

A Brief Historic Examination of Christian Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism among Black Americans and Their Skepticism of Dispensationalism

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Abstract: This journal article briefly examines the historical trend of theology within black fundamental and evangelical Christian churches to evaluate its extensive distrust of dispensational thought. It observes the origin of black American Baptist history, how its roots are connected to Covenant Theology, and its commitment to the Baptist Confession (specifically, The Baptist Confession of 1689). This article also investigates the roots of the black Wesleyan Christian churches and their commitment to the Wesleyan doctrine, which is also underscored in their historic confessions. Lastly, this article notes the significant cultural movement during this time (i.e., slavery), and how these two specific denominations cemented the Covenant Theological system within the black fundamental and evangelical Christian churches in America, which has led to mistrust of the dispensational system.

Key Words: Black Americans, fundamentalism, dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, Southern Baptists, Methodists, slavery

Dispensationalism historically has made a significant impact on American fundamental evangelical Christianity. This was largely due, in part, to the influence of Cyrus Ingerson Scofield

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and the *Scofield Reference Bible*, published in 1909.² Although the *Scofield Reference Bible* was not used in American seminaries, the Bible was predominantly used in Bible institutes and local churches in the early 1900s. These Bible institutes and local churches by and large promoted dispensational thought in American Christianity. After World War I, due to the global conflict unlike the world at that time had seen before, the theological system of dispensationalism assisted in explaining the international conflict from a biblical perspective.² In effect, this explanation brought dispensational thought to the mainstream in American evangelicalism. During this time in history, dispensationalism was welcomed mostly by white American evangelical Christians. However when it came to black American fundamentalist Christians, it was met with skepticism, specifically among black American Southern Baptists and Wesleyans. They were convinced that the interpretative method found within dispensational thought was foreign to the historic Christian faith.

This study will examine the possible explanation of the origins of the distrust among black American fundamental evangelical Christians towards dispensational thought. To do so, it will briefly observe the history of black Southern Baptists and Methodists (i.e., Wesleyans). In addition, this article will present a brief investigation of the positive influence of these two denominations in their work against slavery and how their work against slavery may have impacted the black American interpretive method of the Scriptures. Furthermore, the timing of John Nelson Darby's travels in America and the black American fundamentalist Christian's response to Darby's instruction will also be observed throughout this discourse.

The "Genesis" of Slavery in America

Although slavery has been present throughout human history, slavery was introduced in America soon after the European colonists arrived. Native Americans were used as servants at the start of slavery in the New World; however, shortly after, Africans also began to be imported to the colonies. The first group of Africans were brought into the colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. These Africans were captives who were removed from a previous slave ship, the *San Juan Bautista*, which was carrying these Africans to be imprisoned for

² Renald Showers, "The Life and Legacy of C. I. Scofield," *Israel My Glory*, September/October 2016, <https://israelmyglory.org/article/the-life-and-legacy-of-c-i-scofield/>.

crimes in the country of Mexico.³ John Rolfe, concerning the first Africans brought to America, wrote the following:

About the latter end of August, a Dutch man of Warr of the burden of a 160 tunnes arrived at Point-Comfort, the Comandors name Capt Jope, his Pilott for the West Indies one Mr Marmaduke an Englishman. They mett with the Treasurer in the West Indyes, and determined to hold consort shipp hetherward, but in their passage lost one the other. He brought not anything but 20. and odd Negroes, which the Governor and Cape Marchant bought for victuals (whereof he was in greate need as he pretended) at the best and easiest rates they could.⁴

After they reached Virginia, these African slaves became part of colonial life,⁵ and it appeared slavery was more of a custom that was adopted rather than a law in the New World. They were not known as slaves at the start of this practice, but as indentured servants.⁶ Indentured servitude was practiced in both the North and the South. It was even possible at this time that one who was a slave, after a time,

³ "African Americans at Jamestown," National Parks Service, February 26, 2015, <https://www.nps.gov/jame/learn/historyculture/african-americans-at-jamestown.htm>.

⁴ "Transcription from Original," "20 and Odd Negroes": an Excerpt from a Letter from John Rolfe to Sir Edwin Sandys (1619/1620), https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/_20_and_odd_Negroes_an_excerpt_from_a_letter_from_John_Rolfe_to_Sir_Edwin_Sandys_1619_1620.

⁵ Martha McCartney, "Virginia's First Africans," modified October 9, 2019, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/virginia_s_first_africans.

⁶ "Slavery," *New Standard Encyclopedia*, vol. 15 (Chicago: Ferguson, 2002), 466-67. It should be noted those who were in the care of owners at the start of this practice were not called "slaves" but "indentured servants." It was common practice that indentured servants were contracted (or covenanted) to work for a certain amount of years and were given room and board in exchange for their service. It was more than likely this practice of indentured servitude was taken from the OT (i.e., Exod 21:1-2; Lev 25:45-46). It was not until later on in colonial history (perhaps 1640 with the punishment involving John Punch, who was sentenced to a life of servitude to his owner, that slavery became lifelong. This sentencing, in effect, opened the door for the idea of lifelong slavery).

could gain freedom and his own land.^{7,8} In fact, in the mid-1600s Rhode Island passed a law stating that for a slave to be in the service of a person for more than ten years was prohibited. Contrary to popular belief, a small number of whites from the South owned indentured servants, and most of them owned about two on average.⁹ Furthermore, Indians and blacks who were free from their indentured servitude also owned slaves. In addition to some of the servants working on plantations (mostly for tobacco), others also worked as craftsmen, had domestic jobs, and obtained factory positions.

