

# **Dispensationalism**

TODAY, YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW

**GROVER GUNN**



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## Chapter 1: Defining the Basic System

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Part of our church's antiquated cooling system is a water tower that uses a float mechanism to regulate the water level. Unhappily, this exposed float presents an inviting diversion for children who happen by. A few of the men in the church have commented periodically for several years that we need to install a protective screen over the float but no one has yet gotten around to doing it. This year someone completely broke off the float, and I had to go by the hardware store to get a new one. There by the plumbing supplies stood Rommy, a good Christian friend and the leader of an influential community Bible study. A few years before, Rommy and his family had left a theologically liberal church and had joined a newly forming dispensational Bible church. I had had opportunities to try to explain to Rommy why I had come to disagree with dispensationalism but had had little success. I remember well the time Rommy had looked me straight in the eye and had said with deliberate seriousness, "Grover, I am a dispensationalist."

I greeted Rommy, and he looked up from the faucet parts. Immediately he thanked me for the copy of my little self-published book on dispensationalism that I had mailed him. And then Rommy made another statement that burned itself indelibly upon my consciousness: "Grover, I want you to know that after reading your book, I am never again going to call myself a dispensationalist." The Lord had established the work of my hand in a way far beyond my expectations, and I was grateful.

I wondered exactly what in the little book had been used of God to help effect this dramatic reversal. Was it the exegesis of some verse?

Was it the logical force of some theological argumentation? Rommy soon answered my question. It was the list of the seven dispensational teachings that I find most objectionable. There in the hardware store, Rommy told me repeatedly that he did not hold to a single one of those teachings.

I do not believe that Rommy's situation is all that unusual. Today there are many Bible believing Christians who have to some degree been influenced in their understanding of prophecy and the church by dispensationalism. And yet many, if not most, of these do not have a clear understanding of dispensationalism as it has been classically defined by writers such as Dr. C.I. Scofield and Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer. They have not consistently thought through dispensationalism as a system or even become familiar with its controlling presuppositions. They are largely unaware of many of the theological and exegetical conclusions to which this system naturally and logically leads. My own conviction is that many people who are now favorably disposed toward dispensationalism would not be if they were only better exposed to the dispensational theological system.

A person's theological system is his basic understanding of what the overall teachings of Scripture are and how they interrelate. A verse of Scripture taken strictly alone can often have more than one meaning. One important characteristic of the correct meaning of any verse is that the correct meaning must harmonize with the overall teaching of Scripture, which is summarized in the theological system. The interpreter's job is, on the one hand, to interpret Scripture with the help of his theological system, and on the other hand to constantly evaluate and adjust his system in the light of Scripture. The interpreter must ever seek to insure that his theological system is indeed consistent with all the teachings of Scripture and also

logically consistent within itself. This is a lifelong process for the interpreter. Really it is a lives' long process since the interpreter always builds on the work of previous interpreters and since the job is never completely finished.

The first step in arguing against the dispensational system is to define and document what I mean by the dispensational system. Dispensationalism is today the reigning system in many Christian circles, and the task of proclaiming that the king is naked is never pleasant or popular. Before I assume this unpopular task, I want to try to make sure that people understand what I am talking about when I refer to dispensationalism. In this chapter I will be discussing the recent development of dispensational theology, the fundamental Christian teaching which dispensationalism contradicts, and the three foundational presuppositions of dispensationalism.

The dispensationalists themselves have said that their system, which first began to be taught in the early nineteenth century, is a rediscovery of truths lost since the early days of Christianity. When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, Alan Boyd, an unusually gifted student, studied in the original Greek the early church writings up to the death of Justin Martyr to gather evidence that dispensationalism was indeed the system of early Christianity. Specifically, he was historically evaluating in a master's thesis Dr. Charles C. Ryrie's claim: "Premillennialism is the historic faith of the Church."<sup>1</sup> Alan's conclusion was that Dr. Ryrie's statement was invalid,<sup>2</sup> and he stated "based on classroom and private discussion," that Dr. Ryrie had "clarified his position on these matters."<sup>3</sup> Alan found the prophetic "beliefs of the period studied" to be "generally inimical to those of the modern system."<sup>4</sup> He concluded that there is no evidence that several of the church fathers who are routinely

claimed by dispensationalists as fellow premillennialists were even premillennial, that the premillennialists in the early church "were a rather limited number."<sup>5</sup> He concluded that those church fathers who were premillennial, such as Papias and Justin Martyr, had little in common with modern day dispensationalists.<sup>6</sup> Alan, as a dispensationalist, explained his findings as an example of the rapid loss of New Testament truth in the early church.<sup>7</sup> In other words, there is no extant concrete evidence that dispensationalism or anything significantly resembling it was ever taught in the church any time until the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

Dispensationalists like to contrast themselves with covenant theologians because they can claim that covenant theology is almost as recent a theological innovation as is dispensationalism.<sup>9</sup> What they appear to be referring to is covenant theology as a highly structured system that involves the doctrine of the covenant of works and which explains God's dealings with Adam in the garden of Eden in covenantal terms. Covenant theology so defined is, like dispensationalism, a recent development in the history of doctrine,<sup>10</sup> but I personally do not believe this is a valid comparison. Dispensationalism is a foundational system that offered a new and different paradigm for understanding the church and prophecy. The covenant of works is a relatively minor doctrine that built on a previously accepted doctrinal foundation and that is not universally accepted among opponents of dispensationalism. My purpose is to contrast dispensationalism, not with the covenant of works or with a highly structured covenant theology, but with the general teaching that God has had one basic plan of salvation through the ages that has resulted in one salvifically united people of God through the ages. This teaching that in the midst of the dispensational changes of covenant administration throughout redemptive history, there has

always been one basic plan of salvation and one people of God has in general been the historic position of the church and is specifically the position found in Reformed theology.

God's plan of salvation as administered through the ages has found its unity in Christ, the one Mediator between God and man and the one who is the same yesterday, today and forever. God's eternal covenant of grace from eternity past to eternity future has always been based upon the historical work of the incarnate Christ, whether that work was historically future or past. And God's covenant of grace has always been administered through faith in Christ, whether Christ was the one to come or the one who has come. This position finds eloquent expression in the words of the great Reformer John Calvin:

... since God cannot without the Mediator be propitious toward the human race, under the law Christ was always set before the holy fathers as the end to which they should direct their faith.<sup>11</sup>

... apart from Christ the saving knowledge of God does not stand. From the beginning of the world he had consequently been set before all the elect that they should look unto him and put their trust in him.<sup>12</sup>

... all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us. ... [the patriarchs] participated in the same inheritance and hoped for a common salvation with us by the grace of the same Mediator. ... God's people have never had any other rule of reverence and piety.<sup>13</sup>

The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation.<sup>14</sup>

The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time, the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam, it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last -- when all the clouds were dispersed -- Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth.<sup>15</sup>

The Reformed faith holds that the Bible contains a unified progression of revelation in which God has one basic people who form the universal church. While acknowledging that God's final purpose in every detail of history is His own glory, the Reformed faith teaches that God's plan to save a people through the death of Christ is the unifying purpose that runs like a scarlet thread throughout redemptive history from Genesis to Revelation and ties it all together. There is an essential unity to God's people throughout the ages and a basic continuity in God's program throughout the ages.

This teaching on the unity of God's people and the continuity of God's program is the fundamental teaching with which dispensationalists disagree. Dispensationalists hold Biblical revelation to be an interrupted progression in which God has two basic peoples: the earthly seed, Israel, and the heavenly seed, the church. Dispensationalists tend, in various degrees, to deny that redemption through Christ is the basic unifying purpose in Scripture



and to deny the basic continuity of God's plan of salvation in the Old and New Testaments. This two-people view of redemptive history can also lead to strong theorized dichotomies between law and grace, between conditional and unconditional covenants, between earthly and heavenly purposes, and between Jewish and Christian end-time prophetic events. As dispensationalist Dr. John F. Walvoord explains, dispensationalism "maintains sharply the distinctions between law and grace, between Israel and the church, between earthly and heavenly, and between prophecies being fulfilled and those which will be fulfilled in the millennium."<sup>16</sup>

When one examines in more detail the basics of the dispensational system, one finds three bedrock concepts. The first of these is a literalistic and Jewish understanding of Old Testament prophecy and the Messianic kingdom such that these require a future fulfillment in terms of a resurrected Old Testament order with certain enhancements and variations. The dispensationalist argues that the nature of the kingdom announced by John the Baptist and offered by Jesus Christ should be understood in terms of the popular Jewish understanding of the kingdom at that time, and that the Jews at that time were expecting a literal restoration of Davidic political rule.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the dispensationalist views the Messianic kingdom as a glorified extension of the Mosaic ceremonial law<sup>18</sup> and the Davidic political kingdom.

In reality, there is no strong evidence of a unified Jewish view of the kingdom at the time of Christ. The Jewish understanding of the Messiah and the coming kingdom was varied.<sup>19</sup> What we do know is that among the various understandings of the Messianic kingdom at the time of Christ, there was a national and political hope that expected the earthly restoration of an idealized Davidic kingdom

with deliverance from national enemies and the national exaltation of Israel. The disciples at times gave possible evidence of being influenced by such a view of the kingdom (Matthew 20:21; Acts 1:6). The dispensationalist assumes that this national, Jewish understanding of the kingdom was the correct view.

The dispensationalist defends his view of the Messianic kingdom with a literalistic interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. An easy way to explain the dispensational system of interpretation (i.e., hermeneutic) is to illustrate it with a general description of the millennial situation expected by respected dispensational authorities based on their general interpretation of prophecy. Dispensationalists are expecting literal and cataclysmic topographical changes in the land of Palestine. The Mount of Olives will be split in two to form a new valley running east and west. Mount Zion will be elevated above all the surrounding hills and the rest of Palestine will be transformed from a mountainous terrain to a great fertile plain.<sup>20</sup> There will be an earthly Jerusalem from which Jesus will exercise his earthly Davidic rule and a heavenly Jerusalem hovering over Palestine from which Christ will co-reign with the church. The heavenly city will have a foundation 1500 miles square and will be either a cube or a pyramid that is 1500 miles high.<sup>21</sup> The land in general and the temple area will be enlarged. The land will be redistributed to the twelve Jewish tribes, and the temple described in Ezekiel's temple vision will be built. The Old Testament priestly and levitical orders will be reestablished under the sons of Zadok, and the offering of bloody sacrifices will be reinstated. From the temple, a small flow of water will come forth whose volume will progressively increase with distance from the temple, becoming a mighty river within a little over a mile from the temple. The river will flow south through Jerusalem and divide to flow west into the Mediterranean Sea and

east into the Dead Sea, which will be transformed into a fresh water body full of fish and surrounded by vegetation.<sup>22</sup> Jerusalem will be the center of a world government system, national Israel will be exalted, and the Gentile nations will be subordinated as Israel's servants.<sup>23</sup> This is the basic millennial situation as described by Dr. John F. Walvoord and Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, who are influential and respected dispensational authorities.

The interpretation of prophecy with the degree of literalism necessary to produce the above view of the Messianic kingdom is the first foundation stone of dispensationalism. The second foundation stone is the parenthesis theory. According to this theory, the church age is an unforeseen parenthesis or interjection in the Jewish program prophesied by the Old Testament prophets. If the Jews had not rejected Jesus, the Jewish kingdom age would have begun at Christ's first coming, according to this theory. But since the Jews did reject Christ, the prophetic program was supposedly interrupted, and the church age, totally unforeseen by the Old Testament prophets, was interjected. The kingdom program is to resume where it left off in the future in the dispensational tribulation and millennium after the church age. According to dispensationalism, no Old Testament prophecy can refer directly to the parenthetical church age. These prophecies must be fulfilled literally in the context of a recontinued Old Testament Jewish economy. This parenthesis theory is the logical implication of the dispensation literalistic hermeneutic. If the dispensational interpretation of the Old Testament prophets is correct, then these prophecies are not pointing to the church age and there must be a future Jewish age if these prophecies are going to be fulfilled.

This parenthesis doctrine is dogmatically asserted by Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder and first president of Dallas Theological

Seminary, in the following statement about the beginning of the church age:

Up to that time Judaism had not only occupied the field, but had been engendered, promoted and blessed of God. It was God's will for his people in the world. The beneficiaries of Judaism were as intrenched in their religious position and convictions and as much sustained by divine sanctions as are the most orthodox believers today. The new divine program had intentionally been unrevealed before its inauguration. It came, therefore, not only with great suddenness, but wholly without Old Testament revelation. The case would be nearly parallel if a new and unpredicted project were to be forced in at this time to supersede Christianity. The unyielding prejudice and violent resistance which arose in the Jewish mind was in direct ratio to the sincerity with which the individual Jew cherished his agelong privileges. Added to all this and calculated to make the new divine enterprise many-fold more difficult was its bold announcement that the despised Gentiles would be placed on equal footing with the Jew. ...

... In fact, the new, hitherto unrevealed purpose of God in the out-calling of a heavenly people from the Jews and Gentiles is so divergent with respect to the divine purpose toward Israel, which purpose preceded it and will yet follow it, that the term parenthetical, commonly employed to describe the new age-purpose, is inaccurate. A parenthetical portion sustains some direct or indirect relation to that which goes before or that which follows; but the present age is not thus related and therefore is more precisely termed an intercalation. The appropriateness of this word will be seen in the fact that, as an interpolation is formed by inserting a word or phrase into a context, so an

intercalation is formed by introducing a day or a period of time into the calendar. The present age of the Church is an intercalation into the revealed calendar or program of God as that program was foreseen by the prophets of old. Such, indeed, is the precise character of the present age.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie, a more recent dispensationalist, has said:

The Church is not fulfilling in any sense the promises to Israel. ... The church age is not seen in God's program for Israel. It is an intercalation. ... The Church is a mystery in the sense that it was completely unrevealed in the Old Testament and now revealed in the New Testament.<sup>25</sup>

This parenthesis view can also be vividly seen in the dispensational interpretation of Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy. According to the dispensationalists, the church age is a prophetically unforeseen parenthesis between the sixty-ninth and the seventieth week of Daniel's seventy weeks (Daniel 9:20-27). The seventieth week is identified with a future seven year tribulation period that precedes the millennium and during which God's program for Israel will be resumed.

The third foundation stone of the dispensational system is the dichotomy between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. According to dispensationalism, the Old Testament saints are not in the church universal, which is the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ. The New Testament church is God's heavenly people while Old Testament and millennial Israel is God's earthly people. According to Dr. C.I. Scofield and Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, leading dispensationalists in an earlier generation, the earthly seed Israel is to spend eternity on the new earth, and the heavenly seed, the

church, is to spend eternity in heaven. In other words, the dichotomy between Israel and the church even lasts throughout eternity. More recent dispensationalists have put the saints of all ages together on the new earth in eternity but maintain their dichotomy throughout eternity by eternally excluding Old Testament saints, tribulation saints and millennial saints from the Body and Bride of Christ. This dispensational teaching on the dichotomy between Israel and the church is found in the following quotations:

Israel's distinction, glory and destiny will always be earthly. They will also be a spiritual people, Jehovah's possession. There is no division, however, between the saved Jew and the saved Gentile of this dispensation, both being in the Church. But after the Church is complete, at the end of this dispensation, there will of necessity be a division. The "holy Jerusalem" of Revelation 21 is the "bride, the Lamb's wife," for whom is the "new heaven," while the "new earth" will be for Israel, the tabernacle of God is to be with them, and "God himself shall be with them, and be their God." The distinctive New Testament spiritual and heavenly blessings are for the Church; those blessings of and on the earth, for Israel.<sup>26</sup>

Judaism is not the bud which has blossomed into Christianity. These systems do have features which are common to both -- God, holiness, Satan, man, sin, redemption, human responsibility, and the issues of eternity -- yet they introduce differences so vast that they cannot coalesce. Each sets up its ground of relationship between God and man -- the Jew by physical birth, the Christian by spiritual birth; each provides its instructions on the life of its adherents -- the law for Israel, the teachings of grace for the Church; each has its sphere of existence -- Israel in the earth for all ages to come, the Church in

heaven. To the end that the Church might be called out from both Jews and Gentiles, a peculiar, unrelated age has been thrust into the one consistent ongoing of the divine program for the earth. It is in this sense that Judaism, which is the abiding portion of the nation Israel, has ceased. With the completion and departure of the Church from earth, Judaism will be again the embodiment of all the divine purpose in the world.<sup>27</sup>

The fact that revelation concerning both Israel and the Church includes truth about God, holiness, sin and redemption by blood, does not eliminate a far greater body of truth in which it is disclosed that Israelites become such by natural birth while Christians become such by a spiritual birth; that Israelites were appointed to live and serve under a meritorious, legal system, while Christians live and serve under a gracious system; that Israelites, as a nation, have their citizenship now and their future destiny centered only in the earth, reaching on to the new earth which is yet to be, while Christians have their citizenship and future destiny centered only in heaven, extending on into the new heavens that are yet to be . . .<sup>28</sup>

That God is continuing His work of redemption in calling out a people for His name in the Church the Body of Christ we gladly affirm, but we also insist that this Body of Christ is distinct from any previous body of redeemed people in its nature, characteristics, time, and promises.<sup>29</sup>

... the Church in a technical sense is strictly limited to those who have accepted Christ in this age. Therefore, the Church is a distinct body of saints in this age.<sup>30</sup>

The marriage of the Lamb is an event which evidently involves only Christ and the church. ... While it would be impossible to eliminate [Old Testament saints and tribulation saints] from the place of observers, they can not be in the position of participants in the event itself.<sup>31</sup>

Reformed theology disagrees with all three of these dispensational foundation stones. According to Reformed theology, the people of God from all ages will together be members of the Body and Bride of Christ and will enjoy eternity together on the new earth. Old Testament Israel is seen as organically related to the New Testament church like childhood is related to adulthood in the life of a man (Galatians 4:1-7). Many of the Old Testament prophecies about Israel -- even Old Testament prophecies that refer to ceremonial law, the tribes, the ancient enemies of Israel, and so on -- are seen as being fulfilled in and through the church in this age. Obviously, there is a clear and even dramatic contrast between the Reformed and the dispensational understandings of the church and prophecy. The thesis of this book is that the Reformed understanding of prophecy and the church is Biblically sound and the dispensational understanding is an artificial imposition upon Scripture.

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## End Notes

- 1 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), page 17, compare page 33.
- 2 Alan Patrick Boyd, "A Dispensational Premillennial Analysis of the Eschatology of the Post-Apostolic Fathers (until the Death of



Justin Martyr)" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1977), page 89.

3 Ibid., unnumbered preface.

4 Ibid., pages 90-91.

5 Ibid., page 92, footnote 1.

6 Ibid., page 89.

7 Ibid., page 91, footnote 2.

". . . until brought to the fore through the writings and preaching and teaching of a distinguished ex-clergyman, Mr. J.N. Darby, in the early part of the last century, it is scarcely to be found in a single book or sermon through a period of sixteen hundred years! If any doubt this statement, let them search, as the writer has in a measure done, the remarks of the so-called Fathers, both pre- and post-Nicene; the theological treatises of the scholastic divines; Roman Catholic writers of all shades of thought; the literature of the Reformation; the sermons and expositions of the Puritans; the general theological works of the day."

8

Harry A. Ironside, *The Mysteries of God* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1908), pages 50-51. Quoted in Daniel Payton Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957) page 29.

9 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pages 178-183.

10 "It is difficult to discover the genealogy of the doctrine of the Covenant of Works which appeared in fully developed form in the last decade of the 16th century."

John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume Four:*

Studies in Theology, Reviews (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), page 219.

11 John T. McNeill, editor and Ford Lewis Battles, translator, The Library of Christian Classics, Volume XX: Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), pages 344-345 (II.VI.2.).

12 Ibid., page 347 (II.VI.4.).

13 Ibid., pages 428-429 (II.X.1.).

14 Ibid., page 429 (II.X.2.).

15 Ibid., page 446 (II.X.20.).

16 John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 224.

J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958),  
17 pages 446-447; John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, page 213; Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1974), pages 300-301.

18 Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost objects to the association of the dispensational millennium with the Mosaic system:

"The kingdom expectation is based on the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the Palestinic covenant, but is no way based on the Mosaic covenant. It is insisted that the covenants will be fulfilled in the kingdom age. This does not, however, link the Mosaic covenant with the kingdom necessarily. It is therefore fallacious to reason that because one believes in the fulfillment of the determinative covenants he must also believe in the restoration of the Mosaic order, which was a conditional covenant, non-determinative and non-eschatological in intent, but given

rather to govern the life of the people in their relation to God in the old economy. One great stumbling block that hinders the acceptance of literal sacrifices in the millennium is removed by observing that, while there are many similarities between the Aaronic and millennial systems, there are also many differences between them that make it impossible that they should be equated."

Dr. Pentecost, however, goes on to argue:

"It can thus be seen that the form of worship in the millennium will bear a strong similarity to the old Aaronic order."

"The very fact that God has instituted an order strangely like the old Aaronic order is one of the best arguments that the millennium is not being fulfilled in the church, composed of Gentiles and Jew, in the present age."

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 518-519.

- 19 "As to the contents of the future expectation thus indicated, there was a great diversity of conceptions. For a knowledge of what was actually believed in some circles prior to and at the time of the birth of Christ, the pseudoepigraphic and apocryphal writings of the period are especially important. But they are far from unanimous in their eschatological outlook. It is, consequently, very difficult to state accurately what the future outlook of the Jews actually was at the beginning of the Christian era. Alongside of utterances that start from the prophecies of the restoration of the people of Israel and of the house of David, other writings lay more emphasis on the supernatural-transcendent character of the great time of salvation."

- Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962), page 10.
- John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 320-321; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 509-510; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pages 147-148.
- 20 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 578,580; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 327-328, 334.
- 21 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 309-315,320; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 509-511.
- 22 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 495-507; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 299-304.
- 23 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:40-41.
- 24 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 136.
- 25 C.I. Scofield with Ella E. Pohle, compiler, *Dr. C.I. Scofield's Question Box* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1917), page 70.
- 26 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:248-249
- 27 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:30.
- 28 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 144.
- 29 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 138.
- 30 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 227.
- 31

"From these Scriptures the evidence is conclusive that the Church is the Bride of Christ and that Israel will have her place of

honor in the kingdom as companions of the Bride."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:133.

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## Chapter 2

### Israel and the Church

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The consistent dispensationalist is a theologian in the grip of an idea -- the idea that there is a strong dichotomy between Israel and the church. This idea is a relatively modern theory in the history of doctrine that was initially developed and popularized by J. N. Darby (1800-1882), the father of dispensational thought. During a period of convalescence in 1827, Darby meditated on the fact that the true Christian through the baptizing work of the Spirit is in union with Christ and therefore is seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:4-7). With this on his mind, Darby read in Isaiah 32:15-20 about a prophesied outpouring of the Spirit upon Israel that would bring earthly blessings upon the people of God. Darby took this Scriptural data and concluded it to imply a strong contrast between earthly blessings prophesied for Israel and heavenly blessings promised to the Christian in the New Testament. From this Darby developed his theory that God has two peoples, an earthly people and a heavenly people.<sup>1</sup> In 1840, Darby gave the following summary of his new ideas on prophecy:

Prophecy applies itself properly to the earth; its object is not heaven. It was about things that were to happen on the earth; and the not seeing this has misled the Church. We have thought that we ourselves had within us the accomplishments of these earthly blessings, whereas we are called to heavenly blessings. The privilege of the Church is to have its portion in the heavenly places; and later blessings will be shed forth upon the earthly people. The Church is something altogether apart -- a kind of heavenly economy, during the rejection of the earthly people,

who are put aside on account of their sins, and driven out among the nations, out of the midst of which nations God chooses a people for the enjoyment of heavenly glory with Jesus Himself. The Lord, having been rejected by the Jewish people, is become wholly a heavenly person. This is the doctrine which we find peculiarly in the apostle Paul. It is no longer the Messiah for the Jews, but a Christ exalted, glorified; and it is for want of taking hold of this exhilarating truth, that the Church has become so weak.<sup>2</sup>

This summary statement demonstrates that Darby had come to interpret Scripture in terms of the dispensational dichotomy and parenthesis theories. He had come to view the Jews as the earthly people of God with an earthly purpose, destiny and hope, the Christians as the heavenly people of God with a heavenly purpose, destiny and hope, and the church age as the heavenly parenthesis in the earthly program.

Reformed theology, of course, strongly disagrees with this radical dichotomy between Israel and the church. Reformed theologians do recognize Biblical distinctions between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church but not a strong dichotomy. The Biblical distinctions between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church involve an organic progression analogous to the development of a child into an adult (Galatians 4:3-4). The organic development brought about during the time of the New Testament includes the unprecedentedly clear revelation through the Incarnate Word and His apostles, the historical accomplishment of the prophesied Messianic atonement, the outpouring of the Spirit in unprecedented fullness, the cessation of the burdensome Mosaic ceremonial laws, and the universalization of the kingdom previously limited to the Jewish nation. In the midst of these developmental changes, there

was also a strong continuity with the Old Testament program. Although God often dealt with Old Testament Israel in terms of earthly institutions and promises, these were pictures of the same heavenly realities later spoken of in the New Testament and there was a genuine spiritual dimension in the lives of the Old Testament saints. And although the New Testament often speaks in terms of heavenly and spiritual realities, the Christian is still in the world and has been given the earthly task of being the light of the world, the salt of the earth and the discipler of the nations.

Here are two antithetically opposed systems in regard to the relationship between Israel and the church. To determine which system is correct, we must go to Scripture. A New Testament passage that speaks to this issue is Ephesians 2:12-21, a passage in which the Apostle Paul contrasts the covenant status of Gentiles in general under the old covenant with that of Gentile Christians under the new covenant. In this passage, Paul first reminds the Ephesian Christians of their former spiritual poverty before their coming to faith in Christ in the new covenant age. As "Gentiles in the flesh," they were uncircumcised and were therefore without what had been in former times the sign and seal of God's covenant (verse 11). Paul then in verse 12 summarizes what had once been these Ephesian Gentiles' covenant status:

... at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.

As the uncircumcised, they had been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" (verse 12). Outward membership in God's covenant community does not guarantee inward membership and salvation,



but it is important. Outward membership in Old Testament Israel had not been without its advantages, to say the least:

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there in circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

Romans 3:1-2

... Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 9:4-5

... salvation is of the Jews.

John 4:22

The "Gentiles in the flesh" under the old covenant had been without these advantages due to their alienation from Israel. The word here translated "being aliens" is a strong term used at times to speak of estrangement from God due to moral abominations (Ezekiel 14:5,7-8 LXX; Hosea 9:10 LXX). After the formation of the nations at the tower of Babel, God had chosen one man, Abraham, to father the one nation, Israel, through which He would exclusively administer His covenants until the universalism of the new covenant age when His people would be from every tribe, nation and tongue. During that period of Jewish particularism, God had "suffered all nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16), allowing them to remain in their bondage to demonic paganism and therefore in a state of alienation from God and His people.

As "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel," the "Gentiles in the flesh" had been, most significantly, "without Christ." Under the old covenant, the Jews, of course, had not known the historically manifested Jesus of Nazareth, but they had known the Messiah yet to come through the "covenants of promise" (verse 12). Paul in a sermon addressed to physical Jews stated that

... the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; ...

Acts 13:32b-33a

The uncircumcised Gentile's relationship to these promises had been that of the "stranger," a general term for the foreigner or alien who was without the rights associated with citizenship in the covenant community.

Paul then contrasts this former position of spiritual poverty with the covenant status in this age of Gentiles who believe in Christ. Contrary to their former status, they are now "no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (verse 19). Each major word in this statement is worthy of close examination. According to verse 12, the "Gentiles in the flesh" had been "strangers from the covenants of promise," but now the Gentiles in Christ are "no more strangers or foreigners" (verse 19). The Greek word here translated foreigners is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the resident aliens who lived in Israel and had certain legal rights but who were not citizens in Israel and could not partake of the Passover (Exodus 12:45 LXX). This word literally means "the one beside the house," and Paul states that to be no longer a foreigner is to be "of the household of God," a

symbolic expression for membership in God's people under both the old and the new covenants (Numbers 12:7; 1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 3:5-6). The Gentiles in Christ are also now "fellow-citizens with the saints." In the Greek, the word translated fellow-citizen in verse 19 is closely related to the word in verse 12 translated commonwealth in the King James Version. In the New International Version, this word from verse 12 is translated citizenship, a translation which better shows the close affinity of this word with the one translated fellow-citizen. The Gentile in the flesh had been alienated "from the commonwealth of Israel," but the Gentile Christian is now a "fellow-citizen with the saints." The "saints" are God's holy people, the people of the covenant. The Christian is a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26; Philippians 3:20; Revelation 3:12) and therefore a fellow-citizen with with the saints of all ages (Hebrews 12:22-23).

Verses 13 and 17 also relate to our discussion. In verse 13, the Gentile Christians at Ephesus are referred to as "ye who sometimes were far off." Then in verse 17, the apostle says,

And (Christ) came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh.

As we have seen from verse 13, those who are referred to as "afar off" are the pagan Gentiles who had lived as "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel." Who then are those referred to as "them that were nigh"? Many believe that this term has reference here to the Jews at Ephesus who had heard the Gospel message.<sup>3</sup> Peter used some similar terminology in his Pentecost sermon to the Jews at Jerusalem:

For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

The Jew as a member of God's covenant people was already provisionally near to the Gospel since the Gospel was the fulfillment of the covenants of promise that had been made with Old Testament Israel. Of course, if the Jew persisted in rejecting the Messiah, he was cut off from the true covenant people, but the Gospel was offered to the Jew first and then to the Gentile (Romans 1:16). In verse 13 of Ephesians 2, Paul says,

But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.

Let us assume that the terms "near" and "far" do refer to the respective relationships of the Jew and the pagan Gentile to the Old Testament covenants of promise at the time of the transition between the old and new covenants when the new covenant Gospel was first being offered. Then Paul in verse 13 is teaching that the pagan Gentile who believed in Christ had been made an heir in new covenant fullness of those Old Testament covenants of promise which formerly had exclusively belonged to Old Testament Israel.

This passage is not teaching that the Gentile Christian has become a member of Old Testament Israel. Ephesians two teaches that the Gentile believer has become a member of the church of Messianic fullness, which Paul calls "the new man" (verse 15) and which Paul speaks of as a building built upon the foundation of the New Testament apostles and prophets (verse 20). The importance of this passage is that it stresses both the newness of the church and the continuity of the church with God's previous covenant program. The answer to Gentile alienation from Israel and her covenants is membership in the new man, which makes one a fellow-citizen with

God's covenant people and a member of God's house. These terms have roots in the Old Testament, and this passage fits in well with the Reformed teaching that the New Testament church is Old Testament Israel come to new covenant maturity. The dispensational interpretation of this Ephesians passage puts all its emphasis on the teaching in this passage that the New Testament church is a "new man."<sup>4</sup> True, there is a significant newness to the New Testament church, but that fact does not nullify the equally valid teaching in Ephesians 2 that the New Testament church has a strong relationship of organic continuity with Old Testament Israel. Is the newness of the new covenant church the newness of maturity that occurs in a context of organic continuity with the past? Or is the newness of the new covenant church best explained by the rigid dispensational dichotomy and parenthesis theories? For the dispensationalist to assume automatically and dogmatically that the "new man" has no organic continuity with the Old Testament covenant people is to commit the logical fallacy of begging the question.

Under the Mosaic covenant, only practicing Jews were members of God's covenant people. In this age of the new covenant, however, believing Jews and Gentiles are together full members of God's holy people (Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 2:14) and unbelieving individual Jews and Gentiles are together outside the camp of covenant blessings. There are two ways this equalization of spiritual status between Jew and Gentile could have been effected. In line with the dispensational dichotomy and parenthesis theories, the Old Testament covenants could have parenthetically become inoperative. According to Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, "... the Jew has been removed from the place of special privilege which was his in the past age and leveled to the same standing as the Gentile ..."<sup>5</sup> According to Dr.

John F. Walvoord, "In the present age, Israel has been set aside, her promises held in abeyance, with no progress in the fulfillment of her program."<sup>6</sup> And the new and distinct privileges of the church could have been introduced for believing Jews and Gentiles alike. Or, in line with the Reformed teaching that the church age is an exalted continuation of the Old Testament covenant program, believing Gentiles could have been elevated to the privileged position of spiritual Israel by being made full heirs of the Old Testament covenants in new covenant fullness. Believing Jews would have remained in spiritual Israel during the transition between the old and new covenants, and unbelieving Jews would have been cut off from the covenant people in judgment (Romans 11:20). To be cut off from the church in judgment was to be reduced in the eyes of the covenant people to the religious status of a pagan (Matthew 18:17). Ephesians 2 supports this second suggestion through its teaching that believing Gentiles today participate in the covenants of promise that formerly had been limited to the commonwealth of Israel.

Another relevant passage is Romans 11, in which Paul discusses the status of Jews in the church age. The olive tree of Romans 11 stands for the privileged position of blessing that belonged to Old Testament Israel (compare Jeremiah 11:16; Hosea 14:6). It is an olive tree whose roots are firmly established in the Old Testament covenants made with the Jewish patriarchs. Before looking at Paul's use of the figure, let us examine how we should expect Paul to use the figure if he really were a dispensationalist. Since, according to dispensationalism, all the Jews in this parenthetical age are cut off from their Old Testament privileges, we should expect Paul to teach that all the branches on the olive tree of Israel were broken off at the beginning of the church age. Like the clock of the Jewish prophetic program that supposedly stopped ticking at the beginning of the church age, the old Jewish olive tree would have to stand dormant

during the church age until that future tribulation period and millennium when God again resumes the Jewish prophetic program. It would be like the Jewish train that is waiting on the side track until the church train passes by on the track of history, to use another illustration popular with dispensationalists. Also, since according to dispensationalism, God's program for the church is totally distinct from God's program for Israel, we should expect Paul to teach that at the beginning of the church age a new olive tree representing the church was divinely planted. And all the believing Jews who were broken off from the olive tree of dormant Israel and all the believing Gentiles who were formerly in the wild olive tree of paganism are in this age grafted into the olive tree of church blessings. But this, of course, is not what Paul teaches. Paul instead teaches that only unbelieving Jews were broken off from the olive tree of Israel. Jews who accepted Christ remained where they always had been -- in the olive tree of Israel. And believing Gentiles were grafted into the olive tree of Israel. This Romans 11 explanation of the status of Jews in the church age strongly implies that the church is spiritual Israel in this new covenant age.

Another passage which shows the strong continuity between Israel and the church is Hebrews 3:5-6. This passage refers to both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church as God's house, which demonstrates their unity as the one people of God. This passage builds upon Numbers 12:7, where the term God's house definitely does refer to Israel.<sup>7</sup> This passage also demonstrates the organic progression between the testaments with its message that the Christ of the new covenant era, who is a Son over God's house, is superior to Moses of the old covenant era, who was a servant in God's house.

Another passage that speaks to the issue of the Biblical relationship between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church is Revelation 21. Revelation 21 reveals that the New Jerusalem is symbolic for the saints of all the ages. The city's twelve foundation stones, having the names of the twelve apostles written upon them, represent the New Testament saints. And the city's twelve gates, having the names of the twelve tribes of Israel written on them, represent the Old Testament saints (Revelation 21:12,14). The New Jerusalem, a city whose citizenship includes the saints of all the ages, is in this passage called the Bride of Christ (Revelation 21:2,9-10). The Bride of Christ is elsewhere defined as the church universal, the Body of Christ (Ephesians 5:22-33). This means that both Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are together in the Body of Christ.

The conclusion that Old Testament saints are included in the New Jerusalem is further confirmed by Hebrews 11 and 12. Hebrews 11 sets forth examples of faith in the lives of Old Testament saints and ends with the following comment on the salvific status of the Old Testament saints:

And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

Following this, in Hebrews 12:22-24, the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem are described as follows:

But you have come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the



mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

A comparison of the above verses can leave little doubt that both Old Testament and New Testament saints are citizens of the heavenly city. Hebrews 12:22-23 teaches that "the spirits of just men made perfect," are included among the New Jerusalem inhabitants, and Hebrews 11:39-40 gives evidence that this designation is inclusive of the Old Testament saints.

Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost attempts to explain away the implications of the above reference to the New Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ by arguing that though the New Jerusalem does contain all the saints of all the ages, the city takes its "chief characterization" from the New Testament church, which alone is the Bride of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Dr. C.I. Scofield has a different explanation:

The "Lamb's wife" here [Revelation 19:7] is the "bride" (Rev. 21.9), the Church, identified with the "heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb. 12.22,23), and to be distinguished from Israel, the adulterous and repudiated "wife" of Jehovah, yet to be restored (Isa. 54.1-10; Hos. 2.1-17), who is identified with the earth (Hos. 2.23). A forgiven and restored wife could not be called either a virgin (2 Cor. 11.2,3), or a bride.<sup>9</sup>

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer suggests the following:

It is named for the Bride of Christ and probably because she has some superior right to it; yet other peoples and beings enter her gates.<sup>10</sup>

And Dr. John F. Walvoord says the following:

The New Jerusalem is given detailed revelation and is described in general "as a bride adorned for her husband" (Revelation 21:2). The figure of marriage is used for the church, for Israel, and here for the city in which the saints of all ages will dwell. The fact that the marriage figure is used for more than one entity in Scripture should not be considered confusing, nor should the city be identified specifically with the church. It is rather that the New Jerusalem has all the beauty and freshness of a bride adorned for her husband.<sup>11</sup>

Another significant passage that speaks directly to this issue is Matthew 21:43, a statement which Christ made to the Jewish leaders near the end of His earthly ministry: "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruit thereof." The question that this statement raises is, What is this nation that was given the kingdom of God? The obvious answer is the church, which is elsewhere designated a nation (1 Peter 2:9). If the church was given the kingdom program that God had first administered through Old Testament Israel and had previously rooted in the Old Testament covenants, then there is a strong continuity between Israel and the church. If the church assumes the Old Testament kingdom program begun with Old Testament Israel, then the church truly is the Israel of the new covenant.

A common dispensational answer to the above question is that the kingdom will be given "to the nation Israel when she shall turn to the Lord and be saved before entering the millennial kingdom."<sup>12</sup> This means that the whole church age must intervene between the first clause of the verse in which the kingdom is taken away from physical Israel and the second clause in which the kingdom is given to another nation! Some dispensationalists do admit that this verse is

teaching that the kingdom in some sense has been transferred in this age from Old Testament Israel to the New Testament church or to the believing Gentiles of this age.<sup>13</sup> Those who make this admission must define away through qualifications the significance and meaning of this transfer if they are to maintain their dichotomy between Israel and the church with their two separate and distinct programs. Whenever dispensationalists admit that the kingdom is related to the church, they usually interpret it as either the kingdom in mystery form of Matthew 13 or as God's non-theocratic rule of providence.

Additional insight into the transition of the kingdom from Old Testament Israel to the New Testament church can be found in the Biblical teaching on the Messianic Good Shepherd. The Messianic Good Shepherd was both to dispossess the "bad shepherd" leaders of Israel and to judge between members of the flock of Israel (Ezekiel 34:7-31). Jesus Christ took the kingdom away from the leaders of Israel who had opposed Him and gave the kingdom to the "poor of the flock" (Zechariah 11:7,11), the righteous remnant within the nation who were His disciples. In Luke 12:32, Jesus said to His disciples: "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." His disciples were the true sheep in Israel, for the true sheep within the flock of Israel were those who recognized the Messianic Shepherd, listened to His teachings, and obediently followed Him (John 10:14,27). Those Jews who rejected Christ did not believe because they were not true sheep (John 10:26).

Jesus also taught that He also had sheep outside of the fold of His Jewish disciples (John 10:16). Jesus was here speaking of the Gentiles who would later believe and be incorporated into His church. Though these had not yet believed, Christ spoke of them as those chosen and predestined to be His from before the foundation

of the world. This statement parallels the Lord's later visionary commandment that instructed Paul to continue preaching in Corinth because "I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:10).

In John 10:16, Christ said that these Gentile sheep were at that time outside of His present fold of disciples and that He would lead them into His one flock.<sup>14</sup> The word translated fold in John 10:16 literally refers to a walled court (compare John 10:1) and brings to mind a picture of Israel walled off from the Gentile nations by her ceremonial laws. Jesus was to lead these Gentile sheep into His one flock, "for He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us" (Ephesians 2:14). The new covenant people of God are one flock with no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

The use of the flock metaphor in John 10 demonstrates the relationship of continuity between old covenant Israel and the new covenant church. Both old covenant Israel and the new covenant church are spoken of as God's flock.<sup>15</sup> Christ's sheep are those for whom He savingly died (John 10:11) and to whom He has given eternal life (John 10:28). Since salvation is found in Christ alone, God's true sheep are the saints of all ages.

Taken together, this data on the Good Shepherd teaches that Jesus took the kingdom away from the leaders and members of old covenant Israel who rejected Him, gave this kingdom to the righteous remnant within the nation who received Him in faith, and then added to this one flock the believing Gentiles. This message given under the figure of the one flock is similar to the message that Paul teaches in Romans 11 under the figure of the one olive tree. Both John 10 and Romans 11 teach the essential unity of the people of God through the ages as one flock and one olive tree and illustrate the

organic progression and the developmental continuity in the transition between the old and new covenants.

Another group of passages that are relevant to our discussion of the continuity question consists of passages which give the church a Jewish name. The most commonly discussed of these is Galatians 6:16, where Paul refers to the church as the Israel of God. Dispensationalists argue that Paul here was referring exclusively to the Jews in the early church and not to the church as a whole.<sup>16</sup> But one must remember that one of Paul's main themes in Galatians is the teaching that the Jews have no special privileges over the Gentiles in this age (Galatians 3:28). Christ has broken down the religious dividing wall between Jew and Gentile in the Christian church (Ephesians 2:14). If Paul then gives the Jews in the church a special status or recognition by referring to them exclusively as the Israel of God, then Paul would have destroyed his own argument. He would have played into the hands of the Judaizers by giving them a valid reason for arguing that Gentile Christians could improve their covenant status by becoming Jewish proselytes as well as Christians. According to dispensationalists, believing Jews and Gentiles in the church are together heirs of spiritual promises, but Jews, believing and unbelieving, are exclusive heirs of national promises.<sup>17</sup> Since Paul taught that there is no Jew or Gentile in Christ (Galatians 3:28), he must have been referring to the whole church when he spoke of the Israel of God in Galatians 6:16. If this interpretation is correct, then this verse would be best translated "Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God" as in the New International Version, and the true Israel of God in this age would be defined as all those who walk by the rule of not boasting except in the cross of Christ.

Elsewhere the church is called the diaspora, a technical term for Jews living in Gentile nations (1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1); the twelve tribes (James 1:1; Revelation 7:4; Luke 22:30); a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (1 Peter 2:9-10; Revelation 1:6; Titus 2:14; compare Exodus 19:6; Deuteronomy 7:6); Jews who are Jews inwardly (Romans 2:28-29); the circumcision (Philippians 3:3; compare Colossians 2:11, Romans 2:29); comers unto Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:22); citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem (Galatians 4:26); children of promise like Isaac (Galatians 4:28); Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

Typically, dispensationalists argue that these Jewish names given to the church refer only to believing Jews in the church. There are some cases where the New Testament does make a limited reference to believing Jews, as in Romans 9:6: "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." That verse is contrasting believing Jews and unbelieving Jews. There, however, are many other cases where Paul is clearly referring to the whole church when he uses a Jewish title. For example, Paul defined the circumcision as those "which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). The circumcision is a title for Israel (Ephesians 2:11), and this description of the true circumcision in this age is inclusive of all true believers, both Jew and Gentile. All Christians are spiritually circumcised (Colossians 2:11-12), and "he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart" (Romans 2:29).

It is also relevant that Jesus in Revelation 2:9 and 3:9 called the Jews who were then persecuting the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia, those "which say they are Jews, and are not" and "the synagogue of Satan." These verses clearly show that those ethnic Jews who

rejected Christ were no longer considered a part of the true Israel. Paul said in Romans 3:28: "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh" (Romans 3:28).

