

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 13

“The Christian Century”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was great optimism in some parts of Christendom that modern science, communication, deeper cultural understanding, and a global network of missionaries, as well as a more enlightened and tolerant Christendom had brought the world to the threshold of something revolutionary. One sign of this optimism is an American magazine founded in 1884 as the *Christian Oracle*. In 1900, flush with anticipation over what the coming 100 years would bring, it bravely renamed itself. It has been known ever since as the *Christian Century*.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: “All Hail the Power of Jesus’ Name”]

Episode 13. The Christian Century.

Doctrinal disputes within Christianity are nothing new. If you’ve listened to *The History of Rome* podcast or *The History of Byzantium* podcast, for instance, you know that there have been doctrinal disputes among Christians for as long as there have been Christians. You also know that doctrinal disputes don’t stay contained within the church. They tend to overflow and affect the broader course of history. For example, you can’t talk about the history of Byzantium without talking about monophysitism

Of course, you have to spend a lot of time straining your brain to understand what monophysitism is, and then strain even harder to grasp why such a subtle theological point meant so much to so many people that they would rent an empire over it. They did rent an empire over it. We have to understand the dispute in order to understand the history.

This is no less true in the twentieth century than it was in the sixth. The twentieth century doctrinal dispute that I want to examine today is the nature and authority of scripture. At the root, the reason why Christianity comes with so many doctrinal disputes is that the collection of Christian sacred writings, often referred to simply as the Bible, is a complicated set of texts that

have come down to us from different people at different times. They are parables and histories, poems, and law books, biographies, and sermons. What they are not is a methodical, comprehensive explanation of how the world works, who God is, who Jesus is, and what Christians are supposed to do about any of it. This is where the arguments start.

All the way back in 1517, when he first promulgated his 95 thesis and set the Protestant Reformation into motion, Martin Luther raised up scripture, the Christian Bible, as the highest church authority.

Luther's doctrine, *sola scriptura*, does not mean that scripture is the only authority, but it is the highest one. Protestantism ever since has advocated translation of Scripture into vernacular languages and study of Scripture by all believers, as a check against ecclesiastical error. Luther probably never imagined the degree to which over the centuries that followed Protestants would drill down into the biblical text to digging ever deeper, to find the real meaning.

It is probably not a coincidence that in the 19th and early twentieth century, when our story begins, the most serious scholarship of Christian scriptures going on in Luther's home country, Germany. What exactly does Scripture say? What is all this drilling down getting us? Any text is subject to multiple interpretations. If you don't believe me, ask any literature professor.

First, there's a problem of translation. People can disagree over the best way to translate Christian scriptures out of their original Hebrew and Greek and into modern languages. There's the problem of source, in the early days of Christianity, scripture texts were copied and recopied by hand by scribes.

Scribes are human beings and they make mistakes. Errors creep into the text. Many scribal errors are obvious and easy to correct. Others are more troubling. Some versions of the Gospel of Mark, for example, don't include a resurrection story. What are we supposed to make of that? What are we supposed to make of Biblical passages that contradict each other? The past 200 years have seen the age of enlightenment and the rise of the scientific method. The new intellectual tools that came out of that age were applied to the study of sacred texts. They were also applied to other ancient texts.

When we read a text from an ancient Greek or Roman author, for example, we study the language. We compare it to other texts from the same period. We ask ourselves whether the author is writing from firsthand knowledge or is copying or summarizing older manuscripts, perhaps available to that writer but not to us, we question the author's biases. We analyze the writing style for evidence of material that may have originally been written by an earlier author and incorporated into the text before us.

Then there was the science of the 19th century. Darwin's theory of evolution is one obvious and well-known example. How do we square this with the Creation story? How do we account for the fossil remains of dinosaurs when Scripture never mentions them? How do we account for the

geological evidence that the earth is far older than Scripture implies it is? Many other fields of scientific study pose similar problems, take archeology. British control of Egypt, for example, has brought about a golden age of Egyptian archeology, but the records of ancient Egypt don't have anything to say about an Exodus or the Nile running red as blood or the simultaneous death of every first born in Egypt, all on the same night. How did ancient Egyptian historians miss those little details?

