



Dispensationalism in Transition



Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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DISPENSATIONALISM'S ACHILLES' HEEL PART THREE

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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 Evaluation 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 the February 1989 issue. Last month two additional arguments were dealt with. We here pick up with a fifth argument by Dr. Bell.]

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5. The Olive Tree in Remans 11. Dr. Bell's argument using St. Paul's analogy of the Olive Tree in Remans 11:11ff. is the next line of reasoning we'll take up.

Remans 11 concludes a three chapter discourse by the Apostle Paul on the problem of Jewish unbelief and its relationship to the promises of God to Israel. He begins the chapter by asking the question, "Has God cast away His people?" He emphatically answers himself, "Certainly not!" St. Paul says that the unbelief on the part of the majority of Jews in his day in no way indicated that God had cast off Israel and had nullified His promises to the nation and His covenants with them (vv. 1-6). Rather, it is proof of the truth of his assertion in 9:6 that "they are not all Israel who are Israel." In other words, the promises of God to Israel were intended only for the faithful Israelites, not simply for physical descendants of Abraham. The believing Jews in Paul's day constituted, therefore, a remnant; just as the faithful remnant in Elijah's day constituted a remnant (vv. 2ff). Only members of this remnant are the inheritors of Israel's promises (v. 7).

Dispensationalism's understanding of this passage is that the text is dealing exclusively with the Jew, without reference to any Gentiles or the Church. Walvoord comments, "The unbelief of the nation Israel has never caused God to cast off His people as a whole (Rem. 11:3-4). There has always been a continuing program for Israel as witnessed in the present election of grace. Some Jews are being saved."¹

Bell responds:

It is significant to note that present Jewish believers (including Paul himself) are said to constitute a part of God's 'continuing program for Israel.' It is difficult to see how this can be true if they have been cut off from Israel's promises. Walvoord seems to admit a continuity here which he elsewhere denies. [note previous argument - MRG]

Furthermore, it is evident that Paul and the other contemporary Jewish believers of whom he speaks are a part of the Christian Church, the body of Christ. Therefore, Walvoord would have to admit, it would seem, that God's continuing program for Israel is presently to be found in the church. There can be no escaping this conclusion.²

Bell then gets to the crux of his argument. He points out that St. Paul immediately moves to the use of the illustration of the Olive Tree. St. Paul likens Israel to an Olive Tree. Some of its branches have been removed by God because of unbelief in His son, Jesus Christ. Branches from a wild olive tree have been grafted on as replacements because of their belief in His son. Status on the Olive Tree is as a result of faith alone, not physical descent. The severed branches of Israel may again take their place on the tree *if they believe*. Likewise, if a Gentile branch falls into unbelief, it will be cut off.

St. Paul's intent is clear. The "Gentile Christians have been admitted to the ancient commonwealth of Israel - as replacements, as it were, for unbelieving Jews - and that they now share with the remaining believing Jews the benefits of the promises of God to Israel. *It should be noted that the believing Jews, represented by the good natural branches, did not move* (emphasis mine). They were not transferred to a new tree, etc. It was the Gentile Christians who became a part of the already-existing good olive tree (Israel) and who share with the already present natural branches (Jews). This figure is in perfect harmony with the teaching of Ephesians 2 regarding admission of Gentiles to the commonwealth of Israel. No believing Israelite is cut off from any promise. Rather, it is the unbelieving Israelite who is cut off."³ Remans 11 seems to irrevocably put the dispensationalist to flight. The dichotomy in the dispensational system between Israel and the Church is shown to be patently false.

How do dispensationalists respond to this line of reasoning? Quite honestly, most dispensational scholars are silent on the issue. Where there "is treatment of the subject, the argument typically is that the olive tree does not

1. John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 172. Quoted in William Everett Bell, *A Critical Evaluation of the Pretribulation Rapture Doctrine in Christian Eschatology* (School of Education of New York University, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1967), p. 112.

