

ESCHATOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

PART 44

THE COVENANTS, PART 4

The Lord implied the throne would be vacant for a period of time He called the times of the Gentiles (Luke 21:24). He will assume this throne only upon His Second Coming; He is at this time sitting on the Father's throne at His right hand awaiting the time decreed by the Father for His return. The time of His return is set to end at the conclusion of the times of the Gentiles. Sitting next to the Father on His throne is not the throne of David which is on earth in Jerusalem, Israel. Many theologians, including progressive dispensationalists, believe Christ is ruling from the Davidic throne at this time but there is no throne and no King present to sit on that throne at this time.

Luke 21:24 ²⁴... and will be led captive into all the nations; and Jerusalem will be trampled under foot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

Constable defines the times of the Gentiles this way: "Jesus taught that the Jews would experience domination by Gentile powers during 'the times of the Gentiles' (Luke 21:24), namely, from the time Gentiles assumed sovereignty over Israel's affairs (Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Jerusalem 586 B.C.) until Jesus Christ restored sovereignty to Israel (i.e., when He returns to rule at His second advent). Even though the present State of Israel enjoys a limited measure of sovereignty, Gentiles still dominate its affairs, and a Davidic king is not leading it. However, the privilege of ruling over Israel as king would always belong to David's descendants." [Thomas L. Constable, *Thomas Constable's Notes on the Bible*, "2 Samuel," p. 243].

There is no doubt the Gentile world still dominates Israel and its affairs. It is constantly under assault from Gentiles whether it be in the form of armed conflict or Islamic terrorist acts or in the form of anti-Semitic persecution of the Jewish people from Gentiles, governments, and the United Nations. The Temple Mount is under the control of Moslems. There are five elements to the Davidic Covenant some of which are underway but none of which have been completely fulfilled. God must preserve Israel as a nation and that nation must be in the land. Jesus Christ is to rule over that nation in the land as her Davidic King. His throne will be on earth in Jerusalem and His kingdom is a Kingdom on earth. All of these elements will be everlasting. It is only logical to presume the Davidic Covenant has yet to be fulfilled because these elements of Covenant fulfillment are not now present. That does not mean the Covenant has not been inaugurated; it simply means it has yet to be fulfilled.

David and the Jewish people certainly understood the throne to be literal and located in Israel. Mary would not have thought any differently when Gabriel told her the son

would sit on His father David's throne. God Himself guaranteed the literal truth of the Davidic Covenant; therefore, it must come to pass as presented in Scripture.

Chafer wrote this: "Here the observation may be made that David himself believed this promise was of an earthly throne, which would not be located in heaven then or ever. It would be difficult to begin, as one so inclined must do, with David's own understanding or interpretation of Jehovah's covenant with him and then, in tracing subsequent relations between Jehovah and David's line, to find a point where the literal, earthly throne promised to David becomes a spiritual throne, and the one who contends that David's throne is now a heavenly rule is by so much obliged to name the time and circumstances when and where so great a change has been introduced." [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 4:323-324]. The irony of this is that Chafer's seminary, Dallas Theological Seminary, is largely staffed with professors who teach that Jesus is ruling now on the Davidic throne.

Making the claim of Davidic Kingdom existence now requires a reinterpretation of the Old Testament prophecies and honest theologians will admit that. They also have to resort to partial fulfillment now awaiting complete fulfillment in the future. This is referred to as "already, not yet." George Eldon Ladd represents this very common view.

"The exaltation of Jesus to the right hand of God means nothing less than his enthronement as messianic king. Peter concludes his first sermon with the affirmation, 'God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:36)... [T]he immediate context makes it clear that Peter means to say that Jesus has entered in upon a new stage of his messianic mission. He has now been enthroned as messianic king.... In other words, the new redemptive events in the course of [salvation history] have compelled Peter to reinterpret the Old Testament. Because of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, Peter transfers the messianic Davidic throne from Jerusalem to God's right hand in heaven. Jesus has now been enthroned as the Davidic Messiah on the throne of David, and is awaiting the final consummation of his messianic reign.... [I]n his exaltation Jesus becomes the Messiah in a new sense: he has begun his messianic reign as the Davidic king. This involves a rather radical reinterpretation of the Old Testament prophecies, but no more so than the entire reinterpretation of God's redemptive plan by the early church. In fact, it is an essential part of this reinterpretation demanded by the events of redemptive history. If the first stage of the eschatological resurrection has taken place, then the messianic age has begun and the messianic blessings have been given because the Messiah has already begun his reign. However, here, as in the other eschatological features of the kerygma, there remains something for the future. Jesus is enthroned as the Messiah, but his reign is not complete.... The consummation of his victory still stands in the future. He is reigning, but his enemies are not yet subdued. This is why Peter later spoke about a future coming of the Messiah to accomplish the establishment of all that God promised. Jesus is the Messiah; he is reigning; the messianic age with its blessings is present. But he is waiting a future victory; the consummation of his reign awaits his future coming. Fulfillment-consummation: such

