

THE RAPTURE DEBATE AT THE NIAGARA BIBLE CONFERENCE

Larry D. Pettegrew

ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO THIS SUMMER the Niagara Bible Conference¹ held its last meeting. The roots of the conference go back to 1868 through 1871 when George C. Needham (1840–1902), James Inglis (1813–1872), and a few others met together privately for Bible study. After Inglis died, Needham, James H. Brookes (1830–97), and a few other Christian workers came together again in 1875 for a private meeting near Chicago. But the first official “Believers’ Meeting for Bible Study,” as it was originally called, was held in Swampscott, Massachusetts, in 1876, and for the first time the meeting was opened to the public.

Larry D. Pettegrew is Professor of Theology, The Master’s Seminary, Sun Valley, California

¹ Though the eschatological disagreements in the last years of the Niagara Conference have been researched before, a review of the controversy is justified in light of this centennial and the significance of Niagara to the development of early American fundamentalism/conservative evangelicalism. “The Niagara group and their many followers might well be credited with keeping before American Protestantism some of the great evangelical and prophetic teachings of the Bible” (Frank Gaebelin, *The Story of the Scofield Reference Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1959], 13). See Richard Reiter, “A History of the Development of the Rapture Positions,” in *The Rapture*, ed. Gleason Archer et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 10–34; Larry D. Pettegrew, “The Niagara Bible Conference and American Fundamentalism,” *Central Bible Quarterly* (19 [winter 1976] 2–26, 20 [spring 1977] 3–25, 20 [summer 1977] 2–40, 20 [fall 1977] 2–56), idem, “The Historical and Theological Contributions of the Niagara Bible Conference to American Fundamentalism,” (Th D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1976), and Carl E. Sanders II, “The Premillennial Faith of James Hall Brookes” (Ph D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995). The Niagara Bible Conference has also been a part of the discussion by progressive dispensationalists in defining the development of dispensationalism. See Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993), 22–23. In an earlier work, Blaising called the eras of American dispensationalism Niagara dispensationalism, Scofield dispensationalism, essentialist (*sine qua non*) dispensationalism, and progressive dispensationalism (Craig Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 16–34).

In 1877 the brethren met at Watkins Glen, New York, and then for three years at Clifton Springs, New York. In 1881 the meeting was held at Old Orchard, Maine, and in 1882 at Mackinac Island, Michigan. By this time over five hundred people were attending the gatherings annually. Then from 1883 through 1897 the conference met at Niagara-on-the Lake, Ontario, Canada, and became known officially as the Niagara Bible Conference.² In 1898 and 1899 the conference met at Point Chautauqua, New York, and the last meeting was held at Asbury Park, New Jersey, in 1900. The next year some of the pretribulational participants at Niagara continued the tradition with a summer Bible conference at Sea Cliff, New York. The Sea Cliff Bible Conference, led by A. C. Gaebelein, met annually until 1911.

From 1895 through 1900 the Niagara Bible Conference was in decline for at least four reasons.³ First, some of the longtime key leaders of the conference died. The greatest blow to the conference was no doubt the death in 1897 of James H. Brookes, the president. Second, the number of other Bible conferences had increased, and so attendance at Niagara was not the unique experience it had been years earlier.⁴ Third, the decision to change the location of the conference was a mistake.⁵ Fourth, there was internal dissension over pretribulationism and posttribulationism. A. C. Gaebelein, citing C. I. Scofield's testimony, said this conflict was "the chief reason" the Niagara Conference broke up.⁶ The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine historically and theologically this debate about the rapture among the Niagara teachers, both at Niagara and at Sea Cliff, viewing it as a foreglimpse of the ongoing debate that would harass premillennialists in the twentieth century.

² No conference was held in 1884. Why this was so is somewhat of a mystery. The main reason may have been that James Brookes, the president of the conference, was in Europe that summer trying to restore his health (David Riddle Williams, *James H. Brookes: A Memoir* [St. Louis: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1897], 127).

³ C. Norman Kraus (*Dispensationalism in America* [Richmond, VA: Knox, 1958], 99–110) and Ernest R. Sandeen (*Roots of Fundamentalism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970], 208–32) discuss the reasons for the decline of the Niagara Bible Conference.

⁴ Committee minutes, cited by L. W. Munhall, "The Niagara Bible Conference," *Moody Monthly*, July 22, 1922, 1105.

⁵ "Possibly the peregrinating character of the Conference has had something to do with the diminishing attendance during the past few years" (Robert Cameron, "Niagara Conference," *Watchword and Truth* 22 [1900]: 227).