The relationship between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church is not one of strong dichotomy but one of organic, developmental continuity. If the Bible presents any group as being in a dichotomous relationship with spiritual Israel, it is not the New Testament church but New Testament Phariseeism, which developed into what is today called normative Judaism. The New Testament age differs from the Old Testament period in its non-bloody rituals and its greater spiritual fullness, but the saints of both ages constitute the one people of God who are together the Body and Bride of Christ.

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## End Notes

1 Daniel Payton Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957), pages 38-41.

2 Ibid., page 45; quoting from J.N. Darby, "The Hopes of the Church of God," Collected Writings (William Kelly, editor; 35 volumes; second edition; London: G. Morrish, n.d.), 2:571-572.

3 "In Eph. 2:13 Gentile Christians are reminded of God's gift that those who were once far from God, ..., have been brought near to Him by Christ and become His children. In Eph. 2:17, which sets Is. 57:19 in the context of salvation history ..., the Gentiles are told that to them, who are far from God ..., Christ brought peace and salvation no less than to the Jews, so that the distant and the

near, Gentile and Jewish Christians, experience as the great mystery of God through Christ their union into the new people of God."

Gerhard Kittel, editor; Geoffrey W. Bromily, editor and translator, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 4:374.

See also Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:74; John Eadie, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (reprint: Minneapolis: James and Klock Christian Publishing Co., 1977; original: Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1883), pages 169-170; William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition on Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), pages 213-214; T.K. Abbott, *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clerk, 1897), page 60.

4 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 165.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:248.

5 "The Gentile was not elevated to the level of Jewish privilege; but the Jew was lowered to the level of the hopeless Gentile, from which position either Jew or Gentile might be saved through grace alone into a heavenly position and glory."

*Ibid.*, 4:75.

6 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 136. Yet on page 165, Dr. Walvoord argues that "Israel is not reduced to the



bankruptcy of Gentiles--to become 'strangers from the covenants of promise' ..." Dr. Walvoord's point may be that although unbelieving individual Jews are not heirs of spiritual blessings, all Jews, believing and unbelieving, remain heirs of the national promises, in dispensational theory (page 169). On page 136, he says, "Promises may be delayed in fulfillment but not cancelled."

7 Compare Exodus 16:31; 2 Samuel 1:12; Jeremiah 31:31; Matthew 10:6; 15:24; Acts 2:36.

8 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), page 576; compare page 227.

C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), page 1348 (note on Revelation 19:7).

10 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:367.

11 Dr. John F. Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), page 161.

12 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 71.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible: The New Testament*, 13 note on Matthew 21:43; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 465-466.

This distinction between the flock and the fold in John 10:16 is 14 not made clear in the King James Version where both Greek words are translated fold.

Israel: Psalm 74:1; 78:52; 79:13; 95:7; 100:3; Isaiah 40:11; 63:11; 15 Jeremiah 13:17; 23:1; 50:6; Ezekiel 34:31; Micah 7:14; Zechariah 10:3; 13:7; Matthew 10:6; 15:24. Church: Acts 20:28-29; 1 Peter 2:25; 5:2-3.

16 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pages 139-140. According to Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, there is no spiritual Israel

in this age:

"There is a distinction between the true church and true or spiritual Israel. Prior to Pentecost there were saved individuals, but there was no church, and they were a part of spiritual Israel, not the church. After the day of Pentecost and until the rapture we find the church which is His body, but no spiritual Israel. After the rapture we find no church, but a true or spiritual Israel again. These distinctions must be kept clearly in mind."

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 199.

Dr. Pentecost defines Jewish Christians as those "who would be a part of spiritual Israel" (*Ibid*, page 89). I assume him to mean by this that Jewish Christians are those Jews who, because of their faith, would be a part of spiritual Israel if this were not the parenthetical church age.

<sup>17</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 169.

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## Chapter 3

### The Parenthesis Theory and the Church in Prophecy

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The most basic disagreement between dispensationalism and Reformed theology centers around the relationship between the New Testament church and Old Testament Israel. According to dispensationalism, the church age is a parenthesis in the Jewish kingdom program prophesied in the Old Testament. The New Testament church at Pentecost, they teach, was an absolutely new entity, a mystery to which no Old Testament prophecy had directly referred. They teach that all the Jewish kingdom prophecies referred to a Jewish millennial kingdom that was postponed until after the unexpected church age because of the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Of course, Reformed theology disagrees with this teaching. Reformed theology recognizes both that the church at Pentecost was something new in a relative sense and that the church is built upon and continues the Old Testament kingdom. Just because the butterfly (the heavenly people) emerging from the cocoon is new on the scene does not mean that it has no direct relationship to the caterpillar (the earthly people) that built the cocoon. Also, the kingdom program's being taken from the Jewish leadership because they rejected Jesus does not mean that the kingdom program itself was postponed. According to Reformed theology, the church is spiritual Israel come to dispensational maturity and is the fulfillment of many prophecies made about Israel in the Old Testament.

Which of these two opposing views of the relationship between Israel and the church is correct? From the nature of the question, one should expect to find some clues to the correct answer by studying

the New Testament's use of Old Testament prophecy. If the New Testament ever quotes any Old Testament prophecy as referring directly to the New Testament church, then a basic element of the dispensational system is thereby discredited. Unfortunately for the dispensationalists, there are such quotations in the New Testament.

Probably the best known such Old Testament prophecy is Joel 2:28. Now take note: this prophecy comes from the Jewish Old Testament. According to dispensationalists, the Old Testament prophets were absolutely and completely ignorant of the coming church age. They supposedly had been led by God to believe that the coming of the Messiah would be followed by the dispensational Jewish millennium, not by a church age. Also, the prophecy of Joel was addressed to Israel and the children of Zion (Joel 2:23,27), not to the church. Since Israel means Israel, and since church means church, a prophecy about Israel can have no direct relationship to the church, according to the dispensationalists. Now comes the test: What does the New Testament have to say about the fulfillment of Joel 2:28?

We find Joel 2:28 quoted by Simon Peter in Acts 2:16-17 on Pentecost, the birthday of the New Testament church! The Holy Spirit was on that day poured out upon the church in unprecedented fullness, and Peter explained this phenomenon by saying, "This is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel," and then by quoting Joel 2:28-32. If words are to be taken in their normal and literal sense, it is hard to imagine how one could communicate more clearly that an event was a fulfillment of prophecy than with the words this is that.

The Bible also indicates that Joel 2 continues to be fulfilled throughout this age. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter indicated that the outpoured Spirit as a gift promised in prophecy was also for "all

that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts 2:39), a reference to pagan Gentiles who would believe. The blessings of the Pentecost outpouring were extended to believing uncircumcised Gentiles in Acts 10. Now that the blessings of the new covenant have been ushered in and extended to all nations, the Holy Spirit is poured out in fulfillment of Joel 2 every time a person is regenerated (Titus 3:5-6).

Consistent dispensationalists, because of their presupposed theological system, have difficulty with such an understanding of Joel 2. They cannot even admit that Pentecost where Peter said "this is that" was an outpouring of the Spirit foreseen by the prophet Joel. Dispensationalists believe that Joel's prophesied outpouring will occur in their yet future Jewish tribulation period and millennium, in an age in which there is no baptizing work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> There is a note of irony here. The Pentecost outpouring is identified as the baptism of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 10:44-48; 11:15-18), that divine work that puts one into the Body of Christ, the church universal (1 Corinthians 12:13). Yet dispensationalists say that the true outpouring, the one genuinely foreseen by the prophet, will occur in an age in which there is no baptizing work of the Holy Spirit, for dispensationalists have no place for either the church or the baptism of the Holy Spirit in their earthly millennial program.

How do dispensationalists deal with Peter's words at Pentecost? The following quotation from Merrill F. Unger is typical of many dispensationalists' understanding of this passage:

Peter's phraseology "this is that" means nothing more than "this is [an illustration of that] which was spoken by the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). In the reference there is not the slightest hint at a continued fulfillment during the church age or a coming

fulfillment toward the end of the church age. The reference is solely in an illustrative sense to Jewish listeners at Pentecost. Fulfillment of Joel's prophecy is still future and awaits Christ's second coming in glory and a copious spiritual outpouring ushering in kingdom blessing (cf. Zech. 12:10-13:1; Acts 1:6,7).<sup>2</sup>

According to another dispensational writer:

Peter says that the events of Acts 2 are what Joel spoke of but not necessarily the fulfillment of what Joel spoke of!<sup>3</sup>

The writer goes on to speak of the Pentecostal event as containing "a breakthrough" and "a specimen" of the kingdom age prophesied by Joel. Dispensationalists feel free to interpret Peter's words "this is that" in a less than literal manner so they can interpret Joel's prophecy with a dispensationally strict literality.

Interestingly, the ultra-dispensationalists believe that Joel's prophecy did have a direct fulfillment on Pentecost.<sup>4</sup> According to ultra-dispensationalists, there are three peoples of God: Old Testament Israel, the early Jewish Petrine church, and the later Pauline "Body of Christ" Christian church. Since ultra-dispensationalists associate Pentecost exclusively with the early Jewish church and not with the Christian church, they can allow a fulfillment of Jewish prophecy in Acts and still consistently maintain the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the Christian church. Just as dispensationalists believe the Sermon on the Mount to be Jewish truth not directly related to the church, so some ultra-dispensationalists believe the book of Acts and all the New Testament epistles written during that time period to be Jewish truth not directly related to the Christian church.

Dispensationalists argue for their futuristic view of Joel's prophecy from the prophecy's mention of cataclysmic events in the heavens. They ask when in the church age was the sun turned to darkness and when did the moon become blood? In the Old Testament, however, similar language was used to describe the national disasters prophesied for Babylon (Isaiah 13:10), Egypt (Ezekiel 32:7-8), and Edom and the Gentile nations in general (Isaiah 34:4-5). Historical accounts of the fall of ancient political empires may be boring to us, but there was nothing boring about the prophecies of such events for the ancient Jews. The prophesied fall of these powerful, antagonistic pagan powers were events poetically comparable to the fall of stars and the darkening of the sun. For the ancient people who were exposed to the splendor and glory of, for example, ancient Babylon, the fall of that city would have seemed about as likely as the fall of the heavenly bodies that ruled the sky. The Bible speaks of the sun and moon as rulers over the heavenly realm (Genesis 1:16) whose continuing rule is a metaphor for permanency (Jeremiah 31:35-36). This is my understanding of this language. Others view such language as a literal description of the second coming of Christ and believe that the prophets spoke of these ancient national judgments in terms of the final judgment or in conjunction with a description of the final judgment. What is certain is that Biblical prophetic language sometimes associates cataclysmic events in the heavens with the fall of supposedly infallible and everlasting political systems. First century Judea was no mighty political power but it was God's chosen nation and regarded by first century Jews as under God's protection. Its fall and destruction was unthinkable.

I believe Joel used this language associated with cataclysmic national judgments to refer to the general principle that God pours out His wrath upon His enemies as well as His Spirit upon His people. The conquering Messiah throughout the new covenant era leads the

horsemen of the Apocalypse in judgment against those nations that reject Him (Revelation 6). This general principle about the outpouring of God's wrath had a special application in God's judgment upon the apostate Jewish nation in 70 A.D. (compare 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). At the time of Jesus' crucifixion, there were literal signs and wonders in heaven and on earth--the darkening of the sun, the quaking of the earth, the rending of the rocks, the opening of graves (Matthew 27:45-54). Some who observed these extraordinary events were filled with fear and smote their breasts (Matthew 27:54; Luke 23:48), indications that some may have recognized these events as warnings of a coming divine judgment. Peter in his Pentecostal sermon exhorted his Jewish listeners to "be saved from this perverse generation!" (Acts 2:40). This exhortation had reference to salvation from this coming national judgment which Jesus had prophesied, and history testifies that the Jewish church was delivered from that catastrophe. Also, when Jesus prophesied this national judgment, He used apocalyptic language similar to that found in Joel 2 (Matthew 24:29; Luke 21:11,25). This interpretation of Joel 2 finds further support in John the Baptist's statement that the Messiah would baptize not only with the Holy Spirit but also with the fire of judgment (Matthew 3:10-12; compare Malachi 3:1-2; 4:5-6).

The prophecy in Joel as quoted by Peter also spoke about "wonders in heaven above, and signs in the earth beneath; blood, fire and vapor of smoke" (Acts 2:19). In Jewish literature, the phrase signs and wonders is almost always associated with Moses and the deliverance of Israel from Egypt through mighty acts of God.<sup>5</sup> The last words of the Five Books of Moses are:



And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. In all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, and in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses showed in the sight of all Israel.

Deuteronomy 34:10-12  
(compare Acts 7:36)

Joel's mention of "blood, fire and vapor of smoke" pointed to the Nile's being turned to blood and the plague of outpoured hail and fire and to the fire and smoke on Mount Sinai. Also, his mention of the darkened sun suggested another of the ten plagues upon Egypt. The age of the Messiah was to include new wonders like those associated with the exodus from Egypt (Micah 7:15). Peter proclaimed that Jesus was "a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22). Indeed Jesus was the prophesied Messianic prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:18; Acts 3:22). The apostles (as well as those supernaturally gifted by the apostles through the laying on of hands) continued to perform Messianic signs and wonders (Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:13; 14:3; 15:12) as signs of their genuine apostleship (2 Corinthians 12:12). The mention of signs and wonders in Joel's prophecy is no basis for teaching that it has yet to find a direct fulfillment.

Lastly, dispensationalists sometimes argue that only their system can adequately explain the cessation of the gift of prophecy after the age of the apostles. Dispensationalists argue that if the kingdom period prophesied in Joel 2 is the church age, then this age should be an age of continuing prophecy and miracles in the daily lives of believers.<sup>6</sup> There is a note of historical irony here. Dispensationalists argue that only their system can adequately counter charismatic claims that the

revelatory gifts of tongues and prophecy should be a normative experiences throughout the church age. And yet many Pentecostals who were exposed to the dispensational system through the Keswick movement readily accepted the dispensational system as compatible with their own.<sup>7</sup>

Joel prophesied the Messianic age of the Spirit in which all the people of God would receive the Spirit and spiritual gifts in new covenant fullness. In the Old Testament, the gift of prophecy was associated with the coming of the Spirit in power upon a person (Numbers 11:25,29; 1 Samuel 10:10; 19:20). Joel's prophecy described the new covenant age of spiritual fullness in terms of prophesying, dreaming dreams and seeing visions, all of which the Old Testament associated with the prophetic office (Numbers 12:6). Joel's message was that there was coming an age in which all God's people would receive the Spirit with a fullness and power that was then associated with the prophetic office. And indeed in this age, the least in the kingdom are greater than the greatest of the old covenant prophets (Luke 7:28). I see no need to interpret Joel's prophecy as meaning that the whole new covenant age is to be characterized by literal dreams, visions and prophecies. It was in time past when God spoke in these divers manners through the prophets (Hebrew 1:1). Joel, ministering "in time past," simply spoke of the then unknown future in terms of the working of the Spirit in that age.

There was, admittedly, a more literal fulfillment of Joel's prophecy during the days of the apostles and the New Testament prophets. This was the period during which the New Testament canon was not completed, the apostles were still performing signs and wonders as proofs of apostleship, the extraordinary revelatory gifts of the Spirit were common among the people of God, the Jewish age had not yet ended with finality through the destruction of the temple, and the

church was adjusting to the differences between the old and new covenants. This apostolic period was foundational and not normative for the new covenant age (Ephesians 2:20). Through the inspired committing of the apostolic revelations to Scripture and the completing of the New Testament canon, the faith was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Now, through this completed and all sufficient revelation, all the people of God have access to a greater prophetic revelation than was ever granted to any prophets of old. With the written Word and the illuminating work of the Spirit, the people of God are now no longer dependent upon the prophetic elite for divine teaching (1 John 2:27). This is the age in which all God's people know the Lord from the least to the greatest of them (Jeremiah 31:34).<sup>8</sup> God's perfect revelation through Jesus Christ has been committed to Scripture. Many prophets and righteous men longed to see what we now see through the completed Bible but did not see it.

I see a parallel between the difficulties the modern day dispensationalist has accepting a direct fulfillment of Joel 2 among Christians in the church age and the difficulties which some early Jewish Christians had accepting a fulfillment of Joel 2 among the uncircumcised Gentiles. To prepare Peter the Jew for this event, God gave him a special instructive vision (Acts 10:9- 16). And in Acts 10:44-45, we read of the total surprise experienced by some of the Jewish students of prophecy in the early church when Joel 2 found its first fulfillment among believing uncircumcised Gentiles at the house of Cornelius:

While Peter yet spake these words, the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word. And they of the circumcision which believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because

that on the Gentiles also was poured out the gift of the Holy Ghost.

The Holy Spirit was poured out on the believing uncircumcised Gentiles even as He had been poured out upon believing Jews at Pentecost (Acts 10:47; 11:15). Joel 2 had specifically prophesied that the Spirit would be poured out upon "all flesh," but these early Jewish Christians had apparently assumed that this universal term referred strictly to the Spirit's being given without reference to sex, age or economic status within Israel. This new covenant outpouring upon uncircumcised Gentiles did not fit their preconceived understanding of the prophet's message. The issue of the spiritual equality of uncircumcised Gentile believers within new covenant Israel continued to plague the early church and was not officially settled until the Jerusalem council of Acts 15.

At the Jerusalem council, there was additional New Testament revelation on the fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. This Old Testament prophecy is quoted in Acts 15:13-17 in James' speech at the Jerusalem council:

And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, hearken unto me: Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: that the residue of men shall seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom My name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things.

The issue before the council was the status of Gentile Christians in the church age. Some Jewish Christians were contending that it was necessary for all Gentile Christians to be circumcised and to be required to observe all the Old Testament ceremonial laws. In other words, some Jewish Christians wanted all the Gentile converts to become Jewish proselytes, to become members of Israel in the Old Testament sense. At the Jerusalem council, Peter argued that in the church age, neither Jew nor Gentile had to bear the yoke of observing the ceremonial law in order to receive the full covenantal status of a true Jew. Peter pointed out that God had given the Holy Spirit at Cornelius' house just as freely to uncircumcised Gentile believers as He had given Him to Jewish believers. Paul and Barnabus then related "what miracles and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them." Then James made his climactic speech in which he pointed out that the words of the prophets agreed with what Peter had said about God's taking "out of (the Gentiles) a people for His name" for the first time at Cornelius' house. Here we have the words of the Jewish prophets, who were supposedly ignorant of the church age, agreeing with and confirming an event in the church age. James then paraphrased Amos 9:11-12, a prophecy which in the context of Amos promised that sometime after the destruction of northern Israel by Assyria, God would again return to Israel in a visitation of blessing to rebuild and to restore the Davidic kingdom so that "all the Gentiles, upon whom (God's) name is called," "might seek after the Lord." James viewed this Old Testament prophecy about Gentiles' being included in the covenantal program as being fulfilled by the inclusion of uncircumcised Gentile believers in the New Testament church.

The dispensationalists have their own interpretation of James' use of Amos 9 at the Jerusalem council. I believe the following paraphrase

fairly represents the dispensational interpretation of Acts 15:15-17 found in the Scofield Reference Bible:<sup>9</sup>

After God has taken out a people for His name from among the Gentiles to form the church (which Simeon related would occur first before the second advent), the second advent of Christ will occur and Christ will reestablish the Davidic rule over Israel in order that Israelites may seek after the Lord and also in order that all the millennial Gentiles may do the same.

The dispensationalists stress the words after and first in James' speech. They teach that James addressed the issue of Gentile equality in the church by pointing out that the newly inaugurated and parenthetical period of Gentile blessing must come first and the prophesied period of Jewish blessing must come afterwards. The dispensationalists interpret this as prophetic evidence that there was to be a time of Gentile blessing and that God's special millennial program for Israel had not been abandoned.<sup>10</sup>

There are several inaccuracies in the above that make the exegesis unacceptable.<sup>11</sup> First, the phrase "after this" in Amos does not refer to "after God has taken out a people for His name from among the Gentiles to form the church," an interpretation that puts the time reference after the entire church age in a Jewish millennium. "After this" does not relate chronologically to James' previous statement about Peter's testimony concerning the calling of the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 15:14). "After this" must be related chronologically to the context in Amos. The prophecy of Amos was directed primarily against the northern kingdom of Israel, and the context of Amos 9 refers to the prophesied scattering of the northern kingdom of Israel, which was fulfilled by the Assyrians under Sargon in 722 B.C. (Amos 9:9-10). Therefore, the phrase "after this," which is James'

paraphrase of Amos' phrase "in that day" (compare Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17), referred to the time of the establishment of the New Testament church, which was the prophesied spiritual renewal in Israel after the prophesied scattering.

If dispensationalists interpret "after this" to mean after the church age, then that interpretation contradicts the dispensational parenthesis theory. According to the parenthesis theory, the church age was not foreseen in any Old Testament prophecy. If Amos knew about the church age as a period of Gentile opportunity before the Jewish millennium, then the parenthesis theory is wrong. If Amos did not know about the coming church age, then "after this" could not mean after the church age.

Dr. John F. Walvoord seems to interpret "after this" as meaning after the times of the Gentiles. The times of the Gentiles in dispensational interpretation is that period from the Babylonian captivity to the end of Daniel's seventy weeks during which Jerusalem is under Gentile political rule. The church age is a parenthetical interruption in the dispensational times of the Gentiles, which are now accomplished except for the future seven year tribulation period, which is the seventieth of Daniel's seventy weeks.<sup>12</sup> Dr. Walvoord identifies the "this" of "after this" with "the period of Gentile opportunity" and "the Gentile period." Dr. Walvoord then argues that James was quoting Amos' statement that the restoration of the Davidic kingdom would occur after the Gentile period as evidence that the divine visitation upon the Gentiles which began at Cornelius' house in Acts 10 was to occur first before the millennial period of Jewish blessing.<sup>13</sup> In another book, Dr. Walvoord says the following:

It was difficult for the Jews to understand that for the time being the Gentiles should have a place of equality with Israel, in view

of the many prophecies in the Old Testament which anticipated Israel's pre-eminence and glory...

... it seems that "after these things I will return" refers to the return of Christ after the period of Gentile prominence which began in 606 B.C. and is destined to continue until the second coming. It is after these things--i.e., judgment on Israel, their scattering, and discipline--that Christ will return and build again the tabernacle or tent of David...

... The divine order therefore is judgment on Israel and blessing upon Gentile first, to be followed by judgment on Gentile and blessing on Israel. This is not only the order of the Old Testament, but it is the order of this portion in Acts ...<sup>14</sup>

If Dr. Walvoord is saying that "after this" means "after the times of the Gentiles," then that interpretation does not contradict the dispensational parenthesis theory. That interpretation, however, does take away any relevance the Amos passage would have had to the controversy over the spiritual equality of Gentiles in the church age. All the passage would have said is that after the time of Gentile political rule over Jerusalem, Gentile political superiority over Israel will end and the Davidic political kingdom will be restored. Amos' prophecy would have said nothing about the church age and nothing about spiritual equality for Gentiles. According to dispensational theory, there is no spiritual equality for Gentiles during the "times of the Gentiles" except during the parenthetical and unrevealed church age, of which Amos would have been totally unaware. Is Dr. Walvoord saying that James' argument was that just as there is to be no Jewish political superiority until after the times of the Gentiles, so by analogy the Jew is to have no spiritual superiority over the Gentiles until after the times of the Gentiles? This, however, would



not be a valid argument. The Jews will have spiritual superiority over the Gentiles in the last seven years of the times of the Gentiles, according to dispensationalism. During the future seven year tribulation period, which is after the parenthetical church age and is the last of Daniel's seventy weeks, the Old Testament economy will be restored.

Second, the word first in the sentence "Simeon hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name," does not mean first in sequence before a Jewish millennium. James is referring to Peter's testimony about the introduction of the Gospel into the house of Cornelius (Acts 15:7-9; Acts 10), where the Gospel was introduced to uncircumcised Gentiles for the first time and therefore sequentially first before the miracles wrought among the Gentiles through Paul and Barnabus.

Third, the clause "I will return" does not refer to the second advent. This clause is not found in the Amos passage, and some commentators suggest that it may be based on Jeremiah 12:15 where the return is a return of favor and a divine visitation of blessing. The Hebrew of Jeremiah 12:15 literally says "I will return and have compassion," and the New International Version translates this as "I will again have compassion." The same Greek word translated return in Acts 15 is found in the LXX translation of Genesis 18:10 & 14. There the Angel of the Lord promised to return to Abraham and bless him with a son through Sarah. This was fulfilled through a visitation of blessing recorded in Genesis 21:1-2, not through a literal bodily return. The concept of a visitation of blessing is not uncommon in the Old Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Fourth, the phrase "the residue of men" does not refer to Israel. There is no reference to Israel in this quotation from Amos 9, yet the

Scofield Reference Bible specifically identifies the phrase "the residue of men" with "Israelites." This phrase is the Septuagint translation of the original Hebrew "the remnant of Edom." One can view this as a paraphrase that interpretatively viewed Edom as symbolic for all the Gentile enemies of Israel (compare Isaiah 34:1-5). Or the explanation may be that the early Hebrew text did not have the vowel points and the Hebrew words for Edom and mankind (i.e., adam) without the vowel pointing are almost identical. Regardless of the correct explanation for the paraphrase, this passage specifically states that the house of David would be reestablished in order that Gentiles might seek the Lord. The passage from Amos points to the Messianic age as a time of special spiritual blessings upon Gentiles, and James used this teaching as an argument for recognizing and accepting God's spiritual blessings upon the Gentiles in the church age. The dispensational position is that the Messianic age spoken of in Amos is not the church age but a yet future Jewish millennium and that James quoted Amos to prove that the time of special Jewish blessing follows the time of Gentile blessing. The Amos passage, however, presents the Messianic age as a period of Gentile spiritual blessings, not as an age of Jewish blessing following an age of Gentile blessing.

Fifth, the dispensational interpretation fails to see the obvious connection between "the heathen, which are called by My name" in Amos 9:12 (Acts 15:17) and Cornelius' household where "God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). In the dispensational interpretation, the first phrase refers to millennial Gentiles and the second phrase refers to church age Gentiles.

Sixth, the dispensational interpretation of this passage does not relate well to the issue of the spiritual equality of Jews and Gentiles

in the church, the issue before the Jerusalem council. Dispensationalist Charles L. Feinberg apparently agrees with me that James quoted a prophecy about Gentiles in the Messianic age as an argument for the religious equality of Jews and Gentiles in the church age:

It was left to James to make the concluding remarks. He pointed to the testimony of Peter, which showed conclusively that God was visiting the Gentiles "to take out of them a people for his name." Then followed his statement as to the harmonization of that with the return of the Lord and the setting up of the Davidic kingdom with the conversion of those in Israel and the Gentiles also.<sup>16</sup>

I view the church age as the fulfillment of Amos 9 and Dr. Feinberg does not in accordance with the parenthesis theory. He instead sees Amos 9 as referring to the dispensational millennium and relates it to the church age as a "harmonization." But what is harmonious between the dispensational millennium and the church age spiritual equality of believing Jews and Gentiles? According to dispensationalist Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, Israel in the millennium "will be exalted above the Gentiles," "the Gentiles will be Israel's servants," and "the distinction of Israel from the Gentiles will again be resumed."<sup>17</sup> According to Dr. Feinberg, "The nations in the kingdom will recognize the favored condition of Israel ..." and "... Israel will also rule over the nations under the direct command of the King."<sup>18</sup> According to Dr. John F. Walvoord: "In contrast to the present church age in which Jew and Gentile are on an equal plane of privilege, the millennium is clearly a period of time in which Israel is in prominence and blessing."<sup>19</sup> If the dispensational interpretation of the millennial situation is correct, then the party of the

circumcision who wanted Gentiles admitted into the church as they had been admitted into the synagogue (i.e. as circumcised proselytes) could have made better use of this passage than did James.<sup>20</sup> They could have argued that the prophesied inferior status of spiritually blessed millennial Gentiles is evidence for a similarly inferior status for church age Gentiles.

Scofield in his reference Bible notes described this passage in Acts 15 as "dispensationally ... the most important passage in the New Testament."<sup>21</sup> He was perhaps correct, but not in the sense that he intended. The correct interpretation of this passage demonstrates that, contrary to dispensational claims, a prophecy about Israel and the Jewish Davidic covenant is here declared to be fulfilled in and through the Christian church in the church age.

I would like to discuss the New Testament's use of one last Old Testament prophecy. We read in Acts 13 that Paul spoke to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch about Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy. Acts 13:44-48 records what happened on the following Sabbath:

And the next sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. Then Paul and Barnabus waxed bold, and said, It is necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth. And when

the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.

Here we have Paul quoting Isaiah 49:6, one of the many Old Testament prophecies about the spiritual blessings that were to come upon the Gentiles in the age of the Messiah.<sup>22</sup> If the dispensationalist is to hold to his parenthesis theory with strict consistency, he would directly relate these prophecies about the nations to millennial Gentiles and relate these prophecies to the church age only indirectly. According to the parenthesis theory, the Old Testament prophets were totally ignorant of the coming church age and spoke no prophetic word about the church age. Also, some of these prophecies spoke about the coming spiritual blessings upon the Gentiles in terms of the Old Testament system of worship. For example, Malachi 1:11 says:

For from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same my name shall be great among the Gentiles; and in every place incense shall be offered unto my name, and a pure offering; for my name shall be great among the heathen, saith the Lord of hosts.

For the consistent dispensationalist, these prophecies have no direct reference to the church age. Therefore, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost is only being consistent when he uses Isaiah 49:6 as a proof text for the statement: "the fact of Gentiles' participation in the millennium is promised in the prophetic Scriptures."<sup>23</sup> Paul, however, believed that he was an agent for an actual fulfillment of this prophecy.

The Old Testament prophets spoke about the coming day when Israel would enlarge her tent to include the Gentiles (Isaiah 54:2). All three of the Old Testament prophecies that we have examined in this

chapter have related to this theme of the day when God's covenantal blessing would be upon all flesh and not just upon physical Israel. In all three cases, we have seen that dispensationalists refer these prophecies to a future Jewish millennium and the New Testament refers these prophecies to the present church age. The New Testament's use of Old Testament prophecy contradicts the dispensational parenthesis theory.

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## End Notes

1 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), pages 271, 486; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: The New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), pages 208-209 (note on Acts 2:16-21); John B. Graber, "Ultra-Dispensationalism" (dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949), pages 88-89.

2 Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), page 26.

3 Joseph Dillow, *Speaking in Tongues: Seven Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), page 105. See also Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1974), pages 183-185.

4 John B. Graber, "Ultra-Dispensationalism," page 85.

5 Gerhard Friedrich, editor; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971), 7:216, 221.

6 Joseph Dillow, *Speaking in Tongues: Seven Crucial Questions*, page 101.

"Dispensationalism, which fit so well with the Pentecostal and holiness ideas of the 'Age of the Spirit,' easily gained acceptance in the new Pentecostal movement, even though Scofield-type dispensationalists maintained that tongues ceased with the apostles."

George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), page 94.

7

"The Keswick movement, as we shall see, was absolutely crucial to the development of Pentecostalism. . . . that wing of the Pentecostal movement which had earlier connections with Wesleyanism became Pentecostal by accepting Keswick (i.e. Calvinist) teachings on dispensationalism, premillennialism and the Baptism of the Holy Spirit."

Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), page 43.

8 "The correct understanding of the words results from a right perception of the contrast involved, viz. that under the old covenant the knowledge of the Lord was connected with the mediation of priests and prophets."

C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes: Volume VIII: Jeremiah, Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 2:40.

9 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), pages 1169-1170 (note on Acts 15:13); see also Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the*

Premillennial Faith (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), pages 102-103; J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, page 133; John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pages 204-207; John F. Walvoord, Israel in Prophecy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), pages 91-93; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, The Ryrie Study Bible: The New Testament, page 236 (note on Acts 15:15-17).

John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, pages 205-206;  
10 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, The Ryrie Study Bible: The New Testament, page 236 (note on Acts 15:15-17).

See also William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the  
11 Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), pages 197-203.

J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, pages 314-316; C.I.  
12 Scofield, editor, The Scofield Reference Bible, page 1345 (note on Revelation 16:19).

13 John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, page 205.

14 John F. Walvoord, Israel in Prophecy, pages 91-93.

paqad: Genesis 21:1; 50:24-25; Exodus 13:19; Ruth 1:6; Psalm  
15 65:9; Jeremiah 15:15; 29:10; 32:5; shub: Genesis 18:10,14; 2 Chronicles 30:6; Psalm 6:4; 80:14; 90:13; Isaiah 63:17; Jeremiah 12:15; Zechariah 1:3; Malachi 3:7.

Charles L. Feinberg, Millennialism: The Two Major Views, Third  
16 and Enlarged Edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1936), page 154.  
See also Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy, pages 128-130.

17 J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, pages 507, 508, 519-520.



18 Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views*, page 186.

19 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 302-303.

Daniel Payton Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism"  
20 (dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957),  
page 347, footnote 18.

21 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, page 1169  
(note on Acts 15:13).

Psalm 22:27-30; 68:29-31; 72:8-11,17; Isaiah 2:2-5; 11:9-10;  
22 19:24-30; 42:1-4; 45:14; 49:6-7,22-23; 52:10; 54:1-3; 60:3f.; 65:1;  
66:19; Jeremiah 16:19; Amos 9:11-12; Zechariah 2:3-13; 8:20-24;  
Malachi 1:11.

23 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 508.

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## Chapter 4

### The New Covenant, Part One

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Before discussing the new covenant, I would like to review the basic distinction between dispensationalism and Reformed theology. This basic distinction revolves around the concepts of unity in reference to God's people and continuity in reference to God's program. First, according to Reformed theology, the people of God in all ages are in union with Christ and are therefore together united in the universal church, which is the Body and Bride of Christ. According to dispensationalism, only those who are saved between the Pentecost of Acts 2 and the end time rapture are in the universal church. In other words, Mary, the mother of Jesus, will be in the Bride of Christ, but Joseph her husband who died before Pentecost will only be a guest at the wedding of the Lamb. Also, John the Apostle will be in the Body of Christ in eternity, but not John the Baptist. According to dispensationalism, the Old Testament saints who died before Acts 2 are not to be made perfect together with the New Testament saints (compare Hebrews 11:39-40), but are instead to remain spiritually inferior throughout eternity, never being in the Body and Bride of Christ. Second, according to Reformed theology, the New Testament church is a continuation of the Old Testament program and is directly rooted in the Old Testament covenants. According to dispensationalism, the New Testament church is a parenthesis in the program begun in the Old Testament, not a continuation of the program. They continue the Old Testament program in a future Jewish millennium that is a glorified extension of the Davidic national kingdom and the Mosaic ceremonial laws.

Let us now go on with our examination of the dispensational theory by looking at the dispensational teaching on the new covenant. Since those twenty-seven books of Scripture that were written after the life of Jesus are named the New Testament or covenant, one would expect that all Christians would uncompromisingly acknowledge the Christian nature of the new covenant. Such an acknowledgment, however, is not easy or simple for the consistent dispensationalist. As it turns out, when the dispensationalist tries to bend Scripture to fit his system, the Biblical data on the new covenant is among the most stubbornly unyielding and uncooperative. Dr. Charles C. Ryrie says the following about dispensational interpretation of the new covenant:

Although the new covenant is one of the major covenants of Scripture, a clear statement of its meaning and of its relationship to the [dispensational] premillennial system is needed. Even among [dispensational] premillennialists there seems to be a lack of knowledge concerning this covenant.<sup>1</sup>

[Dispensational] premillennialists are divided into three groups as far as their interpretation of the new covenant is concerned. This does not evince weakness, for not one of the views contradicts the system.<sup>2</sup>

The classic passage on the new covenant is Jeremiah 31. Please take note: Jeremiah is an Old Testament prophecy, and dispensationalists teach that no Old Testament prophecy can refer directly to the New Testament church. Dispensationalists interpret Jeremiah 30 and 31 as referring to their futuristic tribulation period which is to occur after the rapture of the church and to their Judaistic millennium.<sup>3</sup> The "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jeremiah 30:7) is identified with the

seven-year tribulation period, and the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is viewed as a millennial blessing upon Israel. According to Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost:

This covenant must follow the return of Christ at the second advent.<sup>4</sup>

This covenant will be realized in the millennial age.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the relationship of the church to the new covenant as explained in these three views, there is one general point of agreement: the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 must and can be fulfilled only by the nation Israel and not by the Church.<sup>6</sup>

According to Dr. John F. Walvoord,

... the [dispensational] premillennial position is that the new covenant is with Israel and the fulfillment in the millennial kingdom after the second coming of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

The [dispensational] premillennial view, though varying in detail, insists that the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament concerns Israel and requires fulfillment in the millennial kingdom.<sup>8</sup>

According to Dr. Charles C. Ryrie,

... it can be shown that the period of the new covenant is millennial.<sup>9</sup>

Also, Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy is to be made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jeremiah 31:31), and

dispensationalists teach their strong dichotomy between Israel and the church. In other words, what has a prophecy for Israel to do with the New Testament church in a direct and primary sense? Nothing, says the consistent dispensationalist. So, for the consistent dispensationalist, the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 must be for the Jewish millennium and not for the church age. For the new covenant to be fulfilled in and by the church would be to abrogate the new covenant with Israel and to alter its most essential meaning and intention.<sup>10</sup> The significance of this point can be seen in the following quotation by Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost:

If the church fulfills this covenant, she may also fulfill the other covenants made with Israel and there is no need for an earthly millennium.<sup>11</sup>

According to Dr. Ryrie:

If the church is fulfilling Israel's promises as contained in the new covenant or anywhere in the Scriptures, then [dispensational] premillennialism is condemned.<sup>12</sup>

We have seen that dispensationalists interpret the Old Testament data on the new covenant as referring solely to the nation Israel in a future millennium. When one comes to the New Testament data on the new covenant, this dispensational theory encounters some critical complications. For example, in Hebrews 8:6-13, the inspired writer called Christ "the mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises" and then quoted extensively from the Jeremiah new covenant prophecy. In Hebrews 10:14-18, the inspired writer quoted from the Jeremiah new covenant prophecy in an argument for the discontinuation of animal sacrifices in the church age. This indeed is ironic, for the dispensationalist refers this

Jeremiah new covenant prophecy instead to a Jewish millennium in which animal sacrifices are renewed! In Hebrews 12:22-24, several Old Testament concepts, like Mount Zion, Jerusalem, the blood of Abel, and the new covenant, are applied directly to the Christian. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul called himself and Timothy "ministers of the new testament." As if to remove any doubt about which new covenant he was referring to, Paul in verse 3 mentions the Jeremiah new covenant concept of writing on human hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). When Christ inaugurated the Lord's Supper, He said, "This cup is the new testament in My blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20). What did the Jewish disciples associate with this statement? Undoubtedly they related it to Jeremiah 31. What other new testament (i.e. covenant) were they aware of?

Surely you can now see that the consistent dispensationalist has a problem with the new covenant. According to a consistent application of basic dispensational assumptions and the dispensational hermeneutic, the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is for Israel in a Jewish millennium, not for the New Testament church in the church age. Dispensationalists are divided among three suggested solutions to this serious problem in their system.

Let us begin by examining the theory most consistent with dispensational assumptions, the theory of Drs. Lewis Sperry Chafer and John F. Walvoord, the first two presidents of Dallas Theological Seminary. This theory asserts that there are two new covenants in Scripture, one for Israel and one for the church. If a new covenant passage relates to Israel, then the passage is referring to the Jewish new covenant of the Jewish millennium. If a new covenant passage relates to the New Testament church, then the passage is referring to the Christian new covenant of the church age. The following

quotations by Drs. Chafer, Walvoord, and Pentecost respectively further explain the two-covenant view:

There remains to be recognized a heavenly covenant for the heavenly people, which is also styled like the preceding one for Israel, a "new covenant." It is made in the blood of Christ (cf. Mark 14:24) and continues in effect throughout this age, where as the new covenant made with Israel happens to be future in its application. To suppose that these two covenants -- one for Israel and one for the Church -- are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God's purpose for Israel and His purpose for the Church.<sup>13</sup>

[Dispensational] premillenarians are in agreement that the new covenant with Israel awaits its complete fulfillment in the millennial kingdom. However, there exists some difference of opinion how the new covenant relates to the present interadvent age. ...

The point of view that holds to two covenants in the present age has certain advantages. It provides a sensible reason for establishing the Lord's supper for believers in this age in commemoration of the blood of the covenant. The language of 1 Corinthians 11:25 seems to require it: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood: this do, as often as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me." It hardly seems reasonable to expect Christians to distinguish between the cup and the new covenant when these appear to be identified in this passage. In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul speaking of himself states: "Our sufficiency is of God: who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant." It would be difficult to adjust the ministry of

Paul as a minister of the new covenant if, in fact, there is no new covenant for the present age.<sup>14</sup>

This view holds that there are two new covenants presented in the New Testament; the first with Israel in reaffirmation of the covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 and the second made with the church in this age. This view, essentially, would divide the references to the new covenant in the New Testament into two groups. The references in the gospels and in Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 10:29; and 13:20 would refer to the new covenant with the church, Hebrews 8:7-13 and 10:16 would refer to the new covenant with Israel, and Hebrews 12:24 would refer, perhaps, to both, emphasizing the fact of the mediation accomplished and the covenant program established without designating the recipients.<sup>15</sup>

This theory is a pristine and pure application of the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the church, but it requires amazingly strained exegesis to reconcile it with the Scriptural data. A closer examination of the New Testament passages on the new covenant will naturally show the artificial nature of this two-covenant theory.

Some of New Testament data on the new covenant not only relates a new covenant to the church but also clearly relates the Jewish Jeremiah 31 new covenant to the church. One such passage is Hebrews 8:6-13:

But now hath He obtained a more excellent ministry, by how  
6 much also He is the mediator of a better covenant, which was  
established upon better promises.

7 For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no  
place have been sought for the second.



For finding fault with them, He saith, Behold, the days come,  
8 saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the  
house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ...

In that He saith, A new covenant, He hath made the first old.  
13 Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish  
away.

According to the two-covenant interpretation, the "better covenant" of verse 6 is the church new covenant but the "new covenant" of verses 7-13 is the Jewish new covenant for the millennium. Proponents of this view point out that the text never specifically equates the "better covenant" with the "new covenant" of verses 7-13. This is supposed to be a strong argument from silence. They argue that the writer of Hebrews quoted the Jeremiah new covenant passage to prove that the Mosaic covenant was temporary but that he did not intend to leave the impression that the "better covenant" of verse 6 is the new covenant mentioned in the quotation from Jeremiah.<sup>16</sup>

According to the dispensational understanding of prophecy, the church age is an unforeseen parenthesis in the prophetic program between the sixty-ninth and seventieth of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9. Therefore it would have been impossible for Jeremiah to have foreseen the church new covenant. The new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah must take effect in the millennium after the yet future seventieth week (i.e., the tribulation), not in the unforeseen church age between weeks sixty-nine and seventy.

The two-covenant theory dispensationalists are correct that the author of Hebrews would not have taught a church fulfillment for Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy if he had been a consistent dispensationalist. If, however, the author of Hebrews had held to the

two-covenant theory, he could have avoided any confusion by calling the Mosaic covenant the first covenant, the church new covenant the second covenant, and the Jewish millennial new covenant the third covenant. The author of Hebrews instead in Hebrews 8:7 called the Mosaic covenant the first covenant and the Jewish new covenant the second covenant. Assuming the author of Hebrews was a two-covenant theory dispensationalist, we could speculate that he did not count the church new covenant in his calculations, even though he had mentioned it as the "better covenant" of verse 6, because of its parenthetical nature.

The new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is also quoted in Hebrews 10:14-18:

<sup>14</sup> For by one offering [God] hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.

<sup>15</sup> Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before,

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those 16 days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them;

<sup>17</sup> And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more.

<sup>18</sup> Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin.

