

COVENANT THEOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

Covenant theology lacks a clear recognition of what the Church is in the purposes and counsels of God through divine grace and of the supreme position it occupies as the Body of Christ while it waits the soon coming day when it will become the Bride of Christ, the Lamb of God.

They have all but universal disregard for the revelation given to the apostle Paul from the ascended Christ respecting the Church and this has wrought confusion and damage of an immeasurable degree.

Two factors are paramount causes of this deplorable neglect of Paul, namely:

- (a) The **Reformation** did not recover this precious truth as it was formerly held by the early Apostles
- (b) Thus being bound and confined within the limitations of Reformation truth they have avoided and been skeptical of what to them seems new.

While there were occasional references to Church truth in post-Reformation literature, it was not until the middle of the 1800's (1830-50) that this extensive and important body of teaching was formed into a doctrinal declaration through God instrument, J.N. Darby.

From his teaching John Nelson Darby and his brethren produced expository literature covering the entire Word of God which is not only orthodox and free from misconceptions, but assays to interpret faithfully the entire field of Biblical doctrine--that which theology confined to the Reformation failed to do. This includes the hope of Christ's return at the Rapture (**1 Thess. 4:13-18**).

At the same time other men in America and foreign countries were awakened to the fact that the Bible presents a much larger range of doctrine than that released by the Reformers, and, as a result, a widespread movement developed which incorporated all that the Reformers restored, and very much more.

TWO BASIC COVENANTS

The essential error of **Covenant Theology** bears on human responsibility before God. The theological terms, *Covenant of Works* and *Covenant of Grace*, do not occur in Scripture and if they are to be sustained it must be wholly apart from Biblical authority. **Covenant Theology** builds its structure on these two covenants. This is, at least, recognition--though inadequate--of the truth that the creature has responsibility toward his Creator.

Covenant Theology has Cocceius (1603-1669) as its chief exponent. He taught that before the fall, as much as after it, the relation between God and man was a covenant. They teach that the first was a *Covenant of Works* and that this was replaced after the fall, by the *Covenant of Grace*. Upon this human invention of two covenants; **Covenant Theology** has largely been evolved.

DENIAL OF GOD'S DISPENSATIONS

It sees the empirical truth that God can forgive sinners only by the freedom secured by the sacrifice of His Son--anticipated under their first covenant and realized in their new. However, that theology utterly fails to discern God's purposes for the ages and the various dispensations: (the varying relationships to God of the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church) with the distinctive, consistent human obligations which arise directly from the nature of each specific relationship to God.

Thus their theology penetrates no further into Scripture than to discover the truth that in all ages God is immutable in His grace toward penitent sinners and they construct the idea of a universal Church which continues through the ages. This one truth of immutable grace not only disregards vast spheres of revelation but reaps the unavoidable confusion and misdirection which part-truth engenders. No matter how orthodox they may be in matters of inspiration, the Deity of Christ, His virgin birth, and the efficacy of His death, Covenant theologians have not rightly divided the truth of God.

The Reformers did not restore all features of doctrine and along with accepting justification by faith they retained the Romanish notion that the Church is the Kingdom, fulfilling the Davidic covenant, and is appointed to conquer the world by bringing it under the authority of the Church. This idea has prevailed in spite of the clear, uncomplicated testimony of the New Testament that this dispensation must end in unprecedented wickedness, failure and weakness--what we currently see.

SEVEN DISPENSATIONS:

A testimony to God's faithfulness and man's repeated failure

| # | DISPENSATION | MAJOR TERMINAL EVENT | TIME PERIOD | SCRIPTURE | MAIN PERSON |
|---|--------------|--|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | INNOCENCE | Fall of Man | ≤130 years | Genesis 2:15- 3:24 | ADAM |
| 2 | CONSCIENCE | The Flood | ≤1600 years | Genesis 4-9:7 | SETH CAIN |
| 3 | GOVERNMENT | Tower of Babel | ≤350 years | Genesis 9:8-11:27 | NOAH |
| 4 | PROMISE | Israel under Egyptian bondage | 430 years | Genesis 12-Exodus 19:6 | ABRAHAM |
| 5 | LAW | Man tried and failed followed by the dark years of persecution | ≤1500 years 400 yrs Judges 500 yrs Kings 600 yrs Captivity | Exodus 19:7- Luke 2 See John 1:14 | MOSES |
| 6 | GRACE | Lawlessness Rapture Tribulation | ≥2000 years | Luke 2 to I Thess. 4 (Rapture) Present period | CHRIST |
| 7 | PEACE | Satan's rebellion Millennium | 1000 years | Revelation 20:2 | CHRIST |

Although with each dispensation man is tested in different ways to see if there is any good in man the **CHARACTER of GOD** never changes. He is always **LIGHT** and **LOVE** maintaining holiness and displaying love to man in spite of man's failure.