⁶ A. C. Gaebelein, *The History of the Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Our Hope, n.d.), 40.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE CONTROVERSY

THE NIAGARA CONFESSION OF FAITH

In response to disruption at the 1878 meeting at Clifton Springs, New York, by annihilationists and postmillennialists, James Brookes drew up a confession of faith that was informally followed by the conference from then on, though not officially adopted until 1890.⁷ Brookes suggested that "those who deny the coming of the Lord may convene whenever they desire, and encourage each other in the belief that the church and the world are rapidly getting better, and will soon usher in the millennium; but we do not wish to hear from them."⁸ The Niagara creed has fourteen articles. Article 14 on eschatology reads as follows: "We believe that the world will not be converted during the present dispensation, but is fast ripening for judgment, while there will be a fearful apostasy in the professing Christian body; and hence that the Lord Jesus will come in person to introduce the millennial age, when Israel shall be restored to their own land, and the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord; and that this personal and premillennial advent is the blessed hope set before us in the Gospel for which we should be constantly looking: Luke 12:35-40; 17:26-30; 18:8; Acts 15:14-17; 2 Thess. 2:3-8; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Tit. 2:11-15."⁹

Brookes, the primary author of the confession,¹⁰ was a pre-tribulationist. In one of his major works Brookes wrote, "We only know that after the translation of the saints there will be a short period of unparalleled wickedness culminating in the Antichrist, and of unparalleled tribulation culminating in terrific judgments

⁷ "Declaration of Doctrinal Belief of Niagara Bible Conference," *The Truth* 20 (1894) 509-11

⁸ James Brookes, "Believers' Meeting at Clifton Springs," *The Truth* 4 (1878) 404-5

⁹ James Brookes, "Believers' Meeting for Bible Study," *The Truth* 4 (1878) 458 *The Truth or Testimony for Christ*, the periodical in which the confession is quoted, was a monthly paper founded in 1875 and edited by James Brookes throughout its existence. It contained articles explaining and defending premillennialism, the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, and all other major doctrines. Other articles told of Brookes's soul-winning experiences or gave illustrative material on various topics. One issue a year in the later volumes was devoted to the results of the Niagara Bible Conference. Brookes wrote most of the articles in each volume, though many other Christian workers made contributions throughout the years.

¹⁰ The confession, entitled "A Safe Doctrinal Belief," was also published in a book edited by John H. Elliott. The author, according to Elliott, is James Brookes (James H. Brookes, "A Safe Doctrinal Belief," in *Suggestive Outline Bible Studies and Bible Readings*, ed. John H. Elliott [Albany, NY: D. R. Niver, 1883], 23-26). Brookes was almost certainly the author of the Niagara Confession.

inflicted by the true Christ, from all of which sincere Christians who love His appearing shall be delivered by being taken up into His royal pavilion.”¹¹ Brookes probably intended to state pretribulationism in the confession by the phrase “constantly looking.” Moreover, the dominant position at the conference through most of its history was the pretribulationist view. As Kraus says, “It is not clear whether all the early leaders endorsed the theory wholeheartedly or not, but at least until about 1883 or 1884, there was little or no verbal dissent.”¹²

TOLERATION OF MINOR DISAGREEMENTS

Still, the Niagara men had often admitted that premillennialists were not in total agreement. George C. Needham, in the introduction to a book that contains some of the addresses of the first official Believers’ Meeting for Bible Study, recalls a discussion with a postmillennialist who objected to premillennialism because there were too many conflicting opinions among its adherents. Needham replied, “I admit there are different views held by premillennialists regarding the chronology and order of events, the details of anti-christian developments and natural judgments; the signs preceding or following our Lord’s appearing—but all agree on the great over-shadowing features of the Advent itself, viz.: The Lord coming in person in His glory, to take His people to Himself, and to commence a new era of things, differing from all previous dispensations, according to the prophetic Word.”¹³

As late as 1897 the disagreement on eschatology was admitted, but with the explanation that it did not harm the fellowship so often experienced at the conference. Mrs. George Needham reported, “These brethren may not, and do not see eye to eye in all minor points of truth, particularly prophecy. But as all are agreed on the major facts of a literal and pre-millennial return of Jesus Christ, and a restoration of the Jewish Commonwealth, their harmony in the Spirit is unbroken and remarkable.”¹⁴ Thus, while admitting minor disagreements, these premillennialists were saying that premillennialism was still valid, and fellowship and harmony could still be maintained.