Here the author of Hebrews is quoting the Jeremiah 31 new covenant prophecy as the climax of his argument for the discontinuance of the Levitical sacrifices in the church age and as a divine witness to us (i.e. to Christians, not to millennial Jews). Strangely, the two-covenant theory dispensationalists relate the above passage not to the church new covenant but to the Jewish millennial new covenant

which will be in effect when, according to many dispensationalists, the Levitical sacrificial system will be reinstated. Dr. Walvoord explains that "the new covenant with Israel not only anticipated the abrogation of the law but also the end of Mosaic sacrifices as a basis for forgiveness."<sup>17</sup> Is he saying that the Old Testament Levitical sacrifices were a basis for forgiveness but that the millennial Levitical sacrifices will not be a basis for forgiveness? Then in what sense were the Old Testament sacrifices a basis for forgiveness? The blood of bulls and goats never took away sins (Hebrews 10:4). Dr. Walvoord himself, in defending millennial sacrifices, goes on to say, "The millennial sacrifices are no more expiatory than were the Mosaic sacrifices which preceded the cross."<sup>18</sup>

Another interesting and relevant passage in Hebrews is Hebrews 12:22-24:

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the  
22 living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable  
company of angels,

To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which  
23 are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the  
spirits of just men made perfect,

And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the  
24 blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of  
Abel.

This passage is full of references to the Old Testament: Mount Zion, the sprinkled blood of sacrifice, the blood of Abel and the new covenant. Are we to say that in this context, the author of Hebrews was not referring to the new covenant spoken of in the Old Testament? Yet these verses also are addressed to the Christian and

apply this new covenant to the Christian. Dr. Walvoord stresses that the word translated new in this passage is *nea*, a Greek word meaning recent. Therefore, he says, "Reference is apparently to the covenant with the church and not to Israel's new covenant."<sup>19</sup> Dr. Walvoord is correct in arguing that the new covenant of Hebrews 12:24 applies to the Christian but wrong in arguing that this is not the same new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31.

Bernard Ramm has said that the interpretation of the book of Hebrews which does not apply the new covenant to the church, but which instead applies it to a Judaistic future, is an "oddity in the history of the exegesis of this book."<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere he has said,

The New Covenant is one of several items discussed in Hebrews all of which are realized in the Church and the present age. That Christ is our Moses, our Aaron, our Sacrifice, the strict literalists readily admit. To isolate the New Covenant and forward it to the millennium is to disrupt the entire structure of Hebrews.<sup>21</sup>

There are New Testament passages outside of the book of Hebrews that also show the error of the two-covenant theory. For example, in 2 Corinthians 3:6, the apostle Paul called himself and Timothy "ministers of the new testament [i.e. covenant]" In this passage, Paul makes reference to the Jeremiah 31 concept of writing on human hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). In 2 Corinthians 3:3, Paul spoke of the Corinthian Christians as being human letters, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart." Paul then contrasted his ministry of the new covenant with the old Mosaic ministration that was "written and engraven in stones" (verse 7). This is an application of not just a new covenant but the Jeremiah 31 new covenant to the church and the church age.

Christ also mentioned a new covenant when He instituted the Lord's Supper: "This is My blood of the new testament [i.e. covenant], which is shed for many" (Mark 14:24). Moses also had spoken of the "blood of the covenant" at the inauguration of the old covenant (Exodus 24:8). Surely the disciples would have recognized that Christ was instituting a second covenant to replace the Mosaic covenant, whose many types He was fulfilling. Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost has pointed out the following:

In its historical setting, the disciples who heard the Lord refer to the new covenant in the upper room the night before His death would certainly have understood Him to be referring to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. ... Since the disciples would certainly have understood any reference to the new covenant on that occasion as a reference to Israel's anticipated covenant of Jeremiah, it seems that the Lord must have been stating that that very covenant was being instituted with His death . ...<sup>22</sup>

This close association of the Lord's Supper to Jeremiah's new covenant with Israel may explain why E.W. Bullinger, the father of ultra-dispensationalism, taught that the Lord's Supper is a Jewish ordinance that has no place in the Christian church.<sup>23</sup>

The two-covenant theory, the most consistent theory dispensationally, is the most difficult to defend Scripturally. Therefore, it has not received widespread acceptance among dispensationalists. For example, the popular dispensational writer Harry Ironside has said:

It were folly to speak of a new covenant with the Church, when no former covenant has been made with us. In the case of Israel

and Judah it is different. They entered into the covenant of works at Sinai.<sup>24</sup>

John F. McGahey in his doctor's dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary came to the following conclusion:

Consequently, it has been established that there is no warrant in Scripture for maintaining that there are two new covenants. It has been evident from this study that the theory of the two new covenants was born of controversy rather than strong exegesis. For it appears that it was manufactured to avoid the assumed conclusion that to relate the church to Israel's new covenant necessitated that church fulfilling the promises given to Israel under that covenant.<sup>25</sup>

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## End Notes

- 1 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), page 105.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pages 106-107.
- 3 H.A. Ironside, *Notes on the Prophecy and Lamentations of Jeremiah "The Weeping Prophet"* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1906), pages 146-166; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pages 108-114; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pages 481, 183-184, 210-211, 258-259; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), pages 120-121.
- 4 Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 120.

- 5 Ibid., page 121.
- 6 Ibid., page 124.
- 7 Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 209.
- 8 Ibid., page 210.
- 9 Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 111.
- 10 Ibid., pages 105-106.

- 11 Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 116.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, "The Relationship of the New Covenant to Premillennialism" (unpublished Master's thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947), page 31. Quoted in William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), pages 178-179. In Dr. Ryrie's book *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, the word condemned is changed to weakened.

- 12 Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), pages 178-179. In Dr. Ryrie's book *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, the word condemned is changed to weakened.
- 13 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 volumes (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:98.

- 14 Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 218-219.

- 15 Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 124. Also, compare Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 214.

- 16 Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 216-217.

- 17 Ibid., page 217.

- 18 Ibid., page 312.

- 19 Ibid., page 218.

- Bernard Ramm, "Christ and Aaron," *Eternity*, 13:18, May 1962.
- 20 Quoted in Bell, "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology," page 182.

Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of  
21 Hermeneutics (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), page  
264.

22 Pentecost, Things to Come, page 126.

23 John B. Graber, "Ultra-Dispensationalism" (dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1949), pages 36-37. Mr. Graber defines an ultra-dispensationalist as "any student of Scripture who places two dispensations between Pentecost and the end of the church age" (page 6). These two dispensations involve "the Pentecostal apostolic church of the book of Acts and the mystery Pauline church of the prison epistles" (page 6). According to Mr. Graber, dispensationalists and ultra-dispensationalists use the same hermeneutic but differ only in the interpretation of certain passages. For example, ultra-dispensationalists believe that Joel 2:28-32 was fulfilled at Pentecost and dispensationalists do not. Since Joel 2 is a prophecy about Israel and since Joel 2 was fulfilled at Pentecost, the ultra-dispensationalist does not believe that the church age began at Pentecost because of the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the church (pages 88-89). In its extreme form, ultra-dispensationalism teaches that the church was not formed until after Acts 28. This means that the only Scripture directly relevant to the church are those Pauline epistles written after Acts 28 (page 32). Mr. Graber makes the following statements:

"... it is admitted by both premillennialists and amillennialists that the root of their difference lies in the method of Biblical interpretation. Such, however, is not the case in the systems of dispensationalism and ultra-dispensationalism. In the final analysis, the validity of ultra-dispensationalism must be examined on the basis of its



exegesis of various passages of Scripture upon which the system claims to rest" (page 1).

"The distinction between dispensationalism and ultra-dispensationalism is not one of kind but one of degree" (page 7).

<sup>24</sup> Ironside, Notes on the Prophecy and Lamentations of Jeremiah "The Weeping Prophet," page 163.

<sup>25</sup> John F. McGahey, "An Exposition of the New Covenant" (dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957), page 262. Quoted in Bell, "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology," page 189.

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## Chapter 5

### The New Covenant, Part Two

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One of the greatest challenges before anyone who calls himself a dispensationalist is explaining how the new covenant which Jeremiah said would be made with Israel and Judah is related to the Christian church today. In the previous chapter, we examined the dispensational answer to this challenge that is most consistent with the dispensational system and found it wanting. In this chapter, we will examine the other two dispensational attempts to meet this challenge.

A second dispensational theory on the new covenant's relationship to the Christian is the theory advanced by John Nelson Darby, the father of dispensational thought. According to Darby's theory, the Christian is not directly related to any new covenant but is related only to the blood of the new covenant. This theory emphasizes that the blood of Christ is not only the gracious ground for the new covenant to be made with Israel but also the source of all spiritual benefits and blessings, both heavenly and earthly.<sup>1</sup> Since there is no Christian new covenant, every mention of a new covenant in both the Old and New Testaments must always be a reference to a Jewish millennial covenant to which the church is not directly related. The Christian is directly related to "the annexed circumstances of the covenant,"<sup>2</sup> to "the essential privileges of the new covenant,"<sup>3</sup> to the "benefit" of the covenant, and to "the Mediator of the covenant,"<sup>4</sup> but not to the covenant itself.

Darby expressed his theory as follows:

This covenant of the letter is made with Israel, not with us; but we get the benefit of it.<sup>5</sup>

The gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God. It proclaims the great salvation. We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter.

The new covenant will be established formally with Israel in the millennium.<sup>6</sup>

This theory is defined and defended in greater detail by dispensationalists Harry Ironside and E. Schuyler English:

It is important to note that while the blessings of the new covenant are ours, yet it is never said to be made with the Church. ... The Mediator of that covenant is the Lord Jesus Christ. The blood of the new covenant is that which he shed for our sins. Therefore believers now rejoice in the distinctive blessings it insures; but it is with the earthly, not with the heavenly, people that the covenant itself is to be made.<sup>7</sup>

... surely the grace of God has embraced the Church within the benefits of the new covenant. When our Lord took the cup, on the night in which He was betrayed, He said: "This is My cup of the new testament (covenant) in My blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). The cup was taken by Him for all His own through faith -- His Church, His Body, His Bride.

Nevertheless, fundamentally the Gentiles are not a covenant-people, neither is the Church made up of a covenant-people. ...

The Church, then, is not under the new covenant; the Church is, however, a beneficiary of the new covenant in its heavenly, spiritual and eternal operation. The Church, now on earth, is at the same time seated together "in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6) because of the blood of the new covenant, shed by the Mediator of the new covenant, for us.

But now, since it is Israel which is God's covenant- people, ... we must discover the primary facts and functions of the new covenant established for them.<sup>8</sup>

Let us think through the work of Christ in terms of Darby's theory on the new covenant. Jesus Christ at His first coming came to be the mediator of an earthly, nationalistic and Jewish new covenant that is totally unrelated to church age Christianity. He offered to Israel a theocratic political kingdom based on this Jewish new covenant, and He shed His blood to establish this Jewish new covenant. When the Jewish nation rejected the Christ, the offer was withdrawn and the theocratic kingdom was postponed. In this parenthetical age of postponement, God began an entirely new and unprophesied work in the calling of a heavenly people, the Christian church. Although the blood of Christ was shed for the establishment of the earthly people's national new covenant, there was enough efficacy in the Messianic sacrifice for it also to be the basis for individual salvation and heavenly blessings in the church age. Christ had assumed the office of mediator to mediate the Jewish covenant, but in this parenthetical age, His mediatorial office is available for the spiritual benefit of Christians even though they are totally unrelated to the covenant of which He is mediator.

Darby's theory makes God's entire program for the church seem incidental and secondary to God's program for Israel but at the same

time greatly limits Israel's eternal inheritance. This is true of dispensationalism in general, but it is especially true of Darby's theory on the new covenant. This theory teaches that Christian salvation in the church age is an unprophesied benefit of the atoning work of Christ. The atonement's prophesied purpose was the establishment of the Jewish new covenant and kingdom, to which the Christian is unrelated. And yet those saints who are under this new covenant and who inherit this kingdom will be, throughout eternity, inferior in status to the Body of Christ church saints. The Christian will remain throughout eternity a stranger to the new covenant, and yet his spiritual position will be above Israel's like the heavens are above the earth.

Also, the New Testament gives no support to Darby's suggestion that the Christian is related to the basis and benefits of the new covenant but not to the new covenant itself. According to Darby, the Christian, although related to the concomitants of the new covenant, is still a stranger to the new covenant itself. In contrast, Paul taught that Christians before conversion from paganism were "strangers from the covenants of promise" but "now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off have been made nigh by the blood of Christ" and "are no more strangers" (Ephesians 2:12-13,19). To be brought nigh by the blood of the covenant is to be no longer a stranger to the covenant. Also, Paul considered himself to be a minister not only of the blood of the covenant but of the Jeremiah 31 new covenant itself (2 Corinthians 3:6). And the sacramental statement of Christ: "This cup is the new testament (i.e., covenant) in My blood" (1 Corinthians 11:25) makes little sense if the new covenant itself is not directly related to the church in this age. The writer of Hebrews taught that Christ is today "the mediator of a better covenant" (Hebrews 8:6). Is the Christian related to the mediator of this better covenant but not

to the better covenant itself? Bernard Ramm has appropriately noted:

To say that we are under the benefits of the Covenant without actually being under the covenant is to clandestinely admit what is boldly denied.<sup>9</sup>

Many dispensationalists have recognized the validity of these criticisms and have rejected Darby's explanation of the church's relationship to the new covenant. For example, Dr. John F. Walvoord has said:

Most [dispensational] premillenarians (Darby excepted) would agree that a new covenant has been provided for the church, but not the new covenant for Israel.<sup>10</sup>

The third dispensational theory on the church's relationship to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 is the theory advanced by Dr. C.I. Scofield in the Scofield Reference Bible. According to Dr. Charles C. Ryrie, this is the theory most widely accepted among dispensationalists.<sup>11</sup> In his reference Bible notes, Scofield simply applies the new covenant both to the church and to Israel with no explanation about how this is accomplished, as evidenced by the following quotations:

The New Covenant ... secures the perpetuity, future conversion, and blessing of Israel ... .<sup>12</sup>

The New Covenant rests upon the sacrifice of Christ, and secures the eternal blessedness, under the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:13-29), of all who believe.<sup>13</sup>

Later dispensationalists have elaborated upon Scofield's theory. Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost has said the following:

... according to this view, there is one new covenant with a two-fold application; one to Israel in the future and one to the church now.<sup>14</sup>

This view places the church under the new covenant, and views the relationship as a partial fulfillment of the covenant.<sup>15</sup>

Scofield agrees with Darby fully that the covenant was primarily for Israel and will be fulfilled by them. Any application of it to the church, as the Scofield position holds, does not nullify the primary application to Israel.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Pentecost in his writing on Scofield's new covenant theory quotes another writer who says that the new covenant is not made with the Christian but is ministered to the Christian. Dr. John F. Walvoord has the following comments on Scofield's theory:

The [dispensational] premillennial view popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible regards the new covenant as having a twofold application, first to Israel fulfilled in the millennium, and, second, to the church in the present age.<sup>17</sup>

... Scofield ... regards the new covenant with Israel as having an oblique reference to the believers of this age, though concerned primarily with Israel.<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie describes Scofield's theory as follows:

This interpretation holds that the one new covenant has two aspects, one which applies to Israel, and one which applies to

the church. These have been called the realistic and spiritual aspects of the covenant, but both aspects comprise essentially one covenant based on the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup>

W.H. Griffith Thomas has expounded upon this dispensational theory as follows:

It will be observed that the covenant is said to be made "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah," that is, with the whole Jewish nation. There is no doubt that this is the primary designation and purpose of the covenant. The promise of Israel's restoration is clear, together with the specification of benefits. Jeremiah's words are: "Lo the days are coming," and it is well known that the New Testament antitype of the Old Testament types is not the Christian Church but the Kingdom which is still future. ... But we Christians have the spiritual reality of this covenant, which, while made with Israel, is for our benefit as well, through grace, and so we distinguish between the primary interpretation to Israel and the secondary (spiritual) application to the Church today. We now enjoy in the power of the Holy Spirit all the blessings of the new covenant, and yet there will be still further and fuller manifestations in the future for Israel, according to God's promise (Rom. 11:25-32).<sup>20</sup>

The problem with the Scofield theory is that it violates both the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the church and the dispensational literalistic hermeneutic (i.e., theory of interpretation). Scofield's theory violates the dispensational dichotomy in that it allows the church to partially fulfill a prophecy made for Israel and to partially be under a covenant belonging to Israel. If the church can fulfill this Jewish prophecy and be under this Jewish covenant, then why not others? This theory in effect says that the church can be



partially identified with Israel. Dispensationalists have acknowledged this weakness in Scofield's theory. For example, Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost in his discussion of Scofield's theory notes: "The church, however, can not be placed under Israel's covenant."<sup>21</sup> Dr. Charles C. Ryrie has made the following criticism of the Scofield theory:

If the Church is fulfilling Israel's promises as contained in the new covenant or anywhere else in Scripture, then [dispensational] premillennialism is weakened. One might well ask why there are not two aspects to one new covenant. This may be the case, and it is the position held by many [dispensational] premillennialists, but we agree that the amillennialist has every right to say of this view that it is "a practical admission that the new covenant is fulfilled in and to the Church."<sup>22</sup>

Dr. Ryrie elsewhere has the following criticism of non-dispensationalism:

... the amillennialist's hermeneutics allow him to blur completely the meanings of the two words [Israel and the Church] in the New Testament so that the Church takes over the fulfillment of the promises to Israel. In that view true Israel is the Church. The covenant premillennialist goes halfway. The Church and Israel are somewhat blended, though not amalgamated. The dispensationalist studies the words in the New Testament, finds that they are kept distinct, and therefore concludes that when the Church was introduced, God did not abrogate His promises to Israel nor enmesh them into the Church. This is why the dispensationalist recognizes two purposes of God and insists in maintaining the distinction between Israel and the Church.<sup>23</sup>

These dispensational criticisms against covenant premillennialism could just as well have been applied to Scofield's theory on the new covenant. Scofield's theory blends Israel and the church and enmeshes promises made to Israel into the church.

Scofield's theory also contradicts the dispensational hermeneutic. The cardinal rule of the dispensational hermeneutic is never to spiritualize or allegorize. Dr. Walvoord gives the following explanation of spiritualization:

Spiritualization of the ... word Israel would involve in Webster's definition of spiritualization: "to take in a spiritual sense, -- opposed to literalize." In other words, if Israel should mean something else than Israel, e.g., the church in the New Testament composed largely of Gentiles, this would be spiritualization.<sup>24</sup>

Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost quotes the following definition of the allegorical method:

Allegorism is the method of interpreting a literary text that regards the literal sense as the vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual and more profound sense.<sup>25</sup>

In the Scofield theory, the new covenant for Israel has a primary reference to Israel and an oblique reference to the church. The new covenant has a realistic and a spiritual aspect, an earthly and a heavenly application, a primary interpretation and a secondary spiritual interpretation. In this theory, the new covenant with Israel can mean something else than the new covenant with literal, national, earthly Israel. The very criticism of "spiritualizing" and "allegorizing" that the dispensationalists so freely cast at Reformed

theologians can also be cast at this popular dispensational theory. The dispensationalists who hold to this theory should refrain from casting these stones for they are not without "sin" themselves.

This survey of the three dispensational theories on the new covenant shows that dispensationalists are strikingly divided on how to reconcile the New Testament data on the new covenant with the dispensational presuppositions. Dr. William Everett Bell, Jr. has well described this division among dispensationalists over the new covenant and its symptomatic significance:

Since the two-covenant view, although it is consistent dispensationalism, has not found wide acceptance among dispensationalists because of its obvious exegetical failings, leading dispensationalists are found to be seriously at odds over the problem. All are agreed that the church must not fulfill any of Israel's promises, but the method of preserving the dichotomy with regard to the new covenant is elusive.

On the one hand, some recognize the exegetical casuistry involved in trying to retain the blessings of the covenant apart from any vital relationship to the covenant, and thus posit a second covenant. On the other hand, others recognize the exegetical impossibility of a second covenant and prefer to ignore the casuistry. In either case, the position is basically untenable and points up rather dramatically the hermeneutical dilemma of dispensationalism in attempting to reconcile scripture to a basic presupposition.<sup>26</sup>

The New Testament data on the new covenant fits well with Reformed theology. No bending is necessary; no artificial exegesis is required; no hair splitting distinctions are needed. Since the New

Testament church is the continuation of the Old Testament kingdom program and is spiritual Israel in this age and is the fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies, there is no problem in directly relating the Jeremiah 31 new covenant to the church in this age as is done by the New Testament writers. The new covenant relates directly to physical Israel only insofar as Jews accept Christ and are regrafted back into the olive tree of spiritual Israel, which is the church (Romans 11:26-27).<sup>27</sup> The Scriptural data on the new covenant is for the dispensational builders a stone that fits poorly into their theological structure. They cannot agree how best to cement it onto their system in a fitting manner. In contrast, for the Reformed theologian, this stone has become a capstone in his system of interpretation.

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## End Notes

- 1 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pages 210,218; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Company, 1958), pages 121-122.
- 2 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 122.
- 3 William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), page 210; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 210; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 122.
- 4 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 121.
- 5 *Ibid.*, page 121.

William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), page 210; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 210; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 122.

H.A. Ironside, *Notes on the Prophecy and Lamentations of Jeremiah "The Weeping Prophet"* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1906), page 163.

E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Travelers Rest, S.C.: Southern Bible House, 1955), pages 226-227.

Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), page 264.

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 214.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), page 107.

C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), page 1297, note 1 on Hebrews 8:8.

*Ibid.*, page 1298, note 2 on Hebrews 8:8.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 123.

*Ibid.*, page 124.

*Ibid.*, page 124.

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 210.

*Ibid.*, page 218.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 210.

- W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Hebrews: A Devotional Study* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1961), pages 106-107.
- <sup>21</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 124.
- <sup>22</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 118.
- <sup>23</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pages 95-96.
- <sup>24</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 64.
- <sup>25</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 4.
- <sup>26</sup> William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology," page 190.
- Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), pages 72-74; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 2:91-103.
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## Chapter 6

### How They Argue Their Case

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In the past few chapters, we have examined several passages whose teachings, on the positive side, give strong testimony to the correctness of Reformed theology, and, on the negative side, greatly contradict the basic dispensational assumptions. These Biblical arguments are ones that I became aware of only a few years ago when I was painfully leaving the dispensational system while a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, the Mecca of dispensational thought. Dallas was then the home of well-known dispensational writers such as Drs. Charles C. Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost, and John F. Walvoord. Its legacy from the past includes Drs. Lewis Sperry Chafer and Merrill F. Unger. One of its graduates is the well-known Hal Lindsey, the great popularizer of dispensationalism in this generation. So, not only have I been exposed to the arguments for Reformed theology, I have also been exposed to the Biblical arguments for dispensationalism as explained by some of its leading proponents. Now that I have been on both sides of the fence, I have found the theological grass to be much greener on the Reformed side. Yet, I still remember that at one time my thinking was dominated and controlled by the dispensational arguments, and I can sympathetically understand how a sincere Christian can be led astray into the dispensational system. In this chapter we will examine some of the main arguments used by the dispensationalists to defend their theorized dichotomy between Israel and the New Testament church.

As I analyze my former devotion to the dispensational system, I believe that the dispensational argument that held me most

powerfully was the one based on the baptism of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup> The argument goes like this: it is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that puts one into the Body of Christ, which is the church universal (1 Corinthians 12:13); there was no baptism of the Holy Spirit before Acts 2 (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:5; 11:15-16); therefore, none of God's people who died before Acts 2 can be in the church universal; therefore, there is an absolute dichotomy between Old Testament Israel and the church. This is a subtle argument that can appear, on the surface, to be an iron-clad logical deduction from Scriptural data. The apparent strength of this argument, however, is illusionary. Its forcefulness fades into nothingness when one examines the unstated and hidden assumptions that lie at the core of this argument. We will examine these hidden assumptions in the penetrating light of Scripture.

First, this dispensational argument assumes that at glorification the Old Testament saints will not be made perfect together with the New Testament saints. It assumes that those advances in spiritual benefits that were historically realized at the inauguration of the New Testament era cannot be applied in glorification to those who died before the New Testament era began in fullness at Acts 2. This assumption contradicts the teaching of Scripture. No one's salvation, whether Old Testament saint or New Testament saint, is made perfect or complete during this life. This completion of the application of salvation occurs at glorification at the return of Christ. The Scriptures clearly teach in Hebrews 11:39-40 that the Old Testament saints will be made perfect together with, not apart from, the New Testament saints because God has provided better benefits for saints in this age of spiritual fullness. Both Old Testament saints and New Testament saints will receive the full benefits of the Trinity's salvific work at glorification, and that includes the post-Pentecost baptism of the Spirit for the Old Testament saints. This



conclusion is verified by the teaching of Revelation 21 that the Old Testament saints will be included in the Bride of Christ, which is the church universal.

Second, this dispensational argument assumes that the baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost was totally different in nature from the Spirit's Old Testament ministry of salvation. The Spirit's new covenant ministry can be both significantly superior to and significantly continuous with His old covenant ministry. Was not the Spirit renewing, sustaining, illuminating and gifting the people of God before Pentecost? Was not this work in both ages based on the person, work and covenant headship of Christ? Before Pentecost, the saving work of the Spirit was based on Messianic promises, and after Pentecost, the saving work of the Spirit was based on historically realized Messianic accomplishments. The Spirit's present ministry is superior to His old covenant ministry because it no longer relates to the Christ to come but to the Christ who has come and been glorified and who now reigns in power (John 7:39). The Spirit's being poured out in unprecedented fullness on and after the Pentecost of Acts 2 does not mean that the Spirit had not been previously putting the people of God into covenant union with the Christ who was then yet to come.

Third, this dispensational argument assumes that salvation was possible in the Old Testament apart from the union with Christ effected by the Spirit. This would mean that Old Testament salvation could not have included those spiritual benefits based upon being put in Christ by the Spirit. This would include even regeneration (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:5,10),<sup>2</sup> justification or freedom from divine condemnation (Romans 8:1), sanctification or freedom from sin's dominion (Romans 6:1-4), and a place in the resurrection of the righteous under the covenant headship of Christ (1 Corinthians

15:22)! Union with Christ to some degree through the work of the Spirit must have been possible in the Old Testament, or there could have been no Old Testament salvation. Of course, the Old Testament saint did not live in the age of spiritual fullness ushered in by the Son's historic redemptive work, but neither was the Old Testament an age in which all the main effects of the Son's work were absolutely and totally absent! God applied the Son's work to Old Testament believers to some degree even before that work was historically accomplished. There was a relative difference of degree in Old Testament spirituality, not an absolute difference of kind.

I might mention that some dispensational writers consistently accept that their system implies that Old Testament salvation must have been somehow accomplished apart from union with Christ. For example, Dr. Charles C. Ryrie has said that "those who died before Christ's first advent" are not among the "dead in Christ."<sup>3</sup> Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer has stated that the Old Testament saints were not "in the new federal Headship of the resurrected Christ," that their lives were not "hid with Christ in God,"<sup>4</sup> that "the Old Testament saints were no part of the New Creation in Christ,"<sup>5</sup> that other than Christ's needing to be raised from the dead to sit on David's throne, "the nation Israel sustains no relation to the resurrection of Christ,"<sup>6</sup> and that "there is no kind of a position in Christ in any teaching of the law or of the kingdom."<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, this dispensational argument fails to recognize the close relationship between spiritual baptism and spiritual circumcision (Colossians 2:11-12). There definitely was spiritual circumcision in the Old Testament. This was an Old Testament ministry of the Spirit that most probably differed from New Testament spiritual baptism only in degree.

Fifth, the New Testament speaks of salvation in Christ as a participation in the Old Testament covenants of promise (Ephesians 2:12-13). This would indeed be ironic if Old Testament salvation were accomplished apart from union with Christ.

There is another dispensational argument similar to the above. This argument is based upon the New Testament's reference to the church age as a mystery.<sup>8</sup> In Scripture, a mystery is a previously unknown secret that God has newly revealed. Dispensationalists argue that the church age was a mystery in Old Testament times in an absolute sense. Since the church age was absolutely unknown in the Old Testament, then no Old Testament prophecy could refer to the church age. This means that all Old Testament prophecies about a coming age had to refer to the dispensational Jewish millennium, not to the church age. Then the church age is truly an unforeseen parenthesis in God's program for Israel. The Reformed answer to this argument is that the church was a mystery in a relative sense. This answer is based on Ephesians 3:3-6: ". . . the mystery . . . , which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto (God's) holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." The as here is comparative indicating that the church age was relatively unknown in the Old Testament, not absolutely unknown. Certain characteristics of the church age that are referred to here as a mystery (Ephesians 3:6) are elsewhere shown to be predicted in Old Testament prophecy (Romans 15:7-13), which proves the mystery to be relative, not absolute.

Another dispensational argument is based on Christ's statement, "I will build My church" (Matthew 16:18). The dispensationalists argue that if the church were then something just being built, then it could not have existed in Old Testament times. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer has argued this as follows:

When the stress falls on the word will, the prophetic aspect is introduced and the reader is reminded that the Church did not exist at the moment Christ was speaking, but was to be realized in the future. This is a difficult aspect of truth for those who contend that the Church has existed throughout the period covered by the Old Testament, or any part of it.<sup>9</sup>

The answer to this argument is simple. The New Testament church at the time of Christ's earthly ministry was both old and new. It was old in that the concept of God's having a church or a called out people was rooted in the Old Testament. The New Testament church is new in that God's people reached a new dispensational maturity at that time because of the historical work of the Son. The Old Testament church was in the infancy of ceremonial shadows and a nationally confined kingdom; the New Testament church was in the maturity of spiritual realities and a universalized kingdom. In the Old Testament, Moses served the church as a servant; in the New Testament, Christ was faithful over the church as a Son (Hebrews 3:5-8). The newness in Matthew 16 is not an absolute newness as if God had not before had a church or called out people. The newness is the newness of God's people belonging to the Christ in a new and intimate way. Christ was referring to the mature church of Messianic realities as opposed to the immature church of Messianic prefigurations. Christ was saying that He would build His new covenant church not from scratch but out of the material of the old covenant church, replacing the typological shadows with spiritual substance, excluding the Jews who would not accept Him, and expanding the Jewish tent to include the Gentiles (Isaiah 54:1-3).

On the side, when the Greek word translated church is applied to Old Testament Israel in Scripture (Acts 7:38), dispensationalists say that the word is being used in a nontheological sense, as it is used in Acts

19:32 to refer to an assembly.<sup>10</sup> Whenever the word Israel is used to refer to the New Testament church (Galatians 6:16), dispensationalists say that it refers strictly to the physical Jews in the church.

A similar argument to this one based on Matthew 16:18 is one based on Ephesians 2:20, where the apostles and prophets are said to be the foundation of the church. If the church is described as a temple founded on the New Testament apostles and on Christ, argues the dispensationalist, then it cannot have an Old Testament foundation. I have heard that some Reformed interpreters try to answer this argument by pointing out that Ephesians 2:20 also teaches that the church is founded on Old Testament prophets as well as New Testament apostles, but I consider that to be an inadequate argument. The prophets in Ephesians 2:20 are New Testament prophets (compare Ephesians 3:5, especially the word now; Ephesians 4:11). One should acknowledge that Ephesians 2:20 is referring to the church in its New Testament manifestation, to the church in its Messianic maturity, and not to the church in its broader sense. The passage that discusses the church in its broader sense with the use of an architectural figure is Revelation 21:9-14. The word church as used in the New Testament can refer broadly to the elect of all ages or it can refer narrowly to the assembly of Old Testament Israel, to the covenant community in its New Testament manifestations, or to a local New Testament congregation. In Ephesians 2:20, the word church is not even used directly. The reference is to the "new man" (Ephesians 2:15), which refers to the church in its New Testament form. If one examines the church as the community with God's promise of salvation, its foundation goes ultimately back to the Trinitarian covenant of redemption in eternity past and goes historically back to the promise of the Seed Redeemer given to Adam and Eve after the fall. If one examines the church as a

covenant community with a system of sacramental administration, its foundation goes back to the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. If one examines the church as the covenant community of Messianic fullness, then its foundation is the historical work of Christ and the New Testament apostles and prophets. Ephesians 2:20 is admittedly a discussion of the church strictly in its New Testament form, but Ephesians 2:12-19 also stresses the strong continuity of the New Testament church with Old Testament Israel and with the Old Testament covenants. The Reformed theologian acknowledges both the newness of the New Testament church and its continuity with the Old Testament covenant community. The dispensationalist radicalizes the former and denies the latter. Also, the Reformed theologian recognizes that the word church at times refers to the elect of all the ages (Ephesians 5:25) and to the assembly of Old Testament Israel (Acts 7:38), usages which dispensationalists have to deny.

I will deal with one last argument that the dispensationalists use. They argue that since the New Testament continues to distinguish between physical Israelites, physical Gentiles and the Christian church (1 Corinthians 10:32), then one cannot identify Israel and the church. After all, Israel and the church are kept separate in Scripture.<sup>11</sup> This argument is based upon an overly restricted understanding of the term Israel.

Though the physical Jew may have a sense of racial identity, membership in Israel has never been a strictly racial matter but instead primarily a matter of covenant relationship. Israel was the name of the Old Testament covenant community that was distinguished from the nations by the covenant of circumcision. Physical descent and blood lines were emphasized because the Messiah was to be a literal descendant of both Abraham and David,

but Gentiles could join Israel through the proselyte laws. In the genealogy of David, we find Tamar the Canaanite, Rahab the harlot from Jericho, and Ruth the Moabitess. All of Abraham's servants were circumcised into Israel in Genesis 17. When Abraham delivered Lot, his household servants included 318 men trained for warfare (Genesis 14:14). The total number of servants and their families was undoubtedly a large number, and all the males were circumcised. When Jacob went to Egypt, his physical descendants numbered seventy, but his household was so large that they were given the entire land of Goshen in which to live. A mixed multitude came out of Egypt with the physical descendants of Abraham (Exodus 12:38). Many of the mighty men of David's army were of foreign extraction (1 Chronicles 11:26-47), the best known being Uriah the Hittite. Gentiles throughout the ancient world became Jews in the days of Queen Esther (Esther 8:17). During the intertestamental Maccabean era, many Edomites, descendants of Esau, became Jews.<sup>12</sup> In the eighth century A.D. long after the great divorce between Christianity and Judaism, the Gentile Khazars of eastern Europe converted to Judaism. And thousands of professed Christians are converting to Judaism each year in our own day. To be a Jew is to be covenanted into the Jewish people by circumcision just as to be a Christian is to be covenanted into the Christian people by baptism.

Also, members of Israel under the old covenant could be excommunicated from the covenant community for certain high handed sins. One could be a member of Israel by racial descent without being a member of Israel as a citizen or church member. Also, when much of Israel lapsed into idolatry, the prophets spoke of the remnant within the nation who were Jews inwardly as well as outwardly. This concept of being a true inward Jew was stressed by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:9), Jesus (John 8:37,39), and Paul (Romans 2:28-29; 9:6). One could be a member of Israel physically,

nationally, culturally, and religiously without being a member of Israel spiritually.

In this age of the new covenant, the physical Jew must follow the example of Zacchaeus and believe in Christ to be a true son of Abraham (Luke 19:9). In this age, to covenant into ethnic Israel by circumcision is to covenant into a people who reject Jesus of Nazareth. In this age, many Gentiles have followed the example of the Roman centurion of great faith and have come from east and west to sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 8:11). In the New Testament, one can be a physical Jew and not be a spiritual Jew (Revelation 2:9; 3:9), and one could be a physical Gentile and be a spiritual seed of Abraham (Galatians 3:29; Romans 4:11). All Christians are inward Jews, and Paul teaches that "he is a Jew, which is one inwardly" (Romans 2:28).

Although both Christianity and Judaism have roots in the Old Testament religion, only Christianity is the seed according to promise like Isaac (Galatians 4:21-31) and the true heir of the Old Testament covenants. Paul compares unbelieving ethnic Israel to Ishmael, the one who was a physical descendant of Abraham but who was cast out of the covenant community. As long as ethnic Israel remains in spiritual hardness and blindness through her rejection of God's Messiah, she remains cut off from spiritual Israel and from the sap of God's saving grace (Romans 11:23; compare Matthew 8:12) and is an enemy of God concerning the gospel (Romans 11:28). For a season in the days of transition between the old and new covenants, the status of the unbelieving Jews as members of the covenant community with a special interest in God's promises was honored (Acts 2:39; 3:25), but those who hardened in their rejection were eventually pruned off the tree of the true Israel (Romans 11:20).



The use of the word Israel in reference to physical Jews or to ethnic Israel or to the religious heirs of the Pharisees does not imply that the church is not spiritual Israel, the true Israel of God (Galatians 6:16) and the true heir of the Old Testament covenants.

But, asks the dispensationalist, what about Romans 11:29: "For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance"? All this verse is teaching is that there is a sense in which ethnic Israel remains beloved of God because of the special role of her fathers in redemptive history and because of her national election under the old covenant (Romans 9:1-5). This is not to say that ethnic Israel has its own prophetic future apart from the Christian church. This is to say that because of God's respect for ethnic Israel's former participation in the covenant promises, ethnic Israel's apostasy from spiritual Israel will never be full or final. Many Jews have been cut off from the olive tree of spiritual Israel, but there will always be an elect remnant within ethnic Israel who are Jews inwardly as well as outwardly and members of the true Israel of God, which is the Christian church (Romans 11:1-7). And ethnic Israel will one day experience a spiritual fullness that will be in direct contrast to the hardness, blindness and stumbling of her national rejection of Jesus (Romans 11:12,15,26-29). God continues to have a place for ethnic Israel in His prophetic plans in spite of her national stumbling but that future is not divorced from the Christian church. And that future will be realized in and through the Christian church when the cast off natural branches are grafted back into the olive tree through faith in Christ (Romans 11:23). At that point, all Israel will be saved and will experience the blessings of the new covenant (Romans 11:26-27).<sup>13</sup>

In summary, we see that dispensationalism overstresses the differences of kind between the Old and New Testaments to the point of neglecting their organic relationship of developmental continuity.

Old Testament Israel was the church in infancy; Acts 2 was the church's Bar Mitzvah; the New Testament church is Israel come to maturity. The New Testament church is organically related to Old Testament Israel like a man's adulthood is organically related to that same man's childhood (Galatians 4:1-7). In such a relationship, there is both newness and continuity.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pages 136-137.

Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus in John 3 is a classic passage on regeneration. Since that passage was spoken under the old covenant dispensation, dispensationalists tend to acknowledge that there was regeneration under the old covenant economy. Dr. John F. Walvoord says, on the same page, both that people could be born again under the old covenant and that Old Testament saints were not in Christ. The difficulty with this teaching is that

- <sup>2</sup> the New Testament associates regeneration with union with Christ.

John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit at Work Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1973), page 21; compare J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), page 271; contrast with Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:16.

- <sup>3</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 136; compare John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 280.

Darby, William Kelly, A.C. Gaebelien, C.I. Scofield and others have held that the "dead in Christ" of 1 Thessalonians 4:16 includes the Old Testament saints. The most obvious difficulty with this position is the difficulty in putting the Old Testament saints "in Christ" as Paul used that term and keeping them out of the Body of Christ. Many dispensationalists today limit the "dead in Christ" to church saints, and William Everett Bell, Jr. explains the history of this doctrinal evolution:

In 1937, in his *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, Alexander Reese launched a vitriolic attack on Pretribulationism. The major thrust of his argument lay in the identification of the resurrection of the righteous dead with the time of Christ's second coming. He then demonstrated conclusively from scripture that the resurrection of Old Testament saints was to follow the tribulation period; therefore the second coming of Christ must follow the tribulation period also. The force of his argument was felt keenly by pretribulationists, but an ingenious solution was devised to get around the problem. Pretribulationists simply conceded Reese's point that the Old Testament saints would be resurrected after the tribulation, but they maintained that the New Testament church saints would still be resurrected at the rapture before the tribulation." William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), pages 15-16.

4 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:181.

5 *Ibid.*, 4:63.

6 *Ibid.*, 1:xvi-xvii.

7 Ibid., 4:98.

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 232-237; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 134, footnote 4. On page 201 of *Dispensationalism Today*, Dr. Ryrie quotes a dispensational writer who comments as follows on Ephesians 3:5: "The 'as it has now been revealed' may indeed suggest that this mystery had been hinted at in the Old Testament, but under veiled forms or types, and only now was properly revealed." On page 134, footnote 4, Dr. Ryrie gives the normal dispensational interpretation on this point when he denies that : ". . . the 'as' clause of Ephesians 3:5 might imply a partial revelation in the Old Testament . . ." Elsewhere, Dr. Ryrie says, "The Church is a mystery in the sense that it was completely unrevealed in the Old Testament and now revealed in the New Testament." Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), page 136.

9 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:43.

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, page 137; C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), page 1021 (note on Matthew 16:18).

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 164; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 88; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 138.

12 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, XIII,ix,1.

13 For a defense of this view of "all Israel shall be saved," see Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Carlisle, Penn.: The Banner of Truth

Trust, 1971), pages 72-74; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 2:91-103. For a defense of the view that "all Israel" refers to the believing remnant within ethnic Israel throughout the ages, see William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), pages 35-52.

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## Chapter 7

### Consistent Literalism

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I believe that if you were to ask the knowledgeable dispensationalist to specify the most basic and fundamental element in his system, he would probably say consistent literalism or some equivalent expression. The dispensationalist believes that consistent literalism is the basic key to the correct interpretation of Scripture and the only sure hedge against liberalism. The dispensationalist's main criticism of the Reformed theologian is that he "spiritualizes" or "allegorizes," which is to say that he is not consistently literal in the dispensational sense of the expression.

This dispensational criticism most often refers to the Reformed theologian's directly applying Old Testament prophecies that speak of Israel and the Messianic age to the New Testament church. Many dispensationalists also regard the Reformed theologian as an incipient liberal because they believe that it is only the Reformed theologian's inconsistency and his failure to apply his non-literal hermeneutic (i.e., system of interpretation) throughout his system of theology that saves him from liberalism.<sup>1</sup> After all, the Reformed theologian's "spiritualizing" away Jewish prophecies by applying them directly to the church differs only in degree from the liberal's spiritualizing away the creation account or the virgin birth by saying that these are myths, reasons the dispensationalist. The dispensationalist is emotionally committed to his literal hermeneutic and believes that he alone has the moral courage and integrity necessary to accept what Scripture literally teaches.

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie explains the dispensational emphasis on consistently literal interpretation as follows:

The distinction between Israel and the Church is born out of a system of hermeneutics which is usually called literal interpretation. ... The word literal is perhaps not as good as either the word normal or plain, but in any case it is interpretation that does not spiritualize or allegorize as nondispensational interpretation does. ... Consistently literal or plain interpretation is indicative of a dispensational approach to the interpretation of Scripture. And it is this very consistency -- the strength of dispensational interpretation -- that irks the nondispensationalist and becomes the object of his ridicule.<sup>2</sup>

If plain or normal interpretation is the only valid hermeneutical principle, and if it is consistently applied, it will cause one to be a dispensationalist. As basic as one believes normal interpretation to be, to that extent he will of necessity become a dispensationalist.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Walvoord captures the spirit of dispensational literalism in his dramatic statements:

History is history, not allegory. Facts are facts. Prophesied future events are just what they are prophesied. Israel means Israel, earth means earth, heaven means heaven.<sup>4</sup>

A literal promise spiritualized is exegetical fraud.<sup>5</sup>

The importance of consistent literalism to the dispensationalist cannot be overstated. Dispensationalists like to argue that consistent literalism is their first principle and that the dichotomy and

parenthesis theories logically follow from the application of this first principle to the study of Scripture. I believe that the reality is the reverse: dispensational interpretation uses the degree of literalism necessary to interpret prophecy in terms of the dispensational dichotomy and parenthesis assumptions. Beyond this, differing degrees of figurativeness and literality can be found in dispensational interpretations.

