

A New Covenant Critique of Dispensationalism

For centuries, Christianity's greatest theologians have vigorously debated the unity of Scripture and the relationship of the biblical covenants. I will now proceed to fully harmonize these issues systematically within the scope of a few pages. The unapologetic facetiousness of this statement is intended merely to acknowledge the vastness of the subject. It should go without saying that the exegetical and systematic intricacies of the competing views in this arena can never be adequately compared and evaluated in single essay. The present work is, however, intended as a polemical one. Therefore, given the limitations of such an undertaking and the informal nature of this project, I will simply attempt an overview of the primary reasons that I reject dispensationalism. For the sake of clarity, I would state from the outset that I personally tend toward (as the title suggests) what is known as New Covenant Theology (to be elaborated below), and our discussion will henceforth be considered from this perspective.

Dispensationalism

Although Dispensationalism, like most theological currents, can be found in some incipient form in earlier thinkers, most historians agree that it first began to take a systematic form in the early 1800's based on the teachings of Plymouth Brethren founder John Nelson Darby. Its heavy influence on contemporary evangelical thought was spurred on primarily through Bible conferences and colleges, The Scofield Reference Bible, and the teaching of Dallas Theological Seminary, founded by Lewis Sperry Chafer (Guinness, 64). Charles Ryrie has been noted for his famous "sine quo non" definition of the traditional version of the system which is summarized in the following three concepts: consistent "literal" interpretation of Scripture, the unifying theme of God's pursuit of His glory, and a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church (Ryrie, 43-44). With a qualified definition of the word literal that emphasizes the author's intent and the distinctives of literary genres, this first point could be unanimously accepted by advocates of all the major systems. The second point (despite occasional unfounded objections to the contrary) is also common to the major proponents of the respected approaches. To oversimplify things a bit, the primary source of contention in the debate lies in the third point. Defining this relationship defines one's system. This issue will therefore be the focal point of this study.

It must, at this point, be acknowledged that many modern dispensationalists, known as Progressive Dispensationalists, have significantly modified this school of thought, and have found some common ground with opposing traditions. However, as will be noted later, in making these theological concessions, they are in many ways saying the same things as New Covenant theologians, and (in this author's admittedly naive and simplistic opinion) might need to discuss the sometimes misleading connotations of the old name.

New Covenant Theology

It is often unfortunately assumed that one has only two primary options in understanding the structure of the Bible--Dispensationalism or Covenant Theology (of which a complete discussion steps beyond the scope of this paper). However, these are merely the bookends of the spectrum, and along with Progressive Dispensationalism, the middle ground includes what has come to be called New Covenant Theology.

Despite its seemingly recent representation in the modern debate, New Covenant Theology (henceforth abbreviated NCT) actually has respectable roots in history. Baptist history, especially the Reformed strain, is rooted in the basic tenets of NCT. Much of its primary teaching is reflected in the highly influential First London Confession of Faith, especially in its 1646 edition (which is held by many NCT churches today). However, in the historical whirlwind of this period, a need was felt by Particular Baptists to show support for their Reformed brethren in the Congregationalist and Presbyterian churches. Thus was adopted the Second London Confession in 1689, a virtual restatement of the famous Westminster Confession with slight modifications, especially, of course, in the area of baptism. This move left an indelible mark of covenant theology in the Particular Baptists from that point forward (Long, ix).

The last twenty years have seen a great resurgence of Reformed theology in Baptist circles. As a result, many within this camp have sought to develop a more clarified system of the covenants that hearkens back to older thought. This movement has been led primarily by such theologians as John Reisinger, Jon Zens, Fred Zaspel, Randy Seiver, and Geoff Volker, but NCT has also gained a following with such noted scholars as D.A. Carson, John Armstrong, and Douglas Moo (Volker, 3).

