

# *An Examination of The Presuppositions Of Covenant and Dispensational Theology*

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## *Introduction*

*A study of the presuppositions of covenant and dispensational theology is a vast topic. This study, therefore, makes no claims of being exhaustive. But I have taken care to represent the two positions accurately in order that the Scriptural evaluation of them will not involve a shooting down of strawmen. What follows, then, is a distillation of my study of these two systems. I hope it is organized in such a way that we can come to grips with the truth claims made by each one.*

### **1 . THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESUPPOSITIONS.**

No one approaches the Scriptures neutrally, as if he is absolutely objective and void of predispositions. Unconverted men, obviously, approach the Scriptures as prejudiced sinners. Converted men, having the Holy Spirit, come to Scripture with the ability to discern spiritual things. Among professing Christians, then, you discover different emphases, or interpretive schemes, which account for the various systems. For example, dispensationalists come to Scripture with the presupposition that God has an earthly purpose for Israel, and a heavenly purpose for the church. Covenant theologians, on the other hand, come to Scripture with the presupposition that there is one covenant of grace with various administrations. Since there is no neutrality in approaching Scripture, and since presuppositions are a given reality, the necessity of presuppositions being based on careful exegesis is underscored. Thus our understanding of the whole of Scripture affects our approach to the parts; and our examination of the parts; methodologically speaking, leads us to make generalizations about the whole (cf. Eddie Johnston, "Biblical Interpretation and the Church," BRR, Vol.9, #1, pp.21-23).

It is not wrong to have presuppositions. But in light of how influenced we are by them, I trust that we can see the importance of evaluating whether or not the presuppositions of any system are based on textual evidence. If they are not, then what is built on them rests on a shaky foundation. An evaluation of the presuppositions of dispensational and covenant theology, therefore, is both appropriate and of critical importance.

### **2. THE IMPORTANCE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA (SCRIPTURE ALONE).**

Both dispensational and covenant theology claim to be based on Scripture. Yet their theological presuppositions have obviously driven them to divergent conclusions. Since both claim adherence to *sola Scriptura*, they should be open to what Scripture says to them. However, we immediately discover that what constitutes "Biblical evidence" for both sides is determined by different methods. When a dispensationalist reads an argument by the covenant theologian, he replies that it is not "literal" enough. When a covenant theologian reads a dispensational argument, he replies that "explicit" evidence is not necessary. Here, I simply wish to outline some of the problems which surface because of hermeneutical differences.

**2.1** First, fidelity to the usage of words in their Scriptural contexts is critical. As Dr. Gordon Clark puts it, "a Christian theologian should use Biblical terms in their Biblical meaning" (*First Principles of Theology*, unpublished ms., p.402). Many mistakes in interpretation have occurred because a meaning, foreign to the analogy of Scripture, was packed into a Scriptural word or concept. "Scriptural exegesis is to be gained, 'not from a man's private feelings and already formed opinions, but from the actual context, from attention to and comparison of what precedes and follows with other passages of Scripture'" (H. Heppe, quoting Bucan, *Reformed Dogmatics* [1861; Baker, 1978], p. 35)

**2.2** Thus, in principle, our beliefs and actions must be *based on specific Scriptural evidence*. "If we accept something as a point of doctrine, or as a religious practice, we must have some direct precept of revelation or some direct precedent in the Scriptures for it" (Don Fortner, "Who Should Be Baptized?," *The 13th St. Baptist Church Bulletin*, March, 1980).

**2.3** However, as basic as this may sound, covenant theologians tend to reject what they call the "untenable assumption" that "only doctrines and practices explicitly stated in Scripture can be regarded as true or valid" (J.G. Vos, *Baptism: Its Subjects and Modes*, p.4). Gordon Clark believes that "it is not necessary to find explicit N.T. justification for every Christian doctrine .... The correct principle of interpretation is not the Baptist one of discarding everything in the O.T. not reasserted in the New; but rather the acceptance of everything in the Old not abrogated by the N.T. teaching" (*First Principles*, pp.763-764).

Armed with this hermeneutical approach, covenant theology can then impose doctrines and practices which lack N.T. warrant. "That the N.T. fails to give a specific injunction about tithing would no more do away with it than the New Testament's failure to mention children's relationship to the Covenant of Grace does away with that relationship" (Raymond Zorn, *Westminster Theological Journal*, XXXVII, #2, Winter, 1975. p.294; cf. Jon Zens, "Principles of New Covenant Giving, BRR, Vol.8, #2, pp.33-44). "Covenant Theology, therefore, has a particular hermeneutical stance, emphasizing the continuity of O.T. and N.T.... Covenant theologians understand the Mosaic covenant. For example, as an essentially gracious revelation of God" (Douglas H. Shantz, "Baptists and Covenant Theology," *Fellowship For Reformation and Pastoral Studies*. Vol . V . # 10 [12/12/77]. pp 4 -5). This broad hermeneutical stance opens the door for the sufficiency of "implicit" evidence instead of "explicit" evidence from Scripture (cf. my reviews of G. Brimless *Children of Promise*, and J.G. Vos's *Baptism: Its Subjects and Modes* in BRR, Vol.9, #1, pp. 32-41).

**2.4** It is the conclusion of this author that while there are elements of truth in dispensational and covenant theology, at critical points they both fail to do justice to Biblical data which challenges their undergirding presuppositions. It will be the purpose of this paper to interact with both systems in order to move toward a theology which will be more sensitive to the revealed counsel of God. Our goal should not even be to arrive at an "airtight" system which has all the answers. But our goal must be that we would see Christ exalted in the Scriptures, and that we would with humility receive what these sacred oracles say to us about Him, the One in Whom all the promises of God are "Yes" and "Amen."

### **3. A GENERAL EXAMINATION OF THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF DISPENSATIONALISM**

Within a century from when John Nelson Darby started the idea of God's two separate purposes in history (1827). It had arisen to a place of common acceptance among the Bible-believing movement in America, which then centered in Fundamentalism.

There is an intense continuity of thought among dispensationalists. It is *not* difficult to ascertain the guiding presuppositions of this system. Dr. Charles Ryrie has pointedly faced the question. "What is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism?" His answer has three parts.

1. "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct . . . a man who fails to distinguish Israel and the Church will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions."
2. Dispensationalists employ "a consistently literal principle of interpretation." This principle "is at the heart of dispensational eschatology."
3. Dispensationalists assert that God's purposes center in His glory, rather than in the "single purpose of salvation" (*Dispensationalism Today* [Moody 1965]. pp.44-48).

By examining these three pillars we will be able to understand the essence of dispensationalism, and

thereby be in a position to justly consider this system in the light of the Bible.

**3.1 Israel and the Church Separate.** In order to graphically see the continuity of agreement among proponents of dispensationalism, and to see the centrality of this pillar in their system, I will list chronologically quotations concerning the two-purposes theory. We must start with John Darby, for the teaching found in these quotes was never enunciated at any time in history until 1827. Thus it is a perversion of history for Dr. Ernest Pickering to claim that "the principles of dispensationalism" are not "theological novelties" ("Dispensational Theology," *Central Conservative Baptist Quarterly*, Spring, 1961, p.29). The dividing of redemptive history into several economies was surely done throughout church history. But the idea that God has "separate" purposes for Israel and the church (as defined in these quotes) is indeed novel, and not to be found from the pens of all post-apostolic writers. Yet this is the teaching on which dispensationalism stands or falls. It is the presupposition that guides their Biblical interpretation. If it is a wrong teaching, the whole system tumbles to the ground.

*J.N. Darby* - "The Church is in relationship with the Fathers, and the Jews with Jehovah .... The Jewish nation is never to enter the Church .... The Church is . . . a kind of heavenly economy, during the rejection of the earthly people" (*The Hopes of the Church of God*, pp.11, 106, 156).

*E. W. Bullinger* - "It follows . . . that if we read those people and those principles into the present Dispensation, we are taking what God spoke by the prophets to the fathers (i.e., Israel), and reading them as though they were spoken to and about ourselves, in this present Dispensation. This procedure can result only in confusion" (*The Foundations of Dispensational Truth*, p.21. Bullinger is recognized by all as an extreme dispensationalist, but he nevertheless illustrates the beginning principle).

*J.H. Brookes* - "If we forget the distinction between an earthly and a heavenly people, or in other words, if we lose sight of dispensational truth . . . we will be thrown into inextricable confusion in attempting to understand the Scriptures" (*Maranatha*, pp. 522-52.3).

*C. I. Scofield* - "Comparing, then, what is said in Scripture concerning Israel and the Church, we find that in origin, calling, promise, worship, principles of conduct and future destiny all is contrast" (*Scofield Bible Correspondence Course*, 19th Ed.. p.23).

*L. S. Chafer* - "The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages, God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved" (*Dispensationalism*, p.448).

*John Walvoord* - "Of prime importance to the premillennial interpretation of Scripture is the distinction provided in the New Testament between God's purpose for the Church and His purpose for the nation Israel" (*The Millennial Kingdom*, p.vii).

*J. Dwight Pentecost* - "The Church and Israel are two distinct groups" (*Things to Come*, p. 193).

*Ernest Pickering* - "Dispensationalism views them as two different bodies of saints each having its own promises, responsibilities, and expectations" ("Dispensational Theology," p.35).

*Charles Ryrie* - "A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct .... The Church is a distinct body in this age having promises and a destiny different from Israel's" (*The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, p. 12).

Upon this foundation a great building has been erected. This first principle is central and constitutive. Other distinctives, such as the "rapture," stand or fall according to the accuracy of this guiding principle (cf. Walvoord. *The Rapture Question*, pp.15-16; Pentecost, *Things To Come*, p. 193).

**3.2 A Consistently Literal Principle of Interpretation.** This principle arose in Darby's thinking out of his

prior contemplation upon the church. When he read Isaiah 32 he saw a tension between the earthly Old Testament description and his heavenly position in Christ. Hence he concluded that there was "an obvious change in dispensation."

Contemporary dispensationalists argue that the prophecies concerning Christ's birth, death and resurrection were literally fulfilled, and that therefore what they see as promises to Israel must be literally fulfilled. This reasoning, of course, is based on the presupposition of their Israel Church distinction. If the church and Israel ultimately have the same hope in Christ, then the question must be faced. "Does the Bible teach a *separate* destiny for Israel *apart from the church*?" This in turn would have serious implications for the proper interpretation of prophecy.

Further, the question arises whether the "historical-grammatical" approach to the Old Testament (as conceived of by dispensationalists) was indeed used by Christ and His apostles. To impose a method that is not in harmony with infallible instructors is surely a dubious course. J. Dwight Pentecost submits that there is no question but that "the literalism of the Jewish interpreters was identical with present day grammatical-historical interpretation" (*Things To Come*, p.19). It would appear to me that *this form* of literalism present in the first century was rebuked and rejected by Christ (cf. John 2:19-22).

The dispensationalists contend that other methods of interpretation are guilty of "imposing the New Testament on the Old" (Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p.187). However, this offense arises solely because the central presupposition of this system has ruled out the possibility that the promises to the fathers have *already* been confirmed by Christ (Rom. 15:8). Israel's destiny must be kept separate from that of the church. I will seek to show that dispensationalists are guilty of *taking the Old Testament out of the New*. For example they assert that the Day of Pentecost was the "beginning of a new thing in human history, the Church" (*Scofield Bible* p.vi). However, on that day Peter said "*this is that* which was spoken by the prophet Joel." But dispensationalists must get around the strength of such assertions in the New Testament: "the Church, corporately, is not in the vision of the Old Testament prophet [Joel]" (*Scofield Bible*, p.711: also compare Heb. 2:12 with his note on p.989).

Further, it must be questioned whether dispensationalists are indeed "consistently literal" in their interpretations. There are sufficient examples to indicate that they are *very selective* in what is taken literally, and often take *figuratively* that which is *historical*. This points to a problem that must be faced honestly by dispensationalists: "What hermeneutical guidelines - apart from the purely *subjective* - determine what in the historical sections of Scripture can be taken *figuratively*, and what in the figurative (prophetic/apocalyptic) sections may be taken *literally*?" *It remains for them to explain the Biblical basis for finding the church (topologically) in historical sections of the Old Testament, but ruling out the church in the prophetic sections* (cf. Ryrie, *Basis of Premillennial Faith*, p.43).

