

**Genesis 1:26-28**

# COVENANT RENEWAL

**Matthew 28:18-20**

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## KLINE VS. KLINE OR NEW TESTAMENTITIS STRIKES AGAIN *Ray Sutton*

In New Testament times there is no longer a simple coalescence of the authority structure of the covenant with that of any cultural unit.

— Meredith G. Kline<sup>1</sup>

**REWARD:** For the first person who writes me to say he can send me a pocket-sized (shirt pocket) edition of the whole Bible (Old as well as the New Testament) in a modern translation, one that is still in print, I will send him or her a free copy of my newest book,

The first person who finds a shirt-pocket-sized edition of the KJV (in print), I will send him a free copy of a Biblical Blueprints book. And you thought Gary North was the only one who could make super offers!

Hold on, though: it is probably not such a great offer after all, because to my knowledge such a copy of a modern Bible does not exist. But what the heck, my knowledge is pretty limited. If someone out there in newsletter land comes up with a pocket-sized whole Bible, it will be worth my while. I lead an Evangelism Explosion group at my church, and I have always been disappointed that I can't find inexpensive, pocket-sized, whole Bibles, as opposed to just New Testaments, to give to converts.

I'm betting (if I were a betting man) that such a modern edition of the Bible can't be found. Even if someone happens to find a small, modern version of the complete Bible, I'll bet it's extremely rare. Anyway, my point will still stand. So what's my point? Let me make it with a series of questions.

Why don't we have such a Bible, or presuming someone can scrounge one up, don't we have such a limited number of editions? Is it because we don't have the technology to produce one? Hardly. We can put the whole Bible on a 4 x 6 microfiche.

Is it because we don't have enough publishers to publish such Bibles? Who are we trying to kid? The market is glutted with publishers. And it is full of publishers who are afraid to promote and sell responsibility, because they are afraid that responsibility won't sell. The market is up to its eyebrows in editorial pimps, looking for a new addition to their stable of facile-fingered, literary whores, who can write popular schlock to make them all rich. (There are a few exceptions of course, like Crossways.) The market is overflowing with anything but responsibility, and whole Bibles make responsibility too obvi-

ous. Maybe these publishers are right, not necessarily morally right that is, but they are probably right about their assessment of contemporary Christian book-buying interests. If they are right, however (and I think they are), they had better work toward changing the market, or else there won't be any market because there won't be any civilization.

Is it because we don't have enough Bibles? No, if anything, there are too many versions of the Bible. They confuse the average layman, because they often reflect weak theology, especially bad eschatology. And please, don't ever assume that a translation is atheological. So the multitude of versions on the market tend to confuse, and consequently tends to weaken the layman's confidence in Scripture.

O.K. then, is it because there aren't enough people interested in the whole Bible? I doubt it. The Bible is still one of the largest selling books in America; I distinctly remember seeing somewhere that it is no longer the number one best-seller. Well then, is it because there isn't a self-conscious effort to get the new convert to read the whole Bible? Now we're getting warmer. There isn't an effort because there is a subtle presupposition in modern Christianity that the New Testament is more important than the Old.

Now we come to the reason behind my offer at the beginning of this newsletter. We come to the disease, which has symptoms that surface in the fact that there are myriads of little New Testaments, but not one complete, pocket-sized, modern translation of the Bible. We come to the modern Church's affliction of "New Testamentitis."

New Testamentitis is the primacy of the New Testament to the exclusion of the Old. It is the belief that somehow the words of Jesus are more important than the words of Moses, as if this generation doesn't need an overdose of creationism, the message of the first book of the Bible; remember, the Book of Genesis? It is the premise that the Old Testament has been done away in its ethical entirety. It is the ancient heresy of Marcionism, a heresy that rejects the Old Testament in the name of the New, and a heresy that you'll rarely hear mentioned by the master witch-hunter, Dave Hunt, because he's a borderline Marcionite himself. (I'll save this one for another day, maybe even another book.)

### Pandora's Box

New Testamentitis has become a theological pandora's box, opening to three serious problems in the modern Church.