The primary thrust of NCT is the recognition of a promise-fulfillment understanding of Scripture. Whereas “Dispensationalism cannot get Israel and the church together in any sense whatsoever, and Covenant Theology cannot get them apart” (Reisinger, 19), NCT finds the realization of all that the Old Covenant typified in the New Testament church (Covenant Theology, in contrast, merely levels the playing field and identifies them for all intents and purposes). The Mosaic economy is viewed as a temporal, conditional covenant that has been forever replaced by the glory of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3). The implications of this approach will become apparent as we examine certain key biblical texts as they relate to the Dispensational scheme.

Biblical Issues

The Nature of the New Covenant

We will first examine Hebrews chapter 8:

“Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man...Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, ‘See,’ He says, ‘that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.’ But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, ‘Behold, days are coming, says the LORD, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; For they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for all will know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.’ When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.” (Hebrews 8:1-13 NASB, emphasis mine)

Volumes could be written (and have) on this passage alone, but for our purposes, it will suffice to notice a few primary observations. First, though this is written to Christians in the present tense, traditionally, Dispensationalists have denied that the author is claiming the New Covenant is currently active (Hochner, 4)! More recent authors, especially those in the Progressive camp, tend to recognize that this position is completely untenable. Once we acknowledge the application of the passage to the church, the typological fulfillment scheme is undeniable. Many Dispensationalists would readily agree with that statement, but would then want to look toward another future kingdom in the Mosaic style. However, contrary to the Dispensational view, the ending of the Old Covenant is not for the purpose of a temporary setting aside until a future kingdom restoration (the “parenthesis” or “gap” theory which we will discuss later), it is ready to disappear because it is obsolete!

Also, notice carefully the covenant which is being replaced. It is specifically identified as the covenant related to the Israelites’ redemption from Egypt that was broken. This is a very important point. The covenant that has disappeared is not the Abrahamic, but rather the Mosaic. I am convinced that many people err by confusing the heirs of the promises to Abraham with the national people of the Mosaic Law. When the New Testament speaks of the “old” or “first” covenant, this does not mean God’s unconditional promise to Abraham and his seed. The reference is specifically to the nation of Israel under the Sinaitic Law. Confusing the two makes God a covenant breaker.

Citizens of the New Covenant

What is the status of Gentiles in the New Testament church? Everyone seems to be in agreement on this issue in the

modern discussion. It would be difficult to ignore that “[t]here is neither Jew nor Greek...in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28 NASB).” However, the implications of this truth are often discarded.

The New Testament declares that, “...it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:7 NASB),” “...if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to promise (Galatians 3:29 NASB),” “...it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants (Romans 9:8 NASB),” “...from...stones God can raise up children to Abraham (Matthew 3:9 NASB),” and, “Christ redeemed us...in order that in [Him] the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles (Galatians 3:13,14 NASB).” Notice the clear unifying pattern in all of these verses. Gentiles are becoming heirs to the Abrahamic covenant! The Dispensationalist would have us believe this only refers to the spiritual blessing associated with this covenant, but this is totally unwarranted by the texts. Surely anyone accepting the clear meaning of these verses would recognize that “...no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ (2 Corinthians 2:20 NIV).” Furthermore, Paul’s whole argument in Galatians 3 is that the promises were made to Abraham and his Seed, Christ, and therefore we who are in Christ are automatically considered children. How much of the inheritance is due Christ? And to what extent are we sons in Him? As far as God is concerned, we “ARE Abraham’s descendants (Galatians 3:29 NASB)”! (Curiously, Progressive Dispensationalists do a better job of recognizing these truths, but then somehow find a way to keep a future pseudo-Jewish Palestinian kingdom in their future. This is perhaps where serious discussion needs to be done. This inconsistency seems to be the primary point of tension between NCT and Progressive Dispensationalism.)

Ephesians Chapter 2 makes this point strikingly. Before Christ, we were, “...’Uncircumcision’,...separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise (Ephesians 2:11,12 NASB).” But now that He has “...made both groups into one...by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law... (Ephesians 2:14,15 NASB),” we are “...no longer strangers and aliens, but...fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household (Ephesians 2:19 NASB).” To give Jews a special ranking (even in regards to a future kingdom or land) is to do injustice to Paul and to deny unconditional promises to some of the children.

