

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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COVENANTAL RAPTURE: PART II

The other night I was teaching a Bible study at the home for unwed mothers sponsored by our church; the topic was the had been teaching on this subject for several weeks, making my way verse by verse through the Scriptures. I always have visitors, but I particularly remember a new single young lady. She came from a local evangelical independent church. She was kind but I could tell from her facial expressions that she was troubled. I couldn't determine whether it was my teaching, indigestion, or some other problem. At several points, however, she tried to take the Bible study off on her own personal tangents.

I wasn't surprised. This often happens with newcomers. Most people understand the nature of a Bible study. They calm down and are willing to wait until after the meeting to ask specific questions. Some can't wait, or so they think. They continue to divert the group.

She did but this particular Bible study group is quite mature. Many of its members are experienced at working with people. A couple in the study knew this young gal fairly well. They picked up on what was happening and added a little humor to lighten the evening. The woman took a hint and backed off.

On this particular night, I can't remember where we were in the book but I had reached a stopping point. As I customarily do, I opened the floor up for questions before closing. The questions had a rather wide range. It was exciting, however, to interact with other Christians about the Word of God. I well until

the new girl asked a question. She said, "Who do you think are the frogs in Revelation 17?" Before I could get out my answer, one of the regulars made a sound like a frog, "Ribit ribit." Everyone thought it was funny. Don't ask me why this individual did it; he just did. It was the first thing that popped out of his mouth, I hate to say, almost like a frog's tongue going after a fly.

Anyway, while various animal sounds rang through the air, I turned to the passage and explained that it says, "like frogs," not actual ones, clarifying the symbolic nature of the text in question. I could tell a note of skepticism on the face of our visitor. I explained further, when suddenly she blurted out, "Do you believe in the rapture?" I suppose she could tell by that point the absence of the standard dispensational approach. I pressed to answer the question. I calmly told her, "I do not believe in a secret rapture of the Church. I only believe in one bodily return of the Lord."

You would have thought I denied the inerrancy of Scripture and the Deity of Christ in the same breath. She abruptly pulled her keys out of her purse and walked out of the Bible study. No comments were made. She just left without saying a word.

Needless to say, everyone was quite stunned. We all

sat there for a moment, saying to each other, "Did she just do what we think she did?" It was briefly quiet. Not a creature was stirring, not even a . . . f reg. After staring back and forth at each other and back and forth from the door where she exited, we all agreed, "Yes she did it. She walked out."

Somewhere along the line, this young lady had been taught, or at least she had picked up, the virtual equivalence of the doctrines of Scripture, Deity of Christ, and the rapture! She thought and lived as though they are equal. Granted, most who believe in a secret rapture would not come right out and say, "You're a heretic if you don't believe in the rapture." But they often act like it in the real church world, such as was the case in my Bible study. The young lady could not handle this minor eschatological difference because she had elevated the rapture issue to a much higher doctrinal status. And I know why.

I can bear testimony to the way dispensational premillennialists are taught. I remember all too well my seminary days and an experience of being instructed at a Messianic Jewish meeting. In both situations the teachers made certain the students understood the primary hermeneutical principle, to wit, Scripture is interpreted literally. They went on to qualify their statement with the near magical word, normal. They added, "Scripture should be interpreted normally in its context." If the context warrants a symbolic rendering, then the text should be interpreted figuratively. If it doesn't then it should not. I thought at the time of the confusion of such a comment.

Christ says, "I am a door" in the Gospel. Does this "Of

literalists hasten to explain. They believe in the importance of context. If the context does not dictate a literal interpretation then the passage should not be interpreted literally; it's that simple. "Normal" interpretation does not require a literal explanation according to this approach. In a way, they adhere to a kind of "normal means normal, you know."

But wait a minute. What about the context of the Gospel? It is historical and narrative in nature. The literature is straight forward. It is not poetic or prophetic, the two highly symbolic types of literature. I would think a strict literal interpretation would be in order. But not so according to the dispensationalists. They would never want to take literally, "I am a door," but they would want to interpret everything in highly symbolic styles of literature (poetic and prophetic) in a literal sense. Does this make sense to you? It never has to me and never will.

