

© Copyright 1995, 2005, by Sam A. Smith

This document may be copied for noncommercial educational or religious use if distributed absolutely free to the end user.

This notice must be attached to all copies distributed.

All other rights reserved.

This document may not be used for any other purpose than stated above without the express written consent of the author. All commercial use of this document and/or the illustrations contained herein is strictly prohibited.

What the Bible Says About the Future: ISBN 1-59872-275-1

Published by *Biblical Reader Communications*/Sam A. Smith
www.BiblicalReader.com

Softcover edition printed in the United States of America, December, 2005

All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless otherwise indicated.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ©. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society

Scripture quotations taken from the New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org)

The “NASB,” “NAS,” “New American Standard Bible,” “New American Standard,” “Amplified,” “LBLA,” and “La Biblia de las Américas” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by The Lockman Foundation. Use of these trademarks requires the permission of The Lockman Foundation. Cover photograph © Freestockphotos.com

To order print copies of this book: Visit Biblical Reader Communications on the Internet at:

<http://orders.biblicalreader.com> (ordering information), or **www.BiblicalReader.com** (general Internet site)

Quantity discounts are available.

Appendix B:

The Problem With Covenant Theology

When Scripture is taken at face value it unmistakably teaches a *pre*-millennial return of Christ. In fact, for a brief period some of the eastern churches excluded the book of Revelation from their New Testament Canon because they had rejected premillennialism and could find no way to reconcile the teaching of Revelation with their non-premillennial view (amillennialism). So, how do some interpreters get amillennialism (or postmillennialism) out of the Bible? The answer is, “They don’t” – because it isn’t there – but the millennium is, so they have to utilize a process in which the biblical truth of the millennium can be reinterpreted to be compatible with a non-premillennial view. They accomplish this through the mechanism of “covenant theology” (covenantalism).

What is “Covenant Theology?”

We will look at the history of covenant theology in a moment, but it’s important to first understand what covenant theology “is.” One of the most prevalent misconceptions about covenant theology is that it’s primarily concerned with the explanation and significance of the biblical covenants (*i.e.*, the Abrahamic, Palestinian, Davidic and new covenants) – nothing could be further from the truth. Covenant theology is built on three extra-biblical, theological covenants that were developed as part of reformed theology in an effort to square amillennialism with the Bible, since amillennialism simply does not flow out of a literal (or “normal”) understanding of the biblical covenants.

The Roman Catholic Church’s understanding of the visible earthly kingdom of God was dominated by amillennialism from the fifth century. At the time of the reformation the validity of amillennialism was not questioned. The reformation was predominately about salvation. Sadly, the reformers failed to recognize, or at least failed to give due consideration to the strong connections between

the doctrines of salvation and eschatology. Without the authoritarian voice of the Roman Church dictating amillennialism to be “true,” the reformed churches found themselves maintaining a position that could not be supported strictly from the Bible; they needed some kind of biblical and theological basis to support their reformed version of amillennialism.

These theologians were smart enough to realize that amillennialism could not be supported from any type of consistently normal biblical interpretation, because the Bible, when interpreted normally, presents a clear and resolutely premillennial picture of the return of Christ. In the fifth century, when Augustine embraced amillennialism, he had to utilize a dual interpretive system – applying non-literal interpretation to any passages for which the literal interpretation contradicted amillennialism – of course, from a logical standpoint this was a backwards process. The problem for the reformed churches was how to justify the seemingly arbitrary use of allegorization in order to arrive at amillennialism, especially while interpreting other scriptures normally. The reformed amillennialists realized that this gave the impression of an *ad hoc* and highly biased theology, and they quickly realized what they had to do to solve this problem. If they couldn’t prove amillennialism from within the Bible, through a biblical theology developed from consistently normal interpretation (*i.e.*, the same methodology used to interpret other passages of Scripture), they would have to adjust the theological context of the Bible, so as to give them justification to allegorize unfulfilled prophecy. Naturally, this could only be done from outside the Bible. In mathematical terms this would be called, a “fudge factor;” in cards it would be called “stacking the deck” – in either case the end result is predetermined and the process is adjusted to lead to that result. The idea was that when they came to passages that were inconsistent with amillennialism (their pre-concluded endpoint), they would have a reason for not taking those passages at face value. I don’t say this to impute any ill motives; these were men who believed amillennialism to be true; after all, it had been the doctrine of the church for a thousand years, and they were attempting to work out its justification – even if they had to stretch the limits of sound reason to do it. Unfortunately, as is the case with many rationalizations, they often lead to a false sense of reality. Thus, reformed theologians invented the “tri-covenantal system,” which

allowed them to adjust the theological context of the Bible just enough to nudge premillennialism out, and allow the substitution of amillennialism in its place.

