

# The Relationship of the Church to Israel

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## Introduction

Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism are different systems of theology that have been developed to try to explain how God deals with man in the salvation process and the role of Israel and the Church in God's plan of salvation. The role of Israel and the Church and the relationship of the Church to Israel is where the big debate centers. That is where we are headed eventually, but first we have to lay the foundation before we get there.

You could spend a lifetime studying this because there are so many issues to deal with. There has been much ink spilled on the subject, and it would be easy to get bogged down in the details. As a matter of fact, as I began studying for the class, I pulled out six or seven books on the subject and my Theological Journal Library CD and did a search for articles on the topic. I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of material that has been written on the subject. I spent a couple weeks following one argument after another until I thought it was hopeless to try to present a simple overview of the issues.

My plight reminded me of the following story:

Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson went on a camping trip. After a good meal and a bottle of wine they lay down for the night, and went to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions and millions of stars."

Holmes asked, "What does that tell you?"

Watson pondered for a minute. "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is omnipotent and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow.

... "What does it tell you?"

Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke.

"Watson, you meathead. Someone has stolen our tent."

So, while it would be easy to get buried in the details, I'm going to attempt to keep it simple. I could say, "teach the obvious" in keeping with the Sherlock Holmes analogy, but there is very little that is "obvious" in doing theology.

Instead of dealing with this from a systematic theology approach and getting bogged down in a survey of the theological systems known as Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism, I'm going to use a biblical theology model. *The Moody Handbook of Theology* defines it this way, "Biblical Theology takes its material in an historically oriented manner from the Old and New Testaments and arrives at a theology. It is exegetical in nature as opposed to philosophical."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 20.

If we are going to discuss the relationship of the Church to Israel, we have to start by going to the Old Testament and understanding the role of Israel in the plan of God. And we will do this by looking at three biblical covenants: the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenant. It is extremely important to understand these covenants because of their scope. They outline God's plan for all of human history.

Insofar as Israel and the Church are part of history, the issue is how do they relate to these covenants. First we must look at how Israel relates to these covenants. The next lesson will look at how the church relates and we will discuss how Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism have different views on the subject.

What is a Covenant?

A Covenant is an agreement between two parties. Sometimes the agreement required actions be performed by both parties. Such as, if you do this, I'll do that. Sometimes the agreement or covenant was a unilateral covenant. Party number one promised to do something and nothing was required of the other party. The covenants we are going to study are all unilateral or promisory covenants. God made promises that He would do something, and there was nothing required by the humans involved.

## **The Relationship of Israel to the Covenants of God**

### **Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12 and 15)**

In Gen 12:1 God chose Abraham out from the Gentiles and made an unconditional promise to him.

#### **Land (12:1)**

God told Abram to go to the land he would show him. Later, after Abraham had acted in faith in his dealings with Lot, God again confirmed His original promise to give Abraham the land of Canaan (13:14-18). The land is promised as well to Isaac (26:2-4) and Jacob (28:13-15). Thus it is clear that one of the provisions of the covenant God instituted with Abram was that of the land of Canaan.

#### **Seed (12:2a)**

Abram was promised "seed," that is, a nation would come from him. God says again to Abram in Gen 13:16 that He would make his "offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then his [your] offspring could be counted." This same promise was given to Isaac (26:4) and to Jacob (28:14). Thus it is clear that another of the provisions of the covenant was the guarantee that Abram would become a great nation, and that nation would occupy the covenanted land.

And we see that the land promise and the seed promise are closely related.

#### **Blessing (12:2b,3)**

In this passage it is expressly stated that Abram would not only be blessed (12:2), but that he would be a blessing to others and ultimately to the whole world (12:3). Notice that the aspect of universal blessing depends upon others' response to him. God says that He will bless those who bless Abram and curse those who curse him. We can begin to see here how God's plan for the world, with its blessing of mankind, has its origin in His special dealings in and through Abraham based upon this covenant.

You can see how this covenant is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. Those who curse Christ are cursed.... There is much unity in the Bible. It's all tied together, and that's what I hope you will see as we study these covenants and their fulfillment.

## Significance

Thus the provisions of the Abrahamic Covenant are three: a land; a seed and blessing (personal, national and universal).

Here we have the beginning of the nation of Israel because Abraham is the Father of the Jews, the father of Israel.

