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ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH:
THE TRANSCENDENTAL DISTINCTION
WITHIN THE DISPENSATIONAL TRADITION

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Introduction¹

The Question Under Investigation

Ryrie's Sine Qua Non

“What marks off a man as a dispensationalist? What is the *sine qua non* of the system?”² In 1965, Charles Ryrie answered these questions in what is arguably his greatest contribution to the development of dispensationalism. In his book *Dispensationalism Today*, Ryrie listed for the first time his evaluation of the essentials (the *sine qua non*)³ of dispensationalism. These essentials were: (1) A distinction between Israel and the church, (2) the use of a consistent literal hermeneutic, and (3) a doxological purpose of history.⁴ Ryrie's *sine qua non* gained almost immediate acceptance throughout dispensational circles and rapidly became the standard definition for dispensationalism as a system, continuing as such for the next twenty years. Blaising correctly observes, “The importance of this work for the self-understanding of late twentieth-century dispensationalism cannot be overstated.”⁵

¹ This paper was originally published in *The Journal of Ministry & Theology* 8, no. 2 (2004), under the same name. It is presented here in a slightly revised form.

² Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, with a forward by Frank E. Gaebelein (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 43.

³ *Sine qua non* is a Latin phrase which strictly translated means “without which none,” and is used to refer to the essential element or elements of something. Thus, according to Ryrie, the *sine qua non* of dispensationalism are those elements without which dispensationalism could not exist as a coherent theological system.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 43–47.

⁵ Craig A. Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 23.

Progressive Dispensationalism's Rejection of the Sine Qua Non

In 1985, however, with the advent of Progressive Dispensationalism,⁶ these three defining tenets came into question. While some Progressives “sought to preserve Ryrie’s definitional method while adjusting the contents of the definition he proposed,”⁷ ultimately Progressives abandoned the quest for the defining essence of dispensationalism. Blaising lists three reasons for discarding Ryrie’s *sine qua non*.

First, as already noted, the essentialist approach to defining dispensationalism is too narrow. It omits beliefs, perspectives, and emphases that form a more natural identity. Furthermore, it has failed to grasp the living, developing, historical character of dispensationalism....

Second, the essentialist approach has as the object of its quest beliefs or (hermeneutical) practice that belong *exclusively* to dispensationalists. Nowhere did Ryrie assert this more strongly than in the area of hermeneutics. But nowadays this is simply not the case. While hermeneutical self-consciousness does characterize present dispensationalism, it does not pretend to exclusivity....

Finally, the reduction of the essentialist approach ignores the relationship between hermeneutical principles and the other elements of the *sine qua non*. The study of biblical theology...have led dispensationalists to reexamine biblically the distinction between Israel and the Church.⁸

⁶ For a synopsis of the early meetings of the Dispensational Study Group see Ronald T. Cutter, “Dispensational Study Group: An Introduction,” *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1989): 123–24.

⁷ Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 33. Nearly all Progressives contend that a *consistent* literal hermeneutics is common not only to dispensational but also to non-dispensational systems as well (an assertion vigorously denied by their Traditional brethren). Regardless of the truth of this assertion, it should be noted in the interest of fairness that at the very least one aspect of Ryrie’s *sine qua non* can be shown to be not unique to dispensationalism. Many outside dispensational circles have subscribed to a doxological purpose of history. A textbook example of this truth can be found in the writings of postmillennialist Jonathan Edwards. “For it appears, that all that is ever spoken of in the Scripture as an ultimate end of God’s works, is included in that one phrase, *the glory of God*; which is the name by which the ultimate end of God’s works is most commonly called in Scripture; and seems most aptly to signify the thing.... Thus we see that the great end of God’s works, which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed but ONE; and this *one* end is most properly and comprehensively called, THE GLORY OF GOD....” Jonathan Edwards, “A Dissertation concerning the End for which God Created the World,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 119.