In the tri-covenantal scheme, the supposed covenants of “redemption,” “works,” and “grace” form the extra-biblical (presuppositional) context upon which all covenantal interpretation of the Bible is based. The process is effectuated in the following manner. First the covenantalist subsumes all redemptive history under an imaginary covenant called the “covenant of grace,” and having done so, he uses that as a pretext to minimize any distinctions in the work of God within redemptive history – after all, that history (he claims) falls under the singular “covenant of grace” – therefore, he rationalizes, the work of God in redemptive history is uniform. In the mind of the covenantalist, this erases, or at least minimizes any distinction between “Israel,” to whom the kingdom promises were made, and “the church.” The minimalization of the church’s distinct identity, separate from Israel, is then used to justify the notion that the church is merely a New Testament extension of Israel – a “new Israel” – or possibly a substitute, or replacement for Israel, since the Jewish nation rejected their Messiah. (Actually both positions have been argued.) In the process, the distinctions between the Old Testament economy and the New Testament economy are also characteristically dissolved. Of course the church is not an ethnic and geopolitical entity, and therefore cannot inherit Israel’s promises in any literal sense, so the covenantalist (based upon all of the assumptions he has made thus far) justifies the necessity of employing a non-literal method of interpretation to explain how he imagines the promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to the church. [A more recent trend in covenantal interpretation is to deny that God made promises to Israel in the first place, asserting rather that the promises made to Abraham’s descendants refer not to his physical, but to his “spiritual” seed (*i.e.*, those who are of the faith of Abraham). This twist allows the covenantalist to deny the fulfillment of the promises to Israel without having to spiritual (allegorize) them as being fulfilled to the church. Of course, the result is the same – the denial of premillennialism. On this subject see, Appendix D: “*Who is the Seed of Abraham?*” p. 301]

While the suppositional “covenant of grace” gives a pretext to the covenantal interpreter for denying a literal interpretation to premillennial prophecies, it doesn’t provide any guidance as to how those prophecies ought to be reinterpreted; as such, the covenantal suppositions provide only part of what’s needed to arrive at amillennialism (or postmillennialism). The covenantalist has to make up the interpretive content as he goes, and he does this through the process of “spiritualization” (allegorization). Of course, this is a completely subjective process because there are no established protocols for allegorical interpretation. When an interpreter allegorizes Scripture, he’s saying that the text doesn’t mean what it says; so, where does the interpreter get the “spiritualized meaning” from? Obviously, if it doesn’t come from the text (which is the only informational medium we have to work with), there’s only one other place it can come from—the interpreter’s own mind (conditioned with his own theological pre-conclusions). Covenant theology, like many other incorrect views of reality conceals its “fudge factor” in its presuppositional basis. Since most people, including many Bible teachers, never venture to explore these presuppositional assumptions, the result is that covenantal interpretation appears logical up to a point, and even the allegorization seems to be necessary in order to avoid the obvious problems engendered by taking the text at face value.

Covenantalists have written extensively seeking to justify the covenantal system. It’s too bad Peter, Paul, and John didn’t know anything about sixteenth century covenant theology — perhaps they would have been able to understand what they wrote! In fact, this is precisely what covenant theology implies — that without the covenantal frame of reference, one can’t really understand what the Bible teaches on the subject of unfulfilled prophecy. If prophecy that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled according to a literal pattern, and is usually interpreted normally/literally, on what basis do covenantalists argue that unfulfilled prophecy is to be allegorized, especially since all prophecy was unfulfilled at one time? If covenantalists apply a literal hermeneutic to prophecies of Christ’s first advent, how do they justify applying a different hermeneutic to His second advent simply because it hasn’t yet occurred? The answer is that covenant theology is not really “interpretive;” it’s nothing more than a pretext for denying the clear premillennial teachings of the Bible.

Covenantalists reason from the tri-covenantal basis rather than from the biblical covenants (*i.e.*, the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants). This is necessary because a study of the biblical covenants, apart from the covenantal presuppositional “filter,” supports only a premillennial view of the coming of Christ and of the kingdom. Covenantalists have failed to provide even one explicit biblical reference to any of the three suppositional covenants (*i.e.*, “redemption,” “works,” and “grace”).

What is Dispensationalism?

Dispensational premillennialism stands in stark contrast to covenantalism. Dispensationalism, at its core, is a biblical theology – as opposed to a presuppositional theology (*i.e.*, it is exegetical rather than eisegetical); it simply takes Scripture at face value and applies the same interpretive principles to all Scripture – whether prophecy or not, whether fulfilled or not. When that is done, without the influence of covenant presuppositional theology, it is apparent that God has revealed Himself and His truth to man under varying economies (dispensations) in biblical history (*e.g.*, in man’s innocence in the garden, in the pre-Law economy, under the Mosaic economy, and in the present New Testament economy). Not only that, but Scripture indicates that there is yet another economy to come – the millennium – in which Christ will personally rule as King. Dispensationalists maintain that in order for Scripture to be properly understood, the events and statements made in the Bible must be understood in the light of these economies, which are simply part of the natural landscape of biblical history.

It’s important to remember that dispensationalism is based upon a biblical theology, rather than a presuppositional theology – that is to say, it is based upon observations that come *from* Scripture, not a theological framework imposed *upon* Scripture; dispensationalism simply recognizes and gives due consideration to the existing biblical landscape. In other words, unlike covenantalists, dispensationalists don’t claim to know more than the original authors of the Bible. On the other hand, if covenant theology is true,

most of the biblical writers couldn't have understood their own statements, since they did not yet have the "light" of covenant theology to guide them.

