

DISPENSATIONAL TRUTH

"PROGRESSIVE DISPENSATIONALISM" Pt. 3

by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

The New Covenant

Progressives view the new covenant (like the Davidic covenant) as *already* inaugurated by Christ, who is dispensing certain of its blessings in this age, even though its provisions will *not yet* be fully realized until the Millennium. Furthermore, the new covenant will be mediated by the Davidic king, since the new covenant is the form in which the Abrahamic covenant blessing will be fulfilled.²⁷ Exactly how this can be established is unclear, though what it intends to establish seems to be an attempt to interrelate the major covenants of Israel under the supremacy of the Davidic king (and the Davidic covenant) as well as making the Abrahamic and new covenants progressively fulfilled so that the Davidic can be said to be fulfilled also. Even if the Abrahamic and/or the new covenant has been inaugurated, that does not prove that the Davidic has been. But notice again that the Palestinian covenant is nowhere to be found in the discussion.

Revisionists attempt to buttress the inauguration of the new covenant by the death of Christ by showing that some of the blessings of the new covenant as promised in the Old Testament to the house of Israel and the house of Judah are similar to certain blessings promised to believers in this age. Nevertheless, even progressives have to admit that certain of those blessings can only be partially realized today. For instance, the promise of the new covenant "to remove the heart of rebellion" and give us "hearts fully compliant" is not fulfilled today in the experience of believers.²⁸ The progressives' need to qualify the fulfillment as being "not fully free" from resistance to God's will is not at all similar to the promise of the new covenant (to remove rebellion). Bock claims that Peter's "allusion" to Joel 2 in Acts 2 and the coming of the

Spirit in Acts 2 "fulfills the new covenant" and that the coming of the Spirit is "a key promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31."²⁹ Therefore, if the new covenant is fulfilled beginning at Pentecost, and thus inaugurated in this present age, then so also is the Davidic covenant inaugurated in this present time.

In this way progressives link the rule of Christ as Davidic king over Israel in the Millennium with the fulfillment of the new covenant with Israel in that same period (Ezek. 37:24-28) and the inauguration of both the Davidic and new covenants in the present church age. But this linkage hardly proves that Christ is reigning as Davidic king now or that He is fulfilling (however incompletely) new covenant promises now. Also, progressives acknowledge that the few similar new covenant promises allegedly being fulfilled today are being fulfilled only partially and by analogy. However, some new covenant promises are clearly not being fulfilled or even inaugurated in any sense today. Here are some examples: (1) taming of beasts (Ezek. 34:25), (2) increased productivity of the land (w 26-27), and (3) no necessity to teach one another (Jer. 31:34). All agree that these blessings will not be fulfilled

until the Millennium, but, because none of them have been inaugurated now, at best progressives can say that only part of the new covenant has been inaugurated.

Is it true to say that any part of the new covenant as promised in the Old Testament has been inaugurated? Putting all the Old Testament passages together one finds these new covenant promises: (1) putting God's law into Israelites' hearts; (2) no necessity to teach His people; (3) forgiveness of Israel; (4) Israel restored to favor and

Is it true to say that any part of the new covenant as promised in the Old Testament has been inaugurated?

²⁷ Craig A. Blasing and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1993), 170.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁹ Darrell L. Bock, "The Reign of the Lord Jesus Christ" in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 36-67. See especially p. 48-49. But the coming of the Spirit is not mentioned in the promises prophesied in Jeremiah 31. It is mentioned in Isaiah 59:21.