While much ink has been devoted to the hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism,⁹ comparatively less attention has been devoted to the Progressive's understanding of the distinction between Israel and the church¹⁰, particularly from the Traditional Dispensational¹¹ viewpoint. This is surprising when one considers that the introductory volume which introduced

⁹ For various treatments of Progressive Dispensationalist's employment of Complementary Hermeneutics see Bruce A. Baker "Complementary Hermeneutics And The Early Church" *Journal of Ministry & Theology* 7 (Spring 2003); Baker, "Luke's Use of the Old Testament: An Examination of Attributed Citations," *Conservative Theological Journal* 7 (August 2003); Darrell L. Bock, "Current Messianic Activity and OT Davidic Promise: Dispensationalism, Hermeneutics, and NT Fulfillment" *Trinity Journal* 15 (Spring 1994); Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Parts I & II" in *Rightly Divided: Readings in Biblical Hermeneutics*, Roy B. Zuck, gen. ed., (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996); Bock, "Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, Herbert W. Bateman IV ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); Bock, "Interpreting the Bible" in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-To-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993); Bock, "The Son of David and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 600 (Oct-Dec 1993); Mal Couch, "Progressive Dispensationalism: What Really Is It?" *Conservative Theological Journal* 9 (August 1999); Ronald N. Glass, "The Parables of the Kingdom: A Paradigm for Consistent Dispensational Hermeneutics" *Michigan Theological Journal* 5 (Spring/Fall 1994); Elliott E. Johnson, "A Traditional Dispensational Hermeneutic" in *Three Central Issues*; Mike Stallard, "Literal Interpretation, Theological Method, and the Essence of Dispensationalism" *Journal of Ministry & Theology* 1 (Spring, 1997); Robert L. Thomas, "The Hermeneutics of Progressive Dispensationalism," *Masters Seminary Journal* 6 (Spring 1995);

¹⁰ While comparatively less attention has been paid to this issue, there has not been a complete disregard of the subject. For various treatments of this subject as it relates to dispensationalism see Craig A. Blaising, "Developing Dispensationalism Part 2: Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July 1988); Blaising, "The Future of Israel as a Theological Question" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001); J. Lanier Burns, "Israel and the Church as a Progressive Dispensationalist" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, Herbert W. Bateman IV ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Church and Israel" *Conservative Theological Journal* 7 (December 1998); Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist" in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, Herbert W. Bateman IV ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); Michael D. Williams "Where's the Church?: The Church as the Unfinished Business of Dispensational Theology" *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (Spring 1989).

¹¹ Darrell Bock divides the recent history of dispensationalism into three categories: "Scofieldian dispensationalism," which reflects the approach of the 1909 and 1917 editions of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, "Essentialist dispensationalism," which applies to those subscribing to the approach of later dispensationalists, particularly those who hold to Ryrie's *sine qua non* description of the fundamental elements of dispensationalism, and "Progressive dispensationalism," which focuses on the progress of revelation, so that each subsequent dispensation represents "progress" in the unified plan of God. (Darrell L. Bock, "The Son of David and the Saints' Task: The Hermeneutics of Initial Fulfillment" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (Oct-Dec 1993), 440 n. 1.) This author uses the term "Traditional" when describing the dispensationalism of Ryrie and his contemporaries, following the categories in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism: A Comparison of Traditional and Progressive Views*, Herbert W. Bateman IV ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999).

Progressive Dispensationalism dealt exclusively with this question. This emphasis cannot only be found in the name—*Dispensationalism, Israel, and the Church: The Search for Definition*—but also in the first essay in the collection. Blaising writes, “This book will be useful to readers interested in exegetical and hermeneutical studies on the relationship between Israel and the church in biblical theology. It will also be of interest to readers who want to understand modifications currently taking place in dispensational thought.”¹²

The reason for this early emphasis on the relationship of the church to Israel is easy to see. Commenting on the distinction between Israel and the church, Ryrie states, “This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist, and it is undoubtedly the most practical and conclusive. The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will.”¹³ Interestingly, while rejecting the essentialist description of Ryrie, Blaising concedes, “Among contemporary dispensationalists a general consensus exists that a distinction between Israel and the church is the essential distinguishing factor of dispensationalism. In spite of the fact that the other two (supporting) elements of Ryrie’s triad seem less than tenable, at least in the way he stated them, this characteristic, according to many, seems to be truly representative.”¹⁴

This being said, Blaising continues, “. . .it is one thing to assert a distinction between Israel and the church; it is another to explain what the distinction is or what its implications are for

¹² Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” 15.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, revised and expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 39.