At the beginning of the twentieth century, most Protestant biblical scholars are approaching these problems through what is called historical criticism. It is all the rage in academic circles, particularly in Germany. Biblical criticism doesn't literally mean criticizing the Bible. It means subjecting Scripture to rigorous and skeptical analysis. The same way one might read, say, Suetonius for his histories of the Roman emperors. We don't call Suetonius a liar, but we might ask ourselves if he had biases in favor of, or against this emperor or that one, and wonder if his text is trying to persuade us to adopt his line of thinking. When Suetonius makes a factual claim, particularly if it's something he's not seen firsthand, or if the claim is surprising or extreme, we might question how he knows that and whether we should accept his account.

Nineteenth century academics applied the same analytical techniques to scripture. Julius Wellhausen was a 19th century German biblical scholar whose careful study of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, led him to the view that, contrary to the traditional claim that these five books were authored by Moses, there was good textual evidence that they were a redaction, a synthesis of multiple older histories that had one time existed as independent documents and had been collated together into one narrative at a later date, probably during the Babylonian exile.

Similar analysis of the text of the four gospels in the Christian New Testament, give evidence that these writings too were stitched together from older sources.

Then there's the problem of miracles. Consider for instance, the Christian gospels and compare them to other Greco-Roman writings at the same period. Pagan authors also told stories of miraculous signs accompanying the birth of great men, of gods manifesting themselves as human beings or having children by human women, of great men who could heal incurable diseases with a touch or raise the dead, or who became gods themselves after they died.

We don't take these claims seriously when a pagan author makes them, should we accept them without question just because they come from a Christian author? There was practically a cottage industry in the 18th and 19th centuries of people rewriting the life of Jesus into a modern biography by incorporating details from all four gospels into a single narrative and writing everything supernatural out of the story, leaving Jesus as just a man who later became a legend. One writer who tried his hand at this was the third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, which is something to keep in mind the next time someone tells you that America's founding fathers were all Christians.

Is it possible to embrace all this new learning and remain a Christian? Well, of course it is, and many people did and still do. Much of this work was already accepted at the beginning of the twentieth century. Protestant clergy were becoming more professional and more academic, advanced degrees would increasingly be required as a prerequisite to ordination, and seminaries taught Scripture through the lens of historical criticism. Truth in Scripture was found in its moral and ethical claims, not in its literal statements about the physical world. You don't have to believe that the world was created in six literal 24-hour days, for example, to embrace the principle that the world is God's creation and God's gift to us. There was confidence within the established Protestant churches at the turn of the century that the faithful can face modernity without fear. This is what we might call modernism or liberal Christianity.

Now, these terms can be controversial and are sometimes used pejoratively, but I only mean them descriptively. This is the predominant theology of mainline Protestant churches at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this version of Christianity, the modern world is not something to be avoided or feared, but to be embraced. Modern learning doesn't challenge faith, it engages and deepens it. It is another way in which God speaks to us.

Likewise, in the Roman Catholic Church, Pope Leo XIII, who was Pope at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, gave qualified approval to the new critical methods. An approval that the future Popes would broaden as the century progressed. With regard to scientific questions, Pope Leo argued that Scripture is not intended to convey a scientific understanding of the world and should not be read that way, a position many Protestant theologians would agree with.

If you are an optimist, the modern world is an exciting place and the future full of hope. Modern inventions have made it possible for Christians to spread the Gospel around the world. In the final chapter of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus commands His followers to go and make disciples of all nations. For the first time in history, it now seems literally possible to fulfill the Great Commission. Does this mean we have reached the end of history?