¹¹ James H Brookes, *Maranatha* (New York Revell, 1889), 501

¹² Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 100

¹³ George C Needham, “Introduction,” in *Present Truth*, ed James H Brookes (Springfield, IL Edwin A Wilson, 1877), 14

¹⁴ Mrs George C Needham, “Niagara Bible Conference,” *The Watchword* 19 (1897) 144

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the Niagara men believed that the question of the time of the rapture was unimportant. In one of Brookes's early works, he wrote, "It is of unspeakable moment to the Christian to know whether he shall be exposed to the dreadful sufferings and temptations that will mark the close of the present age, or whether he shall be removed to the heavenly heights, and look down with undisturbed composure upon the tempest of judgments that will lay waste an ungodly world before the establishment of righteousness."¹⁵ In another place, speaking of "some excellent brethren" who believe in posttribulationism, Brookes wrote, "They are greatly mistaken in this view, and should cease to hold and teach it, because they are misleading many, who otherwise would receive much comfort and help from 'that blessed hope' of our Redeemer's speedy return. Let prayer be offered in their behalf that He may be pleased to open their understanding to understand the Scriptures."¹⁶

MANAGEMENT OF DISAGREEMENTS

How then were the Niagara teachers able to keep the issue under control for so long? First, these Bible teachers all had a common foe in postmillennialism. For years they were willing to bypass their own disagreement in order to present a united front to this theological enemy. They were also united against many doctrinal errors found in theological liberalism. Eschatology was important at Niagara, but other doctrines were also studied at the yearly gatherings.¹⁷ As conservatives, they wanted to have a strong, undivided position in the battle against heresy.

Second, being interdenominationalists, they had learned how to keep silent on certain doctrinal areas for the sake of fellowship. Baptism, for example, was not discussed at the Niagara Conference. Likewise, for the sake of unity, the brethren were willing to keep silent on the issue of the timing of the rapture.

Third, the Niagara leaders were devoted to "no-controversy" meetings. After the somewhat disturbing meeting in 1878 at Clifton Springs, New York, President Brookes stated that "contro-

¹⁵ Brookes, *Maranatha*, 513. See also James Brookes, "Rapture of the Saints," *The Truth* 5 (1879): 145-51.

¹⁶ James Brookes, "Kept Out of the Hour," *The Truth* 18 (1892): 631. In this article Brookes listed seven reasons why posttribulationism is wrong (*ibid.*, 631-35).

¹⁷ Brookes wrote, "Many suppose that this [prophecy] is the only topic discussed, and some have circulated the report that we have fixed the day, or at least the year, of our Lord's return. But there is not a shadow of truth in either the surmise or the statement" ("Believers' Meeting at Clifton Springs," 403).

versy hereafter will not be allowed under any circumstances.”¹⁸

Fourth, the posttribulational position was not well developed or represented among the Niagara teachers until the latter years of the conference.¹⁹ When the posttribulational view began to be accepted by some prominent brethren, the issue became more important and more difficult to ignore.

Fifth, the presence of James Brookes tended to keep the conference united. Sandeen even suggests that the “only” reason the controversy did not break out sooner was the respect Brookes’s friends had for him.²⁰ But this is an exaggeration. By the time of Brookes’s death in 1897 the controversy had already been aired for two years. In fact it was Brookes himself who, as editor of *The Truth*, began to publish articles on both sides of the question, though lending his own influence to pretribulationism. However, there is no question that his calm leadership was significant and that after his death, the controversy became more heated.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONTROVERSY

ROBERT CAMERON

Two Niagara Conference men are responsible for bringing the rapture question to the surface. The first was Robert Cameron (died 1922), a pastor in the 1880s, first at the Park Baptist Church of Brantford, Canada, and later at the First Baptist Church of Denver, Colorado. Cameron was also a member of the Niagara committee and eventually became the editor of *The Watchword and Truth*, which combined the magazines of A. J. Gordon (*The Watchword*)

¹⁸ Ibid W J Erdman, the conference secretary, also wrote warnings such as this “If any who choose to attend do not accept these truths, they are requested and expected to be silent Controversy is positively forbidden” (*The Truth* 5 [1879] 271)

¹⁹ Though posttribulationism became the major opponent of pretribulationism, the partial-rapture view was represented at Niagara at least once In the 1885 conference, T C DesBarres “presented very ably and earnestly ‘The Second Coming of Christ as Related to the First Resurrection and the End of the Age’ He took the position, in which he would not perhaps be sustained by most of the brethren who heard him, that only those who watch for the coming, who wait for it, who look for it, who love it, will share in the rapture of the first resurrection and translation But while all might not be able to reach the same conclusion, all were surely profited by his words of solemn and searching admonition” (James Brookes, *The Truth* 11 [1885] 413) Brookes briefly responded to the partial-rapture theory several years later (“Who Shall Be Caught Up?” *The Truth* 23 [1897] 263)

²⁰ Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 209–10 See also Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 96

and James H. Brookes (*The Truth*) after their deaths.²¹ Whether Cameron had ever been a convinced pretribulationist is unclear from his own testimony. In one of his books Cameron claimed that in his preaching, “the any moment Advent never had been mentioned without a question mark—where was the Scripture to enforce it?”²² In another place Cameron said that he had accepted the pretribulationist position “with enthusiasm.”²³ Cameron first studied posttribulationist writings while attending Toronto University. The widow of a British officer called his attention to the writings of Benjamin Wills Newton and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, Plymouth Brethren who had separated from John Nelson Darby in the 1840s over their posttribulationist views. Newton and Tregelles convinced Cameron, and he accepted posttribulationism.²⁴

Cameron began promoting his rapture view in the middle 1880s.

