

# THE BUSWELL-CHAFFER CONTROVERSY CIRCA 1936-37: AN UNUSUALLY CIVIL WAR OF WORDS?

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## Overview

The assertion that the Modernist-Fundamentalist Controversy of the 1920's had a profound effect on American Evangelicalism requires little defense.<sup>1</sup> The effects of this controversy went well beyond the traditional lines of a “modern” worldview versus a “fundamentalist” anti-modern perspective, however—extending fissures into several mainline denominations provoking some intense intra-denominational discussions.

One such discussion occurred inside the Presbyterian church between J. Oliver Buswell (the moderator of the General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and President of Wheaton College) and Lewis Sperry Chafer (President of Dallas Theological Seminary) over premillennialism. This dispute was conducted mainly through a series of letters circa 1936-7 in which Buswell and Chafer addressed the salient issues with one another.

This paper will examine the controversy through the words of Buswell and Chafer identifying the main points of the dispute, tracing their increasingly strained relationship with one another, as well as briefly examining the relationship between the premillennialists and the non-premillennialists inside the Presbyterian church. Finally, some “lessons learned” will be extrapolated from their interaction as well as from the broader dispute as a whole—hopefully offering some guidelines in the use of “unusually civil words” to those who might be involved in future “civil wars”—namely, theological disputes within an organization.

## The Gentlemen: Chafer and Buswell

### Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952)

While neither time nor space permits an extensive biography of Chafer, certain key events should be noted in his life as they have a direct bearing on the later controversy with Buswell.<sup>2</sup> The two most relevant matters are his personal and academic background.

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<sup>1</sup> For those needing a little more convincing, consider: James Davison Hunter, *American Evangelicalism: Conservative Religion and the Quandary of Modernity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 27-48; Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), xi-xiv, 3-123; and David Harrington Watt, *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth-Century American Evangelicalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 33-48.

<sup>2</sup> This overview of Chafer is woefully brief and certainly not in any way exhaustive. The brief biography in *Biographical Entries from New 20th-Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 2d ed., ed. J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997) is more helpful: “Presbyterian evangelist and teacher. Born in Rock Creek, Ohio, he studied at New Lyme (Ohio) Academy and at Oberlin College. He also studied under Frank E. Fitch in Buffalo, N.Y. He was a traveling evangelist (1900–1914); an

*Personal Background.* Hannah notes three crucial formative events in Chafer's life—his religious conversion at six during his father's first pastorate, the shock of his father's death when Chafer was eleven (and the resulting severe uncertainty, disruption, and deprivation of Chafer's family), and Chafer's contact with an evangelist named Scott.<sup>3</sup> Hannah writes: "Whether he was stirred by Scott's message, his tragic condition (he was suffering from the same illness that had taken Lewis's father [tuberculosis]), or both, he looked back on the event as a determining factor in his choice of career."<sup>4</sup>

Chafer, due to the relocation of his family, attended Oberlin college, first in the standard college courses, then transferring to the Conservatory of Music. He did not graduate.<sup>5</sup> Hannah notes that at this time, Chafer was more focused on pursuing a musical, rather than a ministerial career.<sup>6</sup> This came to full fruition following a traveling music ministry on 27 March 1896 when Chafer was called to be music director and pastor's assistant at the Congregational church in Painesville, Ohio.<sup>7</sup> Such began his ministerial career as a pastor (although really, a better term would be evangelist).<sup>8</sup> Chafer continued his outside musical endeavors, and this in turn led to the next major development in his personal background—the Northfield Conferences.<sup>9</sup> It was there Chafer met C. I. Scofield and formed a lifelong friendship and mentoring relationship with him.

Hannah writes of Scofield's impact on Chafer: "In that year Chafer appears to have drawn close to Scofield, intertwining their lives into a father-son relationship. It is impossible to understand Chafer without perceiving the deep influence of Scofield."<sup>10</sup> Through the influence of Scofield, Chafer transitioned from an evangelist/pastor to a traveling Bible conference teacher. Hannah summarizes: "Gradually, though enlarged

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internationally known Bible teacher and lecturer (1914–24); founder, president, and professor of systematic theology at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1924; and editor of *Bibliotheca Sacra* from 1940. He wrote *Satan* (1909), *True Evangelism* (1911), *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy* (1915), *Salvation* (1916), *He That Is Spiritual* (1918), *Grace* (1922), *Major Bible Themes* (1926), *The Ephesian Letter* (1935), and *Systematic Theology* (8 vols., 1948)." For a full biography of Lewis Sperry Chafer, see John David Hannah, "The Social and Intellectual History of the Origins of the Evangelical Theological College," Ph.D. diss. (University of Texas at Dallas, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Hannah, "The Social and Intellectual History," 83-4. Chafer met Scott either at end of their time at Rock Creek, or in the early days of their residency in New Lyme, Ohio. As an aside, Hannah notes the account of Chafer's conversion at six is contradicted by the official account in the Board of Incorporate Members, Dallas Theological Seminary, Minute Book 2:20 in the Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary, which records Chafer's conversion at thirteen. Hannah writes: "Such a statement reveals the lack of basic biographical information by those closest to him; they confused the religious stirrings occasioned in hearing Scott with his religious conversion" (Hannah, "Social and Intellectual History," 84 fn 36). This "privateness" of Chafer is an important theme to note for the upcoming conflict with Buswell.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 91. Chafer discontinued his formal studies there spring 1891.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 98-9.

<sup>8</sup> Chafer began and continued a traveling evangelism and music ministry during this time.

<sup>9</sup> The Northfield Conferences were established by D. L. Moody to give the Christian public sound Bible teaching with an emphasis on practical Christian living. See Hannah, "Social and Intellectual History," 115. See also Arthur Percy Fitt, *All about Northfield* (Northfield, MA: Northfield Press, 1910).

<sup>10</sup> Hannah, "Social and Intellectual History," 118. Hannah cites Chafer's own words in referring to his relationship with Scofield as a son's relationship to his father.

exposure in the major Bible and prophetic conferences, the publication of books and articles, and teaching in short-term Bible institutes, Chafer emerged in the 1910's as a quiet, energetic leader of a segment of the emergent fundamentalist movement. More important, however, in this decade friendships were created that became the impetus behind the establishment of the Evangelical Theological College."<sup>11</sup>

*Academic Background.* Although lacking what would formally be acknowledged as a terminally credited degree, Chafer, through Scofield, became associated with several teaching schools including the New York Night School of Bible, and the Philadelphia School of the Bible and also became quite prolific as a writer.<sup>12</sup> After the death of Scofield, Chafer was called to his pastorate in Dallas, TX. There, he was able to pursue his ultimate goal—the founding of a professional school of ministerial training based on sound exposition of the Scriptures and expository preaching of the same. Hannah writes, “the establishment of the Evangelical Theological College was the result of the dream of one man, Lewis Sperry Chafer, though he was encouraged and assisted by many others.”<sup>13</sup> While much more can, and perhaps should, be said concerning Chafer's founding of the school, it must suffice at this point to say he found inadequate the other existing academic and non-academic institutions of the day and so saw a unique need for the creation of a unique institution to fulfill his particular vision of the ministry training needs of his time.

#### **J. Oliver Buswell (1895-1975)<sup>14</sup>**

As with Chafer, the two elements of Buswell's personal and academic background set the stage for the later interaction with Chafer.

