

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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COVENANTAL TRIBULATION: THE FIRST WARNING (The **Covenantal** Structure of Mark 13)

I have been asked many times, "Why are you no longer a dispensationalist?" My answer is always, "Because I discovered that there is no 'Scriptural basis for dispensationalism!'" I know that this may come as a shock to most, maybe even to some of my fellow travelers in the reformed faith. Yet, I can't stress this point enough: **dispensationalism** lacks a Biblical basis. I would even go so far as to say that there is not one single verse in the Bible that proves **dispensationalism**, in contrast to several Biblical passages that cannot be interpreted any other way than by postmillennialism.

Let's not get off the subject of dispensationalism for a moment. Allow me to tell you a story about my experience at Dallas Theological Seminary. Before I do, I should stress that I appreciate my education at Dallas. I don't intend in any way to run down the seminary. It was good to me. It taught me the Biblical languages, the primary reason for my attending the school. It introduced me to some great men of God, some who later became reformed in their theology. But most importantly, Dallas Theological Seminary made me thoroughly reformed in my theology.

Surprised? I'll bet, as I am sure some of my former mentors are to this day. But it is not so far fetched if you'll allow me to explain.

Dallas Theological Seminary pushed me right into the arms of John Calvin by making me study the Bible in its original languages. And why not? The two founders of Dallas Theological Seminary were Calvinists: W. H. Griffith Thomas, a rigorous Anglican Calvinist (And you were wondering why I ended up an Anglican!), and Lewis S. Chafer, a Presbyterian, whose doctrinal standards in Anglican and Presbyterian (Westminster

bodies are distinctly Calvinistic. Beyond the founders, the heads of both exegetical (Old and New Testaments) departments were staunch Calvinists. The Old Testament head has two earned doctorates, has been called the most brilliant man ever to have graduated from Dallas, and was in charge of the Doctoral Studies program. He later went on to teach at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He taught me several Hebrew courses and one in particular that I audited, "Old Testament Theology," required the reading of German, covenantal theologians; of particular influence on me was W. Eichrodt's work that organizes the entire Old Testament in terms of the Biblical Covenant. Exegesis was emphasized when I was at Dallas and exegesis made into a Calvinist.

Beyond the Scriptural emphasis, Dallas Seminary gave me a Calvinistic view of Systematic Theology. Believe it or not, Chafer's systematic theology was not emphasized. By the better professors and students, it was considered fluff with a capital F. Now don't misunderstand, I was re-

quired to read Chafer, but only *cum grano salis*, "with a grain of salt." I had a number of professors who liked to refer to the required reading of Chafer as giving it the "fan job," you know, sit in front of a fan to read Chafer. Guess who the best systematic theologians were considered to be by my Dallas Theological Seminary professors? One was none other than Charles Hodge, the great professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, the bulwark of Presbyterian Calvinism during the 19th Century. Another was R. L. Dabney, the famous chaplain to Stonewall Jackson, founder of Austin Theological Seminary (Presbyterian), and early professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, both of whom were stalwart Presbyterian Calvinists. And most important was L. Berkhof, the Christian Reformed Calvinist, whose one volume, reformed, covenantal, Calvinistic systematic theology was considered to be the best systematic theology ever written. Not only did I read this volume but I was required to read it in all of my systematic classes and even in some of my exegetical classes.

Beyond the Systematic Theology emphasis, Dallas Theological Seminary gave me a Calvinistic view of history. All of my Church History courses were taught from an Augustinian and Calvinistic perspective. I was even required to read that extremely important Calvinistic writer's work,
by Gregg Singer

(A Presbyterian Calvinist).

Beyond history, the best special speakers, preachers and expositors during my years at Dallas. Here are some of the guest speakers who came to Dallas: Jay Adams (Presbyterian Calvinist), Philip Hughes (Anglican Calvinist), and James Boice (Presbyterian Calvinist).

So, when someone says, "How did you go to Dallas and turn out reformed?" I'm often quick to say, "I was expertly prepared to be what I am by my education at Dallas Theological Seminary." In fact, I very quickly learned as I began to move in reformed circles that I was better prepared in many ways to be reformed at Dallas Seminary than many of my new colleagues were at the reformed schools. Most of them hadn't read a single reformed systematic theology. They certainly didn't know their Hebrew and Greek very well; they simply were required to take the number of courses Dallas required. And, they were almost ashamed of Calvinism, often quickly telling me how 'lucky' (That's right, imagine Calvinistic trained pastors using this word!) I was to have gone to a more broadly evangelical school!

So folks, the Dallas Seminary from which I matriculated is a seminary that I am proud to have attended. It made me a Calvinist!

