

CHILTON, SUTTON, AND DOMINION THEOLOGY

by Gary North

David Chilton's 1985 book, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion* (Dominion Press), has already had a remarkable effect on several large television ministries. I can think of two TV preachers who have switched their eschatologies as a direct result of having read this book. One of them once mentioned publicly that the book has changed his thinking, but he remains fearful of promoting it. Its uncompromising postmillennialism has scared TV ministers, who are for good reason afraid of scaring away the bulk of their financial supporters, who remain premillennialists.

Pat Robertson was so concerned (with good reason) that his evangelist peers might think that he had switched to Chilton's version of postmillennialism that he wrote a personal letter to many of them (including one to me) in the summer of 1986 that stated that he had not adopted Chilton's theology. He mentioned *Paradise Restored* specifically. Then he outlined his own views, in which, as a premillennialist, he somehow completely neglected to mention the Great Tribulation. That a doctrine so crucial to premillennial dispensationalism as the Great Tribulation could disappear from his theology indicates the effect that Chilton (or someone) has had on his thinking.

Nevertheless, the spread of dominion theology is not simply the result of the writings of the Christian Reconstructionists. If it were, it would only be some backwater operation. The Holy Spirit moves widely when He changes a civilization, so that no single group can claim exclusive credit for God's work. The change in Pat Robertson's thinking (and the thinking of many premillennialists) had begun several years before *Paradise Restored* appeared. Rev. Jimmy Swaggart begins a highly critical article against "kingdom now" theology, including Pat Robertson's version, with a lengthy excerpt from a speech given by Rev. Robertson on Robert Tilton's Satellite Network Seminar on December 9-12, 1984. This was several months before I handed Rev. Robertson a copy of *Paradise Restored*, and about a month before the first edition of the book was published. He had already made the switch away from traditional dispensationalism. Here is what Robertson said, as excerpted by Rev. Swaggart. See if it sounds like traditional premillennialism to you. (It didn't to Rev. Swaggart.)

What's coming next? . . . I want you to think of a world [with] . . . a school system . . . where humanism isn't taught any more and people sincerely believe in the living God . . . a world in which there are no more abortions . . . juvenile delinquency is virtually unknown . . . the prisons are virtually empty . . . there's dignity because people love the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I want you to imagine a society where the church members have taken dominion over the forces of the world, where Satan's power is bound by the people of God, and where there is no more disease and where there's no more demon possession. . . .

We're going to see a society where the people are living Godly, moral lives, and where the people of God will have so much that they will lend to others but they will not have to borrow . . . and the people of God are going to be the most honored people in society . . . no drug addiction . . . pornographers no longer have any access to the public whatsoever . . . the people of God inherit the earth. . . .

If Pat Robertson had said that this blessed condition is going to come after the Rapture, and also after seven years of tribulation for Israel, when Jesus returns in glory to rule in Person on earth, then Rev. Swaggart would have no objection. He believes all these things, too, if you are talking about the seventh dispensation, the millennium in which Jesus personally rules the earth. But this dispensation is not what Rev. Robertson had in mind:

You say, that's a description of the Millennium when Jesus comes back . . . [but] these things . . . can take place now in this time . . . and they are going to because I am persuaded that we are standing on the brink of the greatest spiritual revival the world has ever known! . . . hundreds of millions of people are coming into the kingdom . . . in the next several years.¹

Dominion theology is the wave of the Christian future. David Chilton has written the two primary eschatological manifestos of dominion theology, *Paradise Restored* and *The Days of Vengeance: An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Dominion Press, 1987). Whoever comes after him will inevitably be labeled a "me, too" postmillennialist. Chilton has established the terms of the debate over eschatology for the next hundred years, at the very least.

Who Is David Chilton?

I first met David Chilton, if memory serves me correctly, sometime in 1973, when I was lecturing to a Sunday evening Bible study. (Conceivably, it could have been at an earlier meeting in 1971.) Chilton was finishing his bachelor's degree in history at California State College (now University) in Fullerton. I did not see him often after that, but I heard of his theological progress over the next few years.

James Jordan's Influence

He spent one year at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi in 1978. That was where he studied under Greg Bahnsen, before Bahnsen left Reformed Seminary. It was to Bahnsen that he uttered his classic definition of modern (mostly liberal) theologians, a remark I later learned that Dr. Bahnsen did not appreciate: "Modern theologians are like a pack of dogs sniffing each other's behinds." (I have heard no better description of them, nor do I expect to.)