At the 1884 Conference it came to be the “fashion” of every speaker to “ring the changes” on the possibility of Christ’s Coming any moment—before the morning dawned, before the meeting closed, and even before the speaker had completed his address. Feeling that this was utterly unscriptural and dangerous, the writer opened his heart to the late Dr. Nathaniel West, the greatest and most exhaustive student of the Bible and of historic theology, among the teachers participating in the Conference. When pressed for the reason, it was frankly made known, and this led the Doctor to accompany the writer to his room in the “Annex.” We talked and prayed until beyond two o’clock in the morning. After walking the floor backwards and forwards in silence, the great man stopped, pointed his finger at me and said “Cameron, I begin to think you are right. I will give these matters careful and exhaustive attention, and if I find that the Scriptures teach contrary to what is taught in this Conference, I will reverse myself and boldly defend the truth.”²⁵

²¹ The uniting of *The Watchword* and *The Truth* was discussed even before Brookes died. See “Important Notice,” *The Truth* 21 (1895) 461–63.

²² Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord’s Return* (New York: Revell, 1922), 144.

²³ Robert Cameron, “To the Friends of Prophetic Truth,” *The Watchword and Truth* 24 (1902) 135.

²⁴ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord’s Return*, 144. This is an interesting point. If some American pretribulationists learned their system from the English Brethren, so did some posttribulationists.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 145–46. Cameron is mistaken as to the year in that there was no Niagara Conference held in 1884. Also the significance of the entire story is uncertain in that pretribulationism is not evident in West’s earlier works (see for example Nathaniel West, “History of the Pre Millennial Doctrine,” in *Premillennial Essays*, ed. Nathaniel West [Chicago: Revell, 1879], 313–404). Kraus says that West was not a

NATHANIEL WEST

Nathaniel West (1826–1906) was the second Niagara leader to promote posttribulationism aggressively. Over a period of years West began to convert several of the Niagara teachers to the posttribulationist position. A. C. Gaebelein, relating what C. I. Scofield had told him, wrote the following:

In the interpretation of prophecy, the teachers of the conference closely adhered to an important distinction taught in the Bible. They distinguished between the coming of the Lord *for* His saints and the coming of the Lord *with* His saints. They taught that the Lord would gather His redeemed ones to Himself before the beginning of the Great Tribulation. Toward the end of the Niagara meetings several of the teachers, influenced by one man, who was considered an outstanding biblical and ecclesiastical scholar (as he undoubtedly was) began to abandon this distinction and branded it a mere invention.²⁶

The “outstanding biblical and ecclesiastical scholar” was Nathaniel West.²⁷ According to Cameron, other Niagara men who reversed themselves and became posttribulationists included W. G. Moorehead, W. J. Erdman, J. M. Stifler, and Henry W. Frost.²⁸ Such a highly regarded group of Bible teachers could hardly be ignored.

PETERS VERSUS WEST

The controversy broke into *The Truth* in 1895 with a series of opposing articles on the rapture question. First, a long article by George N. H. Peters appeared, entitled “The Imminency of the Second Advent.” The subtitle reads, “Being a reply to the unscriptural attitude assumed by Rev. N. West, D. D., in his attack upon prominent pre-millenarians.”²⁹ The article by Peters is actually a presentation of his notes on Luke 17. Peters explained,

While the writer was engaged in preparing his Notes on Luke there appeared the violent and misleading attack of Rev. N. West against

pretribulationist, though he had accepted the teaching of imminency (Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 100). Perhaps Cameron persuaded West to a posttribulationist definition of imminency.

²⁶ Gaebelein, *The History of the Scofield Bible*, 40–41 (italics his).

²⁷ Wilbur Smith credited West’s *The Thousand Years* as being “in many ways, the most learned work on this aspect of Biblical prophecy ever to appear in the English language” (Wilbur M. Smith, “Introduction,” in *The Thousand Years in Both Testaments*, ed. Nathaniel West [Finchastle, VA: Scripture Truth, n.d.], ix).

²⁸ Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord’s Return*, 20.