Charts and Mirrors

But life was not all John Calvin at Dallas Theological Seminary. I return to why I'm not a dispensationalist. I have established that I received a good education. But I have made what my dispensational friends will surely believe is an outlandish statement when I said, "I'm not a dispensationalist because there is no Scriptural evidence, not one single verse." Well if a person won't take my word for it, listen to what happened to me in my Senior Theology Class, the last course taught by Dr. Walvoord to sum up systematic for everyone so that they all walk out committed to dispensationalism. To the best of my recollection, which can be verified by a friend from my class who has long since become reformed, Dr. John Walvoord made the following statements.

Dr. Walvoord surprised all of us when he said, "I know that some of you must be wondering what the Scriptural evidence for dispensationalism must be."

There was laughter,

"Well, there is really only one verse in the Bible that can prove dispensational premillennialism. The position must be proved from the overall sweep of the Scriptures."

I guess "Dr. Walvoord did not realize what he had done to us students at first because he started to go on until he noticed that we, including myself, had a stunned look on our faces. There was a kind of pregnant pause and then Dr. Walvoord said, "Now you know why we wait until the fourth year to tell you all this . . . we wait until we've got your money."

There was hilarious laughter because all the students knew that Dr. Walvoord was only kidding. Nevertheless, he went on to explain that there is indeed only one verse in the Bible on which dispensationalism rests, 1 Thessalonians 5:1. His argument was the following, and I suppose still is. He made the point that the final paragraph of 1 Thessalonians 4 had to do with the rapture. It had to be referring to a "coming" of Christ distinct from the return of the Lord explained in 1 Thessalonians 5 because of the first verse of this chapter that separates it from the previous Scripture. It says, "1. But as to the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written by you. 2. For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2). He made the point that the "But" is the Greek *peri de*, which is normally a logical connection, but in this reference it makes a chronological jump, meaning what goes before refers to one event and what comes after to another.

And that's it. According to the dispensational president of the leading dispensational seminary, this is the Scriptural basis for dispensationalism. Not only was Dr. Walvoord's explanation bad Greek, but it is foolish to build an entire system, so dogmatically couched, on one verse. So don't take my word for it. Take Dr. John Walvoord's. On this basis, I have concluded that I am not a dispensationalist because there is no Scriptural evidence. The whole system is charts and mirrors.

Coming at the lack of Scriptural warrant for dispensationalism from another direction, rapture theology tries to build a case around the future sense of the Great Tribulation. In this newsletter, I want to consider the covenantal nature of the Tribulation that is described by Jesus in His Olivet Discourse, proving that this event cannot be future but already past.

Transcendence (Mark 13:3-5a)

And as He was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter and James and John and Andrew were questioning Him privately, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign when all these

things are going to be fulfilled? And Jesus began to say to them,

Jesus' comments in Mark 13 are a farewell address. He makes statements reminiscent of another great final address in the Bible, Moses' last sermons to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy. Jesus parallels the Deuteronomic structure in the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25) and He matches the structure in His famous passage about the Great Tribulation.

The complete Olivet Discourse is found in the Book of Matthew. First, Jesus begins on the transcendent/immanent note by discussing the destruction of the Temple (Matthew 24:1-3). He does so by means of the Great Tribulation passage, which falls into this context. This is not difficult to see. The issue is one of transcendence: "Which temple will be left standing to represent the Lord?" And, if the temple is destroyed, what does this say about the presence of the Lord. Christ essentially tells His disciples that He is the new Temple that will be raised and not to worry.

But second, Jesus moves to the subject of hierarchy (Matthew 24:4-24). He is concerned that His disciples not be misled by false representatives, counterfeit Christs. It is in this context that He tries to prepare them for His coming.

Third, Christ turns to the subject of ethics, specifically faithfulness (24:45-25:30). He raises the question, "Who then is faithful" (Matthew 24:45), following with three parables about faithfulness: the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servant (Matthew 24:45b-51), the parable of the virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), and the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). Yes, all of these parables continue somewhat the hierarchical emphasis, but Jesus is trying to teach His disciples at this point about being faithful until the end, which leads us to the next point of the covenant.

Fourth, Jesus discusses the subject of sanctions, the verifiers of the oath (Matthew 25:31-46). He raises the subject in this context because He wants His disciples to see that there are eternal consequences for not being faithful. As the first Israel is judged, so is the second, the Church, if the latter does not remain faithful.

Finally, Christ makes a brief statement about succession (Matthew 26:1-2). He tells His disciples that transition is coming at Passover. If we keep in mind that the possession of the land of Israel was after the Passover, then we will see that the closing remark of Jesus fits the final comments of Moses, who told of how and when the Promised Land would be conquered.

