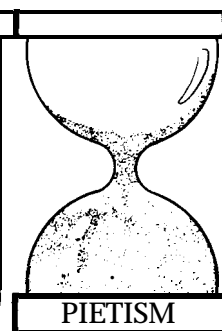


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



Vol. IV, No. 3

©ICE, 1991

March, 1991

"COVENANT CONFUSION CONTINUED"

by Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., Th.D.

In last month's newsletter we saw that **dispensationalism** gets snarled up in the New Covenant. This is somewhat surprising for three reasons: (1) The New Covenant is a "**determinative**"¹ covenant for dispensationalism that is supposedly the "strongest prophecy in the Old Testament for the continuance of **Israel**."² (2) This confusion results despite dispensationalism's "plain interpretation" of Scripture. (3) Non-dispensationalist evangelical, who disavow **literalism**, do not have that much of a problem with the New Covenant.

Last month I noted that there are three basic dispensational views of the New Covenant: (1) The Jews Only View (**Darby**). (2) The Two New Covenants View (**Ryrie**). (3) The One Covenant/Two Aspects View (Pentecost). Quite interestingly, **Walvoord** writes: The interpretation of Jeremiah 31:31 as it appears in Hebrews 8:13 "as it relates to the new covenant is complicated by the fact that conservative scholars have no less than five differing points of view. . . . Interpreters usually choose either between the **amillennial** point of view or one of the three premillennial interpretations," since, when he wrote, "the postmillennial point of view has been largely **discarded**."³ It is remarkable that this noteworthy advocate of the "plain and simple interpretation of Scripture" comments that postmillennialist have a view of the New Covenant and **amillennialists** have a view of the New Covenant, while dispensationalists have **three** views!

Last month I pointed out errors in **Ryrie's** Two New Covenants View. And since **Darby's** Jews Only View, though most consistent with dispensational **literalism**, has little popularity **today**,⁴ that leaves us with the One Covenant/Two Aspects View.

The Position Statad

Pentecost sets forth the One Covenant/Two Aspects View in his recent work entitled *Thy Kingdom Come*.⁵ All parenthetical page references will be to this work, which will serve as our **primary** text. Pentecost **clearly** states the view:

Because of our Lord's statement to the Eleven in the upper room on the eve of the Crucifixion, it seems impossible to say that the church has no relationship to the New Covenant! A more acceptable understanding is that **while** the New Covenant was made with the house of Israel and Judah, there are benefits from the

enactment of that covenant of which the church (comprising both Jews and Gentiles) partake. . . . Thus while the New Covenant was made with the covenant nation at the time of the death of Christ, benefits from that covenant may be applied to those outside the nation. As Matthew noted Christ's words, "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (**Matt. 26:28**). We can logically and consistently conclude, then, that this covenant is **Israel's** covenant; but on the basis of the blood of the covenant, those outside that nation likewise may experience the removal of guilt and the forgiveness of sins (p. 175).

This **would** seem to be **Walvoord's** view, as **well**, though there is ambiguity in his work over this issue: "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."⁶

The Root of the Problem

I would begin by pointing out that the basic problem that generates the three dispensational views may be blamed on what Davidson calls "the insanity of **literalism**,"⁷ which approaches the Old Testament text on a Jewish basis as opposed to a Christian **one**.⁸ Dispensationalism sees Old Testament prophecies one dimensionally, despite the example of Christian theological exegesis given in the New Testament. In other words, the dispensationalist gets started on the wrong foot: a Jewish, as opposed to Christian, foot.

Interestingly, one means by which Pentecost earlier defended the **literalistic hermeneutic** in his **classic Things to Come** is by appeal to Jewish **rabbis**!⁹ In his Chapter 2, "The History of Interpretation," he demonstrates the historical precedent for the literal method: "The prevailing method of interpretation among the Jews at the time of Christ was certainly the literal method of **interpretation**."¹⁰ The error of such an approach is obvious from the misinterpretations of Jews (and a Samaritan) as evidenced in John 2:19-21; 3:4; 4:10-12; 6:52-53. The Jews ultimately were disenchanted with Jesus' "kingdom" on this basis (cp. John 16:15 with John 18:36). They even charged Him with crimes, based on this interpretive approach (**Matt. 26:61**).

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

7. A. B. Davidson, *Old Testament Prophecy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clarke, 1905), p. 476.

8. See our review of Hans K. LaRondelle's *The Israel of God in Prophecy* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1983) in *Dispensationism in Transition* (December, 1990).

9. J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things To Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), Ch. 2: "The History of Interpretation," pp. 16-17.

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

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

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

4. Although Walvoord says "it has many attractive arguments," *ibid.*, p. 54.

We saw last month that it is not necessary to restrict the New Covenant to literal, national Israel on the basis of Jeremiah 31:31-32. Even in dispensationalist literature we can see how such an approach can wreak havoc with an important covenant.

"O, What Tangled Webs We Weave"

Another problem with Pentecost's make-shift approach to the New Covenant is its internal self-contradiction. The New Covenant, **on Pentecost's own interpretive principles**, is clearly and dogmatically delimited to "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Jer. 31 :31). This, according to Pentecost, was even evident to the original disciples in the Upper Room: "Since the disciples would certainly have understood any reference to the New Covenant as referring to Israel's anticipated covenant recorded in Jeremiah, it seems certain that the Lord was stating that very covenant was being instituted with His death" (p. 172).