²⁹ George N. H. Peters, “The Imminency of the Second Advent,” *The Truth* 21 (1895): 45–51, 93–100, 106–15, 148–54, 175–81, 338–41.

the imminency of the Second Advent as taught by leading premillennarians. Believing the series of articles to be dangerous in their tendency and unjust, it was deemed best to incorporate into the Notes a reply to Dr West, to be published when the volumes on Matthew, Mark and Luke should appear. This fact, of a reply being inserted in the Notes under Luke, ch xvii, becoming known to prominent brethren in the faith, they, in view of the attack on its peculiar method of procedure, insisted upon an immediate publication of the reply in its present form for general distribution.³⁰

Peters added that he regretted publishing the article, but he felt that it was necessary and hoped that what was said might influence the brethren "to remain faithful and firm in their scriptural belief and attitude of constant watchfulness."³¹ Perhaps more than any other one thing, Peters deplored the bitterness of West's article, especially "when the subject matter does not involve anything that is positively essential to salvation."³²

SCOFIELD VERSUS ERDMAN

Another small article, entitled "Queries," by Niagara teacher W J Erdman, appeared, questioning pretribulationism.³³ Erdman asked four questions about how the rapture could be imminent when four events had to take place virtually contemporaneously with it. The four events he cited are a partial restoration of the Jews in unbelief, the acceptance of the Antichrist as their king, a rebuilt temple, and reestablished sacrifices. Erdman asked, "Now since not one of these four has taken place or can take place in the next twenty-four hours, how can it be taught, that if the Rapture of the Church were to take place today, the man of sin would begin to reign tomorrow?"³⁴

In a subsequent issue of *The Truth*, fellow Niagara teacher C I Scofield (1843–1921) answered Erdman's questions in an article entitled "Dr Erdman's 'Queries'"³⁵ Significant in the article is Scofield's attitude toward Erdman. Scofield wrote, "Dr Erdman has so often 'for substance of doctrine,' answered the positions assumed in these 'Queries,' that the present writer, who has for many happy years been his disciple, feels not only the strangeness of

³⁰ Ibid, 45

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid, 50

³³ W J Erdman, "Queries," *The Truth* 21 (1895) 180

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ C I Scofield, "Dr Erdman's 'Queries,'" *The Truth* 21 (1895) 297–300

seeming to be in controversy with his beloved teacher, but also that he is perhaps, essaying a needless task. He cannot doubt, however, that the ‘Queries’ are put with the sincere purpose of eliciting replies, and this not in the spirit of controversy, but for the vindication of truth.”³⁶

Scotfield almost seemed to think that Erdman did not really believe what he seemed to be saying.

Nevertheless Scotfield answered the “Queries.” His answer generally was that pretribulationists do not normally teach that the four major events mentioned by Erdman have to be contemporaneous with the rapture. They could take place within a few weeks after the rapture, or in the case of the Jews’ gathering, they will already be in the Holy Land when the rapture takes place. “As a matter of fact,” says Scotfield, “the Jews are there now, all ready for the manifestation of antichrist.”³⁷

So by 1895 the Niagara leaders were making open and sometimes bitter attacks on one another. Though the Niagara meetings themselves still retained a spirit of harmony on the surface, it was apparent that the conference leaders were not in agreement on the timing of the rapture.

PARSONS VERSUS CAMERON

After *The Truth* was merged with *The Watchword*, the new editor, Robert Cameron, continued to publish articles on the rapture question. In the August issue of the 1898 volume of *The Watchword and Truth*, Henry M. Parsons, one of the Niagara leaders, authored a pretribulationist article entitled, “A Study of the Rapture of the Church.” Parsons tried to demonstrate from a study of 2 Thessalonians 2 that the phrase “a falling away” is to take place before the man of sin is revealed. His conclusion is that ἀποστασία (v. 3) means the rapture. Thus the Tribulation cannot begin until the rapture occurs.³⁸

Cameron footnoted Parsons’s article, “The editor does not concur in the above. The reasons will appear in the next number.”³⁹ So the next issue carried an article by Cameron in which he argued that it is impossible to understand the phrase “a falling away” as

³⁶ Ibid , 298

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Henry M Parsons, “A Study of the Rapture of the Church,” *The Watchword and Truth* 20 (1898) 242–44

³⁹ Ibid , 244

the rapture. He said that Parsons's interpretation is "novel and extraordinary" and "without foundation." The phrase means "the apostasy" and nothing more. Cameron hoped that the biblical research that he presented "may lead to the giving up of this expectation of a rapture before the Tribulation."⁴⁰ It seems clear that with the change of editorship from Gordon and Brookes to Cameron emphasis had begun to shift from pretribulationism to posttribulationism.

