

**A CANDID EXAMINATION OF THE
SCOFFIELD BIBLE: A LECTURE DELIVERED
BEFORE THE MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION
OF THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH,
AT CALVIN COLLEGE, GRAND RAPIDS,
MICHIGAN, JUNE 1ST, 1938**

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A candid examination of the Scofield Bible: a lecture delivered before the Ministerial association of the Christian Reformed church, at Calvin college, Grand Rapids, Michigan, June 1st, 1938 by Albertus Pieters

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A CANDID EXAMINATION OF THE SCOFIELD BIBLE

Shortly after I returned from Japan, in the year 1923, when I was beginning my work as Bible teacher and College Pastor in Hope College, Dr. John E. Kuizenga, then one of the professors in our seminary, remarked to me that no one could be a teacher of the Bible, in these days, without reckoning with the Scofield Bible, since it was so widely used, and so highly esteemed by many Christian people. This was not exactly the first time I had heard of the Scofield Bible. I knew that there was such a book, but had never had any occasion to pay any especial attention to it. Upon Dr. Kuizenga's advice, I procured a copy, and made myself acquainted with its contents.

This work was first published in 1909, and a second edition appeared in 1917. From that date the present copyright runs, and this copyright is so carefully guarded that when I wrote my discussion of the Apocalypse permission could not be obtained to quote even a few sentences. The biography of the author, Dr. Cyrus Ingerson Scofield, and the history of his writing the "Notes", may be found in a book entitled: "The Life Story of C. I. Scofield", by Charles Gallaudet Trumbull, editor of the "Sunday School Times." Born August 19, 1843, he was in his youth a soldier in the Confed-

erate army. After the war he studied and practiced law, becoming active also in politics. During that period of his life he became a hard drinker. In 1879, at the age of 36, he was converted. For three years more he continued to practice law, but in 1882 he gave it up to become—without any intervening theological training—pastor of a small Congregational church in Dallas, Texas, where he was ordained to the ministry eighteen months later by a Congregational Council. Many years after that, finding that the Congregational churches were no longer loyal to the great doctrines of the Christian faith, he became a minister of the Southern Presbyterian Church; although I do not find in his biography any mention of his ever having served a Presbyterian congregation. Dr. Scofield was no doubt a man of great piety, earnestly devoted to the gospel as understood and preached by the evangelical churches.

The book known as "The Scofield Bible" consists of the King James Version, with a special system of chain references, invented and prepared by Dr. Scofield, a system of paragraph headings, and numerous notes, of very varied character and value. The whole is called by Dr. Trumbull: "A God-planned, God-guided, God-illuminated, and God-energized work" (p. 114). It would be difficult to say more than that of the divinely inspired Scriptures themselves.

The Great Influence of the Scofield Bible

There is no doubt that Dr. Kuizenga was right in his remark to me about the great and wide-spread influence of the Scofield Bible. It may fairly be

called one of the most influential books—perhaps it is the most influential single work—thrust into the religious life of America during the twentieth century. So far as I know, it is not looked upon as a valuable adjunct to Bible study in any of the regular theological seminaries throughout our country, but in numerous "Bible Schools" it is one of the chief text-books, and in many circles an appeal to the Scofield Bible is the end of all controversy. Through its influence there have arisen here and there "tabernacles" and "undenominational churches," composed of people no longer at home in the established orthodox denominations, because they do not get there the sort of teaching they find in the Scofield Bible. In many other churches, where this development has not yet reached the point of separation, the presence of Sunday School teachers and others who consider themselves illuminated by the Scofield Bible beyond their pastors, forms a troublesome element. Periodicals like the "Sunday School Times" and the "Moody Bible Institute Monthly" frequently refer to it, and always with an air of having spoken the final word, if they can quote a passage from it in support of their views.

All this constitutes a situation to which we as pastors and Bible teachers need to pay attention, and to do so we must be thoroughly acquainted with the Scofield Bible. The importance of the problem is accentuated by the fact that those who use this work are, in other respects, among the best Christians in our churches, those with the deepest faith in the Holy Scriptures and with the most sincere devotion to the Lord. They need to be very carefully and sympathetically dealt with.

These good people do not lack faith and zeal, but they sadly lack knowledge; and the tragedy of the situation lies just here, that this is the very thing they think they have obtained from the Scofield Bible! They are apt to say in their hearts, and not infrequently with their lips: "I have more understanding than all my teachers—because I have a Scofield Bible."