And we begin to see that the seed of Abraham, the nation of Israel, is going to be the vehicle of God's blessing on all mankind. It is important to understand this connection. They are not separate unrelated promises.

That this is an unconditional covenant is also important because, since God is faithful, He will fulfill His promises to Abraham. He will use Abraham's seed to bless mankind. Any particular generation of Israelites could enjoy these promises if they were obedient to God. But ultimately God would fulfill these promises by raising up a generation that would be obedient. He would do this regardless of what Abraham or any of his descendants do.

The covenant is reaffirmed to Abraham in Gen 15:1-21, 17:4-21, 22:15-18; to Isaac in Gen 26:3-5,24; and to Jacob in Gen 28:13-15; 35:9-12.

NOTE: Palestinian Covenant not included.<sup>2</sup>

## The Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:8-16; Ps 89:20-37)

Although the term covenant does not appear in the 2 Sam 7 passage, later references make it clear that it is a covenant. For example, in 2 Sam 23:5 David says, "...For He has made an everlasting covenant with me." Also cf. Ps 89:3-4, 28; 1 Kgs 8:23; 2 Chron 13:5; 21:7.

In 2 Sam 7:8 God says, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be ruler over My people Israel." The shepherd imagery is important to understand because it pictures the king's role as one who leads, guides and protects. This shepherd imagery is developed throughout the rest of the OT and Christ refers to Himself as the "Good Shepherd" when He comes (Jn 10:11, 14)

### Its Provisions

#### *A great name (dynasty) (7:9)*

This echoes the Abrahamic Covenant. God promised Abraham a great name. David's name would be great because of his kingship and family line that would descend from him.

#### *A place for my people (10)*

This looks back to the Abrahamic Covenant which promised security in the land and shows how important the land promises are in the covenants with Israel. With the Davidic Covenant God promises rest for the nation in the land of promise.

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<sup>2</sup> Some would insert what is called "The Palestinian Covenant" here from (Dt. 28-30). But, this is not really one of the covenants for the following reasons: (1) It is not called a covenant in scripture. (2) It is not a promissory "grant" like the Abrahamic, David and New covenants. Instead, it follows the suzerain-vassal treaty format popular during that period of history in which blessings are promised for obedience and curses are promised for disobedience. (3) It promises nothing new in the salvation plan of God. It is simply an amplification of the *Land* aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant. It is a description of how God will regulate the Israelites' possession of the land. Thus it is a logical and natural development out of the promise of land given to Abraham in Gen 12:1.

### ***An eternal kingdom (11-12,16)***

Even after David's death God would perpetuate the kingdom through David's descendants who would rule over the kingdom forever.

This also looks back to the Abrahamic Covenant in which God said that "kings would come from his descendants." (Gen 17:6)

### ***A father-son relationship (13-14)***

This is obviously talking about human kings because God says he will correct them when they sin, but it shows that unlike Saul's kingship, which was cut off, this relationship with David and his descendants would be eternal.

It had immediate application to David who had that intimate relationship with God. Ps 2 and 51. God gave the Holy Spirit to David to enable him to lead the nation. David prays in Ps 51 that God would not take His Spirit from him.

## **Significance**

The Davidic Covenant is parallel to the Abrahamic in many aspects. And more specifically, it is an amplification of the *Seed* aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant and the promise that *kings* would come from Abraham.

It guarantees that Israel will always have a king. In particular the Covenant stipulates that that king will come from the line of David, that his kingdom will ultimately be eternal. 2 Sam 7:13.

The question that arises is this: How can God ever fulfill his promises to a nation that continually rebels and sins? How can there be rest in the land and an eternal kingdom when God has to keep punishing the nation by having foreign nations come in defeat Israel and haul them off into exile.

The answer: He has to change the people so that they can obey. That is where the next covenant comes in.

## **The New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-37; Ezekiel 36:15-28)**

The New Covenant is an extension of the promises made to Abraham and David. And we can see that Israel plays a key role in the realization of these promises. It says the covenant is made with Israel and Judah, which indicates that the nation will be reunited. It indicates a future time when the following will occur:

### **Its Provisions**

#### ***Placing the law in the hearts of the Israelites***

Jer 31:32 says that this covenant is not like the one God made with Israel when they came out of Egypt. It is not like the Mosaic Covenant with its 10 commandments.

How is it different?