*Personal Background.* Originally from Wisconsin, Buswell graduated from the University of Minnesota to attend McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago.<sup>15</sup> Buswell interrupted his seminary career to serve in World War One as a chaplain. He was wounded during his service and received the Purple Heart and Silver Star.<sup>16</sup> Following the war, he returned to seminary and graduated. He pastored in Wisconsin (1919-22) and Brooklyn, New York (1922-6). In 1926, he became President of Wheaton College at the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 121-2. The Evangelical Theological College, of course, later became Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 133-5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>14</sup> The brief biography by Earle E. Cairns, “J. Oliver Buswell, in *Biographical Entries from New 20th-Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 2d ed., ed. J.D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1997) is helpful: “Born in Wisconsin, he graduated from the University of Minnesota and McCormick Theological Seminary, and subsequently earned the Ph.D. from New York University. He was army chaplain (1917/18), pastor in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Brooklyn, N.Y. (1919–26), and president of Wheaton College (1926–40). A strong conservative, he served from 1941 to 1955 at what became Shelton College, and helped found the American Council of Christian Churches and the International Council of Christian Churches. From 1956 to 1969 he taught at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Mo. He was a founder of the Bible Presbyterian Church. He wrote *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (2 vols., 1962/63).”

<sup>15</sup> McCormick Theological Seminary is associated with the (now) Presbyterian Church USA and the University of Chicago. Cf. <http://www.mccormick.edu/>, accessed 14 March 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Summarized from the Memorial composed by Dr. Franklin S. Dyrness delivered before the 155th General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in 1977 as well as Edward A. Steele, III, “Buswell, the Man,” *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review* 2 (spring-fall 1976).

astonishing age of thirty-one. The remainder of his personal background fits best in the context of his academic background.

*Academic Background.* By contrast to Chafer, Buswell was an academician of the first rate. Buswell received the M.A. from The University of Chicago (via McCormick Theological Seminary) in 1924. His thesis was “The Order of the Material in the Fourth Gospel.” Much later in 1949, he later received the Ph.D. from New York University, with a dissertation of “The Empirical Method of Frederick Robert Tennant.”<sup>17</sup> Buswell became President of Wheaton when he was only 31 years old. During his tenure, Wheaton became fully accredited, tripled its enrollment as well as its assets, and started its graduate school. The official Wheaton College web site remarks: “Buswell was a force that kept Wheaton from embracing the liberal theology popular at that time. During his 14 years in office (1926-1940), Wheaton received academic accreditation, upgraded library services, added a substantial number of Ph.D.s to the teaching staff, and launched its first graduate courses. Six literary societies provided training and social activities for many students who went on to national prominence in several professions, morning chapel was a daily experience for students and faculty, and a strong athletics program brought renown to both college and community.”<sup>18</sup> Buswell was gifted in both academic and administrative matters. By all accounts, his time at Wheaton was a great success both to his career academically and to Wheaton institutionally—even though his tenure ended with his involuntary termination.

### Civil Servants

The first meeting between Chafer and Buswell is unclear. The earliest records in the PCA Historical Center Collection in St. Louis, MO begin with a letter from Chafer to Buswell 10 Jan 1930 regarding Buswell’s upcoming delivery of the Griffith Thomas lectures at the Evangelical Theological College.<sup>19</sup> By the tone of the letter, it is clear that a friendship already existed between Chafer and Buswell.

The earliest record in the Archives of Dallas Theological Seminary is an official program of Buswell’s inauguration at Wheaton in 1926—which records Chafer’s attendance as a representative of the Evangelical Theological College.<sup>20</sup> The next artifact

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<sup>17</sup> For more information on Tennant (1866-1957), see [http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/t/tennant\\_f\\_r.shtml](http://www.bautz.de/bbkl/t/tennant_f_r.shtml), accessed 23 March 2003. He was an English religious philosopher and theologian. Buswell also wrote on Dewey in comparison. Buswell’s later Ph.D. is neither widely known nor broadly reported. I found only two references to it in an exhaustive Internet search, and only three references in the broader print literature.

<sup>18</sup> “The History and Heritage of Wheaton College,” online: <http://www.wheaton.edu/heritage.html>, accessed 23 March 2003. The official history does not note that Buswell was terminated in 1940. This matter will be considered below.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 1 Jan 1930, Buswell Papers, PCA Historical Center. Grateful acknowledgement is hereby given to Wayne Sparkman, the director of the PCA Historical Center for his assistance in the location, copying, and delivery of these material to this researcher. His servant heart made this project possible.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase “earliest record” here refers solely to this researcher identification. Unfortunately, the Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers in the Archives of Dallas Theological Seminary have never been officially collated—due mostly to the lack of an archivist. Nonetheless, grateful acknowledgement goes to Jeff Webster, the director of collections development, and Robert Ibach, the library director, for their expert assistance into the archives.

is a letter from Chafer to Buswell 28 April 1926 in which Chafer accepts the offer to speak at Wheaton's commencement 16 June 1926—and Chafer acknowledges that he will be honored at that time with the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree, although he demures: “This is an honor that I am hardly entitled to, but shall defer to your judgment in the matter and accept the same with gratitude.”<sup>21</sup> Accompanying this letter is a copy of the commencement address on James 4:14 titled “What is your Life?” delivered by Chafer at Wheaton in the academic year 1926-7. The following year, Dallas “reciprocated the compliment and had Dr. Buswell as the commencement speaker and presented him with the D.D. degree.”<sup>22</sup>

The warmth and affection between Buswell and Chafer was clear through the tone of their communication. On 26 September 1930, Chafer writes to Buswell regarding Buswell's impact on the school the previous year: “The messages you gave last year continued with the men through the year and I believe that this is a contact which will prove a worth-while ministry. If you can do it, you know the way, and we shall just make a place at any time you might come.”<sup>23</sup> Chafer's comments turn even more personal at the close of the letter: “We have some wonderful new men on the faculty this fall and I want you to sit in with us. I feel as though you were one of this institution in the innermost circle.”<sup>24</sup>

This friendship extended to mutual support of one another's institutions as well. Buswell wrote to Chafer 27 March 1931: “I want to do everything I can to send students your way.”<sup>25</sup> Chafer expressed similar feelings to Buswell: “We feel that we are rich indeed with your confidence and love and that you have become in some measure a living part of this work. I hope that we may be able to claim a ministry from you of considerable proportion each year—will you not try to plan for this also?”<sup>26</sup> Chafer continues in the same letter regarding his feelings for Wheaton: “It is not as though we did not have an ample supply of Juniors next year: I do feel, however, that we have a great responsibility to the Wheaton boys almost above and beyond our responsibility to any others and when there is a fine fellow who would be so great a power for God if he caught the true interpretation of Scripture, I cannot possibly give him up without the very greatest effort on my part.”<sup>27</sup>

Buswell and Chafer also often spoke of other more personal concerns. The concern of Chafer is again evident when Buswell contracts scarlet fever in January 1931. Chafer cables Buswell: “Deeply regret your illness trust not serious lectures later satisfactory.”<sup>28</sup> After his recovery, Buswell writes back to Chafer: “I cannot tell you how deeply I appreciate your prayers on my behalf. It was a very childish thing for me to have

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<sup>21</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 28 April 1926. Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>22</sup> Edward A. Steele, III, “Buswell, the Man,” *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* 2 (spring-fall 1976): 9.