Slavery and Colonial Law

Over time the custom of slavery became law, with mixed ordinances on the treatment of slaves, within the colonies of the New World. Massachusetts became the first colony to observe slavery legally, with Maryland, New York, and New Jersey following suit many years later. However, Massachusetts also required that every black and Indian slave receive militia training. Virginia also passed a law that made it legal for freed blacks to own indentured servants. Furthermore in 1663, a court of Virginia ruled that after children were born, they were to retain the status of the mother (i.e., Hereditary Virginia Slavery Law). If the mother was a slave, that child borne to her would also be a slave. Yet, if the mother was a free woman, the child would also retain the status of freedom.

In the mid-1660s there seemed to be a shift in how the colonies began to view slaves, specifically black slaves. In 1664, the colony of Maryland was the first state to take action against interracial marriages. Furthermore, Maryland not only created a law that made all black slaves indentured servants for life (New York, New Jersey, North and South Carolina, and Virginia followed suit by passing laws concerning slaves of their own), but in Maryland a slave was considered a criminal if he left the care of the owner.

⁷ McCartney, "Virginia's First Africans."

⁸ This situation may be observed in the case of Virginia where an African black man named Antonio, who later went by the name "Anthony Johnson." Anthony Johnson was an indentured servant to a black man named John Castor. In the mid-1600s, Anthony Johnson had owned 250 acres of land and had his own indentured servants to till it (cited by facinghistory.org). It would appear at the genesis of indentured servitude, the ability of the person was more important than the color of the person, and that indentured servitude was a part of the cultural practice in the early colonies.

⁹ "Slavery," *New Standard Encyclopedia*, 15:466-67.

The laws soon affected the religious life for the black slaves in the colonies. In previous times when a slave became a Christian and was baptized in the church, his or her status was considered changed from slave to free man or woman. However in 1667, Virginia ruled that Christian baptism did not change one's status as being a servant (New York announced a similar law in the 1670s). Shortly after Bacon's Rebellion (1676) Virginia passed a law that all blacks and slaves were prohibited from owning guns and gathering in large numbers and allowed for the severe punishment of slaves who either attempted to flee or physically attacked Christians. Moreover, Virginia created a law that slaves who were imported were now indentured servants for life.

The shift in perception, and the degradation of slaves, was now expanded to include the general black population. During the early to mid-1600s, interracial marriages were an occurrence. However, similar to Maryland, at the end of the 1600s, Virginia passed a law that prohibited interracial marriages between whites and blacks, and whites and Indians. North and South Carolina also installed what had become known as the "Slave Codes." Some of laws outlined included that a large number of slaves traveling, without a white person overseeing them while they were traveling, was illegal. If these slaves were caught, they could be punished as outlined below:

And whereas, it may be attended with ill consequences to permit a great number of slaves to travel together in the high roads without some white person in company with them; Be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid, That no men slaves exceeding seven in number, shall hereafter be permitted to travel together in any high road in this Province, without some white person with them; and it shall and may be lawful for any person or persons, who shall see any men slaves exceeding seven in number, without some white person with them as aforesaid, traveling or assembled together in any high road, to apprehend all and every such slaves, and shall and may whip them, not exceeding twenty lashes on the bare back.¹⁰

Additionally, these codes also stated that no slave, or Negro, was able to own personal possessions or property and included sanctions

¹⁰ David J. McCord, ed., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, vol. 7: Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves, and Rivers* (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston, 1840), XLIII.

against slave owners who promoted the personal growth of their slaves. One such code stated the following:

And whereas, the having of slaves taught to write, or suffering them to be employed in writing, may be attended with great inconveniences; Be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid, That all and every person and persons whatsoever, who shall hereinafter teach or cause any slave or slaves to be taught, to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such person and persons, shall, for every such offense, forfeit the sum of one hundred pounds current money.¹¹

In 1705, the colony of Virginia also outlined their own codes for slaves. Among these codes included such laws that if a slave was killed, the owner was to be paid the value of what that slave was worth. These laws and many others that were outlined in other states such as New York highlighted and cemented into the social conscience that slaves should be viewed as property of the owner, even though it was not explicitly stated in the codes that slaves were property. Despite the efforts of the colonies to pass laws that would treat those who were indentured servants humanely (e.g., military captains in the South had to train one slave for every white male and the prohibition of the murder of blacks, Indians, and slaves from other blacks, Indians, and slaves), there were still laws that were exercised discouraging the promotion of blacks within the culture (e.g., free blacks, Indians, and even interracial slaves could never own property).

