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# How John Nelson Darby Went Visiting: Dispensational Premillennialism in the Believers Church Tradition and the Historiography of Fundamentalism

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## CHAPTER 18

# How John Nelson Darby Went Visiting Dispensational Premillennialism in the Believers Church Tradition and the Historiography of Fundamentalism

WILLIAM VANCE TROLLINGER JR.

### FUNDAMENTALISM AND DISPENSATIONALISM

In the United States the history of John Nelson Darby's dispensational premillennialism is intimately tied up with the history of fundamentalism. It is difficult to talk about dispensational premillennialism in the believers church tradition in the twentieth century without making some reference to the fundamentalist movement. In fact, the two distinguishing marks of fundamentalist theology have been the doctrine of biblical inerrancy and the eschatological schema known as dispensationalism. It is thus rather surprising that historians have de-emphasized dispensational premillennialism in explaining the history of fundamentalism. I think that this is a mistake. But to explain why I think this is a mistake, I need to say something about how historians have written about fundamentalism.

The historiography of fundamentalism has gone through three distinct stages.<sup>1</sup> The first stage lasted from the Scopes "Monkey Trial" of 1925 through the 1960s. In these years, scholars of American religion talked about fundamentalism as if it were a product of "cultural lag." According to this viewpoint, poorly educated folks out "in the sticks" held on to fundamentalism in a desperate attempt to hold back the cul-

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<sup>1</sup> For a somewhat different reading of the historiography of fundamentalism than follows here, see William Vance Trollinger Jr., *God's Empire: William Bell Riley and Midwestern Fundamentalism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), 5-6.

tural and intellectual advances of the twentieth century. Fortunately for these intellectually blighted individuals, over time "the light of truth" would reach even Appalachia and the Deep South, and fundamentalism would fade into the historical night.<sup>2</sup>

But fundamentalism did not disappear. By the late 1960s a few historians were beginning to treat fundamentalism as a serious phenomenon in the history of American religion. In 1970, Ernest Sandeen published a book entitled *The Roots of Fundamentalism*. In a sense this elegant little book marks the second stage of historians writing about fundamentalism. Sandeen discussed how John Nelson Darby's ideas spread throughout the United States, with special emphasis on the late nineteenth-century interdenominational Prophecy and Bible Conference Movement. Sandeen concluded with a discussion of the fundamentalist movement, which came into being just after World War I. According to Sandeen, fundamentalism was just another phase in the effort to spread Darby's ideas. That is to say, dispensational premillennialism was central to the fundamentalist movement—it drove the fundamentalist movement.<sup>3</sup>

Ten years later, in 1980, George Marsden wrote *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, one of the most important books written in American religious history in the past half-century. More than any other scholar, Marsden established fundamentalism as an authentic and important religious movement. The validity of his argument was reinforced by the fact that his book came out the very year Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority helped Ronald Reagan win the presidency. In the years preceding the publication of *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Marsden had argued with Sandeen in the pages of *Christian Scholar's Review* and

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<sup>2</sup> For examples, see H. Richard Niebuhr, "Fundamentalism," in *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 6:526-27; Stewart Cole, *The History of Fundamentalism* (New York: Richard Smith, 1931), 35-40, 336-37; Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Random House, 1962), 117-36; Norman F. Furniss, *The Fundamentalist Controversy, 1918-1931* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), vii, 177-79; William McLoughlin, "Is There a Third Force in Christendom?" *Daedalus* 96 (Winter 1967): 45. See also William E. Ellis, "Evolution, Fundamentalism, and the Historians: An Historiographical Review," *The Historian* 44 (Nov. 1981): 15-35.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), esp. ix-xix. For a harbinger of change in the historiography of fundamentalism, see Paul A. Carter, "The Fundamentalist Defense of the Faith," in *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The Twenties*, ed. John Braeman, et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), esp. 186-87.



elsewhere about how to define fundamentalism.<sup>4</sup> Marsden thought that Sandeen had placed too much emphasis on dispensational premillennialism. For Marsden, fundamentalism was much broader and more complex than Sandeen had portrayed it. Many religious influences contributed to the making of fundamentalism, including revivalism, pietism, Common Sense realism, and the non-Wesleyan holiness movement. Yes, dispensationalism had its place in the fundamentalist movement, but it was not the crucial component. According to George Marsden, fundamentalism was best defined *not* as a further stage in the advance of dispensational premillennialism, but instead as "militantly anti-modernist Protestant evangelicalism."<sup>5</sup>

Marsden's argument, so eloquently and compellingly presented, proved to be irresistible. His *Fundamentalism and American Culture* marked the beginning of the third stage in the historiography of fundamentalism, and most serious scholars of fundamentalism writing after 1980 have followed his lead. On the other hand, and in keeping with Marsden's critique, Sandeen's argument that fundamentalism was primarily the effort to spread J. N. Darby's ideas came to be viewed as overstated and simplistic, and Sandeen was relegated to relative obscurity in the historiography of American fundamentalism.<sup>6</sup>

Marsden's argument reigns supreme among American religious historians. But there are problems with Marsden's argument, particularly in terms of definitional precision. The fact is that "militant anti-modernism" is a vague concept. The word *militant* suggests that something can be labeled a "fundamentalist mentality," but this begs all sorts of questions. For instance, when does an individual or a group cross the attitudinal line and become "fundamentalist"? When is an individual or a group *not* "fundamentalist"? In short, "militant anti-modernism" is a murky concept.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> George M. Marsden, "Defining Fundamentalism," *Christian Scholar's Review* 1 (Winter 1971): 141-51; Ernest Sandeen, "Reply to George Marsden," *Christian Scholar's Review* 1 (Spring 1971): 227-32.

