

## The Doxological Focus of Dispensationalism: The Example of Arno C. Gaebelein<sup>1</sup>

Arno C. Gaebelein was a leading fundamental, dispensational Bible teacher in the early half of the twentieth century. He served as one of the associate editors of the Scofield Reference Bible and left us thousands of pages of material in his writings. The theological content of these many writings emphasized three things: inspiration of the Bible, the centrality of Christ at a personal level, and eschatological issues. It is fairly easy to determine a precise statement of the central interpretive motif or integrating idea in Gaebelein's thought. Bible inspiration can be ruled out simply because it does not integrate the content of Gaebelein's theology although it does provide a hermeneutical basis. The centrality of Christ is clearly stated. However, the sheer weight of discussion of eschatology, with its various focuses, speaks as forcefully as many direct statements. Nonetheless, it is possible to merge the theological statements about the centrality of Christ with eschatology to produce one statement clarifying the integrating theme of Gaebelein's theology. This can be done through the concept of *prophetic hope* which finds its fulfillment in the Second Coming of Christ. Thus, the central interpretive motif of Gaebelein's theological formulations can be stated as **prophetic hope centered in the personal Second Coming of Jesus Christ**. That this theme truly integrates Gaebelein's theological system will be seen by an examination of the individual and multiple expressions of prophetic hope which he outlined. However, it may be possible to see in these expressions, taken as a whole, the idea of a multi-faceted program of creation and redemption centered in Christ and leading to the glory of God. That is, unity from diversity can be seen in the light of this doxological purpose to biblical history as the greatness of our sovereign God is displayed.

### The Outline of Biblical Revelation

It is clear that Gaebelein emphasized the theme of redemption with respect to the multi-faceted program of God which he saw outlined in the Bible. The scheme begins in the Old Testament with the presentation of the four great subjects of revelation. It culminates in the New Testament with the outworking of redemption with respect to each of these subjects. Gaebelein saw this biblical outline of revelation in the plan of redemption as yielding proof for the doctrine of premillennialism.

There is one more line of Scripture proof we would suggest. The Bible presents four great lines of revelation in the outworking of the divine purpose of redemption, viz.: *Creation*; the *Gentiles* or nations; *Israel*; the *Church*. This is the Old Testament order in its historical unfolding. The New Testament reverses the order and presents first the calling and destiny of the Church; then follows the restoration of the kingdom to Israel under the sway of Messiah's sceptre on David's throne; next the calling of the Gentiles or nations, and last the deliverance of

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<sup>1</sup> This paper has been modified slightly from an earlier publication by the author, Mike Stallard, "Prophetic Hope in the Writings of Arno C. Gaebelein: A Possible Demonstration of the Doxological Purpose of Biblical History," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 2 (Fall 1998): 190-210. It was first presented at the Pre-Trib Study Group in December 1997 with the same title.

creation from the bondage of corruption. Acts xv:13-18, gives the divine order of events. Each of these lines runs its predicted course of mingled imperfection and pain and suffering until the time of consummation – “the dispensation of the fulness of times” – at the second coming of Him in whom “all things” shall head up (Ephes. i:10). There is no peace, no rest from suffering, no glory for any of these four great subjects of revelation till Christ comes again in power and great glory.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, in spite of this multi-track outline of what Gaebelein believed God was doing, he did not see this as devoid of unity. While discussing the inherent problems with postmillennialism, he remarked that

Its [postmillennialism’s] serious mistake is, that it confounds the accommodation and application of Scripture with the true interpretation, which in Bible study must have always the first place. Delitzsch well said, “Application is not interpretation. Application is manifold; interpretation is the very opposite, it is unitous. By the method of application the promises made to Israel are evaporated; in true interpretation Israel is given its rightful place in the purposes of God.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Gaebelein believed that unity existed as each of the four great subjects of revelation were allowed to have its rightful, yet distinctive, place within the panorama of God’s multi-faceted purposes. This is not far from saying that Gaebelein believed that the sovereign plan of God could not be understood or God given His due, until this valid interpretation was acknowledged.

## The Expressions of Prophetic Hope

There are five major ways in which Gaebelein discussed the idea of *prophetic hope*. The method of presentation will adhere to the chronological order in which each element of hope is realized in his dispensational scheme flowing primarily from New Testament realization. One must always keep in mind that, in each case, this hope can only be fully realized when Jesus comes again.

## The Hopelessness of the Present Age

The first area, while not technically a matter of positive hope, serves as an introduction to the four manifestations of hope which Gaebelein believed would take place in the future. The fact that hope exists implies that in the present there must be conditions which need to be changed. For Gaebelein, the present church age was characterized by such an unwanted environment.