<sup>23</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 26 September 1930, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 27 March 1931, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 1 April 1931, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Copy of Western Union, 19 January 1931, PCA Historical Center. Buswell had been scheduled to deliver to the Griffith Thomas lectures in Dallas—which had been rescheduled from an earlier date.

scarlet fever, but my wife says she never can tell what I am going to do next anyway.”<sup>29</sup> They often share details of the financial struggles at the two institutions and of personal financial challenges as well—a confidence that Chafer seldom shared with anyone else for fear of being solicitous.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the letters often strayed from pure business. Chafer writes: “I would like to enclose some of the brilliancy of this new day.”<sup>31</sup>

As both their friendship and their institutional affiliations grew, it was quite natural to try to formalize the connection between Wheaton and Dallas. Buswell wrote to Chafer on 6 February 1933: “I have been thinking recently of laying before you a certain plan, and I am sure that you will not misunderstand me if I do so by letter rather than waiting to talk with you, as I had intended. The point is this, —what we have in mind is to build up and strengthen the fellowship between Wheaton and Dallas.”<sup>32</sup> Chafer responds 10 February 1933: “I will be glad, indeed, to cooperate in any way I can toward the strengthening of the bond of union between Wheaton and our seminary....”<sup>33</sup>

This friendship and institutional relationship continued throughout 1934. Buswell wrote to Chafer, playfully chiding him 9 October 1934: “When are you coming this way? Please remember that we are in your official parish and we need your attention every so often.”<sup>34</sup>

A minor difficulty in this relationship occurred in 1935 concerning the granting of an honorary Doctor of Divinity Degree to Joseph Hoffman Cohn.<sup>35</sup> Harry Ironside suggested the Evangelical Theological College take this conferral over from Wheaton, with “a view to Wheaton giving the Degree to my [Chafer’s] brother, Rollin Thomas Chafer.”<sup>36</sup> Buswell agrees that Wheaton would be happy to confer R. T. Chafer with the degree, and that he is happy to have assistance with the conferral of the degree for Cohn.<sup>37</sup> Wheaton did confer R. T. Chafer with the degree, but according to a letter from Chafer to Buswell on 11 March 1935, Gaebelein issued an ultimatum threatening resignation and bad publicity if Chafer proceeded.<sup>38</sup> Chafer expresses his embarrassment over the fact that Wheaton followed through with their part of the bargain, but he was

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<sup>29</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 17 February 1931, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>30</sup> Hannah, “Social and Intellectual History,” 282-330.

<sup>31</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 1 April 1931, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>32</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 6 February 1933, PCA Historical Center. Buswell proposed Chafer lecturing in Buswell’s senior class in Theism and the entire student body in New Testament introduction.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 10 February 1933, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>34</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 9 October 1934, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>35</sup> Cohn (died 1953) was the son of the founder Leopold Cohn (and the leader following his father’s death) of the missionary organization now called Chosen People Ministries. Cf. “A Brief History of Chosen People Ministries,” online: <http://chosenpeople.com/docs/GB/Resources/Publications/01-08NL/history.html>, accessed 23 March 2003. Their web site records that Cohn did receive the D.D. degree, but it does not record the granting institution.

<sup>36</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 22 January 1935, PCA Historical Center. Chafer hints of some difficulties in the course of action with respect to the opposition of A. C. Gaebelein. This was a fortuitous warning.

<sup>37</sup> The issue with Wheaton granting the degree to Cohn was not a reluctance on any part with respect to Cohn, but due primarily to the fact Wheaton had recently granted the same degree to Cohn’s father. See J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 13 February 1935, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>38</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 11 March 1935, PCA Historical Center.

now in a position where he could not. The archives contain no additional information as to the resolution of this issue.

But 1935 entailed another dispute between Wheaton and the Evangelical Theological College, or more particularly, between Buswell and Chafer. In a 20 September 1935 letter, Chafer protests to Buswell concerning the difficulties in the “surprising” move of Henry Clarence Thiessen to Wheaton: “We feel that we have suffered a great loss in the removal of Dr. Thiessen and I regret exceedingly that I knew nothing of the proposed plan for him to go to Wheaton until he accepted the call and resisted our pleas on the ground that he must keep his word.”<sup>39</sup> Chafer requested some type of visiting faculty arrangement to ease this sudden burden of a loss of a key teacher. Buswell, in his reply, is conciliatory but not apologetic: “I feel very sorry indeed to have been in a way the occasion of adding to your burden. I have always felt, however, and I believe you agree with me, that in the Lord’s work cooperating institutions and men should be perfectly frank and free in moving or inviting a move. Furthermore, I had been in correspondence with Dr. Thiessen about coming to Wheaton before he ever went to Dallas, but we had no opening for him at that time.”<sup>40</sup> Buswell also declined to offer any assistance for the fall semester for Chafer, but did offer assistance for the following spring. Buswell closes the letter: “With deep regret at the inconvenience we have caused you, and earnest prayer on your behalf, I remain Yours in Christian fellowship.”<sup>41</sup>

Here, again, the difference in the perspective of Buswell and Chafer is clear. Buswell’s academic background makes him more open to a free exchange of ideas—a mindset which will be made much more explicit in the coming controversy of 1937-38. On the other hand, Chafer’s vision for the development of a professional training school for ministers colors his perspective on interchange—making him much more averse to controversy and dissent. This mindset will also be clearly evident in the coming difficulties of 1937-38.

This difference in approach is highlighted again later in 1935. Chafer writes to Buswell 19 October 1935 and proposes a joint-venture:

I am writing especially to you to lay before you this one question, whether you think it would be possible for Wheaton to devise a pretheology course of three years for men who are going to complete the four years’ work at Dallas, and grant them the Bachelor of Arts degree on their completion of this work here. Such a course would draw a great many fine young men to Wheaton, and of course, bring Wheaton and Dallas much closer in cooperation. It has always seemed reasonable to me, in light of premedic, prelaw, and preengineering course, that there was a general field for some Christian college to specialize in a pretheology course.<sup>42</sup>

Buswell responds 23 October 1935 that he is unable to fully implement Chafer’s idea partly owing to the Board of Regents from the State of New York fourth year residency

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<sup>39</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 20 September 1935, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>40</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 24 September 1935, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 18 October 1935, PCA Historical Center.

Continuing their friendly correspondence, Chafer notes that he is dictating this letter from his hospital bed following a bout of appendicitis and surgery. He did not indicate to Buswell how serious the ailment was, however. Other sources in the archives note the illness was quite severe—perhaps even life-threatening.

rule.<sup>43</sup> Buswell acknowledges that while the University of Illinois grants a B.A. degree to pre-medical students following their first year of medical school, many consider that practice questionable at best.<sup>44</sup> Buswell then offers to consider a three year pretheology course of study, but without the transferability that Chafer seeks. Buswell then opines on a trend in theological schools. He writes: “There is a tendency for theological schools to admit non-college graduates. In that movement we are simply interested spectators. We do not question the right of theological schools like Gordon in Boston to take high school graduates and begin immediately their specialized instruction in theology. All that we have to say is that a Th.B. granted without an arts course behind it is just what it is—no more and no less.”<sup>45</sup> Buswell and Chafer clearly have different perspectives and different visions for the institutions they lead.

Despite these problems, it is clear that a deep and abiding friendship existed between Buswell and Chafer—which extended to the affiliation of Wheaton and the Evangelical Theological College. As such, this amiable relationship existed between Buswell and Chafer until the controversy over premillennialism erupted in the Presbyterian church in the spring of 1936.

### **In the Midst of a Civil War**

The Buswell-Chafer controversy was an outgrowth of an already existing intramural discussion inside the Orthodox Presbyterian Church over dispensationalism (and perhaps, even premillennialism).