<sup>5</sup> George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3-8.

<sup>6</sup> Donald Dayton made this point well in "Dispensationalism and the Emergence of Fundamentalism among American Baptists," presented at a conference on "Methodism and the Fragmentation of American Protestantism," Asbury College (Ky.), Sept. 29, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> I say this while confessing that I myself have used *militant anti-modernism* as the essence of fundamentalism in a number of pieces I have written, in-

Much simpler is Ernest Sandeen's notion that dispensational premillennialism should indeed be understood as the central component of fundamentalism. Of course, the fact that Sandeen's argument is simpler does not make it correct. But Donald Dayton, noted scholar of the holiness and Pentecostal movements, has recently argued that we need to take the Sandeen thesis much more seriously. As evidence, Dayton points to the emphasis placed on dispensationalism by fundamentalist organizations and denominations, including the World's Christian Fundamentals Association. Dayton implies that while dispensationalism may not have been central to *Presbyterian* fundamentalism, dispensational premillennialism is central to the various manifestations of fundamentalism in the believers church tradition.<sup>8</sup>

If dispensational premillennialism was and is central to fundamentalism, some things about the fundamentalist movement begin to make more sense. Implicit in the argument that fundamentalism is best defined as "militant anti-modernism" is the notion that fundamentalism is essentially a conservative movement, animated by the passionate desire to protect and preserve orthodoxy from "newfangled" ideas. But fundamentalism has wreaked havoc in a number of denominations and traditions. Churches have split or bolted from their denominations. Organizations have been enmeshed in bitter infighting and new organizations have been created. All of this raises at least some question about how "conservative" fundamentalism really was. But if we go back to Ernest Sandeen, and see John Nelson Darby's newfangled dispensational premillennialism as central to fundamentalism, the radical effects of the fundamentalist movement come into focus. They make sense.

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cluding the article on fundamentalism for Paul Boyer's forthcoming *Oxford Companion to United States*. For a critique of the definitional murkiness afflicting contemporary scholarship on fundamentalism, see Michael Hamilton, "Awash in a Sea of Fundamentalisms," paper presented at the American Society of Church History, Point Loma Nazarene College (Cal.), Apr. 24, 1999. One result of this definitional murkiness is the notion of a fundamentalism that encompasses non-Christian religious groups across the globe. See *Fundamentalism Observed*, ed. Martin E. Marty and Scott Appleby, Fundamentalism Project, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Dayton, "Dispensationalism," 14-27. Among other provocative observations, Dayton suggests that the evangelicalism (or "neo-evangelicalism") of the 1950s was an attempt by conservative Protestants to jettison dispensational premillennialism—for intellectual and theological reasons and as part of an effort to climb the social ladder by eliminating what might be seen as a peculiar set of ideas.



Of course, it is much too early to say that Ernest Sandeen was right about fundamentalism. But in this essay I will take one case study on fundamentalism among the Mennonites<sup>9</sup> that suggests that dispensational premillennialism was central to the fundamentalist movement and that highlights the destructive effects of dispensational premillennialism on a religious tradition. I suspect that this story may have been repeated throughout the believer's church tradition.

#### THE FOUNDING OF GRACE BIBLE INSTITUTE

Grace Bible Institute, now Grace University, was founded in 1943 in Omaha, Nebraska. The school was established by a group of Mennonite educators and ministers, most of whom were affiliated with the General Conference Mennonites (the second-largest Mennonite denomination in the United States.) According to the founders, their purpose in establishing Grace Bible Institute was to create an alternative to "modernist-infected" Mennonite colleges, particularly General Conference schools Bluffton College (Bluffton, Ohio) and Bethel College (North Newton, Kan.). It did not take long for Grace to establish itself as a viable educational institution. Within five years of its founding, the school had 312 (mostly Mennonite) students—good numbers as far as Bible schools go—approximately three-fifths of Bethel College's enrollment, and eleven more students than Bluffton had in the same year.<sup>10</sup>

It is not surprising that General Conference Mennonite leaders criticized Grace Bible Institute as a divisive force in the denomination. The school was siphoning off potential students and monies from denominationally endorsed colleges that could use more of both. Even before Grace Bible Institute had opened its doors, the president of the General Conference Mennonites, C. E. Krehbiel, wrote an article in the denominational paper in which he obliquely questioned the motives of the school's founders. He exhorted good Mennonites to give their "first allegiance" to the denomination and its "authorized" institutions.

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<sup>9</sup> For an earlier and briefer treatment of this case study with no discussion of historiography and only a suggestion about the importance of premillennial dispensationalism, see William Vance Trollinger Jr., "Grace Bible Institute and the Advance of Fundamentalism Among the Mennonites," *Mennonite Life* 53 (June 1998): 4–15.

