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Warfield, Chafer, and the Reformed Tradition: A Question of Historical Perspective

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The late Bernard Ramm, in his *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology*, included an appendix that, in the words of Fred H. Klooster, “represents a rather ludicrous comparison of Lewis Sperry Chafer and Karl Barth.”¹ In terms of educational background and academic qualifications, Barth did indeed tower over Chafer. Ramm seemed to labor under the impression that Chafer still exerts some significant influence in evangelical circles today. He refers to Chafer’s *Systematic Theology* (originally in eight volumes, it has recently been revised by the faculty of Dallas Seminary in two volumes) as

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a standard text in a number of evangelical and fundamentalist schools. It is heralded as the fullest text of systematic theology that we have now in print for evangelicals. It claims to be unabridged, premillennial, and dispensational. It is, then, a paradigm for evangelical and fundamentalist theology.²

Ramm obviously felt that if evangelicals would take the time to do a little comparison, they would quickly see that earth was a far more qualified guide to the study of theology than Chafer.

I submit (and with no disrespect to Chafer or his rightful place of honor in the history of the twentieth-century church) that Warfield has had a more pronounced influence on evangelicalism in this century than Chafer, and Ramm would have been better advised to do a comparison with Warfield and Barth, especially since Warfield’s educational background and academic qualifications are comparable with Barth’s. But this would have defeated Ramm’s original

intention, which was to present Barth in his best possible light. Comparing Warfield and Barth would not have convinced many evangelicals that Barth was superior to Warfield in learning and theological scholarship.

This article does not seek to imitate Ramm by resorting to a similar comparison between Warfield and Chafer. Like Barth, Warfield would stand head and shoulders over Chafer in that regard. Besides, Warfield would have found such a comparison extremely distasteful. Both men were Presbyterian. Both taught systematic theology, and in most critical areas of doctrine (especially in their understanding of Scripture) they were in hearty agreement.³

Warfield and Chafer did have some serious disagreements. In 1918 Warfield reviewed Chafer's popular book *He That Is Spiritual* in *Princeton Theological Review*.⁴ Warfield pulled no punches, and it is doubtful if Chafer ever received a more devastating analysis of his views than the one that Warfield delivered. George M. Marsden sums up Warfield's review:

The essence of Warfield's criticism was, as he put it in a review of a work by young Lewis Sperry Chafer, that the Keswick teacher was plagued by "two inconsistent systems of religion struggling together in his mind." One was Calvinist, so that he and his "coterie" (one of Warfield's favorite words) of evangelists and Bible teachers often spoke of God's grace doing all; but behind this Calvinist exterior lurked the spectres of Pelagius, Arminius, and Wesley, all of whom made God's gracious working subject to human determination. The resulting synthesis, Warfield said, was "at once curiously pretentious and curiously shallow."⁵

Chafer never responded in print to Warfield in the Princetonian's lifetime. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., who studied

under Dr. Chafer in the 1940s, once told me that Dr. Chafer never spoke of Warfield with anything but the utmost respect. However, Chafer did have strong comments about Warfield's understanding of prophetic themes, and it is to that that I turn my attention.

Warfield stands in the mainstream of the Reformed tradition on the interpretation of prophecy. His position is generally identified as postmillennial. In his short article, "The Gospel and the Second Coming," Warfield speaks of the millennium in terms of premillennial and postmillennial, and argues in favor of the postmillennial position. Warfield's interests were elsewhere and he did not devote a great deal of time or effort to the subject. What he did write is restricted to, relatively speaking, brief articles. The longest one, "The Millennium and the Apocalypse" (22 pages), is the most argumentative. Throughout his writings on the subject, one refrain is struck again and again: Warfield has no sympathies for premillennialism.

From its inception with Archibald Alexander, the old Princetonian attitude towards premillennialism has been described in the words of David B. Calhoun, as one of "tolerant dissatisfaction."⁶ Warfield's attitude towards chiliasm (as premillennialism has been referred to historically) is typical of leading Reformed theologians of the period. W. G. T. Shedd and Robert Lewis Dabney on the American scene, as well as the Scotsman James Orr, and the Dutchmen Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, all wrote critically of premillennialism.

Chafer, it must be admitted, was not a product of this Reformed tradition. Although ordained as an evangelist in the Northern Presbyterian Church, he received no formal theological training (something he actually thought was to his advantage).⁹ His circle of friends, for the most part, were among the likes of Harry Ironside, James Gray, R. A. Torrey and especially C. I. Scofield, whose influence was undoubt-

edly the single greatest factor in molding Chafer's thought. All of these men, in addition to being in the forefront of the victorious life teaching, or the Keswick movement, were ardent premillennialists of the dispensational stripe. It would not be an exaggeration to say that, as far as they were concerned, premillennialism constituted the *essence* of what it meant to be a "Bible-believing Christian."¹⁰ Whether it was intentional or not, Chafer lapsed into this mindset on more than one occasion in discussing the various schools of thought regarding the millennium.