Israel didn't keep that covenant, so God is going to change the people on the inside. He is going to write His law on their hearts. So, in fact it is like the Mosaic Covenant because it is about living according to God's ethic. But it is not like the Mosaic Covenant because it will not be an external law imposed on them. It will be an internal law. God will enable them to keep His law by giving them the Holy Spirit in a new way.

### ***New relationship with God***

God says, "I will be their God and they will be my people." and He says "...they shall all know Me." This echoes the promise in the Davidic Covenant of a special relationship with God.

So, the New Covenant is also not like the old covenant because there is no need for the priests to act as mediators between God and man. Men will have direct access. Hebrews 10 tells us this as an application of the New Covenant.

### ***Forgiveness of sins***

Jer 31:34 says "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

Although this is mentioned last, it is the foundation for the entire New Covenant. It is because their sins are forgiven that God can place the law on their hearts and there can be a new relationship with Him.

Christ spoke of this during the Last Supper and said that the New Covenant was established with his death. In Luk 22:15-20 Jesus says, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." His death brought the forgiveness of sins and is the foundation for this new relationship with God.

### **Its Unconditionality and Certainty**

There are 6 "I will's" in the actual covenant section and then in Jer 31:36-37 God says, "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight (which is impossible), will Israel cease to be a nation." and "Only if the heavens can be measured will I reject the descendants of Israel."

So we see a definite eternal future for the nation of Israel promised here.

### **Amplification of Blessing Aspect of Abrahamic Covenant**

We said that there was a Land, Seed and Blessing aspect to the Abrahamic Covenant. The Davidic Covenant was an amplification of the Seed aspect and the New Covenant is an amplification of the Blessing aspect of the Abrahamic Covenant.

### **Conclusions**

What are the central issues the covenants are dealing with?

#### **Israel was chosen by God to be His special people**

Abraham and his descendants were the immediate recipients of God's promises. But Israel was not supposed to hoard these benefits. They were to be a light to the Gentiles pointing them to the one true God.

#### **Israel was the mediator**

God took a pagan, made a nation that would be a mediator between God and the world. Through Israel all the world would be blessed. Ex 19:6 says that Israel would be a kingdom of priests. What is the role of the priest? He is the mediator between God and man.

#### **World wide blessing is the ultimate goal**

Many passages in the Old Testament speak of the nations coming to God. Gen 12:3; Isa 2:1-4; 49:6; 61:5-6; Micah 4:1-5

In practice, from Israelite perception, Gentiles were second class citizens. They were proud that they were God's chosen people. They forgot their role in God's plan because they thought they were better than everyone else.

Theirs was a redemptive role. Jesus understood that world wide blessing was the point. He understood his role as the Savior to the world.

Next, we will look at how the Church relates to these covenants. Certainly the Church is the greatest expression to date of the world-wide blessing promised in the covenants. We can see that many of the promises made in these covenants, especially the New Covenant, seem to be fulfilled in the Church. After all, we do have the forgiveness of sins, the special relationship with God through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, etc.

Some of the questions that arise are: What about Israel? What about all those land promises God made to Israel? Is there a future for Israel or has the Church replaced Israel? That's what we will discuss in the next section.

## **Relationship of the Church to the Covenants of God**

### **Introduction**

#### **Purpose of Study**

In this section we will examine how different Christians view the Church and its relationship to Israel. The question is how to pass on all the complex issues because every issue I looked at was a can of worms. Most people like to condense things into sound bytes and present a doctrine in a neat little package. But there are no neat little doctrinal packages. If you have one, you are naïve.

My goal is for you to have a basic understanding of the issues involved, so that when you hear someone teach on the subject, you can more intelligently evaluate where he's coming from.

The views we will discuss are evangelical. All the theologians involved will agree that salvation comes by God's grace through man's faith. The problem comes when you try to put the whole Bible together and make it fit into a nice package that explains everything. We have to remember that God is infinite and we are finite and that we can't always explain all the details of how God does things. No theological system is perfect. They all have problems. Some passages just don't fit into our system. What we want to guard against is forcing our theology on the text. We need to deal with the text honestly and admit when our interpretation doesn't quite fit. If it doesn't fit, then perhaps we need to adjust our theological system a bit. We don't want to automatically dismiss those that hold to a view that is different than ours. We want to interact with them in love, learn from them, and grow in our understanding of Scripture and gain a greater appreciation for the sovereignty of God.

