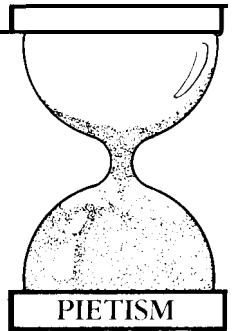


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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DISPENSATIONALISM'S ACHILLES' HEEL PART TWO

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[This issue is a continuation of my review of Dr. William E. Bell's argumentation as found in his doctoral dissertation *A Critical devaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology*. We are focusing on his arguments related to dispensationalism's assertion of the radical dichotomy between Israel and the Church. The importance of this line of argumentation cannot be overstated. If it can be shown from Scripture that dispensationalism posits a false dichotomy, then the entire dispensational system will be shown to be false because the distinction between Israel and the Church lies at the heart of the system. The first two arguments were covered in last month's issue. We here pick up with a third argument by Dr. Bell.]

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3. The problem of the beginning of the Church.

Some reformed writers argue that the Church began in the Old Testament, and thereby proceed to argue for the one people of God throughout the ages, thus refuting dispensationalism's claim to a radical dichotomy between Israel and the Church. Dispensationalism answers that the Church began on the day of Pentecost as described in Acts 2. When the baptism of the Spirit was experienced on that day, the Church of Jesus Christ was born for the first time.

The Christian Church of the New Testament is, therefore, something entirely new. Dispensationalists argue that since the Christian Church did not exist prior to Pentecost, Old Testament believers are not part of the Church. There are, therefore, two peoples of God with two separate destinies: Israel and the Church.

Bell agrees with dispensationalism's assertion that the Church began at Pentecost. He sees more of a discontinuity between Israel and the Church than many reformed theologians are willing to grant. He does, nevertheless, vigorously disagree with dispensationalism's conclusion.

Dr. Bell argues that even when the position that the Church began at Pentecost is granted, it fails to prove what dispensationalism asserts. He points out that all dispensationalism's argument proves is "that Old Testament believers were not a part of the church during Old Testament times."¹ He notes that dispensationalists freely admit that faithful Israelites living at the time of Pentecost were placed into the body of Christ at that point, but that dead Israelites, who were faithful to the covenant, are barred by death from the church and "the intimate relationship to Christ which Christians enjoy, and instead [are] relegated to a

blessed, but somewhat inferior, position as part of Israel."²

Bell points out how ridiculous this would be in practice, and that the general tenor of Scripture militates against such a view.

It seems, unlikely, for example, that families would be broken up for all eternity simply because some members died before Pentecost (perhaps only days before) and others died afterward – and thus were included in the Church. If the dispensational scheme is followed out, however, this is exactly what must have occurred in many instances. It would mean at least seven years difference in the time of resurrection, because (as will be discussed in some detail later) the Old Testament saints are supposedly to be resurrected at the end of the tribulation rather than at the beginning, with the church saints. Wherein would lie the comfort for this first generation of church saints if saved loved ones were not to be included? Husbands and wives, parents and children, would be separated – simply because of the intervention of the day of Pentecost.³

He then drives the knife deep into dispensationalism's side when he writes:

In Matthew 16:18, Christ said, ". I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The term "gates of hell" likely refers to the "powers of death," and thus the meaning would be that death itself will not be able to remove or harm one of Christ's own in His church. It might be argued, of course, that this is a prophetic statement of the condition which would exist in the church after Pentecost and thus has no bearing on those who died before that time, but it does seem incongruous that Christ would allow death to be so vitally determinative as to one's right to be included in the church in the first place (excluding John the Baptist, His own foster-father, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, and – undoubtedly – some of His own disciples) and yet make such a point of the fact that death would not be able to effect any such separation after Pentecost. *Perhaps there are students of Scripture who see nothing amiss in such a scheme, but to most expositors, this would be unthinkable* (emphasis mine).⁴

4. **The Commonwealth of Israel.** This line of argumentation revolves around St. Paul's statement to the Ephesians (Eph. 2:11-22). It is perhaps one of Dr. Bell's strongest. He argues that St. Paul himself "gives one of the most explicit statements to be found anywhere in the New Tes-

1. William Evereff Bell, *A Critics/ Evacuation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (School of Education of New York University, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1967), p. 93,

2. Bell, p. 94.

3. Bell, p. 95

4. Bell, pp. 95-96

tament" with regard to the false dichotomy between Israel and the Church.