Prior to the mid-1700s there were several uprisings that occurred due to the slave codes that were being passed throughout the colonies and the harsh treatment of these slaves that occurred from the hands of their owners. Florida, who would return slaves who had escaped from the Carolinas from their owners seeking refuge, now forbade the selling back or returning of these slaves to their owners. Later during that time, Florida would give freedom and land to slaves who came to their colony. Furthermore, the colonies themselves were beginning to become disenchanted with British monarchy, setting the stage for what would lead to the colonies petitioning and ultimately going to war with the British for their independence. After the American Revolution, the new country, free from the rule of the British, still continued to have

¹¹ Ibid., XLV.

contentions about the slavery issue from state to state. While Rhode Island prohibited that slaves be removed from their own state, Pennsylvania began the process of freeing people from slavery, while New York and Massachusetts gave slaves the right to vote. However, the development of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney in 1794 brought back a demand for slave labor in the Southern states. By the turn of the eighteenth century, the slave trade was outlawed in the United States, but smuggling slaves still continued well into the mid- to late-1800s. The issue of slavery was addressed on a national level when Abraham Lincoln declared the Emancipation Proclamation in which he began his announcement with the following words:

That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.¹²

At the end of the Civil War the American government ended slavery with the passage of the 13th Amendment that was added to the United States Constitution. Slavery has a complex and interwoven history with the colonies, most of whom were deeply religious, attempting to decide the best course of action in regard to the increasing population of indentured servants in the New World. These actions, despite their being well intentioned, were used by others to denigrate and harm blacks and other minorities during this period in history. It is within this social context that how one would interpret Scripture played a significant role in not only the promotion of slavery, but also in the abolishment of slavery.

Slavery, Christianity, and the First Great Awakening

As indentured servitude (and later slavery) was the custom of the colonies, this subject was also being discussed within Christianity, with

¹² "Transcript of the Proclamation," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed July 11, 2019, <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured-documents/emancipation-proclamation/transcript.html>.

opposing positions of thought developing. One such issue was with water baptism. It was the custom in the colonies that no person who was baptized could be a servant to another Christian; however, when a slave became a Christian, this placed the owner in the position to release the slave due to his new identity in Christ.¹³ This led to hesitation for sharing the gospel with those who were slaves to sin and being free in Christ. In effect, the amount of evangelism among blacks was due in large part to the black population within the colonies. As Wheeler comments,

The intensity of the debate over evangelization of Blacks varied directly in proportion to the number of slaves or Blacks in the population, while the evangelization itself varied inversely. In the North, where Blacks were found in small numbers, their evangelization took place with some regularity through the efforts of ministers and missionaries. In the South, where there were large numbers of Blacks, evangelization was sporadic.¹⁴

Massachusetts, the first colony to legalize servitude for life (i.e., slavery), in this same law made a case for the humanity of slaves using the law of Moses and the theocracy of Israel, as noted below:

There shall never be any bond slavery, villeinage, or captivity amongst us unless it be lawful captives taken in just wars, and such strangers as willingly sell themselves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israel concerning such persons cloth morally require. This exempts none from servitude who shall be judged thereto by authority.¹⁵

In the early seventeenth century there was a concerted effort to evangelize the African slaves. Such groups included Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and even the Quakers.¹⁶ Even the Church of Jesus Christ of

¹³ Edward L. Wheeler, . "Beyond One Man: A General Survey of Black Baptist Church History," *RevExp* 70, no. 3 (1973): 309-19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁵ "Massachusetts Body of Liberties, 1641," Constitution Society: Everything Needed to Decide Constitutional Issues, accessed August 14, 2019, <http://www.constitution.org/bcp/mabodlib.htm>.

¹⁶ Wheeler, "Beyond One Man," 309-19.

Latter-Day Saints (i.e., Mormons) attempted to evangelize African slaves. Over time the Roman Catholics and Anglicans were not successful in expanding their influence into converting Africans to their religion. This could have partly been due to the liturgical pattern of worship within these particular denominations. Despite the efforts of Mormons to make progress with African slaves, they also met little success. This was more than likely due to their doctrinal discrimination of blacks not being accepted into the priesthood. The Quakers, in their evangelistic attempts, fared well due to their intentions of desiring to educate African slaves. However, it was the First Great Awakening (1730-1755) that had a significant impact on black slaves. The roots of this revival began with the Dutch Reformed churches in New Jersey in the early 1700s and spread throughout the commonwealth.¹⁷ The revival then expanded to the middle colonies, many of whom were Calvinistic in their theology. Soon after, the First Great Awakening spread the fervor of revivalism from Northern and Middle colonies to the Baptist and Methodist congregations in the South,¹⁸ and with this movement also brought the involvement to speak against the atrocities of slave owners to their slaves. The prominent preacher George Whitefield, in a letter to the early colonists, addressed the inhumane treatment of slaves by their slave-owners:

Your Dogs are caress'd and fondled at your Tables --- But your Slaves, who are frequently stiled Dogs or Beasts, have not an equal Privilege. They are scarce permitted to pick up the Crumbs which fall from their Masters Tables: Nay, some, as I have been informed by an Eye-Witness, have been, upon the most trifling Provocation, cut with Knives, and had Forks thrown into their Flesh --- Not to mention what Numbers have been given up to the inhuman Usage of cruel Task-Masters, who by their unrelenting Scourges have ploughed upon their Backs, and made long Furrows, and at length brought them even to Death itself.¹⁹

¹⁷ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church*" (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 401.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "A Letter from the Rev. Mr. George Whitefield, to the Inhabitants of Maryland, Virginia, North and South-Carolina," *Encyclopediavirginia.org.*, https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/media_player?mets_filename=evm0003029mets.xml.

