

The Dangerous Delusions of Covenant Theology – *Manfred E. Kober, Th.D.*

Biblical Christianity has always been under attack. As soon as Christianity arose, Satan sought to counterfeit biblical doctrines and practice. Thus the Holy Spirit prompted John and Paul to refute the Gnostic heresy in a number of their epistles such as 1. John and Colossians. In the 4th century Arianism and Manichaeism posed a problem for the Christian faith. Every century of the Christian church involved confrontation and repudiation of gross doctrinal error by biblical theologians.

What makes our time unique is the fact that our system of theology is attacked by fellow believers. There is a relentless and irrational attack by covenant theologians against our dispensational, premillennial, pretribulational interpretation of the Scriptures. Their extreme effort to spiritualize specific literal prophecies is equaled only by their dreadful denial of the blessed hope of the any-moment return of Christ. The unjustified attacks from fellow believers come in a steady stream of volumes such as *End-Times Fiction, Last Days Madness* (Gary DeMar), *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?* (Keith Mathison) and *Wrongly Dividing the Word of God* (John Gerstner). In light of these attacks from within the body of Christ, it is more important than ever to contend earnestly for the faith (Jude 3).

Covenant Theology grew out of the Reformation and as system was developed by second generation reformers, such as Johann Bullinger who followed Huldreich Zwingli, the Reformer of Zürich, Switzerland. As a theological system, Covenant Theology (CT) views the history of God's dealings with mankind under the framework of two or three overarching theological covenants, not specifically mentioned in Scripture, the covenant of works, the covenant of grace and the covenant of redemption. God initially made covenant of works with Adam, promising eternal life for obedience and death for disobedience. Adam failed miserably, dooming the entire human race, but God intervened, entering into a covenant of grace through which the problem of sin and death would be overcome. Those subscribing to a covenant of redemption teach that in eternity past God the Father made a covenant with the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, voluntarily taking their place as the substitutionary sacrifice.

In contrast, dispensationalists view God's dealing with mankind in terms of several clearly distinguishable economies or dispensations. The term *dispensation* (Greek, *oikonomia* = economy, stewardship, dispensation) is used repeatedly in the New Testament (Eph. 1:10; 3:2, Col. 1:20, 1 Cor. 9:17), exactly the way dispensationalists use the term. As Charles C. Ryrie notes, "Dispensationalism views the world as a household run by God. In His household-world God is dispensing or administering its affairs according to His own will and in various stages of revelation in the passage of time" (*Dispensationalism* [1995], 29). They subscribe to the covenants mentioned in the Bible. There are at least eight: the Edenic covenant (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15-17), the Adamic covenant (Gen. 3:14-19), the Noahic covenant (Gen. 8:20-9:17), the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1-3), the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 20-23), the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:4-17), the Palestinian covenant (Deut. 30:12-10) and the New covenant (Jer. 31).

Covenant theologians espouse many important biblical doctrines, such as the total depravity of man, the sovereignty of God and eternal security, but on the contemporary scene, their profuse publications, especially in the area of prophecy, challenge the literal, dispensational understanding of end-time events. (*NOTE: Two-word summaries were added to Dr. Kober's notes.*)

1. _____ **ROBBERY:** Covenant Theology (CT) tries to rob believers of the foremost hope Christ left to the Church (Tit. 2:13), the any-moment return for His Bride, to deliver believers from the wrath to come (Rom 5:9; 1. Thess. 1:10; 5:9). Many of their theologians teach that Christ has actually returned already in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D. 70 or the believer must endure the time of the tribulation. The belief in the imminent return of the Savior for the saints is ridiculed as a false doctrine of recent origin.
2. _____ **TRAP:** CT is influenced by ecclesiastical tradition rather than being based on sound biblical exegesis. CT with its Reformation roots follows St. Augustine (d. 430) who denied a literal Millennium, therefore any Scriptures relating to the earthly rule of Christ are summarily rejected by CT.
3. _____ **FOUNDATION:** CT substitutes a theological system for a biblical theology. The opinions of Augustine and the Reformers, who failed to separate from the Roman Catholic amillennial position, count more than the declaration of the Apostles. The reformers followed the end-time view of the Roman Catholic Church. While they saw clearly the issue of salvation by faith alone, they failed to reform the spiritualizing of biblical prophecy. What Calvin (1509-1564), the Swiss Reformer, and Cocceius (1603-1669), founder of CT, espoused concerning the future is heeded more than what Christ taught.
4. **ANOMALOUS** _____: CT engages in a system of interpretation that began in pagan Greece, where the philosophers allegorized Greek immoral religious tales to make them acceptable to the cultural mind. The Greek poet Homer wrote fantastic tales of the gods cavorting on Mt. Olympus. The philosophers allegorized "many lines in Homer which seemed to them unworthy, undignified, morally reprehensible, and even positively blasphemous" (Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 1886, 136). By blatant spiritualizing, the Greek gods suddenly became symbols of vices and virtues.
5. **INCONSISTENT** _____: CT introduces, like Roman Catholicism and St. Augustine before, an illegitimate set of interpretive principles that distorts the plain sense of Scripture. This is primarily so in the area of prophecy. With their "dual hermeneutic" (*hermeneutics* = "the science and art of biblical interpretation") their theologians interpret fulfilled prophecy literally but spiritualize unfulfilled prophecy. CT would defend the literal fulfillment of Zech. 9:9

that Christ entered Jerusalem on a donkey but completely spiritualize the prediction of Zech. 14:4 that He would return physically to the Mount of Olives. Starting with the presupposition that there cannot be a millennium, any passage that remotely refers to a literal future reign of Christ on earth is reinterpreted.