Hannah traces the earliest objection to dispensationalism to E. C. Gould, a Southern Presbyterian cleric and former missionary who objected mostly based on the Westminster Confession. Gould wrote several letters to Chafer in 1916 in response to Chafer's recently published book, *The Kingdom in History and Prophecy*. "Gould's response to Chafer was that the rigid distinctions made by dispensationalists were unwarranted, that Chafer explicitly taught two means of salvation (e.g., that the Old Testament was in conflict with the Epistles), and that dispensationalism was in conflict with the Church's standards."<sup>46</sup>

Minor skirmishes continued over the next few years, until a full blown civil war erupted in 1936 via a series of articles published by faculty members of Westminster Seminary—in the context of the recently formed Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC).<sup>47</sup> Mangum frames the dispute well: “All three argued that establishing a true Presbyterian Church meant withstanding any intrusion of "anti-Reformed" teachings, specifically Arminian and "dispensationalist" teachings, which were too commonly found in the general evangelical-fundamentalist movement. Taking up a different aspect of this one central thesis, each article sought one common objective: to establish a "truly Reformed,"

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<sup>43</sup> How and why this rule is relevant to Wheaton College in Illinois is an unexplained mystery.

<sup>44</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 23 October 1935, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Hannah, “Social and Intellectual History,” 349.

<sup>47</sup> While some have debated the timing of the articles in asserting a coordinated assault on premillennialism, the evidence shows that the time was merely coincidental.

"true Presbyterian" identity over against a less vigilant one."<sup>48</sup>

The third article (Kuiper) was the most irenic in tone, and was an exhortation to encourage the OPC to continue doing the good work for which they had founded the OPC. However, a brief digression by Kuiper proved devastating in its effects:

The General Assembly had the privilege of examining several graduates of Westminster Seminary for licensure and ordination. It would have warmed the cockles of the heart of any Christian Reformed minister to hear how closely they were questioned about the two errors which are so extremely prevalent among American fundamentalists, Arminianism and the Dispensationalism of the Scofield Bible. The Assembly wanted to make sure that these prospective ministers were not tainted with such anti-reformed heresies.

All of which goes to show that synod used no vain words when it spoke of 'the tie that binds us in the propagation and defense of our common Reformed faith.'

The [OPC] is not just another fundamentalist church. Its basis is strictly Reformed.<sup>49</sup>

The arguments of these three authors were primarily concerned with modernism, premillennialism, and dispensationalism. However, Scofield's Notes drew their particular ire as being "unreformed."

While space does not allow for a full retelling of the ensuing war of words and anathemas, the premillennialists (the non-dispensationalist variety, including Buswell<sup>50</sup>)

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<sup>48</sup> Mangum, R. Todd. "The Falling Out Between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology: A Historical and Theological Analysis of Controversies between Dispensationalists and Covenant Theologians from 1936 to 1944," Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001. The first series of articles was by Oswald T. Allis (Old Testament professor): "Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture," *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 [January 1936]: 22-35; and "Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God," *Evangelical Quarterly* 8 [July 1936]: 272-89. The second series was by John Murray (Systematic Theology professor)—his articles had actually begun in late-1935 as a unremarkable defense of Presbyterian orthodoxy against the perils of modernism. Once the split had occurred, however, he decided to raise the bar of "orthodoxy" by arguing against Arminianism and then against "modern dispensationalism": "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part I," *Presbyterian Guardian* 1 [16 December 1935]: 87-89; "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part II," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [3 February 1936]: 142-43; "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part III," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [17 February 1936]: 163-64; "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part IV: Limited Atonement," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [16 March 1936]: 200-01, 211; "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part V," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [20 April 1936]: 27-29; "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part VI: Modern Dispensationalism," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [18 May 1936]: 77-79; and "The Reformed Faith and Modern Substitutes, Part VII—Modern Dispensationalism: The 'Kingdom of Heaven' and the 'Kingdom of God,'" *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [17 August 1936]: 210-12; this last article was continued as "The 'Kingdom of Heaven' and the 'Kingdom of God,'" *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 [9 January 1937]: 139-41. The third and final article was written by R. B. Kuiper (Practical Theology professor) "Why Separation Was Necessary," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 [12 September 1936]: 225-27.

<sup>49</sup> R. B. Kuiper, "Why Separation Was Necessary," *Presbyterian Guardian* 2 (12 September 1936): 227.

<sup>50</sup> Jeffrey Khoo, "Dispensational Premillennialism in Reformed Theology: The Contribution of J. Oliver Buswell to the Millennial Debate," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44:4 (December 2001): 697-717 has recently argued that Buswell was indeed a dispensationalist. Roy B. Zuck, "Review of 'Dispensational Premillennialism in Reformed Theology: The Contribution of J. Oliver Buswell to the Millennial Debate,' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (April-June 2002): 234-35, remarks: "While Buswell held a number of doctrines in common with dispensational premillennialists, particularly in the area of

responded to what they felt was an attack on all premillennialism. Eventually, Chafer joined the fracas by responding to the articles of Allis, Murray, and Kuiper.<sup>51</sup> Chafer's response was a bit different than the other premillennialists' responses in that he did not allow that the notes in the Scofield Bible were unorthodox. As such, Chafer's response left Buswell in a rather awkward public position, and Buswell responded publicly with an article of his own.<sup>52</sup>

As such, the stage is (finally, and perhaps, mercifully!) set for the war of words between Buswell and Chafer. The first salvo comes in the form of a letter from Buswell to Chafer in response to Chafer's article in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (*BSac*).

Buswell writes to Chafer, 21 January 1937: "I have recently read your article on dispensationalism in the last issue of the *Bibliotheca Sacra* [sic]. I am sure you will realize that in raising a question in regard to this article, my fundamental friendly attitude toward you and Dallas has not changed in the least. In fact, we seem to be on exactly the same ground on which we stood ten years ago when this question first arose for discussion between us." Buswell then proposes a "friendly answer" to be published in *Bibliotheca Sacra*—of which Buswell was a contributing editor.

He asks one question immediately in the letter, after demurring that "it may be a point on which I seriously misunderstand your teaching," inquires: "if the keeping of the law in the sense in which you describe it did not justify the Israelite in the Old Testament, do you hold that an Israelite of the Old Testament dispensation who kept the law is to enter into the eschatological promises relating to Israel, without being justified? Is earthly Israel in the millennium to inherit the earthly kingdom without justification?"<sup>53</sup> Buswell continues:

"Probably you have an answer to my question somewhere in your article or in your book, but I have overlooked it. Judging from Paul's remarks in the Galatian letter, the Galatian heresy was justification by works of the law. Paul uses the word justification over and over again. I always thought that you held that in the Old Testament dispensation there was justification by works of the law, and that the Galatian heresy was carrying over the Old Testament truth into the New Testament church. Evidently I have misunderstood you. This question is a very vital one just now in Christian circles outside your immediate connection in Dallas."<sup>54</sup>

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eschatology, several of his teachings reveal he was not a dispensationalist." Among those teachings, Zuck cites the following: Buswell's holding to the covenants of works, grace, and redemption over and against the dispensationalist's views of the biblical covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New), Buswell's understanding that the church manifested itself in Israel in the Old Testament, Buswell's failure to emphasize the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost, and finally, Buswell's recognition of only two dispensations (namely, before and after the Fall)—a view which no other dispensationalists hold but most Reformed theologians do (p. 235).