#### **Review**

In the last section we saw, from the Old Testament, the part that Israel played in God's plan. They were chosen by God to be His special people. God made many promises to bless Israel as a nation and to use them as a vehicle to bless the world. Those promises were given in three covenants: the Abrahamic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant. The Abrahamic is the main covenant, promising Abraham a land, seed and blessing. The Davidic expanded on the seed aspect by promising that David's heir would sit on the throne forever. The New Covenant expanded on the blessing aspect speaking of a time when there would be forgiveness of sins, a special relationship with God, etc.

## The Problem

Along comes Jesus, the promised Messiah, and the Jews as a nation reject him. But many Gentiles and a few Jews do believe, and the Church is born. Some questions come up: What is the Church's role in these promises of God? Does the Church replace Israel as the people of God? What happens to Israel? Are all the promises given in the covenants fulfilled or are we still waiting for them to be fulfilled?

Many passages come to mind as we begin to think about this. Some speak of present fulfillment:

- Gal 3:29 "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise." That passage sounds like it is saying that the promises are fulfilled in the Church.
- 1 Cor 2:12 - The Holy Spirit is now indwelling believers so that we can know God. That sure sounds like New Covenant fulfillment. Then in 3:16 Paul says our bodies are the temple of God. Is that the temple Ezekiel promised?
- Eph 2:11-22 - Jews and Gentiles now participate equally in spiritual blessings. That sure sounds like the "universal blessing" promised in all three covenants.

Others speak of future fulfillment:

- Acts 1:5-6 - The disciples ask Jesus if now is the time that Jesus is going to restore the kingdom to Israel. He doesn't tell them they are wrong to think that the kingdom is going to be restored to Israel. He just tells them that it is not for them to know the time. Does that mean the kingdom will be restored to Israel? It sure sounds like it.

How do we interpret these passages? It is important because how you interpret these passages will impact how you view what is going to happen in the future. While we try very hard to teach "what the Bible says," we can't help but be affected by the system of theology that we hold to.

As it relates to our topic, there are two major theological systems that have grown up in an attempt to explain how we interpret these passages—Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Covenant theology teaches that the promises are fulfilled now. Dispensationalism teaches that they have not been fulfilled. They will still be fulfilled in the future.

Your theological system is going to affect how you interpret these passages. It might be more accurate to say that most people don't even have a theological system, and they haven't got a clue how to interpret these passages. But that's why we're here—to change that.

So, let's look at the theological systems.

## Definitions

Before we go too far we ought to define some terms.

### Reformed

Since it was the Reformers (the theologians of the Reformation) that first delineated Covenant theology,<sup>3</sup> the terms *reformed* and *covenant* are often used interchangeably. In fact, until I began to prepare for this study, I didn't know there was a difference. But *reformed* really has more to do with one's view of salvation (i.e. being reformed means being a Calvinist) than with one's view of the church. Having said that, most Reformed Theologians hold to covenant theology, amillennialism, and presbyterian form of church government.

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<sup>3</sup> That assumption in itself is a can of worms. There has been much study to try to figure out where Covenant Theology began.

## **Covenant Theology**

As we have already seen, a *covenant* is an agreement between two parties.<sup>4</sup> Covenant Theology describes God's plan for the salvation of man by defining three overarching covenants that God made with Christ and with man in which God said, "If you do this..., I'll do this..." Although the Bible doesn't actually use the term *covenant* to describe any of the covenants that make up Covenant Theology. The idea of a covenant or agreement is implied.

Don't confuse the Abrahamic, Davidic and New Covenant we talked about earlier with Covenant Theology. The three covenants we studied were biblical covenants—meaning they are actually called covenants in scripture. The three covenants of Covenant Theology are theological covenants. They are just a systematic way to describe God's plan of salvation for the world. These theological covenants are: the covenant of redemption, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

### ***Covenant of Redemption***

Sometime in eternity past, before the creation of man, God the Father made a covenant of Redemption with God the Son in which they agreed to save or redeem man (hence the term redemption). The Father appointed the Son to be the one who would redeem man through His death. Passages used to support this: Heb 10:10f, John 17:4, 18

As part of this covenant Christ was promised a reward for accomplishing His work. The Father would deliver the Son from death and exalt Him to the Father's right hand to rule over heaven and earth.

### ***Covenant of Works***

God entered into a covenant with Adam, as the representative of the human race, in which God promised that Adam would have eternal life if he obeyed God and death if he disobeyed.

