



Radmacher: Dispensationalism Distinguishes between Israel & the Church; Covenants to Israel Will Be Fulfilled Literally; the Two Fulfillments of Gen 3:15

The Application of the Basic Principle

Literal interpretation, then, is the "bottom-line" of dispensationalism. Although certainly one would not claim absolute consistency among dispensationalists in the application of the principle, there are areas of unanimity among them which have become theological tenets in their system. Undoubtedly, the most significant of these is the maintaining of a distinction between Israel and the church. The roots of this go in two directions, first, the Old Testament covenant promises to Abraham stated in Genesis 12:2-3 and established unconditionally in Genesis 15:6-21, and second, the New Testament revelation of the mystery of the church as established in Acts 2:41-47 and explained in Ephesians 3:1-6. In the minds of dispensationalists it is the Abrahamic Covenant promises—particularly the land and seed promises—that have suffered most from spiritualization in interpretation.

Presenting the logic of this very simply, Ryrie asks two questions:

- (1) Does the Abrahamic covenant promise Israel a permanent existence as a nation? If it does, then the Church is not fulfilling Israel's promises, but rather Israel as a nation has a future yet in prospect; and (2) Does the Abrahamic covenant promise Israel permanent possession of the promised land? If it does, then Israel must yet come into possession of that land, for she has never fully possessed it in her history. [Ryrie, *Basis*, pp. 48-9.]

And, may I add, does not possess it today even though it was an everlasting possession.

One of the most probing recent works on this subject was done by one who would not likely be called a dispensationalist, namely, Arnold A. Van Ruler, the late Professor of Dogmatic Theology at the University of Utrecht 'yü' trekt\. In his work of 1955 translated in 1971 by Geoffrey Bromiley, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament*, Van Ruler states:

To the very depths of Old Testament expectation, the people of Israel as a people, the land, posterity, and theocracy play a role that cannot possibly be eliminated. This role cannot be altered by regarding Christ and his church as the fulfillment, in other words, by spiritualizing. There is a surplus in the Old Testament, a remnant that cannot be fitted into the New Testament fulfillment." [A. A. Van Ruler, *The Christian Church and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) p. 45.]

I believe that the New Testament never says that the people of Israel ... is definitively rejected. It simply says that the people of Israel is blind and hardened and indeed with a view of a new development. This development has an eschatological range: it contains the solution to the riddle of the world:

Romans 11:15 -If Israel's rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

[Van Ruler, *Christian Church*, p. 55.]

May those who posit Replacement Theology take note. And then Van Ruler raises the key question:



How are we, as the Christian church standing in the New Testament in the light of God's act in Jesus Christ, to handle the Old Testament? A renewal of allegorizing may seem to offer a way of assigning an authentic function to the Old Testament... . I believe that we must resist to the last the temptation lurking in this idea. The idea is in fact a temptation, for it seems that allegorizing can solve all the problems of the Christian church in relation to the Old Testament. (It) gives the appearance of making it perfectly plain that the Old Testament is wholly and exclusively the book of the Christian church, which can be exploited fully by it alone. [Van Ruler, *Christian Church*, p. 57.]

It is difficult to resist continuing the quotation from Van Ruler because his remarks are so cogent, but it is that key phrase of his—"surplus in the Old Testament"—which catches one's attention. It is that surplus which has so often been spiritualized to find its fulfillment in the church. But when interpreted literally it demands an earthly reign of Christ such as this earth has never seen. Thus, it is the nature of the earthly reign of Christ as predicted in the Old Testament and not simply the length of that reign in the millennial prophecy of Revelation 20 that provides the basis for dispensational premillennialism.