<sup>10</sup> Harold J. Berry, *Committed to the Vision: 50 Years by the Grace of God* (Omaha: Grace College of the Bible, 1992), 57; Samuel F. Pannabecker, *Open Doors: The History of the General Conference Mennonite Church* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1975), 367; Perry Bush, *Dancing with the Kobzar: Bluffton College and Mennonite Higher Education, 1899–1999* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, 2000).



Krehbiel's was but the first attack on Grace Bible Institute. Over the next two decades, General Conference Mennonite leaders sought to dissuade their membership from supporting the "rebel school." Opposition to Grace Bible occasionally involved more than words. According to a former president of the Omaha school, at one denominational meeting in the early 1950s, the display materials advertising Grace Bible were smashed and "thrown into a heap behind the main stage of the auditorium."<sup>11</sup>

The founders of Grace Bible Institute aggressively responded to the charges leveled against them by the General Conference Mennonite hierarchy. As spokespersons for Grace asserted in Mennonite periodicals, from Mennonite pulpits, and in a variety of Bible Institute publications, "Grace Bible Institute maintain[ed] loyalty to the tenets of the Mennonite church" and had no desire to divide or weaken Mennonite institutions.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the school was simply to counter the spread of modernism among the Mennonites, particularly in General Conference Mennonite colleges and the General Conference Mennonite Church. As Grace's first president put it at the school's dedicatory service on September 8, 1943:

Christianity in its conservative form [has] become a reproach by suffering one defeat after another. This is more or less true of all churches, and we must admit, is to some extent also true of the Mennonite church. A strong trend toward liberalism is manifest on every hand. In order to stem this tide of liberalism, we have banded ourselves together to build the Grace Bible Institute.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> C. E. Krehbiel, "Reply to Inquiries," *The Mennonite* (Aug. 3, 1943): 14; Berry, *Committed to the Vision*, 16; Paul Kuhlmann, *The Story of Grace* (Omaha, Neb.: Grace College of the Bible, 1980), 53–54; Jeff A. Steely, "Cornelius Herman Suckau: Mennonite Fundamentalist," *Mennonite Life* 44 (Mar. 1989): 15, 20; David A. Haury, *Prairie People: A History of the Western District Conference* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1981), 280–81; interview with Harold Burkholder, Elbing, Kan., July 6, 1992, 7.

<sup>12</sup> C. H. Suckau, "Policy of the Grace Bible Institute," *Grace Tidings* 1 (Dec. 1943): 2; C. H. Suckau, "Bible Institutes," *Grace Tidings* 6 (Oct. 1948): 2; Harold Burkholder, "Announcement Regarding Grace Bible Institute at Omaha, Nebraska," *Mennonite Weekly Review* 21 (Aug. 5, 1943): 8; "Grace Bible Institute," *Mennonite Weekly Review* 22 (Feb. 24, 1944): 8; P. P. Tschetter, "Grace Bible Institute," *Mennonite Weekly Review* 27 (Jan. 6, 1949): 8.

<sup>13</sup> C. H. Suckau, *A Miracle of God's Grace: The Marvelous Story of the Beginnings of Grace Bible Institute* (Omaha, Neb.: Grace Bible Institute, 1949), 24–25.

This quote is a wonderful summary of how the Mennonites who established Grace Bible explained what they were up to in Omaha. If we take them at face value, the story of Grace Bible Institute and its General Conference Mennonite opponents is simply a Mennonite manifestation of the conservative-liberal struggle that divided and divides Protestant denominations in the United States in the twentieth century.

As Douglas Jacobsen and I have argued elsewhere, this notion that the history of twentieth-century American Protestantism should be viewed as a conflict between two bitterly opposed parties is not only simplistic, but it also distorts the historical record. The model may indeed work in some instances. But even cases that seem to be obvious examples of simple two-party conflict—such as the recent battles in the Southern Baptist Convention—become, when examined more carefully, much more complex. In fact, the idea that Protestantism is divided into two fiercely warring parties is best understood not as an accurate description of reality, but as a rhetorical device used by particular individuals and groups to dramatize a conflict, to demonize an opponent, and to eliminate the possibility of “middle ground” or compromise.<sup>14</sup>

While the language emanating from Grace Bible Institute would lead one to believe that the Mennonite world had been infiltrated by a host of dangerous liberals and modernists, it is in fact extremely difficult to find anything approximating theological modernism in the General Conference Mennonite Church and the General Conference Mennonite colleges of the 1930s and 1940s. As Jim Juhnke has observed, the label *modernist* does not apply even to someone like E. G. Kaufman, the University of Chicago graduate who was president of Bethel College from 1932 to 1952, and who was the frequent target of attacks by Grace Bible Institute supporters.<sup>15</sup> I do not claim that there were no Mennonite modernists. It is, after all, difficult to prove a negative. Rather, I join with Jim Juhnke, J. Denny Weaver, Theron Schlabach, Paul Toews, David Haury, Cal Redekop, Perry Bush, among others, in asserting that there was little

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<sup>14</sup> Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr., “Introduction” and “Conclusion,” in *Re-Forming the Center: American Protestantism, 1900 to the Present*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and William Vance Trollinger Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 1–14, 467–75.