Now, Christians have been predicting an imminent Second Coming ever since. Well, Jesus actually, or Paul at least. The conventional understanding of the Second Coming has been that the churches of the Kingdom of God on earth and Christians are stewards of the Kingdom until the King returns to reclaim it. In 1901, it was possible to believe that the coming 100 years might see the completion of the great commission and thus the return of the King. The Christian century indeed, if you are an optimist.

What if you aren't?

[music: "Blessed Assurance"]

In Oscar Wilde's 1895 play, *An Ideal Husband*, one of the characters asks another, "Are you an optimist or a pessimist? Those seem to be the only two fashionable religions left to us

nowadays.” It is at the beginning of the twentieth century, you can see it in the writings of the period, brink of a golden age or decadent decline of Western civilization. You can find people taking both positions.

What if you’re a Christian, but instead of seeing modern learning as God revealing Himself in new ways, you see it as a sinful fixation on the things of this world, rather than focusing on the next world as people used to back in the good old days? What if you see modern science as a gimmick to undermine faith? What if you see any departure from strict to biblical literalism as Satan’s plot to drive a wedge between God and His people? What if you think that the Second Coming is imminent, not because you believe the Church is on the threshold of fulfilling the Great Commission, but because you think the church has utterly failed? If it’s 1830 and you’re thinking all these things, then your name is probably John Nelson Darby.

John Nelson Darby was born in 1800 in London. In 1825 he was ordained in the Church of Ireland, which is to say the Anglican Church in Ireland, and served in a rural parish not far from Dublin. There, it has said that he made hundreds of converts from Catholicism to the Church of Ireland, but he ran into a problem when the Archbishop of Dublin ruled that an Irish Catholic could not convert to the Church of Ireland, unless he or she also swore allegiance to the King, then George IV, as the rightful King of Ireland. Darby couldn’t see a good theological reason for making the salvation of a soul contingent on a political oath, and make no mistake; Darby believed that all Catholics were going to Hell. He gave up his orders and left Anglicanism for good.

During the same time, Darby had become involved with a small group of like-minded people who met regularly in Dublin to take communion together and discuss theological issues. Out of these discussions came a group, which came to be known as the Plymouth Brethren, apparently because the operation moved from Dublin to Plymouth at some point. Out of this group came a new way of thinking about the church and the world.

Darby is often credited with this new way of thinking, although it seems more likely it was a group project. Either way, Darby became leader of the Plymouth Brethren, and a jealous leader who was apt to excommunicate people who dared to alter the group’s doctrines, even in a small way.

What were those doctrines? A principal one is called dispensationalism. What is dispensationalism? I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t take the time to answer that question in great detail. Honestly, I’d rather explain monophysitism. In brief, dispensationalism holds that God relates to humans under different sets of rules, or “dispensations,” at different times in history, and interprets Scripture through this framework. If you really must know more, you can check on the internet where you will find plenty of people eager to explain it to you.

Dispensationalism is only the tip of the iceberg. The doctrine of dispensationalism is interlocked with several other doctrines that together make up Darby’s new theology.

These include a hyper-literal reading of the Bible. The view that the world is thoroughly corrupt and that this includes all existing Christian churches, which have fallen so far away from what true Christianity is supposed to be that they can't honestly be called Christian anymore. The view that this corruption of the world is becoming so dire that God will shortly end it all with a series of wars and disasters culminating in the return of Christ Jesus, the Rapture. This is the view that the tiny remnant of people left in the world who are still real Christians, will be bodily taken up into Heaven before all this awful stuff happens because God loves them too much to force them to endure what everyone else is going to have to go through.

Who exactly are this tiny remnant? Darby and his followers, I suppose. Yes. Darby is a stone pessimist. It has been said that he saw the invention of the telegraph as an evil and a sign of the end times.