Certain passages dramatically demonstrate the difficulty in trying to interpret prophecy with so-called consistent literalism. One such class of passages are those which dispensationalists apply to their Jewish millennium and which refer to some ancient enemies of Old Testament Israel which long ago passed out of existence, such as the Ammonites (Isaiah 11:14; Daniel 11:41), the Assyrians (Micah 5:5; Isaiah 19:23-25), the Edomites (Isaiah 11:14; 63:1-6; Joel 3:19; Amos 9:11-12; Daniel 11:41), the Egyptians (Zechariah 14:16-19; Isaiah 19:23-25), and the Moabites (Isaiah 11:14; Daniel 11:41).<sup>6</sup> Dr. William Everett Bell has made the following observations in this regard:

One wonders why if "Israel means Israel," why Assyria does not mean Assyria and Egypt mean Egypt. The answer, obviously, is that plain common sense militates against any interpretation that sees a necessary revival of ancient peoples who passed off the scene of history thousands of years ago. No Christian would deny that God could once again bring together an Assyrian empire or a Philistine nation if He chose to do so, but few expositors, dispensationalists included, look for such an occurrence.<sup>7</sup>

Still another problem for the theory of consistent literalism are those passages which dispensationalists refer to a future Jewish



dispensation and which specifically mention Old Testament family and tribal relationships. Dispensationalists argue that there is a future generation of Jews who will fulfill the Old Testament prophecies about a Messianic age, but some of these prophecies specifically mention the existence of ancient family and tribal relationships. For example, Zechariah chapters 9-12 is usually considered by dispensationalists to be a passage especially supportive of their system. Zechariah 12:11-14, however, specifically speaks of the separate and distinct existence of the families of David, Nathan, Levi and Shimei. Other passages about the Messianic age speak of the distinct existence of the tribe of Levi (Isaiah 66:21; Malachi 3:3), and some even speak of the continued existence of the sons of Zadok within the tribe of Levi (Ezekiel 44:15; 48:11). Other prophetic passages speak of all the separate and distinct twelve tribes of Israel (Ezekiel 48; Revelation 7). These tribal and family relationships, however, have long been lost. God has not seen fit to preserve these genealogical distinctions past the time of the New Testament. Once tribal and family relationships are lost, they cannot be restored except by resurrecting the family and tribal heads and starting over again. Because of such considerations, Patrick Fairbairn has said the following:

So long as any prophecies were depending for their fulfillment on the separate existence of tribes and families in Israel, the distinction betwixt them was preserved; and so, also, were the genealogical records, which were needed to attest the fulfillment. These prophecies terminated in the Son of Mary, the branch of the house of David, and the lion of the tribe of Judah; but with him this, and all other old things, ceased -- a new era, independent of such outward and formal differences, began. Hence, we find the apostle discharging all from giving heed to endless genealogies, as no longer of any avail in the church of

God; and the providence of God shortly after sealed the word by scattering their genealogies to the winds, and fusing together in one undistinguishable, inextricable mass, the surviving remnants of the Jewish family. Now, prophecy is not to be verified by halves; it is either wholly true, in the sense in which it ought to be understood, or it is a failure. And since God's providence has rendered the fulfillment of the parts referred to manifestly impossible on the literal principle of interpretation, it affords conclusive evidence, that on this principle such prophecies are misread. In what it calls men to believe, it does violence to their reason; and it commits the word of God to expectations, which never can be properly realized.<sup>8</sup>

The passage most commonly mentioned in discussions of the difficulty presented by dispensational literalism is Ezekiel's temple vision (Ezekiel 40-48). The dispensationalists are looking for a reinstatement of bloody animal sacrifices in a millennial temple built in accordance with the description found in this passage.<sup>9</sup> Dispensationalists are careful to specify that these sacrifices are merely memorials of Christ's death and will be the millennial equivalent of the Lord's Supper. The problem with this is that Ezekiel's vision refers to these sacrifices as literally making atonement (Ezekiel 45:15,17,20; Hebrew: kaphar, atone). Of course, a dispensationalist can go to the book of Hebrews to prove that animal sacrifices in the Old Testament never literally atoned for sin (Hebrews 10:4). When the Reformed theologian, however, goes to Hebrews to prove that animal sacrifices were done away forever by Christ's once for all offering (Hebrews 10:10-18), then that is "theological interpretation" and "reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament," two practices which dispensationalists routinely criticize.

Another area where strict literalism is difficult are those prophecies which dispensationalists interpret as end-time events and which refer to ancient weapons systems. For example, Ezekiel 38-39 is a passage which dispensationalists interpret as referring to an end-time invasion of Israel by a Russian army. And yet the prophecy speaks of this army as equipped with primitive weapons: "shields and bucklers, ... bows and arrows, and ... handstaves, and ... spears" (Ezekiel 39:9). These weapons are largely made of wood as evidenced by their being burned as firewood. Dr. John F. Walvoord suggests the following explanation:

Modern missile warfare will have developed in that day to the point where missiles will seek out any considerable amount of metal. Under those circumstances, it would be necessary to abandon the large use of metal weapons and substitute wood such as is indicated in the primitive weapons. Whatever the explanation, the most sensible interpretation is that the passage refers to actual weapons pressed into use because of the particular circumstances of that day.<sup>10</sup>

For the sake of argument, let us assume that the dispensationalist is correct in referring this prophecy to a specific futuristic end-time event as opposed to a preterite or axiomatic interpretation. Given that assumption, to teach that the prophet was simply speaking of warfare in terms familiar to ancient Israel would be to compromise the dispensational literal hermeneutic. If the prophet could have prophesied a war with modern weapons in terms of the primitive weapons with which ancient Israel was familiar, then the prophet could also have prophesied the church age in terms of the Old Testament religious system with which ancient Israel was familiar. If the dispensationalist does not interpret the wooden weapons of Ezekiel 39 literally, then he has little basis for crying out

"spiritualization" when the Reformed interpreter interprets Ezekiel's temple vision in the chapters immediately following as a prophecy of the church age in terms of the Old Testament religious system.

Not all dispensational interpreters guard the literal hermeneutic as carefully as does Dr. Walvoord. The popular dispensational writer Hal Lindsey, a graduate of the seminary where Dr. Walvoord is president, shares his hermeneutical approach to the book of Revelation:

Some writers have chosen to interpret each symbol quite literally. For example, a locust with the face of a man, the teeth of a lion, a breastplate of iron, a tail that can sting, and wings that made the sound of many chariots would have to be specially created by God to look just like that description.

I personally tend to think that God might utilize in his judgments some modern devices which the Apostle John was at a loss for words to describe nineteen centuries ago! In the case just mentioned, the locust might symbolize an advanced kind of helicopter.<sup>11</sup>

Mr. Lindsey later suggests that the composite locust creatures of the Apocalypse might be Cobra helicopters that spray nerve gas from their tails.<sup>12</sup> And yet, interpreters such as Mr. Lindsey also argue that Reformed interpreters are making a serious and fundamental error in teaching that the Old Testament prophets at times spoke of the coming church age in terms of the Old Testament religious economy with which the people of God were then familiar!

Another passage where dispensationalists generally insist on strict literality is the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21.

The new Jerusalem vision of Revelation 21, if interpreted with strict literality, involves the coming down to earth of a city whose length, width and height are each 12,000 stadia (i.e., about 1,500 miles). Just stop and try to visualize a city fifteen hundred miles long, wide and tall resting on planet earth. Such a metropolitan mass would put a definite wobble in this planet's orbital spin! Of course, God could do such a feat and overcome any such difficulties, but is it not more likely that these outrageous dimensions were used intentionally to prevent an overly literal interpretation? Also, the use of the highly symbolic number 12,000 would seem enough to indicate that this city, which elsewhere is literally said to be the Bride of Christ (Revelation 21:9-10), is a symbol for the full number of the people of God of all the ages. The number twelve is associated with the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:12,14) and therefore with the covenant people of both ages. The numbers ten and thousand are associated with fullness or completion. Why the insistence on a literal city with such outrageous and disproportionate dimensions relative to planet earth?

The dispensationalist Dr. Paul Lee Tan explains that the dispensationalist believes that Biblical prophecy should be interpreted literally whenever this is possible or plausible. As an example of what he is talking about, he mentions the pearls that are to serve as gates in the extraordinarily large city described in Revelation 21.<sup>13</sup> Of course, it is possible for God to create such extraordinary pearls. And it is possible for omnipotent God to recreate many elements of the Old Testament world and to cataclysmically rearrange the earth's topography in order to allow for a very literal fulfillment of Messianic prophecies. The question, however, is not whether or not such fulfillments are theoretically possible by any stretch of the imagination. The issue is what God was intending to communicate by the language used in Biblical prophecy.

Dispensationalists sometimes do lay aside this insistence on literality if possible by any stretch of the imagination in prophetic interpretation. For example, in Psalm 22, it was prophesied that the Messiah would be surrounded by "bulls of Bashan." Most interpreters take this prophecy to refer to those people who persecuted our Lord at His passion. One must admit, however, that this interpretation is not a "literal if possible" interpretation of the passage. And yet, I am aware of no dispensationalist who insists in the name of literalism that our Lord at His second coming must suffer again under the threats of literal bulls from literal Bashan in order to fulfill all prophecy literally. Yet these same interpreters argue that Christ will not begin His prophesied Messianic reign until He is ruling from a literal Mount Zion in literal Palestine (Psalm 2:6) even though the New Testament teaches both that Christ obtained His Messianic throne at His ascension into heaven (Revelation 12:5; 2:26-27; compare Psalm 2:9) and that Mount Zion and Jerusalem in the age are heavenly realities (Hebrews 12:22).

The editors of the New Scofield Reference Bible have made a significant admission regarding literalism and the interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. They have acknowledged that the animal sacrifices in Ezekiel's temple vision do not need to be interpreted literally but may be validly regarded as a general prophecy of future worship in terms of the Old Testament economy with which the original recipients of the prophecy were familiar.<sup>14</sup> If this principle can be applied here, then why not elsewhere in other prophecies of the Messianic age? If this principle applies to the sacrifices in Ezekiel's temple vision, then why not also to the entire temple setting? Once this principle is acknowledged in regard to one element of Old Testament worship in a Messianic prophecy, it is arbitrary to deny it in regard to other elements of Old Testament worship and other Messianic prophecies. The more this principle is

applied in dispensational interpretation of prophecy, the less Judaistic will be the dispensational millennium and the closer dispensational interpretation will come to traditional Reformed prophetic interpretation.

I opened this chapter with some criticisms that dispensationalists have of the Reformed hermeneutic. Allow me to close by answering these criticisms. First, consistent literalism is not the final key to proper Biblical interpretation. It is too subjective and rationalistic. One man's consistency is another man's absurdity. Consistent literalism means that the interpreter must ultimately look to his own personal sense of literary usage to determine the degree of literalism and figurativeness in prophecy.

The proper hermeneutic involves a study of how Scripture interprets other Scripture as a guide to what is Scripturally normal language. If Matthew's interpretation of prophecy seems abnormal to us, then we should adjust our understanding of what normal language is.

The proper hermeneutic involves a willingness to interpret difficult passages of Scripture in the light of the teaching of clearer passages of Scripture and with a sensitivity to literary genre. One should not build a theological system on possible interpretations of poetic or apocalyptic passages when those interpretations require one to twist the clear meaning of straightforward didactic passages. For example, the clear teaching of the New Testament on the finished sacrifice of Christ should guide one in interpreting the animal sacrifices in Ezekiel's vision.

The proper hermeneutic involves a prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies in truth. The interpreter should not be a rationalist who puts his ultimate trust in his own personal sense of language. The interpreter's own personal sense of language is reliable

only to the extent that it has been sanctified by the Spirit in truth. The interpreter should humbly acknowledge that his ultimate dependence is on the Spirit's illumination for spiritual discernment and for deliverance from sinful biases and blindnesses. Interpretation of Scripture is a moral endeavor as well as an intellectual endeavor. We are dependent on the Spirit to help us to understand Scripture as God meant it to be understood.

Second, strict literalism is not the final hedge against liberalism. Both liberals and cultists defend their distorted theologies both by literalizing Scripture and by allegorizing Scripture. For example, Armstrongism literalizes the eternal throne in the Davidic covenant and insists upon a fulfillment involving a literal, physical throne. The true hedge against doctrinal distortion is not literalizing. The true hedge is a real submission to the illumination of the Holy Spirit and to the teachings of Scripture. Only here in this double combination of Word and Spirit does one find truth safely hedged against error.

What is truly objective interpretation? The ultimate objectivity is found in the divine subjectivity as expressed in the "thus saith the Lord" of the written Word. And for us to have reliable access to this ultimate objectivity, we are ultimately dependent on the Spirit's work in giving us the subjective ability to understand God's Word. In the last analysis, truth and understanding are gifts from God. But for the grace of God, I, too, would be blinded to God's clear revelation and I would be enslaved by cultic error. As is true with many issues, we in the end come to the apparent antinomy between human responsibility and divine sovereignty. I am morally responsible for seeing and obeying the clear message of Scripture. Apart from Christ, I can do nothing and am spiritually blind and dead. When I do understand and obey God's message, it is an unmerited gift from God. And yet my natural inability and my total dependence on God



does not relieve me of my responsibility to use all my God given facilities in an effort to understand His Word. And if I am right and my dispensational friends are wrong in understanding prophecy, I have no basis for boasting. For what do I have that I did not receive? Every good and perfect gift is from above.

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## End Notes

"The amillennial method of interpreting Scripture is correctly defined as the spiritualizing method. It is clear, however, that conservative amillennialists limit the use of this method, and in fact adopt the literal method of interpreting most of the Scriptures. ...

"The modern liberal scholar, who is also an amillenarian, feels free to use the spiritualizing method rather freely in areas other than prophecy whenever it suits his fancy, and being bound by no law of infallible inspiration need not be concerned if the result is not consistent. The spiritualizing method once admitted is not easy to regulate and tends to destroy the literal method. While the amillennial use of the literal method is general among conservatives, among liberal groups it has less standing and use."

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), pages 62-63. See also Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1974), pages 275-277.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), pages 45-46.

3 Ibid., page 21.

4 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 129-130.

5 Ibid., page 200.

6 Compare John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967) pages 160-169.

7 William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), pages 85-86.

8 Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to Its Distinct Nature, Its Special Function, and Proper Interpretation* (n.p.: T. & T. Clark, 1865; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1967), pages 276-277.

9 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), page 519.

10 John F. Walvoord, *The Nations in Prophecy*, page 116. Quoted in Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, page 224.

11 Hal Lindsey, *There's a New World Coming: "A Prophetic Odyssey"* (Irvine, California: Harvest House Publishers, 1973), page 16.

12 Ibid., pages 138-139.

13 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, pages 157-160.

14 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), page 888.

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## Chapter 8

### Interpreting the Prophets

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Interpreting Biblical prophecy is not exactly like reading the morning newspaper. To read Biblical prophecy is to encounter statements about mighty bulls of Bashan, strange composite beasts, armies of locusts, and cataclysmic events in the heavens and on earth. One doesn't often encounter language like that even in the more extravagant tabloids. Interpreting this sort of language is a challenge, especially since we are no longer surrounded by the cultural and linguistic context in which Biblical prophecy was originally given. Interpreting prophecy, however, is a challenge that every Christian should accept. All Scripture is profitable for doctrine and instruction, not just the easier to understand portions of Scripture.

The dispensationalist and the Reformed interpreter have basic disagreements about how the language of prophecy should be interpreted. It would be impractical to go through all the prophecies of Scripture in this chapter and to explain the differences between dispensational and Reformed approaches to their interpretation. A more practical approach would be to examine some of the general issues in the interpretation of prophecy as these relate to the basic differences between dispensational and Reformed prophetic interpretation.

A primary criticism that dispensationalists have of the Reformed interpretation of prophecy is that the Reformed interpreter treats prophecy with a different hermeneutic (i.e., system of interpretation) than he uses with the rest of Scripture. According to Dr. Walvoord, the non-dispensational interpreter "uses two methods of

interpretation, the spiritualizing method for prophecy and the literal method for other Scriptures."<sup>1</sup> According to Dr. Charles C. Ryrie:

What, then, is the difference between the dispensationalists' use of this hermeneutical principle [literalism] and the nondispensationalists'? The difference lies in the fact that the dispensationalist claims to use the normal principle of interpretation consistently in all his study of the Bible. He further claims that the nondispensationalist does not use the principle everywhere. He admits that the nondispensationalist is a literalist in much of his interpretation of the Scriptures, but charges him with allegorizing or spiritualizing when it comes to the interpretation of prophecy.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the nondispensationalist position is simply that the literal principle is sufficient except for the interpretation of prophecy. In this area, the spiritualizing principle must be introduced.<sup>3</sup>

The basic issue here is the simple question of what was "normal" language when God spoke about the then distant future. Should we expect God to have spoken through the prophets about the then distant future with the same basic language that He used when He chronicled the history of the covenant people? Or should we expect a basic literary difference between Genesis and Zechariah, between 1 Samuel and Daniel, between the Acts of the Apostles and the Apocalypse of John? Is the only literary difference between history and predictive prophecy that one looks at the past and the other at the future? Should we interpret predictive prophecy as if it were prewritten history or futuristic newspaper reporting? According to Reformed interpreters, there is a basic literary difference between historical chronicles and prophetic visions. Many Old Testament

prophecies were given in dreams, visions, and dark sayings (Numbers 12:6-8) in which one should expect to find more figurative speech than in historical accounts or didactic literature. One should not interpret the prophets as if their message is in the simple literary form of prewritten history.

One of the greatest contrasts between the Reformed and dispensational understanding of "normal" language in the prophets revolves around the question of whether the prophets ever spoke of the future in terms of the past. The Reformed position is that God through the Old Testament prophets revealed selected truths about the then coming church age without revealing everything about the church age. There were certain mysteries about the church age that were not revealed until New Testament times, such as the believing Gentiles' becoming full members of the people of God under the new covenant without their submitting to the Mosaic ceremonial laws as Jewish proselytes. In the Old Testament prophets, God revealed these selected truths about the church age in the descriptive context of the basic Old Testament religious and political economy with which the prophets and their listeners were familiar. God prophetically spoke of the unknown future in terms of then known and understood realities. God, in the prophets, predicted certain essentials of the church age in terms of the concrete details of the Old Testament world even though some of these details would pass away in the coming age. For example, God, in the prophets, revealed that in the Messianic age, many Gentiles would worship and serve the God of Abraham along with Israel, but, as mentioned above, with no hint that the ceremonial dividing wall between Jew and Gentile would be torn down. According to the Reformed interpreter, this was God's normal way of revealing selected truths about the distant future. According to the dispensationalist, this would have been a deceptive way for God to have spoken about the distant future:

New revelation cannot mean contradictory revelation. Later revelation on a subject does not make the earlier revelation mean something different. It may add to it or even supersede it, but it does not contradict it. A word or concept cannot mean one thing in the Old Testament and take on opposite meaning in the New Testament. If this were so, then the Bible would be filled with contradictions, and God would have to be conceived as deceiving the Old Testament prophets when He revealed to them a nationalistic kingdom, since He would have known all the time that He would completely reverse the concept in later revelation.<sup>4</sup>

It is almost standard among detractors of the literal method to explain prophecy in terms of "Jewish coloration," "historical and contemporary garb," "Israelitish form," and "Old Testament outer covering." By these slogans, interpreters mean that the words or forms of prophecy are colored and influenced by the prophet's contemporary backgrounds, and should therefore not be interpreted literally. ... God allegedly manipulates things before the prophets so that spiritual, heavenly ideas appear in earthly, comprehensible garb.<sup>5</sup>

It is incredible that God should in the most important matters, affecting the interests and the happiness of man and nearly touching his own veracity, clothe them in words, which, if not true in their obvious and common sense, would deceive the pious and God-fearing of many ages.<sup>6</sup>

The practical result of this understanding of "normal" language in prophecy is the dispensational position that no Old Testament prophecy can refer directly to the church age. For example, since the prophecies about Gentiles' worshiping the God of Abraham in the

Messianic age are generally given in the descriptive context of the basic Old Testament religious and political economy, these prophecies must be fulfilled in the coming Jewish age when this basic religious and political context will be literally reestablished. For these prophecies to be fulfilled in the church age apart from a nationalistic Jewish kingdom would be a divine deception, according to the dispensationalists. The church age, therefore, must be viewed as a totally unrevealed parenthesis in the Jewish program prophesied in the prophets. It is instructive to contrast this view of the church age and the Old Testament prophets with that of the apostle Paul:

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer and that He should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles.

Acts 26:22-23

In the last chapter, we quoted Malachi 1:11 where God prophesied a coming age in which God's name would be great among the Gentile nations. The prophet spoke of the coming day when the God of Abraham would be universally worshiped in terms of the universal offering of incense and pure offerings. The Reformed interpreter sees a direct fulfillment of this prophecy in the church age in which Christians from many nations throughout the world worship the God of Israel. According to this interpretation, Malachi spoke about the coming church age in terms of the Old Testament worship system. To the Reformed interpreter, such usage of language in prophecy is both normal and non-deceptive. The dispensationalist insists that this prophecy can be directly fulfilled only in a coming Jewish age in

which the worship of God through literal incense and offerings will be reinstated.

Dr. John F. Walvoord gives an example of the dispensational interpretive mind set in the following:

The idea that Gentiles should be on exactly the same plane as Israelites and furthermore, in intimate relationship as being members of the same body, is absolutely foreign to the Old Testament. According to Isaiah 61:5,6, the Gentiles are pictured as being the servants and Israel as the priests of God. While it is true that the Gentiles were promised blessings in the future millennial kingdom, they are never given equality with the Jews in the Old Testament. What was new and unpredicted as far as the Old Testament is concerned, here forms the content of the special revelation given Paul concerning the church, the body of Christ. A Jew or a Gentile who through faith in Christ becomes a member of the body of Christ, by so much is detached from his former situation, and his prophetic program then becomes that of the church rather than that of Jews or Gentiles as such. It is only as the prophetic program of the church as the body of Christ is distinguished from that of Israel or that of the Gentiles that confusion can be avoided in the interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. Walvoord is commenting on Isaiah 61:5-6:

And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. But ye shall be named the Priests of the Lord: men shall call you Ministers of our God: ye shall eat of the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.



He is saying that this prophecy can be fulfilled only in the Jewish millennial age where there will be literal Gentile servant status before national Israel and where there will be a revival of the literal Old Testament priesthood. After all, does not servant mean servant and does not priest mean priest? Is this not the normal meaning of the language as understood by the original recipients? Is this not the fulfillment that many Jews were expecting at the time of Christ? So reasons the dispensationalist. He sees this passage as the prophecy of an age that stands in contrast to the Christian church where believing Jew and Gentile are spiritual equals.

The Reformed interpreter understands the above prophecy, not in contrast to, but in the light of the New Testament truth that believing Jews and Gentiles are spiritually equal in this age. The prophecy is not teaching that there will be literal Old Testament priests and literal Gentile subservience before national Israel at the time of its fulfillment. The prophecy is not teaching an absolute functional and religious dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles in the Messianic age. The prophecy is simply contrasting the coming age with the Old Testament era during which the Gentiles rejected the God of Israel and generally were hostile toward Israel. In the Messianic age, the previously pagan Gentiles will serve the God of Israel as their God. The Jews will exercise a priestly ministry in that salvation will come from the Jews (John 4:22) through the Messiah. And the believing Gentiles will bring, through their service and finances, new outward strength to the people of God. In his exhortation in Romans 15:27 to the Christians at Rome to help the "poor saints which are at Jerusalem," Paul gives an example of a New Testament fulfillment of this prophecy:

For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things.

For another example of the contrast in dispensational and Reformed interpretation of prophecy, let us look at the prophecy found in Zechariah 2:4-5: "Jerusalem shall be inhabited as towns without walls for the multitude of men and cattle therein: for I, saith the Lord, will be unto her a wall of fire round about, and will be the glory in the midst of her." Is the final fulfillment of this prophecy dependent upon the literal, earthly city of Jerusalem? There was a partial fulfillment of this prophecy under the old covenant in the city's divine protection during the vulnerable days when her walls were being rebuilt under the leadership of Nehemiah and in the future growth of the city's population. There, however, is a more significant fulfillment in this age and in the age to come. In this age of the Messiah, the forces of hell are the ones in need of defensive walls (Matthew 16:18). Today the Lord Jesus Christ has all authority in heaven and on earth, and the wicked one cannot touch His people (1 John 5:18), for greater is He who is in them than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4). The church is no longer on the defensive but is on the Great Commission offensive. The church is no longer isolated from the pagan nations by a wall of ceremonial law but is under orders to go and to disciple the pagan nations. Christ has bound Satan the strong man (Matthew 12:29), and the church is now plundering Satan's treasures as men are translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of the Son of God's love. In the New Testament era, God's kingdom has expanded from the confining walls of Jewish Jerusalem to include people, together with their possessions, from the uttermost parts of the earth. In the New Testament, physical Jerusalem was judged by God to become a desolation (Luke 21:20) and ceased to have significance for God's people (John 4:21; Galatians 4:25; Hebrews 13:14). In the new covenant era, God's people are citizens of the antitypical heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22; Galatians 4:26; compare Hebrews 11:10,16; Revelation 21:2). Every citizen of the heavenly city is also a

living stone in the temple and is filled with the glory of God through the indwelling Spirit. And the blessings of this age are but a foretaste of the blessings of eternity when the heavenly city will descend to the new earth and the glory of the Lord will be its light. These new covenant fulfillments of this prophecy are not dependent on the existence of a literal, earthly, Jewish city. A prophecy spoken in terms of Old Testament physical Jerusalem can be fulfilled in terms of the antitypical heavenly Jerusalem, of which all the elect become members at salvation. There is no need for a future Judaistic age in which Old Testament Jerusalem is rebuilt for the sake of a "literal" fulfillment of prophecy.

I will quickly mention on last prophecy from Zechariah. The following is taken from the Messianic prophecy associated with the royal crowning of Joshua the priest:

Behold, the man whose name is The BRANCH; and he shall grow up out of his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord: even he shall build the temple of the Lord; ... And they that are far off shall come and build in the temple of the Lord, ...  
Zechariah 6:12b-13a,15a

Notice the striking similarity between this prophecy and the message of Paul in Ephesians chapter 2:

But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. ... And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord.  
Ephesians 2:13,20-21

Is the above prophecy from Zechariah directly fulfilled through Jesus Christ's building up the spiritual temple of His church with Gentile living stones? Or will Jesus have to build a literal Jewish temple out of literal stones in a future age to fulfill this prophecy? Which of these do you think the Apostle Paul would have regarded as the "normal" interpretation of Zechariah chapter six?

Another profitable area to examine is the "normal" interpretation of prophetic types. If a sportscaster made a comment about a football team's recruiting a real Goliath for their defensive line, then what would be the "normal" understanding of this statement? Should we expect the rookie lineman to be a literal Philistine? Should we expect to see him on the playing field in ancient armor and with a spear whose shaft is like a weaver's beam? Should we expect the rookie to be the resurrected original with his head stitched on? Or should we understand this comment only to mean that the new lineman is an unusually big, powerful and intimidating opponent on the football field and possibly also, depending on the statement's broader context, boastful, disrespectful, defiant, and showy? What would be the "normal" interpretation of the sportscaster's statement?

This basic figure of speech used by our hypothetical sportscaster is called a prophetic type when used in Biblical prophecy. In using a prophetic type, one takes an event or a person or an institution from the past and uses it to speak of the present or future. The chosen event, person, or institution has both a form and a substance. The substance of Goliath includes his being a big, strong, formidable foe. The form of Goliath includes such things as his being a Philistine and an ancient warrior. The substance is the outstanding general characteristic and the real essence of the matter, and the form involves all the detailed but incidental specifics. When a prophetic type is used to divinely predict the distant future, it is not normal to

expect an exact reproduction of all the incidental details or a reappearance of the literal original.

An example of a prophetic type is found in the prophecy in Amos 9:11-12 about the resurrection of the fallen booth of David. In a previous chapter, we noted the use of this prophecy in Acts 15 and the controversy over whether it refers to the church age or to the dispensational Jewish millennium. There is also controversy over who is meant by the name David in the prophecy. Reformed theologians believe that this prophecy which mentions King David will be fulfilled through his antitype, King Jesus. Some leading dispensational interpreters who are genuinely striving to be consistently literal instead believe that this and other similar prophecies which mention David in the context of the Messianic age<sup>8</sup> must be fulfilled through the literal, resurrected Old Testament David who will be given a millennial viceroyship. For example, Dr. John F. Walvoord says the following:

One of the interesting aspects of the millennial government is the fact that resurrected David will apparently be a prince under Christ in administering the millennial kingdom in so far as it relates to Israel. According to Ezekiel, David will act as a shepherd over the people of Israel. ... Some have interpreted this mention of David as a reference to Christ. However, there is no good reason for not taking it in its ordinary sense inasmuch as David will certainly be raised from the dead and will be on the scene. What would be more natural than to assign him a responsible place in the government of Christ in relation to the people of Israel?<sup>9</sup>

And Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost makes the following comments:

Newell represents this view when he says:

We must never confuse in our minds this situation. We must believe the plain words of God. David is not the Son of David. Christ, as Son of David, will be King; and David, His father after the flesh, will be prince, during the millennium.

There are several considerations which support this interpretation. (1) It is most consistent with the literal principle of interpretation. (2) David alone could sit as regent in the millennium without violating the prophecies concerning David's reign. ... It would be concluded that in the government of the millennium David will be appointed a regent over Palestine and will rule over the land as prince, ministering under the authority of Jesus Christ, the King. The prince thus might lead in worship, offer memorial sacrifices, divide the land allotted to him among his faithful seed without violating his position by resurrection.<sup>10</sup>

Literally speaking, David is no more Jesus than Israel is the church. If the prophet had meant Jesus, why did he not say "Son of David"? And if typological interpretation such as this is valid in Amos, then why not elsewhere? To admit its validity here is truly to allow the Reformed camel's nose into one's hermeneutical tent.

Another good case in point is the prophecy found in the last two verses of the Old Testament (Malachi 4:5-6) that Elijah would precede the coming of the Christ:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.

Was this prophecy to be fulfilled through the reappearance of the literal Old Testament Elijah or through a prophet who would come in the spirit and power of Elijah? We read in Luke 1:17 that an angel told Zacharias the following about his yet to be born son, John the Baptist:

And he shall go before [God] in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

This passage indicates that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of both the Elijah prophecy of Malachi 4:5-6 and the preparatory messenger prophecy of Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Later, Jesus Christ said the following about John the Baptist and Elijah after John sent his message from prison and after the three disciples saw literal Elijah on the mount of transfiguration:

For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias, which was for to come.

Matthew 11:13-14

And [Jesus'] disciples asked him, saying, Why then say the scribes that Elias must first come? And Jesus answered and said unto them, "Elias truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, that Elias is come already, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them." And the disciples understood that he spake of John the Baptist.

Matthew 17:10-13

(compare Mark 9:13)

Like Elijah, John the Baptist was a forceful preacher of repentance and judgment who at times lived in desert regions. The only possible exegetical argument against John's being the fulfillment of Malachi 4:5-6 is that in John 1:19-21, when some priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked John if he were the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet, John answered no. As John Calvin explains in his commentary on these verses, John the Baptist was answering the Jews' question in the spirit in which it was asked. The Jews were expecting the reappearance of the literal Old Testament Elijah before the coming of the Messiah; John the Baptist understood that the Jews by their question were asking him if he were the literal Old Testament Elijah, and John the Baptist knew himself not to be the literal Old Testament Elijah. John the Baptist fulfilled the Malachi prophecy about the coming Elijah but not in the literal sense expected by the Jews.

There are dispensationalists who recognize that John the Baptist directly fulfilled Malachi 4:5-6,<sup>11</sup> but some do not. As evidenced by the following quotation, some dispensationalists, in the name of literalism, are looking for the literal Old Testament Elijah to appear and to fulfill this prophecy before the second coming of Christ:

We affirm that John's coming does not literally fulfill Malachi's prophecy but typifies and foreshadows the yet-future coming of Elijah the Tishbite. ... John did not fulfill Malachi's prophecy regarding the coming of Elijah the Tishbite; he is a type and prefigurement of the yet-future Elijah. ... John the Baptist would have been the personal, literal Elijah had the Jews accepted Christ and His offer of the kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

As I have said, not all dispensationalists accept this interpretation. Even though this interpretation is the most literal and the most



consistent with the popular Jewish understanding of the kingdom, this interpretation, much like the two-covenant view of the new covenant, is difficult to reconcile with the testimony of the New Testament. Dispensationalist Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost, for example, has said the following:

... the prophecy is interpreted by the Lord as being fulfilled, not in literal Elijah, but in one who comes in Elijah's spirit and power. If literal Elijah must appear Christ could not be making a bona fide offer of the kingdom, inasmuch as literal Elijah had to come and John could not have fulfilled that requirement.<sup>13</sup>

That some dispensationalists would defend the literal Elijah interpretation in spite of the witness of the New Testament about John the Baptist does reveal something about the general effects of the dispensational assumptions on prophetic interpretation. Literally speaking, Elijah is no more John the Baptist than Israel is the church. If the prophet had meant "someone in the spirit and power of Elijah," then why did he not literally say so? If a "spiritualized" interpretation such as this is valid in Malachi, then why not elsewhere? Considerations such as these and the desire for consistency explain why some dispensationalists are drawn to the literal Elijah theory.

Another interesting area of study is the New Testament's use of Old Testament prophecy. Dispensationalists routinely claim that every fulfillment of prophecy in the New Testament is a strictly literal fulfillment.<sup>14</sup> That claim simply is not true. Look at the fulfillments of prophecy in Matthew 2:13-18. Hosea 11:1 spoke of the exodus of Israel from Egypt, and Matthew saw Christ's return to Palestine from Egypt as a fulfillment of Hosea 11:1. Jeremiah 31:15 spoke of the weeping of a metaphorical Rachel, the mother of Benjamin, when

Jewish captives were deported to Babylon from Ramah, a city in the territory of Benjamin. Matthew saw Herod's slaughter of the babes at Bethlehem (the place of Rachel's grave) as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:15. Matthew leaves no doubt that he is identifying a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy:

... that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, ...

Matthew 2:15

Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, ...

Matthew 2:17

Were those literal fulfillments of prophecy? No, they were typological fulfillments in which national Israel was a type of Christ, the ultimate Seed of Abraham.<sup>15</sup> God's protecting the nation Israel in Egypt in the nation's infancy during a perilous famine and then calling the nation out of Egypt to Canaan was typologically prophetic of Christ's fleeing to Egypt as an infant until the death of Herod. Also, the grief at Ramah where the Babylonians assembled the last band of Jewish captives was typologically prophetic of Herod's attempt to destroy the Messianic Seed of Abraham. Not all the fulfillments of prophecy mentioned in the New Testament are strictly literal fulfillments.

Whenever a New Testament fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy is not literal enough for the dispensationalist, the dispensationalist simply argues that the fulfillment really was not a fulfillment. Such fulfillments are classified as illustrations, foreshadowings, kingdom breakthroughs, prefigurements, types, and so on. They are said not to be either direct fulfillments or the event the prophet actually predicted. Only by classifying fulfillments in this

way is the dispensationalist able to argue that all the fulfillments of the Old Testament found in the New Testament are literal fulfillments.

A last area to examine is the relative emphasis placed on allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture in the two systems. Dispensationalist Dr. Charles C. Ryrie makes the following charge concerning the covenant theologians use of this principle:

... as a result of the covenant of grace idea, covenant theology has been forced to place as its most basic principle of interpretation the principle of interpreting the Old Testament by the New. ...

Of course, there is everything right about letting the New Testament guide us in our understanding of the Old Testament, but everything wrong about imposing the New Testament on the Old. And this is exactly what the covenant theologian does under the guise of a basic hermeneutical principle which is allowable only if rightly used. The covenant theologian in his zeal to make Christ all in all is guilty of superimposing Him arbitrarily on the Old Testament. He does the same thing with the doctrine of the Church and with the concept of salvation through faith in Christ.<sup>16</sup>

Admittedly, Reformed prophetic interpretation does place a great emphasis on allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. If Peter indicated that Joel's prophecy about the outpouring of the Spirit was fulfilled at Pentecost, then that should influence one's interpretation of Joel's prophecy. If Paul said that the true Seed of Abraham is Christ and those who are in covenant union with Christ (Galatians 3:16,29), then that fact should influence one's interpretation of the

Abrahamic covenant. If the author of Hebrews associates the heavenly Jerusalem with the Abrahamic land promise (Hebrews 11:8-16) and if Paul associates the Abrahamic land promise with the entire world (Romans 4:13), then that should influence one's understanding of the Abrahamic land promise. The supposition here is that the only infallible interpreter of Scripture is Scripture itself, and the fallible human interpreter should study this infallible and inspired interpretation of prophecy as a guide to all prophetic interpretation. The dispensationalist, however, rejects this as reading the New Testament back into the Old Testament.<sup>17</sup>

The Reformed interpreter regards the New Testament as the source of an added clarity and fullness in the understanding of the Old Testament that was not available to the Old Testament saint. This position is consistent with the Scriptural teaching that God's truth is revealed with greatest clarity in the New Testament. Moses was said to be superior to the other Old Testament prophets in that God spoke clearly to him and not in dark sayings (Numbers 12:6-8). Not another prophet like Moses, "whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deuteronomy 34:10), arose until the Christ, who was counted worthy of more glory than Moses (Hebrews 3:3) and who was the prophesied Prophet like unto Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15,18; Acts 3:22). In the Old Testament God spoke through the prophets "at sundry times and in divers manners," but He has "in these last days spoken unto us by His Son," who is "the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:1-3), who has seen the Father (John 6:46), who has explained God (John 1:18), and who descended from heaven to bear witness to what He has seen (John 3:11-13). Through the inspiration of the outpoured Spirit, this apex of revelation continued with the Apostles (John 14:26; 16:13-14). The New Testament then is the final, full, and most clear revelation of God.

The Old Testament is the foundation and background of the New Testament and is indispensable for the proper understanding of the New Testament. The New Testament is the infallible revelation of the divine development of the Old Testament program in the fullness of time and is indispensable for understanding the Old Testament with new covenant clarity. The New Testament tells us about the Old Testament like an oak tree tells us about an acorn. The man who has seen the fully grown oak can better understand the significance and meaning of the acorn. To use another illustration, the New Testament aids in the understanding of the Old Testament like observing a specimen under a microscope with a higher magnification aids in understanding what is seen with a lower magnification. Let us say that two men are observing a specimen magnified twenty times but that one of them also has seen the same specimen magnified one hundred times. That man who has seen the greater magnification will be aware of details the other man cannot even see, and he will more accurately understand and interpret those details that both men can see with the lesser magnification. According to Reformed interpretation, we today, with the aid of the New Testament, can better understand the implications and meaning of the Old Testament than could the original recipients of that revelation because we have had the privilege of observing the same specimen (God's truth) under greater magnification (compare 1 Peter 1:10-12). Many prophets desired to see those things which we have seen but did not see them (Luke 10:24).

I have tried to contrast the basic differences between the Reformed and the dispensational understandings of Old Testament prophecy. These two schools disagree on prophetic interpretation, and the implications of this disagreement are great. If the Reformed principles are correct, then the church age is a continuing fulfillment of many Old Testament prophecies about the Messianic age and Old

Testament prophecy applies directly to the Christian. If the dispensational principles are correct, then the church age becomes an unrevealed parenthesis in the prophesied Messianic program and Old Testament prophecy applies directly only to the tribulation, the millennium, and eternity. Which principles of prophetic interpretation are correct is an important question with significant theological and exegetical repercussions.

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## End Notes

- 1 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 63.
- 2 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 89.
- 3 *Ibid.*, page 91.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pages 94-95.
- 5 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1974), pages 217, 218.
- 6 George N.H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Kregal Press, 1952), 1.315; quoted in Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, page 222.
- 7 John F. Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), pages 46-47.

"That the Gentiles should be fellow heirs and of the same body is not a recognition of the Old Testament prediction that, during Israel's coming kingdom glory, Gentiles will be raised to a subordinate participation in those covenant blessings (Isa. 60:12). Those predictions were of an earthly

calling, and, being revealed in very much Old Testament prophecy, could be no part of the heavenly calling -- the 'mystery ... hid in God.' This mystery is of a present uniting of Jews and Gentiles into one Body--a new divine purpose, and, therefore, in no sense the perpetuation of anything which has been before."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:76-77.

Notice the long list of Old Testament prophecies about Gentiles that are said to be fulfilled in the millennium as opposed to the church age in the following quotation:

"The universal aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, which promised universal blessing, will be realized in that age [the Millennium]. The Gentiles will be brought into relationship with the King. (1) The fact of the Gentiles' participation in the millennium is promised in prophetic Scriptures (Isa. 2:4; 11:12; 16:1-5; 18:1-7; 19:16-25; 23:18; 42:1; 45:14; 49:6; 22; 59:16-18; 60:1-14; 61:8-9; 62:2; 66:18-19; Jer. 3:17; 16:19-21; 49:6; 49:39; Ezek. 38:23; Amos 9:12; Mic. 7:16-17; Zeph. 2:11; Zech. 8:20-22; 9:10; 10:11-12; 14:16-19)."

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 507-508.

8 Isaiah 55:3-4; Jeremiah 30:9; 33:15-17; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-25; Hosea 3:5.

John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), page 121; see also John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 300-301.

10 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958),

pages 500-501; quotation from William R. Newell, *The Revelation*, page 323.

11 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: The New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), page 25, note on Matthew 11:14; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 309-311.

12 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, pages 185-187; compare C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), page 1023, note on Matthew 17:10; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 311-312.

13 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 312.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 10, 61; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 131; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 88; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), page 44.

15 See Patrick Fairbairn *The Typology of Scripture Viewed in Connection with the Whole Series of the Divine Dispensations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1900, 1975), 1.380-382.

16 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 187.

"Nondispensational interpreters (of the covenant theology school) have been guilty of reading back (and sometimes forcing back) the teaching of the New Testament into the Old especially in order to try to substantiate their doctrine of salvation in the Old Testament. ... Covenant theology allows for and even demands this reading back of the New Testament into the Old."  
Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 34.

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## Chapter 9

### Rightly Dividing the Word

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I can distinctly remember the time during my college days when a Christian whom God used in my life gave me a short introduction to dispensationalism. He quoted 2 Timothy 2:15 from the King James Version and pointed out the importance of "rightly dividing the word of truth." He then went over with me the seven dispensations of the Scofield Reference Bible:

1. from creation to the fall, Innocency;
2. from the fall to the flood, Conscience;
3. from the flood to the Abrahamic covenant, Human Government;
4. from the Abrahamic covenant to the Mosaic covenant, Promise;
5. from the Mosaic covenant to the cross, Law;
6. from the cross to the rapture, Grace; and
7. from the second advent to eternity, Kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

Now that I have rejected dispensationalism, I still regard this set of divisions, apart from any hidden significance that the names of the various dispensations might have, as a reasonable way to divide the dispensations, except that I am no longer a premillennialist or a pre-tribulation rapturist. I also no longer believe that 2 Timothy is directly referring to dividing Biblical history into different divine economies. The American Standard Version translates this verse "handling aright the word of truth," which I believe better conveys the verse's intent. Nevertheless, regardless of how one interprets that verse, Christians have recognized from earliest times that God has worked through different spiritual economies in different ages. Dividing Biblical history into different dispensational periods is not

distinctive of dispensationalism. To say that all Christians who do not today offer animal sacrifices and who do not today worship on Saturday are at least incipient dispensationalists is extremely simplistic.<sup>2</sup> The particular number and choice of historical division points presented by Scofield do not define dispensationalism either. The true distinctives are found on a more subtle level.

I believe that one can begin to see at least one real distinctive of dispensationalism's "rightly dividing the Word" by examining Scofield's definition of a dispensation: "A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God."<sup>3</sup> Now it is true that in every divine economy, God gave further revelation of Himself and His will, and man was responsible for responding to that revelation in obedience. It is also true, as pointed out by dispensationalists, that man apart from God's saving grace will always fail the test of obedience because of man's depraved nature. God's judgment upon man's disobedience is seen in the expulsion from the garden, in the flood, in the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel, in the Babylonian captivity, in the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and in the judgment on the final rebellion (Revelation 20:7-10). Yet, although there is truth in Scofield's definition and scheme, there is also error. Dispensationalists and Reformed theologians disagree about the relationship that revelation given to past dispensations has to the present dispensation. Dispensationalists teach that such past revelation is not binding today except to the extent that it is reaffirmed in the revelation given specifically for this present dispensation. Past revelation that is reaffirmed for the present is said to have a secondary and indirect application today due to the presence of timeless principles. In contrast, Reformed theologians teach that past revelation continues to be binding today except to the

extent that it was time bound or situation specific in its original application or to the extent that it has been modified by the more recent Biblical revelations because of the developments in God's program for the ages. An example of such a modification would be the New Testament's teaching that the people of God in this age are no longer to externally administer the Old Testament ceremonial laws, although the spiritual import and message of these laws continue to be valid. Like Christ, the Reformed theologian emphasizes the continuing relevance of God's former revelations (Matthew 5:17-19), whereas the dispensationalist puts the emphasis on the nonbinding nature of past revelation that is not specifically reaffirmed for today. This difference in emphasis is implied in Scofield's statement that each dispensation is related to "some specific revelation," as if each dispensation is limited to the revelation specifically directed to that dispensation.