¹⁴ Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” 273.

dispensational theology.”¹⁵ It is at the point of explaining the distinction as it has been historically understood that Blaising rejects Ryrie’s essentialism. According to Blaising, the dispensational tradition (from Darby to the present day) is so diverse that a *sine qua non* cannot be found that could adequately include all of dispensationalism. In other words, while there is some continuity within dispensationalism, the history of the tradition is so varied that no set of essentials can be found that is broad enough to include the whole of the tradition while being narrow enough to exclude those who are not. Blaising writes:

First, the essentialist view of dispensationalism sought for continuity in certain elements (expressed as the *sine qua non*) that remained unchanged through the history of the tradition. However, as already noted, while there is no question that the elements of the proposed *sine qua non* are *related* to traditional views and practice, nevertheless one must regard them as modifications and reformulations, whether small or great, that were part of the changes then taking place. They were in fact the central tenets of a *new* dispensationalism. But when that which is in fact new is presented and accepted as if it had always been the case, the result is not only historical confusion but a conceptual naïveté that resists both the idea and the fact of further development in the tradition.¹⁶

Thus, according to Blaising, when Ryrie published his *sine qua non*, instead of presenting what had always been the case, he was actually formulating a “new dispensationalism.” The appeal of continuity with earlier dispensationalism was overstated. Thus, “they did not gain a historical understanding of the tradition or of the transition they had undergone.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” 29.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The Need for the Study

Clearly the Essentialist position and the Progressive position are mutually exclusive. Both cannot be right. But why is this question important for Progressive Dispensationalism and the larger Dispensational community as a whole?

Few would reject the notion that dispensationalism has been modified in some of its details and that there has been some theological variety among its proponents down through the years. This being said, there is considerable difference between modification and reformulation of details and the development of an entirely new system. Yet this is what Progressives claim Ryrie did in the establishment of his list of essentials.

The rejection of Ryrie's *sine qua non* is vital to Progressive Dispensationalism for one primary reason. If Ryrie has in fact identified the essence of dispensationalism, then any doctrinal formulation outside of that essence is by definition something other than dispensationalism. Similarly, if Ryrie is correct, there are definite boundaries within which any doctrinal development must take place and by all accounts Progressive Dispensationalism is outside those boundaries. Therefore, it is of primary importance to Progressive Dispensationalism to show an historical discontinuity within dispensationalism as a whole so that Ryrie's *sine qua non* may be falsified. It is also important for dispensationalism as a whole to determine whether Progressive Dispensationalism is in fact a natural doctrinal development within the mainstream of historical dispensational thought, or whether it is a new system outside of that tradition.

Excursus on Doctrinal Development

In order for the *sine qua non* to be falsified, it is important for Progressives to demonstrate the need for doctrinal development. For if it can be shown that dispensationalism has been

developing and changing from its inception, then a strong case may be made that such doctrinal development is in fact necessary for dispensationalism today. To this end Blaising correctly notes, “Dispensationalism is undeniably a doctrinal development in the history of theology. Everyone recognizes this.... John Nelson Darby had his own view of this development. As he saw it, the entire history of the church since the Apostles was marked by apostasy. He saw his own theological work as a recovery of apostolic doctrine.”¹⁸ While few would take issue with the statement that “dispensationalism is a doctrinal development in the history of theology,” there is no way logically to get from this premise alone to the conclusion that all doctrinal developments are good. Neither is it possible to state that, since Darby’s development which originated dispensationalism, further development (of the same magnitude at least) has taken place within the system itself.

Interestingly, Blaising appeals to John Henry Newman for his formulation of the methodology of doctrinal development. Newman, Darby’s contemporary, was influenced by many of the same factors.¹⁹ For example, both men took orders in the Anglican Church. Both men opposed the Erastianism²⁰ of the British Parliament over the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. Ultimately, both men withdrew from the Church of England. Darby “resigned his

¹⁸ Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” 254.

¹⁹ Craig A. Blaising, “Developing Dispensationalism Part 1: Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April 1988): 133—40.

