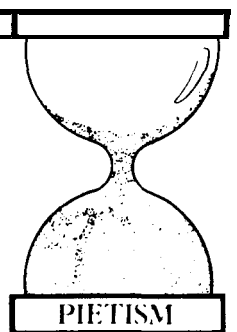


Dispensationalism in Transition

Challenging Traditional Dispensationalism's "Code of Silence"



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WITNESSING TO DISPENSATIONALISTS

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In my experience I am frequently approached by dispensationalists who have begun to rethink their theological commitments. Many of these are concerned over the pervasiveness of dispensationalism among their family members and in their churches. Thus, I frequently receive requests for some succinct arguments to disprove dispensationalism. The matter must be taken up very carefully, for dispensational churches and schools are notorious for totally writing one off as a denier of the faith if he forsakes dispensationalism.

Ephesians and Dispensationalism

Because of these related types of inquiries, I have decided to provide a bite-sized summary of various problems within dispensationalism in the space of one newsletter. At Tennessee Temple University (where I received my B.A. in Bible) we were taught the "Romans Road" approach to evangelism. We were told that when witnessing to someone regarding salvation, you should attempt to keep all your Bible references in Romans. This will generate less confusion since it reduces the tendency to flip back and forth to different books of the Bible.

For the most part I will employ such a methodology for my presentation below. [It should be noted that the teaching in Ephesians regards matters antithetical to classical dispensationalism—some of these do not apply to the new and improved dispensationalism.] Perhaps we could call it: "The Ephesians Road Away from Dispensationalism." Ephesians is virtually an anti-dispensational polemic by Paul. I hope the reader will not miss the irony of the situation: In all of Scripture the word "dispensation" only appears four times, and two of those appearances are in Ephesians! See: 1 Corinthians 9:17; Ephesians 1:10; 3:2; and Colossians 1:25.

Ephesians is so potent in its anti-dispensational theology that I am almost led to agree with dispensationalists that dispensationalism *did* exist in the early apostolic church, but quickly disappeared thereafter. If it was there in the early church, I would say it disappeared in the A.D. 50s—when Ephesians started appearing in Christian Scroll stores,

Christ is Presently Enthroned as King

Classic dispensationalism has been noted for its kingdom postponement theory. It is argued that Christ offered the kingdom to Israel, but that Israel rejected it. Consequently, the Lord postponed it and now awaits His future Second Advent for His enthronement to kingship.

Instead of holding to a postponement of Christ's kingly rule, Paul strongly asserts His present position as a kingly Lord. Ephesians 1:19-22 reads: "He raised him [Christ] from the dead, and *set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that*

which is to come: And *bath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church.*"

The language of Paul here is of *unsurpassed authority*—authority befitting the highest kingship. Christ is at the very "right hand" of God, from whence the universe is ruled. Peter tells us He was exalted to the right hand of God to be a Prince and Savior (Acts 5:31). Time and time again in the New Testament Jesus' place at the right hand of God is mentioned as indicating ultimate exaltation to rule and authority (Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; 2 Cor. 6:7; Col. 3:1; Heb. 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22.).

Christ has already been given a name that is "above . . . every name that is named." What higher elevation of office could be granted Him? What greater name could be applied to Him? The New Testament emphasizes the glory of His exalted Name in this powerful passage, and its parallel in Philippians 2:5-11.

Christians are Presently Ruling with Christ

In postponing Christ's kingship, dispensationalists also quite naturally postpone our ruling and reigning with Him. The dispensational approach to Revelation 20 projects into the distant future the beginning of the millennium and our ruling and reigning with Him.

In Ephesians, however, Paul very pointedly relates that Christians are presently seated with Him in heavenly places: "*He hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus*" (Eph. 2:6). The verbs he employs here are aorists; they indicate past action: He *has made us sit together* in heavenly places.

Thus, according to New Testament theology, we are presently organized as a kingdom (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5). Consequently, we presently rule and reign spiritually with Him as we take His Word into the world. In 1 Corinthians 3:21-22 Christians are shown their noble status. [Some of my taped messages deal with the Christian mandate and are available for \$4 a tape: "The Greatness of the Great Commission"; "The Redemption of the World and Godly Dominion"; and a two-tape set, "The Cultural Mandate." Write to 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.]