<sup>15</sup> James C. Juhnke and Albert N. Keim, “The Progressive Mennonite Denominational Center: Edmund G. Kaufman and Harold S. Bender,” in *Re-Forming the Center*, 220–24. Juhnke had primary responsibility for the section dealing with Kaufman.



modernist influence among Mennonites at the time of Grace Bible's founding.<sup>16</sup>

So if there was no great modernist infiltration, what was the purpose of Grace Bible Institute? One could claim that the school's founders were hypersensitive conservatives who simply imagined a modernist menace. Or one could argue—as some scholars have suggested about other Mennonite fundamentalists—that the Grace folks just used fundamentalist anti-modernist rhetoric as a tool in the conservative campaign to preserve Mennonite traditions and institutions and to define Mennonite boundaries.<sup>17</sup> But neither of these possibilities works. The Grace folks were not delusional. For all their anti-modernist language, they were not conservative. Instead, these are the fundamentalists as radicals, as innovators—the Mennonite fundamentalists who put J. N. Darby's eschatological schema at the center of their theology and their school. In the process, they propelled themselves, Grace Bible, and many who affiliated with the school, right out of the Mennonite world.

#### DISPENSATIONALISM AT GRACE BIBLE INSTITUTE

Cornelius Suckau was Grace Bible Institute's first president. Suckau was born in 1881 into a Mennonite family in south-central Kansas. After attending high school at the Bethel College Academy, Suckau felt "called" to the mission field. He prepared at the Union Missionary Training Institute. After graduating in 1910, he and his wife Lulu went to India under the auspices of the General Conference Mennonite Church. Some individuals on the denominational Mission Board worried that Suckau would prove, to quote A. B. Shelly, to have more "more zeal than

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<sup>16</sup> James C. Juhnke, "The Daniel Explosion: Bethel's First Bible Crisis," *Mennonite Life* 44 (Sept. 1989): 24; James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 258; J. Denny Weaver, "The General Versus the Particular: Exploring Assumptions in 20th-Century Mennonite Theologizing," *Conrad Grebel Review* 17 (Spring 1999): 49, notes 43 and 47; Theron F. Schlabach, *Gospel Versus Gospel: Mission and the Mennonite Church, 1863-1944* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980), 110-15; Paul Toews, "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: A Response to Cultural Transitions?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (July 1983): 244; Hauray, *Prairie People*, 247; Calvin Redekop, *Mennonite Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989), 288; Bush, *Dancing with the Kobzar*.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Toews has put this argument most succinctly. See "Fundamentalism," *Mennonite Encyclopedia* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990), 5:318-20; "Fundamentalist Conflict in Mennonite Colleges: A Response to Cultural Transitions?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (July 1983): 241-56.

judgment." Suckau did prove to be zealous. On at least one occasion, he publicly destroyed a Hindu idol "to show how powerless it was." (It is not clear that he made his point about the powerlessness of idols, since, according to Suckau, his act of destruction provoked Satan into afflicting him with what proved to be a lifelong heart ailment.)<sup>18</sup>

While in India, Suckau became a zealous convert to dispensational premillennialism. His passion for premillennialism apparently contributed to the tensions that developed between him and the other Mennonite missionaries. After being pushed from the mission field in 1928, Suckau accepted the pastorate of the First Mennonite Church in Berne, Indiana. Before long he was devoting many of his sermons to premillennialism, making use of the large end-times charts that would become his trademark.

While many appreciated Suckau's emphasis on dispensationalism, other members, to quote the Berne church's historian, "questioned whether prophecy should or could be mapped out in such precise detail." Surely a few Mennonite eyebrows were raised by Suckau's Sunday morning discourse on the Sermon on the Mount, in which he declared—in good dispensationalist fashion—that these teachings, "and the Lord's Prayer, were not to be applied to the [current] Church Age." Instead, they applied to the Kingdom Age, which would come in the future.<sup>19</sup>

Dispensational theology also affected Suckau's understanding of the role of Christians in wartime, an issue that acquired particular resonance when the U.S. entered World War II in December of 1941. Suckau articulated his views in a 1942 sermon, a summary of which he sent to all the young men from Berne First Mennonite either in active and noncombatant military service, or serving in Civilian Public Service camps. The text for his message was Matthew 22:21: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." Only a small part of the sermon dealt with what we owe God. According to Suckau, this could be reduced to worshiping, attending church, tithing, and opposing modernism. The heart of the sermon had to do with what we owe Caesar in time of war. Suckau granted that it was acceptable to be a conscientious objector if one gratefully acknowledges that being a CO is a "special privilege" granted by the government. COs could be COs only because others were willing to take up arms in their

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<sup>18</sup> Steely, "Cornelius Suckau," 15–16; James C. Juhnke, *A People of Mission* (Newton, Kan.: Faith and Life Press, 1979), 28, 90; Kuhlmann, *Story of Grace*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> Juhnke, *People of Mission*, 95, 256; Steely, "Cornelius Suckau," 16; Naomi Lehman, *Pilgrimage of a Congregation: First Mennonite Church, Berne, Indiana* (Berne, Ind.: First Mennonite Church, 1982), 82–83.