What he received from his year in Mississippi had little to do with seminary, as he admitted publicly three years later. Far more important to his thinking than classroom instruction was James Jordan:

While I was in Seminary, I attended a class that taught me more about the Bible than all my other classes combined. The class was taught by Jim Jordan. But Jim was not a **teacher** at the seminary; he was a **student**. And the class he taught was held at the adult Sunday School of St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, in Jackson, Mississippi. The understanding of Scripture that I received from Jordan's insights has served as a basis for virtually all my subsequent Bible

¹ Jimmy Swaggart, "The Coming Kingdom," *The Evangelist* (Sept 1986), pp 4-5

study and teaching; and I believe it will prove to be just as helpful to other Bible teachers.

In his class, Jim began at the beginning (or almost the beginning)—with the garden of Eden. Essentially, he was teaching **biblical theology**, the study of God's progressive revelation of salvation. In principle, the whole of redemption is taught in the early chapters of the Bible: the chapters that follow simply build on the foundation laid there. This is why, as we shall see below, the later revelations depend so heavily on the theme of the Garden of Eden. The story of Eden contains the three basic motifs of all biblical revelation: Creation, the Fall, and redemption in Christ. . . .²

We can see all of these themes at work in Chilton's *Paradise Restored*, and again in *The Days of Vengeance*. Chilton took his great writing gifts and applied them to Jordan's fruitful hermeneutic (principle of interpretation). The combination is unbeatable: the reigning master of style and the reigning master of biblical theology. But neither of them has a Ph.D or a Th.D., nor has either been asked to teach in an accredited (by humanists) seminary. This reveals a great deal about the academic game.

Paradise Restored and *The Days of Vengeance* are the visible proof of Chilton's assertion concerning the themes of Genesis leading to postmillennialism. Jordan persuaded Chilton of this very early. Chilton then did as much as anyone could to persuade the rest of us.

James Jordan came to Tyler, Texas in 1981, about a year before Chilton came, to serve as associate pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church. He has written three excellent books since then: *The Law of the Covenant: An Exposition on Exodus 21-23* (1984), *Judges: God's War Against Humanism* (1985), and *The Sociology of the Church* (1986). The first, unfortunately, is presently out of print.

Putting Chilton to Work

From 1974 until 1981, I was the editor of the Chalcedon Foundation's *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*. I used Chilton on several occasions to produce essays and reviews. I recognized his remarkable skills in communication. I hired him to produce a monthly newsletter, *The Biblical Educator*, in the fall of 1979, and it ran for almost three years.³

In the fall of 1980, I accepted an assignment to debate Ronald J. Sider (*Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*) at Gordon-Conwell Divinity School in Massachusetts. I wanted to take along a book refuting Sider. Normally, a debater does not expect his opponent to publish a book just for an evening's debate, so I decided to present Sider with a unique surprise. I called Chilton and asked him to research and write in three months a manuscript refuting Sider, so that I could get it printed by the following April. He did it, and we got delivery of the books one day before the debate. I titled the book, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt-Manipulators*, and it is now in its fourth edition.⁴ Sider was surprised, to say the least. Frankly, I think he never got over it. I hope so, anyway.

Chilton Comes to Tyler

A little over a year after *Productive Christians* appeared, I hired Chilton to come to Tyler and work for my publishing company. I wanted him to do several projects that I knew he was capable of, but after an ill-fated beginning on a book about agriculture, we both agreed that the topic should be

eschatology. *Paradise Restored* is one of three books Chilton wrote for me on this topic; *The Days of Vengeance* is the second, and *The Great Tribulation* is the third.⁵

Chilton once again came under James Jordan's ministry. Jordan was by then the associate pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church. It was during Chilton's three-and-a-half year stay in Tyler that he heard Jordan's Sunday School lectures on "Trees and Thorns," which Chilton mentions favorably in the Preface to *Paradise Restored*. (Unfortunately, this series has not yet been published, but these 12 lectures on Genesis 1-4 that influenced Chilton are available as a series of audio cassette tapes.)⁶

What are the unique distinctives of the dominion theology developed in Tyler? It is a combination of Jordan's studies in biblical symbolism, plus his emphasis on the church's exclusive sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a strong doctrine of the institutional church as God's fundamental agency for the comprehensive renewal of society (again, a position counter to a misguided emphasis on family⁷ and its agency, the school,⁸ as the primary Kingdom institutions), and Ray Sutton's development of Meredith G. Kline's five-point covenant structure.