Continuing to apply this basic principle of literal interpretation, the dispensationalist not only finds significant eschatological distinctions within God's kingdom program, but he is confronted with a unifying philosophy of history which presents a majestic and climactic victory within history on this earth. In his system, history is not simply an endless series of cycles of testing, apostasy, and judgment moving nowhere. Rather, history has meaning and purpose, and this is seen in its progressive movement toward its grandest demonstration of its doxological purpose. Thus, with intensity and expectation God's children pray the Disciples' Prayer, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew. 6:9, 10,). The King, the Second Adam, is coming and he is going to reign until he has reversed the curse on this earth and subjected every shred of rebellion precipitated by Satan and his opposing kingdom of darkness "so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians. 15:28).

Too often theological systems, or their applications, have narrowed God's kingdom purpose down to a redemptive purpose. They have become redemptocentric rather than theocentric; consequently, they have minimized or spiritualized activities in the Word that do not have immediate relation to the redemption of man. In this they fall short of an adequate philosophy of history for they fail to account for all of created reality.

On this subject one must listen to Van Ruler again in his chapter "The Necessity of the Old Testament for the Christian Church." [Van Ruler, *Christian Church*, pp. 75-98.]:



... the Christian church really has to make something out of the Old Testament. It is unquestionably the book of the people of Israel. In the Old Testament this original and final element, this faithfulness to the earth and time, is more plainly visible. In my view this means that, in this respect, we have to speak most emphatically of the greater value of the Old Testament as compared with the New. The Old Testament has a more positive concern with creation and the kingdom, with the first things and the last, with the image and the law, with sanctification and humanity, with ethos and culture, with society and marriage, with history and the state. These are precisely the matters at issue in the Old Testament. For this reason the Old Testament neither can be nor should be expounded Christologically, but only eschatologically, in other words, theocratically [divinely governed]. There is in it a profound confidence in the goodness of the world, the serviceability of man, and the possibility of sanctifying the earth.

For the consciousness of the Christian church throughout the centuries there has always been a surplus in the Old Testament that it could not assimilate. This surplus is not just the cultus. The church has spiritualized this or brought it into its own liturgy or used it as a witness to the message of Golgotha or simply said that it has been superseded by Christ. In my view Martin Buber 'bü' ber\ (1878-1965; German Jewish writer) is completely correct to level against the Christian church throughout the centuries the accusation that it has never really been faithful to this Old Testament belief, this grand vision of the God of Israel, this visionary faith in the possibility of the sanctification of the earth. From the necessity of the cross of Christ, which the church has accepted on the basis of the New Testament, the false conclusion has been drawn that no more can be made of the earth. The Christian church has treated the Old Testament just as uncertainly and unsuitably as it has treated the Jews. Does everything end in the church? Does everything, not only Israel, but history and creation exist for the sake of the church? Or is the church only one among many forms of the kingdom of God, and does its catholicity [universality] consist precisely in the fact that it respects, acknowledges, and holds dear all forms of the kingdom, for example, even the people of Israel?

Just a few years after Van Ruler raised those questions, another Dutch theologian, Gerrit G. Berkower, observed a new openness among his colleagues to the (Millennialist's) philosophy of history:

Time was when most theologians regarded (Millennialism) as a fantastic, earthbound eschatology. A remarkable change has taken place. While the critics of (Millennialism) find its description of the millennial times objectionable and unacceptable, the same critics praise the (Millennialist's) fidelity to God's purpose for the earth. It is this motif, they say, which has made (Millennialism) a current that has never been wholly set aside in the Church. The (Millennialist's) hope for Christ's kingdom on earth is sometimes called the anti-spiritualistic motif in millennialism. It is the faith that God's salvation has meaning not only for heaven, but for earth as well. For *this* earth. [G. C. Berkower, "Review of Current Religious Thought," *Christianity Today* 6 (October 27, 1961), p. 40.]



Yes, the dispensationalist, by means of consistent literal interpretation, is enabled to be optimistic about what God is yet going to do with this earth. The greatest and grandest display of God's glory is yet to come when the multiformity of his kingdom program will consummate in a many-splendored unity. The earliest prophecy of God's Word, Genesis 3:15, presents in microscopic fashion, God's twofold solution to a twofold problem occasioned by sin:

Genesis 3:15 - And I will put enmity between you and the women and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.