behalf. Markedly more preferable was noncombatant service because, as Suckau counseled young men in private, "it would prove that you're not a coward."<sup>20</sup> Military service was also a legitimate Christian option, as evidenced by the fact that God "commanded the people of Israel to go to war to exterminate the Canaanites," and by the fact that, in the end times, Christ "will smite his enemies" at Armageddon.<sup>21</sup>

Given such statements from the pulpit, it is not surprising that only twenty of the 150 men called into service from the First Mennonite Church of Berne, Indiana, opted for conscientious objector status during World War II. Just under half of all Mennonite young men in the United States entered Civilian Public Service, while twenty-nine percent of General Conference Mennonite young men went this route. It is nevertheless striking that only thirteen percent of the Berne men opted to be conscientious objectors, thanks in part to the admonitions of C. H. Suckau. The percentage may well have been even lower had C. H. Suckau not turned his energies to the founding of Grace Bible Institute at the height of the war.<sup>22</sup>

Suckau was well-known in the Mennonite world for his opposition to modernism and his dramatic, eye-catching presentations on dispensational premillennialism. He had participated in early conversations about creating a school that would serve as an alternative to Bethel and Bluffton. As a result, Suckau was invited to join a group of Mennonite leaders to meet in Omaha in June 1943 to establish a new Bible school. These ten men—nine of whom were General Conference Mennonites—held their deliberations in room 226 of the Flatiron Hotel in Omaha. The group later came to refer to this room as "The Millennial Room" because of the large painting of *The Millennium* displayed on one of the walls. As Suckau later reflected, this painting provided a "fitting" backdrop for their labors.<sup>23</sup>

Suckau was right. It was indeed fitting that Grace Bible Institute, which opened its doors just three months after the meeting, was birthed in the "Millennial Room." Harold Berry, author of the school's fifty-year history, has noted that Suckau was selected from the group of ten to be-

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<sup>20</sup> Lehman, *Pilgrimage*, 371.

<sup>21</sup> C. H. Suckau, letter to "Friends in the Service," Nov. 18, 1942.

<sup>22</sup> Lehman, *Pilgrimage*, 93-95, 372-75. For an excellent discussion of Mennonites in the U.S. in World War II, see Perry Bush, *Two Kingdoms, Two Loyalties: Mennonite Pacifism in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 56-128. Both Lehman and Bush document how, after Suckau left for Omaha, the First Mennonite Church of Berne began to emphasize the peace position.

<sup>23</sup> Kuhlmann, *Story of Grace*, 19-32; Suckau, *Miracle of God's Grace*, 9-14; Steely, "Cornelius Suckau," 18-19.

come the school's first president primarily because of his commitment to and aggressive promotion of dispensational premillennialism.

Grace Bible Institute was dedicated to promoting dispensational premillennialism. The school's doctrinal statement, written by a committee headed up by Suckau,<sup>24</sup> is an incredible document, even by the standards of fundamentalist faith statements. It consists of fifteen sections or articles, sixty-three paragraphs, 374 lines, and 345 separate Bible verse citations. In order to teach at or graduate from Grace Bible, one had to affirm that one adhered to everything contained in this document.<sup>25</sup> This included the intricate details of dispensational premillennialism as spelled out in Articles XI-XIII, a section comprising about twenty percent of the "Doctrinal Statement."

All faculty and students at Grace had to affirm in writing that "the Second Coming of Christ will take place in two stages, the first being the rapture ... [and] the second being the revelation when he comes as the 'Son of Righteousness' to the Mount of Olives." They had to agree further that "the next great event in the fulfillment of prophecy will be the pre-tribulation coming of Christ into the air to receive to Himself His own," an event for which they should constantly be watching. Furthermore, the rapture will be followed by "the great tribulation," when "God's righteous judgments will be poured out upon the world." Then will appear a "fearful apostasy in the professing Church" and the world will "be headed by a personal Anti-christ." At "the close of this period the Lord Jesus Christ will personally, visibly, and gloriously descend from heaven with the Church and His holy angels to bind Satan in the bottomless pit, judge the living nations, [and] establish His glorious and literal kingdom over all nations for a thousand years." At the end of the millennium, "Satan shall be loosed for a short season to deceive the nations," after which "the unsaved dead shall then be raised, judged according to their works, and cast into the Lake of Fire." They are not "to be annihilated, nor ultimately to be restored, but to be punished with final and everlasting destruction." After all of this, "Christ will finally deliver up the Messianic Kingdom to God the Father, in order that He may reign with the Father [and the saved] in the New Heaven and New Earth eternally."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Harold Berry, Omaha, Neb., 1; Kuhlmann, *Story of Grace*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> One exception to this rule will be discussed later.

<sup>26</sup> *Unabridged Doctrinal Statement of the Grace Bible Institute, Omaha, Nebraska* (Omaha, Neb.: Grace Bible Institute, 1945), Articles XI-XII.



