

The Problem With Covenant Theology

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Anyone who spends much time reading the Bible will quickly realize that when Scripture is taken at face value it unmistakably teaches a *pre*-millennial return of Christ. In fact, the eastern church (now referred to as the Greek Orthodox Church) for a period of time excluded the Book of Revelation from its New Testament Canon because they had rejected premillennialism and they could find no way to reconcile the teaching of Revelation with their non-premillennial view. So, how do some interpreters get amillennialism out of the Bible? The answer is “They don’t” – because it isn’t there – but the millennium is, so they have to utilize a process in which the biblical truth of the millennium can be re-interpreted to be compatible with their non-premillennial view. They accomplish this through the mechanism of “Covenant Theology,” or covenantalism.

What is Covenant Theology?

We’ll look at the history of Covenant Theology in a moment, but it’s important first to understand what Covenant Theology “is.” The Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of the visible earthly kingdom of God has been dominated by amillennialism from the fifth century. [Amillennialism is the view that we are presently living in the millennium, but it takes a highly allegorized (non-literal) view of the millennial aspect of the kingdom, with Christ ruling from Heaven, rather than from the earth. Amillennialism (and postmillennialism) both view the second coming of Christ as occurring at the end of the millennium.] At the time of the reformation the validity of amillennialism was not questioned. The reformation was predominately about salvation. Sadly, the reformers failed to recognize, or at least failed to give due consideration to the strong connections between the doctrines of salvation and eschatology. Without the authoritarian voice of the Roman Catholic Church dictating amillennialism to be “true,” the reformed churches found themselves holding a position that could not be supported strictly from the Bible; they needed some kind of biblical and theological basis to support the reformed version of amillennialism.

The reformed theologians were smart enough to realize that amillennialism could not be supported from any type of consistently “normal” biblical interpretation, because the Bible, when interpreted normally, presents a clear and resolutely premillennial view of the return of Christ. (For further information on premillennialism see *The Biblical Basis of Premillennialism*, by the author, online at www.biblicalreader.com.) When Augustine introduced amillennialism into the western church in the fifth century, he had to use a “dual hermeneutical (interpretive) system” – applying non-literal interpretation to any passages for which the literal interpretation contradicted amillennialism – of course, from a logical

standpoint this was a backwards process. The problem for the reformed churches was how to justify the seemingly arbitrary use of allegorization in order to arrive at amillennialism, especially while interpreting other Scriptures normally. The reformed amillennialists realized that this gave the impression of an "ad hoc" (and highly "biased") theology, and they quickly realized what they had to do to solve this problem. If they couldn't prove amillennialism from within the Bible through a biblical theology developed from consistently normal interpretation (*i.e.*, the same methodology used to interpret other passages of Scripture), they would have to adjust the theological context of the Bible so as to give them "justification" to allegorize unfulfilled prophecy (future prophecy). Naturally, this could only be done from outside the Bible. (In mathematical terms this would be called a "fudge factor;" in cards it would be called "stacking the deck" – in either case the end result is predetermined and the process is adjusted to lead to that result.) The idea was that when they came to passages that were inconsistent with amillennialism (their pre-concluded endpoint), they would have a reason for not taking those passages at face value. I don't say this to impute any ill motives; these were men who believed amillennialism to be true, after all it had been the doctrine of the Roman Church for a thousand years, and they were attempting to work out its justification – even if they had to stretch the limits of sound reason to do it. Unfortunately, as is the case with most "backward processes," (*i.e.*, rationalizations) they invariably lead to a false sense of reality. (There is a profound difference between "rationalization," and rationality). Thus, reformed theologians invented the tri-covenantal system, which allowed them to adjust the theological context of the Bible just enough to "nudge" premillennialism out of the Bible so they could rationalize their own view (amillennialism).

In the tri-covenantal scheme (the supposed covenants of "redemption," "works," and "grace") form the extra-biblical (presuppositional) context upon which all covenantal interpretation of the Bible is based. The process is effectuated in the following manner. First the covenantalist subsumes all redemptive history under an imaginary covenant called the "covenant of grace," and having done so, he uses that as a pretext to minimize any distinctions in the work of God within redemptive history – after all, that history (he claims) falls under the singular "covenant of grace" – therefore (he assumes) the work of God in redemptive history is uniform. In the mind of the covenantalist, this erases, or at least minimalizes, any distinction between "Israel," to whom the kingdom promises were made, and "the Church." The minimalization of the Church's distinct identity, separate from Israel, is then used to justify the notion that the Church is merely a New Testament form of Israel – a "new" Israel – or possibly a substitute, or replacement for Israel, since the Jewish nation rejected their Messiah (actually both positions have been argued); in the process, the distinctions between the Old Testament economy and the New Testament economy are also characteristically dissolved. Of course the Church is not an ethnic and geopolitical entity and therefore cannot inherit Israel's promises in

any literal sense, so the covenantalist (based upon all of the assumptions made so far) justifies the necessity of employing a non-literal method of interpretation to explain how he imagines the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to the Church.