THE RESTRAINING OF THE CONTROVERSY

Even while Cameron was airing the controversy in his periodical, he was also suggesting a way to end the controversy. While reporting that the 1899 Niagara Conference was inferior to past meetings, Cameron suggested, "But we venture to suggest that a meeting of *all* the Teachers, and as many others as might enter into its spirit, be called soon, for prayer, for an open and confidential conference, for the consideration of some question of prophetic truth, and for weighing before the Lord many perplexing matters now thrusting themselves to the front amongst professed Christians."⁴¹ Later in the year, Cameron repeated the suggestion: "We again urge the importance of some extended conference of the *Teachers* who have given the prophetic Scriptures special study. There ought to be a greater *unity* of testimony amongst us. An open, frank and full inquiry into certain questions, where there are differences of opinion, would certainly have some very decided advantages."⁴²

The meeting at last was held near the end of 1900. Cameron said that the meeting continued three days with three sessions each day, and was attended by a "goodly number of ministers and some laymen."⁴³ No sermons or speeches were given at the meeting; rather a spirit of study prevailed. Cameron wrote that besides their own Bibles, "several had Greek testaments, and we had Thayer's Lexicon, Strong's Concordance, and the Englishman's Greek Concordance in the room."⁴⁴ Cameron concluded, "Very great

⁴⁰ Robert Cameron, "The Rapture," *The Watchword and Truth* 20 (1898): 338.

⁴¹ Cameron, "The Niagara Conference," 228 (*italics his*).

⁴² Robert Cameron, "The Conferences," *The Watchword and Truth* 22 (1900): 292 (*italics his*).

⁴³ Robert Cameron, "Private Conference," *The Watchword and Truth* 23 (1901): 34.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*

divergences of opinion on prophetic themes were manifested at the beginning of the meeting but each one confessed that he came there to learn and not to teach. All being submissive to the Word of God and to the leading of the Holy Spirit, it is not surprising that unanimity of thought and feeling on many points was reached at the end."⁴⁵

The unanimity on "the many points," however, was not enough to save the Niagara Conference. Only a few weeks later W. J. Erdman, longtime secretary of the conference, announced in *The Watchword and Truth* that "the Committee of the brethren in charge of the conference have decided not to issue a call for another meeting."⁴⁶

THE AFTERMATH OF THE CONTROVERSY

THE NEW PRETRIBULATIONAL LEADER A C GAEBELEIN

When the Niagara Bible Conference ceased to exist after 1900, the future of pretribulationism in American evangelicalism was in doubt. By being able to set the editorial policy of an important periodical, *The Watchword and Truth*, the posttribulationists had taken the offensive. However, even as the announcement to close Niagara was being printed, A. C. Gaebelein (1861–1945), a Niagara teacher beginning in 1898, instilled new life into the pretribulationist camp.

Sandeen writes, "Arno C. Gaebelein, ambitious and conscientious, provided the spark for the millenarian movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Rather than withdrawing to lick his wounds, Gaebelein led his followers in a vigorous campaign of expansion."⁴⁷

Gaebelein founded and directed the pretribulationist Sea Cliff Bible Conference at Sea Cliff, New York, from 1901 through 1911.⁴⁸ He also was instrumental in encouraging C. I. Scofield to write and publish *The Scofield Reference Bible*. This Bible, of

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ W J Erdman, "Niagara Bible Conference," *The Watchword and Truth* 23 (1901) 150

⁴⁷ Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 221

⁴⁸ A C Gaebelein asserted that at the Sea Cliff Conference in 1906 "the imminency of the Coming of the Lord was emphasized from beginning to end" (*Our Hope*, August 1906, 68)

course, was especially important in promoting dispensational pre-tribulationism⁴⁹

Gaebelein also had begun to publish his own journal, *Our Hope*, in July of 1894. Brookes in fact promoted the new magazine in *The Truth* and gave Gaebelein his complete mailing list. Gaebelein eventually looked on *Our Hope* as the real successor to *The Truth*. He wrote, "When Dr. Brookes was called home his testimony had ended. But it pleased God to use *Our Hope* founded by the author in 1894 in the continuation of the testimony of the blessed hope."⁵⁰

In 1897 there was an effort to convert Gaebelein to a post-tribulationist position. During a Bible conference held in St. Louis, Gaebelein and Nathaniel West roomed together. Gaebelein gave the following account of the evening:

Unlike Brookes, Gordon, Parsons, Needham, myself and others, Dr. West believed that the church would be on earth till the very end of that period of trouble. He tried hard to win me over to his side, and started in about 11 p.m. with the ninth chapter of Daniel, verses 25–27. After we had gone over the Hebrew text and agreed on the correct translation, he attempted to build his argument on this prophecy, but failed to gain his point. Then we drifted to the second chapter of the second Epistle to the Thessalonians and here we kept our vigil. West maintained that the hindering power is human government, I said that it is the Holy Spirit. It was a hot conflict which strengthened greatly my belief in my view, which I believe is based on Scripture.⁵¹

Gaebelein thus remained a pretribulationist, becoming the leader of this position in the post-Niagara era.

OUR HOPE VERSUS THE WATCHWORD AND TRUTH

The rapture debate in the post-Niagara era centered in two magazines, *The Watchword and Truth*, sponsoring posttribulationism, and *Our Hope*, featuring pretribulationism. Gaebelein and other pretribulationists had never considered *The Watchword and Truth* as the real successor to Brookes's *The Truth*. *The Watchword* had only bought the subscription list of *The Truth* and at the same time had kept its own format and emphasis. Thus the pretribulationists looked to *Our Hope* as the replacement for *The Truth*. Gaebelein

⁴⁹ Ernest Sandeen described *The Scofield Reference Bible* as "perhaps the most influential single publication in Fundamentalist historiography" (Sandeen, *Roots of Fundamentalism*, 222).