First, there is the problem of Barthianism. Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian. His major theological flaw was

1. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 100,

expressed on one occasion when he was asked, “Do you believe in creation?” Barth answered, “Yes.” The questioner further pursued the good doctor, “In your opinion Dr. Barth, when did the creation take place?” Barth replied, “With Christ of course.” Barth was extremely self conscious about his answer. He believed that history began at the Cross, an explicit denial of creation. In so doing, he rejected a propositional – creation by Word-approach to life and authority. Furthermore, he theologically and historically placed the New Testament before the Old Testament.

Dispensationalism, the most popular form of New Testamentitis, comes dangerously close to Barthianism’s view of the New Testament. Dispensationalism does not deny creation, nor does it historically locate the New Testament before the Old. But it presupposes a New Testament priority on the Bible, viewing the ethics of the Old Testament as completely done away unless explicitly restated; and the idea that nothing carries over unless it is restated is definitely a supposition foisted on the Bible by Dispensationalists. Consequently, the closeness of Dispensationalism and Barthianism, at this point is something of a crisis among evangelical.

For example, several years ago a leading evangelical and dispensational seminary on the West coast was having trouble fending off Barthianism. The seminary had to call in Dr. Cornelius Van Til, of all people, from Westminster Theological Seminary, unquestionably covenantal in its theology. Van Til gave a series of lectures and saved the day-rather, his theology saved the day. And dispensationalism was rescued from the clutches of neo-orthodoxy by covenant theology. So New Testamentitis in evangelicalism has opened the door to Barthianism.

Second, there is the problem of antinomianism. I don’t intend to imply that all Dispensationalists are antinomian. I am not even inferring that all of them teach antinomianism, although some do (i.e., Colonel Bob Thieme in Houston, Texas). I am saying that New Testamentitis has had a certain ethical effect (should I say unethical?) on the Church, which has fostered moral laxity and confusion.

What is it? Take away the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments are abolished as a summary of the ethical requirements for Christian living. Take away this summary and what is left? The commands of the New Testament? The sayings of Jesus? What’s expected of a Christian? And where is there a summary comparable to the Ten Commandments that categorizes for pedagogical purposes God’s expectations? The Sermon on the Mount? If that’s it, we’re left singing that refrain from Peggy Lee’s old song, “IS that all there is?” And if that is all there is, maybe that explains the complete and total moral breakdown in the modern Church. So New Testamentitis has taken away the Ten Commandments and put nothing in their place, leaving the Church in chaos.

Third, there is the problem of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the study of how to interpret the Bible. It has caused an epistemological (how we know what we know) crisis of the highest order in evangelicalism. It has become a major problem among evangelical because they have moved away from a whole Bible approach to interpretation. If the first four-fifths of the Bible (the Old Testament) is no longer relevant, then how does one interpret the New Testament?

Take a student’s attempt to understand a word like “baptism” as an example. Does he go to outside help, and by outside I mean Classical and Koine Greek lexicons? Or, does he go to the Bible itself and allow it, especially the Old Testament to guide him in his interpretation? Whoops. He can’t go to the Old Testament because it no longer applies. He must form his opinion of a Biblical idea on the basis of non-Biblical ideas. Hence, he usually ends up with a non-Biblical interpreta-

tion, which is false of course. If he goes outside the Bible to understand the Bible, he will misinterpret the Bible.

Yet, the modern student is forced outside of the Bible by his own view of how the New Testament relates to the Old. He will even go outside the Bible into the field of humanistic psychology to acquire some understanding of the text. One evangelical minister recently titled a series of sermons on the Apostle Paul’s writings, “The Psychological Hang-Ups of Paul.” How could he do such a thing? Easy, once the major portion of the Bible is thrown out, there is virtually nothing left with which to interpret. A hermeneutical box of evil is opened that inflicts Christians with all sorts of spiritual and even physical diseases, because they are left without a clear understanding of what God expects of them.

Yes, New Testamentitis explains a number of the problems in the modern Church. It explains the prevalence and near monopoly of red letter editions of the Bible. New Testamentitis explains mountains of New Testaments and no Old Testaments attached. New Testamentitis explains why missions’ organizations translate all the New Testament before the Old, even Genesis, as if every civilization’s basic problem doesn’t involve a wrong view of origins – creation – right next to the problem of redemption – recreation. New Testamentitis explains why a great scholar like Meredith Kline, who has done so much to promote the covenant, has undermined his own covenantal “first love” as much as anyone; he’s simply not been able to shake the affliction; the proof is in his quote at the beginning of this newsletter.