**3.3 God's Purposes Center in His Glory.** It would be superfluous to argue that covenant theology has always maintained that God's purposes center in His own glory. This is not to deny that dispensationalists may claim also to hold to the centrality of God's glory. But it is to deny Ryrie's claim that covenant theology *limits* God's purposes to the "single purpose of salvation."

What seems to bother dispensationalists is that covenant theology views God's purpose as primarily *soteriological* (relating to salvation). This is to be expected because dispensationalists presuppose that "God is pursuing two distinct purposes . . . one related to earth . . . the other is related to heaven" (Chafer). The dispensationalist must produce Biblical evidences that, in light of the universal implications of Adam's fall, God is indeed pursuing any purposes that are not directly related to soteriology. After the fall, all of history was moving toward the fullness of time when the Son would be sent (Gen. 3:15 Gal. 4:4). Even with pointed reference to God's purpose for Israel, was not the manifestation of Messiah to the end that "He will save His people from *their sins*," and "to you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you in turning away every one of you *from your iniquities*" (Acts 3:26). Is this not primarily

soteriological? If the Bible is to be regarded as a progressive history of *redemption*, would this not be a misnomer if from Gen.1:1 to Acts 2 the Bible is "chiefly concerned" with God's "earthly purpose" (*Scofield Bible*, p.vi)?

If what the Bible says about God's pre-temporal counsel is reviewed (1 Pet. 1:19-20 et al.), it appears that the salvation of men *from sin* by Christ is central. God is now working in a post-lapsarian world, and the fundamental purpose He is pursuing is *redemptive*, or soteriological.

#### **4. A BIBLICAL EVALUATION OF THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF DISPENSATIONALISM**

We will now seek to compare the teachings of Scripture to dispensationalism. The following study is intended to be *suggestive*. That is, since we cannot go through the entire New Testament, I will set forth crucial representative passages that directly challenge the pillars of the system.

#### **4. I The Gospels: The Kingdom Has Come And Christ Has Begun His Glory By Resurrection.**

##### **4.1.a Matt. 11:14** - "And if you will receive it, this is Elijah which was to come."

We have noted before that J. Dwight Pentecost asserted that the "literalism of the Jewish interpreters was identical with present day grammatical-historical interpretation." In this passage it appears that to apply a rigid literalism would produce a wrong fulfillment and contradict these words of Christ. According to dispensationalists a "literal" fulfillment of Malachi 4:5 would require Elijah the Old Testament prophet to *personally* come in the flesh (which corresponded with the notions of Jewish interpreters in Christ's day, John 1:21). Thus Scofield posits that Malachi 4:5 will be truly fulfilled just before the coming of Christ, and he sees this delineated in Rev. 11:3-6 (*Scofield Bible*, p.984). But Jesus and the angel that appeared to Zacharias (Luke 1:13) inform us that this O.T. passage has found its fulfillment in *John the Baptist*. Fulfillment here took place, not "literally" by the bodily appearance of Elijah, but in him who came "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Luke 1: 17). Thus the hyper-literalism of the Jews, and the "literalism" of the dispensationalists are shown to be a questionable methodology in light of the N.T. descriptions of how prophecy may be fulfilled (cf. John 2:18-22).

##### **4.1.b Matt. 16:19** - "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven . . . and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."

Scofield submits that at Matt. 11:28 Jesus initiates a "new message," "not the kingdom, but personal discipleship." Thus when the kingdom is mentioned by Jesus in 16:19, he must of necessity argue that these keys are "not the keys of the church" (p 1022). But then in 18:15-19 he sees "discipline in the future church" (p.1024). Thus Jesus clearly connects the keys of the kingdom, the church, and the authority to bind and loose in discipline. Dispensationalists, however, must disjoin the kingdom from the church because of their two-purposes theory.

##### **4.1.c Matt. 21:43** - "The kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bringing forth its fruits."

Ryrie asserts that this passage "conclusively" demonstrates that Israel is to be restored in the future (*Basis of Premillennial Faith*, p.72). The word "nation," he says, "in its strict *interpretation* . . . refers to the nation Israel when she shall turn to the Lord and be saved before entering the millennial kingdom" (p.71). Yet the context, especially v.41 at the conclusion of the parable, suggests that the householder (God) punishes the wicked husbandmen (Israel), and gives out the vineyard (the kingdom) to *others* (Gentiles). This indeed occurred when the Jews killed the heir (v.38). After they rejected their lowly Messiah, the gospel of their exalted Messiah came to them first, and this they also reject. Paul summarizes the fulfillment of v.43 by saying, "since you have judged yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). It is difficult to understand how Dr. Ryrie can so "conclusively" find Israel's future restoration in

this passage, when the natural interpretation would point to the fact that Israel's stewardship of the kingdom was judicially ended, and the "times of the Gentiles" were to begin.

**4.1.d** *John 6:15* - "When Jesus perceived that they would come and take him by force to make him king, he departed again by himself to a mountain."

Walvoord suggests that if the amillennialist is right, then there should have been "extensive correction" of the prevailing idea among the Jews that an earthly Kingdom was their Messianic prospect. This will be further examined in Acts, but in the Gospels there was correction of the prevailing misguided earthly prospects among the Jews. This correction, however, is not structured so much by Jesus and the apostles as a polemic attack, but rather as a positive exposition of the nature and subjects of the kingdom of God.

If, as the dispensationalists contend, Jesus came to offer an earthly Messianic kingdom, why did He not at this point in John 6 accept this Jewish desire to make Him king? The Jews had in v.14 just acknowledged, "this is truly that prophet that should come into the world." Would this not have been an opportune time for their kingdom to be established? Interestingly, neither Scofield nor Chafer offers any explanation of this crucial passage.

In John 18:36, it seems hard to reconcile the idea of an earthly kingdom with Jesus' words. Jesus was being delivered up because He did not fit into the "prevailing idea among the Jews." According to dispensationalists and the Jewish interpreters, Jesus' kingdom must be "of this world."

**4.1.e** *Luke 24:26* - "O fools and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken: ought not the Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?"

The dispensationalist is forced to play down the present kingly office of Christ. If Christ has not yet fulfilled the covenant promises concerning David's throne, the essence of His kingship is still future (Scofield. "The Doctrine of 'Last Things' in the Prophets," *The Coming and Kingdom*, p.42). Thus in the seven "mystery" parables of Matt. 13, Scofield says:

Our Lord explained that the advent to suffer, and the advent to reign, are separated in the divine purpose, already nineteen centuries long ... Our Lord bridged the space between His advent to suffer and His advent to reign with these seven mysteries ("The Doctrine of 'Last Things' in the Gospels," *The Coming and Kingdom*, p. 116; "The Doctrine of 'Last Things' in the Epistles and Revelation," *Ibid.*, p. 175).

Yet the note of Luke 24:26 is one of *triumph*. What solace would Christ's *future* glory be to these disciples? On that road they met the risen, triumphant Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:4). They had already witnessed His sufferings and were downcast. The point of Christ's words to them was to show that the suffering was *finished*, and that He was now in a position of *glory*. To believe that "a period of time is to intervene between His suffering and His glory" (Scofield) is a terrible misrepresentation of our Lord's ministry. Dispensationalists are guilty of separating what God has joined together. The promise to David was that God "would raise up Christ to sit on his throne, he seeing this before spoke of the *resurrection* of Christ" (Acts 2:30-31).

The neglect of Christ's *present* kingship by dispensationalists has serious implications for the Christian life. The Christian cannot, in this scheme, regard Jesus as King in the fullest sense, for this would imply that the Davidic promises were being fulfilled. This dispensational de-emphasis of kingship no doubt accounts for Dr. Ryrie's disdain of "Lordship preachers" in his *Balancing the Christian Life*.

**4.2.** *The Acts: The Hope of the Jews Has Come And Is Preached By The Apostles.*

**4.2.a** *Acts 10:34-43* - "The word which God sent to the children of Israel, preaching grace by Jesus Christ . . . that word was published throughout all Judea, and began from Galilee, after the baptism that John preached."

In this context Peter is preaching the gospel of "repentance and remission of sins" to Gentiles (Luke 24:47). This word, however, had its beginning when it first went to the Jews. This word began in the public ministry of Jesus after John's baptism. Thus this passage clearly reveals a continuity between the message that started with Jesus' preaching and the message given to Cornelius and his house.

This *one* gospel is called "the kingdom of God": "the law and the prophets were until John: since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and ever man presses into it" (Luke 16:16). Paul was separated unto the "gospel of God" which was promised in the Old Testament (Rom. 1:2). But this message did not start with Paul, for in Mark 1:14 we read that "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God."

This context dispels the dispensationalist claim that the "kingdom" Jesus preached is different than that of the apostles. The "kingdom" offered to the Jews, they say, was an earthly Davidic kingdom. This was rejected, and a "new message" began. Thus God's earthly purposes are interrupted, and a heavenly parenthesis was inserted. After the "rapture" of the church, the "postponed" Davidic kingdom is set up. Peter, on the other hand, saw no radical disjunction between the "word" which began with Jesus and what he was preaching to Cornelius.

**4.2.b** *Acts 13:32-34* - "And we declare glad tidings, how that the promise which was made to the fathers, God fulfilled the same to their children, in that He raised up Jesus again .... And as concerning that He raised him up from the dead . . . He said in this manner, 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.'"

As we have seen, dispensationalists teach that Israel's real fulfillment lies in the future when the alleged unfulfilled promises are confirmed after the "rapture" of the church. But v.32 points out that the "hope of Israel" has already been accomplished in the resurrection. Further, the resurrection is said to be a fulfillment of the "sure mercies of David." It is on the basis of this *recently accomplished promise* that the Jews are commanded to repent and believe the gospel. God's dealings with Israel have not been "postponed." He has *at this time* fulfilled the promise "to the fathers for us their children." It is only in utter disregard for a clear text like this that H. A. Ironside can blindly assert:

The moment Messiah died on the cross, the prophetic clock stopped. There has not been a tick upon that clock for nineteen centuries. It will not begin again until the entire present age has come to an end (*The Great Parenthesis*, p.23).

**4.2.c** *Acts 24:5,14-15* - "But I confess that I worship the God of my fathers, according to the way which they call heresy, believing all things written in the law and the prophets."

Jews were accusing Paul of being an apostate Israelite. But Paul confounds them by asserting the closest continuity between his life as a Christian and the Jewish hope. Paul worships the same God, holds to the same canonical books, and cherishes the same hope of resurrection as the Jews.

This simply cannot be allowed in the dispensationalist scheme. There must be great discontinuity between Israel and the church. L. S. Chafer strongly asserts this discontinuity:

A parenthetical portion sustains some direct or indirect relation to that which goes before or that which follows after: but the present age-purpose is not thus related and therefore is more properly termed an intercalation (*Systematic Theology*, Vol. IV, p.41)

But Paul asserts that there is a direct relationship between the church age and the O.T. hopes and aspirations.

**4.2.d** *Acts 28:17, 20, 23* - "For the hope of Israel I am bound with this chain . . ."

What is this "hope" for which Paul was bound? "The only hope answering to the description, as an ancient, national, and still intense one, is the hope of the Messiah" (J. A. Alexander, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, II, p. 412; cf. Acts 26:6-7). Thus it was Paul's "Messianic doctrine that had caused the breach between him and his countrymen" (*Ibid.*, p. 486).

There is nothing to suggest in Paul's testimonies that the "hope" of Israel is *future*, except with respect to the resurrection (24:15) which has just been fulfilled by Christ in the recent *past* (26:23). The hope of future resurrection is based on the accomplished resurrection of Christ. Paul's point is that the "hope" of Israel has come. On this foundation he proclaimed from the O.T. Scriptures "that Christ should suffer and that he should be the first to rise from the dead, and should show light to the Gentiles" (26:22-23). Since their "hope" had come it was Paul's intense desire to see Israel "saved" (Rom. 10:1) and "converted" by the gospel (Acts 28:27).