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BOOK AT A GLANCE

The Gospel according to John

Son of Man

Revelation of God as
LIFE
to the World
1:19-12:50

Revelation of God as
LIGHT
to the Disciples
13-17

Revelation of God as
LOVE
to all Mankind
18-20

Son of God

PROLOGUE
1:1-1:18
PAST

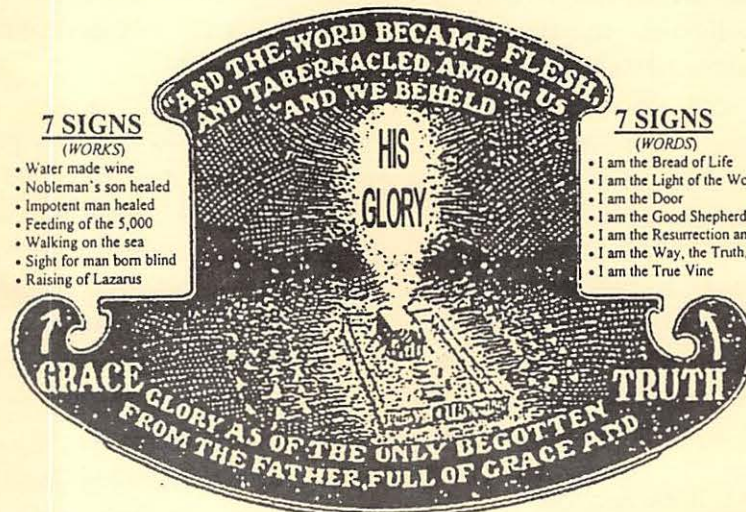
The Divine
LIFE
revealed
1-5

The Divine
LIGHT
displayed
6-13

The Divine
LOVE
expressed
14-18

7 SIGNS
(WORKS)

- Water made wine
- Nobleman's son healed
- Impotent man healed
- Feeding of the 5,000
- Walking on the sea
- Sight for man born blind
- Raising of Lazarus



7 SIGNS
(WORDS)

- I am the Bread of Life
- I am the Light of the World
- I am the Door
- I am the Good Shepherd
- I am the Resurrection and Life
- I am the Way, the Truth, the Life
- I am the True Vine

EPILOGUE
Chapter 21
FUTURE

LIFE
attracting
1-14

LOVE
appealing
15-17

LIGHT
assuring
18-25

"These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name." 20:31

guaranteed everlasting existence; (5) God's Spirit upon the people; (6) material blessing in the land of Israel; (7) peace; (8) God's sanctuary rebuilt. Of course, none of these promises has been inaugurated for the house of Israel and the house of Judah today. But are any of them similar to what God is doing for the church today?

Yes, forgiveness and the ministry of the Spirit are being experienced today. But as specifically promised in the new covenant passages even these are not being fulfilled today. After all, both these promises (a ministry of the Spirit and forgiveness of sins) were realized by Israelites under the Mosaic covenant, but that in no way connects the Mosaic covenant with subsequent covenants any more than their experience today connects a supposed inauguration of the new covenant with a future, clearly fulfilled new covenant.

What is the relation of the new covenant to the present time? Has it been inaugurated? Does that mean it is operative now? If so, how do we decide which parts are operative and to what extent? How can the church fulfill a promise given to the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jer. 31:31)? How does the death of Christ relate to the matter?

Amillennialists understand that the church fulfills the provisions of the new covenant made with Israel. Premillennialists have not always dealt with questions about the new covenant uniformly. Some have taught that the church has no relation to the new covenant, only Israel does. Others see two new covenants, one with Israel and another with the church. Others acknowledge that the church receives some of the blessings (or similar blessings) promised in the Old Testament revelation of the new covenant but not all of them. Progressives make these similar blessings evidence that the new covenant has been inaugurated. All premillennialists agree that there will be a future fulfillment of the covenant for Israel at the second coming of Christ (Rom. 11:26-27; cf. Heb. 10:16).

New Testament references to the new covenant include (1) referring to the cup as the blood of the covenant (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), (2) contrasting the better new covenant

with the obsolete Mosaic covenant (but not saying that the church fulfills the new covenant, Heb. 8:6-13), and (3) declaring us as ministers of "a new covenant," as the *Revised Standard*, *New American Standard*, *New International*, and *New English Bibles* translate it (because there is no definite article, "the," in 2 Cor. 3:6).

