Where’s the Love?
Understanding the Marginalization of Dispensational Theology
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Introduction

For decades dispensationalism has held something of an outsider status relative to both evangelical and Reformed confessional life. Some of dispensationalism’s critics are little short of vitriolic in their opinion of dispensationalism. Others greet dispensationalism with derisive giggles. The reasons for the bemusement and contempt are not monolithic in nature, however, and are often quite poorly understood. The following is an attempt to identify and briefly analyze two major polarizing events in the early history of dispensationalism that led to the disenfranchisement of the movement, and to discover what can (or should) be done to rectify the problem(s).

The Confessional Expulsion of 1936–1944

When American dispensationalism developed during the throes of antebellum concern over the church’s role in the slavery question, it developed largely within the Presbyterian Church. It developed among ministers who were predominantly Calvinistic, who embraced the Westminster Standards, and who affirmed the central tenets of the Federal or “Covenant” Theology.1 These earliest dispensationalists did not see themselves as abandoning the Reformed tradition in the least when they embraced dispensationalism.2 Instead, they saw themselves as recovering the Reformation ideal of the two kingdoms—properly distinguishing what is Caesar’s from what is God’s.3 The earliest dispensationalists were not trying to invent something new; instead, they were attempting, on biblical grounds, (1) to offer a realistic alternative to the optimism of postmillennialism and the

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1See, e.g., Carl E. Sanders, II, The Premillennial Faith of James Brookes: Reexamining the Roots of American Dispensationalism (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992). This denominational fidelity among American dispensationalists was something of a contrast with J. N. Darby’s vision of “get[ting] Christians clear practically of a great corrupt baptized body” (Letters, 2:228).

2James Hall Brookes, C. I. Scofield, and Lewis Sperry Chafer remained staunch Presbyterians until their respective deaths, and fully half of the faculty at Dallas Theological Seminary (including such luminaries as John Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, and S. Lewis Johnson) were subscribing Presbyterians as late as the mid-1940s (R. Todd Mangum, The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: The Fissuring of American Evangelical Theology from 1936–1944 [Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007], 169). In 1924, shortly after the founding of the seminary (then the Evangelical Theological College), L. S. Chafer himself would write of the school that “it stands on the great vital truths embodied in that marvelous document, the Westminster Confession of Faith” (letter to D. S. Kennedy, 23 October 1924, cited in John Hannah, “The Social and Intellectual History of the Origins of the Evangelical Theological College” [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Dallas, 1988], 346).

3While a survey of the origins of dispensationalism is beyond the purview of this presentation, it must be stated most emphatically that the birth of dispensationalism, whether in Darby’s Plymouth or Brookes’s St. Louis, had absolutely nothing to do with eschatology or soteriology. Instead, it had everything to do with the church’s role in the social and political wranglings that dominated their respective denominations. Both Darby and Brookes saw the NT church (in distinction from OT Israel) as a purely spiritual organism wholly independent of and ambivalent toward the earthly, socio-political and civil structures of the day (and certainly in no position to appropriate those structures in the interest of precipitating the kingdom). In truth, the dispensationalists were very close to recovering Calvin’s theory of the “two governments of God” and Luther’s theory of the “two kingdoms.” They had no interest at all in starting a new sect.
immanence of modernism and (2) to recover a more modest goal of ecclesiology in the face of a church obsessed with cultural activism.

In the early decades of the dispensational movement this was understood, and the result was an “alliance between two newly formulated nineteenth-century theologies, dispensationalism and the Princeton theology which, though not wholly compatible, managed to maintain a united front against Modernism.” For fifty years the dispensationalists and the Princetonians collaborated on publication projects, shared pulpits and conference platforms, and mutually praised each other, with many a dispensational work earning favorable review in Princeton’s *Presbyterian & Reformed Review.* Most significantly, when C. A. Briggs sought to evict the dispensationalists from the ranks of Northern Presbyterianism during the 1880s, due to their “gloomy view” of the kingdom that offered “such little encouragement for hearty labor,” the Princetonians stood fast with the dispensationalists. The dispensationalists might have erred in some minor matters, the Princetonians concluded, but their core concerns about the Modernist majority were valid. In Sandeen’s words,