There is actually no specific mention of such a covenant with Adam. It is just implied. We do know that God told Adam not to eat from the tree or he would die (Gen 2:16-17).

### ***Covenant of Grace***

This is a covenant made by God with the elect in which he offers salvation through Christ's atonement. Many covenant theologians actually distinguish only two covenants—Works and Grace. They combine the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace and see them as just one covenant of grace with perhaps two phases.

Support for this would come from such passages as Eph 1:3-14 which seems to imply such a covenant with phrases like, "which He purposed" (vs 9), "according to the plan" (vs 11). Acts 13:32 "What God promised to our fathers...", etc.

So it is obvious that God has a plan. What the Covenant Theologian (CT) has done is put a name to the plan. The plan is called the Covenant of Grace.

Since the time of the fall, God has dealt with man on the same basis throughout human history. That basis is Grace. From Adam to the end of time, salvation comes through faith.

### ***Conclusion:***

For the CT, the emphasis is on continuity. He places so much emphasis on the covenant of grace that he sees the elect of the OT (Israel) and the elect of the NT (the Church) as one people of God. He blurs the distinction between Israel and the Church and believes that the Church has replaced Israel as the people of God.

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<sup>4</sup> Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. p. 507.



## Dispensationalism

The word dispensation comes ultimately from the Greek word *oijkonomiva* which refers to an “order,” “arrangement,” “administration,” or “stewardship.” Most Dispensational Theologians (DT) argue that scripture presents at least three and as many as seven different arrangements in the outworking of God’s plan for humanity. Although there are differences between each of the various administrations, there is continuity as well. Each dispensation is characterized by new revelation from God, testing to go along with that revelation, human failure, and divine judgment in light of that failure. No DT relates the various dispensations to any overarching theological covenant, such as the covenant of grace. Rather, they relate them directly to the biblical covenants of promise.

Examples of three dispensations held by virtually every DT include the Mosaic Law, Grace (the Church Age), and the future Millennial kingdom. The other four debated dispensations are innocence (Adam in the garden), conscience (after the fall till now), civil/human government (Noahic covenant), and promise (Abraham and anyone who wanted to trust in Yahweh).

### DISPENSATIONS

|           |            |                  |         |        |                  |            |
|-----------|------------|------------------|---------|--------|------------------|------------|
| Innocence | Conscience | Human Government | Promise | Law    | Grace<br>Acts 2: | Millennium |
| Gen 1:28  | Gen 3:7    | Gen 9:1          | Gen 12: | Ex 20: |                  |            |

The primary distinctive of dispensationalism is that it makes a clear distinction between Israel and the Church, especially as it pertains to the fulfillment of God’s promises in the OT. These promises were made with the house of Israel, and the DT argues that they will some day be completely fulfilled with a renewed Israelite nation. Thus they regard the political reunification of Israel in 1948 as significant. The dispensation we are in now is the Church Age. It is regarded by DT as a parenthesis in God’s time table of dealing with Israel.

## Historical and Hermeneutical Issues

### Historical Issues

I want to take a few minutes and discuss the history and hermeneutics of the debate because at the heart of the debate between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism is the issue of hermeneutics.

The word *hermeneutic* is a seminary word which means “one’s method of interpreting the bible.” In the first few centuries, the church fathers, beginning with Origen (A.D. 185-254), used an allegorical method of interpretation. The allegorical method did not interpret the scriptures literally. It looked for a deeper, spiritual meaning. For example, Origen wrote,

Now the cause, in all the points previously enumerated, of the false opinions, and of the impious statements or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else than the not understanding the Scripture according to its spiritual meaning, but the interpretation of it agreeably to the mere letter.<sup>5</sup>

Actually, just the opposite is true. His system of interpretation allowed him and others to make the scriptures mean anything they wanted within their theological framework.

How does this affect our topic of study? When God makes a promise to Israel in the Old Testament, the allegorical method allows the interpreter to spiritualize it and say that it wasn’t a promise that would be literally fulfilled. Instead it was fulfilled in a spiritual manner in the church.

<sup>5</sup> Church Fathers, Origen de Principiis, TJLCD, record 12434.