There are three aspects of Darby's doctrine that I do want to emphasize, because I think they're important. The first is, as I said, these are interlocking doctrines. As far as Darby and his followers are concerned, you can't read the Bible literally without becoming a dispensationalist. You can't be a dispensationalist without believing in the Rapture. You can't believe in the Rapture unless you are a literalist. You get the idea. Second, this is a new doctrine. The Christian church has been going on for 1,800 years now, and it's only now that these doctrines have emerged. Third, as far as Darby and his followers are concerned, this radically new doctrine is not a radically new doctrine. It is just basic Christianity. Darby and his followers don't like to be thought of as anything other than simply Christians.

They often describe themselves as non-denominational or non-sectarian. In their view, the differences between Catholics versus Lutherans versus Methodists versus Presbyterians are not in any way their concern. They're only interested in being Christians. However, they also believe that only people like them who accept the entire package of dispensationalism, rapture, literalism, and so on, are Christians. Now, how it can be that a certain subgroup within Christianity can on the one hand define themselves as the only true Christians and on the other hand, deny that they are in any way denominational or sectarian is a puzzle I can't quite work out. If you can figure it out, please let me know.

Over the next 50 years, Darby traveled widely and preached his new doctrines in many countries, including Britain, France, Switzerland, and Germany.

It is in the United States where his ideas really took root. There was a great religious revival going on in the United States in the second half of the 19th century. The Protestant churches, especially the Methodists, boomed. New churches, like the Christian Scientists, the Salvation Army, and the Jehovah's Witnesses, sprang up. This is the era of abolitionism, of temperance, and of the Young Men's Christian Association. Darby's ideas percolated through the evangelism of the time, notably in the preaching of revivalists like James Brooks and Dwight Moody.

I spoke earlier about biblical criticism and the new learning, and now I just told you about Darby's ideas. Now, a biblical literalist might object that although dispensationalism and the rapture and all that stuff might be new, biblical literalism has been the default position of the Church since ancient times. Now, this is true as far as it goes, but for most of the history of the Church, people took the Bible at face value, simply because there was no reason not to. It was only by the 16th or maybe 17th centuries that scientists and academics began to come forward with reasons to question the factual claims in the text. Until the late 19th century, these were largely academic debates, conducted in universities and seminaries. The ordinary people in the pews continued to take the Bible at face value, mostly because few of them were educated in those days. Even those who had gone to public school, learned reading, writing, and arithmetic, but not biology or geology or Egyptology, at least not until the late 19th century, when public education becomes more widespread and more and more people are reaching the high school and college levels.

We have a volatile mix by the late 19th century. Revivalism, scientific advancement, more educated laypeople. It's like a pile of kindling. Now, let me introduce you to the man with the match.

Cyrus Scofield was born in the United States in 1843 in what was then the Michigan Territory. The Scofields were descended from New England Puritans and attended a Congregationalist Church. Cyrus was the youngest of their seven children. In 1859 when Cyrus was 16 years old, his mother died. In February 1861, shortly after his father had remarried, the now 17-year-old Cyrus moved to Lebanon, Tennessee to live with his older sister and her husband, and to attend Cumberland University.

In May of that year, just three months after he arrived, young Cyrus apparently got caught up in secession fever and volunteered for the Confederate Army. He served in the 7th Tennessee Infantry. The 7th served under Stonewall Jackson, during the winter of 1861-62, which was a difficult time. That winter was cold and snowy and food was scarce.

In April 1862, Cyrus was hospitalized, apparently, a victim of the harsh conditions his unit had been forced to endure. Now, he had enlisted for just a year, and so he had every reason to expect that he would be discharged in a few weeks. April 1862 was when the Confederate Congress enacted conscription.

The men of the 7th Tennessee Infantry suddenly found they would be expected to serve for three more years. Cyrus petitioned the Confederate Secretary of War for a discharge on the basis that one, his health was poor, and two, he was not rightly speaking a citizen of the Confederacy. Cyrus did not get a response to his petition until the end of September. In the meantime, he returned to his unit and was present at the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862, just like future president William McKinley, albeit on the other side.