Thus, the context of the Great Tribulation is **covenantal**. This means that Jesus was taking the disciples through a covenantal context to ratify what would happen to them and to history. His sermon engaged them in a covenant process to lead them to new strength in this covenant.

Moving to the specific details of the section that fits into the hierarchical part of this Deuteronomic Olivet Discourse, we discover that even this segment follows the Biblical covenant. As we have seen so many times in our study of the covenant, it is a covenant within a covenant, what I call, "Covenantal Re-enforcement." The passage begins much the same as Deuteronomy, "Jesus began to say them," similar to "Moses spoke all that was commanded" (Deuteronomy 1:3). The passage, in other words, begins with God's message. This makes it transcendent. This also makes it immanent, since Christ is the Incarnation of God; He is present with them, unlike Moses who was not God but only a representative. Transcendence and presence are intensified.

Hierarchy (13:5b-10)

"See to it that no one misleads you. Many will come in My name, saying 'I am He!' and will mislead many. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not

be frightened; those things must take place; but that is not yet the end. For nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will also be famines. These things are merely the beginning of birth pangs."

The second part of the Deuteronomic covenant touches on the subject of authority, specifically the representatives of the covenant (Deuteronomy 1:9ff.). In Deuteronomy the issue was to provide Israel with the correct guidelines for selecting Godly leaders. Anyone attempting to come to power apart from this procedure for recognizing the ordination of God would have to be rejected. Moses did not want the people to be misled by false leaders, precisely the emphasis in the second part of the Great Tribulation passage.

Jesus addresses the subject of authority, false Messiahs, who would wrongfully try to misrepresent Him. He does not want His disciples to be misled. He has made them His representatives. He does not want anyone else to deceive the Church into thinking that there are other Apostles, nor does He want anyone to get away with being "an arr impostor".

Christ warns the Apostles in a very precise way. He tells of covenantal judgments – wars, famines and earthquakes – that will precede His coming. He tells them, "This is the beginning of birthpangs" (Mark 13:8c). In some sense these judgments would not be the sign of the end of the world, which is nowhere mentioned in this passage. They would signal the beginning of something else, namely, the end of the temple, which was actually the end of the Old Covenant world because it destroyed forever the sacrificial system.

Already we start to see that a covenantal understanding of the Great Tribulation changes how it is understood. How so? If we read the Book of Acts, we will find that famines and earthquakes are mentioned (Acts 11:28; 16:26). The question is, "Why?" Why does Luke even bother to tell us about these events, when they don't apparently seem to be critical to anything in the text? They are, however, to one who is interpreting the Bible as a whole, a covenantal unit. If students of Scripture were reading the Bible straight through, and certainly the disciples were looking to connect certain key events as though the Bible were being understood holistically, then the famines and earthquakes to which Jesus referred should be matched with famines and earthquakes in Acts. In other words, one of the fundamental covenantal principles of interpretation is that everything in the Bible relates to what has gone before and to what comes after, everything down to the minutest detail. This means that there is nothing extraneous or random in Holy Scripture. God is not a kind of cosmic Salvador Dali, throwing something into His picture to mess us up in our attempts to understand the message. God is revelatory in His nature; He wants His people to understand.

Given this Biblical presupposition about hermeneutics, the only explanation as to why famines and earthquakes are mentioned, aside from the fact that they just happened in the lives of the Apostles, is that they related to something that had been foretold before. The only prophecy to which these events directly relate is the one given by Christ in the Olivet Discourse. As it is fulfilled in them, the reader sees that they signal in some sense the beginning of the end and the beginning of a new beginning. Indeed, as the Acts 11 and 16 passages are understood in light of the Olivet Discourse prophecy, they will be found to convey a powerful message about the destruction coming on Jerusalem, the deliverance of the Gentiles, and the beginning of a new beginning. The prophecies of Christ as understood

in their fulfillment in the Book of Acts were the means for preventing serious misleading through the misrepresentation of Christ.

Ethics (13:9-16)

"But be on your guard; for they will deliver you to the courts, and you will be flogged in the synagogues, and you will stand before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them. And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. And when they arrest you and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand about what you are to say, but say whatever is given you in that hour; for it is not you who speak, but it is the Holy Spirit. And brother will deliver brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. But when you see the Abomination of Desolation standing where it should not be (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. And let him who is on the housetop not go down, or enter in, to get anything out of his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak."

The third part of the Deuteronomic covenant always stresses specific ethical stipulations. Moses goes through the ten commandments, expounding them a second time in greater detail (Deuteronomy 5-26).