is the tension in the eschatological system." [George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 372-373].

He bases much of this on a faulty interpretation of Acts 2:36 which is simply a proclamation to Israel that Jesus is the Messiah and that He is God; Israel rejected no less than God when they rejected Christ as King. Ladd claims he is simply following Peter's lead in reinterpreting the Old Testament. Nothing could be further from the truth! Peter would be horrified to think that his words could possibly be understood as negating the Old Testament. It has nothing to do with Jesus reigning on the Davidic throne which the gospels clearly reveal has been postponed. Ladd's major presupposition is that God's plan for history is the redemption of mankind; therefore, everything is about man's salvation. He frequently alluded to the concept of the already, not yet structure of his theology. Ladd made many exegetically unsupported statements as though they are settled fact, but they are not. They are made up to support his theology. His theology is also affected by postmillennial Eschatology. This is a prime example of a theologian who does not understand God's Kingdom program for history.

Believe it or not, the so-called progressive dispensationalists are not uncomfortable with Ladd's theology. They too redefine the Old Testament Scriptures only they call their hermeneutical method complementary hermeneutics. They would deny that they are reinterpreting the Old Testament as Ladd admits; they would say progressive revelation allows them to expand the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures. They believe the King is now ruling from the Davidic throne. The path to Christ ruling now on the Davidic throne goes through Acts 2 for them just as it did for Ladd. Because Peter quoted some Scripture concerning the King from Psalms, progressive dispensationalists claim the New Testament adds people to the Old Testament Covenants, namely the people of the body of Christ. That's not correct; we have been grafted into the place of Covenant blessing, but we have not been added to the Covenants as a people. The promise of blessing has always been present. Not only do they add people, they place the Kingdom in heaven when the Davidic Covenant specifically reveals it is to be placed on earth. That's how their complementary hermeneutic works; they add to and enlarge Old Testament Scriptures all the while claiming they are not changing the meaning. That's a fairy tale, but that's what they say. They have already abandoned the *sine qua non* which is the foundation of dispensational theology and I believe it is only a matter of time before they abandon dispensationalism and embrace Covenant Theology.

When I say progressive dispensationalists have abandoned the *sine qua non* [Latin: without which nothing] of dispensational theology, I mean they do not see the sharp distinction between Israel and the church that dispensational theology has always maintained. Instead, they have embraced the Calvinist concept that the two have become one in the church, however, they also claim that Israel will enjoy the Covenant promises in a literal Messianic Kingdom. That does not seem to be consistent. They have also abandoned literal hermeneutics although they would argue they have simply

become more refined in how their hermeneutical system works. The fact is, their complementary hermeneutic is a repudiation of literal hermeneutics. They also claim all other theological systems also use literal hermeneutics; therefore, that is not a distinguishing characteristic of dispensationalism. Obviously, I reject that assertion. If I've proven anything at all over the course of teaching systematic theology, I've proven that most theological systems use their theology as the basis for their interpretation of the Bible and they do not use literal hermeneutics much at all especially when using literal hermeneutics disproves their theology. Progressive dispensationalists have also abandoned the idea that the purpose of history is to glorify God and they have accepted the concept that God's purpose for history is the redemption of mankind. This is a serious departure from dispensational theology. They claim they are simply refining dispensational theology, but they have changed the basis for the system by abandoning the foundational principles and therefore they have created a new theological system that is more in line with Reformed Theology—and Reformed theologians are delighted with these changes.