Premillennialism, as expected, is vigorously defended. Chafer, however, is somewhat uncomfortable with the historical record since the time of the Reformation, complaining that ecclesiastical histories are usually written by men who are not sympathetic to premillennialism. He does point to the testimony of Cotton Mather in seeking to confirm his conviction that chiliasm has a long and glorious following down through the years. In Reformed circles, however, it has always been a minority position.¹¹

Chafer was not a historian of doctrine, and one of the major flaws in his systematic theology is his lack of familiarity with church history and the progress of dogma.¹² Postmillennialism, for instance, is traced back to Daniel Whitby (1638-1725), who published his "Treatise of the True Millennium" in 1703. Whitby was an English theologian whom Chafer stigmatizes as being a secret Socinian.¹³ The trouble with all this is that Whitby was not the first or even the most influential postmillennialist. Iain H. Murray has convincingly demonstrated that the mainstream Puritans of the seventeenth century were, for the most part, postmillennialists.¹⁴

Warfield's position is identified by Chafer as being antimillennial and is said three times by Chafer to be of Romish origin.¹⁵ Chafer writes, "Dr. B. B. Warfield embraced the Romish idea, common to all who defend the amillennial

theory. His great learning and scholarship in other fields of truth have given him an influence over many who do not investigate any more than Dr. Warfield evidently did."¹⁶ Warfield's position and interpretation of Revelation 20 is described by Chafer in this way: "In sheer fantastical imagination this method surpasses Russellism, Eddyism, and Seventh Day Adventism."¹⁷ Chafer is guilty, regrettably, especially in his section on eschatology, of vilifying and demonizing his opposition.

Warfield deserved better than this. His understanding of the question of the millennium was neither Romish nor cultic. He stands in a long line of Reformed thinkers who, like Chafer, have sought to be faithful to Scripture in developing their understanding of last things. This is not to say that Warfield's understanding of last things is innately superior to Chafer's. It is to say, however, that our own understanding of such things is greatly impoverished if, like Chafer, we neglect the historical dimension in our attempts to construct a biblical theology of last things.

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Endnotes

1. Fred H. Klooster, "Barth and the Future of Evangelical Theology," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985), 303.
2. Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 200.
3. Warfield, despite his contribution to *The Fundamentals*

- in 1909 (Warfield wrote the entry on "The Deity of Christ"), was not, strictly speaking, a fundamentalist, and, as Mark Noll has noted, "The rise of Fundamentalism placed the Princeton theologians in an ambiguous situation. They certainly applauded the fundamentalists' adherence to scriptural infallibility, and they heartily approved the fundamentalistic insistence upon a supernatural faith. Yet they were squeamish about the anti-intellectual tendencies and the snap theological judgments that often characterized the movement." *The Princeton Theology 1812-1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983), 299.
- 4 Curtis I. Crenshaw and Grover E. Gunn III, in their trenchant critique *Dispensationalism Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow* (Memphis: Footstool Publications, 1985), 410, mistakenly place Warfield's review in *Bibliotheca Sacra* and compound their error by adding that this journal, at the time Warfield wrote the review, was published by Princeton. *Bibliotheca Sacra* originally was the property of Andover Seminary. After a period of floating from one institution to another (Princeton not being one of them), it became the property of Dallas Theological Seminary in 1934; cf. John Hannah, "The History of *Bibliotheca Sacra*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September, 1976).
 - 5 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 98.
 - 6 Anthony A. Hoekema recognizes Warfield as being post-millennial, but notes that on key passages (especially Rev. 20:1-6) Warfield's interpretation is distinctly amillennial; cf. his *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 179.
 - 7 David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony 1869-1929* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 183.

- This situation later became exacerbated within the ranks of those who followed J. Gresham Machen to establish Westminster Theological Seminary. Premillennialists, especially those sympathetic toward dispensationalism, broke away under the leadership of J. Oliver Buswell, Allan A. Macrae and Carl McIntire to found Faith Theological Seminary and the Bible Presbyterian Church; cf. Timothy P. Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism 1875-1982* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1983), 168.
- 8 Cf. W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* II (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, reprint 1971), 642; Robert Lewis Dabney, *Discussions* I (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1982), 210; James Orr, *The Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1948), 334; Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things: Hope for This World and the Next*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 94-98.
 - 9 C. F. Lincoln, writing the "Biographical Sketch" of Chafer in volume 1 of Chafer's *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: The Seminary Press, 1948) 5; records Chafer as saying, "The very fact that I did not study a prescribed course in theology made it possible for me to approach the subject with an unprejudiced mind to be concerned only with what the Bible actually teaches."⁵
 - 10 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes speaks for many, I think, when he complains about the pride and triumphalism that is sometimes found among the more zealous premillennialists. "Many of these seem to regard the premillennial creed as an authenticating mark of those who are acceptable as fully orthodox. Indeed, it has become customary for dispensationalist authors to adduce the assertion of Justin Martyr (quoted above)— 'I and others, who are right-minded Christians on all points, are assured that there will be a resurrection of the dead and

a thousand years in Jerusalem'—as proof conclusive that premillennialism was 'the criterion of a perfect orthodoxy' in the post-apostolic church, though they can do so only by the really inexcusable suppression of Justin's qualification in the same passage, namely, that 'many who belong to the pure and pious faith and are true Christians think otherwise.' No more impressive is it to cite the names of liberals, romanists, and unitarians whose outlook has been other than premillennial, as though this suffices to demonstrate that premillennialism and soundness of faith belong inseparably together." *Interpreting Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 102.

- 11 This is well documented in Iain H. Murray's remarkable book *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975).
- 12 Chafer relies heavily on secondary sources. For example, Calvin, Edwards and Owen, to name only three, are always cited by means of secondary sources.
- 13 Murray, *op. cit.*
- 14 Chafer, IV, 280.
- 15 It is interesting to note that Chafer was either unaware or chose not to allude to the fact that premillennialism's growth in popularity in the nineteenth century is traced back to Edward Irving's translation of a work titled *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (1827), a volume written by Manuel De Lacunza (1731-1801), a South American Jesuit priest; cf. Murray, *op. cit.*, 189-90.
- 16 Chafer, 281.
- 17 *Ibid.*