

Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

SCOFIELDISM

PIETISM

Vol. IV, No. 2

©ICE, 1991

February, 1991

"COVENANTAL DIPLOPIA"

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In last month's newsletter, I documented the absolutely essential role of Israel in dispensational theology. National Israel *must* always exist as a distinct people of God, separate from the Church in God's plan. Promises to the Church and Israel must be "sharply distinguished."¹ In this article I will turn to a major Old Testament prophecy that has become a source of debate with dispensationalists by other evangelical: the New Covenant mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and elsewhere.

Dispensationalism and the New Covenant

Ryrie states that "the new covenant is one of the major covenants of Scripture."² Walvoord holds that it "is one of the great prophecies in the Old Testament"³ and is the "strongest prophecy in the Old Testament for the continuance of Israel."⁴ Pentecost lists this covenant as one of "the four great determinative covenants."⁵ But despite the New Covenant's significance in biblical revelation, Ryrie asserts that among evangelical "many do not face fairly the question of fulfillment."⁶

As I will show, the problem of "fairly facing" the matter is created by *dispensationalists*, not by other evangelical, among whom there is virtually unanimous agreement. Ironically, despite the New Covenant's determinative significance, Walvoord is driven to admit of the crucial Hebrews 8 reference to the New Covenant: "It is, in fact, the only passage which provides any difficulty to the premillennial view. . . ."⁷ And: "There are problems that remain in the premillennial understanding of this passage."⁸

In point of fact, there has been a serious division even within dispensational circles over the function of the New Covenant. This problem, however, makes one worry about the "plain interpretation" of Scripture, so touted by dispensationalists. In fact, the whole problem illustrates the desperation of the dispensational hermeneutic to make sense of Scripture.

Dallas As a "City of Confusion" (Isa. 24:10)

Of this "determinative" covenant, Ryrie lists three pre-

millennial views of the New Covenant that have been generated by dispensationalists (two found at Dallas Seminary). Unless otherwise indicated, the following quotations and page numbers are from Ryrie's *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*.¹⁰

(1) The Jews Only View. This is "the view that the new covenant directly concerns Israel and has no relationship to the Church" (p. 107). This was the earliest dispensational view, held by John Nelson Darby.¹¹ But "Darby's teaching is not usually accepted by premillennialists today,"¹² despite its consistency with the dispensational hermeneutic!

(2) The One Covenant/Two Aspects View: The one "new covenant has two aspects, one which applies to Israel, and one which applies to the church" (p. 107). This is the view held by Scofield. Sometimes it seems to be that of Walvoord: "This can best be explained as one New Covenant of grace made possible by the death of Christ, whether applied to Israel or the church as in the New Testament."¹³ Yet at other times he clearly sides with Ryrie: "Others hold that the covenant is with Israel but that the church derives blessing from the covenant of Israel. None of these solutions seem to solve the problem. . . ."¹⁴ Although Pentecost was ambiguous while earning his doctorate at Dallas Seminary,¹⁵ he seems now to have settled on this view.¹⁶

(3) The Two New Covenants View. This is Ryrie's view; it actually "distinguishes the new covenant with Israel from the new covenant with the Church. This view finds two new covenants in which the promises to Israel and the promises to the Church are more sharply distinguished even though both new covenants are based on the one sacrifice of Christ" (p. 107).

Hermeneutically Hamstrung

In the remainder of this article I will focus on Ryrie's Two Covenants View. The New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31 ff, says Ryrie, is necessarily limited to the Jews on the basis of "three incontrovertible reasons":

(1) The argument from specific reference. Verses 31 and 33 clearly specify its making with Israel and Judah. And in the dispensational hermeneutic "Israel means Israel."¹⁷

1. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, N. J., 1953), p. 107.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

3. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL., Victor Books, 1990), p. 140.

4. John F. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), p. 50.

5. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 116.

6. Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 105. I agree with this statement, and number Ryrie among those "many."

7. John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), p. 215.

8. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy*, p. 54.

9. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965), p. 67.

10. See also: Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy*, pp. 53-55; Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 122-124.

11. For documentation see: Pentecost, *Things to Come*, pp. 121-122.

12. Walvoord, *Israel in Prophecy*, p. 54.

13. Walvoord, *Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, p. 140.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 502 "The concept of two new covenants is a better analysis of the problem and more consistent with premillennialism as a whole." Walvoord, *Millennial Kingdom*, p. 219.

15. "It is not in the scope of this treatment to attempt to settle the difference of opinion among premillennialists on this question of the relation of the church to the new covenant." Pentecost, *Things to Come*, p. 124.

16. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Victory, 1990), p. 175.

17. Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 125.

(2) The argument from legal contrast. This is "also seen by the fact of its very name which is contrasted with the Mosaic covenant" in Jeremiah 31:32. Pentecost comments: "Since this covenant supplants the Mosaic Covenant, *it must of necessity be made with the same people with whom the original Mosaic Covenant had been made.*"¹⁸

(3) The argument from historic effect. "In its establishment, the perpetuity of the nation Israel and her restoration to the land is vitally linked with it (Jer. 31 :35-40)."¹⁹

These three arguments should have been deemed by Ryrie as "controversial," not "incontrovertible," reasons.