Later, Constantine, the Roman emperor who established Christianity as the universal religion, got involved in church matters. In his letter to the churches over the Passover Controversy, he referred to the Jews as “polluted wretches,” whose hands were “stained ... with a nefarious crime,” “parricides and murders of our Lord.”<sup>6</sup> In a letter to the churches concerning the correct time to observe Easter, he wrote, “it becomes us to have nothing in common with the perfidious Jews.”<sup>7</sup>

This shows us that an anti-semitic spirit in the church existed and the church no longer viewed salvation as being “to the Jew first” as Rom 1:16 says.<sup>8</sup> The church viewed themselves as being the new Israel. This anti-semitic spirit, along with the allegorical method of interpretation caused and allowed theologians to view the Church as the replacement of Israel. This doctrine was perpetuated for the next 1000 years.

About the time of the Renaissance, Bible scholars began to look at the Bible according to the trend of the day which was to be more scientific about things. They began to use a grammatical, historical, literal hermeneutic. They took the words of the text and analyzed them grammatically to determine how grammatical structure would affect the meaning. They looked at the passage in the literary context and the historical/cultural context and tried to see if there was a straightforward literal meaning that made sense.

From this change in the hermeneutical method came the Protestant Reformation. Luther, Calvin, and others recognized that authority did not come from the Church. It came from scripture. They recognized errors in the doctrines of the Roman Catholic church and so they protested its practices and its doctrine. When the Catholic church refused to reform, they left the church. As they began writing to defend and define Protestantism, doctrines such as Covenant Theology were born. However, you must remember that they had over 1,000 years of bad theology to overcome, and one doesn’t study the Bible and form his theology in a vacuum. It is a gradual process and very difficult to change one’s view. So, while they were busy changing their doctrine of salvation, they didn’t see any problems with things like infant baptism, or more applicable to our study, they didn’t see a need to change the doctrine that the Church replaced Israel in God’s plan of salvation.

You will often hear people try to defend this view or that view by saying that their view is older and therefore more orthodox, that it can be traced back to the early church fathers, etc. But that doesn’t necessarily make it correct. You have to understand church history and understand what sociological and cultural issues existed that helped to shape that doctrine. Sometimes, when you understand the history, it helps you look at the doctrine more objectively. However, you must remember that even though we may not be affected by the same cultural issues that were issues back then, we have our own cultural issues which will keep us from being truly objective. It is a complex task.

In the debate between Covenant and Dispensational theology, both claim to use a literal hermeneutic. And both have developed a systematic theology from the text that deals with most of the passages literally. The problem comes when you run across a passage that doesn’t fit literally into your theological grid. When this happens, the tendency is to fall back on your theology and spiritualize the text in some way to make it fit.

## **Hermeneutical Issues**

It is often claimed by dispensationalists that they use a literal hermeneutic (or method of interpretation) and that the CT uses a spiritual or symbolic method of interpretation. In reality, both sides interpret some passages literally and other passages spiritually. The question is how do you decide which ones to interpret which way?

The real issue is the New Testament’s use of the Old. CT places more emphasis on the NT. He looks at the New Testament and lets it reinterpret the Old Testament. If a NT writer takes an OT promise and

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Kaiser in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, p. 363.

<sup>7</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, “Ecclesiastical History, Book 5, Chapter 22. TJLCD record 75080.

<sup>8</sup> Kaiser, p. 363.

applies it in a spiritual way to the church, then the CT concludes that the OT promise was just a picture of the future spiritual reality which we are enjoying now.

For example, if Ezekiel 40-48 makes promises about a future literal temple and then Paul says in 1 Cor 3:16 that we are the temple of God, the CT doesn't have a problem saying that there is no need for a future physical temple. After all, the temple is just where God lives, and since the Holy Spirit now lives in us, the indwelling of the Spirit is the greatest realization or fulfillment of that OT promise.

So the CT places more emphasis on the NT and says it is ok if the NT writer interprets an OT promise in a totally new way that would not have been understood by the OT prophet.

A Dispensationalist places more emphasis on the OT. They say that the literal force of the OT cannot be changed because if you do that, you create instability in the meaning of the OT. And it almost looks like God is being deceptive. After all, He promised land, a temple, etc. We should expect real dirt, temples made of stone and gold, etc.

