

# DISPENSATIONAL



# MODERNISM

B. M. PIETSCH

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Published in the United States of America by  
Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Pietsch, B. M.

Dispensational modernism / B.M. Pietsch.  
pages cm

ISBN 978-0-19-024408-8 (hardback)

1. Dispensationalism—History of doctrines. 2. Bible—Hermeneutics.

3. United States—Church history. I. Title.

BT157.P54 2015  
230'.0463—dc23  
2014043329

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

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## *Acknowledgments*

I BLAME ALL of you. Writing this book has been an exercise in sustained suffering. The casual reader may, perhaps, exempt herself from excessive guilt, but for those of you who have played the larger role in prolonging my agonies with your encouragement and support, well . . . you know who you are, and you owe me.



# *Dispensational Modernism*



## *Introduction*

IN 1991 ANTHROPOLOGIST Joel Robbins moved to a remote village in Papua New Guinea for two years of fieldwork among the small Urapmin community. Subjects of decades of anthropological scrutiny, the extended Min cultural groups had become well known for their complex indigenous religious systems. Yet Robbins found a community of self-identified Christians. More surprisingly, the seemingly isolated Urapmin were practicing dispensational premillennialists, waiting eagerly for Jesus's imminent return and an end-times Rapture. They peppered Robbins with questions about current world affairs, seeking signs of prophecy fulfilled, looking for the rise of a new world government and the Antichrist.<sup>1</sup>

The dispensational premillennialism Robbins encountered is often described by scholars as part of the wacky, anti-modern fringe American Protestant fundamentalism. Indeed, many of the distinctive theological ideas of dispensational premillennialism seem ready-made for imaginations attuned to globalization and honed by Hollywood: Rapture! Antichrist! Holy Land! Global War! Apocalypse! The hope of premillennialists is for the arrival of the promised Millennium, Christ's thousand-year reign of peace and harmony over the Earth. The expectation of premillennialists is that the Bible offers accurate predictions about the future sequence of events that will lead up to the Millennium, including the Rapture of Christians into heaven, the brief and sinister rule of the Antichrist, the tormented seven years of the Tribulation, and the culminating battle of Armageddon. Dispensational theology lays the groundwork for premillennial interpretations by helping readers parse different passages of biblical prophecy and apply them into different eras of divinely ordered time, or dispensations.

Emerging in the late nineteenth century among interdenominational Protestant clergy, dispensational premillennialism found key expressions in the *Scofield Reference Bible* and flourished among Bible Institutes, seminaries, and missionary training schools. But dispensationalism always fit uneasily within the bounds of fundamentalism. By the 1970s, the frictions between the two movements burst into a new form of popular premillennialism, which now plays a major and independent role in American popular culture (witness the 65 million copies of the *Left Behind* novels sold) and throughout the modern world, influencing movements from the Nation of Islam to global Pentecostalism. With hundreds of millions of adherents worldwide, dispensational theology and popular premillennialism have had profound impacts on politics (particularly regarding Israel), economics, and global religious practices. Just eight decades after its original publication from the New York branch of Oxford University Press, Robbins was able to purchase a *Scofield Reference Bible* 9,000 miles away in Goroka, Papua New Guinea. Closer to home, a 2006 Pew survey found that 79 percent of Americans believe in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and a 2014 report found that 35 percent of regular Bible readers did so to learn about the future.<sup>2</sup> In the twenty-first century, dispensational premillennialism has emerged as one of the most powerful forces in American religion, as well as one of America's most significant religious exports.

This is not a book about dispensational theology or popular premillennialism. Instead, this book tells a story about dispensational modernism, the epistemic and methodological techniques that undergird dispensational thinking. The spread of prophecy belief in the twentieth century makes little sense without a richer understanding of how dispensational theology was built upon modernist epistemic foundations. These foundations—what I call dispensational modernism—comprised a pervasive system of attitudes, assumptions, and methods that gave prophecy belief its meaning, traction, and popularity. Emerging between 1870 and 1920, dispensational modernism grew out of popular fascination with applying technological methods—such as quantification and classification—to the interpretation of texts and time. Situating dispensationalism in conversations about the nature of mainstream, modern Protestantism in America, this book examines the role of scientific rhetoric in these forms of religious confidence-making. Through technological methods, dispensationalists sought to imbue religious ideas with the same quality of factuality that increasingly buttressed the cultural authority of scientists and other experts.

