of the saints or as the unit of assembly of believers in a home or town or city, it is always a visible observable entity.[23]

Murray's solution to the problem of the relationship of unbelieving "professors" to the church is interesting. When Paul addressed the church at Corinth in 1 Corinthians he spoke to them as "those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy" (1 Cor 1:2). As the letter shows, Paul did not view the church at Corinth idealistically in any sense. On the contrary, he saw them realistically and addressed the problems at Corinth head-on. When he spoke to the church he defined it in such terms that it would not allow for the inclusion of those who are not sanctified and called to be holy. The unregenerate within the assembly are not church.[24] We must not confuse the existential appearance of the church created by the hypocrisy of the unregenerate camp-follower with the New Testament description of the church as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pet 2:9). To do so is to allow the presence of the unbeliever to dictate the very definition of the church.

Please do not misunderstand me. By speaking of the church as a this-worldly reality I do not mean to refer to the church as an institution. Like any group of people, the church naturally seeks institutions to organize and administer its life and ministry. Yet, it is still the case that the church is not a hierarchy, a polity, or a

[23]John Murray, "The Nature and Unity of the Church," in *Collected Writings of John Murray, 2: Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) 326. Cf. 323.

[24]Ibid., 327.

denomination anymore than it is a building fitted with a steeple and pews. The church is the community of God's people. It is as the people of God that the church is the concrete manifestation of God's sovereign rule. When the world looks at the church and actually sees the church, it does not see buildings, denominations, parachurch organizations or seminaries. What it sees is the people of God gathered together in community. That community is the sole embodiment of the divine presence and rule within our world.

The Body of Christ

Dispensational theologians have often spoken of the Pauline image of the body of Christ as expressing an essential relationship between the church and Christ, who is its head.[25] But is there not more to the image than merely internal relation? Certainly, Paul's use of "body" as referring to the church is metaphorical and we ought to be careful how literally we take the term, but it does not go beyond the image as metaphor to locate its meaning in bodily function as well as internal relation. As such, the image speaks of the church as the locus of Christ's present activity in the world. As the body of Christ, the church is the representative of Christ in the world, a kind of continuation of his own presence and ministry.[26] Ray Stedman writes that, "the holy mystery of the church . . . is the dwelling place of God. He lives in the people. That is the great calling of the church . . . to make visible the invisible Christ."[27] The church makes the rule of God present in the

[25]E.g. Saucy, 32. Saucy limits the image to the expression of relationship between members of the body and the members to Christ. He claims that the body of Christ does not say anything concerning the activity of the church in relation to the world. The image "looks inward and not outward." His stated reason for this construction is his commitment to an individualistic understanding of the church. He writes: "Christ fills His body, giving it life and direction, not that it might move in the world as a body. The church acts in the world as individuals—individuals, however, who are never apart from the body."

Radmacher, 223–37, makes the same restriction of body to internal relations. His reason for doing so, however, concerns his view that when the image of the body is understood as expressing the church's relation to or ministry in the world it leads to an incarnational ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that looks upon the church as an essential extension of the incarnation and therefore identifies the church and Christ. Radmacher contends that such an ecclesiology inevitably elevates the authority of the church to that of Christ.

[26]E. Schweizer, "sōma," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, abridged one volume edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 1148. Edmund Clowney, "The Biblical Theology of the Church," in *The Church in the Bible and the World*, op. cit., emphasizes that the identification implied between Christ and the church in the metaphor of the "body of Christ" is one of identification rather than incarnation, 52–53. I take this as a suitable correction to Radmacher's problem with the identification idea. See fn. 27.

[27]Ray Stedman, *Body Life* (Glendale: Regal, 1972) 15.

world through its ministry. The concrete community is the place where God tabernacles; it is his dwelling place (Eph 2:22), his house (Heb 3:6), and his holy temple (Eph 2:21). God dwells in the church and the church as a physical reality makes God present in the world.