While the modern dispensational movement is fairly recent—less than two hundred years old—it merely represents a return to the premillennialism of the New Testament, and as such is nothing more than a restatement of what the New Testament writers and the early church believed; it simply beckons a return to a normal/literal understanding of Scripture, interpreted within its own historical/theological context, rather than the artificial context of sixteenth century covenantalism. The usual tactic of covenantalists in arguing against dispensationalism is to find an obscure statement, or misstatement—of which all theological history is replete—and to generalize that position as a theological fault of dispensationalism—painting an incorrect and negative picture of dispensationalism (The "straw-man" argument).

In the following paragraphs I will give a brief history of the major views of the millennium, and explain why allegorical interpretation leads to confusion regarding the meaning of prophecy. Finally, I'll make the case for the consistent use of the normal/literal method of interpretation for all Scripture, both prophetic and non-prophetic. (Some of the following points made here are also presented in chapter three: *How Systems of Belief Affect Our View of the Future*, and in chapter five: *The Kingdom of God and the Millennium*, but are included here for the sake of completeness.)

A Brief History of Millennial Views

The early church was premillennial; that is to say, they believed that Christ would come and personally establish His kingdom on earth. This belief was derived by simply taking Scripture at face value, using the same normal/literal interpretative method for all Scripture—since numerous passages clearly picture the second coming as occurring immediately prior to the commencement of the millennial kingdom (Isa. 35:4-10; Zech. 2:10-11; 14:1-11; Matt. 24:29-25:46, *esp.* 25:31-34; Rev. 19:11-20:6). It was not until later that the method known as "spiritualization" (the seeking of a higher, more

“spiritual” or mystical meaning of Scripture) became popular. While this interpretive method was used in early rabbinic interpretation, Origen of Alexandria (A.D. 185-254) is credited with incorporating it formally into Christian interpretation. (The method seems to have been adopted from the Jewish interpreter Philo—also of Alexandria.) For Origen, the “spiritual” sense of a passage represented its highest meaning. Unfortunately, Origen’s method of interpretation resulted in nothing more than a highly subjective assessment of the meaning of Scripture, viewing it as an allegory to be unraveled. The second through the fifth centuries saw an increasing rejection of premillennialism. Greek philosophy, Mysticism, Gnosticism, and the threat of persecution all played a part. For a brief period some eastern churches even rejected the book of Revelation from the New Testament Canon in an effort to eliminate premillennialism. Meanwhile in the western churches premillennial belief continued to be the orthodox position well into the fifth century.

It was not until the time of Augustine (A.D. 354-430) that premillennialism was seriously challenged in the western church. Augustine, who had been heavily influenced by neo-Platonism and Gnosticism, discarded previous premillennial belief for the idea that the church on earth reflected the ideal kingdom occurring in Heaven, and thus, in a figurative sense was fulfilling the biblical prophecies of the millennium on earth. For some, this also solved the puzzling question of why Christ had not returned, since the church had been expecting His return for over three hundred years, only to be disappointed. This conception also seemed to fit well with the teaching of the New Testament that the kingdom was, in some sense, present (see the discussion of the various aspects of the kingdom of God in chapter five, and Appendix G: *The Amillennial Conception of the Kingdom*, p. 375). In order to complete his idea, Augustine needed biblical integration, and for that he needed an interpretive framework that would allow him to reinterpret the patently premillennial teachings of Scripture. He found what he needed in Origen’s method of spiritualized interpretation—except that he refused to apply it generally to Scripture as Origen had done, limiting its application to unfulfilled (future) prophecy. The interpretive framework that Augustine proposed has come to be called the “dual hermeneutic.” It is a system in which Scripture other than unfulfilled prophecy is generally interpreted normally (at face value), and unfulfilled

prophecy is allegorized to fit with Augustine's somewhat neo-Platonist view of the kingdom. Augustine's view of the millennium is now referred to as "amillennialism" (signifying no {literal} millennium); it envisions the present church age as a non-literal (spiritualized) fulfillment of the millennial prophecies. Of course the extension of this thought was that the leaders of the church were therefore Christ's vicars over the kingdom (as expressed spiritually on earth) and thus ultimately sovereign in worldly affairs. This theory promoted by Augustine elevated the status of the church and its leaders in the political realm, and soon became the dominant view in the West. Premillennialism never regained its position throughout the middle ages. [The term "amillennialism" is of fairly recent origin. Prior to the twentieth century, postmillennialism, and what is now referred to as "amillennialism" were both simply referred to as postmillennialism (since they both view the second coming of Christ as a postmillennial event), though they differ on the nature of the kingdom itself.]

