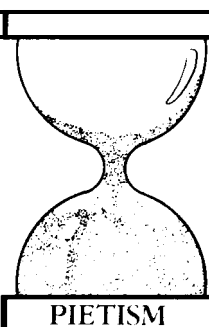


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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"ISRAEL AND ESCHATOLOGY"

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Introduction

Dispensationalism, which arose sometime around 1830, is a late-blooming mutation within premillennialism.¹

The system name "dispensationalism" tends to throw the focus on the system's discontinuous, compartmental view of history, despite the protestations of dispensationalists.² This is because "a dispensation is a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. If one were describing a dispensation he would include other things, such as the ideas of distinctive revelation, testing, failure, and judgment."³ In fact, "The more one moves in the continuity direction, the more covenantal he becomes; and the more he moves in the discontinuity direction, the more dispensational he becomes."⁴ Certainly, then, discontinuity is a major feature of dispensationalism.

Yet most modern dispensationalists would not set the idea of a "dispensation" before us as a *fundamental* distinctive of dispensationalism. In fact, Ryrie writes: "Theoretically the *sine qua non* [of dispensationalism] ought to lie in the recognition of the fact that God had distinguishably different economies in governing the affairs of the world. . . . [Yet] a man can believe in dispensations, and even see them in relation to progressive revelation, without being a dispensationalist."⁵

In point of fact, the role of Israel as it is distinguished from the Church is actually one of the leading fundamental points for dispensationalism. It is important that we who reject dispensationalism grasp the significance of its understanding of Israel; it is important because herein lies a fundamental error of the entire system. This crucial error distorts the entire idea of the progress of redemption, the unity of God's people, the fulfillment of prophecy, and the interpretation of Scripture.

1. This is remarkable in that dispensationalists are prone to speak of postmillennialism as a late-comer to eschatological debate. "It is generally agreed that the view of the church for the centuries immediately following the Apostolic era was premillennial. Whitby, [is] generally held to be the founder of postmillennialism. In the post-Reformation period there arose the interpretation known as postmillennialism. . . . J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), pp. 373, 384.

2. Of covenant theologians, Pentecost writes: "These theologians claimed that they alone had a system that unified the Scriptures into a consistent whole; any other, they insisted, destroyed the unity of the Bible." J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come: Tracing God's Kingdom Program and Covenant Promises Throughout History* (Wheaton: Victor, 1990), p. 9.

3. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 29.

4. John S. Feinberg, "Preface" in Feinberg, ed., *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), p. xii; see also p. 64. Feinberg is a dispensationalist.

5. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 43, 44.

In this and the next few issues of *Dispensationalism in Transition*, I will deal with the question of Israel, giving particular attention to the new covenant phase of her role. In this article I will spend the space afforded me to document carefully the dispensational emphasis on Israel.⁶ In later issues I will demonstrate from Scripture, especially from the New Testament, the confusion in the dispensational view of Israel. Although I have touched on this theme before,⁷ it bears repetition and demands a deeper analysis.

Charles C. Ryrie

Ryrie is perhaps the most influential dispensationalist theologian alive today. He is a former Dallas Theological Seminary (hereinafter DTS) professor. His best-selling *Ryrie Study Bible* gives him an influence well beyond other dispensationalist theologians.⁸ This is largely due to the problem prevalent in modern Christianity of too little serious reading by Christians. The average Christian book store seems really to be a "card store," with a few Bibles and books thrown in for looks. Thus, the average Christian is prone to pick up a study Bible as a short-cut to understanding Scripture.⁹

Ryrie is quite insistent that the role of Israel is one of the three major cornerstones of dispensationalism. In fact, he points to what he deems to be three *sine qua non*¹⁰ of dispensationalism.

The first of Ryrie's *sine qua non* is our subject: "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct."¹¹ Earlier he stated: "The main point in question is whether or not the Church is a distinct body in this present age. If the Church is not a subject of Old Testament prophecy, then the Church is not fulfilling Israel's promises, but instead Israel herself must fulfill them and that in the future. In brief, premillennialism with a dispensational view recognizes the Church as a distinct entity, distinct from Israel in her beginning, in her relation to this age, and in her

6. All of the men cited below have been trained at Dallas Theological Seminary. DTS has become a noted institution in American Christianity. But, to paraphrase Mae West, "who wants to live in an institution?"

7. See our July, 1990, "Dispensationalism?" article at point 3.

8. Although Hal Lindsey's, *The Late Great Planet Earth* has sold far more than any other religious book in print, giving him the nod as the leading non-theologian among dispensationalists. Now that forty years after 1946 and the establishment of the state of Israel have expired, I keep checking in bookstores to see if his date-setting *LGPE* has been moved to the "Fiction" area.