⁵⁰ A. C. Gaebelein, *The Hope of the Ages* (New York: Our Hope, 1938), 167–68.

⁵¹ Arno Clemens Gaebelein, *Half a Century* (New York: Our Hope, 1930), 153–54. This is Gaebelein's autobiography.

wrote, “But *Watchword and Truth* did not continue in the prophetic witness of Drs. Brookes and Gordon, and so it came that *Our Hope* was looked upon as the true and legitimate successor of *The Truth* with the result that hundreds of the old *Truth* readers became readers and supporters of *Our Hope*.”⁵²

The two eschatological positions were represented faithfully by the respective periodicals. The February, 1901, issue of *Our Hope*, for example, carried an article by Gaebelein entitled, “The Post-Tribulation Theory,” in which Gaebelein pointed out the major errors of that position.⁵³ The March issue of *The Watchword and Truth* included an editorial by Cameron in support of posttribulationism, entitled “The Great Tribulation.”⁵⁴ The next year Cameron made some highly debatable statements to the effect that A. J. Gordon and James Brookes had wavered in their belief in pretribulationism in the last days of their lives. The statements about both men were made in *The Watchword and Truth*, but Cameron related his discussion with Gordon in detail in one of his later books. Cameron tried to persuade Gordon to his viewpoint, and according to Cameron, Gordon was finally enthusiastically convinced and exclaimed, “I see it; I see it; you are right! But will you not admit that there has been a partial fulfilling of prophecy all along the history of the Church, and after that there will be a filling full of prophetic truth just before the end?” Of course I concurred at once.⁵⁵ Cameron’s implication is that Gordon’s eschatological position in the last years of his life was partly historicist and partly futuristic posttribulationism.

Similarly Cameron related in *The Watchword and Truth* that in a visit with Brookes in 1895 Brookes told Cameron that Cameron’s article on posttribulationism was “absolutely unanswerable.” Brookes was also supposed to have said, “The apostles did not expect the Lord to come in their day, but can’t you leave me the hope, after all these years have passed away, that I may live to see my

⁵² *Ibid*, 45–46

⁵³ A C Gaebelein, “The Post-Tribulation Theory,” *Our Hope*, February 1901, 261–70

⁵⁴ Robert Cameron, “The Great Tribulation,” *The Watchword and Truth* 23 (1901) 69

⁵⁵ Robert Cameron, *Scriptural Truth about the Lord’s Return*, 124–25 A student of the life and theology of Gordon, George Houghton is not convinced of the truth of this story Houghton says that he “does not hesitate to classify Gordon as a dispensationalist” (George Houghton, “The Contributions of Adoniram Judson Gordon to American Christianity” [Th D diss, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1970], 75–76)

Lord come, and escape the clutches of that awful enemy, death?"⁵⁶ This story greatly upset some pretribulationists, not the least of whom were Gaebelein and Scofield, and Gaebelein wrote that "there was not a word of truth in it."⁵⁷ In defense of Brookes's enduring pretribulationism, Gaebelein documented several people, including Mrs. Brookes, who testified that James Brookes was a pretribulationist up to the time of his death. Also, one of Brookes's last articles in *The Truth*, published in early 1897, the year of his death, is entitled "Who Shall Be Caught Up?" In this article Brookes noted, "It is equally impossible to accept the teaching of many other excellent brethren, that the church . . . must pass through the great tribulation, or that there is no perceptible difference between the coming of the Lord *for* His saints, and His appearing *with* them."⁵⁸ Perhaps Cameron had convinced Brookes of a lesser point, that the apostles could not have believed in imminency. But it is almost certain that Brookes lived and died a pretribulationist.

In the fall of 1902 the two editors addressed each other directly and personally through their periodicals. Gaebelein wrote, "A monthly, *Watchword and Truth*, claiming to be the perpetuation of two magazines, edited by the beloved brethren A. J. Gordon and James H. Brookes, both now absent from the body, has, through its editor, Mr. Robert C. Cameron of Boston, attacked the blessed hope of the imminent coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are obliged, for the sake of the truth, to enter a loving yet firm protest against some incorrect statements of our brother."⁵⁹

Gaebelein then suggested in the editorial that Cameron was following the leading of Satan rather than the Lord in such a position. He also strenuously objected to Cameron's intimation that the doctrine of imminency originated with Edward Irving.