They agreed with one another in general mood and in the elaboration of their central theme of Biblical authority. Both groups insisted upon an inerrant scripture, and, whether by accident or design, began at about the same time to defend their views by recourse to the “original manuscripts.” Both groups thought in pre-Kantian, pre-Schleiermachian rationalistic terms. Over and against the new theologies of immanence and social gospel, both stressed God’s transcendence, and supra-historical power and expressed themselves in very pessimistic terms when discussing social problems. The two movements were by no means completely compatible, but the common Modernist foe kept them at peace with one another throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The alliance deepened after the horrors of the Great War and the consequent collapse of postmillennialism. Dispensationalism had been predicting for decades that society would deteriorate and that the church was courting peril by engaging too intimately with political/social concerns—and their prophecies were shockingly fulfilled. Dispensationalism prospered. The high point of dispensational influence within the Presbyterian denomination occurred in the early 1930s, when the dispensationalists risked everything to assist the conservative Presbyterian minority in their scramble to create a new seminary (Westminster Theological Seminary), a new missions agency (the Independent Missions Board), and ultimately a brand new presbytery (the Orthodox Presbyterian Church). Darryl Hart makes the startling observations that there were not only a premillennialist and a dispensationalist on the charter faculty of WTS (Paul Woolley and Allan MacRae, respectively), but that a full 80% of the early student body was premillennial.

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4Ernest R. Sandeen, “Toward a Historical Interpretation of the Origins of Fundamentalism,” *Church History* 36 (March 1967): 67. Over the decades there have been many dissenters from Sandeen’s thesis, but these appear to me to be motivated more by contemporary angst between the two movements than by historical angst.

5A catalog of these may be found in ibid., 75–77; see also idem, *The Roots of Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), chap. 7 et passim.

6C. A. Briggs, “Origin and History of Premillennialism,” *Lutheran Quarterly* NS 9 (April 1879): 244–45. The warrant for Briggs’s argument against the premillennialists is historical, but his frustration is in the ethical or practical realm: By “denying that Christ is enthroned, or that His kingdom is established, or that His Church, with the Holy Spirit’s energy, is to convert the world; and asserting that the world will wax worse and worse until the second advent,” the premillennarians were cutting the nerve of social activism that defined modernist Protestantism.


8D. G. Hart, “The Legacy of J. Gresham Machen and the Identity of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” *WTJ* 53 (1991): 212–13. Allan MacRae would himself reflect fondly on those days many years after the fact: “I knew Dr. Machen very intimately, and served as a colleague with him and with Paul Woolley for eight years,
In 1936, however, the alliance suddenly shattered. In what appeared to be (but probably was not) a coordinated bit of agitation, four of the more staunchly Reformed members of the faculty at WTS turned against their dispensational brothers in a fierce battery of published critiques of the dispensational movement. The dispensationalists were devastated. They had sacrificed greatly to back Machen and his confessional minority, yet it was Machen himself who would effectively evict them: “If a man really does accept all the teaching of [Scofield’s] notes,” Machen announced in November, “he is seriously out of accord with the Reformed faith and has no right to be a minister or elder or deacon in [the OPC].” The following year, predictably, the OPC ruptured, disgorging its premillennial and dispensational elements to form the new Bible Presbyterian synod. Attempts to heal the breach within broader Presbyterian life fared poorly over the next seven years, and the schism was rendered irreversible in 1944 when the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the PCUS (the intact presbytery of the Southern church) officially affirmed the teachings of dispensationalism to be “out of accord with the system of doctrine set forth in the Confession of Faith.” All cooperation ended, with each side bitterly excoriating the other for savaging the tiny new church.

So what did the dispensationalists do in 1936 that suddenly made them so odious? Nothing, apparently. The Reformed confessionalists had simply failed to see the dispensational problem for what it was, or better, they had ignored this lesser threat in order to more fully engage in the mortal struggle against liberalism. Once the breach with the liberal element occurred, however, they shifted to a new task, viz., the organization of a new, pure assembly. And with that shift in task came a new era of scrutiny: lesser theological aberrations mattered again.

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9See infra.


11“Minutes of the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the PCUS” (1944), 126.

12As early as 1921 we find stout Presbyterian critiques of the Scofield Reference Bible (see e.g., R. C. Reed, “The Scofield Bible Again,” Presbyterian Standard 62 [6 April 1921]: 2), but they were not deemed sufficiently serious to merit censure by the Presbyterian majority. When given an opportunity to explain why the attacks had come so suddenly in 1936, the confessionalists replied: “We cannot offer a very good reason for a failure to raise the issue at an earlier time. Evidently the only reason is that we were absorbed in fighting that great enemy, Modernism” (“A Clarification of Some Issues,” Presbyterian Guardian 3.11 [13 March 1937]: 217).