Let's see how this works out in relation to our topic:

## **Covenant Theology and the Church**

### **Abrahamic**

The CT says that because of disobedience and rejection of Messiah, Israel has forfeited the land promises. The land is just a picture of the place of God's blessing. For Israel, that place of God's blessing was the land of Canaan. For us, that place is being in Christ. The CT would turn to Hebrews 3:18ff as an example. The writer of Hebrews said that Moses couldn't lead the Israelites into their rest (i.e. the land) because of their disobedience and lack of faith. In the same way the audience to Hebrews is being warned against disobedience and told they can't enter their rest (i.e. Christ) without faith.

### **Davidic**

The CT says that the promises to David are fulfilled in Jesus. And Christ is now reigning in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.

Acts 13:32-33 "And we proclaim to you the good news about the promise to our ancestors, 13:33 that this promise God has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus, as also it is written in the second psalm, '*You are my Son; today I have fathered you.*'"

Paul is quoting from Psalm 2, one of the passages that elaborates on the Davidic Covenant. Therefore, Christ is the fulfillment of the Davidic promise and is reigning at the right hand of God, and there is no need for Christ to come back and reign on some literal throne in some literal Jerusalem. They say the word "throne" doesn't have to refer to some literal chair. It simply means seat of power, rule.

### **New Covenant**

In Luke 22:20 Jesus said He was instituting the new covenant with His blood. We have forgiveness through His death. We have the giving of the H.S. at Pentecost. We are God's temple (1 Cor 3:16; cf. also 2:12; Gal 5:15ff; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 1:21-22.)

In 2 Cor 6:16-7:1, Paul, writing to a church full of Gentiles, quotes Jer 31:33 (the New Covenant passage) and applies these promises to the church.

The CT reads these passages and says, "What could be more obvious? Why do you dispensationalists insist on a future fulfillment, a future temple, etc. Paul says these promises were fulfilled, therefore all these promises are realized in the church."

## **Church's Relation to Israel**

And since all the promises are realized in the church. The Church is the new Israel.

Eph 2:11ff makes it clear that there is now one new man in the church, no distinction between Jew and Gentile. Gentiles didn't have the "covenants of promise" before. Now they do.

Gal 3:28-29 plainly states that the we in the church are the descendants of Abraham and heirs of the promise.

## **Problem Passages**

As we said, no theological system is perfect. When you try to put the whole Bible together in one system, some verses just don't fit very well. A couple of those passages that don't fit very well in Covenant Theology are the following:

### ***Rom 9-11***

Rom 11:25 For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers and sisters, so that you may not be conceited: a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. 11:26 And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: "*The Deliverer will come out of Zion; he will remove ungodliness from Jacob.*" 11:27 *And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.*"

Israel has been hardened until the time of the Gentiles is complete. Then all Israel will be saved as part of God's covenant with Israel. This sure looks like there is a future for the nation of Israel. God is going to resume His dealings with them. This passage doesn't fit with the idea that the Church has replaced Israel.

### ***Rev 20:1-10***

Refers to a thousand year reign of Christ.

### ***Acts 1:6, 3:19-21***

Refer to a future restoration that is different from what existed even after Christ's death, resurrection, etc.

## **Conclusion**

The CT's system believes in an overarching covenant of grace with its "one people of God." They emphasize the soteriological "one people of God" so much, they can't recognize a possibility that there might be a separate people of God economically. It is true that Gentiles are spiritually equal to Israel, but the question we must ask is, "are there not functional differences?"

## **Dispensationalism and the Church**

Dispensationalism teaches that the Church is not Israel. The Church has not replaced Israel. Israel still has a future. What God is doing now with the Church is an intercalation or parenthesis in His dealings with Israel. He has set Israel aside for a time to bless the Gentiles, but He will resume his dealings with Israel during the Tribulation and millennium. Therefore, all those promises made to Israel in the OT will still be fulfilled to Israel.

## **Abrahamic**

The promise to Abraham of universal blessing is fulfilled in Christ. When a person believes in Christ, then obviously he receives blessing, eternal life, etc.

However, the land promises made to Abraham and repeated numerous times throughout the OT are not fulfilled. They must still be fulfilled literally to Abraham's physical descendants. Therefore, at some future time God will restore the nation of Israel to the promised land and they will live in peace.

## **Davidic**

Closely related to the literal fulfillment of the land promise to ethnic Israel is the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. The Dispensationalist believes that this also has not been fulfilled. Although Christ may be seated at the right hand of God, His Davidic rule will not begin until He sits down on a literal throne in a literal Jerusalem on a literal earth.

For the Dispensationalist, who stresses a literal interpretation of the OT, Jer 23:5-8 states this very plainly.

