



Dispensationalism in Transition



Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"

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CHRIST IN EXILE OR CHRIST RULING?¹

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Wrongly Dividing the Word

Acts 3:19-21 is a favorite passage of dispensationalists, thought to establish the premillennial expectation against all others. W. E. Blackstone commented on verse 21: "But Heaven has only received Him until the time of restitution of all things which God hath spoken by the mouth of all holy prophets (Acts 3:21), when He shall come again, to sit in the throne of His Father David. This again proves His coming to be pre-millennial."²

Charles Stevens employs it as a dispensational proof-text: "The king is 'exiled' in heaven (Acts 3:20-21; 7:55-56). . . . Scripture everywhere repudiates and disproves the doctrine that Christ is now reigning as Prince of peace, seeking through the church to extend His kingdom on earth by means of the gospel."³ Wiersbe notes: "The declaration is that, if the nation repented and believed, the Messiah would return and establish the promised kingdom."⁴ "Acts 3:17-21 shows that Israel's repentance was to have had two purposes: (1) for individual Israelites there was forgiveness of sins, and (2) for Israel as a nation her Messiah would return to reign," i.e. in the Millenniums

Amillennialists, of course, hold a fundamentally different conception: "Surely the words 'the times of restoration of all things' refer not to an intermediate millennial interval but to the final state."⁵

A postmillennial understanding of this passage is more satisfying than either of these views.

Noting the Context

In the context we must recognize (with the dispensationalist) that Peter is preaching a message most relevant to the Jews of that day: He opens with "Ye men of Israel" (Acts 3:12), emphasizing their lineage from "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (3:13a). They are the "sons of the prophets" and the sons of "the covenant" (3:25). These highly favored people were guilty of crucifying the Messiah:

1. This article is adapted from a portion of a chapter in my *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology*, which is available from I.C.E. for \$19.95, plus shipping.

2. W. E. Blackstone, *Jesus /s Corning* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1898 [rep.]), p. 47.

3. Charles E. Stevens, in Charles Lee Feinberg, ed., *Prophecy and the Seventies* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), pp. 102-103. Here is that absurd dispensational analysis: Christ is "exiled" in heaven. Poor Christ! He is in exile in heaven where He has to spend His time in the presence of His Father Almighty God, the unfallen angels, and the souls of the righteous! He should be down here on the earth ruling over a kingdom that will ultimately rebel against Him, say dispensationalists!

4. Warren W. Wiersbe, *Bib/e Exposition Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 1:414.

5. Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in Walvoord and Zuck, *Bib/e Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1985), 2:362.

8. Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 185, cp. p. 282.

"God . . . glorified His Servant Jesus, whom *you* delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But *you* denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to *you*, and [*you*] killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead, of which we are witnesses." "Yet now, *brethren*, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:13b-15, 17).

Keeping this in mind – along with some additional contextual notations to follow – let us now seek to gain the proper understanding of Peter's statement.

The Call to Repentance

After pointing out their guilt in the crucifixion of Christ, Peter notes God's sovereign prophetic ordering of the event (Acts 3:18). Then he exhorts these guilty crucifiers of Christ to "repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (3:19a). In essence, Peter urges: "Let them repent, for their vast evil has not frustrated God."⁷

This call to repentance from their sins contextually speaks of their horrible guilt in the crucifixion. With an eye to the coming A. D. 70 judgment, he issues a warning from Moses: "And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people" (Acts 3:23). This is reminiscent of his previous allusion to the "blood, fire, and smoke" threatened upon Jerusalem and his urging of his Jewish auditors to "be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:19-21).

The Times of Refreshing

He then adds to this urgent call: "so that⁸ times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19 b). The "times of refreshing" holds forth for Jerusalem the promise of "a respite from the judgment pronounced by Jesus, as it brought the Ninevites a respite from the judgment pronounced by Jonah."⁹ These times of refreshing speak of the glorious salvation that God mercifully offers them along with the favor of God that would issue forth from it. This refreshing is especially glorious in being contrasted to the horrible wrath under which they lived and which was soon to crash down upon them.

But perhaps they would lament their having destroyed the only One who could bring them such consolation – a fear much like he had encountered before (Acts 2:37). In order to circumvent such, Peter sets a promise before

7. E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Tyndale) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 63.

8. The KJV "when" is most definitely mistaken, as all exegetes are agreed. The Greek *hopos on* must be translated "that" or "so that."

9. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts (NICNT)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d. [1980]), p. 91 n. See my earlier discussion of the "to make an end of sins" phrase in Daniel 9:24.

them. That promise is that Christ will yet come to them in salvation: "and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you" (Acts 3:20 NASV).

It is true that He is in heaven physically away from them (but certainly not "exiled" as per dispensationalism's carnal kingdom concept). In fact, "heaven must receive [Him] until the times of restoration of all things" (3:21). Still, there is the promise that God will send Him to them. This is a sending to them *in salvation*.¹⁰ Though He is in heaven, He is not beyond their reach, for He comes to dwell in those who have faith in Him (John 14:23). As the gospel is preached, the hearers discern the voice of the living Christ (Eph. 2:17).