²⁰ Named after Swiss theologian Thomas Erastus (1529–83), Erastianism is the belief in the supremacy of the state over ecclesiastical affairs.

ecclesiastical commission... and established fellowship with an assembly of believers, the progenitor of the Brethren movement.”²¹ Newman, however, took a different path.

John Henry Newman was influential within the Oxford movement of the Church of England. The Oxford movement emphasized the high-church tradition and cherished the historic creeds and theology inherited from the Roman Church. The main organ for the advancement of this movement was a series entitled *Tracts for the Times*.

The Tracts for the Times and the other writings and the preaching of those associated with the Oxford movement provoked excited opposition. In England Protestantism was strong and the antagonism to Rome pronounced.... Criticism reached a high pitch when, in 1841, the ninetieth *Tract*, which had Newman as its author, was published. In this Newman declared that the Thirty-nine Articles which officially stated the position of the Church of England were not contrary to Catholic doctrine and practice but simply condemned some of the abuses which had arisen in connexion (sic) with them. He recognized other sacraments than baptism and the Lord’s Supper, came out for the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, made room for purgatory and the invocation of the saints, qualified the Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone, and in other respects attempted to show how those who held to the faith of the Catholic Church could subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles. The Tract caused such a commotion that the Bishop of Oxford commanded the termination of the series.²²

As a result of his views of doctrine (and no doubt the treatment his views received in the Anglican Church), Newman resigned his orders and entered his submission to the Roman Catholic Church in 1845, where he was made a cardinal for life.²³

Part of Newman’s vast legacy is his publication of the research that led to his conversion to Rome. In *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman uses the fourth century

²¹ Ibid., 134.

²² Kenneth Scott Latrouette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 2, *A.D. 1500—A.D. 1975*, revised ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1975; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 1169–70 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

²³ Ibid., 1170.

as case study to “expound on the principles by which the development of doctrine can be distinguished from doctrinal corruption.”²⁴ Blaising writes, “Though many have disagreed with both Newman’s defense of Roman Catholicism and his principles of development, his work has been seminal for study of the subject of doctrinal development.”²⁵ While one must be careful to avoid guilt by association, there are at least two striking parallels between John Henry Newman and Progressive Dispensationalists.

Newman’s evaluation of Anglican and Roman Catholic doctrine led him to the conclusion that the differences between the two were minor and easily explained. Progressive Dispensationalists have done much the same thing in their comparison of the hermeneutics of dispensational and non-dispensational hermeneutics. When Ryrie published his *sine qua non*, it was generally agreed upon by dispensational and non-dispensational scholars alike that one of the major issues dividing dispensational and non-dispensational systems was the employment of a consistent literal hermeneutic when interpreting Scripture.²⁶ Progressive Dispensationalism has rejected that distinction, maintaining that the same hermeneutic is used by dispensationalists and

²⁴ Blaising, “Doctrinal Development in Orthodoxy,” 134.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Amillennialist Oswald T. Allis writes, “One of the most marked features of Premillennialism in all its forms is the emphasis which it places on the literal interpretation of Scripture. It is the insistent claim of its advocates that only when interpreted literally is the Bible interpreted truly; and they denounce as “spiritualizers” or “allegorizers” those who do not interpret the Bible with the same degree of literalness as they do. None have made this charge more pointedly than the Dispensationalists. The question of literal versus figurative interpretation is, therefore, one which has to be faced at the very outset....” “Literal interpretation has always been a marked feature of Premillennialism; in Dispensationalism it has been carried to an extreme. We have seen that this literalism found its most thoroughgoing expression in the claim that *Israel* must mean *Israel*, and that the Church was a mystery, unknown to the prophets and first made known to the apostle Paul. Now if the principle of interpretation is adopted that *Israel* always means *Israel*, that it does not mean the Church, then it follows of necessity that practically all of our information regarding the millennium will concern a Jewish or Israelitish age.” Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1945), 17, 244.

non–dispensationalists equally.²⁷ One has to wonder if this tendency to blur the lines of distinction between (what was formerly considered) mutually exclusive schools of thought was inherited from Newman.