At the time of the reformation, the amillennialism of the Roman Catholic Church, with comparatively minor modifications, was carried over into the reformed churches. However, the intellectual and scientific revolution that followed opened the door to question the arbitrary application of Augustine's dual hermeneutical system. After all, it was fairly obvious that Augustine had merely "cooked the books" to get the resultant view of the kingdom he had pre-concluded. This not only afforded the opportunity for the re-emergence of premillennialism (Joseph Mede, 1586-1638, seems to be the first post-reformation scholar to embrace premillennialism), but also an opportunity for the emergence of a new millennial view known as "postmillennialism." Daniel Whitby (1638-1726) is generally credited with the development of postmillennialism—the belief that there will be a progressing kingdom on earth that will be brought about not by the personal presence of Christ, but through the agency of the church. Postmillennialism, quickly took two distinct forms. One form, held by theological conservatives, maintained that the spread of the gospel would bring about a golden age on earth, to be culminated at the personal appearing of Christ at the end of the age. The other form, held by theological liberals (who did not accept the inspiration of the Bible), took the position that the kingdom of God would be brought about through the combined efforts of Christian

morality, science and technology, and education. Postmillennial thinking was very widely accepted in different forms in both conservative and liberal circles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even into the early part of the twentieth century. However, the events of two world wars had a strong dampening effect on postmillennial optimism. Before the conclusion of World War II, postmillennialism had virtually disappeared. With the collapse of postmillennialism in the early to mid-twentieth century, most postmillennial institutions were simply reabsorbed back into amillennialism from whence they came. There were many similarities between postmillennialism and amillennialism. In their more conservative forms, both held that the return of Christ would not occur until the end of the millennium; both views also held to a general resurrection at the end of the age, and both views allegorized the tribulation prophecies. In short, both views employed essentially the same methods of biblical interpretation—selective non-normal/non-literal interpretation of future prophecy. The paucity of postmillennialism continued until its re-emergence in the form of “theonomic postmillennialism” in the mid-1970s with the publication of *Institutes of Biblical Law* in 1973 by R. J. Rushdoony. [For additional information on theonomic postmillennialism see, “*What’s Wrong With Theonomic Postmillennialism*,” by the author—available through Biblical Reader Communications (www.BiblicalReader.com).]

The revival of premillennialism was slow. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the major church movements and their schools were dominated either by amillennial or postmillennial thinking. Nevertheless, premillennial teachings were popularized by the Plymouth Brethren in England and through the ministries of influential revivalists in America, such as D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, and Billy Sunday. The latter part of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century in America saw the establishment of numerous premillennial churches, Bible institutes, colleges, and seminaries, as well as a number of premillennial mission boards and other Christian organizations. Today, amillennialism is by far the dominant view, since it attracts both liberal and conservative adherents, and premillennialism is again a major view among theological

conservatives. Postmillennialism, though small, is attempting a comeback, largely in the form of theonomy (sometimes referred to as “reconstructionism”).

The Covenantal System

Covenant theology and dispensationalism both arose in defense and explanation of antecedent views of the millennium and of the return of Christ. Covenant theology arose within the context of the reformation to provide the hermeneutical support for amillennialism, and dispensationalism arose later as a response to amillennialism and the formalization of covenant theology. In the middle ages there was little need for an intellectually defensible justification for the dual hermeneutical system used to support amillennialism; an authoritarian church simply declared it to be so, and as they say, “that was that.” Augustine had provided no real justification for his highly selective allegorical interpretation of unfulfilled prophecy. Simply declaring amillennialism to be true wouldn’t work in the reformation era where a spirit of open theological discussion was developing. Indeed, it would only have been a matter of time before amillennialism came under severe pressure unless some reasonable justification for the dual hermeneutic was developed. Thus, in the early period of the reformation, amillennialism provided an environment in which a new and emerging covenant theology could flourish.

The usual position of covenant theology is to justify amillennialism by applying the kingdom promises that were made to Israel, directly to the church. An alternative would be to deny that God made promises to physical (national) Israel; however this approach is highly problematic (see, Appendix D: “*Who is the Seed of Abraham?*” p. 301). How do covenantalists justify such a transfer? In theory it’s simple: Build a case for the metaphysical unity of Israel and the church, allowing the promises made to Israel to be applied to the church. In practice, however, covenant theology faces huge obstacles – and the more one learns about the nature of those obstacles the more obvious it becomes that covenant theology is nothing more than a pretext for rejecting premillennialism.

The central tenet of covenant theology is that all redemptive history from the fall of man forward is the outworking of a singular covenant referred to as, “the covenant of grace.” While covenant theologians do not agree on the precise nature of this covenant, since it is not contained within the pages of the Bible, nor is it alluded to, it is conceived as a covenant between God and elect sinners, promising redemption upon the exercise of true faith in God. Covenantalists actually employ a “tri-covenantal” system, referring to three supposed covenants: 1) the “covenant of redemption,” made between the members of the Godhead in eternity past, in which the redemptive roles of the members of the Godhead were established; 2) the “covenant of works,” made between God and Adam in which God promised Adam eternal life, if he would obey Him; and 3) the “covenant of grace,” made between God and elect sinners after the fall, promising life upon the exercise of genuine faith in God. [Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531) seems to have been one of the first to present the tri-covenantal system, though perhaps not fully developed. Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), Caspar Olevian (1536-1587), Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669), and Herman Witsius (1636-1708) were among the first theologians to publish extensive theological works built around the tri-covenantal system.] Based on this tri-covenantal construct, covenant theology associates all redemptive history, from the fall of man forward, under one covenant—the “covenant of grace.” The result is a view of redemptive history in which all believers share equally in all of the divine promises, since they are all redeemed under the same covenant, and therefore, according to covenantal reasoning, comprise the same metaphysical identity (whether called “Israel” or “the church”). Thus, according to covenantalism, the kingdom promises made to Abraham and to his descendants can be directly applied to the church, but not literally of course. Covenantalists argue either that the church *is* Israel under a new name, or that the church *replaces* Israel in the divine program (due to Israel’s rejection of their Messiah). In either case, the result is the same—the promises God made to Israel are going to be fulfilled to the church; therefore, they must of necessity be reinterpreted non-literally (allegorically), since the central features of the promised earthly kingdom are ethnically and geo-politically specific to the Jewish nation. The substitution of the church in the place of Israel is generally referred to as “replacement theology.” It is a side point, but perhaps worth mention that cove-