The last biblical covenant to examine is the New Covenant. Reformed theologians place this covenant under the authority of their theological covenant of grace which means it applies to the church because the church was in the Old Testament under this covenant of grace. Amillennialists apply the New Covenant to the church and thereby replace Israel with the church which destroys the literal understanding of a Messianic Kingdom. "Who are these new covenant people? According to the author of Hebrews, they are the members of Christ's church. Couched in the pre-messianic context of Jeremiah's prophecy, the houses of Israel and Judah are typological of the church. This is another clear-cut case of an Old Testament prophecy which is fulfilled in the church, the members of which are the spiritual seed of Abraham through faith in Jesus Christ." [Riddlebarger, p. 54]. Notice the reliance this amillennialist places on the book of Hebrews to support his theology that the New Covenant belongs to the church. The problem is, they don't understand that Hebrews is a warning letter to Jews who are contemplating returning to Judaism in order to avoid persecution prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. They assume the author of Hebrews is affirming the move of the New Covenant from Israel to the church. For them, the church is the New Israel of God and Israel the nation no longer exists.

What is the purpose of Hebrews 8:8-11 in repeating the New Covenant? Is it telling us that the church is fulfilling this Covenant? No. The context of this part of the epistle is showing the Jews the old covenant was never meant to be permanent because the prophets predicted it would be replaced. Jeremiah specifically presents that truth in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This quote is not revealing the replacement of Israel by the church and it is not suggesting the church is fulfilling the New Covenant today. [Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Ariel's Bible Commentary: The Messianic Jewish Epistles: Hebrews-James, I & II Peter, Jude*, pp. 110-112].

When Replacement theologians write commentaries on Hebrews, you can see the influence that the doctrine of the church fulfilling the New Covenant has on their interpretation and on their theology. They use it to prove Lordship salvation as defined by the Calvinist doctrine of perseverance of the saints. The reasoning is if believers are under the New Covenant, then God must be writing the law on their hearts and they will all intrinsically know these laws; therefore, they have to persevere. They must persevere because if they fail, they could not have been saved in the first place. Here's what that looks like: "It [the New Covenant] will overcome the sin problem that deterred God's people from persevering under the first covenant." [Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 364]. One might be tempted to ask, "How's that working out for you today?" It is that easy to slip into serious soteriological error based on the church replacing Israel and assuming the New Covenant. This is clearly a Lordship salvation interpretation. He is saying that true believers have the law sovereignly and divinely written on their hearts so they must persevere because God will insure it. It is also easy to see this is impossible at this time; no believer is able to completely overcome the sin nature and it takes only one sin to fall short. This sets up an impossible standard to meet based on the fact they think the church is under the New Covenant now. Even when the New Covenant is finally realized in the Messianic Kingdom, people will still sin, but provisions will be made for dealing with it. Ezekiel clearly says there will be sin offerings in the Kingdom. It is reasonable to conclude sin will be much more in check during the Kingdom and righteousness will be widespread but real people with real sin natures will need to confess personal sins and be restored to fellowship.

On the cusp of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and Judah and the resultant exile for seventy years, God had Jeremiah write the prophecy of the New Covenant. Jeremiah 31:31–34³¹"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. ³³"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴"They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

This wasn't completely new, however. At least as far back as Deuteronomy 30:6 it was hinted at. This is not the New Covenant, but it is a clue about what God is going to do in the future concerning the nation of Israel in conjunction with returning them to the land.

Deuteronomy 30:6 ⁶“Moreover the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

After the New Covenant was revealed by Jeremiah, during the exile in Babylon Ezekiel also referred to it.

Ezekiel 36:24–27 ²⁴“For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. ²⁵“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. ²⁶“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷“I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.

Throughout the history of the church, Replacement Theology has presumed the doctrine that Israel forfeited the New Covenant and it now belongs to the church.

One theologian not only applies the New Covenant to the church, he also somehow applies works to the Christian life as part of the New Covenant and a requirement for justification salvation. This theologian claims that works, obedience, and faithfulness are an explicit component of the New Covenant. “My argument is that in the new covenant, works are a God-elicited and *necessary* part of the life of the converted person, a constant theme in the New Testament... [cites numerous verses here]. In short, ‘works’ are ‘necessary’ for salvation because part of the ‘newness’ of the new covenant is actual, grace-induced and grace-elicited obedience by true members of the new covenant. When the New Testament documents are read against Old Testament texts such as Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:22-29, this obedience is seen as a promised component of the new covenant.... [T]here are solid biblical grounds for affirming a biblical theology of grace-filled and grace-elicited works, obedience and faithfulness as essential components of membership in the new covenant—that is, of being a Christian.” [Bradley G. Green, *Covenant and Commandment: Works, obedience and faithfulness in the Christian life*, pp. 17-18]. There is not one word in either the Jeremiah or the Ezekiel passages which he cited that says one word about works, obedience, or faithfulness. To link works with the New Covenant, even in regards to Israel, is an egregious abuse of the Scriptures. The point of the New Covenant is that it is a gracious work of God completely apart from works. He also removes the Covenant from Israel and completely gives it over to the church. Ezekiel 36 doesn't mention it, but faith is a requirement for God to bring the Jews back into the land, but faith is never a work so that doesn't strengthen this man's argument at all.