Christ's kingly enthronement is celebrated by the pouring out of gifts upon His Church/kingdom (Eph. 4:8-11) with the expectation of the maturation of the Church (4:12-14).

The Church Receives the Covenant Promises

Another major issue is the idea that the Church in no way fulfills promises to Israel. The Jewish covenants are designed for the Jews. This matter is so vigorously held that it has led to a debate within dispensationalism: Is there more than one New Covenant? Since the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 is for "the

house of Israel and the house of Judah," dispensationalists are pressed to find some means to explain the application of a "New Covenant" by Christ and Hebrews to the Christian Church.

Ephesians runs headlong into that theory. Paul applies "the covenants of promise" to Gentiles in the Church: "Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; that at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (2:11-12). [I will pass by Ephesians 2:10 and its implications for the Lordship Controversy, which is a major soteriological problem in dispensationalism. If interested, the reader may order my book *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* for \$9.00 from me (this includes postage). Write to me at 46 Main St., Conestee, SC 29636.]

Paul's language here teaches that the Old Testament covenants, given originally to Israel are applied to his Gentile converts. His emphasis is that in *times past* the Gentiles were strangers from the covenants of promise. In the present era, says Paul, they no longer are strangers from those covenantal blessings. Indeed, that covenantal blessings devolve upon Gentiles in the New Testament era is evidenced in other places in the New Testament (Acts 15:14-19; Gal. 3:8-29). This leads quite naturally to the next point.

The Union of Jew and Greek

Classical dispensationalists are adamant about keeping Jew and Gentile distinct (in older dispensationalism the two are kept distinct *eternally!*). They demand that there be a special future for the Jew so that their distinct promises maybe fulfilled literally for them. The future millennium of Revelation 20 is a special time for the fulfillment of Jewish blessings, in which the Jews will be exalted above all other peoples.

In Ephesians Paul teaches a *union* of Jew and Gentile. And he teaches it in such a way that its permanent nature is assumed. He emphasizes the removal of the distinction of the Jew and the Gentile:

That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God (2:12-19).

Where is there any indication that this corporate "new man" is a temporary body? Is not the enmity between Jew and Gentile "slain"? Are not those 'afar off' drawn "nigh"? Is this

not so that we both may have access to the one Father through the one Spirit, being united in one body? Thus we are "no more strangers and foreigners." We are forever one body - contrary to dispensationalism!

The Rebuilt Temple is the Church

One of the most odious aspects of dispensationalism is its redemptive retrogression. It calls for a re-institution of the sacrificial system in a re-built Temple! Rather than allowing the entire ceremonial system to find its fulfillment in Christ, so that it might be done away with, dispensationalism holds forth the notion of a rebuilt Temple.

Paul allows that the Scriptures teach the building of a new Temple in the prophets' future. But he sees that Temple as a spiritual, rather than a brick and mortar, reality.

The Apostle refers to the building up of the *Church* as being *the building of the Temple*: "And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (2:20-22).

Here it becomes quite clear that we are the building blocks of the Temple. *We* as individual persons are being "builded together" for a holy Temple! This, of course, is found in a number of New Testament Scriptures (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:4-5; Rev. 3:12).

The Church Era Was Revealed in the Old Testament

Another peculiar element of dispensationalism is the reduction of the New Covenant Church to a parenthesis in biblical prophecy. The Church is supposedly unknown to the prophets of the Old Testament era.

Paul disagrees. The New Testament phase of the Church is taught in the Old Testament, though not with the same fullness. Ephesians 3:3-6 reads: "By revelation he made known unto me the mystery which in other ages was not made known unto the *sons of men*, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of His promise in Christ."

This is argued by Paul in Romans 16:25-26. There Paul points out that the "mystery" of Gentile salvation was hidden only from the *Gentiles* (which in Eph. 3 Paul calls "the sons of men"), *not from the Old Testament prophets*, for he defends his doctrine of the mystery from "the scriptures of the prophets." He speaks of "the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith." Paul says that the "mystery" that was kept secret is "now made manifest" to "a// nations," not just to Israel.

Conclusion

We could continue on with the errors of dispensationalism as exposed by Paul in Ephesians but we must stop. It should be abundantly clear that the dispensational system runs headlong into the theology of Paul in the letter to Ephesus. Dispensationalists should consider Ephesians "a right strawy

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