Dispensationalists inherited their scientific aspirations from popular culture, and the story begins with engineering values in American mass culture. One example will help to illustrate. In 1896 Fannie Farmer published the *Boston Cooking School Cookbook*, the first cookbook in America to incorporate level measurements in recipes. Demonstrating popular fascination with precision, Farmer linked cooking and quantification with scientific spirit, describing her cookbook as “condensed scientific knowledge which will lead to deeper thought and broader study of what to eat.”<sup>3</sup> Popular confidence in classification and quantification became the core of what is best described as the *taxonomic mind*, the specific intellectual commitments that informed dispensational methods. If dispensational premillennialism flowered in many unexpected places in the twentieth century, it was because the taxonomic mind spread rhizomatically beneath the twentieth-century religious landscape. Chapter 1 describes the taxonomic mind in American mass culture and American Protestantism by tracing the proliferation of engineering values in the Sunday school movement, and argues that this context is the best place to start for understanding modern dispensationalism.

Said simply, dispensationalists embraced engineering methods to produce authoritative interpretations of texts and time. Based on these methods, they came to believe biblical prophecy was a unified whole that gave meaning to the experience of discontinuous time, and its deeper, scientific meaning emerged in intricate literary intertextual referentiality. These beliefs were mirrored opposites of those held by other Protestant modernists—theological liberals and academic higher critics—who held that the context of history explained the patchwork text of the Bible and that deeper scientific meanings came from intricate reconstructions of historical contexts. Both groups found comfort in the rhetoric of scientific and technological method, and both sought cultural and intellectual authority through professionalization and specialization. Both claimed to speak for mainstream American Protestantism. In the juxtaposition of these views, both the modernist and counter-modernist aspects of dispensationalism show sharply. Chapter 2 explores the role of professionalization and specialization in the mirrored institutional histories of early dispensationalism and higher education. If this chapter is, perhaps, the least satisfying part of the argument and falls short of fully convincing, it still suggests what I think is the appropriate vector for questions about dispensationalism’s institutional origins and aspirations. Dispensationalists, like other elite knowledge producers, were concerned about status and

prestige, about academic credentials and titles, and about their own ability to speak to and for mainstream American Protestantism.

The core epistemic products of dispensational modernists were their methods for reading the Bible. Far from simple literalism, proof-texting, or conservative retrenchments, dispensationalist understandings of interpretation reveal thoroughly modernist assumptions. The first of these was that knowledge-making required explicit use of method: the Bible must be interpreted to “unlock” its true meaning. They held that authoritative biblical knowledge required years of specialized study, study that made use of engineering methods, such as classification, enumeration, cross-referencing, and taxonomic comparison of literary units. The result was a view of the Bible as an internally coherent whole with a progressive unfolding of meaning, meaning that was located in elaborately coded systems of intertextual relationships, particularly numerical sequences, types and antitypes, literary analogical figures, theological themes, and other intentionally ordered systems. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the late nineteenth-century battles for “scientific” biblical interpretation. The former examines debates about biblical interpretation in academic settings, and the emergence of higher criticism. The latter discusses the broader context of popular biblical interpretation, and the sources dispensationalists drew upon to develop their own form of scientific hermeneutics.

Dispensationalist engagement with time—both history and the future—helped produce their understanding of texts even while it reflected it. Experiencing time as disjunctive and divided, progressive and polyvalent, they sought the meaning of time in its fissures, as divine dictates defined discrete dispensations. Not satisfied with reflecting on the meaning of time, they sought the best means for engineering time to make sense of the present and future. Chapters 5 and 6 discuss, respectively, dispensationalists’ ideas about the meaning and structure of time, and the attempts they made to engineer time, or to organize it through technological methods.