Perhaps some of the confusion surrounding the church's relation to the new covenant can be dispelled by focusing on the word *payment* rather than *fulfillment* or *inauguration*. In other words, clearly our Lord paid for sins that will be forgiven when the new covenant is in force. He also paid for sins committed under the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Palestinian covenants, as well as for those committed in the church age. If that were not so, then there would have to be multiple deaths of Christ, one for each group whose sins have been, are, or will be forgiven. The blood shed to pay for the sins of those who experience the new covenant also pays for sins of those who believe in all ages. It is not a matter of inauguration but payment. New Testament references focus on the blood as payment. In the Upper Room that payment is clearly related to the future fulfillment of the new covenant. This is to be expected since those gathered there did not understand that there would even be an intervening church age. The references in Hebrews 10:29, 12:24, and 13:20 also focus on the blood.

Two of the blessings of the new covenant for Israel in the future are similar to those experienced by the church today — forgiveness of sins and the ministry of the Spirit.

Remember, revisionists see only one new covenant, which has been inaugurated with the death of Christ, some of its blessings being fulfilled now but the complete fulfillment awaiting the second coming of Christ. They use this to help substantiate the

same idea with the Davidic covenant; i.e., that it has already been inaugurated, though not yet fully fulfilled. Obviously, not all the provisions of the new covenant as revealed in the Old Testament have been inaugurated, as, for example, no need of teaching (Jer. 31:34) and Israel being firmly and safely planted in its own land (32:41).

Two of the blessings of the new covenant for Israel in the future are similar to those experienced by the church today — forgiveness of sins and the ministry of the Spirit. But note carefully that those two particular blessings were given to Israel under

the old Mosaic covenant (Ps. 51:11; Neh. 9:20). Does this mean that, in reality, the Mosaic covenant was a preinaugural stage of the inaugurated stage of the new covenant? Not at all, and progressives would agree. Similarity of blessings (even partial similarity) does not mean equation of covenants. Furthermore, even if the new covenant has been inaugurated and is partly fulfilled now, that does not prove that the Davidic covenant follows the same pattern unless the text specifically says so. Already/not yet aspects of salvation (in a new covenant) do not prove already/not yet aspects of the Davidic reign (in the Davidic covenant).

What about 2 Corinthians 3:6-11? Here are some matters to notice:

1 A major purpose of the passage is to contrast the *kind of ministry* based on a wrong use of the Mosaic Law, which promoted works and self-effort, with one that is dependent on the Holy Spirit.³⁰ This contrast between a ministry that kills and one that gives life is vividly seen by comparing the old Mosaic covenant with a new covenant to show the superiority of the new and the inferiority of the old: the letter of the old kills, while the Spirit of the new gives life; the old is a ministry of death, the new a ministry of the Spirit; the old came with glory; the new with more glory; the old had fading glory, the new surpassing glory; the old has been done away; the new remains; the old brings hiddenness, the new boldness; the old hardens hearts, the new saves.

2 If the only new covenant is with the house of Israel and has not been inaugurated with the church, we still minister some things about that new covenant. What? At least two things. First, we minister the payment made for the sins of all time by the blood of Christ. Second, the eschatological promises contained the new covenant, which will be fulfilled in the Millennium. After all, the new covenant tells us about many of the conditions in the millennial kingdom as well as promises about Israel and her future. These matters people need to hear today as we include

them in our ministry and do so in dependence on the Spirit. This approach understands only one new covenant.

3 The reference to "new covenant" is without the definite article. The text does not say we are ministers of "*the* new covenant" but of "*a* new covenant." The definite article is also absent in Hebrews 9:15 and 12:24. This may not be significant at all, or it may indicate that Paul is focusing on a new covenant made with the church, which, of course, is based on the death of Christ as is also the future new covenant made with Israel. If so, there are two new covenants; perhaps even more if one understands a covenant related to each dispensational change in the outworking of God's plan and purpose.³¹ In this view the two new covenants are distinct and not merged into one, which has already been inaugurated (as progressives teach).

To sum up: In what ways are we today ministers of a new covenant? In the sense that we (1) minister in the power of the Spirit to bring life, and not with self-righteous works of the law to bring death, (2) place the substitutionary death of Christ (the blood of the a new covenant) central in all our ministry; and (3) proclaim the eschatological promises of the new covenant made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ■

³⁰ This is the view of John R. Master ("The New Covenant," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, 100-101). As supporting this view, he cites N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 176.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

To be concluded in the next edition of the *Grace Family Journal*.

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