To better appreciate the distinctives of dispensationalism's "rightly dividing the word," one needs to think through the dispensational explanation of Biblical history. A good place to start is the Abrahamic covenant and the dispensation of Promise. Here God provided a salvation administered on a by-faith basis and administered without moral conditions.<sup>4</sup> All went well for the people of God until Mount Sinai where a rash and tragic mistake occurred. There the people of God rashly abandoned their unconditional by-faith covenant position and instead tragically accepted the conditional and legalistic Mosaic covenant. Drs. Scofield and Chafer give the following explanations of Mount Sinai:

The Dispensation of Promise ended when Israel rashly accepted the law (Ex. 19.8). Grace had prepared a deliverer (Moses), provided a sacrifice for the guilty, and by divine power brought

them out of bondage (Ex. 19.4); but at Sinai they exchanged grace for law.<sup>5</sup>

When the Law was proposed, the children of Israel deliberately forsook their position under the grace of God which had been their relationship to God until that day, and placed themselves under the Law. ...

While it is certain that Jehovah knew the choice that the people would make, it is equally certain that their choice was in no way required by Him. ... The surrender of the blessings of grace should have been allowed by these people on no condition whatsoever. Had they said at the hearing of the impossible law, "None of these things can we do. We crave only to remain in that boundless mercy of God, who has loved us, and sought us, and saved us from all our enemies, and who will bring us to Himself," it is evident that such an appeal would have reached the very heart of God. And the surpassing glory of His grace would have been extended to them without bounds; for grace above all else is the delight of the heart of God. In place of the eagles' wings by which they were carried unto God, they confidently chose a covenant of works when they said: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do." They were called upon to face a concrete choice between the mercy of God which had followed them, and a new and hopeless covenant of works. They fell from grace. ...

Upon the determined choice of law, the mountain where God was revealed became a terrible spectacle of the unapproachable, holy character of God. ... He who had brought them to Himself under the unconditional blessings of grace, must now warn them lest they break through unto the Lord and perish. ...

The children of Israel definitely chose the covenant of works, which is law, as their relationship to God.<sup>6</sup>

It is instructive to contrast this traditional dispensational evaluation of Mount Sinai with the Biblical evaluation of Mount Sinai:

And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, ... The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. ... The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire. ... And it came to pass, when ye heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, (for the mountain did burn with fire,) that ye came near unto me, even all the heads of your tribes and your elders; and ye said, ... Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it. And the Lord heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the Lord said unto me, I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee: they have well said all that they have spoken.

Deuteronomy 5:1,2,4,23,27-28

According to dispensational authorities such as Dr. Chafer, by-faith salvation based upon an imputed righteousness was abandoned at Mount Sinai and was not resumed until after Mount Calvary.<sup>7</sup> During this period of law, there was no divine enablement and the people of God obeyed the law in the power of the flesh.<sup>8</sup> Many, if not most, dispensationalists teach that there was no enablement through a universal indwelling of the Holy Spirit among the Old Testament saints,<sup>9</sup> and some also teach that there was no enablement through regeneration under the old covenant.<sup>10</sup> If the Old Testament saints

did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit or a new nature, then they were limited to the energy of sinful flesh in their obeying God's law.

If one considers the period from the Abrahamic covenant to the end time church rapture, the Mosaic covenant was a legalistic parenthesis in a by-faith administration of grace that began in the dispensation of Promise and resumed in the dispensation of Grace.<sup>11</sup> If one considers the period from the Mosaic covenant to the end of the millennium, the church age is a parenthesis of grace in a meritorious administration of law since the post-rapture tribulation is a recontinuance of the dispensation of law and since the millennium will be a period of legalistic kingdom law that is similar to Mosaic law.<sup>12</sup> It is only fair to mention that some recent dispensationalists have, in various degrees, modified this excessively rigid dichotomy between law and grace in their explanations of redemptive history and have begun to drift toward the teachings on law and grace more traditionally held by Reformed theologians.

The next major development in the dispensational explanation of the Bible is the dispensational interpretation of the Gospels and the early chapters of Acts. According to dispensationalism, John the Baptist was announcing and Jesus was offering a Judaistic political kingdom. Even though this was the sort of kingdom that the dispensationalists say the Jews were expecting and wanting, Israel as a nation rejected Christ and His offer. In judgment upon Israel's unbelief, Christ postponed the Jewish kingdom and inaugurated the parenthetical and previously unrevealed church age. Because of this analysis of the ministry of Christ, dispensationalists see the Gospels as a complex combination of truth relating directly to three different dispensations: law, grace, and kingdom.<sup>13</sup> The preaching of John the Baptist<sup>14</sup> and Christ's Sermon on the Mount were legal discourses

related to Jewish kingdom truth and not directly intended for the church age. For example, Dr. Chafer in his Systematic Theology gave the following dispensational analysis of Christ's Sermon on the Mount:

There is in the Sermon on the Mount a recognition of the Father and the Messiah-Son, but no reference will be found to the Holy Spirit whose indwelling and limitless ministry is so great a factor in this age of the Church. There is no reference to the death of Christ with its redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation values. There is no regeneration and no mention of the faith principle as a way into the saving grace of God. There is a reference to faith as a life principle (Matt. 6:25-34), but this is in no way related to salvation from sin. The great truth of a New Creation procured and secured through the resurrection of Christ is wholly wanting in this address. The phrase in Christ with its infinite meaning relative to positions and possessions is not present, nor is even one of those positions or possessions hinted at throughout its more than one hundred verses. No enabling power whereby these great demands both in character and conduct may be realized is intimated. It represents a human responsibility. The great word justification could not possibly be introduced nor that imputed righteousness upon which justification is founded. How far removed is a mere man-wrought righteousness which exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees (Matt. 5:20) from the "gift of righteousness" bestowed on those who receive "abundance of grace" (Rom. 5:17)! And how great is the difference between those who hunger and thirst after righteousness (Matt. 5:6) and those who are "made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21)! Thus, also, great is the difference between those who are in danger of hell fire (Matt. 5:22,29-30) and those who are

justified on a principle of perfect divine justice who have done no more than believe in Jesus -- even the ungodly (Rom. 3:26;4:5). Thus, again, note should be made of the divergence between those who obtain mercy by being merciful (Matt. 5:7) and those who have found everlasting mercy even when dead in sins (Eph. 2:4-5), likewise between those who hope to be forgiven on the ground of their own forgiveness of others (Matt. 6:12-15) and those who for Christ's sake have been forgiven (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). And, yet again, consideration must be given to a distinction between those who follow a course -- strait and narrow -- with the goal in view that they may find life at the end of that path (Matt. 7:14) and those to whom eternal life has been given as a present possession (John 3:36; Rom. 6:23; 1 John 5:11-12). Finally, far removed is a situation in which some hear the Lord say, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Matt. 7:23) and an assurance that one trusting in Christ "shall never perish" (John 10:28; Rom. 8:1).<sup>15</sup>

Dr. Scofield said:

...the Lord's prayer is, dispensationally, upon legal, not church ground; it is not a prayer in the name of Christ ... ; and it makes human forgiveness, as under the law it must, the condition of divine forgiveness; an order which grace exactly reverses ... .<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie said:

It is usually charged that dispensationalists teach that the Sermon on the Mount is all law and no gospel. To those who object to this claim, we merely ask, Where can one find a statement of the gospel in the Sermon?<sup>17</sup>



Dispensationalists regard the Sermon on the Mount as the Messiah's manifesto of the kingdom He would have then set up if Israel had accepted Him. Israel, however, did not accept Him, and Jesus began looking away from the prophesied Messianic age and the earthly people (the Jews) to the unrevealed, parenthetical church age and the heavenly people (the church). The parables of Matthew 13, which obviously refer to the church age, are interpreted by dispensationalists as an initial explanation of some of the unexpected mysteries of the coming age due to this postponement of the Jewish millennium and the unrevealed introduction of the church age. According to Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost:

This thirteenth chapter holds a unique place in the development of the Gospel. ... Christ shows that both He and His forerunner have been rejected (11:1-9), and this rejection will result in judgment (11:20-24). ... In chapter 12 the rejection comes to a climax. ... As the chapter closes (12:46-50) the Lord indicates that He is setting aside all natural relationships, such as Israel sustained to Him and to covenant promises by a physical birth, and establishes a new relationship, based on faith. ... Since this kingdom was the subject of an irrevocable covenant it was unthinkable that it could be abandoned. The chapter gives the events in the development of the kingdom program from the time of its rejection until it is received when the nation welcomes the King at His second advent.<sup>18</sup>

The mystery form of the kingdom, then, has reference to the age between the two advents of Christ. The mysteries of the kingdom of heaven describe the conditions that prevail on the earth in that interim while the king is absent. These mysteries thus relate this present age to the eternal purposes of God in regard to His kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Pentecost gives his dispensational interpretation of these parables of the kingdom in mystery form. The parable of the wheat and the tares "has primary reference to Israel during the tribulation period." The parable of the mustard seed teaches that the church age "is characterized by abnormal external growth." "That which was to be an herb has become a tree -- it has developed into a monstrosity" and has become the resting place for metaphorical birds representing the enemies of God's program. The parable of the leaven reveals "that there will rise a religious system that will introduce a corrupting element into the doctrine of the person of Christ." The parable of the hid treasure depicts "the relationship of Israel to this present age" and the parable of the pearl of great price relates to the Christ's church which, "like a pearl, can only become His adornment by being lifted out of the place in which it was formed [i.e., the rapture]."20

After giving the parables of the kingdom in mystery form, Christ began speaking of both the coming parenthetical church age and the future Jewish tribulation and millennium when the prophesied but postponed kingdom program would be resumed. Matthew 16:18 is where Christ first openly revealed His plans to establish the church.<sup>21</sup> As we noted in a previous chapter, dispensationalists argue that Christ's statement "I will build My church" is a strong argument that the church was then an absolutely new spiritual entity. Matthew 18:17 is where Christ gave church truth on discipline. The Olivet discourse (Matthew 24) is a detailed prophecy of the seven year Jewish tribulation period after the church rapture. The upper room discourse (John 14-16) that occurred a few days later is church truth. The apostles in Acts 1:6 represented the Jewish remnant when they asked the risen Christ if He were then going to restore the kingdom to Israel. In Acts 2 on Pentecost, the disciples

preached church truth. According to some dispensationalists, the apostles in Acts 3:12-26 again offered the Judaistic kingdom to the Jewish nation one last time.<sup>22</sup> If the Jews had accepted this reoffer, the church rapture would have then occurred and the seven year Jewish tribulation period would have begun after an extremely short church age.

After Pentecost, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was called and the emphasis progressively turned away from Israel to the formation of the largely Gentile church. The rest of the book of Acts is viewed by dispensationalists as definitely church truth. A problem for the dispensationalist is the frequent reference to the kingdom both in Acts and in the epistles written during that period. Dispensationalists explain that the kingdom there referred to is not the theocratic Messianic kingdom of Old Testament prophecy but instead is either God's nontheocratic sovereign rule of providence or is "the kingdom in mystery form" of Matthew 13, which dispensationalists interpret as a name applicable to the non-kingdom church age. Dispensationalist Dr. Paul Lee Tan explains the present relevance of the kingdom as follows:

It is true that the kingdom promised by the prophets was postponed when the Messiah in the person of Jesus Christ was rejected. Nevertheless, during the present inter-advent age, the kingdom is anticipatorily present and has its present outworkings.<sup>23</sup>

Explanations such as these do not satisfy the ultradispensationalists who view Acts and the epistles of that period as Jewish truth and not as truth for the later Gentile Pauline Body and Bride of Christ church.

Most dispensationalists believe that the parenthetical church age will end with a secret rapture before the beginning of a seven-year Jewish tribulation period which is identified as the seventieth of the seventy weeks of Daniel 9. The saints who are alive at that time will be translated into resurrection bodies and then be caught up to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17) Dispensationalists define the "dead in Christ" who are resurrected just before the rapture as the deceased saints who were saved after the Pentecost of Acts 2. According to Dr. John F. Walvoord:

The expression "the dead in Christ shall arise first" (1 Thess. 4:16) seems to include only the church.

The Old Testament saints are never described by the phrase "in Christ."<sup>24</sup>

After the tribulation, Christ will return and resurrect the saved of all ages, except, of course, the "in Christ" saints who were resurrected or raptured seven years earlier. The earth will be populated by the believers who survived the tribulation period, and all the resurrected saints of all ages will go to abide in the heavenly Jerusalem that will descend to hover over Palestine during the millennium.<sup>25</sup> Christ will bind Satan, set up a national, Jewish kingdom and reign both on earth and from the heavenly city for 1000 years. Death will be rare or even non-existent except as a penal measure for overt sin.<sup>26</sup> The spirits of wicked millennial residents who die will go to hell to await the final judgment, and I have heard the opinion that millennial saints who die during the millennium will be immediately resurrected and will enter the heavenly city as resurrected saints. At the end of the millennium, Satan will be loosed and will inspire a military revolt which Christ will quickly put down. The earthly millennial saints will be judged and translated into resurrected

bodies and the eternal state.<sup>27</sup> Then the unsaved dead of all ages will be resurrected and condemned with Satan to the lake of fire at the great white throne judgment. The earth will be purged with fire, the new heavens and the new earth will be formed, the heavenly city will descend to earth, and eternity will begin.

This is the basic dispensational explanation of redemptive history. A significant difference between this view of redemptive history and the Reformed view of redemptive history is the unifying theme. In Reformed interpretation, the unifying theme that is the key to understanding the development of redemptive history is the saving work of Jesus Christ. God created Adam and gave him the earth to rule and to subdue. Because of Adam's fall into sin, the earth was cursed and man became a servant of sin and Satan. God immediately promised a coming Seed of woman who would overcome Satan and reverse the effects of the fall. The rest of redemptive history is the developing story of the restoration of fallen man's earthly inheritance and authority through the work of the Seed Redeemer on behalf of His people. The theocracy of Old Testament Israel fits into this redemptive drama as a localized pledge and prefiguration of the coming perfect kingdom rule and everlasting earthly inheritance that the Christ will establish for His people and as the national means through which the Christ was brought into the world. Through the historical work of Jesus Christ, Satan was defeated and Jesus of Nazareth, who is fully man as well as fully God, was exalted to the place of all authority in heaven and on earth. In this age, Christ is exercising His authority, the nations are being disciplined, and Christ's universal rule over men is being extended to the uttermost parts of the earth. The drama of redemption will find its ultimate and final fulfillment in the glorified new earth of Revelation 21 after Christ returns.

The dispensationalist rejects this concept of a Christological-soteriological unity to redemptive history and also claims to be the only one to have an adequate concept of progressive revelation. Dr. John F. Walvoord makes the following observations:

Covenant theology is the view that all the dispensations from Adam to the end of human history are aspects of God's soteriological program. In other words, the dispensations are different presentations of the way of salvation in a gradually unfolding progression. The tendency of this viewpoint is to regard God's general purpose as essentially that of saving the elect, to blend the various Biblical revelations regarding Israel, the Gentiles, and the church into one stream, and to minimize the differences between the various dispensations. In contrast, the dispensational theology, while not disputing the view of the unity of God's plan of salvation, finds in the various dispensations periods of stewardship which are not directly related to salvation. In a word, the dispensationalist does not consider the program of God for salvation as the sole purpose of God, and in fact denies that some of the dispensations are basically soteriological.<sup>28</sup>

According to Dr. Charles C. Ryrie:

The covenant theologian in his zeal to make Christ all in all is guilty of superimposing Him arbitrarily on the Old Testament. He does the same with the doctrine of the Church and with the concept of salvation through faith in Christ.<sup>29</sup>

The hermeneutical straitjacket which covenant theology forces on the Scriptures results in reading the New Testament back

into the Old Testament and in an artificial typological interpretation.<sup>30</sup>

Only dispensationalism does justice to the proper concept of the progress of revelation. ... Covenant theology ... because of the rigidity of its unifying principle of the covenant of grace can never show within its system proper progress of revelation. ... Only dispensationalism can cause historical events and successions to be seen in their own light and not to be reflected in the artificial light of an overall covenant.<sup>31</sup>

Dispensationalism alone has a broad enough unifying principle to do justice to the unity of the progress of revelation on the one hand and the distinctiveness of the various stages in that progress on the other. Covenant theology can only emphasize the unity, and in so doing overemphasizes it until it becomes the sole governing category of interpretation.<sup>32</sup>

Despite Dr. Ryrie's bold claims, dispensationalism provides an inadequate basis for demonstrating the unity of the Word of God.

What is the unifying theme that holds together the dispensational explanation of redemptive history? I believe it is the theocratic kingdom. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer traces the theocratic kingdom from the time of the judges to eternity<sup>33</sup> and Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost traces it from Eden to eternity.<sup>34</sup> The church age fits in this explanation of redemptive history as a parenthesis in the progression. It would even be hypothetically possible to omit the church age altogether. Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer has said the following about the parenthetical nature of the church age:

But for the Church intercalation -- which was wholly unforeseen and is wholly unrelated to any divine purpose which precedes it or which follows it -- Israel would be expected to pass directly from the crucifixion to her kingdom; for it was not the death of Christ and His resurrection which demanded the postponement, but rather an unforeseen age. It should require no great effort to note that the recognition of this age -- wholly unforeseen, wholly unrelated, and itself a strict intercalation -- is the key to the understanding of the entire program of God in the ages, and without that key only confusion would result.<sup>35</sup>

My opinion is that a unifying theme that can logically omit a most important and significant stage of development is not an adequate unifying theme.

Dr. Charles C. Ryrie teaches that the glory of God is the unifying theme in redemptive history:

No dispensationalist minimizes the importance of God's saving purpose in the world. But whether it is God's total purpose or even His principle purpose is open to question. The dispensationalist sees a broader purpose in God's program for the world than salvation, and that purpose is His own glory. For the dispensationalist the glory of God is the governing principle and overall purpose, and the soteriological program is one of the principal means employed in bringing to pass the greatest demonstration of His own glory. Salvation is part and parcel of God's program, but it cannot be equated with the entire purpose itself. ... the unifying principle of covenant theology is in practice, soteriological. The unifying principle of dispensationalism is doxological, or the glory of God as He manifests His character in the differing stewardships given to man.<sup>36</sup>



Reformed theologians believe that the glory of God is the final purpose in all that happens but not the unifying theme that ties together the drama of redemptive history. Because God's glory is the final purpose in all that happens, every segment of redemptive history is related to God's glory. But finding a common factor in those segments is not the same thing as demonstrating that a certain theme is progressively developed and revealed in those segments.

Dr. Ryrie lists five purposes through which God's glory is manifest in redemptive history: "the program of redemption, the program of Israel, the punishment of the wicked, the plan for the angels, and the glory of God through nature."<sup>37</sup> Closer examination will reveal that these are not five independent purposes whose only common link is the glory of God. "The punishment of the wicked, the plan for the angels, and the glory of God through nature" are related progressively and developmentally to "the program of redemption." In redemptive history, the angels function as "ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation" (Hebrews 1:14) and as agents of the punishment of the wicked and as members of the divine court. The "plan for the angels" in redemptive history is primarily a sub-purpose under "the program of redemption" and "the punishment of the wicked." Even when the angels appear in redemptive history as members of the divine court, they are a part of some vision of God that is a revelatory part of "the program of redemption." "The punishment of the wicked" is but the other side of the coin of "the program of redemption." And "the glory of God through nature" is a basis of judgment for the wicked (Romans 1:20) and a basis of praise for the redeemed (Psalm 19). It is also related to "the program of redemption" in that the glorified new earth will be the eternal inheritance of the saints. When one gets to the real kernel of this doxological unifying theme with its five sub-purposes, one finds a theocratic kingdom program for Israel and a

soteriological program with four sub-purposes. The theocratic kingdom program for Israel is inadequate as a unifying theme of redemptive history, and the dispensationalists reject the soteriological program as a unifying theme. To accept the soteriological program as the unifying theme would logically result in a soteriologically united people of God, which would destroy dispensationalism.

Dividing Biblical history into a progression of dispensations is not unique to dispensationalists. All theologians do that. What is characteristic of the consistent dispensationalist is that he suffers from an acute case of "hardening of the categories." Having in practice rejected the typological and organic union of the two testaments that is found in Christ and His saving work, the consistent dispensationalist has instead adopted a two-program, two-people view of Biblical history in which the church age is a logically unnecessary parenthesis in the divine program and, from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets, a divine afterthought and adjustment. My own opinion, to use a pun, is that consistently interpreting Scripture through the rigid grid of dispensational assumptions has the potential for turning Biblical bread into theological shredded wheat. Fortunately, many dispensationalists today are mild dispensationalists who are not all that rigid when it comes to dispensational interpretation and theology and who have had little actual exposure to the classical and definitive dispensational works by men such as Chafer and Scofield where these dispensational dichotomies are more rigidly pressed.

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End Notes

1 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 84; C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), page 5 note 4 on Genesis 1:28.

"(1) Any person is a dispensationalist who trusts the blood of Christ rather than bringing an animal sacrifice. (2) Any person is a dispensationalist who disclaims any right or title to the land which God covenanted to Israel for an everlasting inheritance. And (3) any person is a dispensationalist who observes the first day of the week rather than the seventh. To all this it would be replied that every Christian does these things, which is obviously  
2 true; and it is equally true that, to a very considerable degree, all Christians are dispensationalists. However, not all Christians, though sincere, are as well instructed in the spiritual content of the Scriptures as others, nor have they seen the necessity of recognizing other and deeper distinctions which do confront the careful student of the Word of God."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), page 9.

3 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, page 5 note 4.

"This [Abrahamic] covenant, being without human condition, simply declares the unchanging purpose of Jehovah. It will be  
4 achieved in pure grace, apart from every human factor, and its accomplishments are eternal."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:235.

5 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, page 20 note 1 on Genesis 12:1.

6 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:162-164. See also Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views*, Third

and Enlarged Edition (Chicago: Moody Press, 1936), page 217.

I might mention that the Bible's evaluation of Mount Sinai and the response of Israel to the law is in marked contrast to Dr. Chafer's evaluation (Deuteronomy 5:27-28).

- 7 "Men were just and righteous as related to the Mosaic Law, but none had the righteousness of God imputed to them on the ground of faith except Abraham, he who was so evidently marked out and raised up of God to anticipate and illustrate (cf. Romans and Galatians) the New Testament doctrine of imputed righteousness; so of Abraham alone Christ said, 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad' (John 8:56)." Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 6:74.

"A distinction must be observed here between just men of the Old Testament and those justified according to the New Testament. According to the Old Testament men were just because they were true and faithful in keeping the Mosaic Law. ... Men were therefore just because of their own works for God, whereas New Testament justification is God's work for man in answer to faith (Rom. 5:1)."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 7:219.

Dr. Chafer has here made the same error of interpretation that was common in Judaism:

"God expects those who are within the covenant, and who on this basis have been declared to be in right relationship with him, to live as children of the righteous Lord. ... Where a mistake could be made, and in fact was made in later Judaism, was to think that God's declaration of righteousness was dependent upon an individual Jew's

meticulous fulfillment of the laws within the covenant made with Moses on Mount Sinai. Actually, righteousness as an ethical quality of blamelessness came as a result of God's declaration of right standing before him within his covenant of grace, and not the opposite way around. The Pharisee in Luke 18 represents the way in which the whole pursuit of righteousness can go wrong. He stopped looking to the Lord as the giver of righteousness and concentrated on seeking to achieve righteousness to present to the Lord at the end of his life."

Peter Toon, *Justification and Sanctification* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1983), page 18.

- 8 "The law, being a covenant of works and providing no enablement, addressed itself to the limitations of the natural man. No more was expected or secured in return from its commands than the natural man in his environment could produce. The requirements under the law are, therefore, on the plane of the limited ability of the flesh. On the other hand, grace, being a covenant of faith, and providing the limitless enablement of the power of the indwelling Spirit, addresses itself to the unlimited resources of the supernatural man."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:247.

"The law system provided no enabling power for its achievement."  
Ibid., 4:51.

"...but one of these three divine economies [i.e. law, grace, kingdom] provides directly and purposefully divine enablement for every requirement which it places upon the individual; that is, no mention is made in two of these economies of a provision of divine enablement for their fulfillment. However, in the present

economy, both supernatural standards of action are announced and complete ability by the Spirit is provided for their fulfillment."

Ibid., 4:156.

"The Law of Moses presents a covenant of works to be wrought in the energy of the flesh; the teachings of grace present a covenant of faith to be wrought in the energy of the Spirit."

Ibid., 4:211; compare Ibid., 4:234.

"This same indwelling of the Holy Spirit becomes, as well, an age-characterization. This is a dispensation of the Spirit, a period of time in which the Holy Spirit is the believer's all-sufficient Resource both for power and guidance. In this age the Christian is appointed to live by a new life-principle (cf. Rom. 6:4). The realization of the Spirit's presence, power, and guidance constitutes a wholly new method of daily living and is in contrast to that dominance and authority which the Mosaic Law exercised over Israel in the age that is past."

Ibid., 6.122-123.

"The basis of Law is a covenant of works; that of grace is a covenant of grace. Human merit is the foundation stone of the Law; the merit of Christ is the foundation of grace. ... A covenant of works is grounded in what the flesh can do; a covenant of grace is based upon faith in what God has done and is willing to do."

Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views*, pages 216-217.

Dispensationalist Dr. Charles C. Ryrie acknowledges the error of the above:

"Dispensationalists have often pictured the Law as a period when enablement was completely lacking. It is true that there was a sharp contrast between the enablement under the law and the work of the Holy Spirit (John 14:17), but it is not accurate to say that there was no enablement under the law."

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 120.

Dr. John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954,1958), pages 71,73,75; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 120; C.I. 9 Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, page 982; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), page 271.

"At this point the question of what constituted the right relation of a Jew to God within the scope and purpose of Judaism might be asked. It is the Covenant theologian who advances at this point the assumption that the saints of the old order were 10 regenerated and on the same basis of relationship to Jehovah as is accorded the saints of the New Testament. Such an assumption is needful if their theory is to be sustained."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 6:104-105; compare 3:215 and 6:111.

11 "Since the covenant of grace which is based on human faith was established in the promise made to Abraham, the covenant of law, made four hundred years later, and added only for a temporary purpose, cannot disannul it. The reign of law, with its covenant of works, ceased with the death of Christ. Its purpose had been accomplished, and its appointed time had expired.

Thus the by-faith principle which was announced in the Abrahamic covenant is brought again into force, through the death of Christ."

Ibid., 4:229.

"The example of Abraham who believed Jehovah and it (his faith) was counted unto him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6) was ever before Israel, and David has described the blessedness of the man unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works (Romans 4:6); nevertheless, Israel stumbled over the stumbling stone of human merit ... Their [Israel's] trouble was ignorance. They did not know the truth that faith in God would, as witnessed by Abraham, David, and the prophets, bring about, through divine grace, an adjustment all-satisfying to God -- even a righteousness as perfect as Himself."

Ibid., 3:79.

"Let it be restated that Abraham is the pattern of a Christian under grace and not of a Jew under law."

Ibid., 3:84.

"The Law of Moses, to be sure, was an ad interim dealing in effect only until Christ should come. For the time being it gave to sin the character of transgression (Rom. 5:13; Gal. 3:19). It was preceded (Ex. 19:4) and followed (John 1:17) by grace."

Ibid., 7:225-226.

12

"The nature of a covenant which is based on human works is obvious. Whatever God promises under such a covenant, is conditioned on the faithfulness of man. Every blessing under the Law of Moses was so conditioned, and every blessing in the kingdom relationship will be found to be so ordered. Turning to



the kingdom teachings of Christ wherein the issues of personal conduct and obligation in the kingdom are taken up, it will be seen that all the kingdom promises to the individual are based on human merit. ... It is a covenant of works only and the emphatic word is do. "This do, and thou shalt live" is the highest promise of the law. ...

"Turning to the Law of Moses, we discover that it presents no other relation to God than this same covenant of works:. ...

"By these references to the Law of Moses and the law of the kingdom, it may be seen that both of these systems are based wholly on a covenant of works."

Ibid., 4:211-212.

"... The kingdom teachings, like the Law of Moses, are based on a covenant of works. The teachings of grace, on the other hand, are based on a covenant of faith. In the one case, righteousness is demanded; in the other it is provided, both imputed and imparted, or inwrought. One is of a blessing to be bestowed because of a perfect life, the other of a life to be lived because of a perfect blessing already received."

Ibid., 4:215-216.

"The tribulation period, also, seems to revert back to Old Testament conditions in several ways; and in the Old Testament period, saints were never permanently indwelt except in isolated instances, though a number of instances of the filling of the Spirit and of empowering for service are found. Taking all the factors into consideration, there is no evidence for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers in the tribulation."

Dr. John F. Walvoord, The Holy Spirit, page 230.

"The Gospels are complex almost beyond any other portion of Scripture, since they are a composite of the teachings of Moses, of grace, and of the kingdom." Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:172.

13 "The Synoptic Gospels, though on the surface presenting a simple narrative, are, nevertheless, a field for careful, discriminating study on the part of the true expositor. In these Gospels Christ is seen as loyal to and vindicating the Mosaic Law under which He lived; He also anticipates the kingdom age in connection with the offer of Himself as Israel's King; and, when His rejection is indicated, He announces His death and resurrection and the expectation concerning a heavenly people (Matt. 16:18) for whom He gave Himself in redeeming love (Eph. 5:25-27)."  
Ibid., 4:12.

"If critical scholars assume it possible to claim two Isaiahs on the evidence afforded in the difference in style and subject matter which the two parts of Isaiah's writing set forth, there would be by far more conclusive proof of at least three Christs. It seems not to occur to a certain group of theologians that these discourses not only introduce principles which, for a doctrinal standpoint, are irreconcilable, but also happen to be addressed to classes which are differently related to God and to Christ." Ibid., 5:96.

14 Ibid., 4:214-215.

15 Ibid., 5:112-113; compare 4:216f.

"Sad, indeed, is the spectacle when Christians assume that the

Sermon on the Mount represents the high calling of the Church and attempt to modify the character of sovereign grace to the end that it may conform to a merit system."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:109.

16 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, page 1089-1090 note 1 on Luke 11:1; see also page 1002 note 1 on Matt. 6:12.

Compare Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:221-222.

17 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 108.

18 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 140-142.

19 *Ibid.*, page 143.

20 *Ibid.*, pages 146-149.

21 *Ibid.*, page 201.

22 C.I. Scofield, editor, *The Scofield Reference Bible*, page 1153 note 1 on Acts 3:20; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 469.

23 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1974), page 311.

24 John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), page 154; compare John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 280.

25 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 291,302,317,324-326; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 411,414-415,542,546; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pages 146-147.

26 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 277; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 317-318.

27 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 277,328.

28 *Ibid.*, pages 79-80.

- 29 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 187.
- 30 *Ibid.*, page 190.
- 31 *Ibid.*, pages 19-20.
- 32 *Ibid.*, page 35.
- 33 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:333-358.
- 34 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 433-494.
- 35 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:348-349.
- 36 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pages 102-103.
- 37 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pages 211-212.
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## Chapter 10

### Christian Zionism

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The dispensational system promotes Zionism among Christians, the conviction that physical Jews today have a Biblical right to possess the land of Palestine. The point of discussion in this chapter is not Zionism as a political issue but Zionism as a Biblically based theological issue. The typical dispensationalist does have a passionate commitment to theological Zionism and a religious regard for the epic Zionist events of 1948 and 1967: the modern establishment of the Jewish state of Israel and the Israeli conquest of Jerusalem. These two events are viewed as the two most dramatic fulfillments of prophecy since the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. and as signs of the soon return of Christ. Many dispensationalists are also anticipating a third imminent Zionist fulfillment of prophecy: the rebuilding of the temple at Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup>

The following statement by Dr. John F. Walvoord is typical:

One of the most dramatic evidences that the end of the age is approaching is the fact that Israel has re-established her position as a nation in her ancient land. Israel today is in proper place to enter into the covenant anticipated in Daniel 9:27 which will begin the last seven-year period leading up to the second coming of Christ. Even the modern city of Jerusalem built by Israel is occupying the precise area predicted in Jeremiah 31:38-40 and constitutes a fulfillment of this prophecy given twenty-five hundred years ago and never before fulfilled. Jeremiah states that when Jerusalem is built in the area described, as it has been in our generation, it will be a sign of the final chapter

in the history of Jerusalem, in preparation for the millennial kingdom of our Lord.<sup>2</sup>

Hal Lindsey has even gone so far as to indulge cautiously in some prophetic date setting based on the 1948 event in his best selling book *The Late Great Planet Earth*, copyrighted in 1970:

When the signs just given begin to multiply and increase in scope it's similar to the certainty of leaves coming on the fig tree. But the most important sign in Matthew has to be the restoration of the Jews to the land in the rebirth of Israel. Even the figure of speech "fig tree" has been a historic symbol of national Israel. When the Jewish people, after nearly 2,000 years of exile, under relentless persecution, became a nation again on 14 May 1948 the "fig tree" put forth its first leaves.

Jesus said that this would indicate that He was "at the door," ready to return. Then He said, "Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place" (Matthew 24:34 NASB).

What generation? Obviously, in context, the generation that would see the signs--chief among them the rebirth of Israel. A generation in the Bible is something like forty years. If this is a correct deduction, then within forty years or so of 1948, all these things could take place. Many scholars who have studied Bible prophecy all their lives believe that this is so.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Lindsey is saying that 1948 establishment of the state of Israel has given him reason to anticipate that the events of the seven year Jewish tribulation period that culminates in the second coming of Christ could all occur by 1988. Since Mr. Lindsey, like most

dispensationalists, places the church rapture seven years before the second coming, he would have expected the rapture by 1981 if he had expected the second coming to occur by 1988.

Of course, the really careful dispensationalist neither sets dates nor regards 1948 and 1967 as direct fulfillments of prophecy. According to dispensational theory, no Jewish prophecy can directly refer to the unrevealed and parenthetical church age. Also, dispensationalists argue for their pre-tribulation rapture by insisting that "the prospect of being taken to heaven at the coming of Christ is not qualified by description of any signs or prerequisite events."<sup>4</sup> These Zionistic events are instead regarded as dramatic preparations for the Jewish fulfillment of prophecy that will begin to occur after the rapture of the church. For the dispensationalist, the supposed preparation of the end-time stage in this generation is a strong indication that the end-time drama is now imminent.

Dispensational Zionism is founded on the dispensational interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant. Dispensationalists argue that the Abrahamic covenant is Jewish, unconditional and unfulfilled. Since the covenant is unconditional, it must be fulfilled at some point in history. Since it has not been fulfilled in the past, then it must be fulfilled in the future. And since it is Jewish, it must be fulfilled in a future Jewish dispensation. Therefore, the Abrahamic covenant mandates a coming Jewish age, the millennium, for the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. We will examine in this chapter the dispensational understanding of the Abrahamic covenant as Jewish and unfulfilled.

We will begin with the teaching that the Abrahamic covenant is Jewish. Using their "literal" hermeneutic, dispensationalists interpret the seed associated with the Abrahamic covenant to be the

physical Jews. A difficulty with this interpretation is that in Galatians 3, verses 7 and 29, the Christian, regardless of his race, is said to be the seed of Abraham and the heir of the promise made to Abraham. The dispensational answer to this is that the individual Christian is a spiritual seed of Abraham and heir of the universal spiritual aspects of the Abrahamic covenant but not the physical seed to which the national promises were made. This dispensational solution is typical in that it stresses a rigid dichotomy between the earthly and the spiritual, the Jewish and the Gentile, the national and the individual aspects of the Abrahamic covenant.

According to Dr. Charles C. Ryrie:

It is quite obvious that Christians are called the spiritual seed of Abraham, but the New Testament nowhere says that they are the heirs of the national promises made to the physical descendants. . . . the term Israel is not the appellative given to the spiritual seed of Abraham. It is correct to call some of the spiritual seed of Abraham spiritual Israel, but not all. . . . Only when a believer belongs to the race of Israel can he in any sense be called a spiritual Israelite.<sup>5</sup>

Faith and justification are personal and individual matters, and belonging to the spiritual seed of Abraham is also a personal and individual matter unrelated to race. The spiritual seed of Abraham does not mean Israel, for Abraham is related to Israel as a national father, and he is related to believing individuals of all nations (including the Jewish) who believe, as a spiritual father. But believers as a group are not called spiritual Israel.<sup>6</sup>

According to Dr. John F. Walvoord:



There are, then, three different senses in which one can be a child of Abraham. First, there is the natural lineage, or natural seed. This is limited largely to the descendants of Jacob in the twelve tribes. To them God promises to be their God. To them was given the law. To them was given the land of Israel in the Old Testament. With them God dealt in a special way. Second, there is the spiritual lineage within the natural. These are the Israelites who believed in God, who kept the law, and who met the conditions for the present enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant. Those who ultimately possess the land in the future millennium will also be of spiritual Israel. Third, there is the spiritual seed of Abraham who are not natural Israelites. Here is where the promise to "all the families of the earth" comes in. . . . the children of Abraham (spiritually) who come from the "heathen" or the Gentiles fulfill that aspect of the Abrahamic covenant which dealt with Gentiles in the first place, not the promises pertaining to Israel. . . .

While premillenarians can agree with amillenarians concerning the fact of a spiritual seed for Abraham which includes Gentiles, they deny that this fulfills the promises given to the natural seed or that the promises to the "seed of Abraham" are fulfilled by Gentile believers. To make the blessings promised to all the nations the same as the blessings promised the seed of Abraham is an unwarranted conclusion.<sup>7</sup>

This dispensational explanation of the spiritual and physical seeds of Abraham does not adequately integrate all the Biblical data about Abraham's seed. Even as early as the Genesis 17 covenant of circumcision, there were provisions for including Gentiles and excluding physical seed of Abraham from the covenant community (Genesis 17:12-14).<sup>8</sup> Gentile proselytes such as Rahab the harlot and

Ruth the Moabitess, ancestors of King David (Matthew 1:5), inherited the national promises of the Abrahamic covenant in the Old Testament. Physical descendants of Abraham such as Ishmael and Esau did not. Ishmael did receive his own national promise because of his physical descent from Abraham, but the seed of covenant blessing was reckoned only through Isaac (Genesis 21:12-13). Esau and Jacob were twin brothers, and yet only Jacob became a father of God's chosen nation and an heir of the land promise. This data suggests that the dispensational teaching that the physical seed will inherit the national promises is not an adequate explanation of the Biblical administration of the Abrahamic covenant.

In Reformed interpretation, the land-inheriting seed of Abraham are defined not strictly in terms of racial descent but in terms of a continuing covenant community.<sup>9</sup> Physical descent and genealogies were important under the old covenant because the coming Messianic seed was to be a physical descendent of both Abraham and David, but the developing covenant community both excluded unfaithful physical descendents of Abraham and assimilated believing Gentiles. The historical administration of the covenant can be explained from the Reformed perspective by using Paul's Romans 11 olive tree illustration. The olive tree represents God's covenant community and its roots represent God's gracious covenant. The physical seed within the covenant community are the natural branches who all partake of the roots' sap to some degree, who all enjoy covenant blessings such as exposure to the means of grace and special temporal blessings. Gentiles or branches from the wild olive tree of paganism can be grafted into the covenant community through a profession of faith. And any branch unrepentantly exhibiting obvious high-handed evidences of unbelief should be pruned off in discipline. After being cut off from the covenant community in judgment, the natural branches and their descendants

remain beloved of God on account of their fathers and are prime prospects for grafting in through a profession of faith. In terms of this motif, Isaac and Jacob were persevering natural branches, Rahab and Ruth were persevering grafted on branches, Ishmael and Esau were pruned off natural branches that continued to experience certain temporal divine blessings, and the Edomites who became proselytes during the inter-testamental period were grafted in descendants of Esau, a pruned off branch.

The spiritual seed of Abraham are all those who truly share Abraham's faith (Romans 4:11-12), and these alone are the seed of Abraham in the most fundamental sense of the term (John 8:39; Romans 9:6-7; 2:28). Only these will inherit the promises of the covenant in terms of real spiritual rest and an eternal inheritance. This definition of the seed of Abraham, which is from the perspective of God's secret decrees and sovereign work of grace, is simple and easily understood. Defining the seed of Abraham from within the context of history and human relations, however, is much more complex because of human limitations. In administering the covenant, the church is not to seek to pry into God's secret plans or to presume to be able to infallibly gauge everyone's true spiritual condition. The church's limited responsibility is to function in terms of God's revealed will, the Biblically defined rules for administering the covenant. The seed of Abraham from this perspective of historical covenant administration is a complex phenomenon best defined in terms of a continuing covenant community rather than in terms of racial descent alone.

As we have seen, the dispensational position also stresses that the spiritual seed of Abraham as defined in Galatians 3 have no claim to the national land promise of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul's teaching on the Christian and the Abrahamic covenant will not allow

such a conclusion. Paul argues in Galatians 3 that God intentionally used seed as a collective noun that has both a singular and plural reference so that the singular reference could refer to Christ and the plural reference could refer to those who are in Christ. Paul's point is that the Abrahamic promises were made to Abraham and to his seed (verse 16), that the seed of Abraham is Christ (verse 16) and all who are in Christ (verse 29), and that therefore the promise given to Abraham belongs to all who are in Christ (verse 29). In his argumentation, Paul specifically quotes from the Old Testament the phrase "and to thy seed," the "thy" referring to Abraham (Galatians 3:16; see also Romans 4:13). The Greek phrase in Galatians 3:16 translated "and to thy seed" could have come from only two passages in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek: Genesis 13:15-17 and Genesis 17:8.<sup>10</sup> And in both of these Old Testament passages, that which is promised to Abraham's seed is the land promise.<sup>11</sup> Beyond this, every time in the book of Genesis where the phrase "to your seed" is used in the context of a divine promise to give something to somebody, the reference is to the Abrahamic land promise.<sup>12</sup> When Paul was talking about the Old Testament promise that belongs to the Christian, he was referring specifically to the land promise, the one promise that dispensationalists argue that Paul could not have been referring to. I will explain later my understanding of how the Christian today is related to the Abrahamic land promise.

The Old Testament quotation in Galatians 3 that the dispensationalists stress is the statement "In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8). The dispensationalists acknowledge that this portion of the Abrahamic covenant has reference to the spiritual blessings that are now enjoyed by Gentiles in Christ Jesus.<sup>13</sup> There are many Old Testament prophecies that

expand on this universal statement of the Abrahamic covenant,<sup>14</sup> and it is instructive to note the dispensational position on their fulfillment. Since dispensationalists define the church age as an unrevealed parenthesis in the Jewish prophetic program, they cannot with consistency teach that these prophecies have a direct reference to the church age; these prophecies must be fulfilled in the future Jewish millennium. Under the heading "The Gentiles in the Millennium," Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost states: "The universal aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, which promised universal blessing, will be realized in that age."<sup>15</sup> That the universal aspect of the Abrahamic covenant finds its direct fulfillment, not in the church age, but in the coming Jewish earthly millennium, demonstrates how thoroughly Jewish the Abrahamic covenant is in dispensational interpretation.