These ideas were developed and disseminated among conservative and interdenominational Protestants in new networks of texts, people, and institutions. By the time the early dispensational network matured around 1910, its central node was the lightning-rod Bible teacher C. I. Scofield. His edited *Scofield Reference Bible*—the best-selling volume in the history of Oxford University Press—became the near-canonical statement of dispensational thought and the most popular mechanism for propagation of dispensational methods. As the *Scofield Reference Bible*

became part of the fabric of American religious life, it served as a scholarly, authoritative guide to modernist interpretive method for millions of Americans, and as a textbook within the global missionary movement. Chapter 7 describes the twentieth-century history of the Scofield Bible in order to illustrate the complex interactions of dispensational modernism with popular religious movements.

WHO WERE THE early dispensationalists? A number of names recur in this story, including James H. Brookes, George Carter Needham, Arthur Tappan Pierson, Arno Gaebelein, Cyrus I. Scofield, Charles Gallaudet Trumbull, and Lewis Sperry Chafer. All were ministers or evangelists connected to evangelist Dwight L. Moody's interdenominational network. Alongside common commitments to missions and urban evangelism, they all took the idea of clerical professionalization seriously and labored exhaustively to train, educate, and build nondenominational associations for clergy and Christian workers, through Bible conferences, Bible institutes, and seminaries. They did not share a common background—the self-educated Scofield lived a hardscrabble youth and served in the Confederate Army, while Trumbull graduated from Yale and inherited editorship of one of the nation's largest and most respectable religious periodicals. Yet with the exception of a few women—such as Chicago educator Emma Dryer—the architects of American dispensationalism were white, male, urban Protestants who had achieved some kind of middle-class respectability.

Dispensationalists rarely reflected on the role that social contexts played in creating authoritative religious knowledge. Instead, as part of a highly aspirational culture, and like their liberal Protestant cousins, they sought to speak to and for the American religious mainstream. This mainstream was, of course, always more of a symbolic goal than an institutional or ideological reality. Insofar as they imagined the mainstream in their own image, they unreflexively assumed it mirrored their own white, male, urban, middle-class concerns and desires, perceived as neutral and objective features of society. Dispensationalists' interest in securing religious knowledge through technological and "scientific" methods was an extension of this social location, as was their perception that the mainstream bowed to the same kind of intellectual and scientific authorities that they aspired to. For knowledge to be produced scientifically and objectively was for power to work invisibly, including for the dispensationalists themselves. If the sources they left show an obsessive reflexivity about

their situatedness relative to their epistemic methods, the vast silences concerning race, class, and gender testify to their relatively elite social locations and aspirations.

Recovering this history leads to a more robust definition of dispensationalism and locates it within the spectrum of American modernism. When viewed in a broad context, it is best understood as a new constellation of ideas about time, narrative, and epistemic method. Even as the public sphere became repeatedly disenchanted and re-enchanted—through encounters with Darwin, liberal theology, secularism, consumer capitalism, and other forms of modernist thought—dispensationalists labored to re-enchant the world, and build confidence, through their own scientific methods. Not simply restating nineteenth-century certainties, dispensationalists sought secure religious knowledge through taxonomic readings of texts and time. They developed new methods for interpreting the Bible and contemporary world events, in order to construct elaborate schemas for dividing the dispensations and ordering history. In common with other modernist thinkers, dispensationalists insisted on the explicit use of method for constructing knowledge.

WHY SPEND SO much effort attempting to reimagine the intellectual world of early dispensationalism? After all, dispensational theology and popular premillennialism have suffered from no shortage of attention as scholars have mapped large swaths of the road from New York to Papua New Guinea, elaborately detailing premillennial theology, history, politics, and popular culture.<sup>4</sup> When, in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan revealed his belief that Armageddon may come soon, journalists found a plethora of scholars prepared to weigh in to help explain the phenomenon, in documentaries, newspaper articles, and general media coverage. Predictably for a set of religious, political, and social ideas that have produced considerable public anxiety, there is a long bibliography describing dispensational premillennialism, including both histories of theology and reductionist theories for explaining millenarian and apocalyptic belief.

Yet shifting our gaze from theology and politics to epistemology, methodology, and intellectual authority allows us to discover a richer account of what makes dispensationalism compelling to its millions of advocates, along with a fuller account of its development and spread. Most importantly, it allows us to sidestep a number of problematic assumptions that have become embedded in the historiography of premillennialism. Despite careful attempts by scholars to listen to dispensationalist

voices, the study of premillennialism still reflects the fact that the analytical categories were defined and constructed by theological opponents. In both academic and popular writing, premillennial theology is often held up alongside Mormon polygamy and Islamic fundamentalism as a stock image of religious unreason.