R. L. Omanson makes the point that, "it is significant that [Paul] speaks of the church as the body of Christ but never as a body of Christians."[28] Members are related to one another in the same way that the physical body knows an interconnectedness of all its parts. As an arm or leg has no life outside the body, there is no such idea as an individual's relationship to the Lord in isolation from the community of faith. Yet classical dispensationalists often spoke as though there were. It is to the problem of individualism that we will now turn.

DISPENSATIONALIST INDIVIDUALISM

Enjoying his true identity and position with Christ, "in the heavenlies," the Christian does not dwell in the world for that is "where Satan's throne is," according to Scofield.[29] Rather, the believer pilgrimages through the world ever careful not to defile his separation from it. Scofield asks: "What in a word, is the relation of the Church to the world? Briefly this: to pass through it a pilgrim body of witnesses."[30] The mission of evangelism is not to be thought of, however, as 'the mission of the church'. Scofield and Chafer were united in the contention that the evangelistic mandate is not directed to the church as a corporate body but solely to individual Christians. Scofield claimed:

> The visible church, *as such* is charged with no mission. The Commission to evangelize the world is personal, and not corporate . . . So far as the Scripture goes, the work of evangelization was done by individuals called directly by the Spirit to that work.[31]

Chafer writes in the same vein:

> No responsibility or service is imposed on the church *per se*. Service, like the gifts of the Spirit by whom service is wrought, is individual. It

[28]R. L. Omanson, "The Church," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984) 233.

[29]C. I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford, 1917) (originally published, 1909) 1333. Chafer made statements which imply the same sort of cosmological dualism as that found in Scofield's understanding of the believer's relation to the world. Chafer thought of the Christian as a displaced person, a refuge, who is only "temporarily tenting where an enemy dwells, and where he is the object of that enemy's fiery darts," *Satan and the Satanic System*, 149–50.

[30]C. I. Scofield, *Addresses on Prophecy* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1914) 25.

[31]Scofield, *Comprehensive Bible Correspondence Course*, 3.341. Cf. Radmacher, 22–23; Saucy, 32.

> could not be otherwise. The common phrase, 'the church's task', is, therefore, without Biblical foundation. It is only when the individuals sense their personal responsibility and claim personal divine enablement that Christian work is done.[32]

Chafer thought of the church in the world as a "missionary society," a society whose purpose is the training and equipping of witnesses. Thus, the church when it gathers may be thought of as a lecture hall or a Christian worker's training center. In its pilgrim journey the church consists only of individual Christians who lack any essential structure to unite them and direct their efforts. The individual believer is the sole expression of Christ and his rule in the world.

Sources of Dispensationalist Individualism

Individualism has become all but sacrosanct in American life, both religious and secular. Paul Lehmann describes the prevailing conviction among American Christians: "It has become axiomatic, and on the alleged authority of Jesus himself, to link Christianity with the exaltation of the individual. Jesus' major concern, so the claim runs, was with the individual."[33] The classical dispensationalist restriction of the mission of the church to individualistic witness certainly fits the American ethos. One of the basic distinctions between the dispensation of law and that of grace, as Chafer saw the matter, was that Israel enjoyed a nationalistic or corporate relationship to God while the present dispensation of the Spirit is set aside as a time in which God works with individuals. God does not "call-out" a church *per se*, but individual persons, their sum constituting the body of Christ.[34]

Considering the church in the world to be an adulterous and apostate institution, both Scofield and Chafer located the activity of the Spirit not in the church but in the individual. The Holy Spirit is not a force but a person, and as a person he energizes and deals with persons, not institutions or groups of people. His agency is person-to-person. As the church is conceived of solely as a loose and voluntaristic association of individuals, the body of Christ is identified with the individual. It is in the individual that the Holy Spirit works, not in the church as in classic Protestantism.[35]

[32]Chafer, *ST*, 4.149.

[33]Paul L. Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 57.