Newman also drew heavily on the traditions and theology of the Roman Church while he was still an officer of the Anglican Church. Like Newman, Blaising looks to other traditions for doctrinal development. Denying the exclusivity of a *consistent* literal hermeneutic leads Blaising to rely on an extensive network of varying traditions and practice in what may be nominally thought of as “Christian”²⁸ scholarship. Blaising contends that

...there is no exclusive hermeneutic here. The context for these studies is the field of evangelical biblical scholarship (which in turn interfaces with the broader field of international biblical interpretation). The insights, views, and conclusions offered should be tested dialogically in this community of interpretation. All of our evangelical subtraditions need to be so engaged, if only to avoid the dogmatic illusions that arise from prolonged introversion.²⁹

While one may admire the spirit of fraternity and collegial dialogue, one must also take exception with the requirement to engage all of “our evangelical subtraditions” for testing and validation of theological formulations. Unfortunately, modern evangelicalism has become so variegated that calling someone an “evangelical” says almost nothing about them. As Carson observes, “Giving definition to evangelicalism is not only difficult, but is growing even more difficult as a wider and wider group of people apply the label to themselves. It may be, as some

²⁷ “We do not retract our earlier assertion that the basic hermeneutical procedure, especially in its beginning principles, is essentially the same for both dispensational and non-dispensational scholars. Both affirm a historical-grammatical hermeneutic.” Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 29–30.

²⁸ While there are many that would refer to themselves as “Christian” in modern scholarship, the rejection by many of some of the defining doctrines of the faith leads this author to conclude that this title is often misapplied.

²⁹ Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” 34.

have suggested, that the term will eventually so lack definition as to be theologically useless.”³⁰

Wells describes current evangelicalism in darker terms:

The word evangelical, precisely because it has lost its confessional dimension, has become descriptively anemic. To say that someone is an evangelical says little about what they are likely to believe (although it says more if they are older and less if they are younger). And so the term is forced to compensate for its theological weakness by borrowing meaning from adjectives the very presence of which signals the fragmentation and disintegration of the movement. What is now primary is not what is evangelical but is adjectivally distinctive, whether Catholic, liberationist, feminist, ecumenist, young, orthodox, radical, liberal, or charismatic. It is, I believe, the dark prelude to death, when parasites have finally succeeded in bringing down their host. Amid the clamor of all these new models of evangelical faith there is the sound of a death rattle.³¹

In fairness it should be pointed out that Progressive Dispensationalists still hold a high view of the Bible and use Scripture as “the basis and authority for all such theological formulations.”³² It must also be noted that there is a place for fraternal discussion within the believing community. Eta Linnemann agrees with Blaising that “along with the necessary agreement with God’s Word, there is the criterion of judgment consisting solely in the quality of brotherly service in its function for the Body of Christ.”³³ Yet she wisely limits this “brotherly service” to those who are actually *in* the body of Christ. Speaking of modern biblical scholarship she writes, “It seems obvious that it would be better to leave the theology faculties of the

³⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 444.

³¹ David Wells, *No Place for Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 134.

³² Blaising, “Dispensationalism: The Search for Definition,” 34.

³³ Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?*, trans. Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990), 141.

universities, in which historical-critical theology has become an institution, just as Abraham left the pagan environment of Ur in Chaldea because of God's call."³⁴

Appeals to "evangelical subtraditions" and "the broader field of international biblical interpretation" do not bode well for any type of doctrinal development. In fact, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that evangelicalism as a whole will be able to contribute anything to doctrinal development, for good or for ill. As Wells notes, "Evangelicals now stand among those who are on easiest terms with the modern world, for they have lost the capacity for dissent. The recovery of dissent is what is most needed, and the path to its recovery is the reformation of the Church."³⁵ Without the capacity to dissent there is really no check on any doctrinal conclusion, even heretical ones.³⁶

Purpose of this Study

This paper will attempt to show that Blaising's criticism of Ryrice's *sine qua non* is unjustified, particularly with regard to the distinction between Israel and the church. While there have been some adjustments in the way this distinction has been defined, the basic issue has not

³⁴ Linnemann, *Historical Criticism*, 140. Eta Linnemann knows of what she speaks. Describing herself on the title page as a "Bultmannian turned Evangelical," she was the former student of both Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Fuchs, and taught at several prestigious European universities as a New Testament scholar until she was born again on November 5, 1977, at the age of fifty one. For more information concerning her life, conversion, and current views of biblical scholarship see Robert W. Yarbrough, "Eta Linnemann: Friend or Foe of Scholarship?" in Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell, ed., *The Jesus Crisis: The Inroads of Historical Criticism into Evangelical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998),

³⁵ Wells, *No Place for Truth*, 288.