While the suppositional “covenant of grace” gives a pretext to the covenantal interpreter for denying a literal interpretation to premillennial prophecies, it doesn’t provide any guidance as to how those prophecies ought to be re-interpreted; as such, the covenantal suppositions provide only part of what’s needed to arrive at amillennialism (or postmillennialism). The covenantalist has to make up the interpretive content as he goes, and he does this through the process of “spiritualization” (allegorization) – but hopefully if enough interpreters agree on what the prophecies “mean,” perhaps no one will notice that there is absolutely no objective basis for these interpretations at all – the reason being that there are no hard and fast rules for allegorical interpretation – it’s an inherently subjective process. When one allegorizes, he is saying that the text doesn’t mean what it says; therefore, where does the interpreter get the “spiritualized meaning” from? Naturally if it doesn’t come from the text, there’s only one other place it can come from – from the interpreter’s own mind (conditioned with his own theological pre-conclusions). Covenant Theology, like many other false views of reality conceals its “fudge factor” in its presuppositional basis. Since most people, even many Bible interpreters, never venture there, the result is that if one accepts the presuppositional starting point (*i.e.*, that based on the “covenant of grace” there is only one people of God) covenantal interpretation appears logical to a point, and even the “spiritualization” seems to be necessary – even if fraught with subjectivity.

Covenantalists have written extensively seeking to justify the covenantal system. It’s too bad Peter, Paul, and John didn’t know anything about Covenant Theology – perhaps they would have been able to understand what they wrote! In fact, this is precisely what Covenant Theology implies – that without the covenantal frame of reference one can’t really understand what the Bible teaches on the subject of unfulfilled prophecy. If prophecy that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled according to a literal pattern (and is usually interpreted normally/literally), on what basis do covenantalists argue that unfulfilled prophecy is to be allegorized, especially since all prophecy was unfulfilled at one time? If covenantalists apply a literal hermeneutic to prophecies of Christ’s first advent, how do they justify applying a different hermeneutic to His second advent simply because it has not yet occurred? The answer is that Covenant Theology is not really “interpretive,” it’s nothing more than a pretext for denying the clearly premillennial teachings of the Bible.

Covenantalists tend to reason from the tri-covenantal basis rather than from the biblical covenants (*i.e.*, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants). This is necessary for the covenantalist because a study of the biblical covenants apart from the covenantal presuppositional “filter” supports only a

premillennial view of the coming of Christ and of the kingdom. Covenantalists have sweated bullets to try to find even one explicit reference to any of the three suppositional covenants, but have never been able to provide anything more than weak inferential arguments.

What is Dispensationalism?

Dispensational premillennialism stands in stark contrast to Covenantalism. Dispensationalism (at its core) is a biblical theology – as opposed to a presuppositional theology; it simply takes Scripture at face value and applies the same interpretive principles to all Scripture – whether prophecy or not, whether fulfilled or not. When that is done, without the influence of a covenant presuppositional theology, it is apparent that God has revealed Himself and His truth to man under varying “economies” in biblical history (in man’s innocence in the garden, in the pre-Law economy, under the Mosaic economy, and in the present Church economy). Not only that, but the Bible indicates that there is yet another economy to come – the millennium – in which Christ will personally rule as King. Dispensationalists maintain that in order for Scripture to be properly understood, the events and statements made in the Bible must be understood in the light of these economies (usually referred to as “dispensations”), which are simply part of the natural landscape of biblical history.

It is important to remember that Dispensationalism is based upon a biblical theology, rather than a presuppositional theology – that is, it is based upon observations that come *from* Scripture, not a theological framework imposed *upon* Scripture; Dispensationalism simply recognizes and gives due consideration to the existing biblical landscape. In other words, unlike covenantalists, dispensationalists don’t claim to know more than the original authors of the Bible. On the other hand if Covenant Theology is true, most of the biblical writers couldn’t have understood their own statements, since they did not yet have the “light” of covenantal theology to guide them. (Can we really imagine some dear departed covenantal scholar in Heaven trying to convince the Apostle John that what he wrote in Revelation doesn’t mean what it says, and can only be properly understood when interpreted through the filter of sixteenth-century covenant theology?)

While Dispensationalism is fairly recent – less than three hundred years old – it merely represents a return to the premillennialism of the New Testament, and as such is nothing more than a restatement of what the New Testament writers and the early church believed; it simply beckons a return to a normal/literal understanding of Scripture, interpreted within its own theological context rather than the artificial context of sixteenth century Covenantalism. The usual ploy of covenantalists in arguing against Dispensationalism is to find some obscure statement, or misstatement – of which all theological history is replete – and to generalize it as a theological fault of Dispensationalism – painting an incorrect and negative picture of

Dispensationalism. Such tactics are intended to divert attention away from the serious shortcomings of covenantalism. (This is the reason I have resisted the temptation to critique the theological foibles of individual covenantalists.)