The dispensationalist also argues that the Abrahamic covenant is unconditional in contrast to the conditional Mosaic covenant. Dispensationalists teach that the unconditional Abrahamic covenant was expanded into three other unconditional Jewish covenants: the Palestinian covenant, the Davidic covenant and the new covenant. The expanded covenant dealing with the land promise portion of the Abrahamic covenant is the Palestinian covenant, which dispensationalists identify with Deuteronomy 30:1-10. It does seem strange that anyone would teach that a section of Deuteronomy contains a separate covenant that is not a part of the Mosaic covenant and that differs from the Mosaic covenant in its basic nature. The Palestinian covenant is supposed to be unconditional in the dispensational sense of the word. Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 1-3 and 10, however, contains statements that sound like moral conditions:

And it shall come to pass when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee,

and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath driven thee, and shalt return unto the Lord thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; that then the Lord thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee.

If thou shalt harken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to keep his commandments and his statutes which are written in this book of the law, and if thou turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul.

Lastly, dispensationalists also argue that the Abrahamic covenant is unfulfilled. They prove the covenant to be unfulfilled by examining the chronological and geographic boundaries of the covenant promise. Chronologically, the Abrahamic covenant is a forever promise (Genesis 13:15; 17:8), and the Jews possessed Palestine for only a limited time in the Old Testament. Geographically, the promised land was to include the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River (Genesis 15:18). Dispensationalists argue that the Jews never at any time possessed all the land within these boundaries. In 1 Kings 4:21, we learn that Solomon ruled over all the land from the border of Egypt to the Euphrates River, but the dispensationalists argue that the "border of Egypt" is not the "river of Egypt" and that Solomon merely ruled over much of this territory by collecting tribute, not by actually possessing it.<sup>16</sup> So, if the dispensationalists are right, the land promise of the Abrahamic covenant is Jewish, unconditional and unfulfilled, and therefore there must be a yet future Jewish possession of the land of Palestine.

If this is so, then exactly when and how is the Abrahamic covenant's land promise to be fulfilled? In searching out the details of this question, one encounters some interesting divergencies in dispensational answers. In the earlier dispensational writers like Chafer, the Abrahamic covenant had a truly eternal Jewish fulfillment. According to Dr. Chafer:

Jehovah's fivefold covenant with Israel is everlasting in every respect-- (1) a national entity (Jer. 31:36), (2) a land in perpetuity (Gen. 13:15), (3) a throne (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:36), (4) a King (Jer. 33:21), and (5) a kingdom (Dan. 7:14). These earthly promises are confirmed by the oath of Jehovah and extend forever, else language ceases to be a dependable medium for the expression of truth.<sup>17</sup>

In that system, the resurrected Old Testament saints together with the resurrected millennial saints were to inherit eternally a Judaistic new earth after the Judaistic millennium and the church saints were to inherit a Christian new heavens for eternity. According to Dr. Chafer:

. . . there is an eschatology of Judaism and an eschatology of Christianity and each, though wholly different in details, reaches on into eternity. One of the great burdens of predictive prophecy is the anticipation of the glories of Israel in a transformed earth under the reign of David's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There is likewise much prediction which anticipates the glories of the redeemed in heaven.<sup>18</sup>

. . . Israelites, as a nation, have their citizenship now and their future destiny centered only in the earth, reaching on to the new earth which is yet to be, while Christians have their citizenship

and future destiny centered only in the earth, reaching on into the new heavens that are yet to be . . . .<sup>19</sup>

Every covenant, promise, and provision for Israel is earthly, and they continue as a nation with the earth when it is created new. Every covenant or promise for the Church is heavenly, and she continues in heavenly citizenship when the heavens are recreated.<sup>20</sup>

It should be asserted, however, that the entire system known as Judaism, along with all its component parts, is, in the purpose of God, in abeyance throughout the present age, but with the definite assurance that the entire Jewish system thus interrupted will be completed by extension into the kingdom, the new earth, and on into eternity to come.<sup>21</sup>

Among those who stand in eternal favor with God are the earthly citizens whose destiny it is to go on into eternity as the dwellers on the earth . . . , and the heavenly citizens whose destiny it is to occupy the new heaven . . . .<sup>22</sup>

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity. Why should this belief be deemed so incredible in the light of the facts that there is a present distinction between earth and heaven which is preserved even after both are made new; when the Scriptures so designate an earthly people who go on as such



into eternity; and a heavenly people who also abide in their heavenly calling forever?<sup>23</sup>

In this older dispensational system, there was an eternal dichotomy of destinies between Israel, the earthly seed of Abraham, and the church, the heavenly seed of Abraham.

Some more recent dispensationalists disagree with these details of Chafer's view. They teach that the eternal Jewish land promise is to be completely fulfilled in the 1000 year Judaistic millennial period. According to Dr. Charles C. Ryrie:

The earthly purpose of Israel of which dispensationalists speak concerns the national promise which will be fulfilled by Jews during the millennium as they live on the earth in unresurrected bodies.<sup>24</sup>

According to Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost:

The promises in the Abrahamic covenant concerning the land and the seed are fulfilled in the millennial age (Isa. 10:21-22; 19:25; 43:1; 65:8-9; Jer. 30:22; 32:38; Ezek. 34:24; 30-31; Mic. 7:19-20; Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:16-18).<sup>25</sup>

The promises in the Palestinic covenant concerning the possession of the land are fulfilled by Israel in the millennial age (Isa. 11:11-12; 65:9; Ezek. 16:60-63; 36:28-29; 39:28; Hos. 1:10-2:1; Mic. 2:12; Zech. 10:6).<sup>26</sup>

It will thus be observed that the millennial age finds the complete fulfillment of all that God promised to the nation Israel.<sup>27</sup>

Elsewhere, Dr. Pentecost argues that the eternal nature of the covenants with Israel requires that they be fulfilled in eternity on the new earth.<sup>28</sup> If, however, the land promise finds its ultimate fulfillment in eternity on the new earth, then there is no real mandate for a Jewish millennium in the Abrahamic covenant.

Some more recent dispensationalists also teach that the promised land is to be inhabited during the millennium only by unresurrected living Jews and Gentiles and not by the resurrected Old Testament saints.<sup>29</sup> During the millennium, the resurrected Old Testament saints together with the resurrected church saints are to be in the new Jerusalem, which will be a millennial satellite city hovering over Palestine.<sup>30</sup> At the end of the millennium, the new Jerusalem will descend to earth, and the saints of all ages will inhabit together the new earth. In this system, the strictly Jewish inheritance of the land promise is limited to the millennial years and to unresurrected millennial saints. The land promise specifically promised the land inheritance to Abraham as well as to his seed<sup>31</sup>, but Abraham, together with the other Old Testament saints, will be in the heavenly city with the church saints during the time of the land inheritance.

Here we have the dispensational understanding of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise. Was Scripture truly allowed to interpret Scripture? Was there a sensitivity to progressive revelation? Is there any evidence that the dispensational interpreters recognize their fallibility and have a willingness to adjust, if necessary, their initial understanding of the Abrahamic covenant if it does not harmonize well with further infallible revelation on the subject? Or do we see evidence of a willingness to artificially bend further revelation in order to vindicate a particular understanding of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise?

My own understanding of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise is different from the dispensationalist's. I believe the Jewish inhabitation of Palestine in the Old Testament was a temporary typological symbol and pledge of the ultimate eternal inheritance of the saints. I also believe that the land promise applies to the Christian today in the spiritual rest and heavenly position that is his in Christ Jesus. The following is an eight point explanation of my understanding of the fulfillment of the land promise.

First, there is some sense in which the land promise had a real fulfillment in the Old Testament:

And the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which he sware to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein. . . . There failed not ought of any good thing which the Lord had spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass.

Joshua 21:43,45

. . . not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, and not one thing hath failed thereof.

Joshua 23:14b

Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised: there hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant.

1 Kings 8:56

Thou art the Lord the God who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham; And foundest his heart faithful before thee, and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and

the Jebusites, and the Girgashites, to give it, I say, to his seed, and hast performed thy words; for thou art righteous.

Nehemiah 9:7-8.

This data must be integrated into one's total understanding of the land promise. There were many elements in the Old Testament Jewish economy besides the land promise that were said to be eternal. For the consistent literalist, this requires a belief in an eternity involving resurrected Old Testament rites and rituals and institutions. Another possibility is that these Old Testament rites and rituals and institutions were temporary types of eternal spiritual realities. These found a fulfillment as types in the Old Testament and also anticipated a future fulfillment in terms of the antitype. According to Patrick Fairbairn:

The occupation of the earthly Canaan by the natural seed of Abraham was a type, and no more than a type, of this occupation by a redeemed Church of her destined inheritance of glory; and consequently every thing concerning the entrance of the former on their temporary possession, was ordered so as to represent and foreshadow the things which belong to the Church's establishment in her permanent possession.<sup>32</sup>

Second, as we have already mentioned, the ultimate fulfillment of the land promise is an eternal fulfillment (Genesis 13:15; 17:8). The Hebrew word translated forever is at times contextually limited and does not always refer to a literal eternity (compare Deuteronomy 15:17), but God's covenants do have a truly eternal, forever reference. When the forever nature of God's covenant is compared to the life span of the sun, one can be certain that the divinely inspired writer had more in mind than a mere 1000 years (Psalm 89:34-37; compare Jeremiah 31:35-36; 33:20-21; Isaiah 54:10).

Third, the ultimate fulfillment of the land promise involves the whole world and not just Palestine. Notice what Paul said in Romans 4:13:

For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world (Greek: kosmos) was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of faith.

We have already shown the terminology about a promise given by God to Abraham and his seed can only refer to the land promise. Paul identified the land promise given to Abraham and his seed not merely with Canaan but with the whole world.

Fourth, the ultimate inheritors of the land promise will be the elect of all the ages. As we have already seen, there are New Testament passages which relate the language of the land promise to Christians as the spiritual seed of Abraham (Galatians 3; Romans 4:13). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ identified the heirs of the land promise as the spiritually meek (Matthew 5:5; compare Psalm 37:11), which is an appropriate description of God's people in general. In the book of Hebrews, the land promise is associated with citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. . . . But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

## Hebrews 11:8-10,16

The saints of all ages are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22-23; 13:14; Galatians 4:26), which is further evidence that the saints of all ages will inherit the land promise.

Fifth, this association of the land promise with citizenship in the heavenly Jerusalem means that during the inter-advent age, the land promise finds fulfillment in "an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven" (1 Peter 1:4). From the moment of conversion, the Christian is a comer unto Mount Zion and a citizen of the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:22), has spiritual rest in Christ Jesus (Matthew 11:28), and is seated with Christ in the heavenlies (Ephesians 2:6). We, today, in Christ Jesus have a foretaste of the heavenly rest that was pictured by Joshua's conquest of the promised land (Hebrews 4:8-9).

Sixth, the land promise today is related to the covenant blessing of the fifth commandment. Under the old covenant, those who honored their father and mother were promised, in general, that it would go well with them in the land which God gave them (Deuteronomy 5:16). Now that the covenant people are from every nation, tribe and tongue, this promise of covenant blessing has been dispensationally adjusted by Paul to read: "that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest live long on the earth" (Ephesians 6:3). Paul has removed the Palestinian specific geographic limitation in this covenant promise that related covenant blessing in terms of the land promise.

Seventh, the Christian today is in a position analogous to Israel under Joshua when they conquered the promised land. The difference is that our weapons are not physical (2 Corinthians 10:4) and our task is to conquer the whole world. We know that the

Abrahamic land promise ultimately refers to the whole world (Romans 4:13). Adam was originally given dominion over the whole world (Genesis 1:26-28). This inheritance was lost in the fall and Satan became the prince of this world,<sup>33</sup> but God promised that a Seed Redeemer would ultimately defeat Satan (Genesis 3:15) and that this new Adam would regain world dominion (Psalm 8:6). This Seed Redeemer would be a Seed of Abraham through whom Abraham would be a blessing to all nations (Genesis 12:3). This Seed Redeemer would be a son of David who would have the nations for His inheritance and the ends of the earth for His possession (Psalm 2:8). This Seed Redeemer would be a Son of Man who would be given dominion and glory and a kingdom that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him (Daniel 7:14). Through His resurrection-ascension, Christ has received all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). Christ, from His heavenly throne, is today fulfilling Psalm 2 (Revelation 2:26-27; 12:5) and Psalm 8 (Hebrews 2:6-8; 1 Corinthians 15:25-27). Even as God gave Palestine to Israel under Joshua and told them to conquer it, so God has given the nations to new covenant Israel under Jesus and has told us to disciple them.

And eighth, when Christ returns, the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to the new earth (Revelation 21:1-2), which then becomes the eternal locus of the land promise fulfillment. In Hebrews 4:8-9, we learn that the rest under Joshua after the conquest of the promised land was a type of the heavenly Sabbath rest of the eternal inheritance. The ultimate fulfillment of the land promise will be the eternal inheritance of the new earth by the saints of all ages. Only in this eternal context can Abraham and all his true seed inherit the land forever.

Before closing this chapter on the Abrahamic land promise, I want to comment on the Old Testament prophecies about dispersed Jews' returning to the land. Dispensationalists tend to refer these prophecies to an end-time regathering of the Jews to Palestine, but it seems much more logical that these prophecies primarily referred to the Babylonian exile and the return of the Jewish captives, first under Zerubbabel and Joshua the priest, and later under Ezra. In opposition to this, the dispensationalist can point out that these prophesied regatherings were a second return to the land (Isaiah 11:11) and a regathering from a world-wide dispersion, not from a localized Babylonian exile (Isaiah 49:12). This objection ignores the Biblical fact that the exiled Jews were scattered all over the civilized world of that day (Esther 3:8). And return from Babylonian exile was the second return to the land since the first was the exodus under Moses (Isaiah 11:15-16). Admittedly, there are elements in the restoration prophecies that go beyond what was experienced under the old covenant. This is because the fulfillment of prophecies of blessing can be limited (Joshua 1:4 & 7:11-12) or postponed (Numbers 14:30-31) or cancelled (Jeremiah 18:9-10) due to covenant disobedience and because these prophecies have continuing and progressively greater fulfillments in the church age and in eternity. As I discussed in the previous chapter on literalism, a prophecy can be given in terms of the old covenant economy and fulfilled in terms of the new covenant economy and eternity.

I no longer believe in a Zionistic interpretation of the Abrahamic land promise, but it is possible to retain a Zionistic element in one's understanding of prophecy without going to dispensational extremes. One needs to recognize that the Abrahamic covenant is primarily a spiritual covenant that relates to all the elect of all the ages. If there is any specific Jewish inheritance of Palestine in the Abrahamic covenant, this should be seen as secondary to the



ultimate fulfillment in the eternal inheritance of all the saints. And such a limited Palestinian fulfillment should be conditioned on the physical Jews' being converted in mass to Christianity and being regrafted into spiritual Israel. Nowhere does the Bible promise blessings and return from judgmental exile to God's covenant people when they are still living in rebellion.<sup>34</sup> The blessing of return to the land from exile is always conditioned on repentance and spiritual revival.

The major difference between the dispensational and the Reformed view of the land promise is that dispensationalists view it as having primary reference to physical Jews. This strong Jewish emphasis in the dispensational interpretation of the Old Testament covenants is probably best demonstrated by a statement made by Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost about the dispensational interpretation of the new covenant: ". . . there is one point of agreement: the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 must and can be fulfilled only by the nation Israel and not by the church."<sup>35</sup> If the dispensationalists have such a strongly Zionistic interpretation of the new covenant, is it any great surprise that their interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant's land promise is largely, primarily, and ultimately Zionistic?

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## End Notes

- Hal Lindsey with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), pages 50-58;
- <sup>1</sup> Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now! The Premillenarian Response to Russia and Israel Since 1917* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), pages 199-201.

John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), page 130; compare Dwight Wilson, *Armageddon Now!*, pages 123-143; 188-214.

2 Dispensationalists interpret Daniel 9:27 as teaching that in the middle of the future Jewish tribulation period, the Anti-Christ will break a covenant made with national Israel that had allowed them to have temple worship with sacrifices and will desolate the temple by there proclaiming himself divine. This act is to mark the beginning of the three and one half year great tribulation.

Hal Lindsey with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, pages 53-54.

3 Contrary to Mr. Lindsey, the fig tree species was not "a historic symbol of national Israel." The only possible evidence for such a view is the barren fig tree in Matthew 21 which Christ cursed. That tree was used by Christ as a symbol of national Israel, not because it was a fig tree, but because its abundance of foliage gave reason to expect the presence of fruit when there was none. This was analogous to national Israel whose abundant foliage included the temple, the priesthood, and religious tradition, but which lacked the fruit of faith in God's Messiah. That Jesus did not regard the fig tree species as a symbol of Israel in the Olivet Discourse is evident from the wording in Luke 21:29: "Behold the fig tree, and all the trees." The grape vine (John 15) and the olive tree (Romans 11) were historic symbols of Israel.

4 John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), pages 78-79.

5 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 149.

6 *Ibid.*, pages 149-150.

7 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 145-146.

8 Dr. Walvoord's response is "Circumcision is wider in its application than the term seed, as far as the use in Genesis is concerned." John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 141.

9 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), pages 86-87

10 The phrase "and to your seed" is found in both verses 15 and 17 of Genesis 13 in the LXX but only in verse 15 in the Hebrew.

11 William Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology" (dissertation, School of Education of New York University, 1967), pages 125-126.

12 Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3,4; 28:4,13; 35:12; 48:4.

13 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 145; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953), page 62.

14 Compare Psalm 22:27-30; 68:29-31; 72:8-11,17; Isaiah 2:2-5; 11:10,14; 19:24-25; 42:1-4; 45:14; 49:6-7,22-23; 52:10; 54:1-3; 60:3f.; 65:1; 66:19; Jeremiah 16:19; Amos 9:11-12; Zechariah 2:3-13; 8:20-23; Malachi 1:11.

15 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 507; compare Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 134.

16 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 156-157; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pages 60-61.

17 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 4:30.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:27; Dr. Lewis  
18 Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), page 65.

19 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:30.

20 *Ibid.*, 4:47.

21 *Ibid.*, 4:248.

22 *Ibid.*, 4:401.

23 Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 107.

24 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 146.

25 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 476.

26 *Ibid.*, page 477.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 477; compare William  
27 Everett Bell, Jr., "A Critical Evaluation of the Pre-tribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology," page 85.

28 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 491-494; 561-562.

29 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 536-537, 542, 546.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 546, 576-580; John  
30 F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 327-330; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: The New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), page 482, note on Revelation 21:2.

31 See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:320, 406-407.

Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture Viewed in*  
32 *Connection with the Whole Series of the Divine Dispensations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1900, 1975) 1:359.

33 John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; compare Ephesians 2:2.

34 [34] Louis A. DeCaro, *Israel Today: Fulfillment of Prophecy?*  
(Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974) pages 31-42.

35 [35] J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 124.

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## Chapter 11

### "Thy Kingdom Come"

The Presbyterian Church in America Book of Church Order begins with the statement, "Jesus Christ ... sits upon the throne of David." Most people raised with the teachings of the Reformed faith would take this fundamental truth for granted. Who, after all, would question this essential teaching? Well, an informed and consistent dispensationalist would not only question this teaching, but would take strong exception to it. The Davidic throne is another Biblical subject concerning which dispensationalists and Reformed interpreters disagree.

The Davidic kingdom in Scripture is founded on the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7:12-16. This covenant promise obviously involved Solomon, David's immediate seed and heir to the throne, since it spoke of the seed's building God's temple and of the possibility of the seed's sinning. The promise, however, also involved a greater antitypical fulfillment since it spoke of an eternal kingdom. The prophets later associated the eternal Davidic kingdom with the Messiah, who would inherit the throne of David and rule eternally over the kingdom in righteousness and justice (Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-6- 33:15-16). This Messianic kingdom was to become a universal kingdom over all the kingdoms of the world (Psalm 2; Daniel 2:44). According to Reformed interpretation, these Messianic kingdom prophecies were initially fulfilled by Christ at His first advent, are being progressively fulfilled by Christ throughout this age, and will be perfectly and completely fulfilled by Christ after His second advent. Concerning the nature of Christ's fulfillment of these kingdom prophecies, Reformed interpreter Patrick Fairbairn has said the following:

Jesus of Nazareth needed no outward enthronement or local seat of government on earth, to constitute Him the possessor of David's kingdom, as He needed no physical anointing to consecrate Him priest for evermore, or material altar and temple for the due presentation of his acceptable service.<sup>1</sup>

No more should it have been expected, that the Messiah was to be a king on the earthly model of David, than that he should be a prophet on the same level with Moses, or a priest after the imperfect type of those who presented their fleshly offerings on a brazen altar.<sup>2</sup>

Dispensationalists disagree with this evaluation of the kingdom prophecies and their fulfillment. They teach that Christ at His first advent offered the Jewish nation an earthly political kingdom. If the Jews had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, He would have re-established the old Davidic political kingdom, exalted its majesty and extended its rule to the uttermost parts of the earth. Because the Jewish nation rejected the Christ, this kingdom offer was retracted and the earthly, political, re-established Davidic kingdom was postponed until the future Jewish millennium. Between the withdrawal of the kingdom offer and the future millennial establishment of the kingdom was inserted the church age, a parenthesis in God's prophesied program for Israel and the nations. The present age and the present reign of Christ have no direct relationship to the Davidic covenant or to Messianic prophecy, according to dispensationalism. The following comments by Dr. John F. Walvoord on the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant are representative of dispensational thought:

If a literal interpretation be adopted, the present session of Christ is not a fulfillment of the covenant and it must be referred

to the future. It is clear that at the present time Christ is not in any literal sense reigning over the kingdom of David.<sup>3</sup>

A literal promise spiritualized is exegetical fraud. The point of the Davidic covenant is that the Son of David will possess the throne of His father David. To make His person literal but His throne a spiritualized concept is to nullify the promise.<sup>4</sup>

The New Testament is totally lacking in positive teaching that the throne of the Father in heaven is to be identified with the Davidic throne. The inference is plain that Christ is seated on the Father's throne, but that this is not at all the same thing as being seated on the throne of David.<sup>5</sup>

Which of these two understandings of the Davidic covenant and kingdom is correct? I was once committed to the dispensational understanding of the Messianic kingdom but now am convinced that the Reformed understanding is correct. In my change of conviction on this subject, three areas of study were crucial. First, I came to a better understanding of the word kingdom. Second, I re-examined the New Testament's testimony about the establishment of the kingdom at Christ's first advent. And third, I came to see some of the problems associated with the dispensational explanation of the kingdom.

First, there is the meaning of the word kingdom. Once I could not understand why anyone would believe that Christ is now ruling over His Messianic kingdom. When I thought of the Messianic kingdom, I pictured Christ ruling from earth over a territorial realm and exercising authority over political subjects after the pattern of King David in the Old Testament. I could see the Davidic kingdom in the Old Testament and I could visualize a Messianic kingdom rule in the



coming Jewish millennium, but I could not see any direct association between the Messianic kingdom and the church age. Part of my problem was the common primary association of the English word kingdom with realm and subjects. The following are the second and third definitions of the word kingdom given in the Oxford English Dictionary:

2. An organized community having a king as its head; a monarchical state of government.
3. The territory or country subject to a king; the area over which a king's rule extends; a realm.<sup>6</sup>

These definitions are what we normally associate with the word kingdom, and these definitions are consistent with the dispensational interpretation in which kingdom must refer to a political kingdom. These definitions, however, are secondary definitions. The primary meaning of the English word kingdom is the following:

1. Kingly function, authority, or power; sovereignty, supreme rule; the position or rank of a king, kingship.<sup>7</sup>

This primary definition is marked obsolete, which explains why we seldom associate it with the word, but this obsolete definition is the primary meaning of both the Hebrew and the Greek words that are translated kingdom in our Bibles.<sup>8</sup> According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, the "essential meaning" of the Greek equivalent of kingdom "is reign rather than realm."<sup>9</sup> And the Hebrew equivalent of "the kingdom of heaven" is "an abstract construction to denote the fact that God is King ..."<sup>10</sup> The term "can never mean the kingdom of God in the sense of a territory ruled by

Him. For the expression denotes the fact that God is King, i.e., His kingly being or kingship."<sup>11</sup> Both the Greek and the Hebrew words mean primarily the majesty and authority of the king. This abstract meaning is the primary meaning of the word, and the concrete aspects of a realm and subjects are secondary meanings.

This understanding of the word kingdom is well demonstrated in a parable which Christ gave in Luke 19:11-27 when he was about to enter Jerusalem and some "thought that the kingdom of God should immediately appear" (verse 11):

A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come. But the citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, We will not have this man to reign over us.

Notice that this man left both his realm and his subjects to receive his kingdom. Leaving one's realm and subjects to receive one's kingdom makes little sense if kingdom refers primarily to a realm and subjects. But if the word kingdom refers primarily to the authority to rule, this usage of the word in the parable makes perfect sense. This parable is allegorically referring to Jesus' ascending to the Father to receive His kingdom.

This proper understanding of the word kingdom clarifies the meaning of many passages. For example, in Matthew 6:33, Christ said, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." What is the Christian to seek in order to obey this commandment, a theocratic kingdom in a future age or God's rule and authority in all of life now? Also, notice the second petition of the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come"

(Matthew 6:10). With this proper understanding of the word kingdom, this second petition is almost synonymous with the third petition, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

When one realizes that the word kingdom has a primary reference to an abstract reign and a secondary reference to a concrete realm, he can easily understand how Christ's kingdom is simultaneously past, present and future. It is past in that the old Davidic political kingdom prefigured and anticipated the coming Messianic reign and in that Christ at His first advent actively established and exercised His authority to rule and to reign. It is future in that it is not until the time of the new heavens and the new earth that Christ's kingdom will be fully and perfectly realized in the concrete elements of realm (the new earth) and subjects (the elect of all ages). It is present in that the Lord Christ now has all authority in heaven and on earth and now is progressively concretizing His reign as the nations are disciplined. As nations and peoples acknowledge and submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, He is progressively possessing in practice what is already His in principle. The Messianic kingdom relates to the here and now as well as to the past and future. This is not an age of kingdom parenthesis and postponement.

The second area of study that caused me to change my concept of the Messianic kingdom from dispensational to Reformed was a general study of the New Testament's teachings on the kingdom. To begin with, the language of Scripture does not say that Christ at His first advent offered a kingdom that could potentially be postponed. The language of Scripture indicates that Christ at His first advent established a kingdom. Both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom was near at hand (Matthew 3:2; 4:17), not that it was potentially near at hand. Jesus told his disciples to seek the kingdom because "it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the

kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Jesus gave specific instructions on how to enter the kingdom (John 3:3,5; Matthew 5:20; 7:21) and stated that "every man presseth into it" (Luke 16:16). In His Beatitudes, Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom belonged to those "which are persecuted for righteousness's sake" (Matthew 5:11). Christ spoke of the kingdom as an actuality that He was establishing, not as a potentiality that He might postpone.

Further, Jesus spoke as if the establishment of His kingdom was especially manifested in the casting out of demons (Matthew 12:28-30). In the casting out of demons, Satan, the strong man, was bound and his property was plundered (Matthew 12:29). When the disciples reported that "even the devils are subject unto us through Thy name," Jesus proclaimed that Satan was falling from heaven like lightning (Luke 10:17-18). The power of the name of Jesus over demons demonstrated that Satan was a defeated foe whose power was being grounded out. The kingdoms of this world had been in bondage to demonic paganism and under the lordship of Satan, who was called the prince of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). Satan had come to regard the world's glory and domain as his own (Luke 4:6). But Christ invaded the kingdom of Satan and won the deciding victory. As Christ anticipated His plundering of Satan's treasure through the drawing of people from all nations unto Himself, he declared, "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out" (John 12:31).<sup>12</sup> This coming victory over Satan was so clearly manifested by the casting out of demons that Jesus said: "But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you" (Matthew 12:28). This verse is especially significant in that it occurs in the very chapter in which, according to the dispensationalists, Christ was withdrawing His kingdom offer. Commenting on this verse, George Ladd has said:

While the kingdom as the realm in which God's will is perfectly done continues to be future, the kingdom as the active saving power of God has come into the world in the person and activity of Christ to redeem men from the kingdom of Satan.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus also clarified the nature of the kingdom He was establishing in the parables of Matthew 13. Christ gave these parables, not to explain that He would not be establishing the Davidic kingdom spoken of in prophecy, but to correct some popular misconceptions about the prophesied Messianic kingdom. The mystery or previously unrevealed truth about the kingdom was not that God was going to postpone the kingdom program and temporarily engage in a church program that would be altogether different from the prophesied program. The mystery of the kingdom was that the kingdom would be established, not with cataclysmic suddenness and flaming judgment, but gradually and slowly. The kingdom was not to be established swiftly with military might, but peaceably through the sowing of the Word and the patient waiting for spiritual fruit. Kingdom success would not be immediate or sudden or conspicuous. Many would reject the kingdom like hardened soil rejects seed, and others would profess allegiance only to fall away like a plant in shallow soil or among thorns. The enemies of the kingdom were not to be immediately destroyed, but were to remain in this age like tares in a wheat field. The wicked were not to be fully removed from this world until the end of the age when their judgment will be like the burning of tares after a wheat harvest or the disposal of inedible fish after a harvest from the sea. The kingdom was to have a small and inconspicuous beginning, like a mustard seed, but it was gradually to grow into a great and remarkable entity. The kingdom was eventually to affect the whole world like a small bit of leaven brings life to a large and inert mass of dough. Though the kingdom had a small beginning, it was of great value and was worth giving one's life for. It

was like a small pearl of great value or some treasure inconspicuously hidden in a field. Though these are small in size, men will sell all to obtain them. The kingdom parables taught that the kingdom was extremely valuable and that the kingdom had a great future before it even though its outward success would not be immediate or always apparent.

Jesus continued to refer to His kingdom work throughout His ministry. Referring to His own presence, Jesus told the Pharisees that the kingdom was in their midst (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 16:19) and told his disciples that some of them would not taste death "till they see the Son of man coming in His kingdom" (Matthew 16:28). Jesus explained the principles of kingdom greatness (Matthew 18:1f.), kingdom forgiveness (Matthew 18:21f.) and the first and the last in the kingdom (Matthew 19:30f.; 20:20f.). Jesus explained the relationships of spiritual eunuchs (Matthew 19:12), covenant children (Matthew 19:14), and the materially rich (Matthew 19:23) to the kingdom. Jesus warned the chief priests and elders of Israel that the publicans and harlots were entering the kingdom ahead of them (Matthew 21:31) and that the kingdom would be taken away from them and given to others (Matthew 21:43; 22:1f.).

Near the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus entered Jerusalem and was acclaimed as the Messianic King of prophecy (John 12:13). Soon afterward, at His trial, Jesus was accused of being a political king and a rival of Caesar (John 18:33; 19:12). Jesus denied this, saying that His kingdom was not of this world and arguing that if His kingdom were of this world, His followers would have fought to have prevented His arrest (John 18:36). Earlier in His ministry, Christ had rejected a move to force Him to be such a king (John 6:15). It is noteworthy that Christ did not argue before Pilate that He had

indeed come to set up a political kingship modeled after King David's but that He had since postponed all that and was no longer a rival to Caesar. Caesar's soldiers mocked the kingship of Jesus (John 19:1-3), and He was crucified under the indictment: "Jesus of Nazareth the King of the Jews" (John 19:19). Jesus had given no evidence that He had offered a political kingdom to Israel. This instead was the misinformation His enemies had used to have Him crucified.

After His crucifixion, Jesus was resurrected from the dead and ascended to the right hand of the Father. The New Testament stresses that this resurrection-ascension established in a special way Jesus' Messianic kingship. The resurrected Christ appeared to the disciples and made the regal claim, "All power (or authority) is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18). He then promised to be with the church till the end of the age and gave the church the royal responsibility of discipling the nations, thereby securing for Christ His rightful realm. After giving the Great Commission, Christ ascended up into heaven in a cloud in fulfillment of Daniel 7:13-14:

I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before Him. And there was given Him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve Him: His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.

Through His resurrection and ascension, Jesus became the Messianic Son of God in power (Romans 1:4).<sup>14</sup> Jesus' divine Sonship as the second Person of the Godhead had no beginning or need for exaltation, but His Messianic Sonship as a human Son of David was established in power when Christ entered into His

glorified resurrection existence. This Messianic Sonship had a beginning, a time at which God said, "Thou art My Son; this day have I begotten thee" (Psalm 2:7).<sup>15</sup> Therefore Peter could say on Pentecost regarding the resurrection-ascension of Jesus:

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus whom ye have crucified both Lord and Christ. Acts 2:36

The title Christ, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Messiah, means the anointed one, which is the Old Testament title for God's chosen king over Israel (1 Samuel 24:6; Samuel 23:1; Psalm 2:2).

At the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch, Paul proclaimed a similar message about the Messianic rule of Jesus:

And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten thee. Acts 13:32-33

This second Psalm was written in terms of the Davidic kingdom as evidenced by the statement, "Yet have I set My king upon My holy hill of Zion." And yet the New Testament nowhere teaches that this Psalm awaits fulfillment in a future Jewish age. The New Testament instead gives repeated indication that the Messianic coronation spoken of in this Psalm was fulfilled at the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ.

In Acts 4:25-28, the second Psalm is again spoken of as fulfilled by "Thy holy Child (or Servant) Jesus whom Thou hast anointed." The



book of Revelation also testifies that Jesus Christ by His resurrection-ascension and present heavenly reign has fulfilled and is fulfilling the second Psalm:

And he that overcometh and keepeth My works unto the end, to Him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers (Psalm 2:9): even as I received of My Father. Revelation 2:26-27

And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron (Psalm 2:9); and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. Revelation 12:5

And the author of Hebrews gave the following evidence:

So also the Christ glorified not Himself to be made a high priest; but He that said unto Him, Thou art My Son, to day have I begotten Thee. Hebrews 5:5

Another Psalm that clearly refers to the Messianic kingdom is the 110th Psalm, which begins as follows:

The Lord said unto My Lord, Sit thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool. The Lord shall send the rod of Thy strength out of Zion: rule thou in the midst of thine enemies.

The dispensationalists claim that there is no basis for teaching that "the throne of the Father in heaven is to be identified with the Davidic throne,"<sup>16</sup> and yet this Psalm clearly identifies the Messianic throne with the right hand of the Father. And Peter quoted this very Psalm in his Pentecost sermon in which he sought to prove that God

had made Jesus "both Lord and Christ" through His resurrection-ascension (Acts 2:29-36). The New Testament contains significant additional testimony that the fulfillment of this Messianic Psalm began with the resurrection, ascension and heavenly seating of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

That Jesus is now exercising His prophesied Messianic rule is further confirmed by the apostolic church's total ignorance of any kingdom postponement. At Samaria, "Philip preached the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). Paul and Barnabus encouraged newly formed churches with the message: "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The unbelieving Jews at Thessalonica charged that Paul and Silas were acting "contrary to the decree of Caesar, saying that there is another king, one Jesus" (Acts 17:7). At Ephesus, Paul spoke "boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God" (Acts 19:8; compare 20:25). Throughout Paul's imprisonment at Rome, he "preached the kingdom of God" (Acts 28:31; compare verse 23). If Paul was aware that the kingdom had been postponed, he gave no indication of it. Perhaps this is why extreme ultra-dispensationalists conclude that the kingdom was not postponed until after the book of Acts and that Acts and all the epistles written during the time of the Acts are Jewish books and not Christian books!

The kingdom is also mentioned often in the New Testament epistles. For example, Paul spoke of salvation as deliverance from the domain of Satan into the kingdom of God's dear Son (Colossians 1:13). In Colossians 4:10-11, Paul referred to Aristarchus, Mark and Justus as "fellowworkers unto the kingdom of God." There are many other similar passages.<sup>18</sup> The dispensationalist reasons that since these verses definitely refer directly to the church age and since, according

to dispensationalism, the kingdom Christ offered to Israel was entirely unrelated to the church age, then the word kingdom in the above verses must refer to something entirely different from the word kingdom in the preaching of Christ. They argue that the word kingdom refers to "the universal and spiritual kingdom or rule of God"<sup>19</sup> in verses such as the above. But where was the word kingdom redefined in Scripture? What is the Scriptural basis for claiming that the "normal" meaning of the word kingdom in the New Testament epistles is entirely different from the "normal" meaning of the word in the Gospels? To use a criticism which Dr. Ryrie used against an amillennialist, the reason that the dispensationalist does not see the kingdom which Christ offered in the above verses is because "he feels, of course, that he has found justifiable reasons for spiritualizing the concept of the kingdom."<sup>20</sup> The "justifiable reason" here is that a consistent interpretation of the word kingdom would greatly contradict some basic dispensational assumptions.

Lastly, we want to look at some of the difficulties associated with the dispensational view of the Messianic kingdom. We will do this by looking at the dispensational explanation of the simple promise in the Davidic covenant, "I will stablish the throne of his kingdom for ever" (2 Samuel 7:13b). Dispensationalists teach that this covenant will be fulfilled literally and unconditionally. If this is the case, then dispensationalists need to explain how the throne of David remained literally established during the time of the Babylonian exile? Verses 38, 39 and 44 of the eighty-ninth Psalm give the following description of the status of the Davidic covenant during times of divine chastisement:

But Thou hast cast off and abhorred, Thou hast been wroth with  
Thine anointed. Thou hast made void the covenant of Thy

servant: Thou hast profaned his crown by casting it to the ground.

Thou hast made his glory to cease, and cast his throne to the ground.

There are only two ways of which I am aware that the dispensationalist could deal with this. On the one hand, he could acknowledge that the Davidic covenant is conditional in the sense that God blesses in accordance with holiness. Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost takes this route and says:

The only conditional element in the covenant was whether the descendents of David would continually occupy the throne or not. Disobedience might bring about chastening, but never abrogate the covenant. Peters says:

Some ... wrongfully infer that the entire promise is conditional over against the most express declarations to the contrary as to the distinguished One, the pre-eminent Seed. It was, indeed, conditional as to the ordinary seed of David ..., and if his seed would have yielded obedience, David's throne would never have been vacated until the Seed, par excellence, came; but being disobedient, the throne was overthrown, and will remain thus "a tabernacle fallen down," "a house desolate," until rebuilt and restored by the Seed.<sup>21</sup>

Dr. Pentecost then goes on to argue that the Davidic covenant is unconditional because

... the covenant was reaffirmed after repeated acts of disobedience on the part of the nation. ... These reaffirmations

would and could not have been made if the covenant were conditioned upon any response on the part of the nation.<sup>22</sup>

I disagree with the dispensational teaching on conditional and unconditional covenants, but I am in basic agreement with what Dr. Pentecost has said above about the Davidic covenant. The blessings of the Davidic covenant were conditioned upon obedience by the seed of David. This, however, did not mean that the Davidic covenant could have been abrogated or laid aside because the covenant ultimately had reference to the sinless Christ who through His obedience merited the full blessings of this covenant for His people. I believe Dr. Pentecost has dealt with the problem of the Babylonian exile by compromising the usual dispensational teaching on the nature of an unconditional covenant. I will examine the dispensational dichotomy between conditional and unconditional covenants in the next chapter.

On the other hand, a dispensationalist could deal with the problem of the Babylonian exile by defining the Davidic throne in such a non-literal fashion that the throne could said to be established even while unoccupied. This is the solution suggested by Dr. John F. Walvoord:

By the term "throne" it is clear that no reference is made to a material throne, but rather to the dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king. The right to rule always belonged to David's seed. By the term "kingdom" there is reference to David's political kingdom over Israel. By the expression "for ever" it is signified that the Davidic authority and Davidic kingdom or rule over Israel shall never be taken from David's posterity. The right to rule will never be transferred to another family, and its arrangement is designed for eternal posterity. Whatever its changing form, temporary

interruptions, or chastisements, the line of David will always have the right to rule over Israel and will, in fact, exercise this privilege. This then, in brief, is the covenant of God with David.<sup>23</sup>

It is, then, not necessary for the line to be unbroken as to actual conduct of the kingdom, but it is rather that the lineage, royal prerogative, and right to the throne be preserved and never lost, even in sin, captivity, and dispersion. It is not necessary, then, for continuous political government to be in effect, but it is necessary that the line not be lost.<sup>24</sup>

If the Davidic throne only refers to "the right to rule," then the seed of David did retain the throne even when in Babylonian exile. This brings us to an interesting question: Does Christ not now possess "the dignity and power which was sovereign and supreme in David as king" and "the right to rule"? If the more immediate seed of David could possess the Davidic throne even when in Babylon by retaining the "right to rule," then why does not Jesus now possess the Davidic throne? If one accepts Dr. Walvoord's definition of the Davidic throne, then how can one possibly also hold that Christ does not now possess it because He is not literally ruling from earthly Jerusalem?

In arguing that Christ does not now possess the throne of David, dispensationalists insist that the true throne of David must be an earthly throne. They have insisted that a heavenly throne (Revelation 12:5) and a heavenly Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:22) do not fulfill the prophecy of the Davidic covenant. For example, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer has said the following:

... the throne of David is precisely what David believed it to be, an earthly institution which has never been, nor will it ever be,

in heaven.<sup>25</sup>

More recently some dispensationalists have begun to teach that the Messianic rule will be exercised from both an earthly throne and a heavenly throne, as evidenced by the following quotations from Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost:

According to the established principles of interpretation the Davidic covenant demands a literal fulfillment. This means that Christ must reign on David's throne on the earth over David's people forever.<sup>26</sup>

This heavenly city will be brought into a relation to the earth at the beginning of the millennium, and perhaps will be made visible above the earth. It is from this heavenly city that David's greater Son exerts His Messianic rule, in which the Bride reigns, and from which the rewarded Old Testament saints exercise their authority in government.<sup>27</sup>

In closing this chapter, I would like to point out the practical difference between the Reformed and the dispensational views of the kingdom. When one accepts the Reformed understanding of the Davidic kingdom, it really is meaningful to the Christian today. It relates to the here and now, not to a future Jewish age. The prayer "Thy kingdom come" makes sense for today in the Reformed system. The dispensational view of the kingdom neglects the full significance of the present reign of Christ and can lead to a pietistic, other-worldly sort of Christianity that is culturally impotent. Some dispensationalists have said, "Why polish the brass on a sinking ship?" and "My job is to fish for men, not to clean up the goldfish bowl." Dr. John F. Walvoord has expressed this mentality well in the following quotation from his book *The Millennial Kingdom*:

The premillennial concept of the present age makes the inter-advent period unique and unpredicted in the Old Testament. The present age is one in which the gospel is preached to all the world. Relatively few are saved. The world becomes, in fact, increasingly wicked as the age progresses. The premillennial view holds no prospects of a golden age before the second advent, and presents no commands to improve society as a whole. The apostles are notably silent on any program of political, social, moral, or physical improvement of the unsaved world. Paul made no effort to correct social abuses or to influence the political government for good. The program of the early church was one of evangelism and Bible teaching. It was a matter of saving souls out of the world rather than saving the world. It was neither possible nor in the program of God for the present age to become the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>28</sup>

## End Notes

- 1 Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy Viewed in Respect to Its Distinct Nature, Its Special Function, and Proper Interpretation* (n.p.: T.&T. Clark, 1865; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), pages 230-231.
- 2 Patrick Fairbairn, *Prophecy*, page 229.
- 3 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 199.
- 4 *Ibid.*, page 200.
- 5 *Ibid.*, page 203.
- 6 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1971), s.v. "kingdom."



7 The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, s.v.  
"kingdom."

8 George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of God*  
(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1952),  
pages 77-81.

9 Gerhard Kittel, editor; Geoffrey W. Bromley, translator and  
editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand  
Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 1:582.

10 Gerhard Kittel, editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New  
Testament*, 1:572.

11 Gerhard Kittel, editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New  
Testament*, 1:571-572. According to Ridderbos, "in Jewish  
eschatological literature the malkuth shamaim [kingdom of  
heaven] is understood to be the coming universal revelation of  
the kingship of God with which the appearance of the Messiah is  
intimately connected." Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the  
Kingdom* (n.p.: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing  
Company, 1962), page 13.

12 Compare Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8; Revelation  
12:9.

13 George Eldon Ladd, *Crucial Questions about the Kingdom of  
God*, page 89.

14 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B.  
Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1959, 1965), 1:9-12.

15 H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker  
Book House, 1959), pages 50-51; Gerhard Kittel, editor,  
*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 8:367.

16 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 203.