13In Mangum’s words, “Having escaped the ruination of modernism’s destructiveness in the old denomination, [John Murray] wanted to ensure that the new denomination would get a clean start, unsullied by any other theological impurities, as well—like Arminianism, and…dispensationalism” (“The Dispensational-Covenantal Rift: How It Happened, Can It Be Repaired,” paper presented to the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society [Atlanta, GA]: 19 November 2010, 5).
And so it was that the dispensationalists were subjected to intense theological scrutiny, found to be in conflict with the Presbyterian Standards of Unity, and expelled on confessional grounds. O. T. Allis began the barrage with two articles, “Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture” and “Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God.”\(^{14}\) In these he outlined what would become the centerpiece of concern: troubling discontinuities (1) in God’s decree, (2) in God’s one people, and (3) in God’s ethical demands. John Murray chimed in next, redirecting the focus of his ongoing publication series against the threat of liberalism to take aim at what he appears to identify as the parallel threats of Arminianism and dispensationalism, focusing especially on (4) the dispensational view of the Law and (5) the ill-advised distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God.\(^{15}\) R. B. Kuiper also took part in the publishing blitz, inserting a barb into an article (otherwise about separating from liberal theology) against the “two errors which are so extremely prevalent among American fundamentalists, Arminianism and the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible,” sharply excoriating these systems as “anti-reformed heresies.”\(^{16}\) J. Gresham Machen at first attempted to play the role of mediator, offering an olive branch to some of the more covenant-conscious premillennialists; his complete intolerance for dispensational premillennialism, however, ultimately pushed the former away as well.\(^{17}\) Other concerns included (6) the specter of “two ways of salvation,” usually accompanied by a citation of Scofield’s comment in his Reference Bible that “The point of testing is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ, with good works as a fruit of salvation,”\(^{18}\) (7) cozy relations with Keswick theology, and (8) dubious eschatological schemes.

**Analysis:** My appreciation for confessional theology is such that I am deeply respectful of those who politely decline association based primarily on confessional concerns. That is not to say that confessions replace the Bible or carry anything close to biblical authority. But to base ecclesiastical association (and consequently ecclesiastical separation) on whole confessions painstakingly extracted from the Christian Scriptures is to me a refreshing alternative to models that predicate ecclesiastical association/separation on matters of praxis or the minimalism of the Gospel. So while I believe that men like John Murray, O. T. Allis, and J. Gresham Machen were at points misinformed about the excesses of dispensationalism and mistaken in some of their own confessional commitments, I have a difficult time faulting them for their confessional zeal.

That being said, it is very likely that Todd Mangum is correct in opining (from the standpoint of the Reformed “side,” incidentally) that the division as described in this paper was fueled by much

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\(^{14}\) *EQ* 8.1 (January 1936): 22–35; *EQ* 8.3 (July 1936) 272–89.

\(^{15}\) “The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 1–3 (1935–1937). The fourth installment of his series was directed against those who held to a general atonement (16 March 1936) and the fifth against those who denied the other four “points” of Calvinism (20 April 1936). Installments 6–8 (18 May 1936; 17 August 1936; and 9 January 1937) were directed against the dispensationalists.

\(^{16}\) “Why Separation was Necessary,” *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (12 September 1936): 226.

\(^{17}\) See the aforementioned attacks in the 14 November 1936 issue of the *Presbyterian Guardian*. It should be noted that the sharp distinction between covenant or historic premillennialism and dispensational premillennialism did not fully emerge until the 1940s. While Machen was clearly making this distinction when he wrote in 1936, his readers were not. As a result, Machen was unable to stop the exodus of both breeds of premillennialist from the ranks of the OPC.

\(^{18}\) *Scofield Reference Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1909), 1115. To his credit, after pointing out this admittedly scandalous statement by Scofield, Machen conceded that “some of the worst things in [Scofield’s] notes are actually contradicted by other passages that the notes themselves contain” (ibid., 42).
misunderstanding and was harsher than it needed to be. This is not to say that the division was strictly one of misunderstanding, for real differences existed and persist to this day. But note the following:

- Alarms that dispensationalism was an anachronistic expression of open theism (i.e., God frantically turning from ‘plan A’ to ‘plan B’ to ‘plan C’ in the respective dispensations) have proven to be caricatures of the system.