In the following pages I'll give a brief history of the major views of the millennium, and explain why allegorical interpretation leads to confusion regarding the meaning of prophecy. Finally, I'll make the case for the consistent use of the normal/literal method of interpretation for all Scripture, both prophetic and non-prophetic.

A Brief History of Millennial Views

As was said before, the early Church was premillennial; that is to say, they believed that Christ would come and personally establish His kingdom on earth. This belief was derived by simply taking Scripture at face value, using the same normal/literal interpretative method for all Scripture – since numerous passages clearly picture the second coming as occurring immediately prior to the commencement of the millennial kingdom (Isa. 35:4-10; Zech. 2:10-11; 14:1-11; Matt. 24:29-25:46, *esp.* 25:31-34; Rev. 19:11-20:6). It was not until later that the method known as “spiritualization” (the seeking of a “higher,” more “spiritual” or “mystical” meaning of Scripture) became popular. While this interpretive method was used in early Rabbinic interpretation, Origen (A.D. 185-254) is credited with incorporating it formally into Christian interpretation. For Origen the “spiritual” sense of a passage represented its highest meaning. Unfortunately, Origen’s method of interpretation resulted in nothing more than a highly subjective assessment of the meaning of Scripture, viewing it as an allegory to be unraveled. This jeopardized even the most basic teachings of the Bible, all of which rest upon the normal/literal sense of the text. Origen himself came to hold many unorthodox views, including universalism – the view that everyone will somehow be saved and spared from eternal damnation. The second through the fifth centuries saw an increasing rejection of premillennialism. In the eastern church, Greek philosophy, mysticism, and the threat of persecution all played a part. For awhile, the eastern church even rejected the Book of Revelation from the New Testament Canon in an effort to eliminate premillennialism from the Bible. Meanwhile in the western church premillennial belief continued to be the orthodox position into the fifth century.

It was not until the time of Augustine (A.D. 354-430) that premillennialism was seriously challenged in the West. Augustine lived through a transition period in church history; previously the Roman state had persecuted the church, now the church and the state entered a new phase of cooperative relations. Augustine, who had been heavily influenced by neo-Platonism discarded his previous premillennial belief for the idea that the church on earth was a “reflection” of the ideal kingdom (occurring in Heaven) and thus, in some sense (not literally, but figuratively) fulfilling the biblical prophecies of the millennium on earth. This also solved the puzzling question of why Christ had not yet returned, since the church had been

expecting his return for over three hundred years, only to be disappointed. In order to complete his idea Augustine needed biblical integration, and for this he needed an interpretive framework that would allow him to reinterpret the patently premillennial teaching of Scripture. He found what he needed in Origen's method of spiritualized interpretation; except he refused to apply it generally to Scripture as Origen had done, limiting its application to unfulfilled (future) prophecy. The interpretive framework that Augustine proposed has come to be called the "dual hermeneutic." It is a system in which Scripture other than unfulfilled prophecy is generally interpreted normally (at face value), and unfulfilled prophecy is allegorized to fit with Augustine's somewhat neo-Platonist view of the earthly kingdom of God. Augustine's view of the millennium is now referred to as "amillennialism" (signifying no *literal* millennium); it envisions the present Church age as a non-literal (spiritualized) fulfillment of the millennial prophecies. Of course the extension of this thought was that the leaders of the Church were therefore Christ's "vicars" over the kingdom (as expressed "spiritually" on earth) and thus ultimately sovereign in worldly affairs. Augustine's theory elevated the status of the church and its leaders, in the political realm, and soon became the dominant view in the West. Premillennialism never regained its position throughout the middle ages.

At the time of the reformation, the amillennialism of the Roman Catholic Church (with only very minor modifications) was carried over into the reformed churches. However, the intellectual and scientific revolution that followed opened the door to question the arbitrary application of Augustine's dual hermeneutical system. After all, it was fairly obvious that Augustine had merely "cooked the books" to get the resultant view of the kingdom he wanted. This not only afforded the opportunity for the reemergence of premillennialism (Joseph Mede, 1586-1638, seems to be the first post-reformation scholar to embrace premillennialism), but also an opportunity for the emergence of a new millennial view known as "postmillennialism." Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) is generally credited with the development of postmillennialism – the belief that there will be a progressing kingdom on earth that will be brought about not by the personal presence of Christ, but through the agency of the church. Postmillennialism, quickly took two distinct forms. One form, held by theological conservatives, maintained that the spread of the gospel would bring about a golden age on the earth to be culminated at the personal appearing of Christ at the end of the age. The other form of postmillennialism, held by theological liberals (who did not accept the inspiration of the Bible), took the position that the "kingdom of God" would be brought about on earth through the combined efforts of Christian morality, science and technology, and education. Since liberal theologians did not accept the deity of Christ or the reality of His resurrection, they did not expect the millennium to be followed by the personal return of Christ. Postmillennial thinking was very widely accepted in different forms in both conservative and liberal circles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even into the early part of the twentieth century. However, the events of two world wars