The Five Points of Biblical Covenantalism

Obviously, I believe in the eschatology of victory. I wrote a book about it in 1981.⁹ Nevertheless, the biblical case for

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6 Distributed by Geneva Ministries, P.O. Box 131300, Tyler, TX 75713
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7 Jordan has challenged directly a particular Christian Reconstructionist leader who has written "In the Kingdom of God, the family is in history the basic institution." "The family is the institution of strength. To go outside the family is to deny the family and to break it up." "The family is the Kingdom of God in miniature when it is a godly family, and the more faithfully it serves the triune God, the more clearly it becomes an embassy of the Kingdom." "The office of elder is first of all a family office." "What the Bible teaches is something very different: the offices of father and church elder are completely separate institutionally, although the church elder must first rule his family in an orderly manner."

This overemphasis on the family and underemphasis on the church readily leads to familism, and then to clanism and even a kind of supposed Hebrew tribalism, all of which are features of one or another of the groups associated with the "identity movement," or "Western destiny" movement, or "British Israel" movement, which also frequently emphasize the Old Testament dietary laws.

8 The author of the words in the preceding footnote has also written that the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) places teaching before baptizing, and that this means that people owe their tithes, not to the local church, but to schools and to educational foundations: "The Great Commission is a commission to teach and to baptize. It has reference to education as well as to worship, to the establishment of schools as well as churches. Teaching is cited before baptizing. It is teaching which alone can create a godly civil government and a faithful church."

This is highly misleading exegesis. First, the author has misread the verses because he used the King James Version without cross-checking with a modern translation or the Greek, which literally reads "Going therefore disciple ye all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatever I gave command to you." *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, by Alfred Marshall (London: Bagster, 1958), p. 136. In the Great commission, the word "baptizing" precedes the word "teaching."

Second, his conclusion would have been unwarranted even if teaching had preceded baptizing in the verses. Can teaching, as he writes, *alone* "create a godly civil government and a faithful church"? Of course not! The primacy of worship has always been the fundamental doctrine of the church. We worship God even when we do not rationally understand every aspect of worship. The author has fallen into the trap that Christian philosopher Cornelius Van Til warned against: the primacy of the intellect. The author continues: "The primacy of teaching before church worship and national discipleship are asserted by Scripture. The great missionary requirement of the days ahead is Christian schools and institutions. It must become the central area of activity for all Christians, and for their tithes, in the days ahead." Teaching is central to missions? Schools are primary to missions? Isn't worship primary? Isn't the church, the Bride of Christ, central?

9 Gary North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory* (Ft. Worth, Texas: Dominion Press, [1981] 1987).

2 David Chilton, "Teaching Bible Stories," *The Biblical Educator*, IV (May 1982), p. 2.

3 Published by the Institute for Christian Economics, P.O. Box 8000, Tyler, Texas 75711, bound photocopies are available for \$25.

4 Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1986.

optimism can be overemphasized. Chilton knows this, too. He and I wrote an essay outlining what we then believed to be the four points of Christian Reconstruction: 1) the sovereignty of God; 2) biblical law; 3) Cornelius Van Til's biblical presuppositionalism (the Bible alone judges the Bible, not human logic); and 4) biblical optimism.¹⁰ Postmillennialism is at most only one quarter of the message. But since that time, he and I learned from Pastor Ray Sutton that there is another even more fundamental doctrine: the covenant.

Yes, I know: covenant theology is as old as John Calvin, over four centuries old. But in the fall of 1985, Sutton made a stunning clarification in covenant theology, one vaguely hinted at by Westminster Seminary Professor Meredith G. Kline in the early 1960's, but never developed by him or his disciples. What Sutton discovered was that Kline's earlier discovery of a five-point covenant structure in Deuteronomy also applies throughout the Bible, and it applies to the three covenant institutions of church, state, and family.

