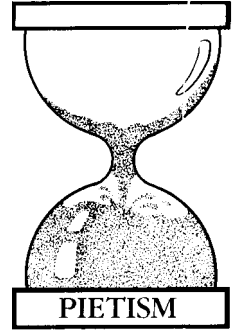


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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THE BRIDE, THE LAMB'S WIFE

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Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. And her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. (Revelation 21:9-14 NKJV)

One of the main distinctive of dispensationalism has been the radical distinction between Israel and the Church. Donald Campbell writes, "The distinction between Israel and the church extends beyond the present age into the future. Some dispensationalists make a sharp distinction between Israel as God's earthly people and the Church as God's heavenly people, both continuing throughout eternity. Others favor a blurring of such distinctions in eternity."¹ Charles Ryrie is even more specific:

The principal emphasis of dispensationalism's doctrine of the Church is its understanding of the Church as distinctive in the purposes of God. Her character is distinct as a living organism, the Body of Christ. The time of her existence is distinctive to this present dispensation, which makes the Church distinct from Israel and not a new spiritual Israel. Dispensationalists recognize that the saving work of God today is being done in relation to the Church, and that there is a continuity which the redeemed of this dispensation share with the redeemed of other dispensations. Nevertheless, this does not make the Church a new Israel any more than those redeemed before Israel was called a nation should be called a "pre-old-Israel." The redeemed in the Body of Christ, the Church of this dispensation, are the continuation of the line of redeemed from other ages, but they form a distinct group in the heavenly Zion.²

Taking into consideration the different degrees of emphasis among dispensational thinkers, the radical distinction between Israel and the Church must be seen as a

constant. As Ryrie reiterates over and over in his writings: Israel is Israel and the Church is the Church. Not even in eternity will this distinction be completely eradicated. Thus far dispensationalism.

Now let's look at the Scriptures.

The New Jerusalem as the Bride of Christ

Revelation 21:9-14 (quoted above) presents to the reader a picture of "the great city, the holy Jerusalem," otherwise known as the New Jerusalem. This is the heavenly city which comes down out of heaven (v. 10). Ultimately, it is the home of the saints of God for all eternity. It is, therefore, a city of divine origin, "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).³

I want to call your attention to several key characteristics of this city. First of all, the angel says to St. John in verse 9, "Come, I will show you *the bride, the Lamb's wife*" (emphasis mine). Unquestionably, the title of "bride" refers to the inhabitants of the city.

Secondly, it is important to note *exactly* who the inhabitants of the city are. In verse 12, St. John refers to the twelve gates, and the names written upon each are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The inhabitants, therefore, include Old Testament saints. Furthermore, in verse 14, St. John refers to the wall of the city which rests on twelve foundations. Upon each of the foundations is written the names of the twelve apostles. We can see, then, that the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem includes New Testament saints as well. David Chilton rightly remarks, "It should be needless to say also that St. John's concept of the City of God, the Church, is that it comprehends both Old and New Covenant believers within its walls. As the historic Church has always recognized, there is only one way of salvation, one Covenant of Grace; the fact that it has operated under various administrations does not affect the essential unity of the one people of God through the ages."⁴

This is a very important point. St. John's New Jerusalem includes both Old and New Testament saints; members of Israel and the Church make up the inhabitants of the city. We must conclude, therefore, that the members of Israel *and* the members of the Church make up *'the bride, the Lamb's wife.'*

This fact presents insurmountable difficulties for the dispensationalist who wishes to maintain the dichotomy be-

1. Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer, eds., "The Church in God's Prophetic Program" in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 149-150.

2. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 154.

3. For more on this heavenly city, see David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 552ff.

4. Chilton, *Vengeance*, 556.

tween Israel and the Church. It is recognized by all that the Church is the "bride of Christ." St. Paul in Ephesians 5 uses the imagery of the bride and the bridegroom to refer to the Church. He carries the analogy to its conclusion when he writes in v. 27 that Christ will one day present this Church to Himself as a glorious Church, holy and without blemish. He will, in other words, take the Church to be His wife.