Contemporary analyses reflect the historiography of dispensationalism, as from the early twentieth century scholars described dispensational thinking as simply anti-intellectual apocalyptic theology. The period around the end of the First World War saw liberal Protestant scholars seeking to explain the phenomenon of dispensational belief in ways that would undermine its authority and popular appeal in mainstream American religion. In 1918 Shirley Jackson Case published an article in *The Biblical World* titled “The Premillennial Menace.” Case, a distinguished professor of early church history at the University of Chicago and a proponent of the new scientific history, found premillennial beliefs to be “a very old and persistent delusion.”<sup>5</sup> That same year his University of Chicago colleague Herbert Willett dismissed all dispensationalist scholarship as “nervous scanning of particular sections of the Bible, most of them apocalyptic,” from “untrained students of the Scriptures and of history.”<sup>6</sup> A year later, Methodist theologian Harris Franklin Rall penned a three-part series on premillennialism published in *The Biblical World*, where he lambasted premillennialists’ “pessimism” and “brutal” theology, charged adherents with “personal abuse” in disagreements, and described the movement as “concerted, vigorous, and well-financed propaganda.”<sup>7</sup> Conservative denominationalists were no more sympathetic, as Princeton theologians and national leaders such as J. Gresham Machen took their own shots at premillennial beliefs. Dispensationalists ended with few allies in the places where histories were being written.

Case and his fellow theologians’ accounts of premillennial origins and logic, despite their overt vitriol, formed the basis for later scholarship. Mid-century accounts elaborated the critique, exemplified by Clarence Bass’s 1960 study proclaiming: “The theses of this book are: dispensationalism is not part of the historic faith of the church . . . and it is based on a faulty hermeneutical basis of interpretation.”<sup>8</sup> In 1963 historian Richard Hofstadter accepted the reductionist categories of the Chicago theologians when he wrote of evangelist D. L. Moody: “His conservatism was a reflection of his pre-millennialist beliefs, which in him engendered a thoroughgoing social pessimism.”<sup>9</sup> By the time historian Ernest Sandeen published his influential 1970 study, *The Roots of Fundamentalism*,

equating dispensationalism with fundamentalism, the stage largely had been set. Scholars assumed that dispensationalism was an anti-modern theological system that led directly to the militant, pessimistic fundamentalist movement.

This historiography embedded some theological and analytic assumptions deep in the study of dispensational premillennialism. The most pervasive of these was that dispensationalism had something to do with psychological moods, such as pessimism, anxiety, status disenfranchisement, or fear. Related to this claim was the corollary that dispensationalist minds were incapable of accepting ambiguity, doubt, or the fractured nature of modern thought, and thus they made extraordinary efforts to seek certainty. Third was the argument that dispensationalism was a defensive reaction against the theological challenges of higher criticism, or against modernity itself. This analysis led to contradictory and often associated claims that dispensationalism was both grouchily conservative and radically new. Regarding their central concerns, many scholars argued that dispensationalists relied on wooden, ham-fisted, “literal” interpretations of the Bible, that they were anti-intellectual pietists, or that they just recapitulated mid-nineteenth-century methods such as simple Baconian induction and common sense reasoning, accompanied by fist-thumping defenses of the inspiration of the Bible. Scholars agreed that North American dispensationalists got their theological ideas in a direct chain of transmission from Plymouth Brethren leader John Nelson Darby, and Darby’s role in inventing dispensationalism is now taken for granted in encyclopedias, textbooks, and even by some contemporary dispensationalists. Finally, connecting these assumptions has been the idea that dispensationalists were a fringe group of militant religious radicals. As fundamentalism became defined in terms of militant anti-modernism, it seemed clear to many observers that dispensationalists were paradigmatic fundamentalists.