In addition, the preaching of the First Great Awakening was unparalleled during this time in history. This revival focused heavily on man's sinfulness and the necessity of salvation from eternal damnation. This mode of preaching led those who heard the messages to have such reactions like crying and wailing.²⁰ This type of freedom to express oneself in the service may have been more welcomed by the slaves at the time due to their cultural practice in their origin country of Africa. As one author noted, "The evangelical emotionalism that allowed freedom of expression and characterized the Methodists and Baptists of this period no doubt bore a resemblance to the religious expressions of West Africa, and to tribal religious practices."²¹ At this time in history, man's sinfulness brought to light by the preaching of God's word lead to more discussions in the concerning the treatment of mankind, particularly slaves. This phenomenon brought together many denominations, specifically the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists. Due to the social activity that was found within all of these religious institutions, with the word of God at the helm, black slaves were beginning to be accepted among these organizations, specifically among the Baptists, although they still had very little influence within these congregations. As Torbet commented,

The churches of the state generally included Negroes in their membership and imposed upon their slave-holding members a strict code to regulate the religious care and treatment of the slaves. A similar policy was followed in other Southern states including North Carolina and Maryland. It appears that the Negro members were provided with a certain space in the meeting-house for worship, but were not permitted to vote in business sessions, although they might be heard in cases related to their own race.²²

The First Great Awakening brought the advent of the first churches in early America, with the majority of black Americans at this period of time joining white Baptist and Methodist churches. However, not all congregations agreed with this change, as there were some congregations that offered second services, segregated church entrances and pews, and in some cases, mass numbers of white congregants exiting the church meetings altogether, leaving black

²⁰ Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1950), 240.

²¹ Wheeler, "Beyond One Man," 311.

²² Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, 240.

congregants to start their own church services.²³ Yet this period of revival and mass conversion still proved productive, especially in Southern states where slavery was more prominent.²⁴

The Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) further solidified the evangelism among black slaves. This period of history was brought by early camp meetings, tent events, and heavy ecstatic emotionalism, which resonated with many blacks, slave and free. This further cemented the doctrinal and denominational influence between these two groups. Additionally the Second Great Awakening further progressed the thought of early Americans in their denominations concerning this issue of slavery. One such writer stated the following:

By 1800, black Methodist churches began to be established, fostered by black members responding to revivals and camp meetings, mainly in Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. Methodist circuit riders and the autonomy of local white Baptist preachers in the rural South contributed to the rapid dissemination of and response to the gospel. For blacks displaying a fervor and giftedness for exhorting others, they were allowed to preach to other blacks and sometimes unconverted whites.²⁵

As in the First Great Awakening John Wesley and his predecessor George Whitefield²⁶ continued to speak out against the atrocities of

²³ Diane J. Chandler, "African American Spirituality: Through Another Lens." *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 10, no. 2 (November 2017): 159-81.

²⁴ This is noted by Edward Wheeler who cited Owen D. Pelt and Ralph L. Smith in their book *The Story of the National Baptist*. The First Great Awakening continued to be promoted with the Baptists and the Methodists in the Southern states. As a result, it was this particular revival that solidified religion in the South.

²⁵ Chandler, "African American Spirituality," 166.

²⁶ There are some who are convinced that George Whitefield was not against slavery, but against the barbaric and inhumane conduct of slave masters toward their slaves, as an author noted, "By the mid-1740s, however, Whitefield became connected with slave master who had converted under his ministry. And though he never publicly retracted his criticisms of the institution, he complied with his wealthy friends offers to give him slaves and a South Carolina plantation. More importantly, Whitefield became convinced that he needed slaves to work at a Georgia plantation to fund the operations of his Bethesda orphanage, outside of

slavery. Another such leader of the Second Great Awakening was Charles Finney, who in his discourse connecting slavery to selfishness wrote,

No human constitution or enactment can, by any possibility be law, that recognizes the right of one human being to enslave another, in a since that implies selfishness on the part of the slaveholder. Selfishness is wrong per se. It is therefore always and unalterably wrong. No enactment, human or divine, can legalize selfishness and make it right, under any conceivable circumstances. Slavery, or any other evil, to be a crime, must imply selfishness. It must imply a violation of the command, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." It implies a breach of this, it is wrong invariably, and necessary, and no legislation, or anything else, can make it right.²⁷

In the colonies of the New World the Bible was a central part of life, and even within this culture the debate of slavery was beginning to take shape. This was due in part to the customs and laws that were in the colonies about how slaves who came to Christ were to be treated. This issue continued to be placed before the colonies' conscience with the advent of the First Great Awakening, exposing man's sin and the need for a Savior, with the Second Great Awakening continuing this tradition. This preaching, in effect, led to the humanitarian efforts against slavery, and at the forefront of this battle were the two denominations that would have a significant impact on black slaves: the Baptists and Wesleyans.