Progressive dispensationalists have merged Israel and the church into one people of God which they claim means the church is a participant in the New Covenant without abrogating the promise to restore Israel to the land. “The discussion above lends support for the conclusion that Israel and the church are in one sense a *united people*

of God (they participate in the same new covenant), while in another sense they remain separate in their identity and so comprise *differing peoples* of God. (Israel is given territorial and political aspects of the new-covenant promise not applicable to the church.) Israel and the church are in fact one people of God, who together share in the forgiveness of sins through Christ and partake of his indwelling Spirit with its power for covenant faithfulness, while they are nonetheless distinguishable covenant participants comprising what is one unified people." [Bruce Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, pp. 96-97].

Within dispensational theology, there have been differences over the relationship of the church to the New Covenant.

John Nelson Darby believed the New Covenant was made for Israel and it will not be in effect until the Second Coming and the church bears no relationship to it at all. The church is not a legal party to the Covenant Walvoord said Darby believed "the church is related only to the *blood* of the new covenant—the gracious ground of the new covenant, rather than the covenant itself." [John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 218]. Cone may have most accurately presented Darby's view. "[H]e believed the church to be totally unrelated to the New Covenant, yet having a relationship with the One who ratified the New Covenant." [Christopher Cone, *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, p. 82]. Dr. Cone refers to Darby's view as the Single Covenant Israel Only view.

Arno Gaebelein believed the New Covenant was made only with Israel in the same way the old covenant, the Mosaic, that was replaced by the New Covenant was made only with Israel. The old covenant was a Law covenant and the New Covenant is a grace covenant. Because the prophecy of New Covenant blessing is as yet unfulfilled, Israel is not enjoying the Covenant at this time.

Scotfield's note on Hebrews 8:8 makes it sound as though the New Covenant applies to the church. "The New Covenant rests upon the sacrifice of Christ, and secures the eternal blessedness, under the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:13-29), of all who believe." [Scotfield Reference Bible]. This also makes it sound as though Israel is already enjoying the promises of the New Covenant. Scotfield apparently didn't write about this issue, so it is unclear just where he stood on it. Sometimes, he wrote in ways that suggested things he really didn't hold. Whether this is one of those incidents or not, is uncertain. Ryrie said that Scotfield held to one covenant with two aspects, one applicable to Israel and one applicable to the church. "These have been called the realistic and spiritual aspects of the covenant, but both aspects comprise essentially one covenant based on the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ." [Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 90-91]. Scotfield's view is referred to as the Single Covenant Multiple Partners understanding of the New Covenant.

Allis, a critic of dispensational theology, provides an example of why some dispensationalists devised the doctrine of two new covenants (more on that below) because he used Scofield's words to discredit dispensationalism. Allis seems to think that because dispensationalists might see a connection between the New Covenant and the church that is an admission that the New Covenant is fulfilled in the church. "That Scofield should appeal to a long passage in Galatians which deals with the status of the Gentiles in the Christian Church and concludes with the words: 'And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise,' is as clear an admission as anyone could ask of the fact that the new covenant relates to the Christian Church; and the fact that this admission is made by a leading Dispensationalist makes it all the more significant. It is difficult to read Scofield's note without finding in it a practical admission that the new covenant is fulfilled in and to the Church." Allis also claims the New Covenant as revealed by Jeremiah is a presentation of the gospel in the Old Testament. [Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy & the Church*, pp. 154-155].

This is why it is so important for dispensational theologians to articulate a solid understanding of the biblical Covenants, how they are related to one another, to Israel, and to the church, and how they are applied in this age.

Harry Ironside believed the New Covenant belonged only to Israel but the church has a relationship to it through the blood of Christ. Christians therefore enjoy the blessings of the Covenant without becoming a legal party to it.