2. Bell, p. 112.

3. Bell, pp 115-116.

represent Israel. Rather, the olive tree is a "place of blessing."

J. Dwight Pentecost writes in *Things to Come*, "Natural Israel and the church are contrasted in the New Testament (Rem. 11:1 -25; 1 Cor. 10:32). In Remans 11 it is shown that God has taken the nation Israel out of the place of blessing temporarily, but will restore them to that place of blessing when His program with the church is terminated. This consideration shows that the church does not supplant Israel in God's covenant program."⁴

Bell responds to Pentecost's assertions by first pointing out the smokescreen laid down by Dr. Pentecost. Pentecost argues that because natural Israel and the Church are contrasted in the New Testament, it therefore follows that there is no continuity between the two. Bell replies that although he agrees that Israel and the Church are not equated in the New Testament (there is discontinuity, therefore), it does not follow that there is no continuity whatsoever. Dr. Bell's basic premise throughout the entire dissertation is that there is the continuity of "the remnant," that is, spiritual Israel in the church. Pentecost's assertions in no way figures in to overturning that basic point.

Secondly, Dr. Bell points out in response to Pentecost that Remans 11 does not speak of "the place of blessing" as an abstraction. The entire context deals with *Israel* – the *place of blessing is Israel*. To argue any other way is to violate the "literal" interpretive canon so important to dispensationalism.

Furthermore, Dr. Pentecost introduces another alien concept into the passage. Remans 11 says nothing whatsoever of any "program with the church." Rather, St. Paul speaks of the termination of the "fulness of the Gentiles." Bell writes, "The meaning is perfectly clear – the time is coming when Gentiles will no longer dominate the Church, as they do at present, but Jews will believe in substantial numbers and be restored to their position in the ancient commonwealth. Believing Gentiles will still be there also."⁵

Fourthly, Bell shows that to argue with Pentecost that the Church *does not supplant* the Church in God's prophetic program is once again misleading. Dr. Bell points out that St. Paul's argument is not that the Church "**supplants**," but rather that it is the *continuing remnant*, believ-

ing Israel in other words, to which Gentiles have not been admitted as well.

Fifthly, Dr. Bell notes that "Pentecost's view that Israel as a nation has been removed from the place of blessing does not follow the sense of the analogy at all. Nothing whatever is said of any removal of national Israel from or to anything. Instead, individual Israelites – symbolized by the natural branches – are divided into two groups. Believers remain on the tree, and unbelievers are cut off. It is impossible to read into this picture any national movements, because the nation is seen as dividing into two groups – with strikingly different destinies."⁶

Dr. Bell ends the section by remarking that he has shown that Pentecost's argument misses St. Paul's thought entirely. With regard to the denial that the olive tree is *Israel*, he writes, "It would seem, once again, that only a theological presupposition could blind an interpreter to the intended reference of the olive tree to *Israel*."⁷

He summarizes his argumentation based on the Olive Tree of Remans 11 by writing:

It is concluded then, that Remans 11, in perfect harmony with other Pauline passages such as Ephesians 2 and with the New Testament generally, teaches that God's promises to Israel were never intended for the physical descendants as a whole, but for believing Israelites only, the remnant of Israel, represented in Paul's day by himself and other believing Jews, and that these promises have now been extended to believing Gentiles as well who, by admission to ancient Israel (the grafting into the good olive tree), share with the believing Jews; they together comprising spiritual Israel and/or the Christian Church.⁸

This concludes my review of a few of the many arguments Dr. Bell marshalls against dispensational theology. Although I've dealt only with five, I trust these representative five have enabled you to glean valuable knowledge and understanding in some of the serious deficiencies of the dispensational system.

Special Note: *Many of you have written tome requesting copies of Dr. Bell's dissertation. It is not, however, published; and it is, therefore, not publicly available.*

4. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 88-89. Quoted in Bell, p. 116.

5. Bell, p. 117.

6. Bell, p. 117.

7. Bell, p. 118.

8. Bell, p. 118.