

I have here some excerpts from the Scofield Reference Bible. It is probably did more to shape American Christianity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than any other book. It was first written in 1909 by Cyrus Scofield and then edited by him in 1917. While there is nothing exactly new in its thoughts, it popularized dispensationalism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Dispensationalism is most notable for its end-times thoughts and focus. The Scofield Reference Bible interprets most of the Bible through the lens of apocalyptic writings like Daniel and Revelation.

American Lutherans generally reject this book. I've recently ordered a copy just to see the whole of what it is about. In my opinion, from what I have read in it, I wouldn't exactly call it *wrong* biblical theology but I would consider it *badly done* biblical theology. It's sort of like having a large dot-to-dot picture. You can connect the dots to get the picture that was intended. But, if you want, you can also connect some of the dots in different ways in order to create whatever you want the picture to be. That is what I believe this book does.

Dispensationalism and the Scofield Reference Bible have given rise to whole Christian denominations focused on the end times. The Left Behind series of books and movies is dispensationalist thoughts. I don't so much anymore, but I used to encounter a lot of people who wanted my thoughts on these matters, or wanted my sermons to reflect dispensationalist thoughts. Again, while I won't call it outright wrong theology, in my opinion it is badly done theology, a connecting of the dots to make a different picture.

Dispensationalist thoughts are probably overlaid in your own mind and so when we come across Bible readings like the gospel for today you find yourself asking, "What is this? Why are we reading this now?"

This time of year we're thinking about Thanksgiving and Christmas. We all know Christmas has become too commercialized so we are ready to hear a sermon about recovering the true meaning of Christmas... that it should be about giving, not getting; and it should be about Jesus, not something else. But we aren't interested in hearing about the rapture. What on earth does the rapture have to do with Christmas?

And the answer is - nothing! In fact the gospel reading has nothing to do with the rapture either. And, in fact almost the whole Bible has nothing to do with the rapture. There's what we have in our gospel reading from Matthew, a parallel in Luke's gospel, and a mention about the resurrection of the dead in 1 Thessalonians. And everything else that you'll hear people talking about the rapture comes from... yes, the Scofield Reference Bible.

We have a perfect Advent/pre-Christmas text here. It's not about what will happen at the end of time. It is about watchfulness and faithfulness to Christ's mission. People will focus on verses 40 and 41 where you have two men working in the field and one is taken while one is left. And two women are grinding meal, one is taken and one is left. Indeed these are vivid images. You've probably all seen bumper stickers that say, "Warning, in case of rapture this car will be driverless." But that is not at all what Jesus meant. People so often overlook what comes before and after these verses. Right beforehand Jesus gave a parable about a fig tree. And right afterward there's a parable about a house being broken into.

It seems to me that if a text is surrounded by parables, quite likely that text is a parable too.

Jesus regularly taught people using parables, stories and exaggerations. Why? Because they're memorable! You all know the parable of the good Samaritan and the parable of the prodigal son, and the parable of the lost sheep; but how much of St. Paul's writings in the Bible can you quote? Not much, if any. Why? Because we remember stories.

As I said before, these stories so often taken to point to the rapture actually teach about watchfulness and faithfulness.

Jesus says he doesn't know when the end will come, but he tells his disciples to be diligent and work hard to spread the good news throughout the world. That makes sense. Even if you aren't a procrastinator and someone said to you, "I have a difficult task to do and I'd like you to do it." You might reply, "When do you want it done?" And they reply, "Oh, you've got at least 2000 years or so." How likely is it that you will pursue the task with diligence and urgency? Not likely.

The original disciples were certain that Jesus would return soon, within their lifetimes. They turned out to be wrong, but it drove them to work and work hard. That same drive goes for us too. Who knows when God will call creation to its close? And who knows how it will happen?

The delay is a time of grace - for without it we wouldn't be here. No one knows God's time though. This time is our time, a time of opportunity.

As we begin Advent in our approach to Christmas we start by focusing on the end of time because it gives us a sense of watchfulness and urgency. God is up to something. We are a part of it. Exactly when it will be completed we don't know. Why don't we know all the details? Again, that's God's to know. But somehow it is in the striving and struggling and waiting that Christ comes. Without the striving and struggling and waiting Christ's appearance is just another day. Somehow God intends us to learn and grow in this meantime.

I'm sure you're all familiar with the experiments that involve freeing a butterfly from its chrysalis rather than letting it struggle and fight to get free itself. You think you're doing it a favor by saving it the struggle. But it turns out the struggle is necessary for the butterfly to develop the muscles necessary to fly. I've heard that if a butterfly is set free from its chrysalis it can never fly. Its wings are useless. If it is all too easy a butterfly never reaches its full glory and potential.

We watch with faithfulness and devotion confident that God is working in us and through us. And ultimately God will bring us to the time of resurrection; the time when celebrating Christmas won't have to be a once a year practice for the coming of Christ but the reality for the whole world to experience.

Amen



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16. Now as he walked by the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishes.	16:1-2 16:3-5 16:6-7 16:8-9 16:10-11 16:12-13
17. And Jesus said unto them, Come ye after me, and I will make you to become fishers of men.	16:14 16:15 16:16 16:17 16:18 16:19
18. And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him.	16:20 16:21 16:22 16:23 16:24 16:25

*Type Sample*