<sup>51</sup> For a full retelling of the controversy, see Mangum, "The Falling Out," 54-116. Chafer's response was an extended article: "Dispensationalism," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 93 (October-December 1936): 390-449. Dallas Seminary Press also published this article in the form of a pamphlet titled *Dispensationalism*.

<sup>52</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, "A Premillennialists View" *Presbyterian Guardian* 3 (14 November 1936): 46-7.

<sup>53</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 21 January 1937, PCA Historical Center. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

Chafer responds 28 January 1937: He declines to make *BSac* available for a Buswell article, but not for personal reasons. Chafer writes, “There are certain reasons why we do not wish to follow this course [i.e., publishing Buswell’s thoughts], none of which have any personal element in them; that is, being one of our contributing editors, any writing from your pen, under normal conditions, would be received with favor.”<sup>55</sup> He enumerates four main motivations for not allowing Buswell a voice:

1. It is a definite policy of our editors not to make the magazine an open forum for controversy, Should this be allowed even once, we could not maintain our position thereafter. The magazine is a voice in behalf of the wide range of doctrine and the specific interpretation for which the Seminary stands.
2. As to the publishing of my article to which you would make reply, our first thought regarding the present dispensational discussion was to remain silent. However, many requests came for a constructive statement of our views. The article was published after much prayer by our faculty and was itself read by the majority of these men and made subject to their suggestions. It was clearly understood that there should be no further discussion in the magazine unless most demanding conditions arise.
3. We do not believe that the effect would be good for two of the editorial staff to be writing conflicting views in one magazine.
4. We do not believe it would be good either for Wheaton College or for Dallas Seminary should the presidents of these two schools engage in public controversy. Naturally, we cannot realize how bewildering such discussion is to the majority of the Lord’s people. They are encouraged by the thought that these two institutions do form a sequence in sound doctrinal education. To create another impression, we believe, would be a great mistake. The average Christian is not called upon to take side for or against either Wheaton College or Dallas Seminary on any subject.<sup>56</sup>

It begins to emerge early on, at this point in the infancy of the discussion, that while Buswell is interested in dialogue, Chafer sees no need nor room for discussion. Chafer changes tone in his letter to a more personal one:

I could not subscribe to one statement in your letter, namely, that we are now about where we were ten years ago in our differences in interpretation. In my own case I have moved on and out into fields of truth along these lines which are transforming and no year in my own development has been comparable to the last. It must be confessed, however, that the progress I have made has been that

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<sup>55</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 28 January 1937. Archives Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

which confirms me in the recognition of the distinctions made in this current article. You will bear with me if I remind you that I have been an active student of these problems for at least forty-one years and have, in earlier days, had the privilege of conferences over these specific subjects with the greatest expositors of the past generation, both of England and the United States, and I trust that I have been teachable.<sup>57</sup>

It is unclear here whether Chafer is chiding Buswell over his youth, or merely reaffirming to Buswell that the matter is closed as far as Chafer's mind is concerned. Chafer provides an answer to Buswell's original question concerning justification,<sup>58</sup> but turns his focus back to the controversy: "I do dislike controversy between men who do have almost everything in common. If there are differences these can be worked out in conference or correspondence—if at all. Who is benefited in the least when one prominent man publicly brands the sincere position of another as 'heresy' and even 'pernicious heresy.' This kind of thing is far removed from the fulfilling of John 13:34, and our time would be better spent getting the gospel to the sinking world about us."<sup>59</sup> Chafer then discusses personal matters and closes his letter very warmly, "Faithfully yours"—probably (or perhaps hoping) this would be the end of the Buswell-Chafer controversy.<sup>60</sup>

Buswell responds 4 February 1937. He first asks additional questions regarding Chafer's article. He then responds to Chafer's chiding: "Nothing I have written or intend to write on the subject of dispensationalism could fairly be called controversial. It is regrettable if Christian men cannot discuss differences in a scholarly way in a conservative journal, without controversy. I really must ask you to erase my name as a contributing editor, and it would seem fair for you to erase 'Theological Eclectic, Biblical Repository, Christian Review' from the cover of the Bibliotheca Sacra, if you are not to allow a reasonable friendly answer to your article on dispensationalism."<sup>61</sup>

Buswell, however, again is as warm as always with Chafer as the letter closes: "By all means come to Wheaton whenever you find it possible. Our chapel service is always open to you, and I am glad to do what I can to put you in contact with our prospective theological students."<sup>62</sup> Clearly, Buswell does not see "heresy" in Chafer, and

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<sup>57</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 28 January 1937. Archives Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>58</sup> In a nutshell, Chafer, *Ibid.*, writes: "I have found that it is imperative to distinguish between two widely different meanings of the word justification." The first is equivalent to the word "just" in the Old Testament, while the second is only used of those who are in Christ. Chafer continues: "I do not know any Scripture which uses the word justification in the higher meaning as applied to national Israel."

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* Chafer is complaining here not about Buswell, but about Chafer's treatment at the hands of the Princeton fellows.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 4 February 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. Chafer would later explain the adjectives as legacy names of the journal—merely there for "historical information" (Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 17 February 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary). Buswell, based on the advice of others, also withdraws his request for Chafer to remove him as one of the contributing editors—see below.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

still regards him as an ally, and one to whom he can entrust his students for additional training.

Chafer responds 17 February 1937 to Buswell: “I am sorry that you do not see our viewpoint concerning the matter of discussion in the magazine. I feel sure that in later years the importance of this attitude we have taken will appear to you perhaps more than now. We could not find any release, however, in connection with it.”<sup>63</sup> He demures: “I will write you later regarding the doctrinal issues mentioned in your letter. I am suspecting you have not understood my position.”<sup>64</sup> Again, although Chafer’s tone is not entirely clear, he appears to be trumping Buswell’s age and seeming immaturity with his experience.

Buswell responds, 20 February 1937, requesting pardon for not knowing the names on the cover were historical in nature. However, Buswell again requests release from his contributing editor status, and is quite insistent: “The question of my name on your list of contributing editors is more or less an academic one. I have said many times and occasionally in print that I do not consider the theological difference between us is one which amounts to divisive issue. If that is correct then people will wonder why I do not write an explanation of my view in columns open to my articles. Purely on academic grounds therefore I must ask you to remove my name or to publish a friendly statement of mine in regard to my views.”<sup>65</sup> He follows-up his own letter two days later withdrawing his request—based on the advice of an unnamed friend—so as not to indicate a clash or break between he and Chafer.<sup>66</sup>

The next skirmish provided the starkest contrast between their views, as well as their perspectives on academic discourse. Ella Burgeson, Buswell’s secretary, wrote to Chafer 11 March 1937 and invited him (on behalf of Buswell) to address the Theism class on the subject of dispensationalism upon Chafer’s next visit to Wheaton.<sup>67</sup> Buswell himself follows-up on the request on 16 March 1937: “Also it will be a great thing if you will lecture to my Theism class on the subject of Dispensationalism. I feel that your view should be fairly presented to our College seniors. It is a subject which of course comes up sometime in almost every Bible class.”<sup>68</sup>

Buswell seems not interested in controversy, but rather in a genuine academic opportunity. Chafer agrees, but notes that the subject is very broad to cover in one class period.<sup>69</sup> Buswell, in quite a (now) infamous letter of 2 April 1937, tries to frame the discussion to come, both in a four point summary and with a chart: “Here is a rough diagram of my understanding of your view of dispensational soteriology and eschatology.