[34]Chafer, *ST*, 7.134.

[35]Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800–1930* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978; originally published Univ. of Chicago, 1970) 205, writes: "The emphasis was always personal: personal salvation,

It is difficult to trace dispensationalist individualism back to a single root. Perhaps it finds its headwaters in a revivalism that was geared solely toward the individual's personal experience of Christ, or possibly something no more theological than American "rugged individualism" forms its source. It is difficult to arrange ecclesiastical individualism and classical dispensationalism's restriction of the proximate locus of the ἐκκλησία to the individual believer in a tight causal sequence. It would appear on the face of it that the reduction of the church to a strictly otherworldly entity and the depiction of the church in the world to the sphere of profession forms the theological basis for dispensationalist individualism. The exact causal relation between the two may not be totally evident, but it is clear that the two notions are correlates. The problem with the heightened individualism of classical dispensationalism is that it was never required by dispensationalism as a theological system. One could construe it as an implication of their reduction of the church in the world to the sphere of profession, but the most it ever really did within the system was form one more item in the list of distinctives and discontinuities between the dispensation of the law and the dispensation of grace.

Redeemed for Community

It is indeed unfortunate that Chafer thought of the church as a voluntary association of persons united around some religious ideal. The reality is not to be found in the group, under his view, but in the atomized elements of the group, the individual members, and no special importance is to be given to their association. The most that Chafer could say in favor of the individual believer gathering together with others was that it provided him with certain "advantages."[36]

The amazing thing about this exaggerated emphasis upon the individual believer as exhausting the church in the world is that it does not proceed from a deductive reading of scripture. It must rather be read *into* the New Testament material bearing upon the church. Paul did not write his letters to individual believers, except for Timothy and Titus, but to churches, groups of people. He spoke to the church as the body of Christ, of which individuals are the members. Robert Banks' most interesting book, *Paul's Idea of Community*, makes the point that Paul directed his correspondence to actual bodies of believers, real people bound together as the people of

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personal consecration, the person of the Holy Spirit, the personal premillennial return of Christ."

[36]Chafer, *ST*, 4.145.

God, not some individual, idealized pilgrim.[37] Furthermore, the New Testament use of the pronoun "you" is usually cast in the second person plural, something which is unfortunately lost in most English translations. The Word of God was not written to the individual for use in his private devotional but to the people of God, Israel in the Old Testament, and the church as the body of Christ in the New.

Certainly, dispensationalist individualism is not solely responsible for the attitude of many modern Christians toward church membership, but it is a contributing factor. For many American Christians today, the church, as an actual body of confessing believers, is simply a matter of convenience. Whether or not one associates, and participates, is considered to be largely a personal matter. If someone in the church offends me in some way, if the pastor hits too close to home from the pulpit, if my pet program or agenda is rejected, I simply pull up stakes and move to the next church. As a society we have simply lost all recognition of the local body of believers as an essential of the Christian religion and the Christian life. We understand our relation to the Lord, our redemption and our sanctification, in totally individualist terms. We have Americanized Christianity more than we have Christianized America.

Contra Chafer, we must affirm that God addresses us in community. We may be redeemed separately, but we are redeemed for community. Once redeemed we are no longer separate 'monads', but part of the people of God. The individual does not disappear into the corporate mass within Christianity. It is not a question of either individualism or corporateness. The individual person matters within the body of Christ not because he stands alone, isolated from all others, but rather because he stands alongside the other members of the church. Robert Webber rightly retains the genius of the evangelical tradition of personal faith while emphasizing the interconnectedness of the members of the body when he writes:

> True, the Christian faith is intensely personal. 'Christ died for me' is an article of faith. Individualism, however, is something different from a personal relationship with God in Christ. Rather, it is a form of Christianity that fails to understand the integral relationship that exists between the members of Christ's body.[38]

[37]Banks, 35ff. G. C. Berkouwer writes: "Paul's view of the Church is by nature strongly anti-individualistic. The Church does not consist of independent 'monads'; rather, she is a fellowship in which isolation is replaced by 'sympathy': if one member suffers, all suffer; and if one member is honored, all rejoice together;" G. C. Berkouwer, *The Church*, trans. by James E. Davison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 81.

