

# THE GREAT DIVIDE: COVENANT THEOLOGY AND DISPENSATIONALISM

MARK KOLCHIN

For the typical believer and especially those younger in the faith, the terms Covenant theology and Dispensationalism can be very confusing. Even older saints find it difficult to get a handle on these two main approaches to biblical interpretation. Combined with other theological terms such as premillennialism, amillennialism, preterism, Christian reconstructionism and progressive dispensationalism, the average believer in any congregation can be easily intimidated by the polysyllabic terminology. However, the serious student of the Word will want to investigate these concepts in the light of Scripture in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the differences between them. Because of the continuing interest in Covenant theology, it is important to understand what it is and how it contrasts with the dispensationalism.

## **What is Covenant Theology and when did it begin?**

Covenant theology or covenantism is a means of interpreting the Bible through the lens of two or three covenants in Scripture. Those who subscribe to this perspective refer to two of these covenants as the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Many in this camp see a third covenant called a covenant of redemption. They claim that this was established between the Father and the Son in eternity past based on Heb. 13:20. Though these terms are not found in Scripture, adherents nevertheless claim that the principles are represented there.

As a system of thought, Covenant theology first appeared during the mid-1500's at the time of the Reformation. According to Louis Berkoff a prominent covenant theologian, Kaspar Olevaanus was the first to develop this line of thought. Later in the mid-1600's, Johannes Cocceius further developed this approach to the interpretation of scripture, which at the time was becoming quickly established in many of the churches in Germany, the Netherlands, Scotland and England. The Puritans were primarily responsible for bringing this teaching to America. Currently, it is the predominant theological persuasion in Protestantism and finds its center in churches following Reformed traditions and those who also favor a Calvinistic persuasion.

Simply put, Covenant theology purports that the whole of Scripture revolves around two or perhaps three main covenants, hence the name. In short, those in the covenant school hold that before time began, a covenant was established among the Godhead that the Son would be the Head and Redeemer of the elect, a select group of individuals predetermined to receive eternal life. This was done knowing in advance of Adam's failure in the Garden. In return, the Son would be raised to life after His atoning work at Calvary, glorified by the Father and given power and great glory. This is called the covenant of redemption. After Adam was created, the triune God established a covenant with Adam in which he was promised eternal life for perfect obedience and warned of physical and spiritual death if he did not, which happened. This all occurred under the covenant of works. Because of Adam's failure, a covenant of grace was then graciously established to provide forgiveness for the offending, elect descendants of Adam, whom he represented. This forgiveness was made possible by the covenant of redemption which predated it in eternity. Consequently, the elect sinner through faith in Christ is forgiven and promises to live a life well-pleasing to God in obedience to the Lord. These are some of the main tenets of Covenant theology.

### **The Problems with Covenant Theology**

Adherents of covenantism have a high regard for Scripture and seek to emphasize the great doctrines of the faith such as the centrality of Jesus Christ in history and justification by grace through faith alone. These are all commendable pursuits, many of which issued out of the Reformation, a significant turning point in Church history. But there are also many things that are lacking in this school of thought. For one, Covenant theology focuses on a limited line of truth. It emphasizes God's work in the salvation of the elect to the exclusion of a number of other important truths in the Bible. That God has a plan to save His people and the importance of that salvation is not the question. But God has other things that He will accomplish that will also ultimately redound to His glory. He has a distinct plan for Israel as well for the other nations, something that is not sufficiently addressed within the framework of Covenant theology. Scripture also cites a series of judgments yet to come; the Judgment Seat of Christ; the Sheep and the Goats (Matt. 25); the beast and false prophet; Satan and the unsaved dead at Great White Throne (Rev. 20). All of these are clearly differentiated in the Scripture and could hardly be grouped into one general judgment which Covenant theology maintains.

The difference between Israel and the Church is perhaps is one of the most obvious differences between Covenant theology and Dispensationalism. To a covenantalist, the Church and Israel are essentially the same, the one simply a continuation of the other. They see Stephen's reference to the "church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38) as proof positive that the church existed in the OT despite the fact that the Lord referred to it in the future tense in Matt 16:18, when He said "I *will* build my church". To them, the church always was present in the OT, instead of being inaugurated at Pentecost, (Acts 2).

In contrast to covenantism, Dispensationalism presents scripture as the unfolding, progressive revelation of God. Through a series of dispensations or time periods, God dispenses His truth for man to obey. Failure to obey this stewardship of truth has resulted in God's judgment on man through history and consequently, a further revelation of the truth of God which then becomes the standard for that time period. Therefore a key component of dispensational thought is that it recognizes the distinctions in Scripture. Further, because covenantalists do not observe some critical distinctions in Scripture, it leads to a convoluted interpretation of prophetic portions of the Bible. Because it does not distinguish between Israel and the Church, the promises made to Israel in the OT are erroneously applied to the Church, since it sees the Church and Israel as the same. When it comes to unfulfilled prophecy, Covenant theology also lends itself to the employment of a *double hermeneutic*, meaning two ways of interpreting scripture. This means applying a literal interpretation of the Bible on one hand and a symbolic or allegorical interpretation on the other. In other words, in matters dealing with the past fulfillment of scripture, a literal method is utilized. But when it comes to unfulfilled prophecy, instead of maintaining a consistency in Bible interpretation, a symbolic hermeneutic is employed. The result makes for some very interesting prophetic predictions, evidenced recently when a well-known radio Bible teacher schooled in Covenant theology foolishly declared May 21, 2011 to be the end of the world. It was the sad result of the allegorization of Scripture and failing to observe biblical distinctions.

Finally, because of the emphasis of God's redemptive work of the elect, some view this Covenant theology as having a deadening effect on evangelistic fervor. "Why evangelize if God is going to save the elect anyway?" is the retort by dispensationalists when analyzing the ramifications of this theological approach.

## **What makes Covenant Theology so popular?**

The question naturally arises, “Why then, is Covenant theology so popular?”. There may be a number of reasons why this might be, but perhaps a few possible reasons can be suggested. One is that it is historically tied to the Reformation. That has an appeal to some people because of the tremendous contribution made by the Reformers and the place it had both in Church and world history. Something in the past for some reason always seems better. As someone has said “Distance lends enchantment to the view”. Another reason may deal with the academic nature of this topic. Detailed, intricate reasoning can appeal to the intellect and that discipline in itself is attractive to some people because it separates the “haves” from the “have-nots”, meaning those who have not grasped the concepts. Still another reason may be that Dispensationalism as a theological explanation of God’s truth came after Covenant theology, historically. It was expounded and made widely known through the pen of JN Darby during the 1800’s. The fact that it came afterwards would seem in some people’s minds to substantiate covenantism, which appeared on the scene earlier. Timing in itself does not legitimize any school of thought. Look at dangerous heresy of Gnosticism which appeared at the end of the first century - certainly not a valid school of thought!

Yes, there are many differences between Covenant theology and Dispensationalism, differences that can easily divide. But despite these differences, those who hold to another view of scripture should never be viewed as the enemy. “He that is not against us is for us” (Luke 9:50). Our attitude should be as Paul stated to the Philippians, “...if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you” (Phil. 2:15). May that be our sentiment as we strive to rightly divide the word of truth.