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<sup>63</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 17 February 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>64</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 20 February 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 22 February 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>67</sup> Ella Burgeson to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 11 March 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>68</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 16 March 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>69</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 18 March 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. Chafer, again, is warm with his friend: “I sincerely trust that I may see you personally during the day.”

I do want you to be perfectly free in correcting my understanding of your view if this chart does not fairly represent it.”<sup>70</sup> The chart is reproduced as Figure 1 below:<sup>71</sup>

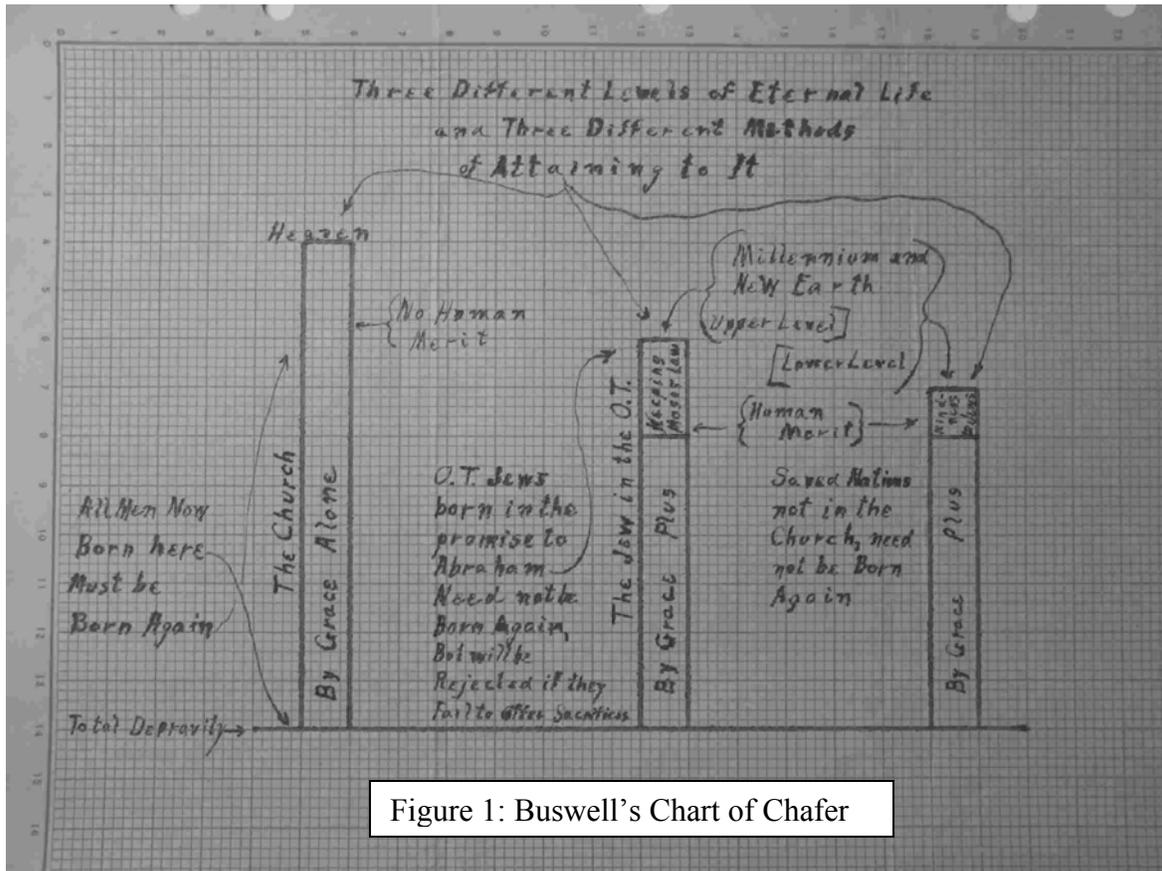


Figure 1: Buswell's Chart of Chafer

Chafer does not see Buswell's chart as helpful.<sup>72</sup> He responds, 3 April 1937: "Your letter of yesterday is just received and I appreciate your attempt to diagram the beliefs that I hold regarding God's purpose in bestowing eternal life. I am sorry that I don't recognize myself in the diagram and I shall not have time this morning to undertake any discussion of it, as I am rushing to get away tonight."<sup>73</sup>

Buswell, however, is not content to wait upon a reply. He wrote to Charles Trumbull (who was the editor of the *Sunday School Times*) regarding the difficulties he

<sup>70</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 2 April 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. As it seems, dispensationalists are not the only ones who make charts (unless, of course, Khoo is correct and Buswell is indeed a dispensationalist. Perhaps this does not count since it is a chart *about* dispensationalists.

<sup>71</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 2 April 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>72</sup> The heading on Buswell's chart provides an apt summary: Buswell viewed Chafer's soteriology as offering three different levels of eternal life with three correspondingly different methods of attaining it. The church is saved "by grace alone." The Jew in the Old Testament was saved by grace plus "keeping the Mosaic law." The "saved nations not in the church" were saved by grace plus "kindness to Jews." The last two groups "need not be born again."

<sup>73</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 3 April 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. But again, Chafer is warm: "It will be a pleasure to see you again."

saw in Chafer's views: "I do feel that Dr. Chafer's closest friends ought to endeavor to open his eyes to the implications of the weak points of his teaching."<sup>74</sup> Buswell had already earlier written in the *Sunday School Times* that some forms of dispensationalism were untenable, although he neither named names nor described those views in detail: "some have carried the dispensationalism to great extremes, and have insisted upon views that others cannot conscientiously accept as Scriptural."<sup>75</sup> However, Buswell offers some grace: "In this there must be latitude for individual freedom."<sup>76</sup> However, following the opening salvos by the Westminster professors, he was under no small pressure to distinguish premillennialism from dispensationalism.

As we shall see, Chafer rather feels ambushed. He writes to Buswell, 8 May 1937: "I am not intending to take up very much doctrinal discussion in this letter, but I do wish to enter a kind protest that you do not publish me as in error until you understand what I believe."<sup>77</sup> He complains: "There is evidently a difference of opinion as to what the human terms may have been in past ages, but this is certainly a very minor issue and does not justify statements which create the impression that I am heretical if, after forty years of careful research, I have come to certain Biblical [sic] conclusions on these matters." He excoriates Buswell:

Back of [your criticism] is an apparent assumption on your part that you, yourself, have all these problems perfectly adjusted and what is lacking on my part is to be instructed. Doubtless these 'weak points' are those on which I disagree with you. So far as I know there is little disagreement as to my position among Bible teachers generally. Your own position, as I understand it, is a most unusual attempt at blending two widely different systems. In this connection, I wonder, Dr. Buswell, what would happen if I should undertake by correspondence with others and by statements before boards and committees and various groups to point out the inconsistencies which do exist in your teaching, for instance, in your recent book "The Christian Life." However, you certainly know that I have no intention of taking up your doctrines at all nor do I pose as your superior or instructor, though much discussion was being considered by me before you were born. That you do not understand my position could hardly be made clearer than it is in your letter in which you attempt to tell Dr. Trumbull what I believe.<sup>78</sup>

Chafer then explains his reticence in answering Buswell's questions, and in so doing gives us a glimpse into what transpired during his time in Buswell's class: "It was because of the fact that I felt at the time that you were seeking for material on which you

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<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 8 May 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer papers, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. Mangum notes that Robert C. McQuilkin also wrote to Trumbull regarding similar concerns 20 February 1937, 6 May 1938, and 3 August 1938. See Mangum, "The Falling Out," 144 fn 49.