Yet, this approach to the Bible explains our young friend's equation of orthodoxy and eschatology. She was taught and put into practice a basic syllogism:

Dispensationalists are literalists
Only literalists fully believe the Bible

Only Dispensationalists believe the Bible
(Only Dispensationalists are orthodox)

I was actually taught this at seminary. The truly orthodox are the dispensationalists because they interpret the Scripture "literally." I am convinced of the centrality of this kind of thinking in the whole dispensational reaction to the present revival of postmillennialism. Why can't Dave Hunt and company simply acknowledge a doctrinal difference? Why do they have to make dispensationalism a test of orthodoxy? Answer: they equate the doctrine of Scripture with the doctrine of eschatology. Mind you, they never make this equation face to face or in a public forum. They know that their hand will be called.

More than simply a fear of being called, I am convinced of their heart-of-heart awareness of the literal hermeneutic problem. They understand that nobody is truly consistent with this approach. Everyone to my knowledge handles those figurative statements of Christ in a symbolic way. Yet, if people are taught that wooden literalism and orthodoxy stand or fall together, they believe that people who interpret the Book of Revelation figuratively are not orthodox. This was the case with the young lady who came to my Bible study and unfortunately this is the case with many in evangelicalism.

The great irony of all of this is that the Bible nowhere teaches or mentions a rapture. As much as dispensationalists hate to be told, there is no exegetical proof. The text will simply not support the notion of a secret escape of the Church! Take a look at the standard commentaries on the books of the Bible where the rapture is supposedly mentioned, for example, Matthew and I Thessalonians. Virtually all of them are written by **non-rapture-believing** people. This ought to say something. Dispensationalists have not been known for their commentaries on Scripture. Why? Their position is exegetically untenable!

Covenantal Problems

Once again, however, my criticisms of the rapture position are covenantal. Dispensationalism commits a covenantal fallacy when it interprets the Bible as teaching a secret removal of the Church from the earth. What is a covenantal fallacy? It is the failure to tie a particular action in Scripture to the covenant. Or, it can be a misapplication of the covenant to a certain action in the text. Rapture theology is a covenantal fallacy because there is no covenantal reason for it.

Consider that the Bible is a covenantal book. It calls what happens before Christ the Old Covenant and what happens after Christ the New Covenant. By the Bible's own language, everything in the text must be *covenantal* in structure and fulfillment.

First, using the covenant structure itself, each passage of Scripture will develop one of the aspects of the covenant: transcendence, hierarchy, ethics, oath, or succession. If the passage has a transcendent emphasis, it will speak of the initiation of a covenant, maybe even a new covenant. If the text is hierarchical in design, it will point to the representative character of the covenant. If the pericope is ethical in nature, it will refer to one or more of God's commandments. If the section of Scripture has an oath focus, it will spell out the sanctions of blessing and cursing. Finally, if the portion of the Bible has a successional flavor, then it will speak of some sort of transfer.

But second, every portion of Scripture **fulfills covenantally** God's original covenantal promise. At the beginning of the Bible, God renews man's covenant by making a new covenant with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3). When He does, He issues a promise in the sanctions portion of the original "new" covenant. I put italics around the word new because

this becomes a promissory covenant that is only the promise of a covenant, not the actual fulfillment of it. Thus, the new covenant did not actually come until Christ fulfilled it, adding another covenantal requirement of interpretation.

The Scripture of the New Testament, most of which is part of the New Covenant (most of the Gospels are not), must in some sense be a fulfillment of what has gone before. It will stand in contrast to the Old Testament (includes most of the Gospels) in its unfulfilled and unable to be fulfilled aspects. It will also present a contrast in the unique way a fulfillment is presented. If some interpretation of Scripture fails either to fit the covenant in one of its aspects or does not reveal fulfillment of the covenant, the concept should be rejected. And from the point of view of the text itself, if a certain passage is being used to develop something that is outside the structure or the fulfillment of the covenant, it is being misinterpreted.

