

Chalcedon must be defended. But we need more thoroughly to appeal to Scripture to do so.

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R. Todd Mangum, *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936–1944*. Studies in Evangelical History and Thought. Milton Keynes, U.K., and Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2007. Pp. 306. \$39.99, paper.

The late Winston Churchill, twice British Prime Minister and also a historian, is reported to have said, “History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it.”

In the case of the struggles which characterized conservative American Presbyterians in the decade following 1935, history *has* been kind. First, contemporary eyewitnesses of this Presbyterian conflict with modernism left us their impressions (Edwin Rian, 1940; Ned B. Stonehouse, 1954; Robert K. Churchill, 1984). They were followed by various denominational historians representing the perspectives of the former Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod (George P. Hutchinson, 1974); the then-Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (Bradley Longfield, 1991); and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (D. G. Hart, 1994; D. G. Hart and John Muether, 1995). Each of these in their own way sought to demonstrate the integrity of the stalwart Presbyterians whom they identified as exemplary in that time. And thus, the portraiture of that sad decade in which conservative Presbyterians fell out with one another, even as they recognized a mightier foe in modernism, might be considered complete.

Todd Mangum’s *The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift* has taken as its *raison d’être* the desire to demonstrate that this portraiture is incomplete. Unrepresented in this half-century of history-writing, according to this writer, is the then-still-extensively-Presbyterian constituency which moved in the orbit of the Evangelical Theological College of Dallas, Texas (now Dallas Theological Seminary). It is Mangum’s concern to show that it was through a combination of excessive zeal for a restatement of Reformed orthodoxy and the Dallas “constellation’s” own doctrinal imprecision that a seemingly unbridgeable “fissure” was opened up. The “fissure” came with costs: conservative Presbyterianism was shorn of thousands who might have been numbered in its ranks and Dallas Seminary—in the period after 1944—moved away from the broadly Reformed theological position for which its founders had meant it to stand. It is an intriguing thesis; for the elaboration of it, Dallas Seminary awarded him the Ph.D. in 2001.

As Mangum sees it, the dispensationalism for which Dallas (personified by its theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer, a Southern Presbyterian minister until his death in 1952) was known by the mid-1930s, was still inchoate; wide variations of emphasis existed, unopposed. The movement was also known to be associated with the system of “notes” inserted in the margins of the Scofield Reference Bible (1909, 1917). Various Presbyterian ministers such as Wilbur M. Smith (1894–1976) were happy to be associated with such a movement; never doctrinaire, he simply maintained that “the Scofield Bible is right more times than it is wrong.” Mangum explains the pervasiveness of this eclectic approach to dispensationalism among many Presbyterians and other evangelicals by

showing its affinity with the themes advanced by the influential Niagara Bible Conference movement (commencing in 1876).

However, this inchoate character notwithstanding, the emerging dispensationalist movement would be found wanting by conservative Presbyterians eager to uphold what they took to be Reformed orthodoxy in the 1935–1944 period. The latter, not unreasonably, took the notes in the iconic Scofield Bible and the writings of Lewis Sperry Chafer as representative. These were found to embrace ideas of discontinuity between the way of salvation reflected in the two Testaments, between Israel and the Church, and the almost-certain abrogation of the Mosaic law for the Christian.

Casualties there were. Among those who had, following J. Gresham Machen, departed from the PCUSA in 1936 to form the Presbyterian Church of America (from 1939 renamed the Orthodox Presbyterian Church), the casualties were the historic premillennialists. These, while disavowing the inexactitudes found within the Scofield notes and the writings of Chafer, still found no explicit guarantee of their right to exist in the newly founded denomination; they exited to launch the Bible Presbyterian movement. Other northern Presbyterians bypassed all attempts at Presbyterian secession from the mainline and departed directly for the “Bible Church” movement. In the southern Presbyterian sphere, historic premillennialists acted in a way that preempted their own being “tarred” with a brush reserved by a General Assembly committee’s report (1943–1945) for un-named Presbyterian dispensationalists (such as Lewis Sperry Chafer) whose biblical interpretation was judged unsound. Insightfully (and I think, correctly), Mangum proposes that the carnage among Presbyterian conservatives in northern and southern spheres could have been mitigated by face-to-face meetings among those who pronounced dispensationalism to be anathema, those with only limited sympathy for these tenets, and those who were taken as “pillars” of the movement.

