

The Blessed Hope -- DISPENSATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many Years ago I sat spellbound enjoying a message delivered by Lewis Sperry Chafer to a group of pastors in the Los Angeles area. He told of a time when a friend of his wrote and asked, "Am I not right in saying 'The church is the blossom of which Israel was the bud'?" "I had the sad task," brother Chafer remarked, "of telling a dear brother in the Lord, 'No, you are not right.'"

In the message following this introduction, brother Chafer emphasized the distinctiveness of this age of grace. "Speaking of the church as a parenthesis is a good beginning," he went on, "but this simile is not strong enough. A parenthesis is related to the sentence in which it is found, while the church is an *interruption* of God's program for Israel, *not directly related to it.*"

He had looked for a word to better express this, and finally found it. "Intercalation" was his word. Before the calendar was adjusted by inserting an extra day every four years, the solar year and calendar year would lose their synchronism. Every four years the calendar year would lag behind the actual seasons one more day. Scientists from various countries would assemble to rectify the situation. After determining how many days should be inserted, they would declare an intercalation. For example their adjusted calendar might show January first, January second, and then ten undesignated days (the intercalation) -- followed by January third and so on. January second and January third would have been pushed apart and ten days inserted. This well illustrates what God did in the middle of the book of Acts. He interrupted the program of Israel, pushed the remaining part of it off into the future, and interposed this age of grace.

In Clarence Larkin's book of dispensational charts he pictures the Old Testament prophet gazing into the future, seeing the Cross (the crucifixion) on one mountain, and the Crown (the coming of Christ in glory) on a more distant one, with an unseen valley (representing the church age) between them. ¹

I find a better illustration (though not a type or prophetic symbol) of this in Zechariah 14:4. "And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south." The Cross and the Crown belong on the same mountain. They would have been only a relatively few years apart if Israel had responded in faith to the offer made by Peter in Acts 3:19 - 21. If they, as a nation, had repented of their rejection and crucifixion of Christ, God would have sent Him back and they would have had their kingdom. The offer was valid, but the response was a resounding "NO!" As a formal decision of their leaders, they emphatically rejected the offer, and stoned Stephen as a crowning act of rebellious unbelief. Now the "mountain" is split in two. The half bearing the Crown has been moved off into the indefinite future and a new valley has been formed. It was not *seen* before because *it was not there* before. In matchless grace, judgment has been postponed and God has inserted

¹"The Greatest Book on Dispensational Truth in the World" by Clarence Larkin, published by the Clarence Larkin est., Philadelphia, PA, copyright 1918, 43rd printing, page 5-A.

this age -- with its new apostle, new program and *new hope*. Refer back to the chapter on the Distinctiveness of the age of grace.

That this age of grace is separate and distinct from God's program for Israel is well documented in Scripture. For one thing, we are clearly told that much of Paul's message was not revealed until it was made known to *him*:

-- "For I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which is preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11, 12 -- NASB).

-- After Paul had stated, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), he added, "Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect [mature]: yet not the wisdom of this world ... but we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory" (1 Cor. 2:6, 7).

-- "Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith" (Rom. 16:25, 26). Verse 26 would be a contradiction of verse 25 if "the scriptures of the prophets" were a reference to the Old Testament Scriptures. Kenneth Wuest translates verse 26, "But has now been made known through *prophetic writings* according to the mandate of the eternal God, having been made known with a view to the obedience to the faith among all nations." To recognize that the "prophetic writings" are Paul's own writings (1 Cor. 14:37; 1 Thess. 2:13) resolves the seeming conflict between the verses and fits with other passages on the subject.

-- "If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given *me* to you-ward: how that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery ... which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Ephesians 3:2, 3, 5). On this passage, Charles L. Feinberg comments, "It is not a matter of whether the mystery was somewhat revealed in the Old Testament, only to be revealed fully in the New Testament in the words of Paul, but that it was not revealed or known at all in the Old Testament, necessitating a new and clear revelation in the New Testament. ... The words 'as it has now been revealed' [Eph. 3:5] cannot be twisted into making the statement relative, because one is not dependent upon Ephesians 3 alone for the definition of the mystery. Consider Romans 16:25, 26 where there are no qualifying words, and to which Paul has reference when he says in Eph. 3:3 'as I wrote before in a few words.' ... That which was hidden in God, in His mind, in His plan, in His counsels, needed not a searching out but an initial receiving or disclosure -- and that was precisely and clearly presented by Paul." ²

²"Millennialism -- the Two Major Views" by Charles L. Feinberg, Th.D., Ph.D., published by Moody Press, Chicago, third and enlarged edition, paperback, 1982, pages 234, 235.