When we come to the next section in the Great Tribulation passage, we begin to see a series of set instructions for the disciples, commands that are ethical in nature. First, Jesus tells them literally, "Watch yourselves" (13:9a). Notice that Christ is addressing the disciples. He is not speaking to someone living a couple of millennia from that time. He is warning the disciples of what will happen to them.

Second, Christ tells the disciples to leave Jerusalem when a specific ethical boundary is violated, making this command doubly ethical in emphasis. Jesus tells them to watch for the abomination of desolation. Luke directly connects this abomination with the invasion of the Roman armies around A.D. 70, "And when you shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh. Then let them which are in Judea flee to the mountains; and let them which are in the midst of it depart out; and let not them that are in the countries enter into it" (Luke 21:20-21). Josephus tells us what happened in 70 A.D. in Book 6, chapter 6, "And now the Romans, upon the burning of the holy house itself, and of all the buildings round about it, - brought their ensigns to the Temple, and set them over against its eastern gate; and there did they offer sacrifices to them." This was the abomination of desolation. An abomination is always connected in Scripture with some form of idolatry (1 Kings 11:5,7; II Kings 23:13; Jeremiah 4:1; 7:30; 13:27; Ezekiel 5:11). When the Romans brought their "ensigns," with symbols of the Roman Empire on them and set them in the Temple and sacrificed to them, they had set up idols in the place of the Lord, the ultimate abomination, an abomination that destroys!

Oath (13:17-23)

"But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! But pray that it may not happen in the winter. For those days will be a time of tribulation such as has not occurred since the beginning of the creation which God created, until now, and never shall. And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect whom He chose, He shortened the days, And then if anyone says to you, 'Behold, here is the Christ'; or, 'Behold, He is there'; do not believe him; for

false Christs and false prophets will arise, and will show signs and wonders, in order, if possible, to lead the elect astray. But take heed; behold, I have told you everything in advance. But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers that are in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then He will send forth the angels, and will gather together His elect from the four winds, from the farthest end of the earth, to the farthest end of heaven. . . . Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away."

The fourth part of the Deuteronomic covenant tells of the ratification of the covenant by means of a solemn oath with sanctions of blessing and cursing attached. These sanctions are themselves witnesses to the oath. They measure whether one is obeying or disobeying the covenant.

Jesus begins the next section with a key sanction word translated, "Woe" (13:17). Specific curse will be on the woman with child at the time of the abomination of desolation, pointing back to the original curse on the woman in the garden. She was told, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbirth. In pain you shall bring forth children; yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). This prophesy is fulfilled all through Scripture, but especially on the fleeing women at A.D. 70. They represent Israel trying to get away from the curse and at the same time, "desiring the husband," that is to dominate the groom, who is none other than the Lord. Yet, they are ruled by Him.

This is the context of the references to the Great Tribulation. The "greatness" of the Great Tribulation is that it specifically fulfills the curses of Genesis 3 on the woman, making it nearly impossible for her to escape. In fact, the only ones who escaped were those who were not premillennial, that is, the only ones who saw this passage as being fulfilled in A.D. 70 and not way off in the future.

Second, Christ pulls in another major theme of the fourth section of the covenant when He makes an oath, saying "Truly this generation will not pass away before all

these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (13:30-31). This is clearly oath language, tying A.D. 70 to the "passing away of heaven and earth," what I believe to be a cosmic description of a change of covenantal order in the world.

Succession (13:32-37)

. . . . "Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the appointed time is. It is like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. Therefore, be on the alert – for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning – lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all, Be on the alert!"

In the final aspect of the Deuteronomic covenant, Moses essentially tells Joshua and the people how they must leave their home in the desert to make a new home in the Promised Land. They were not told the precise moment to enter. They were only instructed to be prepared to go. When the time came, however, the "Captain of the hosts" visited Joshua and told him the time had come to leave their old home and possess the new one (Joshua 5:13-15).

In precise analogy to the final section of the Deuteronomic covenant, Jesus offers the same message to the disciples. He tells them to be prepared to leave their home, which is now Jerusalem, so that when the time is right they can enter the desert, their new home away from home. He gives this teaching by way of the parable of the man going on a journey. He tells them to be ready to march when He comes to them, but as we can see His coming is not to rapture but to destroy Jerusalem.

Thus, the Great Tribulation passage is a covenant between Christ and His disciples. It is a covenant of destruction on the old "house" that the new home might be possessed and entered. The new home is the new world, a place where an earthly Jerusalem is no longer the center, rather, the heavenly Jerusalem, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 12:18-24).