<sup>75</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., "Premillennialism and the Reformed Faith: Has the 'Pre' a Good Standing?," *Sunday School Times* 76 (5 May 1934): 291.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 8 May 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

could base certain claims as to my unsoundness, or what you now term my ‘weak points’ that I avoided, so far as I possibly could, entering into any discussion with you while in Wheaton.”<sup>79</sup> At this point, Chafer departs into a baffling excursus: “I have known that you proposed to establish another theological seminary and have been disappointed that you have not discussed this matter with me. There is plenty of room for another premillennial theological seminary, but no room at all for one which has to belittle the work of Dallas Seminary in order to find a reason for its existences.”<sup>80</sup> While time nor space permits an extensive investigation, Buswell responds later with evidence that he and Chafer have discussed just such a matter. Ultimately, Chafer’s feelings and motivations in this matter have been lost to history. Chafer then returns to the matter at hand:

I cannot understand why I should be singled out as the person who is responsible for clear distinctions between Christianity and Judaism. These distinctions have been recognized and accepted by a multitude of worthy men in this and past generations. In fact, by all well-trained premillennialists.

It pains me to write as I do. I am not capable of running rough-shod over my friends and I close with the one petition with which I began: Please do not undertake to present my views to anyone until you understand what they are. This request is not for my sake, but for your own.<sup>81</sup>

Buswell responds very quickly, on 10 May 1937: “Evidently I have in some way hurt your feelings, and for this I am extremely sorry. I can assure you that I had no intention in the world of doing any such thing.”<sup>82</sup> Buswell then says he has only discussed the matter with Trumbull and Ironside. He also reminds Chafer that they had discussed many times a graduate school of theology at Wheaton. He protests: “It would be entirely wrong to construe any such step as ‘belittling’ the work of Dallas.”<sup>83</sup> He continues his conciliatory tone: “I would not for the world injure your feelings. I do not really understand your letter, but we can talk it over in a friendly way when you come for Commencement.”<sup>84</sup>

Their next exchange frames the entire dispute, and gives keen insight into the differences in perspective between Buswell and Chafer: “I am accustomed to an atmosphere in which we discuss one another’s writings and opinions quite freely and without personal feeling being involved. This was all I had in mind in inviting you to speak on dispensationalism here at Wheaton. I felt it would have been more appropriate if you had told me in advance that you were not willing to speak on the subject.”<sup>85</sup> The difference in the academic environment of Wheaton and Dallas Seminary here seem

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<sup>79</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 8 May 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 10 May 1937, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. But again, Buswell is cordial to Chafer: “I am looking forward with great pleasure to the time of fellowship with you at Commencement.”

profound, as well as the differences in the expectations of such discourse from Buswell and Chafer.<sup>86</sup>

Chafer, in turn, answers Buswell on 21 May 1937. He accepts Buswell's assurances, but expresses regret over the thinly veiled reference in Buswell's article in the *Presbyterian Guardian*. He also offers: "I did comply with your request to speak to the seniors on Dispensationalism and gave just the material I had prepared for them. However, I could not accept your spur-of-the-moment request to discuss our differences before that class; not but what I could speak freely on any such theme without notice, but because I believe it unwise to do such a thing, nor do I consider that those young people have sufficient background knowledge of the subject to follow the discussion."<sup>87</sup> For Chafer, the issue seems not so much an unwillingness to engage, but an unwillingness to continue a misunderstanding—or worse, to provoke additional confusion on the part of the Wheaton students. Chafer then questions Buswell's motives:

I have been at a loss to discover your motive in writing the article, in referencing my views as though they were unusual when they agree with most instructed Bible teachers, and in putting pressure on me not only to speak on certain themes but to sign your own draft as to what I believe. All this I felt to be quite beyond the range of friendly discussion. If it was not and I misjudge you, I am sorry. The impression, growing out of your Guardian article, is abroad that there is controversy between you and me and therefore, between Wheaton and Dallas, and it is not beneficial to either school—especially Wheaton.<sup>88</sup>

Chafer then makes clear his perspective on this, and nay future, discussion: "There is, in my mind, no need of further discussion between us over doctrinal matters. I am always free to discuss the truth, but not under such pressure as you had on me when I was last in Wheaton."<sup>89</sup> Chafer clearly considered the matter closed.

Buswell, on the other hand, does not. He responds with a paragraph by paragraph commentary! His frustration is very clear in his deconstruction of Chafer's letter:

Man, can't you see it! Re-read Murray's article and Allis' also. I do not remember whether Allis mentioned you by name, but Murray did repeatedly.

Now I am a premillennialist, and you are a premillennialist. I stand for the fundamentals of the Christian faith as set forth in the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms. Mr. Murray stands for that same system of doctrine. My name is closely associated with yours and has in the past been closely associated with Mr. Murray's. Now Mr. Murray attacks my premillennial view in the classroom and does not distinguish it from your dispensational view which he attacks in a

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<sup>86</sup> For AAR, maybe pursue the persecution complex angle and/or the academic freedom/indoctrination angle.

<sup>87</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer to J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., 21 May 1937, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

series of articles. I am responsible for my influence on our Wheaton graduates. I do not see how I could conscientiously have kept silent. I prayed and studied much to make my reference as kindly as possible. I do not see how I could have spoken in any kindlier way. The premillennial view is not identical with your view of the dispensation of law. I defend the premillennial view. You are under attack from the enemies of premillennialism for points of doctrine which I personally do not accept. I regard you as an honored brother in the Lord, but under the circumstances I found it my duty to write the article in the Guardian, distinguishing between premillennialism and your interpretation of the dispensation of law.

The Scofield Bible was under attack in what seemed to me a very unfair way. Although I do not regard the notes as inerrant, my article in the Guardian defended the Scofield Bible to such an extent that the editors felt it necessary to preface my article with the statement that they did not agree with me.<sup>90</sup>

Buswell goes on the offensive even more: “I insist that everything I have said about you in public or in private has been within the proper and wholesome bounds of Christian fellowship and discussion.”<sup>91</sup> With reference to Chafer’s time in Wheaton, he refutes: “I do not think you should feel in your heart or say that I had you under ‘pressure’ here at Wheaton. You are really, though unconsciously, doing me a great wrong in making any such remark. I can understand your point of view, I think. You are not accustomed to our type of open free and friendly discussion of points of difference. I did not realize this until I saw your reaction.”<sup>92</sup> He concludes: “It is my honest opinion that you are complaining of an injustice which has no reality in fact. I should like to prove this to you and reassure you in regard to my own motives.”<sup>93</sup>

The official correspondence on this subject ends at this point. However, in the Archives of Dallas Seminary, there is a handwritten emendation to the above letter that shows the frustration involved. Although it cannot be ascertained with certainty as to the author, I suspect it is Rollin Chafer who writes, on the top of the letter: “You will never be done with this man.”<sup>94</sup> A reproduction is included below as Figure 2.