In a series of five books beginning in the turbulent times of the 1930s, Gaebelein outlined for his readers a dark picture for the world. In *Conflict of the Ages* (1933), he portrayed the historic development of the mystery of lawlessness which was, in his mind, close to pushing the world to the precipice. His work, *World Prospects* (1934), held out final hope for Israel, the Gentiles, and the church, but not until a time of great darkness and difficulty.

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<sup>2</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *Meat in Due Season: Sermons, Discourses and Expositions of the Word of Prophecy* (New York: Arno C. Gaebelein, Inc., n.d.), 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 36. It is not clear in Gaebelein’s quote of Delitzsch where the comments of Delitzsch end and Gaebelein’s pick up again.

Over half of the pages in the next book of the sequence, *Hopeless, Yet There is Hope* (1935), were devoted to a description of the bleak condition of the Twentieth Century due to war, financial chaos, and the rise of communism. *As It Was—So Shall it Be* (1937) compared the time before Noah's Flood to the present hour. Finally, the optimistic book, *The Hope of the Ages* (1938), described the present absence of kingdom-hope and noted that only by the Second Coming of Christ can this void be filled with lasting hope. A small booklet, *What Will Become of Europe* (1940), during the beginning days of World War II, observed that "there is no nation which does not tremble."<sup>4</sup> All that appeared from a human perspective on the horizon was darkness, distress, and destruction.<sup>5</sup>

For Gaebelein, the problem with the human race could always be identified with the existence of sin.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, two major areas of concern are emphasized. First, the present age is characterized by an increasing persecution of the Jews. After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 and the subsequent scattering of the Jews throughout the nations, Gaebelein observed that "the fires of persecution burned fiercely in almost every century."<sup>7</sup> This persecution would culminate one day in the Great Tribulation or time of Jacob's trouble when the nation would go through its darkest hour.<sup>8</sup>

The second major characteristic of the present age was the increasing moral and religious declension.

Morally the world sinks lower and lower. Christendom is turning more and more away from the supernatural, the foundation of true Christianity, turning from the spiritual to the material, giving up the message of power for social improvements . . . The faith as revealed in God's infallible Book is abandoned; apostasy is seen everywhere. World conversion, the world accepting Christianity? What mockery! The nations of the world were never as far away from accepting Christ as Saviour and recognize Him as Lord as in 1938.<sup>9</sup>

Both apostasy within Christendom, associated with moral decline, and the persecution of the Jews were understood by Gaebelein as a fulfillment of prophecy. Both called for a cry of hope, the former from the genuine Christian and the latter from the Jewish people. The divine line of revelation, for Gaebelein, began with creation, continued with God's work with the nations, took a turn with God's choosing of Israel, and culminated in the highest revelation of the church.<sup>10</sup> The fulfillment of hope for each takes place progressively in reverse order so that the first manifestation of hope is found in the church.

## The Blessed Hope and the Rapture of the Church

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<sup>4</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *What Will Become of Europe? World Darkness and Divine Light* (New York: Our Hope Publications, 1940), 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>6</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Conflict of the Ages, the Mystery of Lawlessness: Its Origin, Historic Development and Coming Defeat* (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1933), 23

<sup>7</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *World Prospects, How is it All Going to End? A Study in Sacred Prophecy and Present Day World Conditions* (New York: Publication Office, "Our Hope," 1934), 46

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-59. Gaebelein seems to use the expression "Great Tribulation" to refer to the entire seven year period of Daniel's Seventy Weeks. Many pretribulationists would be uncomfortable with this, preferring to see the Great Tribulation as referring to the last three and one half years of that period based upon Jesus' statement in Matt. 24:21. It may be that Gaebelein is simply being non-technical with his usage.

<sup>9</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Hope of the Ages* (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1938), 170-71. One wonders what Gaebelein's analysis would have been had he seen the fifty or so years since he made that statement.

<sup>10</sup> Gaebelein, *Meat in Due Season*, 19-23.

Gaebelein believed strongly that the first manifestation in history of the fulfillment of prophetic hope would be the rapture of the church. This was the “blessed hope” of Titus 2:13 which was to be looked for expectantly by true Christians. It was a common topic in the pages of Gaebelein’s magazine, *Our Hope*, especially the aspect of pretribulational timing, with more outside writers invited to address it than perhaps any other single issue.<sup>11</sup> This hope was the catching up of New Testament believers to be with Christ. It included both those who had died in Christ and believers alive at the moment of the rapture. One aspect of the rapture which often received attention was its imminency. Gaebelein defined imminency with these words:

Now the word ‘imminency’ or ‘imminent’ means that an event is impending, the matter in question is liable to occur at any moment. When we speak of the imminency of the coming of the Lord we understand by it that the Lord may come at any moment. This is the meaning of imminent.<sup>12</sup>