#### Meredith G. Kline

In my development of the structure of the Biblical covenant (see *You I have*), particularly relied on Meredith G. Kline. Anyone who has read his essays on the covenant structure will notice immediately that I have adopted his outline of Deuteronomy. Clearly, my book is not a commentary on Deuteronomy. It is unlike his work in the *Wycliffe Bible* an insightful study well worth meditating on.<sup>2</sup> Rather, I attempt to isolate the various covenantal “principles.”

Kline and I disagree about the applications and implications of each of the five points of the covenant. We disagree to such an extent that my book can legitimately be regarded as a rejection of Kline in the light of Kline. Kline rejects the continuing New Testament authority of the covenant structure that he discovered in the writings of Baltzer and Mendenhall. 1, on the other hand, accept it.

The enigma in Kline appears most strikingly in

On the one hand, he argues that the theme of the covenant model of the suzerain treaties appears all through the Bible; hence, it is the structure of Biblical authority. On the other hand, he believes that Deuteronomy, as part of the Mosaic economy, is an “intrusion” into history.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore temporary. It cannot by his definition be extended into the New Testament; that is, unless his whole intrusionary premise evaporates. So, according to him, there are only bits and pieces of the structure in other places of the Bible, even the New Testament.

As a matter of fact, his references to other segments of the Scripture triggered me to look for the Deuteronomistic structure in the New Testament. But he fails to see that the five-fold arrangement of Deuteronomy is a covenant model in all of its parts in all of the Bible. Thus, he is not able to come up with

2. Rev. James B. Jordan informed me about Kline’s chapter back in the early 1980’s.

3. Meredith G. Kline, “The Intrusion and the Decalogue,” *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, [1972] 1978), pp. 154-71.

a precise covenant model for all of the Scripture. Is it a five-point model? Or is it a six-point model, with "depository arrangements" added?<sup>4</sup> He is not sure. I am not sure either; but I can be a lot more confident than he is. I find no six-point structure anywhere in the Bible; I see a five-point structure repeatedly.

Nevertheless, I am greatly indebted to him, as I am sure he is to Baltzer and Mendenhall, upon whom he largely depended for his insights. If he can make good use of the discoveries of a pair of theological liberals, I suppose I can make good use of the work of an amillennialist who rejects (or does nothing with) all five points of the covenant. Let me make myself clear by comparing his use of each of the five points with my use of them.

### Transcendence

One major difference is my treatment of the first part of the covenant, as indicated by the word "transcendence." This difference is easy to pinpoint. Kline does not discuss the topic; I make it the covenant's fundamental point: the Creator-creature distinction. He does not develop the theme that the distinction between what God said and what Moses said points to the doctrine of transcendence. He says only this: "Ancient suzerainty treaties began with a preamble in which the speaker, the one who was declaring his lordship and demanding the vassal's allegiance, identified himself. The Deuteronomic preamble identifies the speaker as Moses (v. 1a), but Moses as the earthly, mediatorial representative of Yahweh (v. 3b), the heavenly suzerain and ultimate Lord of this covenant."<sup>5</sup> That is all he says – no development, nothing. This is a good insight, as I have tried to show in my book, but in Kline's book of 149 pages, there ought to have been more, if the author intended to do anything with the insight. He has had 23 years to develop this theme, but he hasn't bothered.

### Hierarchy

He does not relate the hierarchical structure of the Mosaic court system to the rebellion of Israel. Consequently, he misses the frame of reference for this second point. He does not call it hierarchy. He includes it as part of the historical prologue. He does not see why God begins the whole section with the hierarchical passage (Deuteronomy 1:12-18). What is crucial is the court system of Israel. He does not ask or answer the question that I regard as crucial: Why does this historical prologue begin with a presentation of Israel's court system?