- Dispensationalism, which admittedly started out as a movement pointing out overlooked discontinuities in God’s program have for decades been correcting this initial imbalance through multiplied quests for a unifying center for all God’s activities in the universe.

Excursus: When I came to DBTS 20 years ago I was confronted within weeks with Rolland McCune’s insistence that if we were going to reject the covenant of redemption as the unifying center of all God’s activity, we needed to come up with a superior alternative. Many of you are familiar with his evolving handout, “The Unifying Center of All God’s Activity” (the final form of which is found in his Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion). Nor was McCune doing something new: he was following in the footsteps of his mentor, Alva J. McClain, whose 1959 work The Greatness of the Kingdom was a triumph of biblical theology long before biblical theologies became all the rage in the 1990s and 2000s. McClain’s thesis was that the unifying center of all God’s activity was not, as the Covenant Theologian supposed, redemption, but rather the kingdom. Six years later Charles Ryrie opined similarly that dispensationalism views doxology and not soteriology as the centerpiece of its “philosophy of history.” Many others could be mentioned, but these key contributions suffice to prove that dispensationalism has, for a half century, been on the forefront of defending the unity of the Scripture. The problem, it seems, is not that dispensationalism has no unifying center, but that it offers a unifying center that their antagonists are unwilling to accept. To the degree that this is acknowledged, allegations that dispensationalists deny the unity of the Bible are replaced with an intramural quibble over the axis of that unity—a significant quibble, to be sure, but not at all the heretical specter that O. T. Allis painted.

- Early dispensational hypotheses of totally disparate peoples of God have been softened such that while they still deny the absolute identity of the “peoples” of God, they also concede many continuities (esp. respecting the basis of their salvation).

- Early key misstatements aside, it has become demonstrable that Reformed angst over the dispensational “two ways of salvation” was misdirected: Ryrie’s explanation that OT and NT saints had a common basis of salvation (Christ), a common requirement for salvation (faith), and a common object of faith (God’s person and promises), with increasing levels of faith content, has proved satisfactory to many leading lights in Reformed life.

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• Early angst about the dispensational denial of the continuing relevance of the Law has been defused over the years by more careful explanations and, most significantly, by Doug Moo’s discovery that the dispensational view has the robust historical provenance of no less a light than Martin Luther.  

23 Acceptance of this view within New Covenant Theology has further mitigated the concern. Differences undoubtedly remain (e.g., dispensationalists reject the “third use of the Law” so valued in Reformed theology), but the dispensationalists surely have not succumbed to the specter of antinomianism.

• Eschatology remains a key point of contention, but as Reformed folk are quick to observe, matters of eschatology alone are scarcely central concerns and should not be the reason for schism.  

25 It is interesting to note that when the Ad Interim Committee on Changes in the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of the PCUS was called to evaluate dispensationalism, it was charged with investigating the purported eschatological deviations of dispensationalism. The scathing report that resulted, however, largely ignored the eschatological concerns and focused instead on other issues of theology. In essence they seemed to conclude that while dispensational eschatology was bizarre, this fact alone did not merit excommunication. Vern Poythress, likewise, identifies a few dispensational deviations from the eschatology of the WCF, but downplays his remarks with the observation that “Historic presbyterianism—and Reformed theology more broadly—has never committed itself credationally to details of the millennium or the idea of an any-moment coming. For the most part, the Reformed creeds confine themselves to general statements about the last judgment and the resurrection” (“Presbyterianism and Dispensationalism,” 423).

• The distinction between the “kingdom of God” and “kingdom of heaven” has largely been abandoned in dispensational thought as a poorly construed model. Incidentally, however, it is worth noting that the recent OPC revival of the Reformation ideal of “two kingdoms” or “two governments” of God brings these particular confessionalists, at least, into greater harmony with dispensationalists than either group enjoys with the neo-Calvinist, one-kingdom approach so prevalent in evangelical ecclesiology (see below).

We cannot hope to eliminate every vestige of disagreement between Reformed confessionalism and dispensationalism. Differences remain and I both welcome and respect this fact. But I would like to express substantial agreement with Poythress in opining that the relationship of modern dispensationalism and Reformed confessionalism should be one where differences remain, but the differences look more minor and less antagonistic than they did in the days of mutual denunciation.”