In light of the fact that Jesus could come for the church at any moment, no signs were expected to herald His coming in advance.<sup>13</sup> The significance of this doctrine for Gaebelein is clear when he warned that to do away with it was to rob the rapture of its “glory and power.”<sup>14</sup>

The second aspect of the rapture of the church is its pretribulational timing. Another way of describing this doctrine is to note that the church would not go through the Great Tribulation. The coming of Christ in the air to receive the church is a separate event from His coming to the earth to set up His kingdom seven years later. Gaebelein gave several reasons for his view with the discussions at times being extremely tedious. However, the following arguments appear to be the major support for a pretribulational rapture as taught by Gaebelein. First, he argued that the rapture had to come before the start of the Great Tribulation because the coming of the Lord for the church was imminent.<sup>15</sup> Second, there were exegetical reasons for pretribulationalism. In 1 Thess. 5:9 (“For God hath not appointed us to wrath but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ”), there is a promise from God that church believers will not suffer the wrath of God during the Great Tribulation. The context of the book

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<sup>11</sup> Some examples would be Arno C. Gaebelein, “Opening Address,” *Our Hope* 8 (September 1901): 93-96; “Notes on Prophecy and the Jews,” *Our Hope* 8 (November 1901): 294-95; “The Patient Waiting for Christ,” *Our Hope* 8 (January 1902): 345-46; “Editorial Notes,” *Our Hope* 8 (February 1902): 394-95; “Who Will Be Caught Up When the Lord Comes,” *Our Hope* 8 (February 1902): 408-17; “Editorial Notes,” *Our Hope* 9 (August 1902): 116-21; “Editorial Notes,” *Our Hope* 9 (October 1902): 225-27; “Will There be a Partial Rapture?” *Our Hope* 44 (August 1937): 100-4; John Nelson Darby, “What Saints Will Be in the Tribulation?” *Our Hope* 8 (May 1902): 597-605; Charles Campbell, “The Interval Between the Lord’s Coming For Us, and His Coming With Us,” *Our Hope* 9 (August 1902): 81-92; G. L. Alrich, “The Imminency of the Coming of Our Lord Jesus,” *Our Hope* 9 (August 1902): 167-74; and I. M. Haldeman, “The Two Distinct Stages of the Coming of the Lord,” *Our Hope* 9 (January 1903): 418-19. Many others can be cited. Most of the articles here appeared during the height of the controversy with Robert Cameron which helped to end the Niagara Bible Conference movement.

<sup>12</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, “Editorial Notes,” *Our Hope* 9 (October 1902): 225. See also Arno C. Gaebelein, “Editorial Notes,” *Our Hope* 39 (August 1932): 76-77.

<sup>13</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, “Notes on Prophecy and the Jews,” *Our Hope* 8 (November 1901): 295.

<sup>14</sup> Gaebelein, “The Patient Waiting for Christ,” 345. See also Gaebelein, “Opening Address,” 96.

<sup>15</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, “The Attempted Revival of an Unscriptural Theory,” *Our Hope* 41 (July 1934): 24-25. This argument stems from an understanding that watching for the coming of Christ, as Scripture exhorts, would be meaning-less without imminency. Gaebelein commented: “Looking for that blessed Hope [Titus 2:13] can mean only one thing, that daily we should look for Him and for His promised coming, not for death, but for Himself. But how is this daily looking possible if He cannot come at any moment?” (24).

indicated to Gaebelein that the start of the day of the Lord or tribulation period is in mind.<sup>16</sup> Another passage (Rev. 3:10) promised that the church would be kept from the “hour of temptation” which was interpreted to be the Great Tribulation of the latter days.<sup>17</sup>

Third, the most frequent argument used by Gaebelein in the rapture debate was the fact that the Great Tribulation or time of Jacob’s trouble, was exactly that, a period designated for Jacob’s offspring, the Jews. Here the absolute distinction between Israel and the church prohibits the involvement of the church in a Jewish event. Gaebelein, in a representative remark, noted:

All passages which have to do with the great tribulation prove that it is Israel’s time of sorrow (Jer. xxx; Mark xiii:14-22; Rev. vii:1-14; Dan. xii:1; Matt. xxiv). “Jacob’s trouble,” not the Church’s trouble. Christ saved us from wrath to come and will deliver us from that hour of trial that shall try them that dwell on the earth. When this takes place the Church will be far above the storm (John iii:36; 1 Thess. v:9; Rev. iii:10).<sup>18</sup>

The third aspect of the rapture of the church was found in the blessings which constituted the realization of the hope. First, the blessed hope pointed toward the resurrection of all saints who have died and the glorification of the bodies of those saints alive at the time of the rapture.<sup>19</sup> Second, the church will receive rewards at the judgment seat of Christ in heaven during the earthly Great Tribulation.<sup>20</sup> Third, the church saints will become rulers with Christ during the millennial kingdom. While living in heaven, they will be priests and kings who will reign and judge the world and angels.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the blessed hope of the rapture of the church is summed up in the encompassing truth that “the Church’s glorious prospect is the eternal fellowship with the Son of God.”<sup>22</sup>

## The Hope of the National Restoration of Israel

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<sup>16</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (New York: Our Hope Publications, n.d.), 116-19. For a more recent approach with similar argumentation, see Zane C. Hodges, “The Rapture in 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 67-79.