had a strong dampening effect on postmillennial optimism. Before the conclusion of World War II, postmillennialism had virtually disappeared. With the collapse of postmillennialism in the early to mid-twentieth century, most postmillennial institutions were simply reabsorbed back into amillennialism from whence they came. There were many similarities between postmillennialism and amillennialism. In their more conservative forms, both held that the return of Christ would not occur until the end of the millennium; both views also held to a general resurrection at the end of the age, and both views allegorized the tribulation prophecies. In short, both views employed essentially the same methods of biblical interpretation (selective non-normal/non-literal interpretation of future prophecy). Seen in this light, it is not surprising that postmillennialism sprang from amillennialism only to be reabsorbed when its theological conclusions seemed to fail the test of reality. The paucity of postmillennialism continued until its reemergence in the form of theonomic postmillennialism in the mid-1970s with the publication of *Institutes of Biblical Law* in 1973 by R. J. Rushdoony. (For additional information on theonomic postmillennialism see the author's book, [What's Wrong With Theonomic Postmillennialism](#), available online at www.biblicalreader.com.)

The revival of premillennialism was slow. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the major church movements and their schools were dominated either by amillennial or postmillennial thinking. Nevertheless, premillennial teachings were popularized by the Plymouth Brethren in England and through the ministries of influential revivalists in America, such as D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Billy Sunday. The latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century in America saw the establishment of numerous premillennial Bible institutes, colleges, and seminaries, as well as a number of premillennial mission boards and other Christian societies. Today, amillennialism is by far the dominant view, since liberals and conservatives hold it alike, and premillennialism is again a major view among theological conservatives; postmillennialism, though small, is attempting to make a comeback.

The Covenantal System

Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism both arose in defense, and explanation of antecedent views of the millennium and of the return of Christ. Covenant Theology arose within the context of the reformation to support amillennialism, and Dispensationalism arose later as a response to amillennialism and the formalization of Covenant Theology. In the middle ages there was little need for an intellectually defensible justification for the dual-hermeneutic used to support amillennialism, the Roman Catholic Church simply declared it to be so, and as they say, "that was that." Augustine had provided no real intellectual justification for his highly selective allegorical interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy. Simply declaring amillennialism to be true wouldn't work in the post-reformation era where a spirit of open theological discussion was developing. Indeed, it would only have been a matter of time before

amillennialism came under severe pressure unless some reasonable justification for the dual hermeneutic were developed. Thus, reformed amillennialism gave birth to Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology seeks to justify amillennialism by applying the kingdom promises that were made to Israel, directly to the Church. How do covenantalists justify such a transfer? In theory it's simple: Build a case for the metaphysical unity of Israel and the Church allowing the promises made to Israel to be applied to the Church. In practice, however, Covenant Theology faces huge obstacles – and the more one learns about the nature of those obstacles the more obvious it becomes that Covenant Theology is nothing more than a pretext for rejecting premillennialism.

The central tenet of Covenant Theology is that all redemptive history from the fall of man forward is the outworking of a singular covenant referred to as the “covenant of grace.” While covenant theologians do not agree on the precise nature of this covenant, since it is not contained within the pages of the Bible, nor is it alluded to (though some covenantalists dispute this point), it is conceived as a covenant between God and elect sinners, promising redemption upon the exercise of true faith in God. Covenantalists actually employ a “tri-covenantal” system, referring to three supposed covenants: 1) the “covenant of redemption,” made between the members of the Godhead in eternity past, in which the redemptive roles of the members of the Godhead were established; 2) the “covenant of works,” made between God and Adam in which God promised Adam eternal life, if he would obey Him; and 3) the “covenant of grace,” made between God and elect sinners after the fall, promising life upon the exercise of genuine faith in God. (If you look closely you will see the connection between Calvinism’s doctrine of “particular redemption,” [*i.e.* “limited atonement”] and Covenant Theology.) Based on this tri-covenantal construct, Covenant Theology associates all redemptive history (from the fall of man forward) under one “covenant” – the “covenant of grace.” The result is a view of redemptive history in which all believers share equally in all of the divine promises, since they are all redeemed under the same covenant, and therefore (according to covenantal reasoning) comprise the same metaphysical identity (whether one calls it “Israel” or the “Church”). Thus, according to Covenantalism the kingdom promises made to Abraham and to his descendants can be directly applied to the Church, but not “literally,” of course. Covenantalists argue either that the Church “is” Israel under a new name, or that the Church replaces Israel in the divine program (due to Israel’s rejection of their Messiah). In either case the result is the same – the promises God made to Israel are going to be fulfilled to the Church; therefore, they must of necessity be reinterpreted non-literally (allegorically), since the central features of the promised earthly kingdom are ethnically and geo-politically specific to the Jewish nation. The substitution of the Church in the place of Israel is generally referred to as “replacement theology.” It is a side point, but perhaps worth mention that Covenant Theology and its theological antecedent – amillennialism – have always had an anti-Semitic flavor, since they see Jews and the Jewish nation as