But dispensationalists claim that the essence of Israel's hope is still *future*. They still await a land, a throne, a king, and a kingdom (Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. IV, p. 7). Was Paul accused of the Jews because he taught such future "hopes" for Israel?

Further, in light of the dispensationalist's claim that the Jews have different promises and a divergent destiny than the church, how can this be reconciled with Paul's claim that his hope and Israel's *are one and the same*? It would be to the dispensationalist a contradiction *par excellence* for a Christian to be jailed for believing a Jewish hope. Yet this was why Paul was in chains.

**4.3** *The Pauline Epistles: The Purposes of God For Israel, Gentiles and the Entire Creation Center in the Church.*

**4.3.a** *Rom. 8:19-24* - "For the earnest expectation of the creation waits for the manifestation of the sons of God . . . the adoption, the redemption of our body..."

Ryrie states that "the goal of history is the earthly millennium . . . this millennial culmination is the climax of history and the great goal of God's program for the ages" (*Dispensationalism Today*, pp. 18, 104). But these texts assert that the goal for which the creation awaits is not a millennium but the "adoption, the redemption of our body." Thus the entire creation is groaning for the consummation of the church, that is, the glorification of the saints. Notice that deliverance from corruption (the curse) is coterminous with the glorious liberty of the saints. How, then, can the goal of the creation be an "earthly millennium" which is, according to dispensationalists, essentially Jewish?

**4.3.b** *Rom. 10:1, 12-15; 11:14ff.* - "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek . . . How then shall they hear without a preacher? . . . If by any means I may provoke them who are my flesh and might save some of them."

Many things are disclosed in this context relevant to dispensationalism. Here however, we simply would note there is no hope for Israel apart from the gospel of free grace which is proclaimed in this age by the church. There may well be an ingathering of Jews after "the times of the Gentiles." But when and if this happens Israel will be "saved" and joined to the body of Christ by faith in the gospel.

**4.3.c** *Eph. 2:11-19* - "You were Gentiles in the flesh . . . being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise . . . Now therefore you are no longer strangers and foreigners."

"In this passage" says Ryrie, "Gentiles are expressly said to be excluded from the blessings peculiar to Israel" (*Basis of Premillennial Faith*, p 64). However, nothing could be more obviously contrary to what Paul says. The apostle clearly says that Gentiles were "aliens and strangers." But Paul also says, "*but now* . . . you are made near by the blood of Christ." The question Ryrie avoids is: What are the Gentiles now made "near" to? The answer is clear. they were far away from Israel and the covenants. Now, by Christ's work, they are near to both of these. Jesus' work has made Jew and Gentile one new man, by breaking down "the middle wall of partition."

Dispensationalists must resurrect the barrier between Jew and Gentile after the rapture," when the earthly purpose starts again. But the history of redemption is an *organic* continuity, not two disjointed purposes (Rom. 11:17, 23).

**4.4** *Hebrews: the Jewish economy - With Its Prophetic Word, Priestly Ritual, and Kingly Rule - Was Never Intended To Be A Separate Earthly Purpose.*

**4.4.a** *Heb. 3:5* - "And Moses truly was faithful . . . as a servant, for a witness of those things which were to be spoken after."

Dispensationalism has made the error of eternalizing a national entity which was intended to be a temporary and preparatory economy. The writer here says that the Mosaic economy was a witness to future gospel realities. The documents of the O.T. were *primarily written for us in this age* (1 Cor. 10:11; 1 Pet. 1:9-12).

**4.4.b** *Heb. 8:5* - "Who serve as an example and shadow of heavenly things . . ."

Darby felt that the Jews had an "earthly religion." But this text informs us that even the earthly elements of Israel's ceremonies were but types and shadows of *heavenly things*. This points out the basic weakness of dispensationalism. It has designated Israel as an "earthly purpose," when in fact *all* its history and institutions pointed to the heavens. This text also reveals that the whole economy was *preparatory*, and awaited some *future* fulfillment. This fulfillment *has come*. This is seen clearly in the fact that the entire national system has been "abolishes" (2 Cor. 3:13). That it should be resurrected again after the "rapture" of the church is to contradict the clearness of Scripture.

**4.4.c** *Heb. 11:10, 13-16, 26, 35, 40* - "For he looked for a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God . . . These . . . confessed that they were pilgrims and strangers on the earth . . . But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly."

Darby said, "If I want an earthly religion, I ought to be a Jew" (*Hopes of the church of God*, p. 159). But we have already seen that the earthly accouterments of the Mosaic system were heavenly oriented. In Heb. 11 we see that the people who lived by faith were related to heaven and not earth.

In vv. 13-16, the writer tells us that the O.T. saints were not led to confess a hope in a great earthly kingdom. Rather, they were pilgrims and strangers *on the earth*. Does this not parallel the church's confession (1 Pet. 2:11)? Were not their affections ultimately set on "better" things above, namely, a "heavenly" city?

The Book of Hebrews levels to the ground the false conception and crucial starting point of dispensationalism, that God has *two purposes*, one earthly and one heavenly. All that was ever connected to Israel's history and institutions was, in the final analysis, directed toward heaven (Christ), not earth.

The ruling presupposition of dispensationalism has failed to pass the test of scripture; therefore, its superstructure has no Biblical foundation.

## **5. SPECIFIC INTERACTION WITH DR. RYRIE'S THE BASIS OF THE PREMILLENNIAL FAITH**

This book is a representative presentation of contemporary dispensationalism. Before his death in 1952, Dr. L.S. Chafer said in the "foreword" of this book that in many areas Dr. Ryrie "has given a true and final word." By interacting with this work, we can further evaluate the presuppositions of dispensationalism.

**5.1** *Dispensationalism's "Basis In History"* (p. 17ff.). Dr. Ryrie claims that dispensational premillennialism "is the historic faith of the Church" (p. 12). While it is true that premillennialism can be found in the early church fathers, Dr. Ryrie fails to point out a significant and major difference between his *dispensational* form of it, and the *earlier* manifestation of it. *No one prior to the 1830s ever posited the radical discontinuity of God's purpose for Israel and the church that undergirds dispensationalism*. Dr. Ryrie asserts that "certain refinements may be of recent origin" (p. 33). But this is very misleading. No form of premillennialism prior to the 1830s was ever based on the notion that God had two different purposes in history. There are indeed major differences between what is generally called "historic premillennialism"

and "dispensational premillennialism." "Historic premillennialism" believes that the conversion of Israel will result in their association with "Christian churches" (John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, Book IV, p. 641). "Dispensational premillennialism" believes that the church has "promises and a destiny different than Israel's" (p. 12). That which is the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism - two separate purposes - is foreign to pre-1830 premillennialism.

**5.2** *Dispensationalism's "Basis In Hermeneutics"* (p. 34ff.). Dr. Ryrie rightly observes that the arena of hermeneutics is "determinative in the controversy" (p. 35). He believes that a proper hermeneutical approach will lead to dispensationalism (p. 47). Here, I will just focus on his idea that the Scriptures must be interpreted "literally" (p. 38).

He insists that other positions "spiritualize" Scriptures, and he equates this with the "allegorical" method of interpretation (p. 46). He concludes that any method of interpretation but his "fosters modernism," and that "the allegorical method of amillennialism is a step toward modernism" (p. 46).

I suggest that he falsely accuses amillennialists of employing "allegory." The N.T. reveals that an O.T. passage can be fulfilled *historically*, but yet not be a one-for-one literal fulfillment (cf. 4.1a above). In other words, Dr. Ryrie's approach utterly fails to consider how the N.T. specifically states that certain prophecies have been fulfilled (cf. 3.2 above; and R. L. Whitelaw, *The gospel Millennium and Obedience to Scriptures*, pp. 6-7). His demand for "literalness" contradicts Christ and His apostles, and parallels the mistaken wooden literalism of the Jewish interpreters.

Further, the N.T. quotes passages from the O.T. which are specifically addressed to Israel, and yet are applied to the church as a whole (Rom. 9:24-26; Heb. 8:8, 10:16; 1 Pet. 1:16, 2:9-10; cf. H. Hoyt, *The First Christian Theology*, p. 106). The O.T. was primarily written for us, upon whom the end of the ages has come. But dispensationalists have ruled this perspective out by insisting that most of what is in the O.T. relates to a future earthly purpose for national Israel.

**5.3** *Dispensationalism's "Basis In the New Covenant"* (p. 105ff.). Their presuppositions rule out the possibility that the New Covenant enacted by Christ has exclusive reference to the church age. Therefore they must posit either that there are *two new covenants*, or that the one new covenant has *two different aspects* (p. 107). So Ryrie says, "the new covenant with Israel is yet to be fulfilled" (p. 106). Since Jer. 31:31 says "house of Israel," Ryrie teaches that the new covenant proper "is for the Jewish people" (p. 108), and is millennial" (p. 111). The N.T., however, reveals that one new covenant has been sealed by Christ's blood, in order that Jew and Gentile might be joined in the one body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:25).

**5.4** *Dispensationalism's "Basis In Ecclesiology"* (p. 126ff.). Believing that "the church is not a subject of O.T. prophecy" (p. 126), Dr. Ryrie posits that the body of Christ must be "raptured" before God's earthly purpose with Israel can be resumed. He argues, "of what comfort would the hope of the rapture be if the church is to pass through the tribulation if that time is as terrible as it is described to be?" (p. 133). Dispensationalists have a real problem with the church going through "tribulation," as if it is opposed to the fact that God has *not* "appointed us to wrath" (1 Thess. 5:9). "Surely," they say, "God would not allow the church to go through the tribulation." However, the N.T. teaches that, following the pattern of our Lord, saints pass through *suffering* (tribulation) in this age, and then enter into *glory* (Luke 24:26; John 16:33; Rom. 8:17; acts 14:22; 1 Thess. 3:3; 2 Thess. 1:4-10; 1 Pet. 2:21). The second coming is of tremendous consolation to believers, for it will result in (1) glorification for the saints (2 Thess. 1:10); and (2) judgment on those who afflicted the saints (2 Thess. 1:6-7).

**5.5** *Dispensationalism's "Basis In Eschatology"* (p. 139ff.). After the "rapture," says Ryrie, "the Holy Spirit, though withdrawn in a special way . . . will nevertheless have a ministry in the world during the tribulation much the same as He had in O.T. times" (p. 142). after the "tribulation," he continues, "the temple is to be rebuilt" and "the sacrificial system reestablished . . . animal sacrifices will be offered in the millennium" (pp. 151, 153). So, minus the church (to whom the Great Commission was given), and minus

the Spirit (for the most part), "the greatest period of evangelism in the history of the world" will take place (Herman A Hoyt, *The First Christian Theology - Studies in Romans* [Baker, 1977], p. 126). People who take the Scriptures seriously ought to think long and hard about embracing such ludicrous and strange ideas.

## **6. A GENERAL EXAMINATION OF THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY**

A few have suggested that the division of redemptive history which surfaced as covenant theology developed constitute a "pre-history" of dispensationalism (Dale deWitt. "The Roots of Dispensational Theology." *Truth*, Vol. XXIX, #5, Feb.-March, 1980, pp. 98-102). However, this is untenable and misleading, for the divisions of history made by dispensationalists are determined by criteria far different from those of covenant theologians. For a general overview, see John Murray's article on "Covenant Theology" in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*. Vol. II pp. 199-216.

**6.1 *The Centrality of the Covenant Idea.*** While the radical disjunction of Israel and the church characterizes dispensationalism, the idea of *one unified covenant of grace* marks covenant theology. William Hendriksen suggests that "this doctrine must become ingrained in the very fiber of our being; it must be incorporated into the very substances of all our thinking and living" (*The Covenant of Grace* [Baker, 1978], p. 35). Heinrich Heppé (1861) observed concerning covenant theology: "thus the concept of the *foedus Dei* [God's covenant] is the essence of all revealed truths . . . the Christian must regard the separate revealed truths in the light of the covenant idea, in such a way as recognizes them as a whole only in relation to that idea" (*Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources* [Baker. 1978]. pp. 43 45). "Rather than considering it [the covenant] a specific dogma or doctrine of the church." says Peter deJong. "We should regard it as a basic motif or pattern controlling and modifying various doctrines in systematic theology" ( *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology 1620-1847* [Eerdmans, 1945], p. 49; cf. pp. 18, 73). Thus the Puritans "used the covenant idea in their construction of a theological system" (deJong, p. 87). There can be no question that the covenant idea still pervades the mainline Reformed denominations (cf. "Faith '80 Conference Says Church Should Focus On Covenant" *Calvinist Contact*, March 28. 1980. p. 1).