[38]Robert Webber, *The Majestic Tapestry: How the Power of the Early Christian Tradition can Enrich Contemporary Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986) 51. G. C. Berkouwer, 77 writes similary: "The individual does not disappear behind the vague

The gospel is not entrusted to individuals but to the church. We can no longer separate the church from the evangelistic mandate or God's soteriological purpose for our world. Rather, we must affirm the church as the divinely appointed context of salvation. The faith has been entrusted to the saints, the church of God. The church's task is to call people to redemption and the fellowship of the saints. As Howard Snyder writes:

> The gospel call is a call to *something*, and that something is more than a doctrine of an experience or a heavenly juridical transaction or the exercise of faith or even, exclusively, Jesus Christ. The gospel intends to call persons *to the body of Christ*, that is, the community of believers with Jesus Christ as its essential and sovereign head.[39]

The Church and Sanctification

Undoubtedly, part of the problem of individualism within dispensationalist theology is to be found in the Keswick doctrine of Christian holiness.[40] The church played virtually no role in the Keswick doctrine, in which the pursuit after holiness was understood as a purely personal sojourn. Thus Chafer was able to limit sanctification solely to individual responsibility.[41] The emphasis of Keswick was always personal. The 'secret' of Christian holiness was understood as exhaustively residing in the activities of the Holy Spirit within the individual believer. Can we so easily divorce holiness from our life in the church? We need the church to be holy. Being a Christian is not something a person does in isolation from others. Sanctification, like justification takes place in and through the church by the working of the Holy Spirit. We are "being *built together* to become a dwelling in which

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contours of a 'totality', but he is liberated from individualization and solitariness in order to have a place in this new fellowship. That the Lord cares for the sheep includes, not excludes specific attention for one lost sheep (Luke 15:4ff). Every individual need receives His undivided attention; yet at the same time, ways are opened by which the individual receives a place in human fellowship, ending all individualism."

[39]Howard A. Snyder, *The Community of the King* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977) 13.

[40]See Douglas W. Frank, *Less Than Conquerors: How Evangelicals Entered the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 113–16. Frank's analysis is openly polemical in character and hostile to dispensational theology and the Keswick doctrine of holiness. However, his point that Keswick sought a perfection of individual dispositions is well taken. A less volatile but no less critical discussion of Keswick can be found in J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappen: Revell, 1984) 145–63.

[41]Chafer, *ST*, 4:13: "To this heavenly people, who are the New Creation of God . . . is committed, not in any corporate sense but only as individuals, a two-fold responsibility, namely (a) to adorn by a Christlike life the doctrine which they represent by the very nature of their salvation, and (b) to be His witnesses to the utmost parts of the earth."

God lives by his Spirit" (Eph 2:22). Christ gave himself *for the church* "to make her holy" (Eph 5:25).

Calvin rightly commented that, "he errs who desires to grow by himself. . . . Just so, if we wish to belong to Christ, let no man be anything for himself: but let all be whatever we are for each other."[42] The New Testament doctrine of the priesthood of the believer is not only about having one's own access to God without the intermediary of a human priest but also the right to act as a priest on behalf of the other members of the body of Christ (Heb 13:15–16). Our own personal holiness is never totally separate from the corporate holiness of the church. The church, which is the temple of God, grows as a structure, composed of living stones. Individual members minister for the growth of the whole body (Eph 4:11–16). It is not too much to say that our personal relationship to Christ cannot be separated from our relationship to the church. Keswick's reduction of Christian holiness to the management of psychological dispositions and the cultivation of personal spiritual experience tended toward an unhealthy anthropocentrism that could often look like outright egocentrism. When holiness is delimited by one's personal relation to Christ, there exists the threat of a narcissism in which the Lord becomes little more than a device for the realization of the believer's own ends.