Dr. T. T. Shields, of Toronto, prominent Baptist and premillenarian preacher, said, in "The Gospel Witness" for April 7th, 1932:

"From a position of entire ignorance of the Scriptures to the position of oracular religious certainty—especially respecting eschatological matters—for some people requires from three to six months with a Scofield Bible."

How is this great influence of Dr. Scofield's work to be accounted for? In answering this question, it is right first of all to point out the real excellencies of the book. It was written by a man of faith. On the great fundamental issues of the Christian religion, such as the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures, the deity of Christ, the atonement, justification by faith, regeneration, sanctification through the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of Christ, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting, it rings clear as a bell. Many Christian people have been profoundly disturbed, during the last forty or fifty years, over the growing denial of these things, on account of the increasing modernism in the churches. Often they fail to hear any clear testimony to the gospel from their own pastors, even in Presbyterian and Methodist churches. For such

people it is a relief, and a most welcome assurance to take up the Scofield Bible, and to find in its notes no suggestion that the old gospel is out of date or that the great doctrines are to be doubted. This is the most vital and valuable service that the Scofield Bible has rendered to the Christian faith and life of our country, and its importance can not easily be over-estimated. It has undergirded the faith of God's people in a remarkable manner, and from that point of view even we who see much fault in it, and seriously deprecate its influence in other respects, must thank God for it.

It has excellencies of method, also. Its chain reference system, considered merely as a method, apart from the special propaganda to which it is largely devoted, is admirable. The same must be said of its paragraph headings, although in some parts of the Bible, particularly in the book of Isaiah, these are abused to present as the content of the prophecy what is at best a most doubtful interpretation.

Another thing that goes far to explain the widespread use and great influence of this work, is the oracular and authoritative tone employed throughout. Here we come to something we can not praise, although we admit its effectiveness with superficial Bible students—as most people are. Dr. Scofield never by any chance intimates that he may be mistaken, or that any other view is possible but the one he lays down. In one place I did find him presenting three possible alternative explanations, without deciding which was right, but this is a rare exception. For the most part, no infallible Pope could speak with greater certainty and authority than he;

and this is true no matter what the subject under discussion. Whether dealing with the great doctrines which are the common confession of all Christendom, or with obscure and doubtful points of eschatology, where the most learned and competent expositors confess themselves at a loss, everywhere it is the same "ipse dixit" style. Anciently it was said: "Roma locuta est: causa finita est"; but if you yield yourself at all to the tone and method of the Scofield Bible, you must believe that the message for the present age is: "Scofield locutus est: causa finita est."

The influence of this authoritative tone upon the untrained and unwary reader is necessarily very great, and this is emphasized in no small degree by the fact that the notes are bound up in the same volume with the sacred text itself, so that the confidence of the reader in writings divinely inspired is unconsciously transferred to and shared by the other remarks on the same page. To be sure, this has been done before, as in the great Dutch "Staten Bijbel"; but that method has passed out of use, precisely because it was recognized that fallible interpretation should not thus be associated with infallible revelation. It was a clever idea of Dr. Scofield thus to revive it. Had his notes been published separately, by themselves, as a commentary, they would by this time have been forgotten.

In line with this authoritative attitude, and necessitated by it, is the fact that Dr. Scofield never argues, never explains, never apologizes, and never assigns any reasons for asserting that this or that is true. Not only would it have been difficult to

do that, within the limits of space available, but it would have detracted very seriously from the impression made upon the reader. Had he given his reasons, the intelligent reader would have begun to judge whether these reasons were convincing; by withholding all reasons he gives the impression that, if he did give them, they would be found satisfactory. Thus, with true psychology, he affirms, but never argues.

Now, there are certainly times, places, and circumstances where this is the correct procedure. In teaching small children one must speak thus. The man who proclaims the great Christian doctrines is entitled to speak positively and with authority. He has the Holy Scriptures and the consensus of the Christian church from the beginning with him and behind him as he preaches these truths. Within the Christian circle, the faith is "The Undoubted Holy Catholic Christian Faith." We don't mean "may-be" when we proclaim the doctrines of God, of Christ, of righteousness, and of judgment to come. Besides this, any one called to the office of a Christian pastor in a given denomination has both the right and the duty to affirm, in his own pulpit, the distinctive doctrines of his own denomination, without qualification or apology. That is what he is there for; what he has been called to do; what his people want him to do, and understand that he is doing. He speaks not as an individual, but as an official teacher, the mouth-piece of his denomination. You can not find fault with a Baptist preacher for declaring in his pulpit that infant baptism is a perversion of the sacrament and a great evil; or with a Reformed