having rejected Christ and having been supplanted by the Church. History is filled with examples of “Christian” anti-Semitism, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that it might be directly traceable to amillennialism’s concept of replacement.

A Better Alternative

As a means of recovering the biblical truth of premillennialism, another view called “Dispensationalism” arose. Dispensationalism addresses the core error of Covenant Theology and amillennialism – the substitution of the Church for Israel – and views the Church not as a replacement for Israel, but as a distinct work of God for the purpose of gathering in a great host of Gentiles and provoking Israel to accept their Messiah so the promises of the kingdom can be literally fulfilled to them (Rom. 10-11). The covenantal system was expressly designed to dismiss the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the particularity of the promises made to them, and thus to allow for those promises to be transferred to the Church. It would not be extreme to say that Covenant Theology attempts to hijack the promises of God made to Israel in order to apply them to the Church.

Dispensationalists believe that the Bible, including the prophecies of the coming kingdom, mean exactly what they say (obviously they take figures of speech and symbols into consideration since they are part of the normal communication process). Dispensationalists do not view allegorization as a legitimate method of interpretation, and they maintain that contrary for what covenantalists claim, there are no examples of the use of allegorical interpretation in Scripture (where earlier Scripture is subsequently interpreted in later Scripture). [Since Covenantalism is totally dependant on allegorical interpretation, it would be very helpful for covenantalists to find some occasion where the allegorical method is approved (or better yet, “used”) in Scripture. However, the allegorical method is never employed or approved. It is common for covenantalists to claim that Paul, following the method of the Rabbis, employed allegorical interpretation in Galatians 4:21-31. However, that is simply not true. In this passage Paul draws an analogy from familiar source material and through the use of a metaphor he conveys a truth – the truth being that Law and grace don’t mix any more than slavery and freedom mix, or than the futures of Isaac and Ishmael mix; the promise was through Isaac, and Ishmael (representing slavery to the Law) was sent away. The answer to the covenantal assertion that Paul is here interpreting the Old Testament story allegorically is simply that he isn’t interpreting at all. He never says that he is giving the “meaning” of the Old Testament story, only that he is drawing upon an analogy to illustrate his point that the Law and grace cannot coexist. To use such a statement as the basis of an entire system of interpretation is greatly stretching the limits of credulity. Allegorical interpretation was practiced by the Rabbis of Paul’s time (and before), but let us not forget that their interpretations did not lead them to Christ, but to the distortion of many biblical truths – hardly a method worthy of emulation in the church.

Is Dispensationalism a more biblical picture of redemptive history? Unquestionably it is. The whole basis for Covenant Theology (the covenants of “works” and “grace”) is not to be found in the Bible. While covenantalists do their best to connect these imaginary covenants to biblical statements, the strain is obvious – they simply are not referred to in a single verse of Scripture, nor have covenantalists been successful in demonstrating their existence through any proper theological deduction. The most common approach in attempting to establish these hypothetical covenants is to begin with a point on which most all people would agree: that the three members of the Godhead agreed in eternity past which roles they would play in redemption – covenantalists refer to this as the “covenant of redemption.” (That such an arrangement qualifies as a “covenant” is highly debatable, since a covenant implies some sort of transactional bargain in which one or both parties will receive something as a result of the fulfillment of the terms of the arrangement.) They then proceed to establish the validity of the “covenant of works” by claiming that God promised Adam eternal life if he obeyed, and death if he disobeyed. Here we run into a problem. Was this a “covenant,” or was it just the statement of a reality already built into creation? In order to support that this statement in Genesis constitutes a covenant it is necessary to demonstrate that there was a “benefit” to be conveyed upon fulfillment of the terms (biblical covenants are always promises with a blessing; there cannot be a covenant without a benefit for the same reason that there cannot be a contract without an exchange of, or offer to pay or provide some benefit.) That being the case, covenantalists have been intent on demonstrating that if Adam had obeyed, he would have been blessed with eternal life (a benefit). However, if Adam died spiritually when he sinned (and there is general agreement that he did), then he must have had spiritual life prior to his fall. [In the New Testament, because of the work of Christ on our behalf on the Cross, spiritual life cannot be forfeited (I am speaking from a Calvinistic perspective) and is thus referred to as “eternal” life, but that does not mean that Adam and Eve did not have the same quality of spiritual life – even though they did not have Christ’s work on the Cross as the assurance of its non-forfeiture. (Remember, in their pre-fall state they did not need salvation, nor did they need the assurance of the eternal continuance of salvation.)] Some covenantalists in seeking to prove that Adam and Eve did not possess eternal life have argued that even if Adam and Eve had not sinned they would have eventually died physically unless “changed” by God. Such hypothesizing is intended only to provide support for the “covenant of works” and has no biblical or proper theological support outside of the presumption of Covenant Theology, and it is at this point that the tri-covenantal system evidences circular reasoning: The “covenant of works” implies Adam and Eve’s lack of eternal life, and their lack of eternal life is evidence for the need of the “covenant of works.” Suffice it to say that covenantalists have failed to prove that Genesis 2:15-17 meets the criteria of a covenant, or that such a covenant was even necessary; that being the case, the validity of the “covenant of works” is highly doubtful, and certainly