The problem is that none of these assumptions hold true for the men and women building dispensationalism between 1870 and 1920. Certainly exceptions can be found, and by the mid-twentieth century there was significant overlap between fundamentalist networks and dispensationalist ones. Yet collapsing these two categories is unhelpful for understanding the origins of dispensationalism and for making sense of its later global appeal. By and large, early dispensationalists were not characterized by conservatism, pessimism, an aversion to complexity or doubt, or a sense of defensive inferiority. They did not reside in marginal social positions, read the Bible literally, or militantly oppose modernity. The historical evidence

for connections with Darby, or for any direct theological transmission of premillennial ideas, remains weak.<sup>10</sup> Dispensationalists believed their interpretive methods were *more* scientific than the speculative hypotheses of higher critics, and deserved to be taken seriously in mainstream Protestantism. Like nearly all professionals, they did sometimes militate to preserve their intellectual authority, but they did so alongside constructive intellectual attempts to create new and alternate modernist methods for producing confident belief.

If standard scholarly characterizations did not hold true for the first and second generation of American dispensationalists, a better understanding of dispensational history and its appeal in the contemporary world requires a retelling of this history, using new assumptions. It was not the specific form of premillennial theology that made dispensationalism compelling in America, but its modernist epistemic assumptions.

### *Preliminary Apologies*

An introduction should not only describe the project of the book, but make an attempt to defend the author's questionable interpretive decisions, or at least the most egregious of them, and I turn now to that task. Readers impatient with reflexive hand-wringing or historiographical self-criticism are invited to skip ahead to the first chapter.

The sensitive reader may be distressed by the seemingly casual use of the categories of "science," "technology," and "engineering." There are significant conceptual differences between these terms, in both historical and contemporary usage. Yet it is important to recognize the way these categories were conflated by many late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Americans. Exploring the scope *and implications* of this categorical conflation is one of the primary tasks of this book. For most of the characters in this story, "science" and "technology" held a number of shifting, sometimes contradictory meanings, and they invoked an even larger set of values. Most often, in popular religious contexts, these terms were used as rhetorical containers, fetishistic ideals of powerful knowledge, forms of magical language, or advertising slogans. Although, by the mid-twentieth century "science" had become thoroughly professionalized, and associated with Darwinian evolution, statistical probabilities among groups, or large-scale laboratory research, the majority of religious Americans did not imagine science in this way half a century earlier. This is not to say that dispensationalists were still

invested in mid-nineteenth-century inductive models of science, nor that their self-identifications as “scientific” were out of step with the times. Dispensationalists’ conceptions of science aligned with much of mass culture in North America, which saw science in terms of technological methods of knowing and problem-solving. Even as liberal Protestants sought to make their beliefs more compatible with the demands of “modern science,” so, too, did dispensationalists, albeit with a different commitment to what constituted “science” or “scientific knowledge.” Rather than attempting to demystify or clarify the various possible meanings based on contemporary categories, I employ these terms in an approximation of historical usage, generally to invoke a mingled sense of desire, intellectual authority, and social power.

Through most of this book I try to avoid using the language of “fundamentalism.” Fundamentalism is a contentious category, defined in relationship to at least two distinct religious phenomena, one in terms of American religious history and the other in contemporary global sociology. Neither seems appropriate to my objects of study. Although dispensationalism grew up in some of the same soil as early American fundamentalism—classically defined as “militantly anti-modernist evangelicalism”—and the chief concerns of both groups overlapped, definitions of fundamentalism that focus on militancy or anti-modernism obscure more than they reveal about the impulses of early dispensationalists.<sup>11</sup> Well into the twentieth century, many dispensationalists distanced themselves from militant evangelicalism. Chapter 7 describes early dispensationalists’ own ambivalence about the label “fundamentalism,” and their concern that already by 1920 it contained more pejorative associations than positive ones. A new generation of scholarship has begun re-examining the theological work that the category of fundamentalism performs in American history, and in recognition of that work I try to avoid confusion by resisting the use of the term “fundamentalist” to describe early dispensationalists.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the greatest interpretive fiction in this book is that I treat “dispensationalism” as a coherent whole, and “dispensationalists” as self-conscious parts of a discrete religious movement. There were, of course, many types of dispensationalisms, and adherents were involved in many simultaneous projects and networks.<sup>13</sup> To the extent they saw themselves as a single movement before 1900, it was grounded in premillennial Bible readings, usually describing themselves as “believers in the Second Coming.” Certainly none of the early dispensationalists would have been

comfortable being labeled as a “dispensational modernist.” Historians must reduce complexity to produce narrative and analysis, but it must be admitted that the result is a narrative in which the subjects may have had difficulty recognizing themselves.