24 See, e.g., Tom Wells and Fred Zaspel, New Covenant Theology (Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 2002), chaps 8–14.


27 “Presbyterianism and Dispensationalism,” 423.
The Neo-Calvinist Expulsion of 1947ff

Once the Dispensational-Princetonian alliance dissolved, dispensationalism lost its Presbyterian axis and became an almost exclusively non-denominational force. Some did retain denominational connections, but even these tended to circulate in the denomination- and confession-wary morass of disenfranchised fundamentalists collectively searching for a new ecclesiastical compass in the aftermath of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy.

When the “Reawakening of American Fundamentalism” occurred, however, the weary dispensationalists again found themselves in the familiar role of outcast. This rejection, however, was quite different from the previous one. The dispensationalists were excluded now not because of perceived confessional aberrations, but because of missional aberrations. In a word, the dispensationalists were expelled this time because they would not ascribe to the neocalvinist agenda that dominated the “new” evangelicalism.

Excursus: What is Neocalvinism?

At the risk of explaining something that this audience probably already knows, it must first be explained that neocalvinism is not a clever name for the Calvinist resurgence in conservative evangelical quarters that has occurred over the last two decades (dubbed by Collin Hansen and others the “New Calvinism”). Many of these resurgent Calvinists are neocalvinistic in their theology, but the idea of neocalvinism is much older than John Piper. It began, in fact, among the turn-of-the-century disciples of the great Dutch diplomat-theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920).

The governing mantra of neocalvinism comes from the mouth of Kuyper himself who famously stated, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’” Kuyper’s followers, observing his curious blend of magisterial and theological acumen, erroneously assumed that he meant by this statement that the whole of creation was to submit to Christ’s kingship in the same way. Christ is sovereign over a single, monolithic kingdom that subsumes everything in its scope. As such, church and kingdom became effective synonyms, and the church as an institution began busying itself not only with evangelism (which they staunchly preserved in all of its orthodoxy) but also with cultural transformation (e.g., suppression of societal vice, restoration of civil rights for various disenfranchised groups, poverty relief and public welfare, civic and political engagement, etc.). For the church to do less, the neocalvinist argued, was be to deny Christ his crown rights.

It is easy to see how the neocalvinist model diverged from the prevailing dispensational model of the day. Dispensationalism taught (1) that God’s universal kingship over the world, while real, is mediated by natural law and civic structures in which all humans participate collectively, (2) that Christ’s kingdom has been suspended and will resume upon the commencement of a literal, future Millennium, and (3) that Christ’s church exists as a separate organism whose mission can be technically equated with neither kingdom; instead, the church’s responsibility to those outside its membership is strictly spiritual (evangelistic) in scope. All other human responsibilities fall under the purview of God’s civic order (e.g., families, neighbors, governmental legislation and tax initiatives, law enforcement, etc.).

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28This is the designation given by Joel Carpenter to the emergence of the “new” evangelicalism that would restore the disenfranchised minority as a formidable player in the ecclesiastical marketplace (Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999]).


30I say “erroneously” because it is almost certain that this is not what Kuyper intended—he was instead a proponent of the traditional “two-kingdom” model with a few “ambiguities” (see e.g., VanDrunen, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms, chap 7). It is for this reason that the neocalvinists are also called neoKuyperians, and not Kupyerians. They were speculating beyond what Kuyper had explicitly propounded.
What is perhaps surprising to some is that the neocalvinist model diverged sharply from classical Reformed theology as well—which is why the label neo-calvinism came to be used. We observed earlier that when C. A. Briggs attempted to expel the dispensationalists from the northern Presbyterian denomination on the grounds that their “gloomy view” of the kingdom that offered “such little encouragement for hearty labor,” the Princetonians defended them. Why? Because the Princetonians agreed with the dispensationalists—at least in terms of the church’s mission. While the classical view of Reformed theology diverged from dispensationalism in seeing a synonymy between the church and the spiritual kingdom that Christ established in his first advent, this spiritual kingdom is just one of “two kingdoms” (using Luther’s terms) or “two governments” of God (to use Calvin’s terms). The other “kingdom” (the visible one) is the purview of “natural law,” and is mediated by God-ordained social structures other than the church. This explains, then, why Sandeen was correct when we cited him earlier as saying, “Over and against the new theologies of immanence and social gospel, both [dispensationalism and the Princeton theology] stressed God’s transcendence, and supra-historical power and expressed themselves in very pessimistic terms when discussing social problems.” In summary, the presence of a spiritual kingdom was not, for the Princetonians, a legitimate basis for propagating an ecclesiastical agenda of immanence (the social gospel) in the civic kingdom.