nant theology and its theological antecedent (amillennialism) have always had an anti-Semitic flavor, since they see Jews and the Jewish nation as having rejected Christ and having been supplanted by the church. History is filled with examples of Christian anti-Semitism, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that some of it might be directly traceable to the covenantal doctrine of replacement.

The Emergence of Dispensationalism

As a means of recovering the biblical truth of premillennialism, another view, called, “dispensationalism” arose. Dispensationalism addresses the core error of covenant theology and amillennialism – the substitution of the church for Israel – and views the church not as a replacement for Israel, but as a distinct work of God for the purpose of gathering in a great host of Gentiles, and provoking Israel to accept their Messiah so the promises of the kingdom can be literally fulfilled to them (Rom. 10-11). The covenantal system was expressly designed to dismiss the uniqueness of the Jewish people and the particularity of the promises made to them, and thus to allow those promises to be transferred to the church. It would not be extreme to say that covenant theology attempts to “hijack” the promises of God made to Israel in order to apply them to the church.

Dispensationalists believe that the Bible, including the prophecies of the coming kingdom mean exactly what they say – obviously they take figures of speech and symbols into consideration, since they are part of the normal communication process. Dispensationalists do not view allegorization as a legitimate method of interpretation, and they maintain that contrary to what covenantalists claim, there are no examples of the use of allegorical interpretation in Scripture—where earlier Scripture is subsequently interpreted in later Scripture. Since covenantalism is totally dependant on allegorical interpretation, it would be very helpful for covenantalists to find some occasion where the allegorical method is approved, or better yet, “employed” in Scripture. However, the allegorical method is never approved in Scripture. It’s common for covenantalists to claim that Paul, following the method of the Rabbis, employed allegorical interpretation in Galatians 4:21-31. However, that is simply not true. In that passage, Paul draws an analogy from familiar source mate-

rial, and through the use of a metaphor he conveys a truth – the truth being that law and grace don't mix any more than slavery and freedom mix, or than the futures of Isaac and Ishmael mix; the promise was through Isaac, and Ishmael (representing slavery to the Law) was sent away. The answer to the covenantal assertion that Paul is here interpreting the Old Testament story allegorically is simply that he isn't "interpreting" at all. He never says that he is giving the "meaning" of the Old Testament story, only that he is drawing upon an analogy to illustrate his point that law and grace cannot co-exist. To use such a statement as the basis of an entire system of interpretation is greatly stretching the limits of credulity. Allegorical interpretation was practiced by the Rabbis of Paul's time, and before; but let us not forget that their interpretations did not lead them to Christ, but to the distortion of many biblical truths (a point which was frequently made by Christ Himself) – hardly an interpretive method worthy of emulation.

Is dispensationalism a more biblical picture of redemptive history? Unquestionably it is. The whole basis for covenant theology – the tri-covenantal system – is not to be found in the Bible. While covenantalists do their best to connect these imaginary covenants to biblical statements, the strain is obvious – they simply are not referred to in a single verse of Scripture, nor have covenantalists been successful in demonstrating their existence through any proper theological deduction. The most common approach in attempting to establish these hypothetical covenants is to begin with a point on which most would agree: that the three members of the Godhead agreed in eternity past which roles they would play in redemption – covenantalists refer to this as the "covenant of redemption." (That such an arrangement qualifies as a "covenant" is highly debatable, since a covenant implies some sort of transactional arrangement in which one or both parties will receive something as a result of the fulfillment of the terms of the arrangement.) Covenantalists then proceed to establish the validity of the "covenant of works" by claiming that God promised Adam eternal life if he obeyed, and death if he disobeyed. Here we run into a problem: Was this a "covenant," or was it just the statement of a reality already built into creation? In order to sustain the notion that this constitutes a covenant, it is necessary to demonstrate that there was a benefit to be conveyed upon fulfillment of the terms (biblical covenants are al-