Sutton presented his findings at a Wednesday evening Bible study which Chilton attended. Immediately, Chilton recognized the implications of this five-point structure for the Book of Revelation. He had become mired for months in the manuscript, looking for a key to unlock Revelation's structure. (I remember this well; I was paying his salary to write it.) Sutton's discovery of Kline's insight opened the door. Within a few weeks after reading Sutton's very rough 60-page preliminary manuscript that became *That You May Prosper*, Chilton had completed his long-awaited first draft of *The Days of Vengeance*.

Chilton's commentary on Revelation is a masterpiece, but it cannot be understood properly without an understanding of Ray Sutton's development of Kline's five-point covenant model, for it was this explicit model, not Kline's vague one, that Chilton adopted for *The Days of Vengeance*.¹¹ (If Kline's outline had been that clear, why did it take 23 years for anyone to write about its implications?)

I will never forget that Wednesday evening prayer meeting at which Sutton presented his discovery. Chilton rushed up to the pulpit after Sutton's presentation and began asking him questions. It was as if a mental fog had lifted from him. He must have stood there asking questions for half an hour, and Sutton stood behind the pulpit and kept answering them. **Sutton showed Chilton the pearl that had been locked tight in Kline's clamshell prose for over twenty years.**

Sutton's breakthrough had the same effect on me when I reread my own manuscript on the Ten Commandments, *The Sinai Strategy*, which was published in early 1986.¹² I hurriedly wrote a Preface incorporating the five-point covenant structure (commandments 1-5 parallel 6-10) just before it went to press. This made me the first person to go into print with this outline, but as I stated in the Preface, I got the whole idea from Sutton. None of us had spotted what Sutton saw in Kline, although we had all read Kline's essays on the ancient suzerainty (kingly) treaties. Kline without Sutton produces confusion about the covenant model, just as Kline without Jordan produces confusion about biblical symbolism, and

Kline without Chilton produces confusion about eschatology. (In short, "Kline without . . ." produces confusion.)

Here, then, is the five-point structure of the Biblical covenant, as developed by Sutton in his excellent book, *That You May Prosper: Dominion by Covenant* (Institute for Christian Economics, 1987). The Book of Deuteronomy is structured around it.

1. The transcendence and immanence of God
2. Authority/hierarchy of God's covenant
3. Biblical law/ethics/dominion
4. Judgment/oath: blessings and cursings
5. Continuity/inheritance

This may seem too intellectual, but after you have read Sutton's book, it becomes almost second nature. Let me put it in simpler terms:

1. Who's in charge here?
2. To whom do I report?
3. What are the rules?
4. What happens to me if I obey (disobey)? ...
5. Does this outfit have a future?

Simple, isn't it? Yet it has implications beyond your wildest imagination. Here is the key that unlocks the structure of human government. Here is the structure that Christians can use to analyze church, State, family, and numerous other non-covenantal but contractual institutions. Gary DeMar shows this clearly in his book, *Ruler of the Nations* (Dominion Press, 1987). With this outline in your mind, you can begin to unlock the fundamental message of the Old Testament prophets and the Book of Revelation.

With his insights concerning the covenant, Sutton completed the outline for a major modification of Christian Reconstruction theology. This modification has unfortunately become known as "Tyler theology," and we are stuck with the phrase, so far. (While its outlines were developed initially in Tyler, Texas in the mid-1980's, there is no assurance that this geographical identification will make contemporary sense in years to come, any more than Calvin's Geneva is relevant to today's Geneva, except as a fact of history and a tourist attraction.)

David Chilton's *Paradise Restored* and *The Days of Vengeance* are by far the most eloquent applications of this theological perspective in the field of eschatology. I doubt that they will be exceeded in style, brilliance, and relevance during my lifetime (if ever). I am biased, of course; I am one of the two primary publishers of dominion theology. (Geneva Ministries is the other, also located in Tyler.)

Chilton's commentary on Revelation reveals that the entire book is a long worship service. As you read it, you begin to see the genius of the historic liturgy of the church. You also begin to see how far modern worship services have departed from the model in Revelation. If the church is ever to regain its authority in the world, it will have to pay more attention to the structure of the worship service. But most important, Chilton ties the structure of the worship service to the structure of the covenant. This is what makes *The Days of Vengeance* a classic. While his style is brilliant and penetrating, the great strength of the book is its covenant-liturgical structure. It will be remembered because of this outline, if only because the outline, once understood, is almost impossible to forget.