Again, my criticism is that he only briefly mentions part two of the covenant structure, and then he does nothing with it. He does not ask the obvious question concerning the courts of law. Thus, his book makes no application of his insight. All he says is, "This reason for righteous administration of justice is at the same time a reminder of the theocratic nature of the Israelite kingdom, a reminder that God was the Lord who was making covenant anew with them this day."<sup>6</sup>

Why does he fail to develop this theme? One obvious reason is that he believes that this Israelite theocratic kingdom and its laws represented an intrusion into the plan of God for the ages – something not carried over into the New Testament. He does not want New Testament judicial reminders "that God is the Lord who is making covenant anew with us this day." I do want such reminders.

### Ethics

Kline does not discuss the whole principle involved in Bib-

lical ethics, namely, that there is an ethical cause-effect relationship. Kline does not believe that such a relationship is visible in history. Whatever cause-and-effect relationship there is, is known only to God. To mankind, such relationships supposedly are inscrutable. I think it is appropriate here to cite Gary North's observations concerning Kline's view of ethical cause and effect:

If you preach that biblical law produces "positive feed back," both personally and culturally – that God rewards covenant-keepers and punishes covenant-breakers in history – then you are preaching a system of positive growth. You are preaching the progressive fulfillment dominion covenant. Only if you deny that there is any long-term sustainable relationship between external covenant-keeping and external success in life-a denial made explicitly Meredith G. Kline – can you escape from the postmillennial implications of biblical law.

North then observes in a footnote that

... Kline says that any connection between blessings and covenant-keeping is, humanly speaking, random. "And meanwhile it [the common grace order] must run its course within the uncertainties of the mutually conditioning principles of common grace and common curse, prosperity and adversity being experienced in a manner largely unpredictable because of the inscrutable sovereignty of the divine will that dispenses them in mysterious ways."<sup>7</sup> Dr. Kline has obviously never considered just why it is that life insurance premiums and health insurance premiums are cheaper in Christian-influenced societies than in pagan societies. Apparently, the blessings of long life that are promised in the Bible are sufficiently non-random and "scrutable" that statisticians who advise insurance companies can detect statistically-relevant differences between societies.<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely the cause-and-effect relationship between external covenant-keeping and external success, and external covenant-breaking and external judgment, that the Book of Deuteronomy's ethics section is all about (Deuteronomy 8). It is also what God's judgments in history are all about (Deuteronomy 28:1-14): sanctions.

### Sanctions

Let Kline speak 'for himself (though he is not very clear at this point):

The kingdom of Israel was, of course, not another Caesar-kingdom but, uniquely, the kingdom of God institutionally present among the nations. Its earthly and cultural form was symbolic of the ultimate integration of culture and cult in the world of the consummation. The judicial infliction of cultural sanctions by its officers typified the final messianic judgment of men in the totality of their being as cultural creatures. This institutional symbolization of the final judgment and eternal kingdom disappeared from the earthly scene when the Old Covenant gave way to the New. In this age of the church, royal theocratic authority with its prerogative of imposing physical-cultural sanctions resides solely in Christ, the heavenly King. The judicial authority of the permanent special officers whom Christ has appointed to serve his church on earth is purely spiritual-cultic.<sup>9</sup>

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.

5. Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King: The Covenant Structure of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 50.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

7. Kline, "Comments on the Old-New Error," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), p. 184.

8. Gary North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, forthcoming, chapter 5.

9. *By Oath Consigned*, pp. 100-1.

Here is where Kline's implicit antinomianism becomes explicit. What about Remans 13? What about the ministers of justice appointed by Christ to protect His church, as well as to protect all men in their "non-cultic" activities? Paul writes of God's appointed authorities, which includes (though is not limited to) civil magistrates:

Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation unto themselves (Remans 13:1-2).

When Paul reminds us that rebels will receive condemnation, he is reminding us, using Kline's words, that the kingdom's "earthly and cultural form was symbolic of the ultimate consummation. The judicial infliction of cultural sanctions by its officers typified the final messianic judgment of men in the totality of their being as cultural creatures." The State legitimately inflicts sanctions, acting as God's appointed agent. These sanctions point directly to God as the final judge. This did not end with the Old Testament. This is why Paul calls the civil authority a minister of God. "For it [authority] is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil" (Remans 13:4).