17 Hebrews 1:13; 5:6; 7:17,21; 10:12-13; Matthew 22:41-46; 1  
Corinthians 15:25-27a.

18 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5; 2  
Thessalonians 1:5; 2 Timothy 4:18.

19 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago:  
Moody Press, 1965), page 172; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to  
Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids:  
Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), pages 471-472.

20 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 93.

21 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pages 103-104.

22 *Ibid.*, page 104.

23 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 196.

24 *Ibid.*, page 201.

25 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:315.

26 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 112.

27 *Ibid.*, page 546.

28 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 134.

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## Chapter 12

### Old Testament Salvation

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According to dispensationalist Dr. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, the most frequent criticism of dispensationalism is that dispensationalism teaches different ways of salvation in different ages.<sup>1</sup> And the most probable basis for this criticism is the dispensational teachings on salvation in the Old Testament and the millennial kingdom. Certain dispensational writers have made statements that do sound like they were teaching that Old Testament salvation was and that millennial salvation will be a meritorious system of works. For example, Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer has said the following:

A distinction must be observed here between just men of the Old Testament and those justified according to the New Testament. According to the Old Testament men were just because they were true and faithful in keeping the Mosaic Law. ... Men were therefore just because of their own works for God whereas New Testament justification is God's work for man in answer to faith (Rom. 5:1).<sup>2</sup>

The Law of Moses presents a covenant of works to be wrought in the energy of the flesh; the teachings of grace present a covenant of faith to be wrought in the energy of the Spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The law, being a covenant of works and providing no enablement, addressed itself to the limitations of the natural man. No more was expected or secured in return from its commands than the natural man in his environment could produce.<sup>4</sup>

It is to be concluded that the preaching of John the Baptist was wholly new, and was according to his mission as herald of the King; but that message is legalistic and not gracious. It is a covenant of works and not a covenant of faith. ... Into that kingdom, men are said to be "pressing in." "To crowd oneself in" is the literal meaning, and the word suggests intense human effort, and implies the need of merit for entrance into the kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

The Sermon on the Mount is the expansion of the full meaning of the personal righteousness which is required in the kingdom. The great words in this age are believe and grace. Not once do these words appear in connection with the kingdom teachings of Matthew 5-7.<sup>6</sup>

The kingdom teachings, like the Law of Moses, are based on a covenant of works. The teachings of grace, on the other hand, are based on a covenant of faith. In the one case, righteousness is demanded; in the other it is provided, both imputed and imparted, or inwrought. One is a blessing to be bestowed because of a perfect life, the other is a life to be lived because of a perfect blessing already received.<sup>7</sup>

Under grace, the fruit of the Spirit is, which indicates the present possession of the blessing through pure grace; while under the kingdom, the blessing shall be to such as merit it by their own works.<sup>8</sup>

In this age, God is dealing with men on the ground of His grace as it is in Christ. His dealings with men in the coming age are based on a very different relationship. At that time, the King will

rule with a rod of iron. There is no word of the cross, or of grace, in the kingdom teachings.<sup>9</sup>

It is strange, indeed, that men who have won honors as theologians of the first magnitude do not see the difference between the proclamation of an earthly kingdom addressed to one elect nation to be established on legal grounds, and the proclamation of a grace message which concerns only individuals with Jews and Gentiles, on an equal footing, under sin and offers in sovereign grace to the one who believes on Christ that he will be made meet to be a partaker of the inheritance of the saints in light.<sup>10</sup>

"The straight and narrow way" is an outworking of personal merit and righteousness and is far removed from salvation, which provides a perfect and eternal justification based on an acceptance in the Beloved. The Christian has been saved by an act of faith and not by relentless persevering in a narrow path. ... There is no rest here in the finished work of Christ (cf. Heb. 4:9); all is personal merit as the basis of hope for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.<sup>11</sup>

Thus it may be concluded that the teachings of the law, the teachings of grace, and the teachings of the kingdom are separate and complete systems of divine rule which are perfectly adapted to the varied conditions of three great dispensations. The teachings of Moses and the teachings of the kingdom are purely legal, while the instructions to the believer of this dispensation are in conformity with pure grace.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Chafer does appear to have taught different ways of salvation in different ages, and yet Dr. Charles C. Ryrie, who studied under Dr.

Chafer, claims the following:

Neither the older nor the newer dispensationalists teach two ways of salvation, and it is not fair to attempt to make them so teach. ... Straw men are easy to create, but the huff and puff it takes to demolish them are only huff and puff.<sup>13</sup>

Such a claim in the light of such quotations demonstrates that the dispensational teachings on Old Testament salvation is a sensitive area for dispensationalists and an interesting area for study.

In this chapter, I will seek to examine the teachings on Old Testament salvation of the older and the newer dispensationalists, as Dr. Ryrie labels them, and to contrast these dispensational teachings with that of Reformed theology. I will first discuss a basic inherent weakness in the dispensational teaching on Old Testament salvation and then go on to examine the specifics of their teaching on this subject.

This basic inherent weakness results from the foundational dispensational assumption that there is a strong dichotomy between Israel and the church such that the Old Testament saints will not be in the Body and Bride of Christ in eternity. This means that the dispensational system contains a presuppositional prejudice against the Old Testament saints' being in Christ and under the covenant headship of Christ. The dispensational system imposes upon its consistent adherents the necessity of explaining Old Testament salvation in such a way that Old Testament salvation does not involve covenant membership in the Body of Christ. To be in covenant union with Christ is to be in the Body and Bride of Christ, and to be in the Body and Bride of Christ is to be in the church universal, and for the Old Testament saints to be in the church

universal is to deny dispensationalism. According to Dr. Paul Lee Tan:

To see the church as the Body of Christ, an organism different from Old Testament Israel, is to read Scripture dispensationally and to qualify as a dispensational interpreter.<sup>14</sup>

According to Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost:

The marriage of the Lamb is an event which evidently involves only Christ and the church. ... While it would be impossible to eliminate these groups [Old Testament saints and tribulation saints] from the place of observers, they can not be in the position of participants in the event itself.<sup>15</sup>

According to Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer:

There is probably no word of Scripture which more clearly defines the essential fact concerning the Christian than the phrase in Christ; and as the Christian is the most important fact of all creation, there has never been a word uttered which was so far-reaching in all its implication, or which is fraught with greater meaning to humanity than the phrase in Christ. ... Over against the emphasis which is given to this truth in the teachings of grace, is the corresponding fact that there is no hint of a possible position in Christ in any teaching of law or of the kingdom.<sup>16</sup>

Much of divine blessing is determined for Israel all of which is anticipated in her covenants and prophecies; but no covenant or prophecy brings that nation into heavenly citizenship or into marriage union with Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Dispensationalists recognize that if Old Testament saints are in Christ as Paul used that term, then Old Testament saints are in the church universal (1 Corinthians 12:13), and that would effectively destroy the dispensational dichotomy between Israel and the church. A salvifically unified people of God through the ages is a concept antithetical to the foundational presuppositions of dispensationalism. This fundamental dispensational bias against the salvific unity in Christ of the people of God through the ages is, I think, the most basic weakness in the dispensational teaching on Old Testament salvation.

Now that we have discussed this preliminary consideration, I will examine the specific details of the dispensational teachings on Old Testament salvation. Since dispensational teaching in this area has evolved over the years, I will first look at the older dispensational teaching as represented by Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer and then at the newer dispensational teaching as represented by Drs. John F. Walvoord, Charles C. Ryrie, and J. Dwight Pentecost.

The older dispensational teaching on Old Testament salvation is extensively explained in the fourth volume of Dr. Chafer's Systematic Theology, the primary source for my understanding on this subject. Fundamental to Dr. Chafer's system are his concepts of conditional and unconditional covenants. A conditional covenant, according to Dr. Chafer, is a covenant in which God agrees to do His part only upon the condition that man does his part. It is a meritorious, by-works, "be good, and I will bless you" proposition. In contrast, Dr. Chafer defines an unconditional covenant as a covenant in which God has bound Himself to do something regardless. There is no human responsibility involved. It is a gracious, by-faith, "I have blessed you, now be good" proposition.<sup>18</sup>



In Dr. Chafer's system, the nation Israel after Mount Sinai was under both a conditional and an unconditional covenant. The Abrahamic covenant with its land promise to Abraham and his Seed was Israel's unconditional covenant:

This [Abrahamic] covenant, being without human condition, simply declares the unchanging purpose of Jehovah. It will be achieved in pure grace, apart from every human factor, and its accomplishments are eternal.<sup>19</sup>

When the nation Israel was redeemed from Egypt, they were in an ideal position. They had been redeemed as a nation, and, on the basis of the Abrahamic covenant, they had an unconditional right to the promised land which was contingent upon no human responsibilities. But then, according to Dr. Chafer, Israel made a foolish and rash mistake at Mount Sinai by accepting the meritorious Mosaic covenant.<sup>20</sup>

Dr. Chafer regarded the Mosaic covenant as a meritorious covenant of works in which divine blessing was conditioned strictly upon human faithfulness.<sup>21</sup> It was the antithesis of a covenant of grace.<sup>22</sup> Its byword was "This do and thou shalt live." It was a legal relationship in which one entered into God's blessings by means of personal self-righteousness.<sup>23</sup> In a covenant of works like the Mosaic covenant, there is no divine enablement and man must depend on the energy of the flesh.<sup>24</sup>

We now have the nation Israel under both the conditional, "Be good, and I will bless you," meritorious, by-works, and temporary Mosaic covenant and the unconditional, "I have blessed you, now be good," gracious, by-faith and eternal Abrahamic covenant. This, of course,

seems logically impossible. How could the same people simultaneously be related to God through two such antithetical covenants? The dispensational solution is to posit a strong dichotomy between national and individual promises and blessings and hopes. According to Dr. Chafer,

What Jehovah has covenanted to His elect nation is one thing, and what He covenants to individuals within that nation is quite another thing. The national entity has been and will be preserved forever according to covenant promises (Isa. 66:22; Jer. 31:35-37; Gen. 17:7-8). The individual Israelite, on the other hand, was subject to a prescribed and regulated conduct which carried with it a penalty of individual judgment for every failure (Deut. 28:58-62; Ezek. 20:33-44; Matt. 24:51; 25:12,30).<sup>25</sup>

Israel as a nation was secure in its national salvation under the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, but the individual Israelites had an unsure salvation under the conditional Mosaic covenant. Dr. Chafer contrasted this with the situation of the universal church in which both the corporate body and all the individuals in the corporate body are secure.<sup>26</sup>

We now have the background necessary to examine Dr. Chafer's understanding of the way of salvation in the Old Testament. There are four elements in Dr. Chafer's explanation of Old Testament salvation.<sup>27</sup> The first element is physical birth into Judaism. According to Dr. Chafer,

Whatever may have been the divine method of dealing with individuals before the call of Abraham and the giving of the law of Moses, it is evident that, with the call of Abraham and the giving of the law and all that followed, there are two widely

different, standardized, divine provisions whereby man, who is utterly fallen, might stand in favor of God, namely, (a) by physical birth into Judaism or (b) by spiritual birth into Christianity or the kingdom of God.<sup>28</sup>

Distinction would also be made between the blessings and privileges within the covenants and the terms of admission into the covenants. In the case of the Israelite, entrance into the covenants was by physical birth; while in the case of the Christian it is by spiritual birth.<sup>29</sup>

Israelites become what they are by physical birth. They are each one begotten of human parents and their inheritance is transmitted by human generation. Christians become what they are by spiritual birth. They are begotten directly by God and are therefore His legitimate offspring. Their inheritance is that each is a child of God.<sup>30</sup>

Too much importance cannot be placed on the fact that an Israelite was physically born into an elect race, a redeemed nation, and made heir of the everlasting covenants. While an Israelite was inducted by his physical birth into all privileges of the chosen people, there was in the law an element of merit because its attending blessings for compliance and judgments for failure.<sup>31</sup>

The Jew, though under the legalistic Mosaic law, was still an heir by birth to the gracious and unconditional Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant was a national covenant, and since a Jew became a member of the Jewish nation by birth, he became an heir of the promised national blessing at birth. Therefore, according to Dr. Chafer, the Jew became a member of God's earthly people

through physical birth just as the Christian becomes a member of God's heavenly people through spiritual birth. This gracious admission into the covenant relationships through physical birth meant that Old Testament salvation was not entirely through the law.<sup>32</sup> After all, the law did not make one a Jew. That was done by physical birth.

The second element in Dr. Chafer's system of Old Testament salvation is the sacrificial system. The Jew as an individual was under the meritorious covenant of law and he was responsible for keeping the law in full. That, however, was impossible. No one could keep the law fully, especially not in the power of the flesh with no divine enablement. The only reason salvation was possible for the Jew was because he had the sacrificial system as a means for obtaining forgiveness for his transgressions of the law. As Dr. Chafer explains it:

The final standing of any Jew before God was not based on law observance alone, but contemplated that Jew in the light of the sacrifices he had presented in his own behalf.<sup>33</sup>

In case of failure to do the law, sacrifices were accepted as a means to restoration. As the Christian may be forgiven and cleansed on the ground of confession of his sin to God (1 John 1:9), so Israelites both individually and nationally were restored by sacrifices.<sup>34</sup>

When looking back upon his experience in Judaism, the Apostle Paul could say that he had been, as 'touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless' (Phil. 3:6). This did not imply sinless perfection, but rather that he had always provided the

requisite sacrifices. On that basis the faithful Jew lived and was accepted of God in the Mosaic system.<sup>35</sup>

Old Testament salvation in Dr. Chafer's system involved forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial rituals and personal righteousness through keeping the law. Dr. Chafer stated that neither the by-faith principle of grace nor the imputed righteousness of Christ was a part of Old Testament salvation.<sup>36</sup> He taught that the Jews did not use the by-faith principle because they were ignorant of the possibility of a by-faith imputed righteousness in spite of the example of Abraham and David spoken of in Romans 4.<sup>37</sup> Dr. Chafer said that Abraham was "the pattern of a Christian under grace and not of a Jew under law."<sup>38</sup> He stated that "the by-faith principle which was announced in the Abrahamic covenant is brought again into force, through the death of Christ,"<sup>39</sup> and that the Mosaic law "was preceded (Ex. 19:4) and followed (John 1:17) by grace."<sup>40</sup> Concerning imputed righteousness in the Old Testament, Dr. Chafer said the following:

Israel, as a nation, is never seen in heaven, nor are they as a people, as is true of the Church, constituted righteous. Though termed "a holy nation," that holiness is relative rather than absolute.<sup>41</sup>

And Dr. Chafer said the following about imputed righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount and in the millennial kingdom:

No reference, here or elsewhere, in this sermon, is made to imputed righteousness. The kingdom saint's righteousness under Messiah's reign will exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Indeed, such personal quality and merit are demanded for entrance into that kingdom at all. Many Jews

will be judged unworthy to enter the kingdom, and those who will be judged will include Jews of the past dispensation who are raised to this judgment (cf. Dan. 12:1-3) as well as the last generation living who will enter that judgment. A reminder at this point may be in order, which asserts again that the believer is provided in this age with righteousness which is a gift from God made possible through the sweet savor aspect of Christ's death and on the ground of the believer's position in Christ.<sup>42</sup>

Old Testament salvation as explained by Dr. Chafer sounds like a legalistic system based on ritualistic and moral obedience. Dr. Chafer, however, argues that Old Testament salvation as he has explained it is a by grace system:

Since human faithfulness in whatever degree could never be the exact compensation or exchange for the values of eternal life or for unending blessings in the kingdom, there is a very large measure of divine grace to be seen in the salvation of the elect earthly people.<sup>43</sup>

The third element in Dr. Chafer's system of Old Testament salvation is the teaching that a Jew could be disowned from the nation and thereby from the gracious Abrahamic covenant by neglecting to keep the law and to offer sacrifices. Dr. Chafer expressed it as follows:

The individual Jew might so fail in his conduct and so neglect the sacrifices as, in the end, to be disowned of God and cast out (Gen. 17:14; Deut. 28:58-61; Ezek. 3:18; Matt. 10:32-33; 24:50-51; 25:11-12,29-30).<sup>44</sup>

Thus it is disclosed that the salvation of an Israelite, who lived in the Mosaic age, which age will be completed in the coming

Tribulation, was guaranteed by covenant; yet the individual could, by failing to do God's revealed will as contained in the Mosaic Law, sacrifice his place in the coming Kingdom and be cut off from his people (cf. Lk. 10:25-28; 18:18-21; Matt. 8:11,12; 24:50,51; 25:29,30). Jehovah's salvation of Israel will be on the ground of Christ's death. The human terms, because of the covenant promise regarding their salvation, are not the same as that required by Abraham or an individual in this age, whether Jew or Gentile.<sup>45</sup>

And Dr. Chafer also gave insight to his thinking on this point in his comments of the Sermon on the Mount:

Thus, also, great is the difference between those who are in danger of hell fire (Matt. 5:22,29-30) and those who are justified on a principle of perfect divine justice who have done no more than believe in Jesus -- even the ungodly (Rom. 3:26; 4:5). ... And, yet again, consideration must be given to a distinction between those who follow a course -- strait and narrow -- with the goal in view that they may find life at the end of that path (Matt. 7:14) and those to whom eternal life has been given as a present possession (John 3:36; Rom. 6:23; 1 John 5:11-12). Finally, far removed is the situation in which some hear the Lord say, "I never knew you: depart from me, ye who work iniquity" (Matt. 7:23) and an assurance that one trusting in Christ "shall never perish" (John 10:28; Rom. 8:1).<sup>46</sup>

Of course, Reformed interpreters agree that the Old Testament Jew could be disinherited from the nation for unrepented, high-handed sin. The Reformed interpreter, however, does not make physical birth into Israel the Old Testament equivalent to new covenant regeneration. For the Reformed interpreter, this Old Testament

pruning of the unfaithful from the olive tree of Israel is in the same category with New Testament church discipline and is not to be contrasted with new covenant security in Christ.

The last element in Dr. Chafer's system is the national salvation of the nation Israel. Dr. Chafer held that this national salvation was a main objective in Christ's death.<sup>47</sup> This national salvation is to take place during the futuristic dispensational seven-year tribulation period after the church has been raptured and in connection with the post-tribulational return of Christ. During the tribulation, Israel will be regathered to the land of Palestine and many Jews will turn to God through the renewed preaching of the kingdom gospel.<sup>48</sup> The kingdom gospel, according to Dr. Chafer, was what John the Baptist and Jesus had preached at the first advent before Jesus turned from Israel to the Gentiles. Dr. Chafer quoted the following definition of the kingdom gospel from the Scofield Reference Bible:

This is the good news that God purposes to set up on earth, in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7:16 ...) a kingdom, political, spiritual, Israelitish, universal, over which God's Son, David's heir, shall be King, and which shall be, for one thousand years, the manifestation of the righteousness of God in human affairs ...

Two preachings of this Gospel are mentioned, one past, beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist, continued by our Lord and His disciples, and ending with the Jewish rejection of the King. The other is yet future (Matt. 24:14), during the great tribulation, and immediately preceding the coming of the King in glory.<sup>49</sup>



At the post-tribulational return of Christ, He is to deliver the nation of Israel from all her enemies and to save Israel as a nation from all her sins by applying the efficacy of His death to the many Jewish sins that for ages have been temporarily covered by animal sacrifices. There is to be a national judgment in which all the Old Testament Jews who were unfaithful to the Mosaic law will be cut off and purged from the people. Then the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of the remaining faithful Jews, who then will be moved to accept in faith Christ's death for their national salvation. Thus, "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26).<sup>50</sup> As a result of the return of Christ and this national salvation, the Jews of every age except the parenthetical church age who were faithful to Judaism will inherit the land promised to Abraham.<sup>51</sup> These Jews, together with the Gentile nations that treated Israel well during the tribulation period, will enter the earthly millennium and the church will remain in heaven. In the millennium, the Gentile nations will be inferior to Israel as Israel's servants.<sup>52</sup> And Israel will have a millennial inheritance that is inferior to the church, which will reside in heaven and rule as Christ's consort.<sup>53</sup> Dr. Chafer expressed uncertainty about "the eternal estate of such patriarchs as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Job and Melchizedek."<sup>54</sup> I do not know if Dr. Chafer believed these would inherit the earth with Israel or heaven with the church.

At the end of the millennium, there will be the creation of the new heavens and the new earth. In this new creation, the separation between Israel and the church will continue throughout eternity. The new heavens will be the eternal inheritance of the heavenly people, the church, and the Judaistic new earth will be the eternal inheritance of the earthly people, Israel.<sup>55</sup>

There are three obvious problems with Dr. Chafer's system. First, though he denied that he taught divergent ways of salvation in different ages,<sup>56</sup> he did make many statements that appeared to justify this criticism. Second, Dr. Chafer interpreted the phrase heaven and earth as referring to two separate spheres that are to remain eternally distinct. The phrase heaven and earth is a common Hebrew figure of speech (a merism) used to refer to all created reality.<sup>57</sup> And third, Dr. Chafer's teaching that the resurrected Old Testament saints would be on earth during the millennium and that resurrected church saints would not be on the new earth during eternity contradicts the New Testament teachings on the New Jerusalem.

This third point about the New Jerusalem needs some explanation. A close examination of Revelation 21 will show that the New Jerusalem does not come to planet earth until after the creation of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1-2,9-10). As was demonstrated in Chapter Two, the teaching of Revelation 21, Hebrews 11:39-40 and Hebrews 12:22-23 indicates that the New Jerusalem is symbolic for the saints of all the ages. This New Testament teaching on the New Jerusalem contradicts two aspects of Dr. Chafer's system. Both the resurrected Old Testament saints and the resurrected church saints are in the New Jerusalem. The New Jerusalem has a heavenly location during the dispensational millennium but is on the new earth during eternity. This makes it impossible for the resurrected Old Testament saints to be on earth during a millennial age and for the resurrected church saints not to be on the new earth during eternity.

These three problem areas with Dr. Chafer's teaching are the areas in which the newer dispensationalists have departed from Dr. Chafer's system. The neo-dispensationalists have eliminated the first problem

by clearly teaching an Old Testament by-faith salvation. Dr. Charles C. Ryrie explains this position as follows:

The basis for salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the requirement for salvation in every age is faith; the object of faith in every age is God; the content of faith changes in the various dispensations. It is this last point, of course, which distinguishes dispensationalism from covenant theology, but it is not a point to which the charge of teaching two ways of salvation can be attested. It simply recognizes the obvious fact of progressive revelation. When Adam looked upon the coats of skins with which God had clothed him and his wife, he did not see what the believer today sees looking back on the cross of Calvary. And neither did other Old Testament saints see what we can see today.<sup>58</sup>

Dr. Ryrie goes on to quote the Dallas Theological Seminary doctrinal statement, which goes on to say:

... we believe that it was historically impossible that [the Old Testament saints] should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ. We believe also that they did not understand the redemptive significance of the prophecies or types concerning the sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 1:10-12); therefore, we believe that their faith toward God was manifest in other ways as it is shown by the long record in Hebrews 11:1-40. We believe further that their faith thus manifest was counted unto them for righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:3 with Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:5-8; Heb. 11:7).<sup>59</sup>

Since dispensationalists cannot allow the Old Testament saints to have a position in Christ, it seems consistent that they would deny that the Old Testament saint's faith was in the coming Christ.

Dr. Ryrie has stated that the object of faith in every age has been God and that the content of faith was different in the Old Testament. This statement allows great latitude in interpreting the content of faith in the Old Testament. For example, it would accommodate the following analysis of the faith of Abraham by Dr. Chafer:

Abraham believed God respecting a son whom he would himself generate. ...

... God imputes righteousness to those in this age who believe, which righteousness is the foremost feature of salvation, on the one demand that they believe; but this belief is not centered in a son which each individual might generate, as in the case of Abraham, but in the Son whom God has given to a lost world, who died for the world and whom God has raised from the dead to be a Savior of those who believe. In Romans 4:23,24 it is written, "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead." From this it will be seen that, though the specific object of faith - - Isaac in the case of Abraham and Jesus Christ in the case of Christians -- varies, both have a promise of God on which to rest and both believe God.<sup>60</sup>

Christ, however, said that Abraham saw His day and was glad (John 8:56). Paul said that God preached the gospel to Abraham (Galatians 3:8). This is not to say that Abraham understood God's covenant promise as well as we do today. This is to say that the content of

Abraham's faith went beyond the belief that he would have a son in his old age. This is to say that the object of Abraham's faith was a progressive revelation of the covenant promise which God began to reveal in the Seed-Redeemer promise of Genesis 3:15.

In regard to the object and content of faith, I would say that the object of saving faith for God's people has always been God as the giver of His covenant promise and that the covenant people's knowledge and understanding of God's covenant promise has progressively changed through the ages. Paul refers to the "covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12), which implies that all the various covenants which God has administered throughout redemptive history are united by a common promise. Here we have the developmental diversity (many covenants) and the organic unity (one promise) of progressive revelation. God's covenant promise has never changed but man's knowledge and understanding of God's covenant promise has greatly progressed through the ages and will greatly progress in the future when all the saints see the risen and glorified Christ face to face at the second advent. That we today know and understand God's covenant promise better than did the Old Testament saints does not mean that the object of their faith was not the same covenant promise. The Christian today has faith in the Christ who has already historically come and manifested Himself through the first advent. Faith in the Christ who has come, however, is but faith in the promise of Genesis 3:15 with a progressed knowledge and understanding of the promise of Genesis 3:15. The object of Adam and Eve's faith was the Seed-Redeemer promise, and the ultimate referent of that promise was Jesus of Nazareth, regardless of the level of their understanding of the promise. The ultimate referent of the sacrificial system and much of the Mosaic ceremonial law was Christ. To have believed in these Old Testament promises and institutions was to have believed in the Messianic promise to the

extent that it had been revealed. The content of saving faith has not changed through the ages; men's knowledge of and understanding of that content has progressively changed through the ages. This explanation of the content of Old Testament salvation is better adapted to the concept of progressive revelation since the very concept of progression implies an organic unity as well as diversity and developmental change.

In spite of Dr. Ryrie's teaching about the changing content of faith through the ages, Dr. Ryrie appears in his discussion of the Old Testament sacrificial system to teach that the dimly seen content of the Old Testament saint's faith was the coming Christ:

And yet the law contained the revelation which brought men to a realization that their faith must be placed in God the Saviour. How did it do this? Primarily through the worship which it instituted through the sacrificial system. The sacrifices were part of the law; the keeping of them did not save; and yet a man could respond to what they taught so as to effect eternal salvation.<sup>61</sup>

... there seemed to have been in the offerings that which could point a believing worshipper to a better sacrifice which would deal finally with the entire sin question. This might be called an ulterior efficacy in the sacrifices which did not belong to them as sacrifices but as prefigurations of a final dealing with sin. However, it cannot be implied that the Israelite understood what that final dealing was. ... Christ was not the conscious object of their faith, though they were saved by faith in God as He had revealed Himself principally through the sacrifices which He instituted as a part of the Mosaic law.<sup>62</sup>

There is little difference between what Dr. Ryrie has here stated and the general Reformed position on the content of Old Testament faith. To distinguish himself from the Reformed position, Dr. Ryrie has to characterize the covenant theologian as presuppositionally inclined toward the teaching that the Old Testament saint understood Christ's work as typified in the sacrifices as clearly as does the New Testament saint:

The obvious fallacy in the covenant theologian's solution to this problem is that it is an a priori approach which has yielded artificial results. The assumption is that everything about salvation must be the same; therefore, the conscious object of the faith of old Testament saints must have been Christ. This is not to imply that covenant theologians do not recognize a limitation on the revelation of the Old Testament, but they do everything possible to obliterate the resulting effect that any limitation of revelation might have on the doctrine of Old Testament salvation.<sup>63</sup>

The above may be a valid criticism of certain statements by individual Reformed interpreters,<sup>64</sup> but Dr. Ryrie should not accuse covenant theologians as a class with making this mistake. For example, examine the following statement by Reformed theologian Geerhardus Vos:

Even though the defective provisional efficacy of the ceremonies might be to some extent perceived, it was far more difficult to tell what was intended to take their place in the future. Here the type needed the aid of prophecy for their interpretation (cp. Isa. 53). We must not infer from our comparatively easy reading of the types that Israelites of old felt the same ease in interpreting them. It is unhistorical to carry back into the Old Testament

mind our developed consciousness of these matters. The failure to understand, however, does not detract from the objective significance these types had in the intent of God.<sup>65</sup>

Or examine the following statement by Patrick Fairbairn, a Reformed interpreter from a past age:

It was comparatively an easy thing for the Jewish worshipper to understand how, from time to time, he stood related to a visible sanctuary and an earthly inheritance, or to go through the process of an appointed purification by means of water and the blood of slain victims applied externally to his body, -- much more easy than for the Christian to apprehend distinctly his relation to a heavenly sanctuary and realize the cleansing of his conscience from all guilt by the inward application of the sacrifice of Christ and the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit. But for the Jewish worshipper to do both his own and the Christian's part, -- both to read the meaning of the symbol as expressive of what was already laid open to his eyes, and to descry its concealed reference to the yet undiscovered realities of a better dispensation, -- would have required a reach of discernment and a strength of faith far beyond what is now needed in the Christian.<sup>66</sup>

A second area where neo-dispensationalists significantly differ from the older dispensationalism of Dr. Chafer is related to the concept of the New Jerusalem and to the interpretation of the new heavens and the new earth, the second and third problem points in Dr. Chafer's system. In the newer system as contained in the writings of Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost and Dr. John F. Walvoord, the church enters her eternal state in the heavenly Jerusalem at the rapture immediately before the beginning of a seven year tribulation period. During this



tribulation period, God's program with Israel, which was interrupted by the church age, will be resumed. After this tribulation period, at the time of the second advent and the beginning of the dispensational millennium, the heavenly Jerusalem will descend to a hovering position over the land of Palestine.<sup>67</sup> This satellite city will have astonishing dimensions, being either a cube or a pyramid with a 1500 mile square base and a height of 1500 miles.<sup>68</sup> At the time of the second advent, the dead Old Testament saints will be resurrected and will enter their eternal state in the heavenly Jerusalem along with the resurrected church saints. The living Jewish saints who survived the tribulation period, however, will enter the millennium in unresurrected bodies on earth along with select Gentiles.<sup>69</sup> The resurrected saints of the heavenly city will be free to travel to and from the earth during the millennial period.<sup>70</sup> At the end of the millennium, the new heavens and the new earth will be created, the heavenly city will descend to Palestine on the new earth, and the redeemed of all the ages will enjoy eternity together on the new earth.

This newer system does not have the specific problems previously pointed out in Dr. Chafer's system. In this neo-dispensational system, there is one eternal destiny for the saints of all ages in accordance with a proper interpretation of the phrase heaven and earth. Also, this system does not contradict the New Testament's teaching on the New Jerusalem the way Dr. Chafer's system does. This new system, however, has generated new problems in its adjustments to compensate for the old problems in Dr. Chafer's system.

First, the newer system does not allow the Old Testament saints to inherit the land promised to Abraham and his seed. Neo-

dispensationalist Dr. John F. Walvoord has said the following:

Much of the confusion that exists in regard to the millennium and the eternal state stems from a failure to distinguish between the promises that are given to the last generation of saints who are on the earth at the time of the second advent and the promises that are given resurrected or translated saints in both the Old and New Testaments. The prophecies of the Old Testament give adequate basis for the doctrine that Israel has an earthly hope. The prophets in Israel's darkest hours painted the most glowing picture of the coming earthly kingdom in which Israel would participate as a favored nation and possess their promised land under the reign of the Son of David. The promises given, however, clearly refer to those who were not resurrected and are directed to the nation of Israel as it is to be constituted at the time of the second advent, that is, the Israelites who will survive the great tribulation. They and their seed will inherit the promised land and fulfill the hundreds of prophecies that have to do with Israel's hope in the millennial kingdom. These promises are delineated in the Abrahamic, Davidic, Palestinian, and new covenants.<sup>71</sup>

Dr. Walvoord's explanation becomes obviously inadequate the moment one remembers that the Abrahamic covenant specifically stated that Abraham himself would inherit the land along with his seed. But Abraham, in this neo-dispensational scheme, will not be on earth during the millennium to inherit any land. He will be in the heavenly city. The speculation about the New Jerusalem's hovering over Palestine during the millennium and its inhabitants' being able to travel to and from planet earth may be meant to compensate for this flaw by at least giving the Old Testament saints such as Abraham access to the land they are supposed to inherit. In reality, this newer

system does not allow Abraham to inherit any land during the millennium but instead makes him a millennial bond servant in the heavenly city.<sup>72</sup>

A second problem with this newer system is that in this system the word forever no longer literally means forever but means a long duration or, to be specific, one thousand years. This is not consistent literalism, for God promised to give the land to Abraham and to his seed forever. That is why in Dr. Chafer's system the Jews continued throughout eternity on earth with a distinctive Jewish inheritance. As Dr. Chafer said,

Those earthly promises are confirmed by the oath of Jehovah and extend forever, else language ceases to be a dependable medium for the expression of truth.<sup>73</sup>

If the dichotomy between the earthly people and the heavenly people is to be consistently maintained and if the Jewish covenants are eternal covenants, then the Jews must have a distinctively Jewish eternity separate from the church. But if the Jewish covenants find their complete fulfillment in eternity, as in Dr. Chafer's system, this de-emphasizes the millennium and makes it a mere addendum to the dispensational system. The dispensationalist's millennium is no longer mandatory and "an integral part of his entire scheme and interpretation of many Bible passages"<sup>74</sup> if the Jewish covenants find their final fulfillment in eternity, not in the millennium. Therefore, in neo-dispensational thought, these eternal covenants must find their basic fulfillment in the specifically Jewish millennium and not during the eternity on the new earth that will be shared with the church. Forever, therefore, means one thousand years.

A third problem with the neo-dispensational system is the significant new strain that it puts on the dispensational dichotomy between national and individual promises. In Dr. Chafer's system, all the individuals within the nation were to receive the same promises, though admittedly on a conditional basis, that the nation as a whole was to receive on an unconditional basis. All those individuals who remained members in good standing of the nation were heirs of the national land promise that was to be realized in a coming earthly kingdom. According to Dr. Chafer,

The glorious Messianic kingdom has been the hope of the Old Testament saints and in conformity to this hope they ordered their lives.<sup>75</sup>

In neo-dispensationalism, none of the individuals who made up the nation in the Old Testament are to receive the promised national inheritance. The only individuals who will inherit land in this newer scheme are the living Jews of that future generation that will enter the millennium and their descendents. The individual hopes of all the individual Jews of the Old Testament era find their fulfillment not in the Jewish national inheritance but in the heavenly Jerusalem and in an eternity shared with the church.<sup>76</sup> Of what significance was a national promise to an Old Testament Jew if he as an individual were not to partake of it?

A fourth problem is that the neo-dispensationalist gives the Old Testament saint an eternal destiny in common with the church but without giving the Old Testament saint a salvation based upon covenant union with Christ. I see no justification for the Old Testament saint's having the same eternal destiny as the New Testament saint apart from the Old Testament saint's being in union with Christ in eternity. Not being in covenant union with Christ is

not simply a quantitative difference in Old Testament salvation that allows the Old Testament saint to have the same inheritance as the church saint but with less honor. It is a qualitative difference that requires a separate inheritance altogether, assuming that any inheritance is possible apart from covenant union with Christ. A dispensationalist might argue that Abraham had an imputed righteousness, and that Abraham, an Old Testament saint who had not experienced the baptism of the Spirit, was not and is not in covenant union with Christ. Was he not? Paul uses Abraham's imputed righteousness as a proof that the Christian has an imputed righteousness (Rom. 4:22-25), and the Christian's imputed righteousness is an "in Christ" imputed righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). Did Abraham have an "out of Christ" imputed righteousness? That is not possible since the righteousness that is imputed in justification is the righteousness of Christ. And, assuming that there can be an "out of Christ" imputed righteousness, then it would be radically inferior to "in Christ" righteousness. And in correlation to this, the Old Testament saint must be given an eternal destiny that differs from the eternal destiny of the church like the earth differs from the heavens. This is how Dr. Chafer reasoned, and not without reason. To give the Old Testament saint an eternal destiny in accord with an "in Christ" righteousness is to put the Old Testament saint in the church, for the church consists of all those who are in Christ.

A fifth problem is that differences between the newer and the older dispensationalism evidence a less consistent use of the dispensational hermeneutic by the neo-dispensationalists. On the basis of their hermeneutic, dispensationalists have long insisted that the seed which is to inherit the land is the physical seed of Abraham. Dr. Chafer put more emphasis on the significance of physical birth in Old Testament salvation, making physical birth an integral part of Old Testament salvation and playing down the importance of

proselyte salvation apart from physical lineage in the Old Testament.<sup>77</sup> The newer dispensational emphasis on by-faith salvation in the Old Testament could also be called a reading of the New Testament back into the Old Testament.

After examining the dispensational concept of Old Testament salvation, it must be concluded that the dispensational theories on this subject are inadequate and objectionable. Several questions can be raised to show further this inadequacy: Is the rent veil of the temple to be repaired for the millennium and eternity? Is worship again to be centered in Jerusalem (John 4:21)? Is the dividing wall that was destroyed by Christ to be rebuilt (Eph. 2:14)? Are all church saints going to be superior in eternity to Old Testament saints such as Abraham, Moses and David? It is true that Jesus said that the least in the kingdom of heaven would be greater than John the Baptist, but was he not referring to spiritual privileges enjoyed in this life and not to eternal destinies? Is Mary, the mother of our Lord, to be in a different eternal assembly from her husband Joseph simply because she lived a few years longer? Is the future to be a time of retrogression in God's program instead of a time of progression? These and other difficulties are the inevitable result of the dispensationalist's dogmatic dichotomy between Israel and the church as it is applied to Old Testament salvation.

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 110.
- <sup>2</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:219.

3 Ibid., 4:211.

4 Ibid., 4:247.

5 Ibid., 4:214-215.

6 Ibid., 4:215.

7 Ibid., 4:215-216.

8 Ibid., 4:219.

9 Ibid., 4:222.

10 Ibid., 5:101.

11 Ibid., 5:110-111.

12 Ibid., 4:225.

13 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 207.

14 Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1974), page 251.

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come, A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), page 227.

15 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:98.

16 Ibid., 4:142.

18

"Whatever God declares He will do is always a binding covenant. If He in now way relates His proposed action to human responsibility, the covenant is properly termed unconditional. If He realities it to human responsibility or makes it to depend on cooperation on the part of any other being, the covenant is properly termed conditional. ... A covenant which is unconditional cannot be conditional and a conditional covenant cannot be unconditional."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), page 73.

"If God has made a covenant declaring what He will do provided man does his part, it is conditional and the human element is not one of walking worthy of what God's sovereign grace provides, but rather one of being worthy to the end that the promise may be executed at all. When the covenant is unconditional, God is limited in what He will do only by the knowledge-surpassing bounty of His infinite grace. When the covenant is conditional, God is restricted by what man is able or willing to do. As an efficacious appeal, the obligation to walk worthy, though in no way conditioning the sovereign purpose, secures more normal and spiritual response than all the meritorious systems combined. The human heart is far more responsive to the proposition couched in the words "I have blessed you, now be good," than it is to the proposition couched in the words "Be good, and I will bless you." The element of human conduct thus appears in each form of the divine covenant but in such a manner that one is rendered unconditional and the other conditional."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 75.

"In relation to His earthly people, Israel, and their blessings God has made various covenants. Some of these are conditional, and some unconditional, which terms suggest that in some covenants God has them to depend upon human faithfulness, while in others He merely declares what He will do wholly apart from the question of human worthiness or faithfulness."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:97.

<sup>19</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:235.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:162-163.



"The law covenant was strictly a conditional agreement which conditioned divine blessings upon human faithfulness."

Ibid., 3:77.

21 "The Law of Moses presents a covenant of works to be wrought in the energy of the flesh; the teachings of grace present a covenant of faith to be wrought in the energy of the Spirit. ... The nature of a covenant which is based on human works is obvious. Whatever God promises under such a covenant, is conditioned on the faithfulness of man. Every blessing under the Law of Moses was so conditioned, and every blessing in the kingdom relationship will be found to be so ordered. Turning to the kingdom teachings of Christ wherein the issues of personal conduct and obligations in the kingdom are taken up, it will be seen that all the kingdom promises to the individual are based on human merit."

Ibid., 4:211-212.

22

"In this context [Romans 8:2-8], the law stands as the representation of the merit system -- that divine arrangement which, according to the New Testament, is held as the antipodes of God's plan of salvation by grace."

Ibid., 3:343.

"Since law and grace are opposed to each other at every point, it is impossible for them to coexist, either as the ground of acceptance before God or as the rule of life. Of necessity, therefore, the scriptures of the New Testament which present the facts and scope of grace, both assume and directly teach that the law is done away. Consequently, it is not in force in the present age in any sense whatsoever. This present nullification of the law applies not only to the legal code of the Mosaic system and the

law of the kingdom but to every possible application of the principle of law. The larger conception of the law, as before defined, is threefold: (1) the actual written instructions of both the teachings of Moses and the teachings of the kingdom; (2) the law covenant of works in all of its applications, which conditions blessing and acceptance with God on the ground of personal merit; and (3) the law principle of dependence of the energy of the flesh, in place of the faith principle of a dependence on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit."

Ibid., 4:234.

"The kingdom teachings, like the Law of Moses, are based on a covenant of works. The teachings of grace, on the other hand, are based on a covenant of faith. In the one case, righteousness is demanded; in the other it is provided, both imputed and imparted, or inwrought. One is of a blessing to be bestowed because of a perfect life, the other is of a life to be lived because of a perfect blessing already received."

Ibid., 4:215-216.

"The determining character of pure law is seen in the fact that it is a covenant of works wherein the divine blessing is conditioned on human merit. No semblance of this principle is to be found under grace, except that rewards are to be bestowed for faithful service upon those who have already entered into every present position and possession provided in grace. It therefore follows that, not only the written rules of the law, but the very principle of the law covenant of works, has been done away in this age of grace."

Ibid., 4:247.

"According to the Old Testament men were just because they were true and faithful in keeping the Mosaic Law. ... Men were therefore just because of their own works for God, whereas New Testament justification is God's work for man in answer to faith (Rom. 5:1)." Ibid., 7:219.

23

"The nature of a covenant which is based on human works is obvious. Whatever God promises under such a covenant, is conditioned on the faithfulness of man. Every blessing under the Law of Moses was so conditioned, and every blessing in the kingdom relationship will be found to be so ordered. Turning to the kingdom teachings of Christ wherein the issues of personal conduct and obligation in the kingdom are taken up, it will be seen that all the kingdom promises to the individual are based on human merit. The kingdom blessings are reserved for the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemaker. It is a covenant of works only and the emphatic work is do. 'This do, and thou shalt live' is the highest promise of the law. As men judge, so shall they be judged. A tree is approved, or rejected, by its fruits. And not every one that saith Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of 'my Father' which is in heaven. As the individual forgives, so will he be forgiven. And except personal righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, there shall be no entrance into the kingdom of heaven. To interpret this righteousness which is required to be the imputed righteousness of God, is to disregard the teaching of the context, and to introduce an element which is not once found in this whole system of divine government. The kingdom teachings of the Sermon on the Mount are concluded with the parable of the house built on the rock. The key to this message is given in

the words, 'Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them.'

"Turning to the Law of Moses, we discover that it presents no other relation to God for the individual than this same covenant of works: ...

"By these references to the Law of Moses and the law of the kingdom, it may be seen that both of these systems are based wholly on a covenant of works."

Ibid., 4:211-212.

"First, both the commandments and requirements of the Mosaic system and the commandments and requirements of the kingdom are wholly legal in their character, and, together, comprise the written statement of the law, which law, it will be seen, is set aside during the present reign of grace.

"Second, every human work, be it even the impossible, heaven-high beseeching of grace, which is wrought with a view to meriting acceptance with God, is of the nature of a legal covenant of works, and therefore belongs only to the law. Through the finished work of Christ, acceptance with God is perfectly secured; but that acceptance can be experienced only through faith which turns from dependence on merit, and rests in Christ as the sufficient Savior. In like manner, it will be seen, the whole proposition of legal, meritorious acceptance with God has passed during the reign of grace.