## **New Covenant**

And, to be consistent, since we must have a physical, literal land with real dirt and a physical, literal throne with real gold for Messiah to sit on, and a physical literal Israel with real Jews to rule over, then the New Covenant must also be applied to Jews and has not been fulfilled.

However, the Dispensationalist will say that, "Characteristics of Church are sort of similar, but not the same. This present fulfillment is primarily limited to the promise of spiritual salvation found in the new covenant (i.e., the forgiveness of sins and spiritual renewal through the indwelling Spirit)."<sup>9</sup>

## **Church's Relation to Israel**

Since all these covenants of promise are yet to be fulfilled with Israel, whatever is happening now, in the body of Christ, called "the Church," is a parenthesis in God's plan for Israel.

Because of dispensationalism's emphasis on a literal interpretation of the OT, the unconditional promises made to Abraham require that at some point in history both the spiritual and material blessings find simultaneous fulfillment. Additional data from Scripture indicate to the dispensational reader that the time of this fulfillment is the return of Christ to set up the millennial kingdom on earth.

## **Problem Passages**

Acts 2:33; 13:32ff. The exaltation of Christ is clearly linked with the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant.

Gal 3:29. The Church seems to be the recipient of the Seed aspect of the promises, not just the universal blessing part.

## **Conclusion**

So, some passages do seem to teach that the covenants have been fulfilled to the Church in Christ. The traditional Dispensationalist spiritualizes away the fulfillment language and says that "it's not really fulfilled, there are just similarities."

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<sup>9</sup> Robert L. Saucy, "Response to Understanding Dispensationalists, by Vern S. Poythress" GTJ V10:2, Fall 89. 140.

Perhaps you can begin to see that the claim by the traditional Dispensationalist that his is a literal hermeneutic, is not really true. He is as guilty as the Covenant Theologian. The difference is that the CT spiritualizes the OT and the Dispensationalist spiritualizes the NT.

What are we to do?

### **Progressive Dispensationalist View**

The CT system sees the NT authors applying spiritual meaning to OT promises. But he doesn't allow for passages that also indicate a physical fulfillment of the promises. The Dispensationalist takes the OT promises and insists on a literal fulfillment. But he has a tendency to deny present spiritual fulfillment of the covenants, especially the Davidic Covenant, and view the fulfillment as all happening in the millennium.

The Progressive Dispensationalist (PD) enters the argument with a new approach—a now/not yet approach. If you think about it, God often does things this way. Salvation is a now/not yet proposition. It is realized in stages. When you are saved, you are saved from the penalty of sin and the power of sin, but not the presence of sin. That comes in the future. Why can't the fulfillment of the covenants be the same?

The PD sees a lot more continuity between the present and future dispensations than the Classic Dispensationalist. Rather than see the Church as a parenthesis in God's plan, He sees the Church and the present fulfillments of the covenants as *part* of God's plan. It is called Progressive Dispensationalism because he sees a progressive fulfillment of the covenants—some now, more later.

The PD agrees with the covenant theologian that the church is the recipient of the promises (the Now). He would say that Christ is ruling from heaven. "Jesus is not sitting passively at God's side merely waiting for the time of His return. Rather Jesus exercises key elements of the promised rule when He pours out the Spirit of God on His people to enable them to undertake their current tasks."<sup>10</sup>

But the PD also agrees with the Dispensationalist that there is still a literal future for Israel. (the Not yet). He is still dispensational, because he makes a distinction between Israel and the Church and sees a future literal fulfillment of the promises to the nation of Israel in the millennium.

### **Conclusion**

Our question was "What is the relationship of the Church to Israel?"

Your system of theology and your method of interpretation are going to affect how you answer that.

Are you going to be like the CT or amillennial person who says the church is the fulfillment of all the promises. Israel is replaced?

Or are you going to be like the Dispensationalist who says the Church is just a parenthesis in God's plan for Israel. All the promises are yet to be fulfilled with Israel. In the Church we have stuff that looks a little (or a lot) like a fulfillment of the promises, but Israel was the recipient of the promises and must be the recipient of the fulfillment.

Or, you might be a Progressive Dispensationalist and say that the Church is indeed the recipient of the promises. There is fulfillment now. But there is still more fulfillment to come for the nation of Israel.

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<sup>10</sup> Bock, "The Son of David and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," BSac V150, p. 455.