Rapture theology fails conceptually and textually to fit within the covenantal framework of Scripture. It does not satisfy one of the points of the covenant and it in no sense fulfills the promise of the covenant! In *Covenantal Rapture*:

showed conceptual and, textual fallacies of rapture theology in the Old Testament. In //, want to do the same in the New Testament. Let's apply covenantal thinking to the standard passages used by "rapturists" to see the fallacy of their interpretations. This will add a unique slant to other effective studies (Marcellus Kik and David Chilton) on the same passages, particularly Matthew twenty-four.

Covenantal Evaluation of Matthew Twenty-Four

Fulfillment theology sets the parameters of Christ's ministry. He summarized His work, "I did not come to destroy but to fulfill the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 5:19). The word fulfill (**pleroo**) means "to bring to fullest expression." It does not mean static maintenance for this would imply the lack of advancement in the Gospel kingdom. Nor does it indicate total novelty. The tracks are set, in other words, in the Old Testament. The changes that come about are in terms of fulfillment not negation. Thus, Christ did nothing that was outside the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Since Jesus made the statement about, "Coming to fulfill and not to destroy the Old Testament," in the Gospel according to Matthew, the famous "rapture passage" in Matthew twenty-four should be understood in terms of this **covenantal** fulfillment principle. Some "rapturists" may be able to say, "This covenant fulfillment principle is valid in other parts of Scripture but it has to be true of the book in which the covenantal fulfillment occurs." I believe in the need for any interpretation of Scripture, whether the rapture or the Deity of Christ, to be explained as a **covenantal** fulfillment. This is especially true in Matthew because it is one of the central passages for the alleged proof of rapture theology. And it is a focal passage in the very book where Christ lays down the boundaries of His own ministry.

Marcellus Kik has done an especially excellent verse-by-verse study on Matthew twenty-four from a postmillennial perspective. He points out, for example, how the passage must be referring to the first century. He notes Jesus' reference, "this generation will by no means pass away till these things take place" (Matthew 24:34), concluding that this statement ties everything prior to verse thirty-four to the first century. I see no need, therefore, for additional exegetical statements to this end.

I do think, however, that a covenantal analysis of the passage would be helpful, particularly one in which the covenant fulfillment pattern is developed. This is my purpose in the following comments. I will work through the covenant fulfillment of Matthew twenty-four, using the five-fold structure. To do this, I will examine how Christ in this

passage brings to fullest possible expression what was in the Old Testament and compare this with the rapture approach, showing how the latter fails to meet Christ's own "Not to destroy but to fulfill" criterion.

Transcendence (24:1-2)

Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

The disciples raise the issue of the "temple," as they leave with Christ. The text merely says, "The disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple" (24:1). Yet, they did so for a very important reason. They had just heard Christ talk about the destruction of Jerusalem (23:37). They knew the implication. The temple would be destroyed, leading to one very serious problem. Since the temple was the house of God, it represented the place where God dwelt. If it were destroyed, the real transcendent point of tension being raised is, "Where will God dwell?"

The action of the disciples, in other words, is an issue of transcendent concern. Their attention is on the temple. Christ turns their focus away from the temple when He says, "Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (24:3). This is undoubtedly a covenantal statement, as it begins with the common form of an oath, "Assuredly," literally translated, "Amen" from the Greek Amen with a long e. Meredith Kline has observed that this usually begins a covenant statement of some sort. Often Christ will double the amen, saying, "Amen, Amen," translated "Truly, truly." I believe the amen formula starts a covenant sequence. In this case, we can see that Christ opens an entire new discussion with His comment. It is definitely the beginning of a covenant pattern.