The Argument from Specific Reference

Despite Ryrie's literalistic argument from specific reference, we should note that:

1. The New Covenant is specifically applied to the Church.

(a) Pentecost is quite correct, when he writes of the establishment of the Lord's Supper: "in its historical setting, the disciples who heard the Lord refer to the new covenant. . . would certainly have understood Him to be referring to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 ."²⁰ What could be more obvious?

(b) In fact, the sudden appearance of the "New Covenant" designation in the New Testament record, without qualification or explanation, demands that it be referring to the well-known New Covenant of Jeremiah. See: Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25.

(c) Hebrews 8, on everyone's view, cites Jeremiah's New Covenant in a context in which he is speaking to New Testament Christians. In addition, this New Covenant sacrament is specifically for the "Church age" (1 Cor. 11 :23ff). Yet Ryrie argues that "the writer of the Epistle has referred to both new covenants" (p. 121)!

(d) The apostle to the Gentiles even promotes the New Covenant as an important aspect of his ministry (2 Cor. 3:6). He does not say he is a minister of a "second new covenant" or "another new covenant."

2. Prophecies of Israel are applied to the Church. Though I will deal with such prophecies more fully in a future newsletter, I would quickly point out that the very Jewish Amos 9:11 is cited in Acts 15:14-16 as James' proof that the Lord was saving the Gentiles in the "Church age." There, the calling of the Gentiles into the Church is deemed the rebuilding of "the tabernacle of David."

3. Names of Israel are applied to the Church. Christians are called "Jews" (Rem. 2:28-29), "the circumcision" (Phil. 3:3), "the children" and "the seed of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7, 29). We are of the "Jerusalem which is above" and are called the "children of the promise" (Gal. 4:24-29). So why the fuss over Jeremiah 31 as speaking about the Church?

James designates Christians as "the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad" (Jms. 1:1). Peter calls the Christians to whom he writes, the "*diaspora*" (Gk., 1 Pet. 1:1). He draws upon several Old Testament designations of Israel and applies them to the Church: "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9-10; Exe. 19:5-6; Deut. 7:6).

(4) The Church is called Israel. Dispensationalists cannot affirm this: "The term *Israel* is nowhere used in the Scriptures for any but the physical descendants of Abraham."²¹ Yet, Christians compose "the Israel of God" for we are a "new creature" regarding which "circumcision

availeth nothing" (Gal. 6:16). (This passage will be dealt with in detail in a future newsletter.)

Though Ryrie dogmatically affirms "Israel means Israel" via his literalistic hermeneutic, he does so on the basis of an inconsistently applied principle. Elsewhere Ryrie fails to demand that "David means 'David.'" He cites Jeremiah 30:8-9 as proof of *Messiah's* millennial reign: "They shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king, whom I will raise up unto them." Then he says: "the prophet meant what he said — and what else can we believe? . . ." (pp. 86-87). He cites also Hosea 3:4-5, where "David their king" will be sought in the millennium, then comments: "Thus the Old Testament proclaims a kingdom to be established on the earth *by the Messiah*, the Son of David as the heir of the Davidic covenant" (p. 88, emphasis mine).

The Argument from Legal Contrast

The second argument by Ryrie is that the New Covenant of Jeremiah is set in contrast to the Mosaic Covenant. Thus, "**since this old covenant was made with Israel, the new covenant is made with the same people, no other group or nation being in view**" (p. 109). Consider then:

(a) All the preceding arguments clearly apply the New Covenant to the Church, despite Ryrie's maneuver.

(b) As we noted above, Paul speaks of the New Covenant for the Church ministry among the Gentiles (2 Cor. 3:6). What is more, *he does so in the context of speaking of the Mosaic Covenant* (2 Cor. 3:7ff)! The newness of the New Covenant is clearly contrasted by Paul with the oldness of the Old Covenant. Yet, it applies to the Church. Ryrie mentions this passage, but he does not seem aware of its contradiction to his legal contrast argument, (p. 117). In fact, he denies the old/new parallel he uses when speaking of *Israel's New Covenant*, when he writes of the *Church's New Covenant*: "Why is there any need for an old covenant with the Church if the word *new* means new in quality?" (p. 118).

(c) Hebrews 8:7, written to Jewish *Christians*, contrasts the New Covenant with the Old Covenant: "For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second." The writer makes the New Covenant the supplanter of the Old — for the Church (Heb. 8:6-9, 13).

Ryrie recognizes that the "better covenant" mentioned here is "the new covenant with the Church." Yet he applies the immediately following verses supportive of this "better covenant" to the New Covenant with Israel, so that "both new covenants" are mentioned here! Such confusion for the poor reader, who had to shift back and forth between two New Covenants!

Nevertheless, his system drives him to such pandemonium: Hebrews 8:8 is "the determining reference in relation to the premillennial system" (p. 117). This is so because: "If the Church does not have a new covenant then she is fulfilling Israel's promises, for it has been shown that the Old Testament teaches that the new covenant is for Israel alone" (p. 118).

(Due to space limitations, we will deal with Ryrie's third argument regarding historic effect in a later newsletter given to the continuance of Israel.)

Conclusion

Ryrie is perceptive, recognizing the handwriting on the wall: the New Covenant is a "determining reference" for dispensationalism. The Church does *not* have a separate New Covenant; she is the fulfillment of Jeremiah's New Covenant. The Church is grafted into the root of the promises to the fathers, including the New Covenant (Rem. 11 :16-18).

18. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 172

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 109.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 127.