**6.2 *The Covenant of Grace Defined.*** Although there are slight variations, such as whether the covenant of at ace is between the Father/Son or Trinity/elect, covenant theologians are generally agreed in their description of this covenant.

*John Calvin* - "The covenant made with all the fathers in so far from differing from ours in reality and substance, that it is altogether one and the same: still the administration differs" (*Institutes*, 2:10:2).

*Edmund Calamy* (1600-1666) - "There are two covenants that God made with man, a covenant of nature, and a covenant of grace. The covenant of nature. or of works. was made with Adam, and all mankind in him. This covenant Adam broke, and God presently had a quarrel against him for breaking of it . . . But, after man was fallen, God was pleased to strike a covenant of grace, or of reconciliation. This was first propounded to Adam by way of promise, "The seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head"" ("Keep Covenant!," *The Protestant Review*, Jan., 1979. p. 34).

*William Hendriksen* - "This one covenant of grace [is] identical in both dispensations. . . both Old and New Testaments reveal to us one and the same covenant of grace" (*Covenant of Grace*, pp. 24-25).

*Gordon Clark* - "Hence from the fall of Adam there has been one, just one continuing covenant of grace" (*First Principles*, p. 483).

*Lewis A Ruff, Jr.* - "At the heart of covenant theology is the understanding that there is continuity

between the Old and New Testaments. There is only one way of salvation for both Abraham and I because there is only one covenant of grace in all ages. We rightly emphasize this truth in exposing the errors of Dispensationalism and upholding infant baptism" ("Reformed Churches and Jewish Evangelism," *Presbyterian Guardian*, March, 1979, p. 3).

W. A. Brown. - summarizing covenant theology, said: "A scheme of doctrine in which the entire system . . . is expressed in terms of two covenants (of works with Adam and of grace with Christ, the second Adam)" ("Covenant Theology," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 4, p. 216; quoted by D. Shantz, p. 1).

While the covenant idea did not pervade Calvin's thought. it appears accurate to say that the "implications of covenant theology *are* present in Calvin's teaching" in E. H. Emerson, "Calvin and Covenant Theology." *Church History*, Vol. XXV, June, 1956, p 141; quoted by D. Shantz, p. 6). However, it may also be the case that certain emphases in Calvin were obscured as covenant theology developed (cf. Dr. R. T. Kendall. *Calvin and English Calvinism* [Oxford Univ. Press, 1980], 237 pages; reviewed by Carl Henry in *Christianity Today*, March 21. 1980. pp. 37-38).

## **7. GENERAL INTRODUCTION WITH HEINRICH HEPPE'S REFORMED DOGMATICS – SET OUT AND ILLUSTRATED FROM THE SOURCES**

By looking at relevant sections of Heppe, we can further Isolate the broad theological approach of covenant theology. Heppe collates the teachings of selected Reformed theologians during the period of roughly 1530-1700.

**7.1** "*The Covenant of Works and the Righteousness of the Law*" (pp. 281-300). Heidegger, and others, taught that the arrangement with Adam was a "covenant of works," that is, a covenant based on the legal principle of "do this and live" (pp. 283-284). Van Mastricht used Gal. 4:24, 3:10. 3:23-24 to show that a covenant of works with Adam came before a covenant of grace. The question naturally arises, what do these verses have to do with the Adamic situation? His answer is. "If you say the apostle is speaking of a covenant not in Paradise, but the covenant at Sinai, the answer is easy, that the apostle is speaking of the covenant in Paradise so far as it is reenacted and renewed with Israel at Sinai in the Decalogue, which contained the proof of the covenant of works" (pp. 289-290). Already we must begin to ask ourselves, where is the Scriptural evidence for a covenant of works being one of the two major covenants in history?

**7.2** "*The violation of the Covenant of Works*" (pp. 301-319). Since Adam failed to earn eternal life by the legal principle of "do this and live," God purposed to have a Mediator fulfill the requirements of the law by the "covenant of grace." "This covenant of grace," said Heppe, was not so much set up in room of the covenant of works, as added to it" (p. 316).

**7.3** "*The Covenant of Grace*" (pp. 371-409). Before the foundation of the world, the Father and Son "concluded a pact" (p. 376, called by many Reformed theologians the "covenant of redemption") in which Christ would come and redeem the elect. The unfolding of this pre-temporal "agreement" "was at last revealed after the fall" in Gen. 3:15 (pp. 378-379, 389). From henceforth, "as regards substance the covenant of grace was at all times one and the same" (p. 391). However, "the manner and mode of proclaiming and appropriating it varied at different periods" (p. 393).

This brings us to the distinction of "old" and "new" Testaments. Heppe asserted that covenant theologians generally regarded phrases like "first covenant" and "old covenant" as referring, not to tile Mosaic covenant, but to the whole age between Adam's fall and Christ's coming (pp. 394-395). Riissen (1695) said in this regard: "the name O. T. is not restricted to the Mosaic dispensation but is extended to the entire dispensation from the actual lapse of man and the promise given to him" (p. 395). This is a very questionable handling of Scripture. To push the "old covenant" back to Eden, and make Gen. 3:15 the

commencement of the "new covenant" is certainly not doing justice to the historical moments when the Scripture states those covenants were ratified (Exod. 19:8; 24:7-8; Matt. 26:28).

Since covenant theologians pushed the "old" covenant back to the Adamic "covenant of works," a problem was encountered with the nature of the actual Mosaic covenant. Was it too a "covenant of works," or essentially a "covenant of grace"? Although there was some dissent among covenant theologians (p. 395), the majority agreed with Riissen: "we deny that it [Mosaic covenant] constituted a third covenant, and we insist that there was nothing else than a fresh administration of the covenant of grace, so that in actual substance it is the same as the covenant entered into with Abraham" (p. 399).

To say that the Mosaic covenant was "the same" as the Abrahamic covenant destroys the argument of Paul in Gal. 3:11-29. Paul's point is clear: though the law was "added" to the Abrahamic promise, and was not opposed to the promise its legal foundation was indeed *different* ("do this and live") than the Abrahamic covenant ("the just live by faith").

When history arrives at the Mosaic covenant, the "one covenant of grace" notion runs into a serious problem. Covenant theology is forced to talk out of both sides of its mouth, and assert a rather dubious proposition: the Mosaic covenant *looks like* a covenant of works, but *in reality* it is a covenant of grace.

*Heidegger* - "That by the same covenant of grace which he had previously made with Abraham, renewed at Sinai . . . donning the appearance of a covenant of works" (p. 398).

*Riissen* - "it is the same as the covenant entered into with Abraham .... clothed as to outward administration in the form of a covenant of works" (p. 399).

*Alting* - (1687) "The covenant of Sinai is of grace, the same as that With Abraham" (pp. 407-408). This tension will be further explored as we interact with H. Witsius' *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*.

## **8. SPECIFIC INTERACTION WITH HERMAN WITSIUS' *ECONOMY OF THE COVENANTS* (1685; NEW YORK: 1798; VOL. 1)**

While Witsius confesses at the outset of his work that a man should not set forth "anything he is not firmly persuaded is contained" in Scripture concerning covenants. I believe he dogmatized in many crucial areas where the Bible does not speak, or does speak as opposed to his position.

**8.1 *The Two Primary Covenants in Scripture.*** Witsius asserted that "we find two covenants of God with man in Scripture: *the covenant of works* . . . and *the covenant of grace*" (p. 56). He then cites Rom. 3:27 as proof that a covenant of works ("do this and live") came before a covenant of grace ("whoever believes"). Where does the Bible teach that these are the two covenants between God and man?

**8.2 *The Covenant of Works.*** The covenant of works, Witsius said, was related to the principle of "do this and live." Thus, the "condition" of this covenant was "to be performed by man himself" (p. 57). In this covenant man is considered as working, and "man's *glorying* [in himself] is not excluded" (p. 57). In the covenant of grace, on the other hand, man is considered as *believing*, "which excludes all boasting" (p. 57). He related Adam's *working* to Lev. 18:5 and Deut. 27:26 (p. 59). Witsius made the baffling statement that in this pre-fall covenant of works, "there was no room for *redemption*, yet there was for *salvation* and *eternal life*" (p. 64). Is it Biblical to assert that Adam would have "earned" his own "salvation" by works had he obeyed God?

**8.3 *"Of the Law, or Condition of the Covenant of Works"*** (p. 72 ff.). Since the covenant of works is connected with the Mosaic terminology, "do this and live," the door is opened to posit that what Adam was "under" corresponded "in substance with what is expressed in the Decalogue, being, what the apostle calls, *the commandment which is unto life*" (p. 76). Somehow, then, the Ten Commandments were "undoubtedly

the law proposed to Adam, upon which the covenant of works was built" (p. 76). A question I have at this point is this: if Adam was ignorant of good and evil in his pre-fall condition, what sense does it make to allege that the "substance" of the Ten Words (which presuppose the existence of sin) was "proposed" to Adam? Further, this perspective does no justice to the appearance of the Decalogue in history, which Paul pinpoints in Rom. 5:13-14: "for until the law sin was in the world .... death reigned from Adam to Moses."

Witsius believed that the law given to Adam reflected "the most holy nature of God Himself" (p. 80). Since he related the Decalogue to this, just how does the Sabbath commandment reflect God's *essential* holiness?

Witsius said that Rom. 7:10, "the commandment ordained to life." refers to the covenant of works when Adam was in *innocency* (p. 92). Even though it is clear that Paul has in view the Mosaic administration as addressed to *sinner*s. Witsius stated that a "commandment ordained unto life" can refer only to a pre-fall situation (p. 93).

**8.4 *The Covenant of Grace*** (p. 217 ff.). After the fall, a "new covenant of grace" was instituted by God. As textual support, Witsius cited Heb. 8:13, "he says, new, he makes the first old" (p. 217). Feeling sonic inappropriateness about the relevance of this text, Witsius immediately added, "it is indeed true, that the apostle, in that place, does not speak precisely of the covenant of works, but of the old economy of the covenant of grace .... Yet we properly build on his reasoning," for every new covenant supposes the abrogation of an old one (pp. 217-218). Is this a careful handling of the Word of God? Does this not point to the great lengths one must go in order to "fit" Scripture into a system?

The covenant of grace, then, "is an agreement between God and the elect sinner" after the fall (p. 226). It is based on the "compact between God the Father and the Son" in eternity (p. 226). Witsius saw three periods of this "pact": (1) "Its *commencement* is to be sought in *the eternal counsel of the adorable Trinity*" (p. 244); (2) "the *second period* of this covenant I place in that *intercession* of Christ, by which, immediately upon the fall of man, he offered himself to God . . . actually to perform those things" (p. 245; where does the Scripture teach this sentiment?); (3) "the *third period* Of that compact is that, when, on his *assuming human nature*, he suffered *his ears to be bored*" (p. 246).

**8.5 *"Of the Oneness of the Covenant of Grace, As To Its Substance"*** (p. 411 ff). Witsius proposed to look at the things which are the same in every age, "and shall explain the different economies, or dispensations, and the new accessions to each" (p. 412).

**8.6 *"Of the Different Economies, or Dispensations of the Covenant of Grace"*** (p. 434 ff.). The "two principal heads" of the history of redemption are the Old and New Testaments (p. 434). Obviously, the N.T. means by these designations the Mosaic covenant (Old) and the covenant ratified by Christ's blood (New). However, this simplicity must be clouded in covenant theology. Why? Because to them the "Old Covenant" came to include everything after the fall until the coming of Christ. "We begin the economy of the Old Testament immediately upon the fall and the first promise of grace, and end it in Christ" (p. 437). Witsius boldly stated that this idea was founded on Scripture: "nor do we speak without Scripture, when we reckon all that time which followed frond the fall to the coming of Christ. to the Old or former Testament. For this we have the apostle's authority" in Heb. 9:15, "he is the mediator of the new covenant . . . for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant" (p. 439). Thus, the "first testament" included four ages (1. from Adam to Noah; 2. Noah to Abraham; 3. Abraham to Moses; 4. Moses to Christ; pp. 443-446). I trust that you are struck with the arbitrariness of this reasoning. The writer of Hebrews certainly meant the Mosaic covenant, and nothing else, when he said "first covenant" in Heb. 9:15 (cf. 9:18-19). Yet the covenant of works/covenant of grace structure forces covenant theologians to be insensitive to the *concrete moments in history* when the specific covenants mentioned in Scripture were "cut."