<sup>17</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Return of the Lord* (New York: Publication Office “Our Hope,” 1925), 101. For perhaps the best description of how this passage plays a role in the rapture debate, see W. Robert Cook, *The Theology of John* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 168-72. The exegetical arguments of Gaebelein with respect to 1 Thessalonians 5 and Rev. 3:10 appear to be the strongest and are based, in large measure, on grammatical-historical interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, “The True Church: Its Translation Before the End,” *Our Hope* 38 (September 1931): 184. See also “Editorial Notes,” *Our Hope* 39 (August 1932): 78. This method of arguing is a use of a dispensational-theological hermeneutic. The distinction between Israel and the church becomes the switch which helps to determine an interpretation. There are two problems (although they can be overcome) with using this argument which Gaebelein was not careful to address. First, as seen earlier, he included the Old Testament saints in the rapture of the church. An alert nondispensationalist might ask if the heavenly people can be mixed, what keeps the earthly people from being mixed in the tribulation? That is one reason that contemporary dispensationalists have come to view the resurrection of Old Testament saints at the end of the tribulation. Second, Gaebelein included the Gentiles in the tribulation (Revelation, 59). Since distinctions between Israel and the nations are made, why not between Israel and the church? This shows that the particular distinction between Israel and the church had priority for Gaebelein over all other distinctions.

<sup>19</sup> Gaebelein, “True Church,” 184-85.

<sup>20</sup> Gaebelein, “Unscriptural Theory,” 24. This aspect of the blessed hope was considered by Gaebelein the greatest incentive for holy living (*Return*, 118).

<sup>21</sup> Gaebelein, *Return*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Gaebelein, *World Prospects*, 166.

It can readily be observed that Gaebelein's use of literal interpretation concentrated often on that portion of the Scriptures which prophesied the national restoration of Israel in the millennium. This literal promise provided hope for the nation, a hope that was a living hope.<sup>23</sup> One of the greatest evidences of that hope was the desire, stated during Passover ceremonies, to be in Jerusalem the next year. "And this has been going on generation after generation, century after century, during the darkest ages, during the times when satanic powers attempted their complete extermination. 'This year here—next year in Jerusalem.' The Jewish Hope is a never dying Hope. Israel is the nation of Hope."<sup>24</sup> In addition, this hope was not known by other nations.<sup>25</sup>

According to Gaebelein, the basis for this national hope was clearly outlined in prophetic Scripture: "The foundations of the Hope of Israel, that never dying Hope, are the two promises; the promise of the Messiah and the promise of the land in the dimensions as given in the [Abrahamic] covenant."<sup>26</sup> In this way, the future restoration of Israel is tied to the coming of Messiah, which from a Christian perspective, meant the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Although the focus of this hope is on the unique relationship between God and the Jewish people, it is also the basis of hope for other nations. Gaebelein observed:

And the people Israel have been thus preserved because the other great promise of Hope and Glory, the promise of the land, their national restoration, spiritual regeneration, and the promise of future blessing to "all the families of the earth" will have to be fulfilled. Such is Israel's Hope, and, when it is reached, it will mean *the Hope* and *blessing* for all the world.<sup>27</sup>

The realization of the national restoration of Israel with its overflowing blessings upon other nations awaits fulfillment when Jesus, Israel's Messiah comes again.

## The Hope of the Nations

Hope for the nations of the world was seen above as a side effect of the restoration of Israel. Gaebelein outlined the history of God's dealings with the Gentile nations beginning with Israel's own apostasy and resultant judgment via the Babylonian captivity.<sup>28</sup> The setting aside of "Israel as a nation in government and dominion" started with Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>29</sup> The book of Daniel yields the prophetic account of the history of the dominion of the Gentiles during a period known as the times of the Gentiles.<sup>30</sup>

However, this period of Gentile supremacy was only temporary. Again, following closely the prophecies in Daniel (especially chapters two and seven), Gaebelein noted the future defeat of Gentile domination culminating in the setting up of the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>31</sup> This was preceded by the seven-year time of Jacob's trouble which also included the wrath of God poured out on Gentiles.