-- In Eph. 3:3, Paul received truths directly from God. The Spirit revealed them to the other apostles and prophets, (Eph. 3:5) but not by direct disclosure. With no Old Testament passages teaching these things, it was necessary for the Spirit to *confirm* that *what they heard through Paul* was indeed the truth of God. Peter acknowledged this by inference in Second Peter 3:15, 16. There he recognized Paul's epistles as Scripture, but admitted his difficulty in understanding some of the things he wrote about. If these truths had been revealed by God directly to Peter as well as to Paul, he should have had no such difficulty.

-- "I am made a minister [of Christ's Body, the church], according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil [complete -- πληρῶσαι] the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:25 - 27). Paul did indeed complete that portion of the word of God dealing with the mystery. When he laid down his pen the revelation specifically concerning the Body of Christ was complete. Failure to recognize this has led to reading the Body of Christ, and its program, into other New Testament passages. Even though the book of Revelation (for instance) was written many years after Paul's writings had been completed and circulated widely among the believers, it contains no reference to the Body of Christ or the body of truth specifically given for the age of grace.

-- Also Paul's apostleship was distinct from that of the twelve apostles of the circumcision. Their apostleship was linked with the twelve tribes of Israel, for in the kingdom they are to sit on twelve thrones judging those tribes (Matt. 19:28). The suggestion that Paul, rather than Matthias (Acts 1: 15 - 26), was *God's* choice to take the place of Judas is not once suggested in Scripture. He specifically tells us that he was "the minister of Jesus Christ to the *Gentiles*" (Rom. 15:16). In First Corinthians he relates, "He [Christ] was seen of Cephus, then of the *twelve ... after that*, He was seen James; then of *ALL* the apostles, and *last of all* He was seen of *me also*, as one born out of due time" (1 Cor. 15:5, 7, 8). Instead of including himself among the twelve apostles he lists himself separately. Significantly, when his apostleship was being viciously attacked he spent three chapters defending it (Second Corinthians eleven to thirteen). Here, of all places, he should have stated his case for being God's choice to succeed Judas -- if it were true. But he never even hinted that he was, or should be, one of the twelve.

While much of Paul's written ministry falls under the category of "progressive revelation," this cannot be the explanation for a very substantial part of it. With progressive revelation old truths are expanded, or new truths made known, which will stand from then on. For instance, Paul, to a degree not before revealed, makes it extremely clear that no man ever has been, or ever will be, justified by the works of the law (Rom. 3:20). This will be true and applicable during the Tribulation and the Kingdom just as it was before the law (Abraham, Rom. 4:1 - 5) and under the law (David, Rom. 4:6 - 8). This is progressive revelation. On the other hand, when Paul tells us we are "not under law" he is not merely introducing a truth that can be claimed by all believers from now on. It evidently was not recognized as truth for the Jewish saints at Jerusalem, for they were all zealous for the law (Acts 21:20). In a day still future those who have "gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name ... sing the *song of Moses* the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb"

(Rev. 15:2, 3) Concerning the Hebrews (as a nation evidently) it is not said that the Old Covenant has vanished away, but that it is waxing old and *nigh unto* vanishing away (Heb. 8:13). Israel as a nation will not be out from under the Old Covenant until the New Covenant becomes a full reality -- and part of the New Covenant is the conversion of all Israel, an event still future (Jer. 31:24; Rom. 11:26).

Paul taught us that "every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4). Yet during the future Tribulation (Isa. 66:15, 16) Jews will be judged for "eating swine's flesh ... and the mouse" (Isa. 66:17).

Paul taught that today there is no difference between Jew and Gentile, but during the Tribulation 144,000 witnesses will be sent forth who "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17). They will all be Jews -- specifically proved to be so by their descent from the twelve Patriarchs (Rev. 7:4 - 8). The oneness of Jew and Gentile in one Body is not merely "progressive revelation" but, specifically, new revelation assigned to a beginning and just as definite a conclusion.