ways promises with a blessing; there cannot be a covenant without a benefit for the same reason that there cannot be a contract without an exchange of, or offer to pay or provide some benefit.) That being the case, covenantalists have been intent on demonstrating that if Adam had obeyed, he would have been blessed with eternal life (a benefit). However, if Adam died spiritually when he sinned (and there is general agreement that he did), then he must have possessed spiritual life prior to his fall (in which case spiritual life could not have been a “benefit,” and thus there was no covenant of works). [In the New Testament, because of the work of Christ on our behalf on the cross, spiritual life cannot be forfeited and is thus referred to as “eternal” life, but that does not mean that Adam and Eve did not have the same quality of spiritual life—even though they did not have Christ’s work on the cross as the assurance of its non-forfeiture. Remember, in their pre-fall state they did not need “salvation,” nor did they need the assurance of the eternal continuance of salvation—since they were not fallen creatures with a sin nature.] Some covenantalists in seeking to prove that Adam and Eve did not possess eternal life have argued that even if Adam and Eve had not sinned, they would have eventually died physically unless “changed” by God. Such hypothesizing is intended only to provide support for the supposed “covenant of works” and has no biblical or proper theological support outside of the presumption of covenant theology; and it is at this point that the tri-covenantal system evidences circular reasoning: The “covenant of works” implies Adam and Eve’s lack of eternal life, and their lack of eternal life is evidence for the need of the “covenant of works.” (We could also point out that those who are now saved, and thus possess eternal life, will still need to be “changed,” but that does not mean they do not possess eternal life, simply because their physical bodies must be changed [glorified] at some future time.) Suffice it to say that covenantalists have failed to prove that Genesis 2:15-17 meets the criteria of a covenant, or that such a covenant was necessary; that being the case, the validity of the “covenant of works” is highly doubtful, and certainly unworthy of serving as a critical link in the development of a hermeneutic by which the rest of Scripture should be interpreted. Next, covenantalists attempt to prove the existence of a covenant they call, “the covenant of grace;” but although it would have been made within the scope of biblical history, after man’s fall in the Garden, there isn’t a single reference to such a

covenant in the Bible. The only covenant referred to prior to the Abrahamic covenant is the covenant that God made with Noah after the flood. Of course the idea that there would be a covenant promising the bestowal of grace is an idea that can be inferred, because it's simply reasonable. However, that covenant, according to both the Old and New Testaments, is not a covenant made with Adam in the Garden, but the covenant of promise by faith that God made with Abraham, and which finds its ultimate extension and highest expression in the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34, *cf.*, Heb 7-9), which as the New Testament declares is the covenant sealed with Christ's blood. So far as the Bible is concerned, there is no evidence that God made a "covenant of grace" with Adam, but after the fall He spoke prophetically (Gen. 3:15) of the covenant He would make in the future with His chosen people (Jer. 31:31-34), which covenant He sealed in Christ's blood on the cross (Matt. 26:27-28 *cf.*, Heb. 9:15-24). How God brought this to pass is the story of the Old Testament and the Gospels, and the covenantal scheme distorts the entire picture by relating redemptive history to an imaginary theological covenant, while failing to give proper consideration to the actual biblical covenant of promise made to Abraham. Of course, this is the purpose of the tri-covenantal hypothesis in the first place – to shift biblical interpretation away from the explicit covenants of the Old Testament, because of their inherent premillennialism.

The manifestation of dispensational characteristics in redemptive history was recognized very early; the New Testament writers themselves were well aware of dispensational distinctives. On three occasions Paul made specific reference to particular dispensations [Gr. *oikonomia* = "economy"]; those occasions are Ephesians 1:10, 3:9, and 1 Timothy 1:4. However, the concept was not limited to a particular vocabulary, and was expressed in various forms in many New Testament passages (*e.g.*, Gal. 3:19; 4:1-5; Heb. 3:1-6; 7:11-25; 8:6-7; 9:15-28; 10:1-18; Rev. 20:4; 21:1-22:5). It's important to point out that while each dispensation involves changes in man's stewardship before God, this does not mean that dispensationalists believe there has been more than one means of salvation. They don't. It seems to be a favorite past-time of covenantalists to say, or imply, that dispensationalists teach more than one means of salvation. Covenantalists mistakenly assume that because dispensationalists regard the previous dispensation as "the Law" that they believe keeping the

Law was the method of salvation under that economy. This is not what dispensationalism teaches. Dispensationalists believe there is only one means of salvation throughout history — salvation is, and always has been by grace through faith. (Actually most covenantalists are well aware of this, even though they persist in bringing up this allegation.) Dispensationalism does not conceive of the dispensations as varying means of salvation, but simply the progressive unfolding of God's work with man, and revelation of truth to man.