The Apostle Peter also makes an amazing statement on this subject. He plainly declares that as Christ’s New Testament church we are “...a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [and] a people for God’s own possession (1 Peter 2:9). The remarkable thing about this text is that Peter is directly referring anyone familiar with the Old Testament to the words of God when He established the Mosaic covenant. The one mind-blowing thing he changes is the conditionality. The nation of Israel was given the opportunity to be the recipients of God’s blessings as His special people if they kept the covenant. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of their failure to do so, just as God had predicted to the very man he had used as mediator (Deuteronomy 31:16). In contrast, the New Testament people of God, believers, currently possess these very blessings. Do not miss the direct correlation here. What the Law was incapable of accomplishing, specifically the establishing of a holy nation that would receive the promised inheritance, Christ has fully accomplished by the blood of the New Covenant. To ever return to the old system would be, as Galatians and Hebrews proclaim, absurd. Granted, Dispensationalism claims that the covenant in effect in the kingdom will be the New, not the Mosaic, but as we have seen in Hebrews 8, the New Covenant is not like the Old. Their New Covenant, with reinstated sacrifices, temple, and law seems strikingly familiar, does it not?

Israel’s Rejection of the Messiah/ The Gap Theory

In handling the current situation of the nation of Israel, Dispensationalism pulls what has become one of its most infamous and disheartening schemes. Refusing to deny the nation of Israel a future, but bound by Daniel’s prophetic timeline of seventy “weeks” (sets of seven years) in chapter 9, they acknowledge the flawless fulfillment of the first sixty-nine up to the arrival of Christ, and then proceed to insert a multi-millennial “gap” into the countdown. There is no biblical encouragement to do this, and in fact, I do not believe anyone would want to claim that this theory was ever even imagined before the rise of Dispensationalism. While much discussion has been made (and perhaps still should) regarding the nature of the events in the seventieth week (review Gentry, 310-324 for a thought-provoking study), the problem with this theory is that the point of the whole passage appears to be a time limit. Adding years in between, or “stopping the prophetic clock” destroys what seems to be the very reason for marking out boundaries-- to countdown to the end of God’s working with the Mosaic nation. The idea behind the Dispensational view is that Christ came at his first advent to offer Israel an earthly kingdom but they refused, and it was postponed, creating the church as a “parenthesis” in history. Ironically, in John 6:15, we find the Jews trying to make Him king by force, but Jesus refuses! In contrast, Christ said, “My kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36 NIV).” They didn’t reject Christ’s earthly kingdom offer, He rejected theirs! They rejected His spiritual kingdom. The attempt at a proof text

for this “mystery” “parenthesis” idea of the church usually results in resorting to Ephesians Chapter 3. In another irony, this is actually a great passage against Dispensationalism. Paul claims God gave Him a special role in revealing “...the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit (Ephesians 3:4,5 NASB).” The Dispensationalist will claim this “mystery” is the surprise church which interrupts God’s plan with Israel. However, Paul directly identifies this mystery. He says the mystery is, “...to be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6 NASB).” Heirs to what? What promise? The promise of salvation in Christ to Abraham, which is the sum and substance of the Abrahamic covenant (Galatians 3:8). The mystery is not that there would be a covenant nation (the church), it is the fact that the Gentiles would be considered as heirs! On a disturbing note, the week before the writing of this paper, I had the opportunity to sit under a distinguished professor at Dallas Seminary (historically, a home of Dispensationalism) as he taught the “mystery” concept from this very text. To say the least, I was quite curious as to how he would handle these verses. I was stunned when he proceeded to exposit verses 1-5 and 8-10, but amazingly skip verses 6 and 7, the very text where Paul specifically identifies the mystery!

Israel’s Future

It would seem that understanding the New Covenant as presented above would discourage anyone from setting aside a special future for a Jewish kingdom, but this is steadfastly reserved in Dispensational eschatology...even Progressive (though they may give Gentiles a better place). Despite the theological tide against them, loyalty to a concrete version of a literal hermeneutic (probably the Achilles’ heel of the system) rules the day, and they find themselves naturalizing what the New Testament authors consistently spiritualize (a four-letter word in Dispensationalist dictionaries).