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<sup>23</sup> Gaebelein, *Hopeless*, 156.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> Gaebelein, *World Prospects*, 101-8.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 124-42.

However, during this time many Gentiles will come to know the Lord, mainly due to the witness of the Jewish remnant which also follows Him.<sup>32</sup> However, this is not the great hope of the Gentiles. At the coming of Christ at the end of the tribulation, the conversion of the world will take place.

But there are other nations; though missionaries went and brought them the message of salvation, as nations they were hardly touched by the Gospel. Millions upon millions never heard it. Humanly speaking, as conditions are today they would never hear that Gospel of Grace. There is not the remotest chance of the conversion of these great nations of Asia, Africa and other parts of the world.

Now these nations, such as China, Japan and the millions of India and the millions living in Africa, will heed this Gospel of the Kingdom, they believe, and then turning away from their idols and their false system will learn righteousness. The great revival comes to the unevangelized masses of the heathen world. Out of them comes the great multitude; though they suffer in the great tribulation, they come out of it victoriously and enter as saved nations the earthly Kingdom of our Lord.<sup>33</sup>

Gaebelein associated this conversion with the judgment of the nations found in his interpretation of Matt. 25:31.<sup>34</sup> As with the national hope of Israel, the ultimate realization of this hope of the nations occurs when Jesus returns to earth.

## The Hope for Renewal of Creation

Gaebelein marveled at the wonder of God's creation. However, the existence of sin in the universe led to another less beautiful facet of nature.

What about the other side? Cyclones and tornadoes sweep over God's fair creation, working a terrible destruction. Earthquakes devastate many regions of different continents; volcanoes emit their streams of hot lava inflicting sufferings on man, beast, and vegetation. There are droughts and dust storms which turn the most fruitful lands into a hopeless wilderness. Ferocious animals attack man, poisonous snakes and insects claim many thousands of human victims . . . There is a terrible blight upon all creation. Did a kind and loving Creator create such things for His own pleasure and glory?<sup>35</sup>

As in the case of the church, Israel, and the nations, only the intervention of God could correct the situation and give cause for hope.

Gaebelein expected a reversal of the fortunes of creation in a literal fashion. Two key passages were Isa. 11:6-9 and Rom. 8:19-22. The first passage predicted a time when wolves would dwell in peace with sheep and, among other changes, children would be able to play with and around what used to be dangerous animals. Gaebelein's literal interpretation is indicated by his rhetorical question:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 153-54.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>35</sup> Gaebelein, *Hope of the Ages*, 68.

“Who authorizes the expositor to say that these words have not a literal meaning but they must be understood allegorically and given a spiritual interpretation.”<sup>36</sup>

Gaebelein believed that “the hope of Creation” was evinced in the second passage (Rom. 8:19-22). There, the Pauline picture is one of the entire creation groaning and longing for the day when the sons of God (believers) will be manifested.<sup>37</sup> The theme of hope dominates the context of this passage and takes in not only creation, but the church (Romans 8) and the hope of Israel and the Gentiles (Romans 9-11).

When will the hope of a renewed creation be realized? In the context of a commentary on the crown of thorns, Gaebelein highlighted the answer.

That crown of thorns is emblematic of creation’s curse. Not science with its inventions and discoveries can arrest or even ameliorate the curse of sin. Only One can remove it. He is Creation’s Lord who paid the price of redemption and whose redemption power can alone deliver groaning creation. But it will never come till He comes again, no longer wearing the crown of mockery, but crowned with many diadems.<sup>38</sup>

Renewal of creation will then be the last hope to come to fruition when Jesus comes again.

## Significance for the Doxological Purpose of Biblical History

In *Dispensationalism Today* (1965), one of the most important books on dispensationalism written in this century, Charles Ryrie taught us that there were three essential principles which mark off a dispensationalist from a nondispensationalist.<sup>39</sup> The **first** in his presentation was a distinction between Israel and the Church. The **second**, which formed the basis for the first, was consistent literal interpretation. Prophetic portions of the Bible should be interpreted using grammatical-historical interpretation just like historical and other sections of the Bible should be viewed. The **third** essential principle was what we are referring to here as the *doxological purpose of biblical history*. Ryrie said it this way:

A third aspect of the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism . . . concerns the underlying purpose of God in the world. The covenant theologian in practice makes this purpose salvation, and the dispensationalist says the purpose is broader than that, namely, the glory of God. To the dispensationalist the soteriological or saving program of God is not the only program but one means God is using in the total program of glorifying Himself. Scripture is not man-centered as though salvation were the main theme, but it is God-centered because His glory is the center.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 69. This literalism with respect to the restoration of creation is also evident in passages such as Zech. 14:1-4. There the topographical changes in the Mount of Olives are taken literally in Gaebelein’s exposition (Studies in Zechariah, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. [New York: Publication Office “Our Hope,” 1911]), 140-46. However, he is not consistent throughout the passage. Later in verse eight, living waters flow out of Jerusalem into the Mediterranean and Dead Seas (149-50). The association is made with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit as mentioned in the description of John 7:38-39.