Dr. Bell begins by pointing out that dispensationalism's entire orientation is in error regarding this whole problem. "The New Testament actually speaks not so much of the Old Testament saints being admitted to the church, but of the Gentile believers of the New Testament age being admitted to Israel. The end result is the same – the Old and New Testament saints comprise a single group, known after Pentecost as the church – but the orientation is different."⁵ He then offers his analysis of Ephesians 2:11-22 as proof of his assertion.

St. Paul summarizes the hopeless Gentile position before the coming of Christ in verse 12:

1. Without Christ.
2. Aliens from the commonwealth of Israel.
3. Strangers from the covenants of promise.
4. Having no hope.
5. Without God.

The remainder of the passage deals with the radical change that has occurred in the Gentile's status since the coming of Christ. Bell notes that the contrast with their old status is specific:

1. They are no longer without Christ – but now "in Christ" (v. 13).
2. They are no longer aliens – but are now fellow-citizens (v. 19).
3. They are no longer strangers – but are now fellow-citizens (v. 19).
4. They are no longer without hope – but are now enjoying peace (v. 17), reconciliation (v. 16), etc.
5. They are no longer without God – but are now in communion with God (v. 18) and members of the household of God (v. 19).

Dr. Bell sees points two and three as particularly germane to the argument. The Gentiles were estranged from the commonwealth of Israel and aliens from the covenants of promise; that is, those covenants made by God with Israel (Abrahamic, Davidic, etc.). St. Paul states that now, however, this situation or condition no longer exists. The Gentiles are, therefore, no longer strangers or aliens to the covenants of promise. Nor are they aliens from the commonwealth or state of Israel. Indeed, the text goes on to

specifically state that the believing Gentiles are "fellow-citizens" with the saints (i.e., OT saints. This is obvious by the reference in v. 20 to the apostolic foundation: All the apostles were Jews).

Bell sums up his analysis of the passage by writing:

This passage, then, is perfectly clear. Believing Gentiles, members of the Church, have been admitted as citizens to the commonwealth of Israel, from which they had been aliens previously, and thus share in the covenants made by God with Israel in Old Testament times. There is no doubt that this commonwealth has undergone a transformation, but the continuity remains.⁶

Dispensationalism, on the other hand, sees the church as an entirely new entity, totally separated from Old Testament Israel, and thus, allows for no continuity at all. Bell points out that in order for the dispensationalist to be consistent with such a view, he must assume that "the Jews who became Christians forfeited their status as Israelites and thus lost claim to the ancient Jewish promises, having received in their place a totally new set of 'church promises.'"⁷ He closes this line of argumentation by quoting John Walvoord, past president of Dallas Theological Seminary, who writes in his book *The Millennial Kingdom*, "The Church is composed of Jew and Gentile on exactly the same terms and the same fellowship united in one body of Christ in such a way that both are cut off from their distinctive national program and introduced into a vitally different order."⁸ Bell notes of Walvoord's assertion:

Walvoord offers no scriptural proof for his contention that Christian Jews are severed from Israel and from the covenants of Israel. This would seem to be because, once again, the statement is a deductive theological conclusion based on dispensational presuppositions, rather than an induction from the scriptural data themselves. Indeed, scripture explicitly denies such a picture.⁹

Many other arguments might be gleaned from this invaluable work, but alas, space allows us to cover only two in this issue. We shall conclude our review of Dr. Bell's argumentation against dispensationalism in the next issue of *Dispensationalism in Transition*.

5. Bell, 102

6. Bell, p. 105

7. Bell, p. 110.

8. Quoted in Bell, p., 110.

9. Bell, p. 110.