It is often claimed that the covenant promises yet to be fulfilled lie primarily in Israel’s possession and rule of the land of Palestine. While it is recognized by all that the land promise is a continuous theme on seemingly every page of the Old Testament, it is rarely noticed that it virtually vanishes in the New. In fact, except for a couple of brief historical references, it is only even mentioned in one book! Furthermore, this single epistle, Hebrews, directly deals with the promise, and spiritualizes it. In Chapters 3 and 4, the writer teaches that a promise remains for some to enter God’s rest because of the unbelief of the Israelites, and that Joshua’s conquest did not fulfill the promise, but rather left remaining a “...Sabbath rest for the people of God (Hebrews 4:9)”. Is this the “millennial kingdom”? Not in this context. The rest of the chapter, indeed the entire book, is about salvation in Jesus Christ. To finish the thought, the writer expresses in Chapter eleven that the faithful saints of the Old Testament did not receive the promises in their lifetime, but rather were “strangers and exiles on the earth...seeking a country of their own...a better country, that is, a heavenly one (Hebrews 11:13-16).” Again, this is the only place in the New Testament where the land is discussed, and it is taught to be fulfilled in the rest we have from our works in Christ.

Two texts should be noted that should, in a Dispensational framework, be screaming “Palestinian kingdom”. Granted these are arguments from silence, but an argument from silence’s strength or weakness is weighed by the degree to which one would expect to find mention of a subject, and this would clearly be a case of high expectancy. First, Romans 11 is a favorite of Dispensational proof-text because Paul directly deals with the future of Israel. This passage is notorious for eisegesis by Covenant theologians who try to ignore any future reference to the Jewish people, but no such parlor tricks will be attempted here. Once again, a text that Dispensationalism tries to adopt as its own actually serves to harm its case. The remarkable thing about Romans 11:23-31 is what Paul does not say. He encourages the reader with hints of future mercy for the people of Israel, but in what form? This would certainly be the ideal moment for promise of a kingdom, but what does Paul predict? Salvation! No mention here of a special separate covenant tree; instead, he claims they can look forward to being grafted back into the very tree of salvation of which the Gentiles are currently partaking.

Lastly, it must be noted that Dispensationalism is notorious for its preoccupation with the end times. Popular writers such as Tim LaHaye, John Hagee, and Hal Lindsey have pushed Dispensational eschatology into the forefront of the lay Evangelical mind. Claiming a system so tightly interwoven with recognizing Israel as a central figure in the “last days”, proponents of Dispensationalism may want to consider shying away from what has ironically become their favorite book, Revelation. This twenty-two chapter book which is claimed to graphically expound upon Israel’s future has a remarkably low number of references to Israel; precisely, two. One reference reveals 144,000 Jews who will be saved. The other simply tells us the names of the twelve tribes will be represented on New Jerusalem (the bride of Christ)’s gates (a discussion of the symbolic nature of this passage should be given). The old city of Jerusalem is mentioned briefly, and it is referred to as “Sodom and Egypt” (Revelation 11:8). Even the most

unnecessarily concrete reading of the supposedly pivotal Chapter 20 (probably not a wise hermeneutical approach anyway) can do nothing more than support “saints” being surrounded in the “beloved city” in verse 9. Still, the careful student will search this book in vain for even a passing reference to the supposedly crucial land inheritance or Israel’s anticipated homecoming.

Conclusion

I desire and pray that this study would at least provoke some further thought. There is much discussion left to be done, but the primary point is this: while our understanding of eschatology, ecclesiology, sanctification, and other disciplines demands a proper understanding of the relationship of the covenants, all that ultimately matters is that Christ receive due glory for His magnificent work of redemption and that we so grasp the truth of our inheritance in Him that we become consumed with praise and thanksgiving for the “better covenant” and “Sabbath rest” we have in our beloved Surety.

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