unworthy of serving as a critical link in the development of a hermeneutic by which the rest of Scripture should be interpreted. Next covenantalists attempt to prove the existence of a covenant they call the “covenant of grace,” but although it would have been made within the scope of biblical history (after man’s fall in the garden), there isn’t a single explicit reference to this “covenant” in the Bible. The only covenant referred to prior to the Abrahamic covenant is the covenant that God made with Noah after the flood. Of course the idea that there would be a covenant promising the bestowal of grace is an idea that can be inferred – it’s simply reasonable. However, that covenant, according to both the Old and New Testaments is not a covenant made with Adam in the garden, but the covenant of promise by faith that God made with Abraham and which finds its ultimate extension and highest expression in the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34, *cf.*, Heb 7-9), which as the New Testament declares is the covenant sealed with Christ’s blood. God made no “covenant of grace” with Adam in the garden, but after the fall He spoke prophetically (Gen. 3:15) of the covenant He would make in the future (Jer. 31:31-34) with His chosen people, which covenant He sealed in Christ’s blood upon the Cross (Matt. 26:27-28 *cf.*, Heb. 9:15-24). How God brought this to pass is the story of the Old Testament and the Gospels, and the covenantal scheme distorts the entire picture by relating redemptive history to an imaginary covenant that never existed, while failing to give proper consideration to the covenant of promise made to Abraham (and it’s development in the three subsequent unconditional covenants). Of course, this was the purpose of the tri-covenantal hypothesis in the first place – to shift biblical interpretation away from the explicit covenants of the Old Testament because of their inherent premillennialism.

The manifestation of dispensational characteristics in redemptive history was recognized very early; the New Testament writers themselves were well aware of dispensational distinctives. On three occasions Paul made specific reference to particular dispensations [Gr. *oikonomia* = “economy”]; those occasions are Ephesians 1:10, 3:9, and 1 Timothy 1:4. However, the concept was not limited to a particular vocabulary and was expressed in various forms in many New Testament passages (*e.g.*, Gal. 3:19; 4:1-5; Heb. 3:1-6; 7:11-25; 8:6-7; 9:15-28; 10:1-18; Rev. 20:4; 21:1-22:5). It is important to point out that while each “dispensation” involves changes in man’s stewardship before God, this does not mean that dispensationalists believe there has been more than one way of salvation. They do not. It seems to be a favorite past time of covenantalists to say, or imply, that dispensationalists teach more than one means of salvation. They mistakenly assume that because dispensationalists regard the previous dispensation as “the Law” that they believe keeping the Law and sacrifices saved people in the Old Testament. This is not what dispensationalists believe. There is only one means of salvation throughout all history – grace through faith. (Actually most covenantalists are well aware of this, even though they persist in trying to score points by bringing up this charge.) Dispensationalists do not conceive

of the dispensations as varying means of salvation, but simply the progressive unfolding of God's work with man and revelation of truth to man.