Thus, it is not surprising that all Grace students were required to purchase and use the *Scofield Reference Bible*, with its dispensationalist commentary. As one student from the 1950s recalled, there was no Bible but Scofield—it was “the Bible.” Another student observed that “the Scofield was our theological guide”; “we carried it everywhere.”<sup>27</sup> The *Scofield Bible* was put to great use in the required biblical prophecy courses, where students learned about “the prophecies concerning the first and second advents of Christ, the Jews, the land of Palestine, the end-time, and other important prophetic truths and their relation to the Christian’s present-day life.” Among other things, students learned how to draw a prophetic timeline, with the requisite segments for the “tribulation and the rapture and so on.” According to one Grace Bible alumnus, students rated professors on how quickly they could graph the dispensations in all their prophetic detail. The faster the instructor could draw the line, the greater their expertise in explicating Daniel and Revelation.<sup>28</sup>

This commitment to dispensationalism had interesting curricular effects besides the required courses on biblical prophecy.<sup>29</sup> It is striking how many separate Bible classes were offered in the 1940s and 1950s. In 1955, for example, the Bible offerings included Old and New Testament surveys and separate courses on eight Old Testament books. Also offered were separate courses on Acts, Romans, Hebrews, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians and James, the Prison Epistles, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and the letters of Peter and John. Despite this surfeit of courses on individual books of the Bible, there were no courses on a Gospel, on the Gospels, or on the life and teachings of Jesus. Such a deficiency is curious, given that Grace was ostensibly a Mennonite school. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that this curricular curiosity was due primarily to the school’s dispensationalist commitments. As Suckau’s message to the Berne church

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with John Esau, North Newton, Kansas, July 9, 1992, 3; interview with Glendon Klaassen, Newton, Kansas, July 9, 1992, 2. In a striking remark that drives home the intimate connection between dispensationalism and fundamentalism, Esau noted that his whole life changed when he decided to read a Bible other than the Scofield: “I took Grace’s emphasis on the Bible seriously, and so I went to the Grace bookstore to buy a Bible without commentary. But reading the Bible on its own tore my fundamentalist world apart. The gospels just didn’t fit with fundamentalism.”

<sup>28</sup> *Grace Bible Institute Catalog (1944–1945)*: 25; interview with Randy Basinger, Dillsburg, Pa., Apr. 23, 1992, 2.

<sup>29</sup> I am reiterating here a point I made in an earlier article on Grace Bible Institute. See Trollinger, “Grace Bible Institute,” 13–14.

on the Sermon on the Mount made clear, traditional dispensationalism emphasizes that while Paul's teachings are applicable for the present age, Jesus' teachings are for a future or kingdom age.<sup>30</sup>

Given the importance of biblical prophecy at Grace Bible Institute, it is natural that dispensational teaching was not limited to the classroom. School administrators frequently brought in big names in prophetic teaching to address the students, including Dallas Theological Seminary's John Walvoord and Grace Theological Seminary's Alva McClain. Walvoord spoke at commencement in 1957, exhorting the graduates to strive for "unity of thought" on "principal prophetic teachings, such as the return of Christ, and the resurrection and judgment of all people."

The most popular venue for speakers like Walvoord and McClain was the annual Prophetic Bible Conference, a weeklong affair designed to reach the larger Omaha community. The program for the July 1950 conference was typical, with addresses on "The Difference Between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven," "The Church Escaping the Tribulation," "The Jews and the Last Days," "The Silver Trumpet!" "The Rapture of the Church," and "The Judgment Seat of Christ."<sup>31</sup>

Until his 1951 retirement as president, C. H. Suckau was at the center of these efforts to indoctrinate Grace students in dispensational theology. Besides his visits to Mennonite churches in the Midwest, Suckau gave numerous presentations on campus, in chapel and elsewhere, on the intricacies of the end times. He was also a frequent contributor to the school's magazine, *Grace Tidings*, on the topic of biblical prophecy. By writing to the school, interested folks could secure "a miniature ['End of the Ages'] chart by Dr. Suckau, suggestive of the lectures [he has] given on the Second Coming, the Tribulation, and the Millennium."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> *Grace Bible Institute Catalog* (1955-56): 47-50. The emphasis on prophecy remains strong at Grace, with a course on Daniel and Revelation that "follows the premillennial, futuristic interpretation," and a course (required for some majors) on prophecy in which students deal with "prophecies related to the present age, the tribulation period, the second advent, the millennium, and the eternal state." See *Grace College of the Bible Catalog* (1991-1993): 71.

<sup>31</sup> "Commencement," *Grace Tidings* 14 (July 1957): 6; "Dr. Cooper Speaks," *Grace Tidings* 9 (Mar. 1952): 2; "Prophetic Conference Report," *Grace Tidings* 17 (Dec. 1959): 4; "Grace Bible Institute," *Mennonite Weekly Review* 29 (Nov. 8, 1951): 15; "Prophetic Bible Conference," *Grace Tidings* 7 (Apr. 1950): 4. It should be noted that Grace Theological Seminary (Winona Lake, Ind.) was not institutionally connected to Grace College of the Bible.

<sup>32</sup> "Mid-Semester Bible Conference," *Grace Tidings* 1 (Nov. 1943): 3; C. H. Suckau, "The 'Ends of the Ages,'" *Grace Tidings* 3 (Feb. 1946): 4-5; C. H. Suckau,



It is at the level of student life that one really gets a feel for the degree to which dispensational premillennialism permeated Grace Bible Institute. As interviews with former students made clear, students talked endlessly about biblical prophecy. In the cafeteria and in the dorms, students discussed and debated dispensational details, such as the characteristics of the antichrist, the signs of the end times, and the date of the rapture. According to one alumnus, there was an "eschatological fervor" on campus, an obsessive "emphasis on the fact that the end was near," that "definitely was not healthy."