Another complaint often heard from covenantalists is that dispensationalists divide the Bible into segments, denying that much of its truth relates to believers today. This is simply not true. However, what dispensationalists do insist upon is that biblical promises will be fulfilled to the people, or group, to which they were addressed. In other words, promises made to Israel will be fulfilled to Israel, promises made to the church will be fulfilled to the church, and promises made to specific individuals will be fulfilled to them. Dispensationalists believe that even if a particular work or promise of God is not directed at the church, all truth is still truth, and is useful. For example, even though God's promises to Israel in the Old Testament were specific to that nation (and not to the church), the way in which God dealt with His people there reveals a great deal about what God is like, what pleases Him and displeases Him, and what He is doing in human history — and that information has tremendous usefulness to the church. Let me illustrate what I mean. Let's say a family has two children, an older and a younger child. Now let's say that a privilege is entrusted to the older child, but he fails to act responsibly and is disciplined. Is the privilege or the ensuing discipline directly applicable to the younger child? Of course not. He may get his own privilege in time — and his own discipline if he is irresponsible, but the circumstance of the older child is specific to that child. However, the younger child can certainly profit from seeing how the parents dealt with the older child. In that sense, the circumstance of the older child provides an invaluable resource (*i.e.*, truth) to the younger child even though the actual circumstances of the older child's case do not directly involve him. Transferring this to Israel and the church, God made specific promises to Israel, but they disobeyed him and failed to enter into the enjoyment of the blessings flowing from those promises. The prom-

ises were not to the church, so they will not be fulfilled to the church, but that does not mean the record of God's dealing with Israel is of no importance today. On the contrary, It's extremely important because it reveals a great deal about what God is like and what He is doing in human history – as well as what pleases and displeases Him. In addition, the Old Testament material serves as an invaluable backdrop in understanding the present work of God—even the every existence of the church. Without the Old Testament theological background, how would we ever hope to have a New Testament theology?

What distinguishes dispensational interpretation is a commitment to interpret the Bible normally/literally, and in the light of its own theological context, rather than a presuppositional context. The fundamental difference between covenantalism and dispensationalism is that dispensationalism recognizes that normal/literal interpretation leads to the conclusion that Israel and the church are distinct entities, and therefore, promises made to Israel cannot be arbitrarily reassigned to the church simply to justify a favored eschatological theory like amillennialism, or postmillennialism. Dispensationalists contend that the Bible can only be properly understood when it is understood in its grammatical, historical, and dispensational (historio-theological) context, and when that is done—without the imposition of covenant presuppositions—the result is inevitably a premillennial view of the second coming of Christ and the kingdom.

Covenant theology is an elaborate scheme designed specifically to allow interpreters to deny the literal interpretation of passages explicitly teaching or implying premillennialism. Of course, over time, covenantal thinking has affected other areas of interpretation and theology as well. As mentioned previously, covenant theology is only one half of a hermeneutical system. While ostensibly providing justification for denying a premillennial interpretation to certain passages by seeing no future for national Israel, it provides no guidance for what the correct interpretation ought to be. This leaves the interpreter to supply what he thinks is the meaning— which is, of course, an entirely subjective process. It is important to understand that there are no standards for implementing allegorical interpretation, nor can there be, since standards would imply conven-

tional, or “normal” communication – which brings the interpreter right back to the literal/normal (conventional) method. This is a vexing dilemma for covenantalists. Even though covenantal interpretation might have a veneer of biblical facts, observations, and allusions from which to work, its core process is entirely subjective – how could it be anything but subjective if the text means something other than what it actually says? (If the text doesn’t mean what it says, what is the “link” to the actual meaning?) I’m not referring to a simple disagreement about how symbols and figures of speech should be understood. Symbols and figures of speech are a common part of normal communication, and the conventions for interpreting them are quite well understood. Rather, when I say that covenantalists interpret “subjectively,” I mean that they disregard the obvious (and “normal”) meaning of passages (whether containing symbols and figures, or not) and inject a foreign meaning *into* the text. This process is called “eisegesis,” whereas the proper, and only reasonable method of interpretation is “exegesis” – deriving the intended meaning *out of* the text. Eisegesis is presuppositional (*i.e.*, it simply uses the text as a carrier to which a predetermined idea can be attached; exegesis is interpretive – it explains what the text means based on what it actually says. Covenant theology makes extensive use of eisegesis in assigning meanings to future prophecies. Dispensationalism denies the validity of such a process and maintains that all Scripture, including future prophecy should be interpreted exegetically.

Dispensationalism imposes no extra-biblical filter upon the interpretive process. Instead, it recognizes the natural landscape of redemptive history as recorded in Scripture, and interprets accordingly. Dispensationalism maintains that instead of pre-concluding the nature of the kingdom, and then tailoring the interpretive process to support that pre-conclusion, one should simply interpret Scriptural statements in light of their clearly intended meaning, according to the normal rules of grammatical and historical interpretation. In other words, dispensationalism maintains that the meaning of a text should be determined by the text and its biblical context, not the extra-biblical assumptions of the interpreter. For an interpreter to arbitrarily manipulate interpretation through the selective

use of some alternate method of interpretation—like allegorization—simply to validate a pre-concluded theology is patently biased.