6. **ABRAHAMIC** _____: CT refuses to see any fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (e.g. Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18) in a future nation of Israel. The Reformed Knox Theological Seminary in Florida, published “An Open Letter to Evangelicals and Other Interested Parties: The People of God, the Land of Israel, and the Impartiality of the Gospel” in which the authors assert that “the entitlement of any one ethnic or religious group to ... the ‘Holy Land’ cannot be supported by Scripture. In fact, the land promises specific to Israel...were fulfilled under Joshua” (IX). Why the blindness to clear land promises to Israel? Why the denial of specific, literal prophecies that Israel would possess the land “from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18). The “land of Canaan [would be Israel’s] for an everlasting possession” (Gen. 17:8). Sadly, to date, over 200 theologians and pastors added their signature to the open letter which constitutes a clear denial of God’s future program for His people.
7. **HABITUAL** _____: CT has fostered a movement that is inimical to biblical truth and polemical in its publications. The biblical dispensational position, clearly espoused in the “Thief in the Night” films series and the “Left Behind” volumes, is constantly under attack by such books as Gary DeMar’s *Last Days Madness* and *End-Times Fiction*. It is virtually impossible to find a similar no-holds-barred dispensational attack on the CT position. Theologian R. C. Sproul, in his foreword to the latter volume, says that “in my years of study and ministry I have yet to discover a single text of sacred Scripture that teaches a pretribulation Rapture.” The notion is “pure fiction” (ix). One wonders whether his version of the New Testament contains verses such as 1. Thess. 4:17 and Rev. 3:10!
8. **REJECTED** _____: CT denies a literal rule of Christ on the throne of David, contradicting the angelic promise to Mary (Luke 1:32-33) and detracting from the future exaltation of Christ. That someday the Savior will graciously rule the world from Jerusalem - a frequent prophetic prediction (Is. 2:1-4; Mic. 4:1-3) - is strongly rejected by CT.
9. **PERISHING** _____: CT undermines any hope for a world yearning for righteousness and peace. For them human history ends in tragedy and ruin rather than triumph and redemption. The prophets clearly speak of a future time when Jerusalem will be the world’s capital. Christ will judge righteously the whole world from the holy city. The nations will gather there for worship. All wars will cease. Redeemed Israel will bask in the light of their Messiah (Is. 2:4; Mic.4:2; Hab. 2:14). CT might believe in a return of Christ after the tribulation but sees that event as the end of human history.
10. **CONSTANT** _____: CT leaves the saving work of Christ incomplete as it fails to see the redemption of nature from the curse of sin (Is. 11:6-8; Rom. 8:21-23). God predicts the future deliverance of this planet from the curse occasioned by the Adamic transgression (Rom. 5:12). CT does not allow any time for the glorious transformation of our planet to occur. All of creation groans for deliverance and that will surely come. A denial of clear literal prophecies will not deter their ultimate fulfillment.
11. _____ **PROBLEMS**: CT distorts and denies not simply isolated passages but major portions of the prophetic Word, such as Ezekiel 40-48, Zechariah 14 and Revelation 4-22. Many in the CT camp insist that most of the predictions in the Revelation were fulfilled in the events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70! Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, they insist that John penned the Revelation in the mid 60’s and predicts that God would divorce national Israel for rejecting the Messiah, would judge her and replace her permanently with the universal church.
12. **ERRONEOUS** _____: CT expands its energy and finances against fellow-Christians rather than rightly dividing the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). Failure to do that, says the Apostle Paul, brings shame to those who fail to make biblical distinctions. Israel is not the Church. Law is not Grace. The throne of David will never be found in heaven.
13. _____ **CENSURING**: CT makes the Holy Spirit a liar who expressly revealed **6 times in Revelation 20** that Christ’s reign would last **1000 years**. With exegetical sleight of hand, CT tries to explain the number 1000 away. CT insists despite clear grammatical rules that the number 1000 is symbolic. In fact, when in the Greek (or Hebrew) language the word day or year is preceded by a numerical adjective, the reference is to a literal time period. What is true for the days of Genesis 1 is equally true for the years of Christ’s reign. The earthly kingdom so clearly revealed and promised to believers (Lk. 12:32; 1 Cor. 6:2; Rev. 3:21) cannot be so cavalierly dismissed.
14. _____ **FUTURE**: Theologians in the CT camp are unable to agree among themselves on a clear outline of future events. Some see the tribulation period in the past (Gary DeMar, R.C. Sproul), some in the present (Billy Graham) and still others future (Bill Bright). They are agreed on what they do not believe, but are unable to come to an agreement on what they do hold about the future. Departure from literal interpretation is detrimental to an understanding of the divine design for the future. The literal fulfillment of Bible prophecy is a striking demonstration to the world of the power and wisdom of God. The fact is that God does have a future plan, “Yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it” (Is. 46:11). Furthermore, to know that the blood-bought believer has such a prominent place in God’s plan for the future gives the individual an ardent desire to live for Christ, a hope that he will perhaps soon be summoned by Christ and an anticipation of the future eons of basking in the presence of Christ.