This understanding of the "sending" (*apostello*) of Jesus in salvation is no more awkward than is the Second Advent view. Neither the wording for the *sending* of the Son in salvation nor for the sending of the Son in the Second Advent expressly occur in Scripture. Though in the economy of redemption it is more precise to speak of the Father sending the *Spirit* in the gospel (John 14:26), we must understand that the sending of the Spirit results in the coming (sending) of the Son into the believer (Rom. 8:9). And in the present context, the focus is on what they have done to Christ, who was perfectly subject to God. God foreannounced His incarnation (3:18); Christ was God's "Servant" (3:13, 26), "His Christ" (3:18), whom God sent (3:22). Hence the unusual manner of speaking: Christ is being emphasized as One Who is subject to the Father.

This particular sending of Christ does not await His Second Advent. Why would Peter tell the Jews that if they repent today, God will send the Son thousands of years later? The Christ is being presented to them *at that very moment*. In fact, the exaltation of Christ forever provides for the sending of the Son to lost sinners; this is particularly true for those to whom He is speaking: "When God raised up his Servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from his wicked ways" (Acts 3:26 NIV).

The Times of Restoration

Peter continues. Christ must remain in heaven "until the times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21a). "[T]he word 'until' denotes that *during* these times the Lord Jesus will remain in the heavens, having been there 'received' upon His ascension, to the right hand of the majesty on high. This is the context. 'Until,' according to the lexicon, carries the meaning of, 'continually, fixing attention upon the whole duration.' [T]he force of 'until' makes the times of restitution simultaneous with Christ's mediatorial session in heaven. He will come again not to introduce the restitution predicted by the prophets, but because He shall then have completed it."¹¹

This "restoration of all things" has already begun, having been instituted during the ministry of Christ. In fact, Peter informs his auditors of the events begun in time: "Yes, and all the prophets, from Samuel and those who follow, as many as have spoken, have also foretold these days" (Acts 3:24). This is also clear from Matthew 17:11, where John the Baptist functions as an Elijah introducing the restoration of all things.

The restoration is a reformation that supplants the old order (Heb. 9:10). It is a process leading to "the regeneration" of the fallen world as a system (John 1:29; 3:17;

4:42), where Christ's will shall be done in earth (Matt. 6:10), as His kingdom grows and spreads (Matt. 13:31-33; 1 Cor. 15:20-27). It is the fulfillment of all things "which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21), as in Isaiah 2:2-4; 9:1-7; 11:1 ff. Acts 3:24-25 demonstrates that "these men of Israel who stood listening to Peter were 'sons of the prophets' – not in the OT sense of the words which denoted the professional prophetic guild, but in the sense that they were heirs of the promises made by God through the prophets – promises which had found their fulfillment before their very eyes. So, too, they were 'sons of the covenant' made by God with Abraham, and that in a special sense, for they had lived to see the day when that covenant came true in Christ: 'In thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.'"¹²

This fulfillment progressively grows during "the times" of the "restitution of all things." "The gospel blessings that were to flow from His death and resurrection must spread abroad throughout the world, and then He would return from the right hand of power."¹³ Even rebellious Israel will be re-incorporated into the kingdom (Acts 1:6; Rom. 11). Christ will not return in His Second Advent until this reformation/restoration/regeneration has overwhelmed the earth.

Conclusion

This passage in Acts 3 is frequently set forth as a Scriptural evidence against postmillennialism and a positive confirmation of dispensationalism. But a careful, contextual examination of the text shows it to breathe postmillennialism, in that it holds forth the glorious salvation of God that can overcome all sin and resistance.

The passage is no evidence for an "exiled" king who is forced to hang around the eternal throne of God awaiting the day He might come back to dwell in the dust of the earth and rule over a mixed kingdom – a kingdom that eventually turns against Him. As Walvoord teaches regarding the rebellion in Revelation 20:7-9 during the final days of the millennial reign of Christ:

"These who are tempted are the descendants of the tribulation saints who survive the tribulation and enter the millennium in their natural bodies. The children of those entering the millennium far outnumber the parents, and undoubtedly the earth is teeming with inhabitants at the conclusion of the thousand-year reign of Christ. Outwardly they have been required to conform to the rule of the king and make a profession of obedience to Christ. In many cases, however, this was mere outward conformity without inward reality, and in their inexperience of real temptation they are easy victims of Satan's wiles. The number of those who rebel against God and follow Satan is described as innumerable 'as the sand of the sea.' Thus the last gigantic rebellion of man develops against God's sovereign rule in which the wicked meet their Waterloo. As the battle is joined in verse 9, the great host led by Satan and coming from all directions compasses the camp of the saints. Even in the ideal situation of the millennial reign of Christ, innumerable hosts immediately respond to the first temptation to rebel."¹⁴

These are the results of the "times of refreshing"?

10. John Lightfoot, *Commentary on the New Testament from the Talmud and Hebraic a*, 4:40-41. Cp. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ*, p 151.

11. Wilmot, pp. 33, 34.

12. Bruce, Acts, p 93.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

14. John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), pp. 302, 303, 304.