Yet he goes on in the same long sentence to say: "and that they (the disciples) were ministers of the blood (the **soteriological** aspects) of that covenant (2 Cor. 3:6)" (pp. 172-3). Here he "wrongly divides the word of truth" for Paul was a minister to the Gentiles on the basis of the New Covenant set in opposition to the Old Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6ff). And we are to partake its sacramental seal until Christ returns (1 Cor. 11 :24-26). It is stretching **literalism** beyond recognition to say of the Jewish New Covenant: "**that very covenant** was being instituted with His death" and then to turn around and apply parts of it to Gentile Christians. Christ made no **eschatological/soteriological**, no Jewish millennial/Christian Church Age distinction in the institution of the Lord's Supper! Christ dogmatically says "**this is the new covenant**," without qualification. He simply established the New Covenant, the covenant which the disciples took and promoted indiscriminately to all whom they met.

In response to all of this, we cite Ryrie against Pentecost: "One might well ask why there are not two aspects to one new covenant. This may be the case, and it is the position held by many premillennialists, but we agree that the **amillennialist** has every right to say of this view that it is 'a practical admission that the new covenant is fulfilled in and to the Church.'" ¹¹ Well said.

"You're Going to Eat it Whether You Like it or Not!"

Pentecost boldly states of the New Covenant establishment in the Upper Room: "But those to whom it was primarily and originally made (Israel as a nation) will not receive its fulfillment or its blessings until the second advent of Christ, when 'all Israel shall be saved . . and this is My covenant with them when I take away their sins' (Rem. 11 :26-27). In other words, **there is a marked and critics/difference between the institution of the covenant and the realization of its benefits**" (p. 173).

But here we have a remarkable situation. Why does the Church get the benefits **before** Israel? Why not the normal pattern "to the Jew first and also to the Greek"? It is noteworthy, too, that the "enactment" of the New Covenant was not with Israel as a nation, but with the representatives of the Church (**Matt. 16:18-19; 18:18**) in the Upper Room! Is God's covenant with Israel established with **Israel**, not only **in absentia**, but in the midst of her vehement opposition to it? Had not Christ just a few days previous to the Upper Room taught "the kingdom of God will be

taken from" Israel (**Matt. 21 :43**)? Had He not just recently wept over Jerusalem's recalcitrance and left her temple desolate (**Matt. 23:37-38**)? How could this New Covenant have been "made with the covenant nation at the time of Christ's death" (p. 175) since they are the one's blamed for His death (Acts 2:22-23, 36; 3:13-15a; 5:30; 7:52; 1 Thess. 2:14-15)?

What's a Poor Dispensationalist to Do?

Two arguments beyond those mentioned above are employed by Pentecost to keep dispensationalism afloat. His argument hinges on his inconsistent **literalism** in conjunction with the view that "the term *Israel* is not used in the Scriptures to describe anyone but the physical descendants of Abraham" (p. 173). But we saw last month that this is not so. In the first place, **Galatians 6:17** does apply the term *Israel* to the Church.¹² And furthermore, what term would seem **more** appropriate to apply to "the physical descendants of Abraham" than "the seed of Abraham"? Were not the Jews proud of their Abrahamic heritage (**Matt. 3:9**; Luke 1 :73; 3:8; 16:24; John 8:3, 9, 53, 56; Acts 7:2; Rem. 4:1; Jms. 2:21)? Yet it applies to Christians (Rem. 4:12, 16; Gal. 3:29), as do the Jewish labels the words "circumcision" (Phil. 3:3) and "Jew" (Rem. 2:29). Thus, Paul applies Hosea's prophetic promise of Israel's restoration to the organization of the Church (cp. Rem. 9:25-26 with Hos. 2:23; 1:10).

Pentecost also attempts to divvy up the New Covenant promises along dispensationally mandated lines. "Within the New Covenant . . there were promises of spiritual blessings and promises of earthly blessing. While the church – like Israel – is promised salvation, the forgiveness of sin, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, the church is **never** promised inheritance in a land, material blessings on the earth, or rest from oppression, all of which are parts of the promise to Israel. . . . The church certainly is not fulfilling the material portions of this **covenant!**"¹³

The statements down playing material blessings and rest from oppression are typically pietistic. Pentecost is an example of a portion of the church receiving material blessings **apart** from oppression, is he not? Of course, the real proof is in the postmillennial pudding, as I have argued elsewhere (House **Divided**, Part II).

But what about the constant dispensational refrain regarding "the Land"? The problem for dispensationalism is two-fold: (1) The Land of Israel is "**His** holy Land" (**Lev. 25:23**; **Psa. 78:54**); it depended upon His favor upon Israel (**Hos. 9:3**; **Jer. 2:7**) and His dwelling therein (**Num. 35:34**; **Lev. 26**) as long as Israel was obedient to Him (**Deut. 4:40**; **Isa. 1 :19**; **Jer. 15:13-14; 17:1-4**). When Israel is rejected, the Land is rejected.

(2) The Land serves as a **type** of the whole earth (which is the Lord's, **Psa. 24:1**). It is, as it were, a tithe to the Lord of the entire earth. in Psalm 37:11 the psalmist speaks of God's promise to His people: "But the meek shall inherit the earth." But Jesus takes this promise and extends it over the entire earth in Matthew 5:5! Abraham apparently understood the Land promise as a down payment representing the inheriting of the world (Rem. 4:13). And Paul expands Land promises over the earth, when he draws them into the New Testament (**Eph. 6:3**).

Consequently, the Land promises **do** become the Church's! And the New Covenant clearly applies to the Church.

11. Ryrie, *Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ. 1953), p. 118.

12. See a future newsletter for an exposition of Galatians 6:17

13. Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, p. 173.