In the next issue of *Our Hope* Cameron's response to Gaebelein was published in part. Cameron asked Gaebelein to state publicly in *Our Hope* that he had been misquoted and that he had not said that Edward Irving originated the doctrine of imminency. What Cameron had actually said was that Irving originated pretribulationism, but Gaebelein insisted that "the statements made so often

⁵⁶ Cameron, "To the Friends of Prophetic Truth," 302

⁵⁷ Gaebelein, *The History of the Scofield Reference Bible*, 42

⁵⁸ Brookes, "Who Shall Be Caught Up?" 265 (italics his)

⁵⁹ A C Gaebelein, "The Imminency of the Coming of the Lord," *Our Hope*, September 1902, 116

in that paper have amounted to this and nothing less.”⁶⁰ He then quoted a paragraph from *The Watchword and Truth* to the effect that “imminency. . . was never taught before the day of the reformation.”⁶¹ Gaebelein, weary of the editorial controversy, concluded, “We wish to say that we consider this blessed hope an important part of the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, and were therefore compelled to enter our protest against the theory of post-tribulation. We do not like controversy, and consider this matter closed with this.”⁶² After this, direct confrontation lessened, though the respective positions were often taught and promoted in the two periodicals.

CONCLUSION

The point of this article has not been that the Niagara Bible Conference teachers split over minor details of doctrine and that the controversy was a waste of time and energy. Kraus correctly observes that “though the debate often raged over the more incidental aspects of the argument,” the posttribulationists of the Niagara Conference actually “made a fundamental break with dispensationalism.”⁶³ Robert Cameron, for example, shows his nondispensational theology in a book published toward the end of the Niagara Conference. “There is no foundation whatever,” he wrote, “for the assumption that ‘the Church which is His Body,’ is to be made up only of the believers between Pentecost and Parousia. A new body was not formed on the day of Pentecost.”⁶⁴ It thus became apparent at Niagara that dispensationalism and pretribulationism are almost inseparable.⁶⁵ For both dispensational and nondispensational theologians, the issues involved were significant.

Moreover, the division between the pretribulationists and the posttribulationists among the Niagara teachers was important for clarifying the finer points of the doctrine of the rapture. The rap-

⁶⁰ A C Gaebelein, “The Imminency of the Coming Once More,” *Our Hope*, October 1902, 225

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ Kraus, *Dispensationalism in America*, 102

⁶⁴ Robert Cameron, *The Doctrine of the Ages* (New York: Revell, 1896), 55

⁶⁵ A major exception to this statement is Robert H Gundry’s endeavor to combine a modified form of dispensationalism with posttribulationism (*The Church and the Tribulation* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973])

ture, though taught primarily as pretribulationist, had not been thought through carefully by many premillennialists up to that time. The controversy forced them to grapple with the issue, and at the same time it brought to the surface some of the major arguments of the respective sides. The doctrine of imminency was clarified and became a strong argument for pretribulationism. At the same time posttribulationists noted that by imminency they meant “possible in any generation.” The accusation that Edward Irving was the founder of pretribulationism was presented, and though considered historically inaccurate by pretribulationists, posttribulationists have continued to make this assertion.⁶⁶ The Niagara Conference teachers also debated whether *ἀποστασία* in 2 Thessalonians 2:3 could be understood as “the departure,” that is, the rapture. Even differentiating between “wrath” and “tribulation” was argued by the posttribulationists.⁶⁷ There are few arguments even in today’s discussions about the timing of the rapture that were not marshaled by the respective sides in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Beyond this, the Niagara Bible Conference was an important base for the development and spread of premillennialism. So, for some of its details and for many of its points of emphasis and clarity, American premillennialism owes much to the Niagara Conference. Certainly premillennialists today can stand on the shoulders of the Niagara Bible Conference teachers.

⁶⁶ Historians Mark Patterson and Andrew Walker have recently tried to demonstrate that the “essential elements” of the pretribulation rapture of the saints “were first formulated by Edward Irving and the Albury Prophecy Conferences” Thus “Irving and his circle, not Darby, as is often supposed, are the true originators of [the] prophetic premillennial school known as dispensationalism” (Mark Patterson and Andrew Walker, “Our Unspeakable Comfort,” *Fides et Historia* 31 [winter/spring 1999] 67) From the evidence given in the article, however, it seems more likely that Irving, who had adopted “a modified historicist perspective,” was either a midtribulationist or pre-wrath proponent, believing that his own day was “on the very edge of the final cataclysm when the seventh trumpet, bowl and vial would together be turned upon unfaithful Christendom” (ibid , 74) Before this final outpouring of wrath, Christians would be translated into a state of immortality and thus would escape the judgments (ibid , 77) See “Review of “Our Unspeakable Comfort” Irving, Albury, and the Origins of the Pretribulation Rapture,” by J Lanier Burns, in this issue of *Bibliotheca Sacra* (pp 363–65)

⁶⁷ Cameron, “The Great Tribulation,” 69