My use of the term “modernism” raises additional questions. The scholarly literature engaging with modernity and modernism is bloated with contested, conflicting, obscure, and mischievous definitional and theoretical arguments. In a survey of these terms, English professor Susan Stanford Friedman suggested it may be “a critical Tower of Babel . . . a parody of critical discourse in which everyone keeps talking at the same time in a language without common meanings.”<sup>14</sup> Likewise, historian David Hollinger described it as “a walk through a multisided room of mirrors. Each wall is said to be ‘modernist,’ yet each reflects light differently, and makes it difficult to get a clear view of any object in the room, including the walls themselves.”<sup>15</sup> If scholarship on modernism is so fraught with confusion and conflicts, why wade into such troubled waters? What is to be gained?

Before attempting an answer, we must first compound the difficulties. American Protestants have long equated “modernism” with “theological modernism,” and both the primary sources and canonical histories of liberalism and fundamentalism often adopt this elision. Starting in the late-nineteenth century, American Protestants used the term “modernism” to refer to a specific set of theological commitments promoted by the liberal advocates of New Theology, related particularly to their views of the Bible and history. This sensibility was captured by University of Chicago theologian Shailer Mathews’s 1924 assertion: “To the Modernist any statement of Scripture is to be located in its proper historical environment and seen as the expression of the religious attitude of men in that environment. The Bible sprang from our religion, not our religion from the Bible.”<sup>16</sup> The definitive scholarly works on mainline Protestantism and fundamentalism accept this sense of the term. William Hutchison mirrored Mathews when he defined modernism in terms of “conscious, intended adaptation of religious ideas to modern culture,” the “idea that God is immanent in human cultural development,” and “a belief that human society is moving toward realization . . . of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>17</sup> George Marsden accepted Hutchinson’s categories, and doubled down by defining fundamentalism in theological opposition, as a “militantly anti-modernist” phenomenon.<sup>18</sup> This theological understanding of “modernism” offers consistency with primary sources and clear analytical binaries—modernists and

anti-modernists, liberals and fundamentalists—and thus has proven useful for many scholars.

In this narrow theological sense of the term, dispensationalists were certainly not modernists. They frequently attacked “modernism,” and they vigorously defended themselves from accusations (mostly from conservative denominationalists) of being modernist. Dispensationalists rejected most of the theological impulses of liberal theological modernism, which they saw as hostile to beliefs in the material fulfillment of prophecy, the reality of miracles and the resurrection, and the unity of the Bible. Dispensationalist Lewis Sperry Chafer responded testily to one allegation that his mentor, C. I. Scofield, was a modernist by arguing that this accusation “evinces ignorance of the facts” and was an “unqualified misrepresentation.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, in a somewhat confusing irony, liberal theological modernists themselves often accused premillennialism of being “a modern heresy,” by which they meant to suggest it was a recent innovation and had no basis in historic Christianity. Dispensationalists found this claim equally offensive, and made equally strident attempts to establish their historic bona fides.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in a broader cultural sense, dispensationalists could also be described as anti-modernist. Historian Jackson Lears described how anti-modernism developed when “many beneficiaries of modern culture began to feel they were its secret victims.”<sup>21</sup> Certainly many dispensationalists, along with Americans of many other stripes, felt victimized by modern culture, even as they embraced it.

Yet dispensationalists’ twinned desire for, and revulsion toward, the “modern” world—articulated in their own specific ways—is best understood in the context of other American religious engagements with modernity. In attempting to expand the category beyond theological concerns, this work follows in the footsteps of a generation of scholarship that has been arguing about the merits and disadvantages of using theological modernism and adherents’ self-descriptions to talk about modernism in American religion. Such scholarship suggests a number of drawbacks to using “modernism” as shorthand for “theological modernism.”