Dispensationalism also rejects the covenantal idea that because all saved people are saved under the same covenant, that automatically makes promises made to one person or group applicable to all. If specific promises made to individuals cannot be applied to others (*e.g.*, that Abram would become the father of many nations, or that Hezekiah would live another fifteen years), it doesn't seem logical that promises made to Israel should be applied to the church, particularly in view of the fact that the New Testament makes a clear distinction between the two (*cf.* Rom. 11:1-36). Dispensationalism holds that the meaning of a passage must be derived from the text itself, according to the only rules of communication suitable—the customary usage of language, understood in its historical and temporal-theological (dispensational) context. When this is done, premillennialism is the clear and natural conclusion. As stated previously, dispensationalism doesn't add anything new (or foreign) to the biblical revelation. In fact, had it not been for the rejection of premillennialism, and the development of amillennialism/postmillennialism and covenant theology, there would have been no need for dispensationalism to have arisen at all, since it is fundamentally a revival of the premillennialism of the New Testament and the early church. The post-reformation emergence of dispensationalism was not the emergence of a new hermeneutic, but a return to a much older, pre-Augustinian hermeneutic—indeed a truly New Testament hermeneutic. This is not to say that no dispensationalists have been “innovative” in their interpretations of Scripture (as have some covenantalists); I'm simply saying that the core process of dispensational interpretation is not new.

Why the Bible, Including Unfulfilled Prophecy, Should be Interpreted Normally (Literally)

Normal/literal interpretation is the only method of interpretation by which the intended meaning of Scripture can be discovered. Covenantalists argue that symbols and figures of speech cannot be interpreted literally, since they were not meant to be understood

literally. Nothing could be further from the truth. Symbols and figures of speech are a natural part of human communication, recognizing them is usually not difficult, and in most cases their meaning is fairly obvious. If we negotiate the use of symbols and figures of speech in our daily communications, we can certainly negotiate them in the Bible. The presence of symbols and figures does not give the interpreter license to jettison the author's literal statements in order to substitute his own ideas through the use of subjective allegorization. Normal/literal interpretation requires that these literary devices be understood according to the prevailing usage at the time they were recorded. Thus, the key to interpreting symbols or figures of speech is to ask the question, "How would they have been understood by the writer's contemporary target audience?" This is the tell-tale sign that covenant theology's subjective allegorization is not really interpretive at all, for the original recipients of the biblical communication would never have arrived at the same "interpretation" as the post-reformation covenantalists—indeed how could they without the "light" of covenant theology to guide them?

A consistently normal/literal method of interpretation is superior for at least three reasons. First, it is the only method by which exegesis (deriving meaning out of the text) is possible. If we accept the fact that the Bible is God's communication to man, and that God intends for man to understand that communication, we can only conceive of God using human language in a rational and logical manner, according to prevailing usage; this is the only way man could ever discern the intended meaning, because the rules of language apply only when language is being used in its normal (conventional) sense. Second, Scripture in general, and prophecy in particular, makes sense when interpreted normally/literally. The normal method is the method of interpretation we depend upon for other areas of doctrine, including the interpretation of fulfilled prophecy, so it's only consistent to apply it to unfulfilled prophecy as well. It's worth observing that prophecy in the Bible that has been fulfilled has been fulfilled in a manner consistent with normal/literal interpretation. By what authority does the covenantal interpreter maintain that only future prophecy will be fulfilled according to a different pattern? Third, the application of a dual (normal/allegorical) system of interpretation results in inconsistencies. For example, it results in the first sixty-nine "weeks" of Daniel's "seventy-weeks"

prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27) being interpreted literally, but the last, or seventieth “week,” being taken figuratively. Or, in the case of Christ’s advent, it requires a literal interpretation of the first advent of Christ, and a non-literal interpretation of the events associated with the second coming—even though they may be contained within the same passage, or even within the same sentence (*cf.* Isa. 61:1-3). Once the decision is made to depart from a consistently normal manner, interpretation becomes merely the opinion of the interpreter, and cannot be solidly linked to the text through any generally agreed upon standard of communication. What would happen in a modern communication system if the receiving end applied whatever decipherment protocols it wished; or if it applied a particular protocol simply because it appeared to support what the receiving-end “thought” was the meaning of the communication (albeit, nonliteral and subjective)? Or even worse, what if it applied no protocol at all? This is what covenantalism does.

There are at least three key advantages to the literal method of interpretation. First, the literal method anchors interpretation in fact, rather than subjective opinion. Second, the literal method promotes restraint in the interpretive process, since interpretation cannot go beyond the clear statements of Scripture. Third, the literal method is the cornerstone of orthodox theology. Its abandonment in other areas of theology can lead, and has led to apostasy, and its abandonment in the area of future prophecy is the first step in that direction. Abandonment of the normal hermeneutical method ought to be a warning sign to anyone evaluating any theological position.

Conclusions

Covenant theology is a product of the reformation and early post-reformation period. It was developed for the purpose of denying premillennialism and justifying the allegorization of future prophecy needed to support amillennialism. Neither amillennialism, nor covenant theology are consistent with the normal interpretation of Scripture. Additionally, the validity of the tri-covenantal system is highly doubtful to say the least. The Bible, when interpreted in a consistently normal manner leads inevitably to the conclusion that Israel and the church are distinct entities with dis-

tinct promises (within the larger prophetic program), and to premillennialism. Covenant theology leads one to deny the normal/literal meaning of Scripture, and along with amillennialism (and postmillennialism) may well be the most detrimental influence on biblical interpretation in the history of the church – preventing multitudes of God’s people from understanding what the Bible has to say about the future.