That this did not happen, says Mangum, reflects most poorly on the handful of Westminster Seminary professors (not yet Orthodox Presbyterian ministers) who used the *Presbyterian Guardian* to denounce dispensationalism. Only slightly less deserving of censure, according to Mangum, were the members of a southern Presbyterian General Assembly committee (conservatives such as J. B. Green of Columbia Seminary and Nelson Bell among them) who helped ensure that suspicion would fall on dispensational premillennial contemporaries (a good number of whom, like Chafer, were PCUS ministers serving as Dallas Seminary faculty members).

If the history of the Presbyterian theological controversies of the 1930s is not fully complete, now with the publication of Mangum’s volume it is at least more nearly complete. Himself a Southern Baptist, teaching in Biblical Seminary, Hatfield, Pennsylvania, this writer has provided the conservative Presbyterian family with the reminder that northern and southern Presbyterian zeal against dispensationalist premillennialism in the pre-war period was mutually destructive. It is an interesting and plausible hypothesis.

Yet, it seems to this reviewer that, in spite of the attractiveness of Mangum’s approach to these questions, its explanatory power is thin at crucial points. First, we can consider Mangum’s argument that conservative Presbyterian inhospitality towards 1930s-era dispensationalism ultimately cost conservative Presbyterianism a constituency which a more patient approach might have preserved. The difficulty with this line of argument is that the best statistical evidence he brings forward in support of it is inconclusive. Even in the

years when Westminster Seminary faculty members had only begun to focus upon dispensationalism's shortcomings, no more than 40 percent of Dallas Seminary's student body and 50 percent of that school's faculty were of Presbyterian affiliation. These fractions, while substantial, do not render this institution, its faculty or supporters, an "arm" of the Presbyterian movement, which was struggling for its life at this time. This seminary and its constituency were already highly eclectic and embracive of a considerable range of opinion. The concern of conservative Presbyterians was for *denominational* theological integrity; the concern of Dallas and the dispensational movement was that of advancing a pan-conservative evangelical alliance. Yes, the movements *might* have found ways to provide mutual support; principal persons in each had already collaborated in enterprises such as the League of Evangelical Students. But it is for seminaries to uphold the positions of sympathetic denominations, rather than the reverse, and this support a seminary endorsing even an inchoate dispensationalism could not offer to confessional Presbyterians.

Second, his argument has maintained the openness of Presbyterian dispensationalists to change through dialogue with Covenant theologians. In support of such a contention, Mangum has drawn attention to dispensationalism's passing through three permutations in the seventy-five years following the publication of the Scofield Bible. However, this same evidence may as surely be construed as an indication of dispensationalism's inherent theological instability (and Mangum himself allows that a theological reaction against Covenant theology characterized dispensationalism in the 1950s). The question for conservative Presbyterians who were moving in the Dallas "orbit" in the 1930s ought to have been one of *why*—when they too had the historic Westminster Confession of Faith—they were "hitching their wagons" to a system of biblical interpretation which was so "homespun" that it would require constant "tinkering" at intervals. The burden of proof here does not lie with Presbyterian confessionalists but with the Presbyterian dispensationalists who discounted, at the practical level, the theological and hermeneutical distinctives of their Reformed theological tradition and chose to steer by a different rudder.

The tale under review in this admirable work is therefore not quite "the fissuring of American Evangelical Theology, 1936–1944"; such a typology implies that a more unified evangelical "whole" predated this period of conflict. In point of fact, what is described is the fissuring of an eclectic, broadly conservative Presbyterian movement, originally spread across Presbyterian churches north and south, into (largely) amillennialist, premillennialist, and dispensational premillennialist subgroupings, with the latter eventually surrendering its tie with Presbyterianism when the two other groupings treated it as beyond the pale.

Happily, the give-and-take theological conversation which did not characterize the decade reviewed in the book is now more customary. We are indebted to Mangum for a fine, thought-provoking book which comes accompanied (in appendices) by important denominational documents from the period in question.

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