Further, Witsius pushed back the "yoke" and "burden" of the Mosaic economy to those in the patriarchal age. "That covenant [Mosaic] . . . was also entered into with the ancient patriarchs" (pp. 454, 459). But Paul states that the Mosaic law was "added" at a specific time in history to the Abrahamic promise (Gal.

3:17).

When Witsius treated Jer. 31:32 and Gal 4:24, which both speak of an "old" covenant, he, as must be expected, came up with two Old Testaments: "the first institution of the Old Testament is not treaded of in these places, but the solemn renewal and confirmation of it" (p. 456).

The overriding feature which struck me as I considered Witsius' formulation of covenant theology is his absolute disregard for the plain statements of Scripture, and invention of things not stated in Scripture. Everything is swallowed up in the covenant of works covenant of grace presupposition. These are asserted to be the two primary covenants of Scripture, and yet the Scriptural "evidences" presented is twisted and strained. If these two covenant are so important in structuring a Biblical theology, should not the textual evidence for them be perspicuous?

## 9. SOME TENSION POINTS IN COVENANT THEOLOGY

Having looked at the backbone of covenant theology, I wish now to examine some tension points which surfaced in my study of covenant theology. If the presupposed covenant of works/covenant of grace foundation is shaky, then it is natural for problems to arise in the building erected upon it.

**9.1 *The Covenant of Grace and Historical Covenants.*** It is my contention that viewing the covenant of works/covenant of grace as the primary covenants is Scripture has had the effect of *dehistoricizing* the covenants revealed in the Bible as "cut." This occurs because the covenant of grace is a post-fall, yet *a-historical* covenant, which is said to be variously administrated in the *historical* covenants (cf. my "is There A 'Covenant of Grace'?" BRR, Vol. 7. #3, 1977, pp. 43-53). In this system, then, it is impossible to do justice to the "covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12; Rom. 9:4) which were "cut" *in history*, because they are all flattened out, being contemplated as "various administrations of the one covenant of grace." To emphasize this, consider what two contemporary covenant theologians have said:

The two primary covenants are: Covenant of Works (or Creation): the promise of God is life for Adam and his posterity . . . Covenant of Grace (or salvation): the promise of God is life and salvation through Jesus Christ for all who believe (Dr. Jack Fennema, "Growth in the Lord," *Calvinist Contact*, March 3, 1978, p. 2).

The advocates of Covenant theology reject 'this common belief in two basic covenants' and hold that the really basic covenant is the *one covenant of grace*. It is found throughout the Old and New Testaments . . . The two halves of the Bible should be regarded not as separate covenants made by God with mankind, but as records of the way in which the one covenant was administrated in two different ways for necessary reasons (J. G. Vos, *Blue Banner Faith and Life*. April-June, 1978, p. 29).

Can these truth claims be sustained by careful exegesis?

If, as Dr. Gordon Clark suggests, "a Christian theologian should use Biblical terms in their Biblical meaning," is it valid to take the covenant concept and employ it as a theological catch-all without careful regard for how the word "covenant" is employed in Scripture? Check the *Englishman's Hebrew and Chaldee Concordance* (pp. 272, 274, 618-619), and the *Englishman's Greek Concordance* (p. 144). and see if "covenant" is ever used to designate something that is not ratified *in history*.

The covenant implies a *covenant occasion* in which the contract between God and man was actually established in space and time . . . The covenant is established in historical occurrences that can be recorded, commemorated and renewed (*The Problem of Wineskins*, p. 104).

It seems to me that an objective examination of the Biblical data reveals *one eternal purpose (counsel) of God in Christ* (Eph. 3:11; *et al.*) and a *plurality of historical covenants* (Eph. 2:11; Rom. 9:4). It is *Christ*

who gives meaning and continuity to all the covenants (Rom. 15:8). In Heb. 13:20, the new covenant is called "everlasting." This indicates both the historical moment of that covenant ("blood"), and the consummatory nature of that covenant (it will never be superseded by another covenant, hence "everlasting"). Read John Murray's *The Covenant of Grace*. His biblical-theological study led him to see in Scripture a plurality of covenants (p. 26) culminating in the *finality* of the new covenant (pp. 28, 31-32). He nowhere found in the Bible "one covenant of grace" variously administered. To be sure, in his other writings he states that such a covenant exists. But he did not find it as a result of his study with the title, *The Covenant of Grace*. Here, he uses the phrase "covenant grace," but never "the covenant of grace."

Also, read H. Buis's article on "Biblical Covenants" in the *Encyclopedia of Christianity*, Vol. II, pp. 219-229. Is it not passing strange - if the covenant of works/covenant of grace are the two main Biblical covenants - that this study of *Biblical* covenants never once mentions them as being revealed in Scripture?

Dr. R. J. Rushdoony rightly observes that a covenant is "cut" in history ("Covenant, law, grace, and antinomianism." *Chalcedon Position Paper #11*, March, 1980). We must ask, "Where was the covenant of grace *cut in history*?" Where does the Bible teach about an a-historical covenant of grace which hovers above history, and is the same in "substance" in all the historical covenants? Scripture moves from an eternal purpose in Christ to historical covenants. Covenant theology moves from an eternal covenant, to an a-historical covenant of grace, and then to historical administrations of this covenant of grace.

Douglas Shantz says that "covenant divisions are not as arbitrary as dispensational divisions" ("Baptists and Covenant Theology," p. 24). I disagree, My study would lead me to conclude that the categories articulated by covenant theologians are, in the final analysis, just as arbitrary and confusing as those in dispensationalism (cf. 7.3, 8.6 above).

**9.2** *The Covenant of Grace and the Trinity*. Covenant theology pushed the covenant concept back into the deliberations of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This is usually called the "covenant of grace" is based.

It seems to me that covenant theology ended up with a *bi-lateral* covenant, and some unhealthy statements about the reason why the Word was made flesh.

**9.2.a** *A Bi-lateral Covenant of Redemption*. While on occasion the involvement of the Trinity is alluded to (Witsius, p. 399) in the covenant of redemption, usually it is presented as a bi-lateral "compact" between the Father and Son (cf. Shantz, p. 3; Heppe, p. 376; Witsius, pp. 226-227, 397; John Owen, Works, Vol. 10, p. 168; deJong, pp. 53-54; Clark, p. 461). "The covenant of our salvation," says E. W. Johnson, "is not a bi-lateral contract between the Father and Son. It is a unilateral contract made by the persons of the eternal Trinity: (*Sovereign Grace Message*, Sept., 1971, p. 2). While covenant theology obviously wishes to be Trinitarian, their "covenant of redemption" issues in confusion at this point. Why is the Holy Spirit, practically speaking, usually omitted in discussions pertaining to the "eternal purpose"? Also, in some cases, this pre-temporal covenant concept elicits some very dubious language. For example, Gordon Clark states: "For Christ the Covenant of Redemption was a Covenant of Works" p. 468).

**9.2.b** *Reason For the Son Coming As Mediator*. I believe that in discussing the pre-temporal relationship of Father and Son, covenant theologians kept talking when they should have put their hands over their mouths and remained silent. Through asserting the *equality* of the Father and Son, there is a marked tendency for the system to result in a pre-temporal *subordination* of the Son. For example, John Gill stated that in the pre-temporal "council," the Father was greater than the Son, not just with reference to His assumption of human nature in the economy of redemption, but with reference to their essential "nature": "this economy . . . of the covenant, thus settled in subordination among themselves by agreement and consent, is done with great propriety . . . suitable to their *natural relations* they bear to each other, as equal divine persons; for who so proper to be the proposer of terms in the covenant, to direct and prescribe them, and to exercise a kind of authority, as He who is the *first person in order of nature*, and that stands in the relation of a Father to the second person" (*Body of Divinity*, Vol. I Book II, p.313).

And why was the Word chosen as the suitable Mediator? Gill, Thomas Goodwin and H. Witsius all assert that Christ is the Mediator of God and men because He stood as the middle person between Father and Spirit in the Trinity.

*John Gill* - "The fitness of Christ for his work and office, as the Mediator of the covenant; since a mediator was necessary, and he must be one of the divine persons in the Trinity; the Son of God being the middle Person in it, seems most proper and suitable to preserve the order, name, and place of the persons in it: it does not seem so decent, that the first Person should be a Mediator to the second; but rather, since, as Dr. Goodwin expresses it, the suit of trespass was commenced, and ran in the name of the Father, of the first Person for the rest . . . and since it was proper that the Mediator should become the son of man . . . it seems most agreeable that he who is the Son of God, should become the Son of man . . . and for the first or third Person to become a Mediator between God and Man, does not seem so becoming, as he who is the second or middle Person among them" (p. 333).

*Thomas Goodwin* - "Of the three persons in the Godhead, the Son is the fittest to be mediator . . . If we consider the relations of the three persons among themselves, [the Son] is of all the fittest to undertake this work . . . He that was to be mediator it was meet he should be the Son of man, the son of a woman as his mother . . . and this title and appellation will fitliest become him that is a Son (though of God) already . . . It was meet that the Son of God should be this mediator, that the due order that is between these three persons be also kept. The Father is the first, the Son second, the Holy Ghost the third; and he that is to be mediator must be called to it, and sent by another person, therefore the Father is not to be mediator; for both the Son and the Holy Ghost being from the Father in subsisting, are not to send the Father, who is the first . . . He being the middle person of the three, bears the best resemblance of the work, to be a mediator, to come between for us, to the other two . . . He was from the Father, and the Holy Ghost from him, and it is he in whom, as it were, the other two are united, and are one, and so he is able to lay hands on both . . . as for one and the same person to be both God and man was a middle rank between God and us men; so it is Son of God and middle person between the persons themselves" (*Christ Our Mediator*, 1692, pp. 41-42).

*H. Witsius* - "As the second person alone is the Son, and our salvation consists in adoption, was it not proper, that the Son of God should become the Son of man?" (*Economy*, p. 277).

Where does the Scripture reveal this rationale for why the Word was made flesh? It would be my judgment that their elaborations of the "covenant of redemption" caused them to bring the proper subordination of the Son in the historical economy of salvation into the pre-temporal Trinitarian relationship.

The verse that has been used in a confusing manner in this regard is Psalm 2:7 - "I will declare the decree; the Lord has said to me, you are my Son; this day I have begotten you." This verse has been used with reference to an *eternal* relationship of Father and Son (cf. Heppe, p. 120). However, it is clear that the verse itself refers to a decree to be realized in history, not to an *eternal relationship*. Further, the N. T. quotes this verse several times (Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:4-5). In these places, Ps. 2:7 is clearly referenced to the *historical manifestation* (and, more pointedly, to the resurrection) of Christ, not to the *eternal relationship* of Father and son. R. C. H. Lenski noted on Acts 13:33:

The passage occurring in the Psalm does not speak of the *generatio aeterna*, not of the inner Trinitarian relation of the two Persons, not of eternity but of time (*Interpretation of Acts*, p. 538).

The verses used to substantiate an *eternal subordination* of the Son in fact refer to the relationship of the Trinity in the *outworking of redemption in history* (cf. Heppe, pp. 118-121). Verses that relate to *God's action in history* are wrongly applied to the pre temporal relationship of the Trinity. It is of critical importance to distinguish between the *pre-temporal* (metaphysical) relationship and the *economic*

(historical) relationship of the Trinity. Ps. 2:7 falls in the latter category; a verse like John 17:5b falls in the former category.