Students were so steeped in and fixated on the intricacies of biblical prophecy that they played what might be called "dispensational pranks." A student who attended Grace in the 1960s reported that on one occasion he and his friends "staged a rapture" in one of the dorms. "We turned the radios on, left the water running, left food out on the table, all that sort of thing, just to give one unfortunate girl the impression that we had all been 'raptured.'" The young lady immediately "bought" the prank, assuming that she had been "left behind" while all of her friends had been "called up into the air to be with Christ." It was "not until she called home and found her mother there that she realized that it was a hoax." She "knew that, of all people, her mother would have been 'raptured'" if Jesus had indeed returned.<sup>33</sup>

Dispensationalism pervaded every nook and cranny of Grace Bible Institute. As one disgruntled alumnus has observed, "Dispensational premillennialism was the dominant intellectual paradigm at Grace." There could be no deviation, no challenges to the "party line," no suggestion that there might be an alternative approach to understanding the book of Revelation. It was not enough just to be a dispensational premillennialist. As indicated by the school's detailed and lengthy doctrinal statement, Grace Bible Institute required adherence to a very specific interpretation of biblical prophecy in which Christ returns at the rapture, which takes place *before* the tribulation, *after* which is the millennium. Requiring all members of the Grace Bible community to be both "pre-mill" and "pretrib," to use common dispensationalist shorthand, made eminent good sense to Grace administrators and faculty members. After

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"Prophecy," *Grace Tidings* 5 (Apr. 1948): 2; C. H. Suckau, "The Road to Peace," *Grace Tidings* 5 (Sept. 1948): 2.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Darrell Fast, North Newton, Kan., July 7, 1992, 1; interview with Glendon Klaassen, 2; interview with Randy Basinger, 2.

all, as it was explained to one student, anyone who doubted the pre-tribulation rapture was inevitably on "the 'slippery slope' to perdition."<sup>34</sup>

Some Grace students and faculty members questioned the "party line" on the timing of the rapture, suggesting that it may occur at a time other than the beginning of the tribulation. Such people were denied permission to graduate or were asked to leave the school. One New Testament professor was dismissed for "not toeing the line regarding 'pre-trib'—he held to a 'midtrib' rapture." According to a former Grace faculty member who taught at Grace in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a senior in his final semester of coursework felt compelled to inform the administration that he was unsure as to the timing of the rapture and other details of the tribulation. Although he wholeheartedly affirmed most of the school's doctrinal statement, he said that he "could not sign that part of the faith statement." At the faculty meeting called to deal with this issue, the dean stood up and asserted, "We simply cannot allow a person like this to graduate" from Grace. The faculty agreed and overwhelmingly voted to withhold the student's diploma. A motion to commend the student for his candor and to express the faculty's regret at having to make such a painful decision died for lack of a second.<sup>35</sup>

The Grace professor who recounted this story left the school soon after this incident. But what really frustrated this professor was that students and faculty alike could opt out of affirming the clause in the doctrinal statement that called on Christians to abstain from "taking personal vengeance and participating in carnal strife." As a Grace graduate and long-term administrator candidly admitted, this eight-word statement on nonresistance, which was buried at the very end of an extraordinarily lengthy list of doctrinal affirmations, was always seen "as open-ended, and not required." One could "attend or graduate from Grace, or teach at Grace, and not hold to nonresistance." As one of the school's founders put it, "For Grace people, ... nonresistance was not at the same level of

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Randy Basinger, 2; *Doctrinal Statement of the Grace Bible Institute*, Article XI; interview with Erwin Rempel, North Newton, Kan., July 7, 1992, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with John Esau, 3; interview with Jim Chancellor, Louisville, Ky., Nov. 11, 1994, 1. Chancellor, who now teaches Christian missions and world religions at Southern Seminary in Louisville, taught physical education and coached basketball at Grace from 1967 through 1972.



importance" as other doctrines, and thus the school had a "broad view" of the topic.<sup>36</sup>

"A broad view" of nonresistance meant that the topic, even in the mild form articulated in the doctrinal statement, was de-emphasized at Grace Bible Institute. Virtually every interviewee who attended Grace in the school's first three decades made a point of observing that nonresistance was rarely discussed or dealt with inside or outside the classroom. When it was discussed, it was "treated as a matter of choice, an option." One former student recalled that a professor defined it as "being obedient and being kind." Another student observed, "I have no memory of dealing with issues of nonresistance when I was at Grace." As one alumnus who went on to become an administrator at the school observed, "dyed-in-the-wool Mennonite speakers" occasionally did come to campus, preaching nonresistance; however, such speakers "did not go over very well at all," thanks in good part to the fact that "administrators and faculty members [had] placed very little emphasis on nonresistance," and thus many "students were opposed to the whole idea" of nonviolence.<sup>37</sup>

None of this is surprising, given Grace Bible's emphasis on dispensational premillennialism. As Beulah Hostetler and other scholars have noted, and as we saw with Cornelius Suckau's advice to young men during World War II, there is a clear link between dispensationalism and the de-emphasis of nonviolence. This link derives in large part from relegating to a future age the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere about the kingdom and "kingdom values."<sup>38</sup>