GOD'S PLAN FOR ISRAEL DENIED

The **Covenant error** does retain Israel, God's people as such, to the time of Christ's death. Rather the Church is thought to be a spiritual remnant within Israel to whom all Old Testament blessings are granted, and Israel the nation as such is allowed to inherit the cursing's of **Deut. 28:20**. The fact that the Bible recognizes an Israel within the nation itself--sometimes termed "the remnant"--has been seized upon by Covenant theologians as a ground for their contention that the Church is the true Israel of the Old Testament. The Old Testament Scriptures teach that Israel's history leads on to its consummation in a glorious earthly kingdom in which they will realize her covenants. This is disruptive to their one-covenant theory.

A LACK OF APPRECIATION FOR CHRIST'S RESURRECTION & THE CHURCH'S HEAVENLY CALLING

As traced by Covenant theologians, the death of Christ is given a place of large significance but His resurrection is accounted as little more than something for His own personal convenience --the Lord's necessary return from the sphere of death back to the place which He occupied before. In other words there is practically no doctrinal significance to Christ's resurrection [and our identification with Him!]. That Christ by resurrection became what in Himself He had not been before--the Head of a wholly new order [creation] of beings and that these were the primary divine objective, as this is set forth in the Pauline Epistles--

cannot be incorporated into a system of which the cherished and distinctive feature is one unchangeable divine purpose from eternity past.

This ignorance of the doctrinal aspects of the resurrection of Christ is due to the fact that according to their idealism the Church is not a new creation with its headship in the ascended Christ but has existed under a supposed uniform covenant from the beginning of human history. Thus for that system the great reality of a heavenly purpose peculiar to this dispensation is ruled out completely. The doctrinal aspects of Christ's ascension and present ministry in heaven mean but little to those who are committed to the theory of an unchanging covenant.

According to this assumption, the Church existed without a headship in heaven, even before Christ came; therefore, the inauguration of that headship as something sprung out of His resurrection could not be of any great moment.

A LACK OF APPRECIATION FOR CHRIST OUR HIGH PRIEST AND ADVOCATE

The Covenant error cannot be broadened to allow for Christ's new priesthood in heaven, nor for His immeasurable ministry as Advocate, for the same reason. Therefore, all this precious truth is not included in their system by Covenant theologians.

A LACK OF APPRECIATION OF THE VARIOUS WORKS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Also wherever the Covenant error is stressed, there must go along with it a neglect of the most vital truths respecting the present age-characterizing ministries of the Holy Spirit. The same reason may be assigned for this neglect, namely, that if the Church existed and progressed in Old Testament times apart from these ministries of the Spirit, they cannot be of vital importance the present time.

It is also to be expected, when Covenant Theology has so neglected the fact and meaning of Christ's resurrection, that there would arise much misunderstanding about the reason for the celebration of the first day of the week rather than the seventh.

THE KINGDOM AND CHURCH ARE CONFUSED

In the present time there are those who, misapprehending the prediction that the Gospel of the Kingdom must be preached in all the world (**Matt. 24:14**), assert that Christ cannot return until the missionary enterprise has reached to all the inhabited earth. They do not recognize that the passage in question is found in a context belonging to the future Great Tribulation, and that because of the unending cycle of birth and death there could not be a set time in this dispensation when the missionary endeavor would be complete.

Although the Millennial Kingdom occupies so large a place in Scripture, the theme of the Kingdom has been more misunderstood and its terminology more misapplied than any other subject in the Bible. This is directly due to the failure, so inherent and far-reaching in Covenant Theology. Truth concerning the Messianic expectation as that is set forth in the Old Testament does not imply that the Kingdom is the Church, nor does the New Testament, with its objectives centered in heaven, teach that the Church is the Kingdom.

Strong objection is offered by Covenant theologians to a distinction between the Gospel of the Kingdom as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Disciples, and the Pauline Gospel of the Grace of God. One Covenant theologian states that to make such a distinction is "unfortunate," and "dangerous." He with others contends that the Kingdom Gospel is identical with the Gospel of the Grace of God.