**9.3 *The Covenant of Grace and Church/State Union.*** Historically, covenant theology has been connected with the idea of a "Christian state," or "holy commonwealth" (cf. Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, and *Anatomy of A Hybrid*; J. Zens, "'More of Cromwell, Less of Gurnall?'," BRR, Vol. 8, #1, pp. 20-32; W. B. Selbie, "The Influence of the Old Testament On Puritanism," BRR, Vol. 8, #3, pp. 13-24). Some contemporary men, such as Drs. R. J. Rushdoony and Greg Bahnsen, are calling for covenant theologians to evidence consistency by returning to the strong "holy commonwealth" ideals of the Westminster Assembly (cf. Bahnsen, "God's Law and Gospel Prosperity: A Reply to the Editor of the *Presbyterian Journal*," pp. 10-12, 29).

The Reformers and the Puritans, unfortunately, believed it was justifiable to employ the sword in the maintenance of "true religion." The O. T. had to be their textbook in this regard (deJong, p. 80: "much of the political theory of the Puritans was derived directly from the Old Testament:). H. Bullinger, Zwingli's assistant, was typical of their attitude when he said: "the Christian emperors a 1000 years ago were right to appoint capital punishment for those who should spread new dogma and teach different things with insult to God [about the Trinity]" (quoted by Heppe, p.105).

While developed covenant theology came to believe that church and state should be separate in principle, "in practice this did not happen" (deJong, p. 79). DeJong sees the rejection of the "theocratic ideal which had inspired the first [New England] fathers" as a significant contributing factor to the decline of Calvinism (p. 9).

John Warwick Montgomery seems to pinpoint the connection of the *one* covenant concept and church/state union:

The most influential factor in creating a legalistic tone in Puritanism was doubtless the Calvinist stress on a single covenant in Scripture . . . which elevated the Old Testament to a position of great prominence in Puritan theology. Old Testament laws were indiscriminately applied to New Testament situations (cf. Earle's detailed work, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*) . . . Puritan-Calvinist preoccupation with the history of salvation in the Old Testament gave a special cast to the New England colonists' western dream . . . consistent with their Old Testament interests, they went on to identify themselves with Israel, reading their own history as the story of a new Chosen People (*The Shaping of America* [Bethany, 1976], pp. 44-45).

**9.4 *The Covenant of Grace and Infant Baptism.*** Historically, the one covenant of grace has been the most-employed argument by covenant theologians to justify infant baptism: "the doctrine of the covenant of grace is the strongest argument for infant baptism" (J. G. Vos, *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, April-June, 1978, p. 29); "it is precisely because there is such evidence of the perpetual operation of this gracious principle in the administration of God's covenant that we baptize infants. It is for that reason alone that we continue to baptize them" (John Murray, *Christian Baptism*, p. 71). Since explicate exegetical evidence for infant baptism is non-existent (cf. G. Bromiley, *Children of Promise*, pp. 105, 107), pedobaptists must resort to their a-historical covenant of grace. "Because," they say, "children were included in the old administration of the covenant of grace, we have all the reason to believe that children are included in the new administration of the covenant of grace."

This is clearly John Calvin's line of reasoning. "The covenant made with all the fathers in so far from differing from ours in reality and substance, that it is altogether one and the same: still the administration differs . . . If the covenants remains firm and fixed, it is no less applicable to the children of Christians in the present day, than to the children of the Jews under the Old Testament" (*Institutes*; 2.10.2, 4.16.5). To withhold baptism from an infant of Christian parents brings dreadful consequences, which Calvin found in the provision for those who failed to circumcise their children; "God will take vengeance on every one who

despises to impress the symbol of the covenant on his child (Gen. 17:14)" (*Institutes*; 4.16.9). Thus, for Calvin, the idea of one covenant with two administrations "served especially to maintain the place of infants in the church" (deJong, p. 22). Zwingli, too, saw the idea of one covenant "as one of the outstanding arguments in favor of infant baptism" (deJong, p. 23).

Not a few Baptists have virtually capitulated to infant baptism upon a consideration of the "one covenant of grace variously administered." That is why it is absolutely imperative for Calvinistic Baptists to think through this matter. Is the covenant of works/covenant of grace theological structured exegetically tenable or not?

**9.5 *The Covenant of Grace and "Conditions."*** There were varying ideas among covenant theologians as to whether the covenant of grace was "conditional" (upon faith and repentance) or "unconditional" (cf. Shantz, pp. 3-4). Here, I simply wish to point out my judgment that in Puritanism the emphasis came to fall on the "conditions" (cf. William K. B. Stoever, '*A Fair and Easie Way to Heaven' - Covenant Theology and Antinomianism in Early Massachusetts* [Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1978], "The Conditionality of the Covenant of Grace," p. 97 ff.; Dr. R. T. Kendall, "Assurance and Sanctification" [taped message]; and Norman Pettit, *The Heart Prepared* [Yale Univ. Press, 1966]). The idea of "entering into covenant" with God was accompanied by such ideas as putting oneself in the "way of grace," the "probability" of success in conversion with proper use of the "means of grace," and "striving against our corruption" while seeking salvation (cf. Stoever, pp. 105-106).

Iain Murray insists that in all of this the Puritans were not "reviving the idea of human ability in salvation" ("Thomas Hooker and the Doctrine of Conversion (3)," *Banner of Truth*, Feb., 1980, p. 17). The Puritans clearly intended to maintain human inability in salvation. But their emphasis on "means" and "striving" also clearly intended and communicated *more* than just the duty of men to believe the gospel. Consider the following remarks by Joseph Alleine, John Flavel and George Whitefield. Judge for yourself whether or not the effects of such teaching would open the door wide for misunderstanding the place of human activity in the salvation process.

*Joseph Alleine* - "Being thus prepared, on some convenient time set apart for the purpose, enter upon the work, and solemnly, as in the presence of the Lord, fall down on your knees and spreading forth your hands towards heaven open your heart to the Lord in these, or the like words: [a prayer three pages long follows] . . . This covenant I advise you to make, not only in heart, but in word; not only in word, but in writing; and that you would with all possible reverence spread the writing before the Lord, as if you would present it to Him as your act and deed. And when you have done this, set your hand to it and sign it. Keep it as a memorial of the solemn transactions that have passed between God and you, that you may have recourse to it in doubts and temptations" (*Alarm To The Unconverted* [1671; *Banner of Truth*, 1976], pp. 117-120).

*John Flavel* - "Objection: But you have told us that no sinner can open his own heart, nor bow his own will to Christ? Answer: True, he cannot convert himself, but he may do many things in order to it, and which have a tendency to it, which he does not do . . . If it be not in your power to open your heart to Christ, it is in your power to forbear the external acts of sin, which set your heart the more against Christ . . . Objection: [After all our striving] we may be Christless and hopeless when all is done. Answer: But yet remember, God may bless these weak endeavors, and give you his Almighty Spirit with them: nay, it is highly probable that he will do so; and is a strong probability nothing with you?" (*Christ Knocking At the Door of Sinners' Hearts*, pp. 58, 60).

*George Whitefield* - "Wait therefore at Wisdom's gates. The bare probability of having a door of mercy opened, is enough to keep you striving . . . You know not but you may be in the number of those few, and that your striving may be the means which God intends to bless, to give you an entrance in . . . For though after you have done all that you can, God may justly cut you off. Yet

never was a single person damned who did all that he could" (*Memories of George Whitefield*, John Gillies [1834], sermon on John 16:8, p. 418).

The elements of Alleine's remarks ("sinner's prayer," signing a document, and looking to that document in times of doubt) parallel contemporary Arminianism, often castigated by the Calvinists. Yet we are told in the prefatory remarks to *Alarm* that "here, we have no hesitation in saying, are the principles which must be present in any true presentation of the Gospel." I believe contemporary Calvinists need to read such material with great discernment.

**9.6** *The Covenant of Grace and Law.* The doctrine of the covenant also served to emphasize "the importance of the Decalogue for the Christian life" (deJong, P. 22). According to covenant theology, the "substance" of the Decalogue was present from Adam onwards (cf. 8.3 above). Thus, in this system, "the law, from the beginning, has been a means of grace" (E. Kevan, *The Law of God in Christian Experience - Bible Readings Given At the Keswick Conference, July, 1955* [London, 1955], p. 48).

I suggest that this approach fails to do justice to the centrality of Christ in ethics (cf. "This Is My Beloved Son . . . Hear Him," BRR, Vol. 7, #4, pp. 15-52). At this point, I wish to make several pointed observations about covenant theology's view of law in Christian experience.

**9.6.a** First, Witsius made the following remarks about the Ten Commandments: "all prescription of duty belongs to the law . . . [in the teaching of Christ and the apostles] there is a certain mixture of various doctrines . . . each of which ought to be reduced to their proper heads, so that the promises of grace be referred to the gospel, all injunctions of duty . . . to the law" (pp. 407, 411). Does this hard and fast distinction reflect sensitivity to the N. T. ethical perspective? Is it not the case that in the N. T. duties are pressed upon believers because of their relationship *to the grace of Christ in the gospel*? (Cf. my "Believer's Rule of Life," BRR, Vol. 8, #4, p. 16). "Love one another, even as I have loved you," is the starting point of Christian ethics. "Under grace," *duty flows out of union with Christ*. In Witsius scheme, the gospel is said absolutely not to prescribe duty; *only* the law is granted this function. But how contrary this is to N. T. teaching (cf. C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* [New York, 1951]. "Principles and Motives of Christian Ethics in the New Testament," pp. 25-45)! Because everything is subsumed under the one covenant of grace, covenant theology has not done justice to the new demand that obtains with the coming of Christ. The command to love is *old*; the command to love as it is connected to the decisive redemptive event of the cross is new (John 13:34-35; 15:12-13). Patrick Fairbarin said that the Law is the "special instrument . . . for keeping alive in men's souls a sense of duty" (*Revelation of Law in Scripture*, p. 289). Will such a statement stand the test of N. T. exegesis? Ethics in covenant theology has been oriented around Moses, not Christ.

**9.6.b** Secondly, covenant theology puts the believer in a tension of being both "under law" and "not under law." Samuel Bolton put it like this: "The law sends us to the Gospel that we may be justified; and the Gospel sends us to the law again to inquire what is our duty as those who are justified . . . It is a hard lesson to live above the law, and yet walk according to the law . . . to walk in the law in respect of duty, but to live above it in respect of comfort" (*True Bonds of Christian Freedom*, pp. 71, 219, 220). Where does the N. T. teach all of this? I submit that (1) this places the Christian in a position God has never intended for him: and (2) that this is contrary to the N. T. teaching on sanctification. On the one hand, covenant theology tells us that the law promotes transgression, stirs up sin, brings death, and cannot be the means of sanctification (Kevan, pp. 30, 38., 49, 77). Yet, on the other hand, we are told that "grace is more commanding than law," "that it is a mark of spiritual infancy . . . to be under law." and that in sanctification we are left "within the law as a rule of life" (Kevan, pp. 66, 59, 68).

I am not in any way denying the usefulness of the Mosaic commands in the Christian life. But these commands come to us through Christ. Perhaps the following diagram will help illustrate my point.

<u>OLD EXODUS</u>	<u>NEW EXODUS</u>
(Moses, Mediator)	(Christ, Mediator)
Redemptive Event: "I have brought you out" (Exod. 20:2)	Redemptive Event: "I have loved you" (John 15:12-13)
Moral Demand: "no other gods" "honor your father/mother"	Moral Demand: "Love one another" "children, obey your parents in the Lord . . . honor your father/mother"

The N. T. uses the O. T. freely (2 Tim. 3:16). But the O. T. is not viewed in isolation from the consummation of redemptive history in the New Covenant (cf. "Believer's Rule of Life," p. 19). When Christ said, "if you love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15), He did not mean, "keep all the old covenant commandments"; He meant that our attention was to be fixed on *His* commandments (cf. D. M. Canright, "What Law Are Christians Under," BRR, Vol. 9, #1, pp. 11-13; cf. Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?*, pp. 40-41, where he equates Christ's commandments with the Ten Commandments). In our sanctification, we are "in-law to Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21), and are enabled to "fully fulfill (anaplerotically) the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2).