Chafer held a view of the New Covenant that is without merit and has been fairly discredited within dispensationalism but not without causing a lot of problems for dispensational theology in general. Chafer wanted so desperately to maintain the Israel/church, heavenly/earthly dichotomy that he decided there were two new covenants, one for the church and one for Israel. "There remains to be recognized a heavenly covenant for the heavenly people, which is also styled like the preceding one for Israel a 'new covenant.' It is made in the blood of Christ (cf. Mark 14:24) and continues in effect throughout this age, whereas the new covenant made with Israel happens to be future in its application. To suppose that these two covenants—one for Israel and one for the Church—are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God's purpose for Israel and His purpose for the Church. Israel's covenant, however, is new only because it replaces the Mosaic, but the Church's covenant is new because it introduces that which is God's mysterious and unrelated purpose. Israel's new covenant rests specifically on the sovereign 'I will' of Jehovah, while the new covenant for the Church is made in Christ's blood. Everything that Israel will yet have, to supply another contrast, is the present possession of the Church—and infinitely more." [Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 7:98-99]. Chafer's definition is called the Multiple New Covenant view.

Ryrie, a student of Chafer, also held to the two covenant view, one for Israel and one for the church. Ryrie's purpose, as was Chafer's, was to preserve the church/Israel

distinction. He believed that without the doctrine of two new covenants, premillennialism was weakened; conversely, two new covenants strengthened dispensational theology. [Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 89-104].

Walvoord, also a student of Chafer, held Chafer's two covenant view [John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, p. 218].

Pentecost had what I would consider the standard view that the New Covenant will only be fulfilled in and with Israel at the beginning of the Messianic Kingdom while recognizing the church has a relationship to it. "[T]he new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 must and can be fulfilled only by the nation Israel and not by the church. Since this was a literal covenant made with the physical seed of Abraham, any relationship of the church to the blood required by that covenant can not change the essential promises of God in the covenant itself. Apart from any relationship of the church to this blood, the covenant stands as yet unfulfilled and awaits a future literal fulfillment." [J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology*, pp. 124-125].

A few years ago, Dr. Cone edited a book suggesting the church has no relationship to the New Covenant whatsoever and is therefore not participating in the blessings of the New Covenant. His motivation was the preservation of literal hermeneutics; he believes it is inconsistent to interpret the Bible teaching any connection with a covenant that is expressly made with Israel and with Judah. "After spending several years researching, writing, and teaching on the literal grammatical-historical method, I began to be aware of some inconsistencies in my own understanding of Scripture. Most prominent, in my estimation, was my understanding that the church was somehow enjoying present blessings of the New Covenant. As I began to examine the covenants more closely I concluded that I had missed some important Biblical concepts in drawing a connection between the New Covenant and the church. I became convinced that such a connection could not be exegetically justified if the literal grammatical-historical method was consistently employed..." [Christopher Cone, *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, p. ix]. Certainly, Dr. Cone is correct when he says we must uphold the integrity of literal hermeneutics, but I think Dr. Cone overstates the case and understanding the Covenants and how they are moving through history before the Messianic Kingdom begins coupled with progressive revelation will allow us to understand the connection between the New Covenant and the church.

Part of Cone's problem as he sees it is the idea that the church now possesses some of the blessings of the New Covenant but its fulfillment with Israel awaits the arrival of the Messianic Kingdom, which he claims supports the "already/not yet" hermeneutic of Covenant Theology and progressive dispensationalism that has been created by those systems. "The problem of consistency is readily apparent: how can one apply the "already not yet" to the new covenant and yet argue that it should not be applied to the Davidic covenant?" [Christopher Cone, "Hermeneutical Ramifications of Applying

the New Covenant to the Church: An Appeal to Consistency" in *Journal of Dispensational Theology*, 13, no. 40 (Dec. 2009), 15]. If the Bible applies the blessings of the New Covenant to the church, then Cone's argument is rendered moot and his concern is misplaced. Perhaps we are also being blessed by aspects of the Davidic Covenant right now without assuming the King is ruling from the Davidic throne right now? Perhaps we are being blessed right now by the Abrahamic Covenant without Israel realizing the complete and final fulfillment of the land promise at this time? Perhaps we need to reassess how the church relates to all the Covenants in this dispensation and then perhaps this conundrum about whether the church is blessed now by the New Covenant will be resolved.

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