The problem was (1) how to reclaim His usurped kingdom, and (2) how to provide redemption for mankind. Two prophesied bruising or crushings are the key.

"He shall bruise your head" portrays the final destruction of Satan and his kingdom provided for in Christ's death on the cross. "You shall bruise His heel" pictures Christ's death as also the basis for God's redemptive program. In his work, *Biography of a Great Planet*, Stanley Ellisen shows the progressive unfolding of this twofold purpose in the rest of the Scripture. [Stanley A. Ellisen, *Biography of a Great Planet* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1975), pp. 22-26.]

The Lord chose two men of faith through whom he inaugurated these programs. [Note Matthew 1:1, "The son of David, the son of Abraham."] With Abraham he made a covenant promising among other things a seed that would bless all nations. This seed Paul identified as Christ who would bring redemption to men, fulfilling the redemptive program (cf. Galatians. 3:6-16). To fulfill his kingdom purpose, God chose David out of the same line and made a covenant about a kingdom and a royal seed (2 Samuel 7:12-16). This royal seed would rule, not only over Israel, but over the whole world. Through the seed of David, God would fulfill his kingdom program by destroying the rebels and ruling the world in righteousness. The victory will be won where the battle was started. Ellisen concludes:

Although these two functions of Christ are inextricably related throughout the Bible, they are distinct in their purposes. The kingdom purpose is primarily for God, having to do with his reclaiming what was lost from his kingdom.

What a tragedy it would be, indeed, to lose these truths of the future universal reign of King Jesus on this earth and much, much more through the allegorizing/spiritualizing method that has blighted so much of Christ.

In fact the beautiful hymn by Isaac Watts, the Father of English hymnody, "The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom," has been spiritualized under the title "Joy to the World" and made to refer to the first advent.

Think of the words as Watts meant them with respect to Christ's coming as King at the second advent.

"The Messiah's Coming and Kingdom"

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
 Let earth receive her King;
 Let every heart prepare Him room,
 And heaven, and nature sing,
 And heaven and nature sing,
 And heaven, and heaven and nature sing.



Joy to the earth! the Savior reigns;
 Let all their songs employ;
 While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
 Repeat the sounding joy,
 Repeat the sounding joy,
 Repeat, repeat the sounding joy

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
 Nor thorns infest the ground;
 He comes to make His blessings flow
 Far as the curse is found,
 Far as the curse is found,
 Far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
 And makes the nations prove
 The glories of His righteousness,
 And wonders of His love,
 And wonders of His love,
 And wonders, and wonders of His love.

18. Radmacher and Ellisen's comments on the return of Jesus Christ to this earth to set up His millennial kingdom reminded me of a song I wrote for Prep School while at Berachah Church. The lyric is a good summary of these events:

“Shekinah Glory Reigns”

The Lord God of Israel goes to war
 Upon a steed of white;
 And, following onward, the saints of old;
 The kingdom of God is nigh.

The sword of Truth His coupe de grâce;
 The Cosmic War is o'er!

Shama', Yisrael! The Messiah has returned!
 Come see, *Yisrael!* He is David's greater Son!

The government shall be on His shoulder;
 He rules with a rod of iron;
 And He shall be King over all the earth,
 Thus blessings to all abound.

The world shall see prosperity;
 Perfection is restored.

The Lord of the armies shall rule eternally,
 And we, the elect, are His honored royalty.

All eyes shall turn toward Jerusalem,
 The city of our God;
 And there they behold with a scept'r of gold,
Adonai Echad!

There, in the Temple on His throne
 Between the cherubim—

Praise God! Thy most holy Shekinah Glory reigns!



All hail! Jesus Christ, the Shekinah Glory, reigns!

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19. Dr. Radmacher's paper, delivered last year, serves as an excellent summary of our study of hermeneutics. Before closing out this series we will take time to review principles that we have developed in the eleven paragraphs plus their introduction.