**9.6.c** Thirdly, covenant theology allows for no other means of conviction than the Ten Commandments. "It is the law that brings conviction of sin" (Kevan, p. 40). "Our Savior used the law as a primary tool of evangelism. He knew that preaching the Ten Commandments was the *only way* to teach a sinner his guilt and thereby stir within him a desire for God's grace" (Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel*, p. 39; emphasis mine). We have already seen that covenant theology rules out the gospel's ability to press duty; now we see that the gospel is denied the power to produce conviction. Covenant theology dogmatically asserts that *law must be preached before gospel* (cf. Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, pp. 222-238).

But we must ask some questions. Are the Ten Commandments the "only way" to teach sinners their guilt? Apparently not, for Paul specifically said that when he was among Gentiles his evangelistic method was "with law" (1 Cor. 9:21). He nowhere used the Ten Commandments with Gentiles to convince them of sin. There is no evidence of this in the brief sermons addressed to Gentiles that are recorded in Acts 14:15-17 and 17:23-31. Rather, as can be seen in Rom. 1, his starting point was *general revelation*. Furthermore, even the use of the O. T. *special revelation* in Acts does not reveal the use of the Ten Commandments to drive men to Christ. Rather, *Christ* in all of His offices is proclaimed (Acts 17:2-3; 26:22-23).

If "law-preaching" is *essential*, as the Puritans asserted it is, why do we not find any examples of this method in Acts? Would we not expect something so allegedly crucial to be *clearly* revealed in apostolic preaching? But, as F. F. Bruce observes, "there is no evidence that Paul ever used the law in this way" (Paul: *Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, p. 192).

Does the N. T. teach that the law is the only medium of sin-conviction? John 16:8-11 is admittedly the most important passage concerning Holy Spirit conviction. George Smeaton said of it: "the most conclusive passage on the Spirit's work in connection with conversion in the whole compass of Scripture." After studying this passage extensively, I can see nowhere the teaching that the Spirit will take law-preaching and drive men to Christ. I have found no commentator who finds the exclusive use of the law by the Spirit in this text. Rather, as Leon Morris notes: "it should not be overlooked that all three aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit dealt with in these verses are interpreted Christologically. Sin, righteousness and judgment are all to be understood because of the way they relate to Christ" (*Commentary on John*, p. 699). Thus James Buchanan said about this passage in his book on the Holy Spirit: "it may be safely affirmed that it is by the Spirit's witness to Christ that he is *first* brought to see the magnitude of his guilt . . . Christ's exaltation . . . is *sufficient* . . . to carry home conviction of sin."

Walter Chantry says: "until this moralist [the rich young ruler] could see his soul in the light of God's law, he was unprepared for the Gospel . . . [When pulpits proclaim the law] you also discover churches with convicted sinners prepared to hear the way of salvation" (*Today's Gospel*, pp. 38, 46). Does the N. T. divide sinners into the categories of "prepared" and "unprepared" with reference to hearing the gospel? Was the Philippian jailor "prepared" for the imperative to "believe" by Ten Commandment preaching? Who determines when a man is "sufficiently" convicted by the law so as to be "fit" for advancing on to the gospel (cf. 9.5 above)? Where in the N. T. is Ten Commandment preaching presented as a *necessary* prerequisite which "prepares" men for the "message of salvation"?

I believe that the dogmatism regarding "law-preaching" must be re-examined in the light of Scripture. Binding the consciences of preachers (who wish to be faithful in their ministries) and sinners (who may sit under the Word) to the absolute necessity of Ten Commandment preaching elicits a type of bondage because such a method is out of line with the N. T. data.

The Puritans took this matter of "law-preaching" very seriously, as the following quote from John Owen demonstrates:

What is necessary to be found in us antecedaneously to our believing unto the justification of life? . . . there is supposed in them in whom this faith is wrought . . . *the work of the law in conviction of sin* . . . that which any man hath first to deal withal . . . is the law . . . Without this the gospel cannot be understood, nor the grace of it duly valued . . . the faith which we treat of being evangelical . . . cannot be acted by us, but on a supposition of the work and effect of the law . . . And that faith which hath not respect hereunto, we absolutely deny to be that faith whereby we are justified, Gal. 3:22-24; Rom. 10:4 (*Justification*, pp. 74-76).

Will the N. T. sustain such a strict opinion? In light of the truth claims made by Owen, we need to be clear in this matter.

### ***10. A POSITIVE TEXTUAL PRESENTATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE OLD AND NEW COVENANTS***

For our purposes here we will examine Rom. 3:9-4:8 and Gal. 3:1-6:2 (focusing on Rom. 3:21 and Gal. 6:2). This will allow us to discuss some important issues, and give us much to think about as we come to grips with Christ's truth.

**10.1 Rom. 3:9-4:8.** 3:9 - Paul's goal is to show that all men, Jews and Gentiles, are "under sin." In chapters 1-3, he has already shown this. Both those without law and those with law are destitute of righteousness, and sinful by nature.

3:10-18 - In these verses, Paul quotes from the O. T., specifically from the Psalms and Isaiah. In these quotations, Paul demonstrates from the "law" that Jews and Gentiles are totally depraved. They, being unrighteous, need a righteousness in order to stand before God.

3:19-20 - Verse 20 has often been used to show that the Ten Commandments must be preached to convict of sin: "God's law is an *essential* ingredient of gospel preaching, for 'by the law is the knowledge of sin'" (Chantry, p. 36). Historically, the "law" in 3:20b has been equated with the Ten Commandments. But there is nothing in the context to warrant this conclusion. In verse 9 Paul states that all men are "under sin." He proves this by quoting from "law." Here, he has in view *the entire O. T.* (John Murray, *Romans*, Vol. 1, pp. 240, 105). The translation "under law" in v. 19 is incorrect. The Greek is *en nomos* ("in the law"), not *hupo nomos* ("under the law"). Whatever the O. T. says, it says to those described in it, namely Jews and Gentiles (Murray, p. 106). Thus, while the Ten Commandments are a part of the O. T., the "law" in 3:20b certainly cannot be *equated* with the Ten, and contextually it refers to the whole O. T. If anyone reads Genesis through Malachi, he will come to a full knowledge of sin - the sin of Adam, the sin that brought

the flood, the sin that brought fire on Sodom, the sin that caused Israel to be cast out of the land, etc., *and thereby come to a knowledge of his sinfulness.*

3:21 - This is a very significant verse, for it is a transition from the proven unrighteousness of men to the revealed righteousness of God. In this verse, I believe we have an assertion of both the *discontinuity* and *continuity* of the Old and New Covenants (cf. Murray, *Romans*, Vol. 1, p. 109). The *discontinuity* is revealed in the phrase, "without law a righteousness of God has been manifested." "Righteousness" cannot come by the law. Therefore, gospel righteousness has come apart from law, that is, "in a sphere different from that in which the law says, 'do this and live'" (*Wuest's Word Studies*, Romans, p. 57). John Brown says "without law" means that this righteousness "stands apart from law; it is founded on other principles: it is characterized by different qualities" (*Commentary on Romans*, ad. 3:21). The "now" of 3:21, says John Murray, "should not be deprived of its temporal force" (*Romans*, Vol. 1, p. 108). "When Paul says 'without the law' the absoluteness of this negative must not be toned down" (*Ibid.*, p. 109). Thus, Murray continues, "the emphasis falls upon the manifestation without law rather than upon the fact that it is righteousness without law" (*Ibid.*, p. 110).

In this Messianic age, then, a righteousness has been manifested which is "apart from law." It is founded, not on the legal principle of "do this and live," but on "the law of faith" (3:27). This, then, is the essence of what Paul means in Gal 3:12 when he says that the law is "not of faith." Because this righteousness is "without law," it is for Jews and Gentiles (3:22-23). Paul shows in 4:10 that righteousness by faith came to Abraham "without law" - and in his case, *prior* to the law.

The *continuity* in 3:21 is seen in the fact that this righteousness is witnessed to in the O. T. Habakkuk 2:4, for example, often quoted in the N. T., teaches justification by faith. While the law, contemplated as a legal covenant, was "not of faith," the O. T. documents taught righteousness by faith (Gal. 3:11-12). The gospel, then, was manifested in history apart from law, but was foretold in the law (Gal. 3:8).

The history of covenant theology shows a tendency to overplay the *continuity*, and not do justice to the revealed *discontinuity* of the two covenants. Discontinuity is virtually ruled out as a possibility when *all* covenants are viewed as administrations of one covenant of grace. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, have ruled out the possibility of *continuity* by teaching that the O. T. is "silent" about this present "intercalation" age. We must do full justice to *all* that is revealed in Rom. 3:21.

3:31 - Historically, covenant theology has seen this text as establishing the abiding validity of the "moral law" under the gospel. Charles Hodge is representative of this when he says concerning this text, "no moral obligation is weakened" (*Commentary on Romans*, ad. 3:31). However, it appears that Paul's point here, and in the preceding and following context, is *to validate the fact that his teaching is not contrary to the law.*

In 3:27, Paul uses the phrase "law of faith" as opposed to salvation by works. Some might suppose that this invalidates the O. T. Thus, in 3:31, he indicates that his gospel upholds the law. for righteousness by faith was "witnessed by the law and prophets: (3:21). F. F. Bruce summarizes the teaching of 3:31 and the context by saying:

"do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" . . . "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." In the immediate context, in which Paul goes on to expound the narrative of Abraham's faith which was reckoned to him for righteousness (4:1-25), it might appear that the law which is upheld by the gospel of justification by faith is the Torah in the wider sense -- the Pentateuch, and more particularly the Genesis account of Abraham. That is so, but Paul goes on farther to show that the law in its stricter sense, as the embodiment of God's will, is upheld and fulfilled more adequately in the age of faith than was possible "before faith came," when law kept the people "under restraint" (Gal. 3:23). Only in an atmosphere of spiritual liberty can God's will be properly obeyed and his law upheld (*Heart Set Free*, p. 201).

In summarizing this Romans context, I believe the remarks of Geerhardus Vos are appropriate and insightful.

It is evident that there are two distinct points of view from which the content of the old dispensation can be regarded. When considered in comparison with the final unfolding and rearranged structure of the N. T., negative judgments are in place. When, on the other hand, the O. T. is taken as an entirety by itself and as rounded off provisionally in itself, and looked at, as it were, with the eyes of the O. T. itself, we find it necessary to take into account the positive element by which it prefigured and anticipated typically the N. T. (*Biblical Theology*. p. 144).

**10.2** Gal. 3:1-6:2. In this context, it appears to me that we must remember that Paul is dealing with people who have been urged to *come under Moses*. This makes his appeal to the *law of Christ* in 6:2 take on increased significance.

3:1-5 - Paul confronts the Galatians with the original way in which they come to Christ. The answer to his question is obvious: they came to Christ through *faith*, not through *the law*. Covenant theology has argued, and not without textual foundation (Gal. 5:4), that the issue here is not *sanctification*, but *justification*. Their position, of course, avers that the Christian is not under the law for justification, but that he is under the law in sanctification. However, it is impossible to separate the *way* of justification and sanctification in the N. T. If we are justified *by faith*, so we are sanctified *by faith* - the just live by faith in all of their days (cf. H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* [Baker, 1978], p. 480). If justification does not come by law, than, to Paul, neither does sanctification: "if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law" (Gal. 5:18; cf. Rom. 6:14). The *gospel* brings justification, sanctification, and all blessings in Christ. Many Galatians were trying to *maintain their standing before God* with the law, and Paul tells them it just will not work (cf. Tom Smith, "Have You Fallen From Grace?," *Free Grace Herald*, May, 1979).

3:17-29 - Paul here shows that blessing comes via the Abrahamic promise. Abraham stands as our reference point in the history of redemption. He was justified by faith *prior* to his own circumcision, and 430 years *prior* to the law. Abraham was essentially like a heathen when justified -- he was without law and uncircumcised. Thus for Christians to come under the Mosaic covenant is retrogressive and dangerous.

For Paul there is obviously some tremendously significant difference between the Abrahamic-promise and Mosaic-law covenants. The one was a *uni-lateral* declaration of God's purpose in Christ (3:16-17; cf. Gen. 15:17-18). The other was *bi-lateral*, and involved the consent of the people (Exod. 19:8; 24:7). The Abrahamic covenant was incapable of being forfeited; the Mosaic covenant was conditioned upon obedience, and indeed was "broken" (Jer. 34:32). However, in covenant theology, the Mosaic covenant is transformed into a "fresh administration of the covenant of grace" (cf. 7.3 above), and asserted to be the same in substance as the covenant with Abraham. Frankly, in this regard, there is no place in covenant theology for Paul's line of reasoning in Gal. 3:17-29. Redemptive history is leveled, with the result that all covenants are the same.