Slavery, Christianity, and the Civil War

The influence of the Scriptures continued to have an impact on the cultural perspective of slavery. Black and white pastors would preach to their congregants about the decency and dignity of human beings by defending that mankind is created in the image of God. As a

Savannah, which was the great charitable project of his career" (Thomas S. Kidd, "George Whitefield's Troubled Relationship to Race and Slavery," January 6, 2015, *Christian Century* Blog, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2015-01/george-whitefield-s-troubled-relationship-race-and-slavery>). This underscores that slavery, as a practice, was more about the societal custom among the early colonists in America at the time, than it was about superiority over another ethnicity.

²⁷ Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology: The Complete & Newly Expanded 1878 Edition* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994), 29.

result of this message, many churches in the North took stances against the practice of slavery, and many denominations took sides on this subject.²⁸ Additionally, denominations would train blacks with compelling qualities that led to, in effect, greater influence among black slaves. As one author noted,

The denomination that allowed Blacks to preach had an advantage in attracting Blacks. African slaves with exceptional speaking ability or exceptional leadership qualities found it easier to become exhorters or ministers among the Baptist than in other denominations, which usually required more formal training...Early in Black Baptist history, then, the role of the preacher took on special significance. He became the strong charismatic leader among an oppressed people, a center of power among the powerless²⁹

In the case of the Methodists concerning the antislavery movement, the Wesleyan Methodist Church was established in 1843 with the purpose of promoting members who did not own slaves. This was in opposition to the Methodist Episcopal Church, which promoted slavery and defended slave-owners in their congregations.³⁰

Hostile tensions grew between the North and the South, as the culture began to shift from the rural areas to industrialized places in the North. As a result many of the Methodist denominations began grow rapidly. Within the conflict of the Civil War there were many advocates of the abolitionist movement who were associated with the Methodist denomination, as Chandler observed when writing the following: "Harriet Tubman, an A.M.E. [i.e., African Methodist Episcopal] Zion member, helped slaves escape to free states in the North and transition to cities. The estimated 90,000 African Americans who initially escaped to the North were the first fruits of a massive migration to come."³¹

²⁸ It should be recognized that there were many missionary movements by black Americans that had developed due to the attitude change of slavery in the North. There were black churches established in the South, except most of them were overseen by white Southerners.

²⁹ Wheeler, "Beyond One Man," 311-12.

³⁰ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity through the Centuries: A History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 458.

³¹ Chandler, "African American Spirituality," 166.

The Baptists were also involved in inner conflicts within their denomination regarding slavery. Most Baptists went along with the culture of slavery. As Torbet noted,

The majority of the Baptists were cautious about the issue for three reasons: (1) their preference for unity whenever possible; (2) their hesitancy to violate the principle of non-interference in of the church in civil affairs; (3) the presence of slave holding members in their churches.³²

However, there were Baptist congregations and organizations developed for the movement of anti-slavery. Among them were the Hancock Association (1836), the Washington Association (1836), and the Freewill Baptist Anti-Slavery Society (1843), who were all involved in promoting abolition in the Union. Much like the Methodists who had divided over slavery, there were schisms within the Baptist denominations. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention was formed as a response to the Baptists in the Northern states and their response to anti-slavery.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, those denominations that sought to assist former black slaves and those who escaped from the South to the North in search of freedom saw large numbers of black Americans among their congregations. This was also partly due to the contribution of Baptists and Methodists who assisted to meet the basic needs of former slaves by providing them housing, work, and food.³³ Slavery, which had developed from indentured servitude, was now placed at the fore of the early Union. The Baptist and Wesleyan churches continued to remain at the center of this social debate, even dividing and creating sub-denominations over this very issue. However, even after the Civil War, the two major denominations, despite the various schisms that occurred due to their social work, continued to have a religious impact among former black slaves in both the North and the South.

³² Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, 300.

³³ Chandler, "African American Spirituality," 167.

The Interpretive Perspective of the Baptists and the Methodists

The Scripture during the time of the colonies and early America was extremely influential in common life.³⁴ As a result of the significant impact of the Scriptures, how the colonies and the early United States viewed the Bible had influenced the black slaves' explanation of the Scriptures. Historically, most Baptist congregations in the early colonies and the Union showed doctrinal fidelity to Covenant Theology, specifically outlined in various confessions. As one author explained, "The same use [of the confessions] of Scriptures became prevalent among American Baptists, for in 1742 the Philadelphia association adopted as its Declaration of Faith another Calvinistic Confession which had been drawn up by London Baptists in 1689."³⁵ In chapter 7 of the London Baptist Confession of Faith is a statement concerning the Covenant of Redemption, Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace.³⁶ To the Baptists, these covenants became the means by which they were convinced Scripture was to be understood.³⁷ As Baptists in the colonies during the First and Second Great Awakening, they had received many black slaves in their congregations, and as the slaves heard the sermons in their churches, they were exposed to this particular theological system.