This identification of the Church and the bride is freely admitted by dispensationalists in other contexts. In discussing the Church as a "mystery," John Walvoord comments on Ephesians 5:2-33 as follows:

In this passage the church is not explicitly called either a "wife" or a "bride," but the obvious figure of the passage is that the church at present is a bride and in heaven will become the wife of Christ when she is presented a glorious church (Eph. 5:27). The church is expressly called "his body" in this passage. It is natural to conclude that the present bride, the future wife, and the church which is the body of Christ are *all one and the same entity* (emphasis mine).⁵

Furthermore, St. John in another passage identifies the Church as the wife of Christ. (This is consistent with St. Paul's conclusion in Ephesians 5:27.) In Revelation 19:7, the great multitude around the throne of God exclaim, "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His *wife* has made herself ready" (emphasis mine). Who else can this be but the Church? Once again, the identification of the "wife of Christ" and the Church is freely admitted by dispensationalists.⁶

Something which complicates the problem for the dispensationalist is that this same language is used of Israel and her relationship to the Lord under the Old Covenant. The prophet Isaiah writes, "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall **your God rejoice over you**" (Isa. 62:5).

We see, therefore, that the Scripture refers to both Israel and the Church as "the bride of Christ." In Revelation 21, St. John merely echoes what at that time was accepted biblical truth: the "bride, the Lamb's wife" is **made Up** of all the redeemed of all ages, both Old and New Covenant saints. The bride and the wife include all who are joined to Christ. There is not, therefore, the radical, eternally viable distinction between Israel and the Church as set forth in dispensational dogma.

Dispensationalists are aware of the tension, particularly when it comes to the passage before us. In commenting on Revelation 21, Walvoord remarks:

The use of the marriage figure, however, in both Old and New Testaments is sufficiently frequent so that we

cannot arbitrarily insist that figures **are always used** in precisely the same connotation. The subsequent description of the new Jerusalem in this chapter makes plain that saints of all ages are involved and that what we have here is not the church per se but a city or dwelling place having the freshness and beauty of a bride adorned for marriage to her husband.⁷

How convenient! Not a church, but a city! Is this the same author who wrote that the bride, the future wife, and the body are all "one and the same" Church? In an attempt to avoid the obvious identification by St. John of the "Bride" with the redeemed of all ages, Walvoord resorts to the transparent obfuscation of saying that what we have here is not the Church, but a city.

Anticipating his critics' response that it would be ludicrous for the angel to refer to the "city" as the "bride, the Lamb's wife" without reference to the inhabitants of the city (i.e., Israel *and* the Church), Walvoord comments, "Since a city is not a bride nor a wife, the truth here represented is that the city, the residence of the saints of eternity future, is *to be compared to a bride for beauty* and is intimately related to Jesus Christ the Lamb" (emphasis mine).⁸

I hasten to point out that that interpretation is not at all a "plain, normal, or literal" interpretation. The text does not say "like a bride." St. John specifically records that the city *is* "the bride, the Lamb's wife." Furthermore, to interpret this passage as speaking of the structure of the heavenly city considered apart from its inhabitants is to do great violence to the text. The obvious intent of the author is to give to his readers the identity of the inhabitants of the New Jerusalem, the bride and wife of the Lamb. He specifically states that these inhabitants include the redeemed of all ages, both Old and New Covenant saints.

One may only conclude after comparing Walvoord's clear statements regarding the identification of the Bride and the Church in other places and his waffling when it comes to Revelation 21, that he had already made a decision on the identity of the bride of Christ before coming to Revelation 21. He is therefore, guilty of inductive (reading into the text) reasoning. Instead of letting the text speak for itself, he imposes upon the text his presupposition regarding the bride. In so doing, he even goes so far as to violate his own inviolable rule of "literal" interpretation in order to escape the clear message of the passage.

It seems perfectly clear that the intent of St. John is that the heavenly city, which is made up of both Old and New Testament saints, is the bride, the wife of the Lamb. Because Scripture also identifies the Church as the Bride, we must conclude that the radical dichotomy between Israel and the Church, which is so important to the dispensational system as a whole, is unfounded when measured against the yardstick of Scripture.

Once again, dispensationalism and the Word of God fail to agree at a fundamental juncture in the history of redemption.

5. John W. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), 245.

6. See John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 270f. Other dispensationalists, however, attempt to apply the designation "bride" only to the Church, and "wife" only to Israel. See J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, [1958] 1964, 202.

7. Walvoord, *Revelation*, 313.

8. Walvoord, *Revelation*, 317.