This distinctiveness is clouded if the age of grace is conceived of as beginning at Pentecost, existing during the time of Israel's rejection of the kingdom offer of Acts 3:19 - 21. It is *lost* if this age is thought to continue through the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7) resulting from that rejection. Both Post and Mid-Tribulationism logically necessitate a Pentecostal (or earlier) beginning for the church of this age, and demand a Tribulation destiny for it.

Robert H. Gundry, who definitely is not a Pre-Tribulationist, states, "An absolute silence in the OT about the present age, a total disconnection of the Church from the divine program for Israel, and a clean break between dispensations would favor Pre-Tribulationism: the Church would not likely be related to the seventieth week of Daniel, or Tribulation, a period of time clearly having to do with Israel."

He continues, however, to make the above condition so absolute that Paul's epistles would almost have to be in a separate Bible to fulfill them. "But a partial revelation of the present age in the OT, a connection (not necessarily identification) between Israel and the Church, and a dispensational change involving a transitional period open the door to the presence of the Church during the tribulation."³

In seeking to establish links between Israel and the Church he quotes from Peter's message on the day of Pentecost. He points out that Acts 2:16 does not say, "This is *like* what was spoken" (in Joel), but "This *IS* what was spoken." Then he goes on to declare, "If then the main event on the very birthday of the Church was prophesied in an OT passage within an Israelitish context, it should not seem strange that the Church bears a relationship also to end-time events similarly prophesied in the OT, even though they are Israelitish in cast. In fact, since the beginning of the Church age bears a marked relationship to OT predictions concerning Israel, we are not hindered dispensationally from presuming that the same will be so at the end of

³"The Church and the Tribulation" by Robert H. Gundry, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976 edition, page 12.

the Church age." ⁴

These objections are largely nullified if we recognize the first eight chapters (at least) of Acts as part of Israel's program before the church of this age had its "birthday." A mid-Acts beginning for the Body of Christ also fits with the distinctive character of Paul's apostleship as "the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles" (Rom. 15:16).

As to any "connections" between Israel and the church, there are *some* we would gladly agree to. The same word translated "church" (ἐκκλησία) in Paul's epistles is used of gatherings of Jewish believers in early Acts. However it is used also of the Jewish believers who fellowshipped with the risen Christ *before Pentecost* (Heb. 2:12 when taken with Psa. 22:22, 23 surely has the post-resurrection ministry of Christ in view). We have the same Savior and God; the same redemption provides salvation; and the same Bible is *for* (but not all of it *to*) us all. These and similar items surely do not blur the clear distinctions between the two programs.

Also Paul makes frequent use of the OT Scriptures to relate us to principles that are not dispensationally limited and to assure us that even truths peculiar to this age are not in *contradiction* to previous revelation. Paul teaches us that we are "not under law." With this in mind, it is enlightening to notice that, while Paul calls attention to the promise accompanying the fifth commandment (Eph. 6:2, 3), he does not call upon the children to obey their parents because it was *commanded*, but because it is *right* (Eph. 6:1).

The beginning of the Body of Christ awaited the unbelief and setting aside of Israel (Rom. 11:12, 15). In light of Peter's offer of the kingdom to Israel in Acts 3:19 - 21, this had not yet taken place at Pentecost. At the other end of this parenthetical age, the Rapture of that Body clears the way for the events of the prophesied Tribulation to begin (2 Thess. 2:3, 6, 7). These "connections," however, actually serve to emphasize the clear-cut distinction between the program for Israel and that for the Body church.

As to the presence of a transitional period, it must be conceived of as beginning with Paul and the revelations given to him (Col. 1:25, 26). The first eight chapters of Acts record progression within the kingdom program, not the introduction of a new one. See the discussion of the transition in a later chapter.

Though the distinction between Israel and the Body church is not as absolute as the impossible requirement set forth by this author, his principle stands. The more clearly we see the differences between these two programs the more convinced we become that the Rapture must come before the Tribulation. Almost the total body of proofs for Mid-Trib, "pre-wrath," and Post-Tribulationism come from non-Pauline Scripture, or Pauline Scripture misinterpreted to fit with the non-Pauline passages. But once see that Paul, alone, teaches the Rapture of the church -- as a part of the revelation granted to him (1 Thess. 4:13; 1 Cor. 15:51, 52) -- and their arguments collapse.

While the following chapter is somewhat redundant, the distinctiveness of this age of grace is so vital that it deserves the emphasis of repetition. There it is set forth in expanded

⁴Ibid, page 15.

outline form that it might be fully understood and appreciated.

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