Christ actually talks about the removal of transcendence from Israel. God will no longer be walking with them, literally dwelling with them in the temple, which is the historic covenant promise that was given to Israel. The Lord told Nathan to order David,

Go and tell My servant David, "Thus says the Lord: 'Would you build a house for Me to dwell in? For I have not dwelt in a house since the time that I brought the children of Israel up from Egypt, even to this day, but have moved about in a tent and in a tabernacle.'" (II Samuel 5-7)

The temple was the place of the dwelling of God with them. To take it away meant more than removing the building itself. It implied removing God from their midst. It required God to dwell somewhere else. The question is, "Where?"

The announcement of the destruction of the temple was an important covenantal fulfillment. It was the fulfillment of a prophecy given to Amos:

"Yet I will utterly destroy the house of Jacob," says the Lord. "For surely I will command and will sift the house of Israel among the nations, as grain is sifted in a sieve; yet not the smallest grain shall fall to the ground. . . . On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins and rebuild it as in the days of old (Amos 9:8-11).

Notice the two sides of this prophecy. One has to do with the destruction of the former temple. The other points to the raising of a new temple.

This is the sense of covenant fulfillment, showing how the temple will come to its fullest possible expression.

Christ prophesies the same destruction. His prophecy is the fulfillment of the former prophecy. But, He also declares the coming of a new temple in His person. He is the one of whom John says, "The Word became flesh and dwelt [literally in the Greek, tabernacled] among us" (John 1:14). Christ is the New Temple.

More significantly, James at the Jerusalem Council applies Amos' prophecy to the time of the Gentiles in the New Covenant. Over a dispute about the requirements for saved Gentiles, he interprets Amos with the following paraphrase:

After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up. So that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things (Acts 15:16-17).

Compare Amos' original statements above with James' divinely inspired interpretation/paraphrase. James clearly interprets the time of the first century as the fulfillment of Amos, because the Gentiles are coming to the rebuilt temple.

So the question is, if the Amos prophecy has been fulfilled with regard to the Gentiles' coming into the new temple, what is the new temple and when was it rebuilt? The only answer can be Christ and the establishment of the Church. It is significant that the sequence of events around the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles at Pentecost follow the same series of actions when Shekinah Glory filled the newly built Temple of Solomon (cf. Acts 2 with 1 Kings 8). The Church is the extension of the New Temple, Christ.

Thus, Christ destroys the former temple but brings the old to the fullest possible expression in His Incarnation. This completely destroys the rationale for a rapture, to wit, that the Church must be removed from the earth so that Israel can be restored, rebuild the temple, reclaim the land, and renew the sacrifices. This is absurd, a direct denial of the Book of Hebrews which categorically teaches the cessation of the old sacrificial system at the first coming of Christ (Hebrews 9-10). The point is simple: When Christ becomes the final sacrifice there is no need for any other sacrifice. This dashes the need for ridiculous searches for the former temple and its furniture, even down to the ashes of the red heifer. To seek the old is to deny the new. There is no need for the old! There is no possible covenantal purpose. The covenant reason for the destruction of the old and the establishment of the new in Christ is the only way the fulfillment principle of the covenant can be satisfied. Only Christ can bring the old to its fullest expression, not the physical rebuilding of it.

Hierarchy

. . . . And Jesus answered them, "Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. . . . Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many (Matthew 24:3-11).

The second section of the Olivet Discourse turns to the issue of covenantal representatives. Christ warns the disciples about those who will claim to be false Christs as well as false prophets. This is a hierarchical theme in the covenant. It appears to be predominant in this part of the discourse. More importantly, it is also a specific covenant fulfillment. The prophet Jeremiah says,

"Therefore behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who steal My words every one from his neighbor. Behold, I am against the prophets," says the Lord, "who use their tongues and say, 'He says.' Behold, I am against those who prophesy false dreams," says the Lord, "and tell them, and cause My people to err by

them or command them; therefore they shall not profit this people at all," says the Lord (Jeremiah 23:28-32).