So why is it that neocalvinism gained the upper hand in the fundamentalist community as it took shape in the 1930s, leading to the emergence of a neocalvinistic “new” evangelicalism in the 1940s?

- First of all, the (largely neocalvinist) Christian Reformed Church joined the National Association of Evangelicals during the Second World War, and naturally began asserting influence on the young group.
- What earned the neocalvinists standing within evangelicalism, however, was that they offered the church some welcome optimism to counter the “doleful” outlook shared by Reformed and dispensationalists alike. Echoing Sandeen, James Bratt complains that while “the Reformed differed from the dispensationalists in refusing to ‘rapture’ the faithful out of this suffering, their doleful readings, combined with the controlling image of Jesus as avenging judge, betokened the same profound disaffection with the course of contemporary civilization.” Neocalvinism, on the other hand, was much more optimistic. To be sure, neocalvinism did not offer the same level of optimism that liberalism had offered, but it made believers feel better about the contribution that their churches were making to society, and even won the evangelical church occasional nods of approval from the denominations that had expelled them.
- A significant boost to neocalvinist advance among the new evangelicals came with the

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31 Which explains, incidentally, the response of the Stuart Robinson, another prominent Presbyterian pastor in a border city during the American Civil War. We have already noted that when James Hall Brookes (pastoring in St. Louis) found himself in a tug of war between the political and social interests of northern and southern Presbyterianism, respectively, he withdrew to champion a new model, thus becoming the father of American dispensationalism. For Brookes, Reformed Theology had failed the church by insisting that the church take sides in a political/social dispute. Stuart Robinson (pastoring in Louisville), faced with the exact same circumstances, responded differently: he devoted himself to a publishing blitz attempting to prove that the problem was that the Presbyterian church was not being faithful to its own doctrinal standards: if the Presbyterian Church would simply embrace the established its own doctrine of the two governments of God, the need to decide between northern Presbyterianism and southern Presbyterianism would disappear. See Preston D. Graham, Jr., A Kingdom Not of This World: Stuart Robinson’s Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular During the Civil War (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002).


33 *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 132.
publication of Carl F. H. Henry’s little book, _The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism_. In his introduction to the book Harold J. Ockenga introduced the thesis of the book in its simplest form: “The church needs a progressive Fundamentalism with a social message” and offered as the best means to that end a view of the kingdom as “one, but with several forms.” Henry developed this basic premise more explicitly, explaining, “Nothing is so essential among Fundamentalist essentials as a world relevance for the Gospel. Whatever in our kingdom views undercuts that relevance destroys the essential character of Christianity as such.” Henry followed this statement with his solution: We must agree that “the kingdom is here, and that it is not here,” and, furthermore, that “no study of the kingdom teaching of Jesus is adequate” if it fails to reach this conclusion. To summarize Henry’s message relative to our study, then, it seems that a _neocalvinist vision of a singular kingdom that is “here and not here” is the only model that preserves a robust social mission for the church and thus maintains the “essential character of Christianity.”_

Dispensationalism had been expelled once again—this time not due to confessional concerns, but due to a practical variance with the new evangelical vision of the church’s mission. Indeed, the new evangelicals had labeled _every_ system of theology that fails to employ this newly discovered view of the kingdom to promote, on an institutional level, cultural identification, transformation, and assimilation as opposed to the “essential character of Christianity.”

• If Henry laid down the gauntlet against dispensationalism, it was George E. Ladd who offered the comprehensive alternative to dispensationalism: the _Gospel of the Kingdom_. Since this venue is too limited to detail Ladd’s contribution at length, a summary is in order, and no summary is more suited to our purposes than that offered by Joel Carpenter. Carpenter opines George Ladd’s personal mission was “replacing dispensationalism with an evangelical view of the kingdom of God and the end times that was...more able to sustain evangelical social engagement.” And so it was that code words like “Gospel” and “Kingdom” came to communicate to the evangelical community the singular means whereby Christ embodies the neocalvinist agenda and announces, “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”

**Assessment:** In the first section of this presentation I respectfully disagreed with the sentiment that led to the expulsion of dispensationalism from Reformed Presbyterian life in the late 1930s, but suggested that at least _some_ level of rapprochement might be legitimately sought. While theological differences clearly remain, I am convinced (perhaps naïvely) that they are of a relatively minor sort—neither the church’s Gospel nor its mission are at stake (at least not in any necessary sense).