The problem is this: What is the nature of the sanctions in the New Testament age? Kline cannot show why or how something in the New Testament restricts to the Mosaic economy the dual sanctions of Deuteronomy 27-28. My question is simple: What principles govern God's historical judgments in this New Testament era? Silence in this case is not golden. Kline does not see any New Testament civil applications. Specifically, he does not see the civil sanctions as being tied to a system of covenantal adoption. (He does make one important covenantal application of his insights regarding the dual sanctions of the covenant: the covenantal basis of New Testament infant baptism.)<sup>10</sup> It is his intrusionist thesis again - an outworking of his self-conscious rejection of Biblical law in the New Testament.

### Continuity

Continuity means continuity over time. But he has already said that there is no cause-and-effect relationship between the covenant and historical sanctions in New Testament times, which he defines strictly as an era of "common grace." So, if there are no personal cause-and-effect relationships, then there certainly are no "cultic" cultural relationships.

This means that there can be no earthly progress over time. One generation does not bequeath God-sanctioned blessings in a system of positive, long-term growth and development. There is no "positive feedback: economically, politically, or culturally." Remember his position: "And meanwhile it [the common grace order] must run its course within the uncertainties of the mutually conditioning principles of common grace and common curse, prosperity and adversity being experienced in manner largely unpredictable because of the inscrutable sov-

ereignty of the divine will that dispenses them in mysterious ways."

Inscrutable sovereignty in this case means "no growth, no judgments, and no predictability" in the historical working out of the kingdom of God. In short, no postmillennial hope. He is adamant about this, as he insisted in his ill-fated attempt to cross intellectual swords with Greg Bahnsen.<sup>12</sup>

I have indicated that the Book of Revelation is divided into the five-point covenant model in *That You May Prosper*, Appendix 5. It is highly significant for the proper use of Kline's insights that David Chilton asked me in the fall of 1985, "DO you think that the Book of Revelation divides into this five-point structure?" I thought that it did, and the two of us worked through the application of the Deuteronomic structure to Revelation together. I highly recommend the reader to Chilton's monumental book, *The Days of Vengeance*, in which he states the postmillennial position as eloquently as anyone ever has. Chilton's use of Kline's suzerainty treaty model will not be appreciated by Professor Kline.

### Conclusion

Kline wants to ignore the effects of the gospel over time. He especially wants to destroy cause and effect in God's judgments in history. His rejection of the New Testament validity of points two through five of the covenant is grounded in his hostility to Biblical law (#3), law courts governed by Biblical law (#2), the judgments of God in history based on Biblical law (#4), and the success of covenant-keeping societies over generations (#5).

For these reasons, I take issue with Kline's work on the covenant. He vaguely - and I stress vaguely - refers to the five points of the covenant, but he refuses to draw any implications. Why? Because the only believable implication point directly to the theological system developed by his theological rivals, the "theonomic postmillennialists," or Christian Reconstructionists. This is why I depend on Kline in order to reject Kline's conclusions - or lack thereof.

Hence, "Meredith Kline: Yes and No." Mostly "no." In terms of New Testament Biblical social theory in general, completely "no."

11. Kline, "Comments on the Old-New Error," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), p. 184.

12. "Along with the hermeneutical deficiencies of Chalcedon's millennialism there is a fundamental theological problem that besets it. And here we come around again to Chalcedon's confounding the biblical concepts of the holy and the common. As we have seen, Chalcedon's brand of postmillennialism envisages as the climax of the millennium something more than a high degree of success in the church's evangelistic mission to the world. An additional millennial prospect (one which they particularly relish) is that of a material prosperity and a world-wide eminence and dominance of Christ's established kingdom on earth, with a divinely enforced submission of the nations to the world government of the Christocracy. The insuperable theological objection to any and every such chiliastic construction is that it entails the assumption of a premature eclipse of the order of common grace. In thus postulating the termination of the common grace order before the consummation, Chalcedon's postmillennialism in effect attributes unfaithfulness to God, for God committed himself in his ancient covenant to maintain that order for as long as the earth endures." Meredith G. Kline, "Comments on an Old-New Error," *Westminster Theological Journal*, XLI (Fall 1978), pp. 183, 184. Cited by North, *Dominion and Common Grace*, p. 90.

10. Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, chapter 5.