Jesus prophesies the ultimate fulfillment of this passage. He warns of those who will do the same shortly before the coming of Christ in judgment. He also brings to the fullest expression, however, the prophet. He actually declares the end of all prophecy when it comes to His coming. He is the only one who can predict His coming. Anyone else is a false prophet. He is the fullest expression of prophecy, explaining why prophecy with a capital "P" comes to an end with Him (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Furthermore, He makes a particularly relevant point to those who speak of secret comings of Christ. Later in the passage, Jesus returns to the false prediction theme when He says, "Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the **desert**!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it" (Matthew 24:26). This is dangerously close to the rapturists who speak of a secret removal of the Church from the earth. Their view cannot be, because Jesus indirectly condemns such a position in His discourse. **Covenantal** prophets do not make predictions of a secret character or occurrence because the nature of their office is a public declaration that can be publicly evaluated. Why would the prophecy and the event have to be public? The law required false prophets to be held publicly accountable (Deuteronomy 18). Thus, secret fulfillment of a prophecy is a complete violation of the law of covenantal fulfillment!

Ethics

And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. . . . "Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place". (Matthew 24:12-15).

The third part of the Olivet discourse addresses issues pertaining to the law, the ethics section of the Biblical covenant. Christ declares that the law of God will be fulfilled on all of those associated with the temple. This is consistent with His previous statement not to "abolish the Law and Prophets" (Matthew 5:19), confirming the continuity of the Law of God after the Resurrection. As a matter of fact, Christ guarantees by the Word of His mouth that the "love of many will grow cold because of lawlessness. "

Further, He specifically says the "abomination of desolation" will be fulfilled in the first century. How so? He has just assured that the temple would be destroyed stone by stone. And we have seen that the New Temple to be built is Christ. Thus, the "abomination of desolation" can only be committed in the old temple.

Oath

. . . . For wherever the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together. Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, . . . Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the

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The fourth section of the Olivet discourse bears the markings of the oath/sanctions themes of the Deuteronomic covenant. Christ gives special "woe" warnings to those who are unable to flee rapidly out of Jerusalem when judgment comes, the "woe" word being one of the key indicators throughout Scripture of an oath segment.

Most significant, however, is the special Deuteronomic covenant fulfillment in this section. In the sanctions portion of Deuteronomy, the text refers to a specific judgment on violators of the covenant: "Your carcasses shall be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and no one shall frighten them away" (Deuteronomy 28:26). As Christ moves through His discourse, He apparently tracks the Deuteronomic covenant, even referring to the specific scavenger judgment. He says, "For where the carcass is, there the eagles will be gathered together" (24:28). The unique covenant fulfillment of this statement is that Christ applies the fulfillment of a **Deuteronomic** curse in the era of the New Covenant. Christ does this. He is the one who therefore fulfills the Deuteronomic covenant on the same people to whom the original Mosaic covenant was made in the generation of His day, making the rapture theory covenantally inconsistent.

Succession

And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matthew 24:31).

The final section of the Olivet discourse speaks of an important covenantal transfer, as does the last part of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 30-34). An earlier parable of Jesus explains this passage (Matthew 22:2-14). He told of a wedding feast where the king invited guests to his son's marriage. When they wouldn't come, he sent armies to kill them. He then invited new guests from outside the natural and established order, those beyond the nobility. In other words, he found new heirs for his kingdom.

Christ told this parable before the Olivet discourse. He prepared His listeners for the covenant fulfillment of new heirs. How was this done? He kept old promises to new people, fulfilling the great covenant of Hosea. God told the ancient prophet to call a people who were not His people (**Lo-Ammi**, Hosea 1 :9), "sons of the living God" (Hosea 1 :10). Israel forgot this principle. God reminded them when He raised up Gentiles in their place, bringing the fullest possible expression of the covenant given to Abraham.

Rapture theology violates this important covenant fulfillment. It does not recognize a transfer of the old promises to new people. It rejects the teaching of the parable of the wedding feast. It therefore does not do justice to the Biblical covenant of Scripture. According to the rapture position, the Gentiles come into the covenant but they do not become the true wedding guests. They are only temporarily allowed at the feast until the rapture takes them away and allows the original guests who were murdered to come back and be the true heirs. In conclusion, the rapture position undermines the great truth of covenant fulfillment in Matthew twenty-four and throughout Scripture.