Another complain often heard from covenantalists is that dispensationalists divide the Bible into segments, denying that much of its truth relates to believers today. This is simply not true. What dispensationalists do insist upon, however, is that biblical promises will be fulfilled to the people (or group) to which they were originally directed. In other words, promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to Israel, promises made to the Church will be fulfilled to the Church, and promises made specifically to individuals will be fulfilled to those individuals. Dispensationalists believe that even if a particular work or promise of God is not directed at the Church, all truth is still "truth," and is useful. For example, even though God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament were specific to that nation (and not to the Church), the way in which God dealt with his people there reveals a great deal about what God is like, what pleases him and displeases him, and what he is doing in human history – and that information has tremendous usefulness to the Church. Let me illustrate what I mean. Let's say a family has two children, an older and a younger child. Now let's say that a privilege is entrusted to the older child, but he fails to act responsibly and is disciplined. Is the privilege or the ensuing discipline directly applicable to the younger child? Of course not. He may get his own privilege in time – and his own discipline if he is irresponsible, but the circumstance of the older child is specific to that child. However, the younger child can certainly profit from seeing how the parents dealt with the older child. In that sense, the circumstance of the older child provides invaluable information to the younger (*i.e.*, truth) even through the actual circumstances of the older brother's case do not directly involve him. Transferring this to Israel and the Church, God made specific promises to Israel, but they disobeyed him and failed to enter into the enjoyment of the blessings flowing from those promises. The promises were not to the Church, so they will not be fulfilled to the Church, but that does not mean the record of God's dealing with Israel is of no importance for believers today. It is extremely important because it reveals a great deal about what God is like and what he's doing in human history – as well as what pleases and displeases him. In addition, the Old Testament material serves as an invaluable backdrop in understanding the present work of God – even the every existence of the Church.

What distinguishes dispensational interpretation is a commitment to interpret the Bible normally/literally, and in the light of its own theological context (rather than a presuppositional context). The fundamental difference between Covenantalism and Dispensationalism is that Dispensationalism recognizes that normal/literal interpretation leads to the conclusion that Israel and the Church are distinct entities, and therefore, promises made to Israel cannot be arbitrarily reassigned to the Church (simply to justify a pet theory like amillennialism or postmillennialism). Dispensationalists contend that the Bible can only be properly understood when it is

understood in its grammatical, historical, and dispensational context, and when that is done – without the imposition of covenant presuppositions – the result is inevitably a premillennial view of the second coming of Christ and the kingdom.

Covenant Theology is an elaborate scheme designed specifically to allow interpreters to deny the literal interpretation of passages explicitly teaching or implying premillennialism. Of course, over time, covenantal thinking has affected other areas of interpretation and theology as well (for example: the reformed protestant view of infant baptism after the Roman Catholic tradition). As mentioned previously, Covenant Theology is only half of a hermeneutical system. While ostensibly providing justification for denying a premillennial interpretation to certain passages by seeing no future for national Israel, it provides no guidance for what the “correct” interpretation ought to be. This leaves the interpreter to supply what he “thinks” is the meaning, which is an entirely subjective process. It is important to understand that there are no rules for implementing allegorical interpretation, nor can there be, since rules would indicate “conventions” (implying conventional, or “normal” communication), which brings the interpreter right back to the literal/normal (conventional) method. This is a vexing dilemma for covenantalists. Even though covenantal interpretation might have a veneer of biblical facts, observations, and allusions from which to work, its core process is entirely subjective – how could it be anything but subjective if the text means something other than what it actually says? [I am not referring to a simple disagreement about how symbols and figures of speech should be understood. Symbols and figures of speech are a common part of normal communication, and the rules for interpreting them are quite well established. Rather, when I say that covenantalists interpret “subjectively” I mean that they disregard the obvious (and “normal”) meaning of passages (whether containing symbols and figures, or not) and inject a foreign meaning *into* the text. This process is called “eisegesis,” whereas the proper (and only reasonable) method of interpretation is “exegesis” – getting the intended meaning *out of* the text. Eisegesis is presuppositional (*i.e.*, it simply “uses” the text as a container into which a predetermined interpretation is poured; exegesis is interpretive – it explains what the text means based on what it actually says. Covenant Theology makes extensive use of eisegesis in assigning meanings to future prophecies. Dispensationalism denies the validity of such a process and maintains that all Scripture, including future prophecy should be interpreted exegetically.]

Dispensationalism imposes no extra-biblical filter upon the interpretive process. Instead, it recognizes the natural landscape of redemptive history as recorded in Scripture, and interprets accordingly. Dispensationalism maintains that instead of pre-concluding the nature of the kingdom and then tailoring the interpretive process to support that conclusion, one should simply interpret Scriptural statements in light of their clearly intended meaning, according to the normal rules of grammatical and historical interpretation. In other words, Dispensationalism holds that the meaning

of a text should be determined by the text and its biblical context, not the extra-biblical pre-conclusions of the interpreter. For an interpreter to arbitrarily manipulate interpretation through the selective use of some alternate method of interpretation (like allegorization) simply to validate a pre-concluded theology is nothing more than interpretive bias.