First, it has become commonplace to observe that anti-modernists and fundamentalists were also often modernists, even according to Hutchison’s categories. Fundamentalists self-consciously adapted themselves to the modern world, looked for God’s immanence in culture, and, although perhaps not believing that society is progressing in moral virtues, still imagined that time progressed along a divinely ordained linear track toward the Kingdom of God. For example, in his study of holiness

leader A. J. Tomlinson, historian Roger Robins argued that holiness movements “encompassed multiple strategies of change and preservation in the face of the social dynamics of their day,” and that both holiness and modernist movements “directly engaged the ‘modern’ world. Both tried to live relevantly within it.”<sup>22</sup> Acknowledging Hutchison’s categories, Robins argued that many other Americans fit the definition equally well: “Mainline Protestant Modernists … developed an intellectual architecture that they believed to be uniquely compatible with modernity, and they were not far wrong … their faith in human progress, and their celebration of change and subjectivity certainly qualified them for the term *modernist*. But though they merited the term, they by no means exhausted it.”<sup>23</sup> In the past few decades, historians have paid increasing attention to the modernity and modernism of supposed anti-modern movements.

More recently, scholars have questioned whether Hutchison’s description of theological modernism could be improved. Historian Kathryn Lofton suggested that instead of theological beliefs, a focus on *methodology* best described the self-conscious practices of American theological modernists. “What made them Christian *modernists*,” Lofton argued, “was their overt allegiance to the inherent virtues of method.” She described these concerns as a “preoccupation with the intellectual procedures over consequences,” worked out “through detailed strategies for biblical exploration and self-examination.”<sup>24</sup> This focus on methodology was also evident in the epistemic reflections of early dispensational thinkers. From plainfolk to elites, Americans came to believe that the explicit use of epistemic method—and particularly “scientific” method—was necessary to produce authoritative, “modern” knowledge, according to modern standards. Although they disliked the label “modernist,” dispensationalists, too, sought to be modern thinkers, in the sense of buttressing their ideas with sufficient methodological reflexivity to warrant confidence. More than simply using epistemic methods, dispensationalists remained aware of their relationship to their methods as the basis for their knowing. As Lofton argued, “To be conscious of method is to watch how oneself enacts something or imagines its fruition; in other words, methodological awareness is nothing more than another way of describing self-consciousness.”<sup>25</sup> Time and again, adherents signaled their modernity by revealing their methods, and their relationship to their methods. This is the sense in which I use the term “modernism” in the phrase “dispensational modernism.” Dispensational thinkers were

committed to this explicit and reflective use of methods in knowledge production.

Focusing on methodology suggests that here, as in other respects, self-described modernists and anti-modernists shared more in common than perhaps either group might have recognized, or cared to admit. Indeed, the taxonomic mind was prevalent throughout American religion, not just among dispensationalists, and broadening the category of “modernism” helps expose the underlying commonalities that have often been hidden by binary categories in the scholarship that function to highlight difference.

However, neither a focus on theology nor a focus on method comes close to representing all the useful senses of the term “modernism.” In the past decade, scholars have argued that American religious modernism could best be described in terms of specific forms of literary or artistic representation, or as crises of representation, or ways of positioning oneself in space, or through the bureaucratization and rationalization of society, or as ways of imagining the secular, or about adaptations to technological modernization, or concerning nostalgia, or coercion, or enchantment, or through particular relationships to time, progress, and the present, or with regard to individuals’ relationships to knowledge. To be modernist was to embrace “an esthetic style that incorporates otherwise misfitting elements in a unified composition, relying forthrightly on the composer’s subjectivity as the unifying ingredient.”<sup>26</sup> To be modernist was to accept a world in which religion became a choice vis-à-vis the secular, to live in a “situation in which individuals feel the authority of their choices or, at the very least, arrive at a place in which some choice can and must be made.”<sup>27</sup> To be modernist was to recognize in present representations “a ruthless break with any or all preceding historical conditions . . . a never-ending process of internal ruptures and fragmentations within itself.”<sup>28</sup> To be modernist was to be inflicted with the fractured consciousness of modernity, and thus even anti-modernism itself has been identified as fundamentally modernist.