<sup>37</sup> Gaebelein, *Hope of the Ages*, 69-71.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 43-47.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 46.



Ryrie expanded this thought in a later chapter in which he answers the charge from covenant theologians that dispensationalists had no unifying principle to their theological system. In fact, in the thinking of covenant theologians, dispensationalism could be compared to higher criticism's parceling out of the Bible into different unrelated sections.<sup>41</sup> These covenantalists saw individual redemption as the unifying principle of the Bible. Ryrie noted that many of these nondispensationalists acknowledged the glory of God as the ultimate theme, but in practice that theme was addressed only from a soteriological, rather than a fully doxological vantage point.<sup>42</sup>

This third essential principle of dispensationalism has largely been ignored for several years by both covenant and dispensational theologians. One such recent and thoughtful dismissal of Ryrie's third point was worded this way by Craig Blaising:

It would be difficult to identify this perspective as a particularly distinctive feature of earlier dispensationalism. Most evangelicals, especially among the Reformed, would have agreed on the comprehensive doxological purpose of God. Ryrie's insistence on this point can be seen as a calculated response to covenantalist criticisms that dispensationalism (Scofieldism) divides up the salvific unity of the Bible. Ryrie distinguishes dispensationalism from covenantalism as the difference between a doxological versus a soteriological perspective. The fundamental issue was whether or not the divine purpose is broader than the salvation of individual souls and the spiritual communion of the church. The proposed doxological unity was supposed to embrace these broader purposes, which include Israel's national and political future. But in spite of its categorical breadth, divine self-glorification does not seem particularly useful for explaining changes within history. At Niagara, the unity of the dispensations was found in the person and history of Jesus Christ. Scofield saw history in terms of human failure, a notion that Ryrie dismisses as secondary and inappropriately anthropocentric. Other dispensationalists used salvation and redemption as integrating themes but defined them to include national and political salvation and even the redemption of the entire creation.<sup>43</sup>

The last couple of years this writer has revisited this issue and has come away with the conviction that there is a core of truth to Ryrie's observation, although much remains to be said in this area. In fact, there are several questions that could be raised with respect to Blaising's response to Ryrie in the above quote.

First, Blaising has acknowledged that the covenantalists have in their approach often emphasized the glory of God. However, we showed that Ryrie had done the same pointing to Hodge's and Shedd's theologies.<sup>44</sup> What Ryrie has noted is that the *practice* of covenant theologians yields the conclusion, not their statements: "But covenant theology makes *the means* of manifesting the glory of God the plan of redemption. Thus, *for all practical purposes*, covenant theology uses redemption as its unifying principle."<sup>45</sup> Appeals to certain statements affirming that one's theology is unified by the theme of God's glory may simply not be sufficient on either side. For example, it is clear that Gaebelein's statements focus on the word **redemption** but his overall outline leaves open the possibility of a broader interpretation.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 98-105.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 103-04.

<sup>43</sup> Craig Blaising, "Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition," in *Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 27. See also Craig Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (1988): 267-69.

<sup>44</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 104.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Second, it seems that Ryrie may not merely be responding to charges that dispensationalism has divided up the salvific plan of God and destroyed biblical unity. Such attacks upon dispensationalists have taken many forms and a response to them is certainly part of what has happened historically.<sup>46</sup> However, what may lie behind the statements of Ryrie and other dispensationalists who are in agreement with him is, in fact, a reaction to the false theology flowing from the theological covenants which govern covenant theology.<sup>47</sup> The covenant of works and the covenant of grace are theological constructs which govern all of biblical history for the covenant theologian. Especially, the covenant of grace, which has been operative since the Fall in Gen. 3, provides a kind of unifying program based upon individual election. It is this focus on individual election that does not really fit the emphasis of Old Testament biblical history with its focus on national and community promises. Consequently, the covenant theologian is uncomfortable in that domain and his reading of the Old Testament text is colored by his reading of the New Testament where he does feel comfortable with his focus on individual election.<sup>48</sup> The dispensationalist is not necessarily denying individual election. He is rejecting the idea of making it the central interpretive motif for the entire Bible. It is this rejection that may be at the heart of Ryrie's third point in the essentials of dispensationalism.<sup>49</sup>

Further, it is possible to see the doxological purpose to biblical history as a corollary to the distinction between Israel and the Church. Although the multi-track approach to biblical history as cited in Gaebelein's five-fold presentation above is clear, the primary distinction in the list is that between Israel and the Church. Simply put, the dispensationalist is open to the diversity which the biblical text yields because of his belief in a great sovereign God who can coordinate multiple tracks in His will and way. By implication the covenant theologian may not be so open to such diversity since he has a tendency to unify every aspect at the point of individual election.