Furthermore, this system also added to the overall cultural context of their function in society, as the black slaves directly related to the historical narrative of the slaves that were held in captivity in Egypt,³⁸

³⁴ This theological influence was observed in colonial law. For instance, in the Law of Massachusetts it is written that those who worship another god other than the Lord, a person was engaged in witchcraft, or blasphemed the Holy Spirit were offenses that were punishable by death. This is taken from the OT instruction given to Moses by the Lord to the nation of Israel (cf., Deut 13:1-5; 18:15-22).

³⁵ Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, 475.

³⁶ "1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith," *The Reformed Reader*, accessed August 14, 2019, <http://www.reformedreader.org/cc/1689lbc/english/Chapter07.htm>.

³⁷ Torbet, *History of the Baptists*, 476.

³⁸ Due to the Africans' and slaves' perspective in relating their struggles of slavery to the nation of Israel, it would not be too far to believe that they considered the black preacher of their time to be like a Moses figure, who was called by God to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt into the promised land and give them the truth about God directly.

as well as the ministry of Jesus Christ to the downtrodden and the slave. As Chandler commented,

Portions of Scripture, including the Gospels and the Exodus motif in the Old Testament where the Israelites awaited freedom from Egyptian bondage, deeply resonated with converted slaves. Additionally, the realization that Jesus came into the world to exalt the humble and that God was no respecter of persons contributed to the deepening faith through commonality, community, safety, and identity that would eventually lead to black congregations.³⁹

The Methodists adopted the *Articles of Religion* in 1794, which were taken from the thirty-nine articles that originated from the Church of England. Contained in the *Articles of Religion* were twenty-four statements that articulated the doctrine of the Methodist religion. In contrast to the London Baptist Confession of 1689, the *Articles of Religion* did not contain the explicit descriptions of Covenant Theology, nor did they include the distinction between Israel and the church, and there was no statement concerning eschatology.⁴⁰

This interpretive influence is seen in many of the black preachers and Negro spirituals of this time in history. For example in the song titled “Bound for Canaan Land” contains the following words:

³⁹ Chandler, “African American Spirituality,” 164.

⁴⁰ Even though John Wesley did not pen an official doctrine in the *Articles of Religion*, it is interesting to note his explanation of the view of Israel in regard to eschatology. In his interpretation of Revelation 12 concerning the image of the woman clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet and the crown of 12 stars on her head, he wrote, “A woman - The emblem of the church of Christ, as she is originally of Israel, though built and enlarged on all sides by the addition of heathen converts; and as she will hereafter appear, when all her ‘natural branches’ are again ‘grafted in.’ She is at present on earth; and yet, with regard to her union with Christ, may be said to be in heaven. . . .” Concerning Revelation chapter 12 he commented, “The whole of this chapter answers the state of the church from the ninth century to this time.” Even though this doctrinal subject is absent from this particular document, it would appear he conflated the program of Israel with the church. See John Wesley. “Bible Commentaries: Wesley’s Explanatory Notes, Revelation 12,” accessed August 14, 2019, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/wen/revelation-12.html>.

Where're you bound?
Bound for Canaan land
O, you must not lie
You must not steal
You must not take God's name in vain
I'm bound for Canaan land

Your horse is white, your garment is bright
You look like a man of war
Raise up your head with courage bold
For your race is almost run

How you know?
Jesus told me.

Although you see me going so
I'm bound for Canaan land
I have trials here below
I'm bound for Canaan land.⁴¹

Similarly the words to the song "Dry Bones" (aka "Dem Bones") spoke of Ezekiel and how the word of the Lord through Ezekiel made the dry bones in the valley come alive (Ezek 37:1-8). This song was used by black slaves to discuss the power of the word of God in the life of the church, rather than the future work of God to restore the nation of Israel (Ezek 37:11-14). This type of belief was also found in the black preachers of this time. One such preacher, John Jasper, in a sermon titled "De Sun Do Move," used the story of Joshua and the sun standing still to discuss the doubt a saint has about the Lord's word.⁴²

Additionally, this sermon by John Jasper did not distinguish between the works of Lord for Israel while they were in the promised land, spiritualizing this particular verse for the church. Most preachers in the country at this period in history, especially black preachers, were more concerned about the saving of souls from eternal damnation rather than the complete deliverance of the nation of Israel or the system of

⁴¹ "Bound for Canaan Land," *Negrospirituals.com*, accessed August 14, 2019, http://www.negrospirituals.com/songs/bound_for_canaan_land.htm.

⁴² John Jasper, "De Sun Do Move." Baptist History Homepage, accessed August 14, 2019, <http://baptisthistoryhomepage.com/jasper.sun.do.move.html>.

dispensationalism. Concerning early twentieth-century preacher, Dr. R. B. Roberts, one author noted,

For Roberts, the verses⁴³ in question were not so much a guidebook to future events (or even an explanation of past human events) but instead were a part of a comprehensive plan for salvation contained in scripture and plainly understood by those who read it. Reading with guidance was still a part of his mission, as likening the six steps to Solomon's throne to the stages of the life of Christ was not an obvious connection.... The exercise served as a means for the believer to understand the actions of required of him or her in order to gain eternal life and avoid eternal punishment.⁴⁴

The Bible was the centerpiece of colonial and early American life, and due to the extensive evangelistic work of the Baptists and the Wesleyans and their promotion of human decency and antislavery, this gave these two denominations great gains among black and free slaves in the North and the South. Due to the increase of blacks within these congregations, they had heard and believed the theological system of Covenant Theology, or an equivalent of the system that was found in their confession and creeds and were taught within their local churches.