The Classical Dispensationalist Reduction of the Church

When the church is thought of in primarily institutional terms, the marriage between culture and church becomes so close that the latter loses its own character and for all intents becomes invisible. When it is conceived in mystical, otherworldly categories, it is effectively removed from all cultural life and relevance, and thus becomes truly "invisible." In its partitioning of Israel and the church into different metaphysical realms, classical dispensationalism cut the believer and the church off from the earthliness and the earthiness of the Old Testament. Dispensationalism's understanding of the church's essentially otherworldly nature restricted the Christian revelational horizon to the internal and the personal. Through their effort to separate themselves from the world-system and their restriction of Christianity to a gospel of individualistic spiritual rescue, classical dispensationalists in effect allowed the powers of secularization to control and direct the greater part of the believer's life. We are left with a religion that could in reality be practiced on the side since it did not impact or inform the believer's social existence in any way. Ordinary business, political, and educational life could be carried out as if the gospel did not even exist.

[42]John Calvin, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Ephesians*, C. R. LXXIX, 203. Quoted in Lehmann, 66.

It is indeed unfortunate that Scofield and Chafer read the New Testament's critique of worldliness as a recommendation of otherworldliness. The world outside of the parameters of the salvation of the individual soul was abandoned to secularism. The dispensationalist theology of Scofield and Chafer subverted its own intentions and assisted the very forces from which it had sworn to protect the faith. The process of secularization has forced much of Christian theology to limit its recognition of biblical authority to areas that are largely irrelevant to the direction of culture and society as whole. C. I. Scofield and Lewis Sperry Chafer unwittingly participated in that process in their reduction of the Christian revelational horizon to a personalist soteriology and an otherworldly ecclesiology.

The dispensationalist theology of Scofield and Chafer is a good example of the contextualization of evangelical theology during an age when that theology was under intense attack from its theological rivals, and when the rise of historical consciouness threatened to eclipse all objectivist or ontologist understandings of the Christian faith. Attempting to offer a vital critique of culture in the context of trying to articulate the ways of God in history is an enterprise that is certainly to be welcomed by the Christian faith; and Scofield and Chafer both did that in a timely fashion. Their endeavor to critique liberal theology and modernism in American culture, and offer an alternative vision of the kingdom of God and its demands upon the Christian was to a degree successful. Their commitment to scripture and the defense of orthodoxy tutored a generation of Bible believing Americans. Their attempt to preserve or restore traditional Christian values and ways, however, was a total failure. Classical dispensationalism was not only incapable of halting the process of secularization in American society, but was itself, and largely by its very own hand, a victim of that secularization. Its radical emphasis upon a metaphysical distinction between Israel and the church reduced the gospel to one of individual rescue and the church to a vague, otherworldly entity that is of little consequence to the Christian's existence in the world. Thus the believer's work-a-day existence is surrendered to the very powers of autonomy and secularism that Scofield and Chafer so vehemently denounced.

CONCLUSION

Darby said that the church is in ruins. It is time to re-enter the ruin and take stock. Yes, there is sin in the church; and yes, there are even unregenerate people in the church. But is it a ruin, something that must be abandoned in favor of some other form of dwelling in some other locale? Paul did not appear to think so. He could call a congregation that was terribly divided the "saints," a congregation that was polluted by sin "the church of God." The church is not yet

what it will be in the *eschaton*, but there is no biblical ground upon which one can stand and abandon the church.

Dispensational theology seeks to understand the ways of God in our world in an historical framework. That is its genius. Dispensationalism understands that the Bible is about God's work in our historical existence. That is its great contribution to evangelical theology. In light of the rising ability of dispensational theology to be self-critical, I suggest that it is time for dispensationalism to give the same attention to the church as the people of God within the world and within history that it has given to Israel.