Third, Blaising's comments point to a discussion of the *usefulness* of the doxological purpose as an integrating principle. In this he is only right to a point. He shows that some dispensationalists have integrated their theology around redemption as a category. Their category is just broader than most covenantalists and perhaps not broader than other theologians. In the end he feels, there really is not a lot to argue about. Gaebelein's example seems to cut both ways on this issue. It is true that Blaising's reminder about the Niagara Bible Conference focus on a Christological center is instructive especially as we look at Gaebelein who was certainly a child of the Niagara movement. Gaebelein surely talked about biblical history as God's plan of redemption through Christ.

Yet the stress on redemption tied to Christology should not rule out other emphases. Gaebelein believed that God had a plan for lost men and for angels<sup>50</sup> as well. In his discussion on angels, which highlights the issue of God's glory, Gaebelein betrayed a possible way of thinking about the many things that God does: "If man is God's only creature, gifted by Him with powers to search out His

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<sup>46</sup> John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991), 149-69.

<sup>47</sup> Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, 177-91.

<sup>48</sup> This present writer deals with the basic mistakes of theological method found in covenant theology in "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 1 (Spring 1997): 5-36.

<sup>49</sup> It must be admitted that this third point distinguished dispensationalism from covenant theology but may not distinguish it from other forms of nondispensationalism. It may also be true that some covenant theologians have tried to develop their theological system with the glory of God in mind as part of an integrating grid. However, the common approach to covenant theology with its focus on individual redemption via election can certainly be responded to with Ryrie's third point.

<sup>50</sup> Arno C. Gaebelein, *The Angels of God* (New York: "Our Hope" Publication Office, 1924).

creation, to admire His works and to praise Him for them, how little is the praise and glory He gets from His creatures!”<sup>51</sup> In other words, if the plan of God involved only mankind, then one’s view of the glory of God should be diminished. Couple this with his earlier statement about the need to understand the distinctive place of each of the four great subjects of the Bible (creation, the nations, Israel, and the church) in order to fathom the purposes of God. It is easy to imagine Gaebelein believing that the loss of these distinctions would somehow diminish the glory of God.

Although, in the end, there may be only a difference in degree between covenant theology and dispensationalism on the matter of the glory of God, the difference does seem to exist. The dispensationalist sees biblical history as following a multiple track scheme which highlights the glory of God as he fulfills his purposes of prophetic hope. Such a multiple track approach simply cannot be handled by covenant theology. However, dispensationalists who want to affirm the third essential principle of Ryrie’s *sine qua non* can demonstrate that the doxological purpose is undergirded with both redemptive and Christological threads. This is, in essence, what Gaebelein outlined for us. One of its side benefits is a theological warmth which prevents dispensational theology from being merely an academic enterprise.

## The Christological Focus of Hope

The theme of prophetic hope expressed, in spite of the hopelessness of the present age, to the church, Israel, the Gentile nations, and creation is the thread that unites the theological system of Gaebelein.<sup>52</sup> It is not surprising then to find the name of his Jewish outreach ministry to be *The Hope of Israel Movement* or to note that the highly significant expository magazine which he edited for over half a century was named *Our Hope*.

However, this thread has a Christological focus. While the evangelical character of Gaebelein’s theology shows that the benefits of God for the human race are grounded in the work of Christ on the cross, the Christological spotlight falls on the doctrine of the Second Coming.<sup>53</sup> In a chapter entitled “Hundreds of Questions But Only One Answer,”<sup>54</sup> the message is unblurred,

There is but one answer to all these questions concerning the promised hope for Israel, for the nations of the earth and for all creation. That answer is:

*The Lord Jesus Christ.*

He alone is the only answer, the completest answer, the never-failing answer to all our questions. But what do we mean when we give His ever blessed and adorable Name, the Name above every other name, as the only answer? We do not mean that the answer is a practical

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<sup>51</sup> Gaebelein, *The Angels of God*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> The consistency of Gaebelein’s theology over the years can be seen by comparing the books mentioned above from the 1930s to an earlier article in *Our Hope*. See Arno C. Gaebelein, “The Coming of the Lord, the Hope of Israel, and the Hope of the Nations and Creation,” *Our Hope* 8 (September 1901): 194-99. This article was actually the publication of an address given at the first Sea Cliff Bible conference

<sup>53</sup> Gaebelein viewed the atonement on the cross by Christ as the greatest event in human history while the Second Coming of Christ was the second greatest event (*Hope of the Ages*, 76). Yet the Second Coming is “the great hope, the only hope, for all the earth . . . All waits for that coming event” (76). It is the work of Christ in the Second Coming, rather than the first advent, which serves as the focus of the unifying theme of hope.