Consequently, those who were black preachers had learned from their churches this particular doctrine, which was mainly soteriological in its scope. In addition, due to the early preaching to slaves, blacks identified with national Israel and connected the messages of freedom and grace in their songs and their preaching, connecting commonalities between their slavery and the OT nation. Additionally, the use of certain passages of Scripture, especially those of an eschatological nature, were used for evangelism. All of these factors possibly paved

⁴³ The "verses" the author notes in this paragraph is 2 Chronicles 9:17 in which Dr. R. B. Roberts outlays what he refers to as the "six steps" of the "throne of Solomon" foretelling of the ministry of Christ in his first advent, specifically his incarnation, baptism, temptation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Furthermore he connected this verse with the verses in Revelation 5:1-8 to show that Jesus is the faithful witness who redeemed all nations from their sin. The interpretive method used by R. B. Roberts and others further underscored the soteriological grid that was placed on the Scriptures for the purpose of evangelism and Christian piety.

⁴⁴ Mary Beth Swetnam Mathews, *Doctrine and Race: African American Evangelicals and Fundamentalism between the Wars* (Tuscaloosa, AL: U Alabama P, 2017), 78.

the way for the uncertainty and cynic attitude among black slaves and early black Americans to adopt dispensational thought.

Dispensationalism and the Suspicion of Black Americans

In the late nineteenth century there were a few theologians and Bible scholars who endorsed dispensational thought.⁴⁵ However the system was being instructed and taught more on a local church level rather than in academic institutions. It was not taught in higher education until John Nelson Darby came to America to promote dispensational thought among many denominations. During his time in the United States, he found an audience among the Brethren and some Presbyterian churches. However it was difficult for Darby to penetrate any other denominations due to their established traditions and theological beliefs. As Darby commented,

They are going on happily enough in the east, some added, but no great progress in numbers; in the west a good many Presbyterians, several ministers among them, teach the Lord's coming, the presence of the Holy Ghost, that all sects are wrong, but as yet few move from their place.⁴⁶

Darby was encouraged to observe Bible teachers instructing their congregations in proper doctrine concerning the second coming, and the indwelling ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Yet many congregations were dismissive of adopting dispensational thought as the way to read and explain Scripture. Black Baptist and Methodist churches agreed with their white counterparts in respect to the fundamental teachings of Scripture (i.e., the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ, the physical resurrection of Christ, and his second coming).⁴⁷ Yet when it

⁴⁵ Such dispensational Bible scholars included Arno Clemens Gaebelein (1861-1945), James Hall Brooks (1830-1897), and Henry Ironside (1878-1951).

⁴⁶ Quoted in Larry V. Crutchfield, *The Origins of Dispensationalism: The Darby Factor* (Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1992), 14.

⁴⁷ There are many that would include the supernatural works of Jesus as a fundamental. However this was ancillary point that supported all of the other fundamentals. Furthermore, due to the soteriological and hyper-ecclesiastical focus of people's interpretation at this particular time, the

came to dispensationalism, most Black churches, due to their hermeneutical perspective of the end times, and their position of an ethnic Israel observed the system as problematic. As Mathews noted,

While African American Protestants lined up with white fundamentalists on many common tenets, they did not voice dispensationalist notions with nearly the same frequency. In fact, these Baptist and Methodist writers, with a few notable exceptions, tended to read eschatological texts of apocalyptic passages and a reluctance to embrace John Nelson Darby's complex and often innovative system of reading for clues about the end of time.⁴⁸

Early black American Baptists and Methodists who maintained fidelity to their theological system (i.e., Covenant Theology) believed that Darby's way of reading Scripture, from their point of view, was inconsistent from the traditional way that Scripture had always been explained. Mathews comments,

... for African-American Baptists and Methodists between the wars, there was a single theological objection to dispensationalism—it was, in their opinion, a newfangled and contrived way of reading the Bible.... For them, a recent (within the last 50 years) method of interpreting Scripture that required alternative meanings beyond the traditional literal and allegorical was a wrong-headed practice.⁴⁹

This traditional and allegorical interpretive method could be observed within the writings of Eli George Biddle. He was an African American AME Zion preacher and writer for the *Star of Zion* who appeared to be intrigued by Darby's writings. However, upon further examination of later articles that Eli George Biddle wrote, he further distanced himself from the system and instead opted to come up with his own peculiar explanation concerning the nature of God in end time

miracles of Jesus were not highlighted, but more of how these miraculous works fit into the overall redemptive work of Christ for mankind.

⁴⁸ Mathews, *Doctrine and Race*, 76.