9. See our June, 1990, issue: "Dispensing Dispensationalism."

10. This Latin phrase means: "without which, not." It means "an essential condition, qualification, etc.; an indispensable thing; an absolute prerequisite." Webster's *New Twentieth Century Unabridged Dictionary* (2nd ed.: New York: Prentice Hall, 1963), p. 1694.

11. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 44.

promises."¹²

He gets even more detailed: "(1) The Church is not fulfilling in any sense the promises to Israel. (2) The use of the word **Church** in the New Testament never includes unsaved Israelites. (3) The church age is not seen in God's program for Israel. It is an intercalation. (4) The Church is a mystery in the sense that it was completely unrevealed in the Old Testament and now revealed in the New Testament. (5) The Church did not begin until the day of Pentecost and will be removed from this world at the rapture which precedes the Second Coming of Christ."¹³

These observations by Ryrie represent serious deviations from standard evangelical – even evangelical premillennial – **eschatologies**, as his own quote indicates, when it mentions "premillennialism with a dispensational view."

J. Dwight Pentecost

Pentecost has written a sizeable work that has been in print since 1958, has enjoyed numerous printings selling more than 100,000 copies, and has served as a primary text in **eschatology** courses in dispensational seminaries: *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*.

Pentecost clearly holds "to a distinction between God's program for Israel and His program for the church in the present **age**."¹⁴ He argues that "several considerations support the view that the church is *not* now fulfilling Israel's New **Covenant**."¹⁵ I will omit his "several considerations," for they all relate to the New Covenant, to which I will devote an article or two later.

Certainly one of the most popularly discussed features of dispensationalism is the notion of the "rapture." For the dispensationalist this is a *secret* return of Christ that involves only Christians being taken from the world, so that the world may endure the Great Tribulation, in which the Jews will be converted in large numbers. Pentecost ties the distinctive position of Israel to the doctrine of the **rapture**: "These clear contrasts, which show the distinction between Israel and the church, make it impossible to identify the two in one program, which it is **necessary** to do if the church goes through the seventieth week [of Daniel 9:24ff]. These distinctions give further support to the **pretribulation rapture position**."¹⁶

John F. Walvoord

Walvoord's influence in dispensationalism has been due largely to two leading factors: his numerous published writings and his presidency and professorship at the leading dispensational seminary in America (DTS) for several dec-

ades. He has influenced the training of thousands of pastors through his position at DTS.

Walvoord writes: "Perhaps more to the point in this discussion is the New Testament contrast between natural **Israel** and the church. As has been pointed out, there is a tendency on the part of some **amillenarians** to regard the church as the New Testament Israel. . . The nation **Israel** is promised a future, and, though this future is largely fulfilled by spiritual Israel, the existence of these promises as distinct from God's program for the church maintains the difference between the two **terms**."¹⁷ "The salvation and sanctification of those who form the body of Christ is the central purpose of God in this present age and in some sense suspends the progress of God's dealings with the Gentile nations and Israel until God's purpose for the church has been **realized**."¹⁸ Thus, he speaks of "the contrast between God's program for Israel and the **church**."¹⁹

Due to this view of Israel, Walvoord writes: "In the broad program of prophecy relating to Israel, few factors are more important than the promise to Abraham of the perpetual possession of the **land**."²⁰ This drives a distinction between Israel and the Church, as well.

Paul D. Feinberg

Feinberg is Associate Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Of the rapture, which is so closely tied to **pre-tribulation dispensationalism**, Feinberg notes: "The Rapture touches the extremely important issues of biblical interpretation, the relationship between the church and Israel, and the course of human **history**."²¹ Thus, he sees the Israel questions as "extremely important."

John S. Feinberg

Feinberg is chairman of the department of Biblical and Systematic Theology at Trinity. He writes: "It is clear that holding a distinctive future for ethnic Israel is essential to **Dispensationalism**."²² And: "From my perspective, the church neither replaces nor continues Israel. There will be a distinctive future for ethnic Israel, despite the fact that spiritual aspects of the kingdom are now being applied to the church."²³

Conclusion

It should be evident that the radical distinction of the Church from Israel is a key issue in the debate between dispensationalists and other evangelical. As we will see, dispensationalism is a house built on sinking sand.

12. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), p. 126.

13. Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 136.

14. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 9

15. *Ibid.*

16. Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 202. I should note that some dispensationalists are now disputing the necessary relationship between dispensationalism and the pre-tribulation rapture. See: Paul O. Feinberg in Richard R. Reiter, Paul O. Feinberg, Gleason L. Archer, and Douglas J. Moo, *The Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984), p. 48 (although Feinberg does hold the position; Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), pp. 27-28.

17. John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), pp. 56, 57.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, p. 63. Although this does not make much historical sense, since Israel has not had "perpetual possession of the land."

21. Feinberg, et al., *The Rapture*, p. 47.

22. John S. Feinberg, in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1988), p. 81.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 63.