<sup>54</sup> Gaebelein, *Hope of the Ages*, 54-76.

application of the principles of righteousness declared by the infallible teacher in the sermon on the mount. We do not mean the practice of what has been termed the golden rule. We do not mean a leadership of Jesus. We do not mean that these questions will be answered by future spiritual revivals, nor do we mean that a blasted Western civilization, misnamed Christian, will influence heathen nations to accept Christianity and turn to God from their idols. The sorrowful fact is that what military Christendom has done and is doing, and the shameful failures of Western civilization, has been a curse to heathen nations. What we mean, the only answer, the completest and neverfailing answer to all our questions, is

*The Glorious Reappearing of the Lord Jesus Christ*

This future event will answer every question, solve every problem which humanity faces today, and all the existing chaotic conditions, and bring about that golden age of which heathen poets dreamed, which the Bible promises is in store for the earth.<sup>55</sup>

In light of such an emphasis, it is no wonder that for many years the cover of *Our Hope* magazine had on it the words “The Lord Jesus Christ, Who is Our Hope.” The central interpretive motif, **prophetic hope through the Second Coming**, was best captured in a prayer which closed Gaebelein’s volume, *Hopeless, Yet There is Hope*,

**Even so Come, Thou Hope of the hopeless, Thou Hope of Israel, Thou Hope of the World, all Nations and Creation. Even so, Come Lord Jesus.**

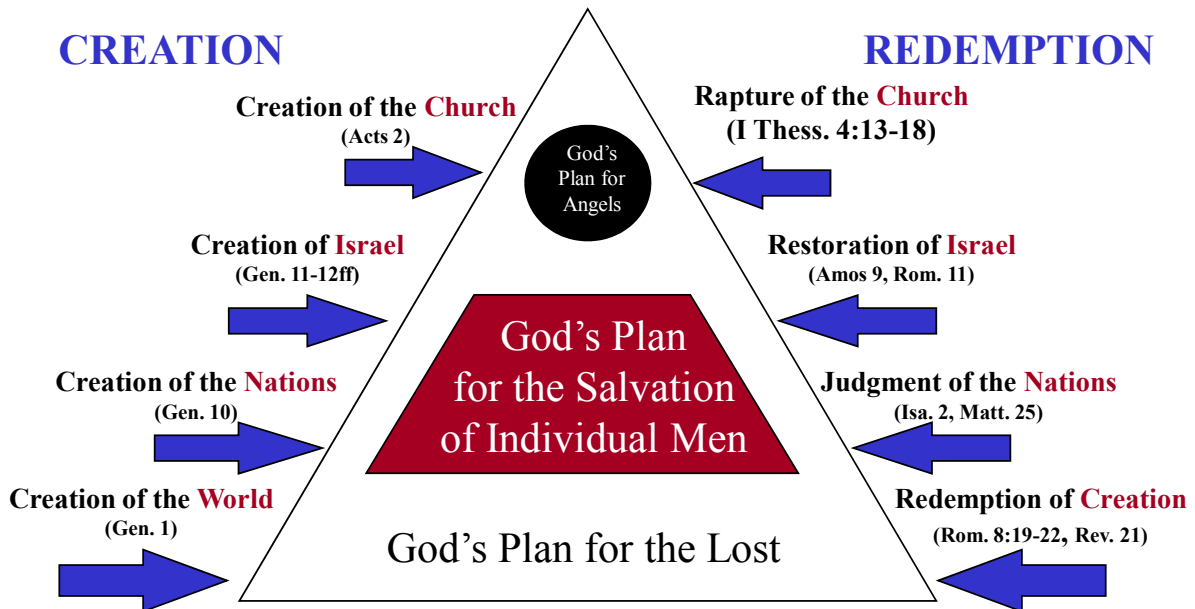
## Conclusion

Arno C. Gaebelein believed in a sovereign God who controlled history. Predictions He had made came true because of His great power and plan. The “plan” is a multi-faceted one which highlighted prophetic hope in the personal Second Coming of Jesus Christ as God’s redemptive plan is accomplished on several fronts. It may be possible to see in Gaebelein the makings of our understanding of the doxological purpose of biblical history. If so, then Ryrie’s third point in the essentials of dispensationalism may have some merit.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 71-72.

## THE FOCUS ON THE GLORY OF GOD IN DISPENSATIONALISM



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