If this litany of modernisms is exhausting—a “critical Tower of Babel”—then it at least points to a final reason to describe dispensationalists as modernists. More than anything, to be modernist means, and has meant, to belong as part of a conversation about the promise and perils of change in the modern world. Central to this conversation was reflexive subjectivity, and the attempt to find methods to represent the world from within this subjectivity. Thus, to be modernist was to take part in that

conversation. Or to be more precise, if one can be forgiven for excessive recursion, to be modernist was to see oneself as a part of this conversation. Dispensationalists were fundamentally engaged in this conversation. The fact that their voices—and epistemic methods and solutions—have been left out of the story of religious modernism in America has impoverished our analysis.

The category of dispensational modernism, then, is an attempt to explore the intellectual foundations of dispensationalism in terms of one late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century conversation about modern knowledge. Participation in this conversation is what made dispensationalism so compelling to its adherents. Put differently, this book argues that the success of a dispensational product like the *Scofield Reference Bible* came not because it was dispensational but because it was modernist.

This study is not meant as an apology for this tradition, nor an intervention in theological battles. The twentieth century saw dispensationalists embroiled in many such theological battles: with liberal theologians, with conservative denominationalists, with covenant theologians, and with each other. To borrow a phrase I learned after moving to the South: I have no dog in those fights. I hope the account I have written of early dispensationalism proves both generous and unsympathetic in measures. However, my primary goal was to describe an episode in the broader history of confidence, showing how early dispensationalism fit alongside other forms of religious modernism, and seeing what it tells us about modernist ambitions and strategies for securing confident knowledge. This is a story about the ways in which the boundaries have been drawn in the modern world—around orthodoxy, around piety, and around knowledge—and the powers that created these boundaries. If the purpose of writing history is liberation, and sometimes I believe that it should be, then this story may help us to see what, precisely, we need liberation from.

But perhaps the purpose of history is not liberation at all, but humility? This is also a story about how the desire for confidence and intellectual authority can lead down unexpected and unreliable paths. Reminders of the need for humility are everywhere. Early dispensationalists had as many reasons for confidence in their interpretations as I do for confidence in my historical methods. While it is one thing to say that early dispensationalists might not recognize themselves in the following pages, it is quite another, and perhaps more serious, to write history about subjects who rejected the idea that historicism or historical contexts provide us

with real meaning or scientific truths. Dispensationalists were neither the first nor the last to distrust the slippery ease with which historical narratives tell us what happened in the past *and* what it meant. As the English modernist novelist B. S. Johnson observed: “Life does not tell stories. Life is chaotic, fluid, random . . . Writers can extract a story from life only by strict, close selection, and this must mean falsification. Telling stories really is telling lies.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps early dispensationalists were right to be wary of historical narratives that come bearing gifts, particularly gifts disguised as confident knowledge about the past. If there is a larger significance to this project (and I am far from certain there is), it may be that what we most need liberation from is our own perennial lust for confidence in our stories about the past.

# I

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## *Taxonomic Minds and the Technological Construction of Confidence*

### *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*

Philadelphia merchant John Wanamaker was big stuff. Physiognomically, as well as socially. During his stint as US Postmaster General from 1889 to 1893, his “chubby face uncannily resembling that of a cherub” made him a common subject of satire and caricature in magazines like *Puck* and *Judge*.<sup>1</sup> Beyond appearances, Wanamaker’s impact on American culture was weighty, particularly through his innovations in retailing and advertising. The eponymous store Wanamaker opened in 1861 distinguished itself as the first department store in the United States. A series of ads in 1871 captured Wanamaker’s sense of revolutionary historical significance: “At this very moment, the Oak Hall buildings of Wanamaker & Brown are now the scene of the GREATEST POPULAR MOVEMENT!! in Fine Clothing ever inaugurated anywhere in America.”<sup>2</sup> Wanamaker’s policies of fixed prices, guaranteed returns, and exemplary service transformed the way merchants and middle-class consumers imagined their interactions, systematizing and institutionalizing the trust required for commercial exchanges. Perhaps nothing illustrates this as clearly as his introduction of price tags, which helped shift the basis of commercial transactions from interpersonal haggling to impersonal, quantified purchasing.

Despite his cherubic bearing, Wanamaker’s portrait is not usually one that first welcomes readers into a history of American dispensationalism. His commitment to dispensationalism was secondary to his other ambitions,