Dispensationalism rejects the covenantal idea that because all saved people are saved under the same covenant that automatically makes promises made to one person or group applicable to all. If specific promises made to individual believers cannot be applied to others (*e.g.*, that Abram would become the father of many nations, or that Hezekiah would live another fifteen years), it does not seem logical that promises made to Israel should be applied to the Church, particularly in view of the fact that the New Testament makes a clear distinction between the two (*cf.* Rom. 11). Dispensationalism holds that the meaning of a passage must be derived from the text itself, according to the only rules of communication suitable – the customary usage of language, understood in its historical and temporal/theological (dispensational) context. When this is done, premillennialism is the clear and natural conclusion. As was said previously, Dispensationalism doesn't add anything new (or foreign) to the biblical revelation. In fact, had it not been for the rejection of premillennialism and the development of amillennialism/postmillennialism and Covenant Theology, there would have been no need for Dispensationalism to have arisen at all, since it is merely a call to return to the premillennialism of the New Testament and the early church.

Why the Bible, Including Unfulfilled Prophecy, Must be Interpreted Normally

Normal/literal interpretation is the only method of interpretation by which the intended meaning of Scripture can be discovered. Covenantalists argue that symbols and figures of speech cannot be interpreted "literally," since they were not meant to be understood literally. Nothing could be further from the truth. Symbols and figures of speech are a natural part of human communication, recognizing them is usually not difficult, and in most cases their meaning is fairly obvious. If we negotiate the use of symbols and figures of speech in our daily communication, we can certainly negotiate them in the Bible. The presence of symbols and figures does not give the interpreter license to jettison the author's literal statements in order to substitute his own ideas through the use of subjective allegorization. Normal/literal interpretation requires that these literary devices be understood according to the prevailing usage at the time they were recorded. Thus, the key to interpreting symbols or figures of speech is to ask the question, "How would they have been understood by the writer's contemporaries?" This is the telltale sign that Covenant Theology's subjective allegorization is not really interpretive at all, for the original recipients of the biblical communication would never have arrived at the same "interpretation" as the post-reformation covenantalists – indeed how could they without the "light" of covenant reformed theology?

A consistently normal/literal method of interpretation is superior for at least three reasons. First, it is the only method by which exegesis (deriving meaning out of the text) is possible. If we accept the fact that the Bible is God's communication to man and that God intends for man to understand that communication, we can only conceive of God using human language in a rational and logical manner, according to prevailing usage; this is the only way man could ever discern the intended meaning, because the rules of language apply only when language is being used in its normal (conventional) sense. Second, Scripture in general, and prophecy in particular, makes sense when interpreted normally/literally. The normal/literal method is the method of interpretation that we depend upon for other areas of doctrine, including the interpretation of fulfilled prophecy, so it is only consistent to apply it to unfulfilled prophecy as well. It is worth observing that all prophecy in the Bible that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled in a manner consistent with normal/literal interpretation; by what authority does the covenantal interpreter maintain that only future prophecy will be fulfilled according to a different pattern? Third, the application of a dual (normal/allegorical) system of interpretation results in inconsistencies. For example, it results in the first sixty-nine "weeks" of Daniel's "seventy-weeks" prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27) being interpreted literally but the last, or seventieth "week," being taken figuratively. Or, in the case of Christ's advent, it requires a literal interpretation of the first advent of Christ and a non-literal interpretation of the events associated with the second coming (even though they may be contained within the same passage, or even within the same sentence, *cf.* Isa. 61:1-3). Once the decision is made to depart from a consistently normal manner, interpretation becomes merely the opinion of the interpreter, and cannot be solidly linked to the text through any generally agreed upon standards of communication. What would happen in a modern communications system if the receiving end applied whatever communications protocols it wished; or if it applied a particular protocol simply because it appeared to support what the receiving-end "thought" was the meaning of the communication (albeit, nonliteral and subjective); or worse yet, what if it applied no protocol at all? This is exactly what covenantalism does.

There are at least three key advantages of the literal method of interpretation. First, the literal method anchors interpretation in fact, rather than subjective opinion. Second the literal method promotes restraint in the interpretive process, since interpretation cannot go beyond the clear statements of Scripture. Third, the literal method is the cornerstone of orthodox theology. Its abandonment in other areas of theology can lead, and has led to apostasy, and its abandonment in the area of future prophecy is the first step in that direction. Abandonment of the normal hermeneutical method ought to be a warning sign to anyone evaluating any theological position.

Conclusions

Covenant Theology is a product of the early post-reformation period. It was developed for the purpose of denying premillennialism and justifying the allegorization of future prophecy needed to support amillennialism. Neither amillennialism, nor covenant theology are consistent with the normal interpretation of Scripture. Additionally, the validity of the tri-covenantal system is highly doubtful to say the least. The Bible, when interpreted in a consistently normal manner leads inevitably to the conclusion that Israel and the Church are distinct entities with distinct promises (within the larger prophetic program), and to premillennialism. Covenant theology leads one to deny the normal/literal meaning of Scripture, and along with amillennialism (and postmillennialism) may well be one of the most detrimental influences on biblical interpretation in the history of the Church – preventing multitudes of God’s people from understanding what the Bible has to say about the future.

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