It's not clear whether Cyrus fought in the battle or served in some support capacity, given his poor health, but undeniably he was there. Private Scofield received his discharge a few days after the battle. The reason given in his discharge papers was that he lacked Confederate citizenship, but the discharge did not mention his health nor did it specifically exempt him from future conscription.

Unfortunately for Cyrus, he returned to Lebanon, Tennessee only to be conscripted again, just a few weeks later. He had had enough at that point, he fled Tennessee for Kentucky, got behind Union lines, and after swearing an oath of allegiance to the Union, was permitted to travel onto St. Louis where another one of his sisters lived. There, he met his first wife, Marie Leontine Serre, and they were married in 1866. Marie was French Catholic, but received a dispensation from her church to marry Cyrus.

They would have two daughters and a son, although the son would die at a young age. The daughters were raised Catholic. Scofield's brother-in-law was an attorney for the St. Louis City Registrar; with his help, Scofield became chief clerk in the land title office and began to study law. His big break came when his brother-in-law got him a lucrative appointment as an attorney in a land case in Kansas. Scofield and his family moved to Atchison in Kansas, where he successfully concluded the case, became involved in Republican politics, served two terms in the Kansas legislature, and was appointed United States Attorney for Kansas at the age of 29.

It was a remarkable rise, but it would be followed by a remarkable fall. Scofield resigned his position as United States Attorney just six months into his term, under a cloud of allegations of bribery and embezzlement of campaign funds that had led to him and his family fleeing Atchison to avoid prosecution. They returned to St. Louis where Scofield tried to resume his law practice, but he descended into confidence schemes and forgery, was caught, and served time in prison. One of Scofield's fraud victims was his own mother-in-law. His wife and his two daughters left him, returning to Atchison, Kansas where they would spend the rest of their lives. He would have very little contact with his family from then on.

Scofield would later attribute this crash in his life to a drinking problem. In 1879 at the age of 36, at the low point in his life, he had a Christian salvation experience; by some accounts in prison, by others at the St. Louis, YMCA. There he met James Brooks and later Dwight Moody. This is apparently where he picked up Darby's theology of dispensationalism and biblical literalism. He began to attend a Congregational church in St. Louis, apparently, his first time attending church since his childhood.

The following year, he obtained a preaching license from the Congregational Church and became a local pastor. As he began to become prominent again, the newspapers picked up on the story of his criminal past and his abandoned wife and daughters. When the Congregational Church found out about this, they revoked his preaching license. In 1882, Scofield moved to Dallas, Texas, where he had been offered a position as pastor of the tiny first Congregationalist Church of

Dallas. In 1883, his divorce was finalized, the denomination restored his preaching license, and he was able to take up the position. He remarried at about the same time and he would have a son with his second wife.

The First Congregationalist Church of Dallas only had about 14 members at this time. Remember that the Congregationalist church is a New England Puritan church, which Southerners of the day tended to associate with abolitionism and the Union and regard with a certain degree of hostility. Nevertheless, by all accounts, Scofield was hugely successful at the church. It garnered hundreds of new members in the next few years, and it still exists today and is known today as the Scofield Memorial Church.

Scofield's reputation grew. He began to write tracts on dispensationalism. Since none of the denominational seminaries of the time taught dispensationalism, Scofield and some of the other followers of Darby would organize Bible conferences to teach these new doctrines to clergy, and Scofield operated a Bible correspondence course. The movement was hostile to Catholicism, and it would've been scandalous if anyone had known that Scofield had two Catholic daughters, but he kept that fact as well as the fact of his failed first marriage a secret.

He also kept quiet about his disgrace as the US Attorney and his prison record. The fact that he had served in the Confederate Army during the civil war, stood him in good stead in Dallas. Scofield conveniently began to omit that he had petitioned for a discharge, deserted, and ultimately swore allegiance to the Union and instead began to claim that he had served with the 7th Infantry all the way to Appomattox. He would also claim falsely, he had been decorated for valor at Antietam.