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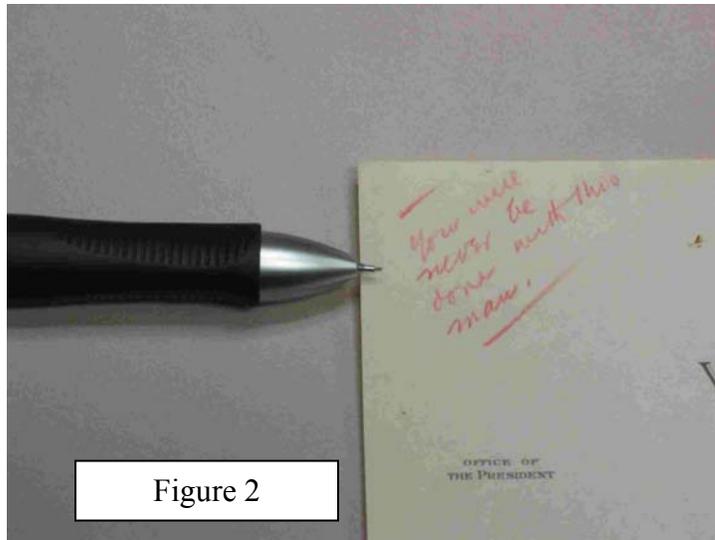
<sup>90</sup>Letter, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer, 24 May 1937, J. Oliver Buswell papers, PCA Historical Center.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> J. Oliver Buswell, Jr. to Lewis Sperry Chafer. 24 May 1937, Lewis Sperry Chafer Papers, Archives, Dallas Theological Seminary. The pointing device in question is indeed a pencil!



There is no additional correspondence in either the Chafer Papers in the Dallas Seminary Archives or the Buswell Papers in the PCA Archives.<sup>95</sup> Mangum gives probably the clearest reason for the abandonment of the discussion: “At this point, Buswell was clearly hoping to preserve premillennialism’s good standing in the OPC. Within a month, however, other issues ... contributed to splitting the church anyway, making Buswell’s endeavor somewhat moot.”<sup>96</sup>

### **Reconstruction (i.e., Lessons Learned)**

What lessons can be learned from the mostly civil war of words between Buswell and Chafer? Four notions punctuate the Buswell-Chafer controversy.

*Ignoring a problem rarely makes it go away.* Chafer thought by ignoring Buswell’s issues, the problems might go away. This course of action only seemed to cause frustration on both sides, and then raised the level of rhetoric when the discussion occurred. It seems best to address matters openly and honestly when they occur—giving the freedom to agree to disagree.

*A free exchange of ideas must be bidirectional.* A lot of the misunderstanding seemed to be more related to the backgrounds of Chafer and Buswell. Chafer seemed more concerned with unity and limiting the chance for misunderstanding—two very commendable and necessary goals. Buswell seemed more interested in the free-flowing of academic ideas (although one cannot discount any agenda he might have had beyond this open exchange). It is an open question as to which perspective is more beneficial. However, any free exchange must be bidirectional to keep one party from feeling attacked (in this case, Chafer) or the other party from feeling ignored (in this case, Buswell).

*Stick to the issue.* Chafer’s introduction of the other seminary idea seemed to greatly complicate matters and raise the level of acrimony. This tactic is called escalation.

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<sup>95</sup> However, this is not to say the controversy ends. Another controversy happens in 1939 in the Wheaton student newspaper regarding this topic that provokes some discussion, but that is for another day.

<sup>96</sup> Mangum, “The Falling Out,” 148.

If this had been an earlier concern of Chafer's, an earlier introduction of the matter to Buswell might have been beneficial. In like manner, Buswell's later introduction of additional questions into the conversation seemed to increase Chafer's frustration level markedly—and probably led to the “you will never be done with this man” mentality.

*Avoid the tendency to vilify and anathematize.* The last lesson is a positive from both Buswell and Chafer. They resisted the temptation to anathematize one another—no mean feat given the nature of the discussion and the time in which they occurred. At the end of the discussion, Buswell and Chafer remained friends and brothers—even though they had disagreements on theological issues of keen importance to them both. As such, Buswell's later struggles with the Presbyterian church probably did more to end this controversy than any agreement the two reached. This much larger controversy made the Chafer-Buswell controversy pale in comparison—and thus seem hardly worth additional dialogue.

### **Postscripts: Chafer and Buswell**

*Chafer.* Although his friendship with Buswell remained, Chafer became increasingly antagonistic to covenant theology. Mangum writes: “By 1943, Chafer's views do not seem to have changed much, but his tone toward covenant theology did become considerably more antagonistic. Chafer no longer toys with the possibility that, if nuanced in a certain direction, covenantalist phrases and concepts might be acceptable.”<sup>97</sup> Chafer's rhetoric increases correspondingly with his ire. He describes “Covenantism” (his terminology) as “that form of theological speculation which attempts to unify God's entire program from Genesis to Revelation under one supposed Covenant of Grace,” he then argues that it is untenable as a theological system: “That no such covenant is either named or exhibited in the Bible and that the covenants which are set forth in the Bible are so varied and diverse that they preclude a one-covenant idea, evidently does not deter many sincere men from adherence to the one-covenant theory.”<sup>98</sup> The antagonism came full circle in 1944. Mangum writes: “[T]he AIC submitted its unanimous report to the GA declaring “dispensationalism” out of harmony with the Westminster Confession of Faith. . . . Not only did the 1944 AIC report represent back then the culmination of hostilities that had been building for decades, it remains to this day as close to an official denunciation of dispensationalism by a Reformed-Covenantalist body as has ever been produced.”<sup>99</sup> Chafer continued his teaching, writing, and Bible conference career for the remainder of his life.

*Buswell.* There are a variety of sources that address Buswell's role in the split in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church into the Bible Presbyterian Church, Columbus Synod (and much later, other name changes and offshoots).<sup>100</sup> In addition to his academic

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<sup>97</sup> Mangum, “The Falling Out,” 17.

<sup>98</sup> Chafer, “Dispensational Distinctions Challenged,” 338.

<sup>99</sup> Mangum, “The Falling Out,” 17.

<sup>100</sup> D. G. Hart and John Muether, *Fighting the Good Fight: A Brief History of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: The Committee on Christian Education and the Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1995); Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, & Moderates* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991); Robert K. Churchill, *Lest We Forget: A Personal Reflection on the Formation of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Committee for the Historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1986); Edwin H. Rian, *The Presbyterian*

endeavors, Buswell also pursued other interests: He ran for office of Illinois Superintendent of Public Instruction on the Prohibition party ticket in 1938 but was defeated by Democrat John A. Wieland.<sup>101</sup> Following this foray into politics and for reasons that are still unclear (at least publicly), Buswell was terminated from Wheaton in 1940.<sup>102</sup> Following a brief stay at Faith Theological Seminary, he served from 1941 to 1956 as President of what later became Shelton College in New York City. From 1956 until his retirement, he served as Dean of the Graduate Faculty at Covenant College and Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. His academic teaching career consisted of both teaching theology and philosophy. Although the author of other works, his two volume systematic theology is regarded as his most influential work.

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*Conflict* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1940); and George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Co., 1974). These sources address the broader issues, not just Buswell's role.

<sup>101</sup> Lawrence Kestenbaum, "Illinois: Superintendents of Public Instruction," *The Political Graveyard*, <http://politicalgraveyard.com/geo/IL/ofc/sppi.html>, accessed 23 March 2003. From the site self-description: "*The Political Graveyard* is a web site about U.S. political history and cemeteries. It is the Internet's most comprehensive source for American political biography, listing 107,137 politicians, living and dead."

<sup>102</sup> "What happened to Buswell?" The publication data on this newspaper article is unclear, but the PCA Historical Center writes (<http://www.pcanet.org/history/findingaids/buswell/article01.html>): "An undated [circa 1978-85] article from a Wheaton, IL or Wheaton College newspaper regarding the story of Buswell's dismissal from Wheaton and the question of where his papers are. The article reproduced below was donated by Florence Graham, long-time volunteer worker at the PCA Historical Center."