This does not mean, of course, that Chilton agrees with every jot and tittle of Tyler's version of dominion theology. He is his own man. He no longer lives in Tyler, nor is he on my payroll. But what it does mean that **there are at present no more effective, path-breaking statements of "Tyler's" theological method than Chilton's books on eschatology.**

¹⁰ Gary North and David Chilton, "Apologetics and Strategy," *Christianity and Civilization* 3 (1983)

¹¹ Sutton's appendix on Kline explains why Kline's model is so vague. First, he misses transcendence, calling it simply the "preamble" section of the covenant. Second, he ignores the authority aspect of point two, calling it instead "historical prologue." Third, he does not discuss adoption in the third section ("sanctions"). In point five, he does not develop historical continuity and inheritance because his amillennial theology does not lend itself well to such concepts. Most important, he does not discuss this covenant structure in terms of historic Protestant theology. For him, it is an historical exercise. Sutton, *That You May Prosper*, Appendix 7.

¹² Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics.

If the dominion approach to the Bible becomes widespread, it should be remembered that it was David Chilton who first broke through to the Christian public at large with this unique system of biblical interpretation. This is another reason why his books are so important.

What should be an inspiration to any dedicated Christian layman is the knowledge that another layman with a bachelor's degree in history and only one year of seminary wrote two of the most important works in eschatology in the history of the church—perhaps **the** most important. It makes a person wonder: Why didn't some distinguished seminary professor write them? I believe the answer is simple: if distinguished theology professors write at all, they write mainly to impress other distinguished theology professors, and this is the kiss of death. (Never forget Chilton's description of modern theologians!)

Optimism Is Not Enough

Let me say, however, that if all a person gains from the Christian Reconstruction movement in general is its optimistic eschatology, then he is skating on thin ice. Optimism is not enough. In fact, optimism alone is highly dangerous. The Communists have a doctrine of inevitable victory; so do radical Muslims. So did a group of revolutionary communist murderers and polygamists, the Anabaptists who captured the German city of Münster from 1525-35, before they were defeated militarily by Christian forces. Optimism in the wrong hands is a dangerous weapon.

Ray Sutton has explained the problem, and I can do no better than to cite his position at length.

* * * * *

Here's where we are: We have a lot of people who believe some of the correct things, but they don't believe in or understand the covenant. Consequently, they are making some very serious mistakes in their teaching and practice.

First, there is the **dominion without covenant** group. They believe in dominion. They like dominion eschatology. They believe in Christians taking charge in society. They want Christians in political office. They want Christian influence. **But dominion without covenant can be very dangerous.** Dominion without covenant means people who take to the streets without law and structure. Dominion without covenant means influence without a clear, objective stand-

ard for having, or even gaining influence.

You know what this means? It means we could get a repeat of the Anabaptist radicals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like the group at Münster, the precursors to the modern revolutionary movements.¹³ It means that we're could get men in office who act on the basis of hearing voices, instead of listening to God's already-Inscripturated-Voice, the Word of God, the covenant in written form. Men who hear voices tend to make careless mistakes.

It has always been this way. If we get this kind of dominion without covenant, Christianity could experience its worst setbacks in the history of America. That's right. A Christian leader who finally rises to power, but who doesn't understand the covenant, what it is, and how it works, could drive this country into an even worse spiritual condition, simply because he listened to the wrong voice one day. The bottom line on dominion without covenant is that we don't get the blessing of God.¹⁴

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If I, as the publisher of *Paradise Restored* and *The Days of Vengeance*, did not warn readers against making too much of the idea of dominion as such, I would be abusing my authority. As Christians, we need to preach dominion, but dominion must always be on God's terms, not man's. **Dominion is always by covenant.** I should have written this earlier, but Sutton had not yet worked out the details of his thesis on the covenant. Now he has. If you take seriously the optimistic Christianity expressed in *Paradise Restored*, then you need also to read Sutton's book, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant* (\$12.50). The book is published by the non-profit Institute for Christian Economics, of which I am the unpaid president. I do not make a penny on the book. I am recommending it only because I truly believe its message. Order from

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13 See Igor Shafarevich, *The Socialist Phenomenon* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975). Also, see David Chilton's *Preface 3*, which reviewed this book, write I C E for it

14 *Covenant Renewal*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January 1987) Published by the Institute for Christian Economics