It was about at this time that he began to claim a doctor of divinity degree, although there is no evidence that any institution ever awarded him one. Early in the twentieth century, Scofield began the work by which he is best remembered, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, originally published in 1909 by Oxford University Press. *The Scofield Reference Bible* is the text of the King James translation with cross-references and interpretive notes, by Scofield.

This book may have been the most revolutionary Christian writing since Luther and Calvin. It seems like a simple idea to put interpretive notes right on the same page as the text, but it had not been done in hundreds of years and it put all of Darby's sometimes obscure ideas in a clear logical form right there on the same page as the biblical texts that inspired them. Just as modern education was meaning more and more ordinary church people were coming face-to-face with the problem of reconciling Scripture to the modern world, here was Scofield with a quick and easy solution. Biblical literalism, bolstered by explanatory notes that speak with authority, never acknowledging that anything it says might be controversial, cross references that gloss over any inconsistencies in the text, and a dogged focus on the corruption of this world and the imminence of the Second Coming.

Scotfield's notes also carefully explain that Catholics are pagans, and the sons of Ham—in other words, people of color—are ordained by God to serve white people. While academics in the seminaries were debating the finer points of the historical critical method, the grassroots in the church were getting 200-proof Darbyism, including a warning that anyone who preached anything other than literalism, was not to be believed or trusted. Scotfield once preached that he would rather spend Sunday morning in a saloon than sitting in a church under the preaching of a modern higher critic. Strong words when you consider they're coming from a reformed alcoholic.

The *Scotfield Reference Bible* was a huge bestseller, and remains so to this day. It made Scotfield a wealthy man, although sad to say, none of that money ever found its way back to Atchison, Kansas to repay his fraud victims or to support his two daughters. Although Scotfield was thoughtful enough to send each of his Catholic daughters a copy of his *Reference Bible*, so they could read for themselves all about how the church they attended was the whore of Babylon.

Scotfield, along with Moody, Brooks, and other proponents of the new Christianity, would go on to establish schools to teach their theology: the Moody Bible Institute, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, the Philadelphia College of the Bible. What to call this new movement? Well, they like to call themselves simply Christians, but we need a way to distinguish them from traditional Christianity.

From 1910 to 1915, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles published a set of 90 essays on the new theology, which were distributed free of charge to clergy, missionaries, and religious workers across the United States at the expense of Lyman Stewart, then the president of the Union Oil Company. Later, these essays would be collected into a 12-volume compilation, entitled, *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*. By 1920, the title of this work will have given the movement a name: fundamentalism. It would grow and prosper in the United States in the twentieth century and come to have tremendous political influence.

We'll have to stop there for today. While I promised you a break from war and killing, and now you've had it, but at the dawn of the twentieth century, there were three wars in progress. We've already discussed America's war in the Philippines and the Boer War, but we have one more to go. I hope you join me next week for the *History of the twentieth Century*, as we visit China at the turn of the century and examine the Boxer Uprising. The Boxer Uprising was triggered in part by Christian missionary work in China, and it would change the balance of power in East Asia, accelerating coming confrontation between Japan and Russia, and ultimately, the Great War. That's next week on the *History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. The first Mrs. Scotfield spent the rest of her life in Atchison, Kansas. In 1883, the Atchison Public Library was founded and Mrs. Scotfield became its first librarian, a position she held until she retired in 1916. In 1989, Joseph Canfield would publish a biography of Cyrus Scotfield and offered a copy of the work as a gift to the Atchison Public Library.

Although more than 100 years had passed since Cyrus Scofield had left town, the library refused the gift, replying that, “I don’t think we need his biography. Many Atchison citizens remember what a rascal he was.”

[music: “It Is Well with My Soul”]

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