"Third, again, any manner of life or service which is lived in dependence on the flesh, rather than in dependence on the Spirit, is legal in character and has passed during the present period in

which grace reigns."

Ibid., 4:238. See also Ibid., 4:119-120.

"The Law of Moses presents a covenant of works to be wrought in the energy of the flesh; the teachings of grace present a covenant of faith to be wrought in the energy of the Spirit."

Ibid., 4:211.

24 "The law, being a covenant of works and providing no enablement, addressed itself to the limitations of the natural man. No more was expected or secured in return from its commands than the natural man in his environment could produce. The requirements under the law are, therefore, on the place of the limited ability of the flesh. On the other hand, grace, being a covenant of faith, and providing the limitless enablement of the power of the indwelling Spirit, addresses itself to the unlimited resources of the supernatural man. The requirements to be met under grace are, therefore, on the plane of the unlimited ability of the Spirit. There is no divine injunction addressed to the unregenerate concerning his daily life. The gospel of the saving grace of God alone is offered to him. The only divine injunctions now in force in the world are addressed to those who are saved, and these heaven-high standards are to be realized on the principle of faith toward the sufficiency of the indwelling Spirit, and never by dependence on the energy of the flesh."

Ibid., 4:247. See also Ibid., 4:51,156,234,239.

25 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 43; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:15.

"But this national election does not extend to every Israelite. This it does not, the Apostle proves in Romans 9:1-24. On the contrary, the individual Israelite, when under the Mosaic Law, was, in the matter of his personal blessing, under a secondary, meritorious covenant with gracious provisions in the animal sacrifices for the covering and cure of his sins and failures. In sharp distinction to this, the Church is, in respect to her corporate whole, an elect people also (Rom. 8:33), but her election and sovereign security is extended to every individual in that body (John 5:24; 6:37; 10:28; Rom. 8:1, A.R.V.)."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 76.

"Of the election of the Church which is individual, not one could ever be lost. On the other hand, the elect nation will be purged and out of them will be removed all that offend."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:321.

"The national covenants with Israel do not extend to the individual; they guarantee the perpetuity of the race or nation and its final blessing. When under the Mosaic Law, the individual Israelite, it will be seen, was on an unyielding meritorious basis. Over against this, the divine purpose for the whole Church as a body do extend to the individual believer and every one predestinated will be called, and every one called will be justified, and every one justified will be glorified (Romans 8:30)."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 90.

"The conclusion is that blessing under the Mosaic economy was conditioned on individual faithfulness to the law. This economy formed a secondary covenant which was meritorious in character -- secondary in the fact that it was restricted to the problems concerning the individual's conduct and in no way compromising

the primary covenants which determine the destiny of the nation. In contrast to this, the Christian, while given a rule of life which is in no way meritorious though his faithful service will win a reward or divine recognition (1 Cor. 3:12-15; 9:19-27; 2 Cor. 5:9-11), is in regard to his personal salvation -- like the corporate whole to which he belongs -- both secure and safe and destined to eternal glory from the moment he believes."

Ibid., page 93.

<sup>27</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:181.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism, page 41; Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:14-15.

<sup>29</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism, page 76.

<sup>30</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:48.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4:159.

"Thus, in like manner, the Mosaic Law, even if observed, never had the function of creating Israelites; it was given as a consistent rule of life to those how were Israelites by physical birth."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism, page 91.

<sup>32</sup>

"They [the Jews in the old dispensation] were born into covenant relation with God wherein there were no limitations imposed upon their faith in Him nor upon their fellowship with Him. This fact was in itself a demonstration of superabounding grace."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:181.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 4:182.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 4:159.

35 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 92.

36 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:215-216.

37 *Ibid.*, 3:79-80.

38 *Ibid.*, 3:84.

39 *Ibid.*, 4:229.

40 *Ibid.*, 7:226.

41 *Ibid.*, 4:131.

42 *Ibid.*, 5:106.

43 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 91.

"As before stated, whatever God does for sinful man on any terms whatsoever, being made possible through the death of Christ, is, to that extent, an act of divine grace; for whatever God does on the ground of Christ's death is gracious in character, and all will agree that a divine covenant that is void of all human elements is more gracious in character than one which is otherwise. These distinctions apply only to the divine side of any covenant. On the human side -- a theme yet to be considered -- there is no exercise of grace in any case; but the human requirements which the divine covenant imposes may be either absolutely lacking or so drastically imposed as to determine the destiny of the individual."

*Ibid.*, page 74.

"Once again and finally let it be asserted, that salvation of any character or of any people or upon any varied human terms is the work of God in behalf of man and is righteously executed by God on the sole basis of the death of Christ. It is puerile to intimate that there could be a salvation achieved alone by the power of



either law-works or faith. It is only God's power set free through Christ's death that can save and it is always and only through Christ's death, whatever the human responsibility may be."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 102, number 405 (Jan. - March, 1945), 5.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:181.

"Of the election of the Church which is individual, not one could  
44 ever be lost. On the other hand, the elect nation will be purged  
and out of them will be removed all that offend."

*Ibid.*, 4:321.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through  
45 Misunderstanding," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 102, number 405  
(Jan. - March, 1945), 4-5.

46 Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 5:112-113.

47 *Ibid.*, 3:108.

48 *Ibid.*, 4:318-322; 3:105-108.

49 *Ibid.*, 7:175.

50 *Ibid.*, 3:105-107.

51

"Quite in contrast to the experience accorded the Church (cf. John 5:24), the nation Israel must be judged, and it is reasonable to believe that this judgment will include all of that nation who in past dispensations have lived under the covenants and promises. Therefore a resurrection of those generations is called for and must precede their judgment. The glorious Messianic kingdom has been the hope of the Old Testament saints and in conformity

to this hope they ordered their lives. ... Their rewards will be for them when they 'return,' which term anticipates the day of Israel's regathering."

Ibid., 4:406-407.

"As indicated before, Israel in all her generations -- exclusive of those who have entered into the exalted privilege of the present age of grace -- will come up for judgment, some to everlasting life and others to everlasting contempt (cf. Dan. 12:2; Ezek. 20:33-44; Matt. 24:37-25:30). The portion of this people who are destined to enter the kingdom become the 'all Israel' who will be saved (cf. Isa. 63:1) when the Deliverer comes out of Sion according to God's unalterable covenant (Rom. 11:26-27,29). These, like all other creatures of God, are traced into eternity to come; for the kingdom is 'an everlasting dominion' (Dan. 7:13-14). Great grace from God will be upon those who enter the land (cf. Ezek. 20:44; Rom. 11:27)."

Ibid., 4:416-417.

"As has been seen, the blessings proffered to the individual Israelites under the law were in two classifications: ...

"(b) For faithfulness under the law they were promised a share in the future glories which Jehovah, with unconditional sovereignty, covenanted to the nation."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 91.

52 Ibid., pages 20-22; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:5-6,416; 3:108; 5:355-356. See also John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 304.

"Should the present king of Great Britain marry a woman of another nation he would bring her into his kingdom, not as a subject, but as a consort. The present divine purpose is the outcalling from both Jews and Gentiles of that company who are  
53 the Bride of Christ, who are, therefore, every one to partake of His standing, being in Him, to be like Him, and to reign with Him on the earth (Rev. 20:4,6; 22:5)."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:10; Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism, pages 30-31.

"Whatever may be the eternal estate of such patriarchs as Adam, Enoch, Noah, Job, and Melchizedek, who are classed as the original stock which Gentiles perpetuate, a very distinct company  
54 of Gentiles are being called out and saved by God's grace into an eternal likeness to Christ and are destined to share His glory forever."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:416.

55 "Such contrasts might be cited to great lengths, but the important objective has been gained if it has been made clear that there is an eschatology of Judaism and an eschatology of Christianity and each, though wholly different in details, reaches on into eternity. One of the great burdens of predictive prophecy is the anticipation of the glories of Israel in a transformed earth under the reign of David's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There is likewise much prediction which anticipates the glories of the redeemed in heaven."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism, page 65; Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:27.

"The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism;

while the other is Christianity. Why should this belief be deemed so incredible in the light of the facts that there is in the present distinction between earth and heaven which is preserved even after both are made new; when the Scriptures so designate an earthly people who go on as such into eternity; and a heavenly people who also abide in their heavenly calling forever?"

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 107.

"The fact that revelation concerning both Israel and the Church includes the truth about God, holiness, sin, redemption by blood, does not eliminate a far greater body of truth in which it is disclosed that Israelites become such by a natural birth while Christians become such by a spiritual birth; that Israelites were appointed to live and serve under a meritorious, legal system, while Christians live and serve under a gracious system; that Israelites, as a nation, have their citizenship and future destiny centered only in the earth, reaching on to the new earth which is yet to be, while Christians have their citizenship and future destiny centered only in heaven, extending on into the new heavens that are yet to be ... ."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:30.

"Every covenant, promise, and provision for Israel is earthly, and they continue as a nation with the earth when it is created new. Every covenant or promise for the Church is for a heavenly reality, and she continues in heavenly citizenship when the heavens are recreated."

*Ibid.*, 4:47.

"It should be asserted, however, that the entire system known as Judaism, along with all its component parts, is, in the purpose of God, in abeyance throughout the present age, but with definite

assurance that the entire Jewish system thus interrupted will be completed by extension into the kingdom, the new earth, and on into eternity to come."

Ibid., 4:248.

"... each [Judaism and Christianity] has its sphere of existence -- Israel in the earth for all ages to come, the Church in heaven."

Ibid., 4:249.

"Among those who stand in eternal favor with God are the earthly citizens whose destiny it is to go on into eternity as the dwellers on the earth (cf. Rev. 21:3-4; Isa. 66:22), and the heavenly citizens whose destiny it is to occupy the new heavens (cf. Heb. 12:22-24; Rev. 21:9-22:7; John 14:1-3)."

Ibid., 4:401.

"It is clear that Israel will dwell in their own land forever. If it is to be an unending residence, that dwelling in the land must transcend the millennial kingdom and thus continue into the new earth that shall be. ... Earth has been the sphere of sin and corruption unsuited to the presence of God; but it will then be as holy as heaven, and in the new earth He will delight to dwell among men and to be their God. The term men is evidently in contradistinction to the Biblical term saints. Heaven will be, as now, the abode of the saints, while earth will be the abode of men. God is said to dwell among men too. Peter asserts that righteousness will dwell in both the new heaven and the new earth alike (2 Pet. 3:13)."

Ibid., 5:365-366.

As demonstrated by the above, Dr. Chafer dogmatically and repeatedly asserted in his writings that there is an eternal dichotomy between Israel and the church with Israel's inhabiting

the new earth eternally and the church's inhabiting the new heaven eternally. Dr. Chafer, however, did on occasion make statements contradicting this teaching and which anticipated the newer dispensational teachings. For example, Dr. Chafer in one place suggested the possibility, and in another place stated the fact, that the earthly people or Israel will be included together with the church in the heavenly Jerusalem (Ibid., 4:131; 5:367). And in another place, Dr. Chafer spoke as if he believed that the unconditional Old Testament covenants would find their complete fulfillment in the one thousand year millennium (Ibid., 1:41).

Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through Misunderstanding," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 102, number 405  
56 (Jan. - March, 1945),1. Quoted in Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 113.

57 Merism: a form of synecdoche in which a totality is expressed by two contrasting parts.

58 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pages 123-124.

59 We Believe ... Doctrinal Statement (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, n.d.), page 11.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, "Inventing Heretics Through  
60 Misunderstanding," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, volume 102, number 405 (Jan. - March, 1945),2-3.

61 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 126.

62 Ibid., page 129.

63 Ibid., page 123.

64 Ibid., page 122.

Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*  
65 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1948), pages  
147-148.

Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture Viewed in*  
66 *Connection with the Whole Series of the Divine Dispensations*, 2  
vols. (New York, 1900; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book  
House, 1975), 1:58.

67 "This heavenly city will be brought into a relation to the earth at  
the beginning of the millennium, and perhaps will be made  
visible above the earth."

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 546.

"This dwelling place prepared for the bride ... is moved down into  
the air to remain over the land of Palestine during the  
millennium, during which time the saints exercise their right to  
reign. These saints are in their eternal state and the city enjoys its  
eternal glory. At the expiration of the millennial age, during the  
renovation of the earth, the dwelling place is removed during the  
conflagration, to find its place after the recreation as the  
connecting link between the new heavens and the new earth."  
Ibid., page 580.

"This view contemplates the heavenly Jerusalem as in existence  
during the millennium over the earth as the habitation of the  
resurrected saints, and is in contrast to the city Jerusalem  
located on the earth. The heavenly Jerusalem apparently is  
withdrawn at the time of the destruction of the present earth and  
heaven. Then as pictured in Revelation 21:2 it returns to the new  
heaven and the new earth when the scene is ready for its descent.  
This interpretation regards Revelation 21:9 ff. as the heavenly  
city in the eternal state though recognizing its existence in the

millennium. This seems to solve most of the exegetical problems that are involved and, in fact, answers many objections to the premillennial interpretation of Scripture as a whole. It provides a clear distinction between resurrected saints who inhabit the New Jerusalem and the millennial saints on the earth who will inhabit the millennial earth. It is assumed, though the Scriptures do not state it, that the millennial saints at the end of the millennium will be translated prior to their entrance into the eternal state and thus will qualify for entrance into the heavenly Jerusalem." John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 328.

"If this interpretation be admitted, there is no particular reason why the New Jerusalem should not be in existence throughout the millennium and suspended above the earth as a satellite city. ... If the heavenly Jerusalem is hovering over the earth during the millennial reign, it would be a natural dwelling place not only for Christ Himself but for the saints of all ages who are resurrected or translated and therefore somewhat removed from ordinary earthly affairs. Their position thus close to the earth would permit them to carry on their functions in earth in connection with the millennial reign of Christ and yet would removed them as far as residence is concerned from continuing or mingling with those in their natural bodies and would solve the problem of lack of reference to a dwelling place for resurrected beings on earth during the millennium."

John F. Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), pages 159-160.

"During the millennium the new Jerusalem ... apparently will be suspended over the earth, and it will be the dwelling place of all believers during eternity ... ."

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible: The New*



Testament (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), page 482 (note on Revelation 21:2).

"A most astounding feature is the dimension of the city which is given as 1500 square miles and also 1500 miles high. ... Expositors differ as to whether the city is in the form of a cube or a pyramid though the latter seems more likely. If in the form of a pyramid, it is possible that the throne of God will be at the top  
68 and the river of life will wend its way from the throne down the various levels of the city."

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 334.

In a more recent work, Dr. Walvoord sets the dimensions at 1342 miles and mentions that the city also might be a sphere. See John F. Walvoord, *The Church in Prophecy*, pages 161-162.

John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 324-325; J.  
69 Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 542, 415, 422; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, page 146.

70 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, page 329; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 579.

71 John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 324-325.

"At the rapture and resurrection of the church the saints of this age are, after judgment and marriage, installed in that prepared place. They are joined by the saints of the Old Testament at the time of their resurrection at the second advent. This dwelling  
72 place prepared for the bride, in which the Old Testament saints find their place as servants (Rev. 22:3), is moved down into the air to remain over the land of Palestine during the millennium, during which time the saints exercise their right to reign."

J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 580.

73 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:30.

The language used here is from a criticism of nondispensational  
74 premillennialists by Dr. Ryrie. Charles Caldwell Ryrie,  
Dispensationalism Today, page 160.

75 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:406. See also Lewis  
Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism, page 91.

"There is no question in the mind of the literal interpreter of the  
Scriptures but that Israel's national promises will be fulfilled by  
the nation itself in the millennial age, which follows the advent of  
the Messiah. All the covenanted national promises are earthly in  
content and will be fulfilled in the time of the earthly reign of  
Messiah."

J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, page 535.

"... the national promises were to be fulfilled but at the time of  
and in the millennium ... ."

76 Ibid., page 536.

"The living will realize the fulfillment of the national promises of  
the Old Testament in the millennium, while the resurrected will  
realize the fulfillment of the expectation of a 'city which hath  
foundations' during the millennial age."

Ibid., page 542.

"The conclusion to this question would be that the Old Testament  
held forth a national hope, which will be realized fully in the  
millennial age."

Ibid., page 546.

77 "Apart from the privilege accorded proselytes of joining the  
congregation of Israel -- which seemed to bear little fruitage --

entrance into the right to share in the covenants of blessing designed for the earthly people was and is by physical birth."

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, 4:15.

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## Chapter 13

### Dealing with It in the Real World

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I began to question the dispensational system during my fifth year as a student in the Th.M. program at Dallas Theological Seminary. Up until that time, I had had a somewhat unquestioning faith in the teaching of my Dallas professors. I knew so little and they were so knowledgeable and respected that questioning their teaching seemed presumptuous. Then, through the influence of my seminary friend Herb Swanson, who had then recently graduated from Dallas, I began reading Reformed literature on Calvinism. Thank you, Herb! Through this reading, I came to disagree with a good bit of what I had been taught at Dallas regarding salvation. Although I continued to value much of the instruction I had received at Dallas, I came to view some of the theological instruction as shallow and inaccurate. I then, naturally enough, came to the point where I wanted to reevaluate my commitment to dispensationalism. What was discouraging was the great difficulty in finding anyone who could show me Biblical passages that related to the basic issues at stake. I finally found the help I then needed in a dissertation by William Everett Bell, Jr. entitled "A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology." This work is a much broader criticism of dispensationalism than the title would suggest. Dr. Bell, a Dallas graduate, wrote this while pursuing a doctorate in philosophy at New York University. Thank you, Dr. Bell! Ironically, the summer before my last year at Dallas, I had publicly challenged Dr. Bell at a Southern Baptist Sunday school class when Dr. Bell had criticized Dr. Ryrie's teachings on "Savior only" salvation.

I hope this book that has grown out of my own continuing study will help the Reformed pastor when someone comes to him and says, "Show me from Scripture why I should not be a dispensationalist. Show me from Scripture why I should accept Reformed or covenant theology."

I offer the following suggestions on dealing with the open-minded inquirer with a dispensational background:

1. Center your arguments on the teachings of specific Scriptures. Dispensationalists are sometimes taught that Reformed interpreters superimpose a rationalistic theological system onto Scripture that distorts its true message. Dispensationalists will probably be more open to arguments taken directly from the exegesis of specific passages than to general theological arguments.
2. Deal with the foundational issues of the unity of God's people in Christ and the continuity of God's program. Don't get sidetracked on peripheral issues such as the definition of a dispensation or the pre-tribulation rapture.
3. Be content with arguing against dispensationalism in general and for Reformed theology in general. Don't feel that you also need immediately to convince the inquirer of your particular convictions on secondary prophetic issues.
4. Don't begin with arguments about the proper interpretation of genuinely difficult passages such as Daniel's seventy weeks prophecy, or Ezekiel's temple vision, or the man of sin passage, or the book of Revelation. I do not believe anyone could have convinced me to reject the dispensational interpretation of Daniel's seventy weeks vision until I had first begun to doubt the dispensational system in general and the parenthesis theory in particular. I had been well drilled in the dispensational

understanding of Daniel 9 but had never really noticed or given thought to most of the clear New Testament passages on unity and continuity.

5. Be careful not to overstate your case. Acknowledge that there is a real newness to the New Testament church, that the word Israel does often refer to the physical Jews in the New Testament, that the prophets in Ephesians 2:20 are New Testament prophets, and so on.
6. State your case with prayerful compassion and patience. Don't present your case with arrogance and emotion or with an "I'm right and your position is ridiculous" attitude. Sow the seeds of truth and leave the rest to the Lord of the harvest.
7. Know the basics of the dispensational system well and be able to document them if necessary. Some who today call themselves dispensationalists are very emotionally attached to that system but have done little actual research on the basics of the system. They would prefer not to believe the facts about what traditional dispensational teachers have taught.

I also would like to list what I consider to be the really objectionable teachings associated with dispensationalism. There are other dispensational teachings with which I disagree, but I do not view them as foundational and basic. The following are the dispensational teachings that I personally regard as especially objectionable:

1. The belief that Old Testament salvation was not through faith in the coming Christ. The Reformed position is not, as it has been misrepresented on occasion, that the Old Testament saints understood as much about Christ and the Gospel as we do today. The Reformed position is that the object of saving faith in the Old Testament was the same as the object of saving faith in the New Testament, although admittedly the Old Testament saint

had much less knowledge of Christ. He saw dimly through the Messianic prophecies and types. The object of faith has not changed through the dispensations; the degree of knowledge of the object has.

2. The belief that the Old Testament saint had a salvation that did not include union with Christ and that the Old Testament saints in eternity will not be members of the Body and Bride of Christ. Reformed theology does recognize that the New Testament era is an era of greater grace and spiritual fullness to the point that Scripture can contrast the New and Old Testament ages as light compared to darkness. This is not to say that the Old Testament was so lacking in grace that Old Testament salvation did not involve covenant union with Christ and the covenant headship of Christ.
3. The belief that there is a strong dichotomy of nature between the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant in that one is unconditional and the other conditional. Related to this would be the dispensational teaching that the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's Prayer are legal ground and thus not directly applicable to the Christian. Reformed theology views the Mosaic covenant as basically a nationally expanded version of the Abrahamic covenant, and its moral law elements are regarded as still valid. Since moral law is merely the expression of God's holiness as it relates to created reality, God's moral law can no more be invalidated than can God's holiness (cf. Matthew 5:17-20). There can be, and are, adjustments in the realm of case law and ceremonial law since case law is a time-bound, situation-specific application of moral law and ceremonial law is positive law.
4. The belief that the New Testament era is a parenthesis in the prophetic program for Israel to the point that no Old Testament prophecy can directly refer to the church age.

5. The conviction that the Abrahamic covenant and the Davidic covenant and the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 are primarily Jewish covenants that can relate to the Christian only in a secondary and indirect sense at most.
6. The belief that Christ's present reign at the right hand of the Father has no direct relationship to the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and the Messianic kingdom prophecies.
7. The belief that there is no organic relationship of continuity between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. Reformed interpreters believe that the Christian church, and not the theological heirs of Phariseism, are the true present heirs of the Old Testament covenants and kingdom promises.

The purpose of this list is not to stereotype all dispensationalists. These are objectionable beliefs from the perspective of Reformed theology, and these are beliefs that have been taught by leading dispensational theologians as basic elements in that system. If there are Christians today who think of themselves as dispensationalists and who disagree with some of the above listed beliefs, then I am thankful that they do disagree with at least some of these. What a person actually believes is more important than how he classifies himself theologically. Such people, however, should be challenged to think through their total theological systems. A person should accept with consistency all the implications of the basic dispensational presuppositions or else reject the basic dispensational presuppositions as invalid impositions upon Scripture.

I would like to conclude with some suggestions as to why dispensationalism has been so popular among Bible believing American Christians in modern times. I know that I was a sincere student of God's Word when I was a dispensationalist, and I have no reason to doubt that this is true of dispensationalists in general. And



yet dispensationalism so plainly contradicts the teachings of Scripture. Why do they continue to adhere to this system? I would suggest the following possible reasons.

First, many dispensationalists have never been exposed to the weaknesses of their system. I attended a dispensational seminary for four years without becoming aware that there were any significant weaknesses in the dispensational system. I was so confident in dispensationalism that I saw no need for wasting my time reading any unsympathetic critiques of the system. When I finally was exposed to some of these weaknesses, I had no answers.

Second, many dispensationalists have not consistently thought through the implications of their system's foundational assumptions. How many who accept the dispensational dichotomy theory realize that this theory, if applied consistently, excludes the Old Testament saints from the Body and Bride of Christ? How many realize the implications of this theory concerning the federal headship of Christ in Old Testament salvation? How many who accept the parenthesis theory realize that this theory, if applied consistently, denies any direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy in the church age?

Third, many have been attracted to dispensationalism because some dispensational predictions have seemingly materialized in the modern world. The rise of Russia, the establishment of the Israeli state, the formation of the European Common Market, the development of the World Council of Churches, and the growth of apostasy in the mainline denominations all fit in well with the dispensational end time scenario. This apparent spectacular modern day confirmation of the ancient Biblical prophecies is attractive to many sincere Christians because of its apparent apologetic value.

Fourth, the pessimism of dispensationalism explains the current world problems and also effectively relieves the Christian of his responsibility to work toward discipling the nations in this age. We are today facing the repercussions of the age of reason in which man was philosophically elevated and God was dismissed as a myth. This philosophical rebellion spawned the atheistic social scientists who have gained control over much of the world. There is presently a major ideological war to the death between Christianity and atheistic humanism. At a time such as this, it is convenient for the Christian to be eschatologically pessimistic. If the church is responsible for discipling the nations for Christ, then we have an awesome task on our hands. Wouldn't it be much more convenient to believe that the church age was prophesied to be a failure and that all the Christian can hope to accomplish today is to snatch a few souls from the fire? It is convenient to think that things are inevitably going to get worse and that there is little we can do except wait to be raptured out of the situation. But we need to remember that the same Christ who commanded us to disciple the nations also assured us that He now has all authority in heaven and on earth and that He will be with us till the end of the age. Those who believe that Christ must be bodily present before the kingdom of God can have any victories ought to take a lesson from the centurion with great faith (Matthew 8:5-13). We must live by faith and not appearance. We must not despise the day of small things. The mountains before the church will be cast into the sea. The gates of hell will not prevail against the onslaught of the church. He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world. The mustard seed of God's kingdom will in this age become the greatest plant in the field of this world.

Fifth, we are approaching the year 2000. While this millennial date approaches, there will naturally be much prophetic speculation just as there was when the year 1000 approached a millennium ago. In

such an atmosphere, dispensationalism, with its direct identification of prophecy with current events, will have a popular appeal.

Sixth, dispensationalism appeals to some philosophical biases. As we have noted, dispensationalism is pessimistic, and pessimism conforms to the existential spirit of our age. Also, there are some striking parallels between empirical philosophy and dispensationalism. They both prefer literal, precise language over figurative poetic expression. They both emphasize the diversity of truth, seeing each truth as a self-sufficient, encapsulated entity to the point of neglecting the organic unity of truth. British empiricism compared truths to billiard balls and rejected the concept that truths are related organically like a blossom is related to fruit. Similarly, dispensationalists reject the idea that the Old and New Testaments are related like a bud is related to a blossom. British empiricists also emphasized individual autonomous freedom, and a similar emphasis can be seen in the teaching of those dispensationalists who say that the Christian today is not under law in any sense. Dispensationalism is individualistic in its pessimistic attitude toward the organized church and in its relegation of kingdom truths, with their social implications, to a future age.

George M. Marsden has pointed out that dispensationalism developed in the nineteenth century when the empiricism of Francis Bacon was philosophically popular in America. Mr. Marsden made the following observations:

To whatever degree dispensationalists consciously considered themselves Baconians (it is rare to find reflections on philosophical first principles), this closely describes the assumptions of virtually all of them. They were absolutely convinced that all they were doing was taking the hard facts of

Scripture, carefully arranging and classifying them, and thus discovering the clear patterns which Scripture revealed.<sup>1</sup>

The role of the interpreter, according to the same Baconian assumptions, was not to impose hypotheses or theories, but to reach conclusions on the basis of careful classification and generalization alone. This disposition to divide and classify everything is one of the most striking and characteristic traits of dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup>

Dispensationalist leaders regarded these methods of dividing and classifying as the only scientific ones. Scofield, for example, contrasted his work to previous "unscientific systems." Similarly, Reuben Torrey regarded ideas basically as things to be sorted out and arranged. One of his major works, *What the Bible Teaches* (1898), is an incredibly dry five-hundred-page compilation of thousands of Biblical "propositions" supported by proof texts. The closest analogy would be to an encyclopedia or dictionary. Torrey explicitly defended this utter lack of style or elegance. "Beauty and impressiveness," he said in the preface, "must always yield to precision and clearness." As usual, his model was the scientist. Torrey depicted his work as "simply an attempt at a careful unbiased, systematic, thorough-going, inductive study and statement of Bible truth. ... The methods of modern science are applied to Bible study -- thorough analysis followed by careful synthesis."

Induction had to start with the hard facts, and dispensationalists insisted that the only proper way to interpret Scripture was in "the literal sense," unless the text or the context absolutely demanded otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

The parallels between dispensational and empirical thought are striking.

My prayer is that Bible believing dispensationalists will prayerfully reconsider their commitment to that system and prayerfully analyze the reasons for their commitment to it. I have been through the process, and I know that it is painful. Giving up familiar beliefs and seeking new answers is not easy. Our ultimate loyalty, however, should not be to any system. It should be to Jesus Christ, for He is the Truth. And the Truth will make us free.

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## End Notes

George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), page 56.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., page 59.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., page 60.

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## Chapter 14

### Appendix One

#### The Pre-Tribulation Rapture Doctrine

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From experience, I have learned that when I am discussing the dispensational pre-tribulation rapture doctrine, I need to be careful to explain that I do believe that the saints who are alive when Christ returns will be raptured to meet Him in the air. This is the clear teaching of 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17:

... the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air.

The English word rapture is based on the Latin rapere which means to seize or snatch and is used in the Latin translation of 1 Thessalonians 4:17. Since I believe what 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 teaches, I believe in the rapture of the saints. What I disagree with is the notion that the rapture will occur seven years before Christ's second coming and will involve only those saints who were saved after Acts 2. According to dispensationalist Dr. John F. Walvoord:

The expression "the dead in Christ shall arise first" (1 Thess. 4:16) seems to include only the church.

The Old Testament saints are never described by the phrase "in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

For what purpose will the saints meet the Lord in the air? A study of the Greek word translated meet in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 answers that question. That word was a technical term for a civil custom of

antiquity whereby a public welcome was accorded by a city to important visitors.<sup>2</sup> If any dignitary were newly arriving in an ancient city, the great of the city would go out to meet him as he approached the city gates and then would personally escort him into the city. It was the ancient equivalent of rolling out the red carpet. This word translated meet does not always refer to this ancient custom, but, interestingly, this understanding of the word does fit each of its three occurrences in the New Testament. This word occurs in Matthew 25 in the parable of the foolish virgins:

And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. ...the bridegroom came, and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut.

This word also occurs in Acts 28 in the account of Paul's arrival at Rome:

... we went toward Rome. And from thence, when the brethren heard of us, they came to meet us as far as Appii forum, and the three taverns ... And when we came to Rome ...

The use of this same Greek word, translated meet, in 1 Thessalonians 4:17, would indicate that the resurrected saints will meet the Lord in the air to honor Him as the King of kings and the Lord of lords by providing Him with a royal escort for the remainder of His descent to earth. The saints, the truly royal citizens of planet earth, will meet Christ in the air at His second advent to give Him the "red carpet treatment" when He comes to earth to renew it and to rule over it for eternity.

I believe that the rapture of the saints will occur at the time of Christ's second advent and not seven years before. I know of no place in Scripture that teaches the rapture and the second advent are separated by a significant time span. And there are certain passages that are especially difficult to explain in terms of the dispensational pre-tribulation rapture doctrine. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10, Paul comforts the church age saints at Thessalonica with the blessed hope of the rest that will be both theirs and Paul's when Christ returns in flaming fire and judges those who have been troubling the church. According to dispensational assumptions, however, this passage could not be referring to the Christian's blessed hope. In dispensational thinking, there is no flaming judgment associated with the church return of Christ, which is a secret rapture. Flaming judgment is associated only with the Jewish return of Christ, which is the second advent. So the Christian, church age recipients of 2 Thessalonians 1 were there being taught Jewish truth. According to a consistent application of the dispensational distinctions and assumptions, the Christians at Thessalonica must have been acting as representatives of Jewish tribulation saints.<sup>3</sup>

Notice also Titus 2:13. Paul there mentions "the blessed hope," which dispensationalists acknowledge to be the church return of Christ, the secret rapture. Paul, however, also mentions in this verse the appearing of the glory of Jesus Christ. To what end-time event does that refer? The most obvious answer is the second advent when Christ will openly come to earth in flaming glory, the opinion of Dr. John F. Walvoord in an early article.<sup>4</sup> The problem with this interpretation for the dispensationalist, who distinguishes and separates in time a church return of Christ (the rapture) and a Jewish return of Christ (the second coming), is that the Greek of Titus 2:13 strongly identifies "the blessed hope" and "the glorious



appearing" as one event. This can be clearly seen in the New International Version which translates this phrase "the blessed hope -- the glorious appearing." The dispensational answer that has appeared in the later writings of Dr. Walvoord is an argument that "the glorious appearing" must refer to the rapture. He points out that at least the raptured church saints will then see the glory of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The main subject of the classic rapture passage (1 Thess. 4:16-17) is not the rapture of living saints but the resurrection of the "dead in Christ." Paul wrote this passage primarily to assure Christians that those saints who are alive at the return of Christ will have no precedence over those saints who die before the return of Christ. Paul states, "we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep" and "the dead in Christ will rise first." Paul's main point in this passage then is that the physically dead who are in covenant union with Christ will be resurrected prior to the rapture.

There are two passages of Scripture which dispensationalists commonly interpret to teach that the OT saints will not be among those resurrected at the time of the pretribulation rapture: Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:1-2. I will discuss only the clearer of the two: Daniel 12:1-2:

At that time Michael shall stand up, the great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people; and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall be awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.

This passage teaches that there will be a resurrection of saints after "a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation." Most dispensationalists identify this "time of trouble" with an end-time tribulation and interpret this passage to teach that the Old Testament saints will be resurrected at the second advent. If the OT saints are resurrected at the second advent and if the "dead in Christ" are resurrected seven years before the second advent, then the Old Testament saints cannot be included among the "dead in Christ." Dispensationalists will argue that the OT saints are included among "those who are Christ's" (1 Cor. 15:23) but not among the "dead in Christ" of 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

Dispensationalists must either give up the pretribulation rapture doctrine or teach that the Old Testament saints were saved apart from covenant union with Christ. As a rule they have held onto their pretribulation rapture teaching. Note the following statements by Drs. Ryrie and Walvoord, respected dispensational theologians:

Concerning the completion of the Church when saints will be translated and resurrected, Paul uses the phrase "dead in Christ" (1 Thess. 4:16). This clearly distinguishes those who have died in this age from believers who died before Christ's first advent, thus marking the Church off as distinct to this age and a mystery hidden in Old Testament times but not revealed.<sup>6</sup>

The Old Testament saints are never described by the phrase "in Christ." . . . The best answer . . . is to concede the point that the resurrection of Old Testament saints is after the tribulation, but to divorce it completely from the translation and resurrection of the church.<sup>7</sup>

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## End Notes

1 John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1957), page 154; compare John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), page 280.

2 Gerhard Kittel, Editor, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 1.380-381.

3 John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976) pages 122-124.

4 J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 157; quotation from John F. Walvoord, "New Testament Words for the Lord's Coming," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 101:288, July 1944.

5 John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, pages 81,157; John F. Walvoord, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation*, pages 57,165

6 Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), page 136.

7 John F. Walvoord, *The Rapture Question*, page 154.

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Chapter 15  
Appendix Two  
Conditional and Unconditional Covenants

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Dispensationalists stress a strong dichotomy between the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, which was expanded into the Palestinian covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the new covenant, and the conditional Mosaic covenant. What do the dispensationalists mean when they label the Abrahamic covenant unconditional and the Mosaic covenant conditional? Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer explains it like this:

Whatever God declares He will do is always a binding covenant. If He in no way relates His proposed action to human responsibility, the covenant is unconditional. If He relates it to human responsibility or makes it to depend on cooperation on the part of any other being, the covenant is properly termed conditional.<sup>1</sup>

In relation to His earthly people, Israel, and their blessings God has made various covenants. Some of them are conditional and some unconditional, which terms suggest that in some covenants God has them to depend upon human faithfulness, while in others He merely declares what He will do wholly apart from the question of human worthiness or faithfulness.<sup>2</sup>

When any person becomes the beneficiary of God's unconditional, unalterable promise apart from any consideration of human merit, his obligation for righteous conduct becomes that of adorning, or walking worthy, of the

position into which the covenant has brought him. If God has made a covenant declaring what He will do provided man does his part, it is conditional and the human element is not one of walking worthy of what God's sovereign grace provides, but rather of being worthy to the end that the promise may be executed at all. When the covenant is unconditional, God is limited in what He will do only by the knowledge-surpassing bounty of His infinite grace. When the covenant is conditional, God is restricted by what man is able or willing to do. As an efficacious appeal, the obligation to walk worthy, though in no way conditioning the sovereign purpose, secures more normal and spiritual response than all the meritorious systems combined. The human heart is far more responsive to the proposition couched in the words "I have blessed you, now be good," than it is to the proposition couched in the words, "Be good, and I will bless you." The element of human conduct thus appears in each form of the divine covenant but in such a manner that one is rendered unconditional and the other conditional.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. J. Dwight Pentecost has given the following explanation:

There are two kinds of covenants into which God entered with Israel: conditional and unconditional. In a conditional covenant that which was covenanted depends for its fulfillment upon the recipient of the covenant, not upon the one making the covenant. Certain obligations or conditions must be fulfilled by the receiver of the covenant before the giver of the covenant is obligated to fulfill that which was promised. It is a covenant with an "if" attached to it. The Mosaic covenant made by God with Israel is such a covenant. In an unconditional covenant that which was covenanted depends upon the one making the

covenant alone for its fulfillment. That which was promised is sovereignly given to the recipient of the covenant on the authority and integrity of the one making the covenant apart from the merit or response of the receiver. It is a covenant with no "if" attached to it whatsoever.

To safeguard thinking on this point, it should be observed that an unconditional covenant, which binds the one making the covenant to a certain course of action, may have blessings attached to that covenant that are conditioned upon the response of the recipient of the covenant, which blessings grow out of the original covenant, but these conditioned blessings do not change the unconditional character of the covenant. The failure to observe that an unconditional covenant may have certain conditioned blessings attached to it has led many to the position that conditioned blessings necessitate a conditional covenant, thus perverting the essential nature of Israel's determinative covenants.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to analyze this dispensational dichotomy between conditional and unconditional covenants because it is difficult to understand. The conditional nature of the Mosaic covenant as described by dispensationalists makes the Mosaic covenant sound like a legalistic and meritorious system of salvation. Also, some of the dispensational descriptions of an unconditional covenant make the unconditional covenants sound like "cheap grace" licenses to sin. If the land promise were unconditional in the sense of involving no "ifs" or moral conditions of any sort, then why did God punish Israel's rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea by not allowing that generation to enter the promised land and why did God later in judgment expel Israel from the land in the Babylonian captivity? Because of Biblical considerations such as these, some dispensationalists qualify the

position that an unconditional covenant contains absolutely no moral conditions by suggesting a dichotomy between the covenant and the blessings of the covenant, as evidenced by the above quotation from Dr. Pentecost. To give another example, Dr. John F. Walvoord in one place states that an unconditional covenant "is not conditional upon the obedience of individuals or nations for its fulfillment," and then in another place in the same book argues that unconditional covenants involve "human contingencies."<sup>5</sup>

Instead of seeing a rigid dichotomy between the unconditional, gracious and national Abrahamic covenant and the conditional, meritorious and individualistic Mosaic covenant, Reformed interpreters view the Mosaic covenant as a national expansion of the promises, moral stipulations and ceremonial law found in the Abrahamic covenant. Both covenants were by-grace covenants and both involved moral stipulations with blessings promised for obedience and neither, when properly interpreted, were legalistic or meritorious.

Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer argues that "A covenant which is unconditional cannot be conditional and a conditional covenant cannot be unconditional."<sup>6</sup> I disagree. God's covenants are all unconditional in their meritorious base and conditional in their normal instrumental means of administration. The meritorious base of God's covenant is the substitutionary suffering and the alien righteousness of Jesus Christ. The Christian is saved, not because of His own works, but because of the work of Christ in his place. The suffering of Christ satisfies God's wrath against the guilt of His people, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed to their legal account before God. And Christians do nothing to earn or to deserve this saving work of Christ on their behalf; it is all of grace, totally undeserved, completely gratuitous.

That the Christian's personal holiness is not the meritorious basis for his salvation, however, does not mean that personal holiness is not a necessary part of the Christian life or that God does not administer covenant blessings in accordance with the Christian's personal obedience. God normally administers His gracious covenant through a required response of genuine faith. I say normally because God saves without such a response in exceptional cases such as the death of an elect infant. I say genuine faith because not all professed faith is genuine faith. Genuine saving faith is faith that progressively bears the fruit of holiness and good works (James 2:17; Ephesians 2:10; Hebrews 12:14). The saved then are, as a rule, those who do good before God (John 5:29; Romans 2:7; Ephesians 2:10) but the saved are not saved by means of or because of the good they do (Titus 3:5; Ephesians 2:8-9).

These conditional and unconditional aspects of the covenant are not antagonistic dichotomies for two reasons. First, though an obedient faith is necessary for salvation, it is not meritorious. The only meritorious work in salvation is the saving work of Christ on behalf of His covenant people. In this essential question of covenantal merit, God's covenant is purely unconditional. And secondly, an obedient faith is necessary for salvation except in exceptional cases such as the death of an infant, but Christ gives His chosen people the spiritual life and ability needed to meet this requirement. As a part of His saving work, Christ redemptively purchased for His people deliverance from their bondage to unbelief and the gift of regeneration through the work of the outpoured Holy Spirit. Every professed Christian has the God-given responsibility to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12), but God works in His people's lives to enable them to will and to work according to His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). God unconditionally gives His chosen people the spiritual ability



necessary to meet the conditions for receiving the blessings of the covenant.

In my estimation, the Calvinistic theology of rewards is the best explanation of how God's covenants can condition blessings upon moral stipulations and still be totally unconditional and all of grace. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6), and the natural, non-regenerate man is totally unable to please God (Romans 8:8). The person, however, whom God unconditionally chooses to bless, He regenerates and sanctifies and enables to believe with a dynamic faith that will lead to holy living. God then rewards this obedient holiness with blessings and rewards. The faith that works is not a meritorious condition for blessing but is the instrument through which God brings blessing upon the saint in accordance with the divine principle, "to be carnally minded is death but to be spiritually minded is life and peace" (Romans 8:6). God's covenant blessings are but rewards upon the effects of His own grace.

When God unconditionally chose Abraham to receive blessings, God regenerated him and enabled him to believe and to obey so that God could bless him in accordance with holiness. God chose to actively, personally know Abraham in order that Abraham might raise His family in the way of righteousness and thereby receive covenant blessings (Genesis 18:19). God rewarded Abraham for his obedience (Genesis 22:15-18; 26:2-5) and yet Abraham's salvation was unconditional and all of grace.

In regard to the land promise, the covenant blessing of rest in the land was historically conditioned on covenant obedience (Deuteronomy 4:25-26; chapter 28). This explains the wilderness wanderings and the exile and the times of unrest and the geographic limitations on the land inheritance in the Old Testament history of

Israel. The land promise, however, will have a perfect, final, full, and eternal fulfillment when the saints are glorified and freed from all sin. The new earth will be inherited both in holiness and unconditionally since glorification will be a by-grace gift from God to His people.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936), page 73.
- <sup>2</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 7:97.
- <sup>3</sup> Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, pages 74-75.
- <sup>4</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, page 68.
- <sup>5</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pages 149, 177.
- <sup>6</sup> Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Dispensationalism*, page 73.

## Table of Contents

[Chapter 1: Defining the Basic System](#)

[Chapter 2 Israel and the Church](#)

[Chapter 3 The Parenthesis Theory and the Church in Prophecy](#)

[Chapter 4 The New Covenant, Part One](#)

[Chapter 5 The New Covenant, Part Two](#)

[Chapter 6 How They Argue Their Case](#)

[Chapter 7 Consistent Literalism](#)

[Chapter 8 Interpreting the Prophets](#)

[Chapter 9 Rightly Dividing the Word](#)

[Chapter 10 Christian Zionism](#)

[Chapter 11 "Thy Kingdom Come"](#)

[Chapter 12 Old Testament Salvation](#)

[Chapter 13 Dealing with It in the Real World](#)

[Chapter 14 Appendix One The Pre-Tribulation Rapture Doctrine](#)

[Chapter 15 Appendix Two Conditional and Unconditional Covenants](#)