The fact that dispensationalism was the "dominant intellectual paradigm" at Grace all but ensured that the traditional Mennonite emphasis on nonresistance would have to go. So would other signs that Grace was a Mennonite institution. By 1949 references to Mennonites began to be purged from the historical sketch contained in the college catalog. By the early 1960s, Mennonites had been eliminated from the story altogether. Early Grace administrators had used the Mennonite History course as prime evidence that the school was loyal to Mennonites and the

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Jim Chancellor, 1; interview with Donald Tschetter, Omaha, Neb., Sept. 20, 1994, 1; interview with Harold Burkholder, Elbing, Kan., July 6, 1992.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with John Esau, 3; interview with Darrell Fast, 1; interview with Glendon Klaassen, 3; interview with Virgil Dirks, Omaha, Neb., Sept. 20, 1994, 2.

<sup>38</sup> Beulah Stauffer Hostetler, *American Mennonites and Protestant Movements: A Community Paradigm* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1987), 223-34.

Mennonite heritage. But just nine years after the school's founding, this course was eliminated from the school's catalog, replaced by a generic "Church History" course. According to the catalog and to students who took the class, this course paid virtually no attention to Mennonite history or to Anabaptism in general.<sup>39</sup>

By the 1960s, it was becoming harder and harder to see Grace Bible Institute of Omaha as anything approximating a Mennonite institution. In 1971, the school hired its first non-Mennonite president, Robert Benton, who immediately and aggressively set forth to expunge any last remnants of Mennonite heritage at Grace.<sup>40</sup> The logical trajectory of Grace Bible Institute, which started with the appointment of arch-dispensationalist Cornelius Suckau as the school's first president, had taken it beyond the Mennonite orbit—and in less than three decades.

#### CONCLUSION

First, it should not be difficult to guess what happened to Mennonite students once they left Grace Bible. Many who went to Grace as Mennonites eventually left the Mennonite churches, opting instead to attend Baptist or Evangelical Free or independent Bible churches. As far as Grace graduates who went on to take Mennonite pastorates, one General Conference Mennonite official who graduated from Grace and who has many good things to say about the school reported that "Grace graduates who came back to the General Conference to pastor churches often took them out of the Conference, or, at least, further soured [their congregation] on the Conference. I hate to say it, but General Conference leaders are right to have their antennae up about Grace people."

The Evangelical Mennonite Brethren (EMB) Church is a tiny denomination described nicely in a recent book by Cal Redekop, significantly entitled *Leaving Anabaptism*. The EMBs had already begun to move beyond the Mennonite orbit by the time Grace began operations. Strongly influenced by dispensationalism, they tended to look to Grace Bible Institute as the EMB college. In fact, the school trained most of the denomination's ministers. Over time, these Grace-educated Evangelical

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<sup>39</sup> *Grace Bible Institute Catalog* (1949–1950): 6; *Grace Bible Institute Catalog* (1958–1959): 8; *Grace Bible Institute Catalog* (1964–1965): 15; *Grace Bible Institute Catalog* (1953–1954); *Grace Bible Institute Catalog* (1955–1956): 56; interview with Melvin Friesen, Omaha, Neb., Sept. 20, 1994, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Harold Burkholder, 7; Harold J. Berry, *Committed to the Vision: 50 years by the Grace of God* (Omaha, Neb.: Grace College of the Bible, 1992), 64–65.



Mennonite Brethren drifted further and further from their roots. In the 1980s, they abandoned the name *Mennonite*, choosing instead to call themselves the Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches.<sup>41</sup>

Second, I cannot prove that Grace Bible Institute or its graduates or its affiliate denomination abandoned the Mennonite tradition simply because the school revolved around dispensational premillennialism. However, I do argue that it would be difficult to understand the Grace Bible Institute story if we insisted on seeing these fundamentalists as anti-modernist conservatives who were trying to preserve orthodoxy in the face of intellectual and cultural changes buffeting and threatening the Mennonite world. After all, there was little Mennonite modernism to be fighting, and these folks abandoned the Mennonite ship with unseemly haste. Clearly something else was going on.

Once we bring dispensational premillennialism to center stage and see it as central to fundamentalism, as does Ernest Sandeen, then what happened at Grace Bible Institute makes much more sense. These fundamentalists were not anti-modernist conservatives. They were radicals who subordinated or rejected their Mennonite commitments for another set of commitments (i.e., dispensational premillennialism). In the process, they abandoned Mennonite distinctives, split some churches and communities, and took some other churches and an entire denomination out of the Mennonite world altogether.

Finally, I doubt that the story of Grace Bible Institute is an isolated instance in the history of believers churches in the United States. I strongly suspect that there are other examples in the believers churches where fundamentalism might best be understood as a movement centered around the idea of dispensational premillennialism. If this is the case, then there is no overstating the importance of John Nelson Darby's ideas for the history of believers churches in the twentieth century.

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Angela Rempel, North Newton, Kan., July 7, 1992, 5; interview with Erwin Rempel, 5; Calvin W. Redekop, *Leaving Anabaptism: From Evangelical Mennonite Brethren to Fellowship of Evangelical Bible Churches* (Telford, Pa.: Pandora Press, 1998).