⁴⁹ Thomas Kidd, "African-American Christians and Fundamentalism," The Gospel Coalition, April 13, 2018, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/african-american-christians-and-fundamentalism/>.

events.⁵⁰ This method of explaining the Scriptures was common among Baptist and Wesleyan traditions concerning the worship and preaching in black churches, which often allowed for more expressive story in their worship services. As Edward Wheeler observed, “The evangelical emotionalism that allowed freedom of expression and characterized the Methodist and Baptist of this period no doubt bore a resemblance to the religious expression of West Africa and tribal religious practices.”⁵¹ Due to the specific hermeneutic of dispensational thought, this would not allow the allegorical method of interpreting the Scriptures to be employed, which also could have contributed to the skeptical attitude of black Americans toward dispensationalism.

Dispensationalism, in terms of being involved in the social movement of slavery in early America, was largely absent, leaving Reformed believers in Baptist and Methodist denominations to evangelize slaves, Africans, and early black Americans. Consequently, for slaves and black Americans who had lived in a community that had endorsed and reinforced this view, had been trained in Covenant Theology by confessions and creeds, and had been instructed due to the First and Second Great Awakening, the single focus of the Scriptures was primarily evangelistic. It is no wonder that they observed the dispensational interpretation of the Scriptures as obtuse.⁵²

⁵⁰ Biddle affirmed that the word of God was without error writing the following: “Both the written and the Living Word are imperishable ... absolutely reliable ... pure and chaste ... eternal” (quoted in Mathews, *Doctrine and Race*, 83). However, he also took interpretive license when he wrote that “with no racial prejudice, no intolerance, or unkindness, all peoples, with regard to race, color or creed, will live harmoniously together as children of God, brothers and sisters of one Father and mother” (ibid.). In fact in several other articles he penned, he stated that God was a mother.

⁵¹ Wheeler, “Beyond One Man,” 311.

⁵² It must be noted that in eschatological doctrine John Nelson Darby (and later on C. I. Scofield) promoted the future deliverance and the fulfillment of promises given to national Israel by God himself (e.g., land, seed, blessing, king, and kingdom), and to attribute the blessings of ethnic Israel with the church was a violation of Scriptures. One author comments, “Darby [believed] that to confuse the hopes of Israel and those of the church are extremely detrimental. If the spiritual condition and hopes of Israel are the same as the churches, they are disappointed in them for they have no fulfillment. If, on the other hand, their hopes are the churches hope, then our hopes have been lowered to temporal and Jewish earthly ones” (Crutchfield, *Origins*, 180). However, this author is convinced one of the main reasons

Conclusion

The skepticism of dispensationalism among black Americans can be traced back to the evangelization of the slaves in the colonies and early America. Baptists and Wesleyans intentionally sought to preach the gospel and promote humanitarian acts to this specific population, which led to a significant impact of black slaves joining the ranks of these two denominations. As a result, due to the Calvinistic influences and their perspective concerning the covenant of grace, the free and non-free blacks in the Baptist and Wesleyan congregations were instructed and trained in the early creeds and confessions that promoted Reformed thought among Baptists and Wesleyans. Additionally, this theological ideology was reinforced by the colonial laws and ordinances in the states in which they lived. Lastly, the Christological, soteriological, hyper-ecclesiastical hermeneutic, and evangelization foci were also solidified in the minds of free and black slaves and early black Americans in these congregations.

Subsequently, when John Nelson Darby appeared, the suspicion among blacks was high because dispensationalism was foreign to the system they had all been instructed in and taught previously within the culture. Simply put, the system of dispensationalism in terms of societal efforts and biblical impact was very late among the colonial and early American landscape. By the time dispensationalism gained influence within fundamental evangelicalism, the culture had already been through the American Revolution (1775-1783) and the Civil War (1861-1865), where both Baptist and Wesleyan denominations with Reformed backgrounds were heavily involved.

This lesson in history is a reminder for dispensational thinkers and scholars to be on the front lines of societal issues within our world. Dispensational thinkers and scholars must discuss injustices within the culture and societies from the consistent literal grammatical historical (CLGH) perspective, and to be personally involved and invested in the lives of human beings and fellow brothers and sisters from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds for their well-being (Gal 6:9). Additionally, our conduct should be grounded in the “one anothers” found within the New Testament.⁵³ These are the *oughts* that our Lord and Master has

black Americans found this risible was at the time there was no national Israel in Jerusalem.

⁵³ For example, the “one another” instructions found in the epistles of the apostles are the conduct by which the church would address the needs of the members of the body of Christ. All of these instructions of the Christians’ conduct are based on the reality that one has been born again (John 3:4-18)

given to the church so that believers may truly operate by their new identity in Christ and in their desire to love God and serve one another. Furthermore, dispensational thinkers must be invested in training those from other cultures in how to explain the Scriptures in light of the *sine qua nons*, and how this particular method of explanation is adequate to address all contentions found in the society. Then the black American Christian, or Christians of any culture in the future, may want to subscribe to and promote such a theological system.

Soli Deo Gloria!

and has been unified with all ethnicities that are assured that Christ has died for them and rose for their justification (cf. Eph 2:11-22).