Further, covenant theology has historically viewed this context with reference to *effectual calling*, and not with reference to *salvation history* (cf. 8.6 above). We must understand the apostle's perspective in this context.

Gal. 3:24 - The "to bring us" is in *italics* in the King James Version. These words are not in the Greek text. It should read, "the law was our schoolmaster unto [or, *until*] Christ." The "to bring us" rendering makes it appear that Paul has in view our *personal calling* into salvation. Gal. 3:24, based on this idea, has been used to teach that in the process of salvation, men *must first* be convicted by the Ten Commandments, and then are driven to Christ. For example, Archbishop Usher said, "First, the *covenant of the law is urged*, to make sin, and the punishment thereof known . . . *After this preparation, the promises of God are propounded*" (quoted by Bridges, *Christian Ministry*, pp. 233-234). Walter Chantry states that gospel preachers must "exposit the Ten Commandments until men are slain thereby (Rom. 7:11). When you see

that men have been wounded by the law, then it is time to pour in the balm of Gospel oil. It is the sharp needle of the law that makes way for the scarlet thread of the Gospel" (*Today's Gospel*, p. 43). But, clearly, this is not what Paul is teaching in Gal. 3:24. Rather, he is showing the *advance of history* from the Abrahamic covenant to the Mosaic covenant, to the coming of Christ. He does this to show that salvation is *of faith*, not *of law* (3:18), and that salvation is connected with *promise*, not *law* (3:17). Notice the following *historical* terminology in this context: "430 years after . . . [the law] was *added* . . . *till* the seed [Christ] should come . . . *before* faith came, we [Jews] were kept under the law, shut up to the faith which should *afterwards* be revealed . . . the law was our schoolmaster *unto* Christ . . . But after that faith is come, we are no longer under a schoolmaster . . . *until the time* appointed of the father . . . the *fullness of time* was come." Ernest DeWitt Burton said concerning 3:24:

Nor is the reference to the individual experience under law as bringing men individually to faith in Christ. For the context makes it clear that the apostle is speaking, rather, of the historic succession of the period of revelation upon another and the displacement of the law by Christ (*Galatians*, p. 200).

This text, probably more than any other, has been used to prove that law *must* be preached before gospel. In fact, the Puritans built a whole theology of "law-preaching" on this text. But this is a misunderstanding of the mind of the Spirit. That the Ten Commandments *must* convict Jews and Gentiles *prior* to gospel preaching is the last thing in Paul's mind *in this text*. If the Galatians had been so driven to the gospel by the law in the beginning, would not his point that they are not "made perfect" through the law *after* salvation lose its punch?

4:10-11, 15 - I would just point out here that we need to mark well the danger of coming "under law" (cf. 5:18). There is something to be afraid of when we go one-on-one with the law (cf. Anthony Hoekema. *The Christian Looks At Himself*, "Romans Seven"). The "sense of blessing" the gospel brings with it simply cannot be maintained when a person is "under law." Paul, therefore, feared for people when they lost sight of their status in Christ as "under grace" (Rom. 6:14). Because covenant theology is so old covenant oriented, as I believe its history amply demonstrates, and makes no qualms about keeping the Christian "under the conduct of Moses" (Bolton, p. 760. inherent dangers are built into the system. The Christian is asked to learn the "hard lesson" (and *hard* it is) of stopping his ears to the curses of the law with reference to justification, but opening his ears to that same law in sanctification. Thus, in order to maintain this system, Abraham is put under the yoke of the law, and the Mosaic covenant is said to be the same as the Abrahamic! (Cf. 7.3, 8.6 above).

6.2 - The false teachers in Galatia were imposing dangerous burdens on the brethren. Paul exhorts them, therefore, to turn away from these burdens, and to rather give themselves to the bearing of one another's burdens. In this way they will fully fulfill the "law of Christ".

The Jewish people were weighted down with many burdens. First, there were those burdens imposed by the Pharisees: "they tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders" (Matt. 23:4); "you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry" (Luke 11:46). Secondly, there was the burden of the Mosaic economy itself: "a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear" (Acts 15:10). It is in the light of these burdens that we must understand the invitation of Christ in Matt. 11:28, "come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

In Galatia, then, the Judaizers were putting believers under such burdens again. Paul challenges them to *bear one another's burdens*, and in this way they will fulfill *Christ's law*. Thus, to paraphrase, Paul is saying: "I would have you to bear, not the burden of the Mosaic law (which none can bear), but bear one another's burdens and thereby fulfill Christ's law." What does Paul mean by "the law of Christ"? It is the "new commandment" to *love one another* (John 13:34-35; 15:12-13). I think John Brown's words are most instructive:

"The law" here [5:14] plainly does not signify the Mosaic law, but the law by which Christians are bound to regulate themselves; for, as the apostle elsewhere says, though completely free from the obligation of the Mosaic law, they are "not without law to God, but under the law to Christ" . . . There seems to be a tacit contrast [in 6.2] between the law of Moses and the law of Christ. It is as if the apostle had said, "This bearing one another's burdens is a far better thing than those external observances which your new teachers are so anxious to impose on you. To be sure, it is not like them, a keeping of the law of Moses, but infinitely better, it is a fulfilling of the law of Christ - the law of love (*Galatians*, pp. 287, 326).

In light of the fact that in his Galatian Epistle Paul has in view the imposition of the Mosaic system on believers, his focus on the "law of Christ" is all the more significant. It indicates where our attention is to be directed in this age: to the words of the Prophet in Whom God has spoken in these last days (Acts 3:22-23; Matt. 7:24; 17:5).

## 11. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I trust the Lord will somehow use the above examination of dispensational and covenant theology to minister grace to your hearts, and stir you up to search the Scriptures to see what things are so (cf. my editorial, "A Plea For A Berean Spirit," BRR, Vol. 9, #1, pp. 4-6). I earnestly desire, and desperately need, your reciprocal contributions to me, If you see areas where my thinking should be corrected by Scriptures, please inform me. I have been under both the dispensational and covenant systems. I know that most of you are wrestling with these matters. May the Lord give us light as we seek His will in the Word. I offer the following concluding observations for your consideration.

**11.1** *Is Covenant Theology Sacrosanct?* John Murray many years ago suggested that

It would not be . . . in the interests of theological conservation or theological progress to think that the covenant theology is in all respects definitive and that there is no further need for correction, modification, and explanation. Theology must always be undergoing reformation . . . It appears to me that covenant theology . . . needs recasting (*The Covenant of Grace* [1954], pp. 4-5).

It would be my judgment that if covenant theology were "recast" in line with Scripture, then it would cease to maintain its distinctive character. Covenant theology is permeated with gratuitous assumptions, and strained Scriptural interpretations. The "Five Points of Calvinism," as far as I can tell, are in no way dependent on the accouterments of covenant theology, although historically Calvinism has been articulated primarily by covenant theologians. Thus, we should not think that a questioning of the peculiarities of covenant theology is tantamount to a denial of the doctrines of grace.

I believe that George P. Hutchinson has discerned something important when he said:

We should also note that the charge of adding to scripture may also be leveled at certain aspects of classic covenant theology. For just as Edwards and Shedd were dependent on certain philosophical leanings for the restatement and defense of scriptural truth, much of covenant theology was dependent on certain extra-scriptural legal ideas prevalent in the seventeenth century, ideas which may very well have been used to the distortion of the covenant theology of scripture (*The Problem of Original Sin in American Presbyterian Theology* [Presbyterian & Reformed, 1972], p. 111).

**11.2** *Should Calvinistic Baptists be "Covenant Theologians"?* Douglas Shantz believes that "Baptists convictions are . . . compatible with covenant theology . . . one *can* be a covenant theologian without sacrificing Baptist convictions" (pp. 7, 18; cf. p. 15). Erroll Hulse says that "Reformed Baptists and Reformed non-Baptists . . . accept covenant theology *in every sense* but differ over the implications of Heb. Ch. 8" ("Unity, The Covenant and Baptism," *Reformation Today*, #53, Jan.-Feb., 1980, p. 7). I believe that such unqualified endorsements of covenant theology need to be carefully evaluated in the light of the many

tensions between Baptist convictions and historical covenant theology, especially in light of the apparent paucity of exegetical evidences for the major pillars of covenant theology (i.e., that the covenant of works/covenant of grace are the two primary covenants in Scripture. David Kingdom believers that "Baptists will never seriously disturb Reformed paedobaptists" until they acknowledge that the covenant of grace is *one* (*Children of Abraham*, p. 21). I submit that a Biblical theology more closely aligned with Scripture will not be attained until the covenant of works/ covenant of grace concepts are challenged.

Erroll Hulse evidences misunderstanding when he says, "Some panic-stricken Baptists have-been so foolish as to abandon covenant theology by adopting a false kind of dispensationalism -- setting up the old covenant against the new" ("What Is Covenant Theology?." *Reformation Today*, March-April, 1980, p. 20). It would be my observation that the Baptists he refers to have not spoken out of "panic," but out of serious study. Further, is it fair for Mr. Hulse to assume that the *only* alternative to covenant theology is some form of dispensationalism? Mr. Hulse goes on to say, "I venture a prophecy that when correctly handled covenant theology will be the best vindication of the Baptist position" (*Ibid.*, p. 20). But covenant theologians see it as "impossible to maintain the truth of the covenant of grace and its inseparably related truth of infant baptism without adhering to the doctrine of sovereign grace" (H. C. Hoeksema, *The Standard Bearer*, May 1, 1980, pp. 342). I venture to say that Baptists will be frustrated as long as they try to vindicate their position on the basis of historic covenant theology.

### **11.3 Crucial Questions to Consider Before God's Word, In Light of the Presuppositions Examined.**

1. Does the Bible teach that God has two separate purposes, an earthly one for Israel and a heavenly one for the church?
2. In the final analysis, is dispensationalism *Christ-centered* or *Israel-centered*?
3. Does the Bible teach that the "covenant of works/covenant of grace" are the two "primary" covenants in Scripture?
4. Is "covenant" a specifically *historical* term? Does a covenant have an historical moment when it is "cut"?
5. Is it *Scriptural* to apply "covenant" terminology to the pre-temporal Trinitarian counsel?
6. Does the Bible teach that the "Old Covenant" is the entire period from the fall to Christ's coming?
7. Does the Bible teach that there is a "covenant of grace" *above history*, inaugurated *after* the fall, which is then mirrored in the subsequent *historical* covenants?
8. Covenant theologians constantly use the phrase, "the covenant," in their writings (cf. Erroll Hulse, *Reformation Today*, #53, p. 6). What "covenant" is in view? Where is *this* "covenant" revealed in Scripture, and where was it "cut" in history?
9. Does the status of being "under law" accurately describe the pre-fall condition of Adam?
10. Where does the N. T. *require* that the Ten Commandments be preached *before* the gospel?
11. Where does the N. T. describe the Christian as facing the "hard lesson" of being "not under the law," yet "under the law"?
12. Is the New Covenant based on the same "do this and live" principle as the Old Covenant?

#### 11.4 A Generalized Comparison of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology.

<u>DISPENSATIONALISM</u>	<u>COVENANT THEOLOGY</u>
Two separate purposes	One covenant of grace
Israel: Future earthly purpose	Israel: Present political model
Law/Grace opposed	Law/Grace fused together
Law postponed to future	Law carried over into the New Covenant
Redemptive history chopped up	Redemptive history flattened
Assume literalism, avoid N. T. use of O. T.	Assume one covenant avoid historical covenants
Read the O. T. without N. T.	Read the N. T. into the Old Covenant
Eschatological rigidity ( <i>only</i> dispensational premillennialism tolerated)	Eschatological liberty (historic pre-mill, a-mill, and post-mill allowed)

#### 11.5 Suggested Reading.

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M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* [Eerdmans].

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Ernest Sandeen. *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* [Baker, 1978].

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