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35Ibid., 13, 14, respectively.
36Ibid., 57. Elsewhere Henry writes, “While not itself the kingdom, the church is the kingdom’s most vital approximation and manifestation in the present age. Its ongoing mission is to extend the King’s victory over the hostile forces of sin and evil, injustice and oppression” (_Christian Countermoves in a Decadent Culture_, 25–26).
37Ibid.
38Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959. This title represents the second of three books that Ladd published on the topic. The first was _Crucial Questions About the Kingdom of God_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); the third _Jesus and the Kingdom_ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), reprinted and revised in 1974 as _The Presence of the Future_.
39_Revive Us Again_, 195.
I am not so optimistic about the dispensationalist’s chances of repairing this second schism. Or better, I do not see how the dispensationalist can repair this breach without discarding its own identity. The neocalvinist will broker no deal with the dispensationalist that does not from the first demand that the dispensationalist abandon his historically and theologically most primary distinctive: an ecclesiastical mission that is not controlled by the inaugurated presence of the mediatorial kingdom of Christ.

**Historical Excursus:** A fairly successful attempt was made about a quarter century ago to repair the breach between the dispensationalists and the neocalvinists. It was at this time that Darrell Bock, Craig Blaising, and others invented what would come to be known as “progressive” dispensationalism. Arguing from the revolutionary concept (at least among dispensational thinkers) that “the church is an inaugurated form of the future kingdom of God,” they argued, “the church’s continuity with the… kingdom helps to define its ministry in this dispensation.” ⁴⁰ While “earlier dispensationalists stressed the personal, individual aspect of Christianity exclusively,” they continued, this new version of dispensationalism argues that “the church is a manifestation of the future kingdom” from which may be justified a robust “social ministry of the church.” ⁴¹ Specifically, the church’s “connection with the coming kingdom gives the church a basis for an evangelistic participation in the political and social affairs of this world,” because, as “the church becomes the workshop in which kingdom righteousness is pursued in the name of Christ, then social ministry externally becomes a call to Christ.” ⁴²

If I may summarize Blaising and Bock’s response relative to this presentation, I would contend that they are advocating conciliation via the radical reversal of the historical sentiment that birthed dispensationalism in the days of Darby and Brookes, viz., that the church’s **distinction from the kingdom meant that the institutional church should withdraw from socio-political engagement.** I conclude by observing that the only solution to the breach between dispensationalism and neocalvinism (that will satisfy the neocalvinist) is one that denies the essence of dispensationalism and wholly embraces neocalvinism. The two models are fundamentally opposed. Rapprochement is possible only through the elimination of one model or the other.

Happily, there are a few voices that are being raised against the neocalvinist agenda. Among Reformed writers, the aforementioned Escondido theology is waging an aggressive, even acerbic war against neocalvinist evangelicalism. ⁴³ Among evangelicals, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert have slowed the neocalvinist advance with their recent book *What Is the Mission of the Church?* ⁴⁴ A few notable voices of dispensational resistance have also emerged, ⁴⁵ but surprisingly few. This is unfortunate, because the very **raison d’être** of dispensationalism is at stake. If the neocalvinist cause captures the dispensationalist heart, there is little hope or reason for the survival of the dispensational model.

**Conclusion**

It is unlikely that the antipathy of the Reformed and evangelical communities toward dispensationalism will ease any time soon. And I am content with that. Nonetheless, it behooves us to understand the **confessional and neocalvinist essence** of the complaints leveled against the dispensational model and respond accordingly. Failure to do so will, I fear, lead to the disappearance of the dispensational movement and loss of its substantial contributions to the theology and mission of the New Testament Church.

⁴¹Ibid.
⁴²Ibid., 289–90.
⁴³In addition to the sources cited in footnote 26, above, see the ongoing and aggressive defense of Two-Kingdom theology at Darryl Hart’s blog, www.oldlife.org.
⁴⁴Wheaton: Crossway, 2011.