³⁶ Current examples include the Open Theism of Clark Pinnock [Clark H. Pinnock, ed., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994.)] and the Covenantal Nomism of E. P. Sanders [(E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1983)] among others.

changed. Dispensationalists from Darby to Ryrie have held to the belief that the promises to Israel are not transferred to the church and that both Israel and the church have their own special and unique programs in the doxological purposes of God. To this end, this paper will examine the positions of notable dispensationalists in order to determine if there really is a broad level of agreement within the tradition.

The Transcendental Distinction

The Earthly/Heavenly Dichotomy

At the outset, any discussion of the relationship of Israel to the church must include a definition of what is meant by “distinction.”³⁷ The problem one encounters is that the word *distinction* when used in this context is often “stated in different ways by both friends and foes of dispensationalism.”³⁸ While some of the explanations are relatively straightforward, some can be remarkably obscure.³⁹ Fortunately, Blaising’s concept of the relationship of the church to Israel is somewhat more approachable.

One of the striking differences between progressive and earlier dispensationalists, is that progressives do not view the church as an anthropological category in the same class as terms like Israel, Gentile Nations, Jews, and Gentile people. The church is neither a separate race of humanity (in contrast to Jews and Gentiles) nor a competing nation

³⁷ Even Covenant Theologians see *some* differences between these two, even if they maintain an essential unity between both groups. “The representation given in the preceding proceeds on the assumption that the Church existed in the old dispensation as well as in the new, and was *essentially* the same in both, in spite of acknowledged institutional and administrative differences.” L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th revised and enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 571.

³⁸ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 39.

³⁹ “For dispensationalism, the church is an independently valid historical entity even though it is not an ontologically distinct entity. Although I do not hold to the older *parenthetical* (the ‘after-thought’ view) identity to the church in dispensationalism, I also do not hold to a *parasitic* (‘footnote’) view of the church in God’s redemptive plans.” Ramesh P. Richard, *The Population of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 141 n 25.

(alongside Israel and Gentile nations) nor is it a group of angelic-like humans destined for the heavens in contrast to the rest of redeemed humanity on earth....

The prophetic promises envision Christ ruling forever over the nations of the redeemed. The church is not another “people-group” in that picture. Those Jews and Gentiles who compose the church prior to Christ’s coming join the redeemed Jews and Gentiles of earlier dispensations to share equally in resurrection glory. Those who during their dispensation had certain blessings only in promise or in an inaugurated form will all be brought to the same level of complete fulfillment when they are raised together from the dead. Redeemed Jews and Gentiles will share equally in the completed blessings of the Spirit.⁴⁰

While Blaising is correct in stating that the church is not an anthropological category, his assertion that the church is not a “competing nation,” is more problematic.⁴¹ Still, this definition has the virtue of being (relatively) clear. Under the Progressive Dispensational system, Israel was not the Old Testament equivalent of the church, although they do view the New Testament church as being composed of believing Jews and Gentiles,⁴² and continuing to be throughout the future. During the millennial kingdom, the church of this present dispensation and the believing remnant of OT Israel are joined together in resurrection life as the one people of God.⁴³

When one understands the Progressive’s conception of the relationship between Israel and the church, it becomes clear why Progressives would desire to downplay the historical continuity

⁴⁰ Craig A. Blaising, “The Extent and Varieties of Dispensationalism,” in *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-To-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: BridgePoint, 1993), 49–50.

⁴¹ “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, *a holy nation*, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” 1Pet 2:9 NIV.

⁴² Actually Blaising classifies all of God’s people in the past dispensations as the “Remnant of Faith,” defined as “Believing Jews and Gentiles (a remnant of Israel and the Gentile nations).” Interestingly, this is the same way that he defines the Church: “Believing Jews and Gentiles (a remnant of Israel and the Gentile nations).” *Ibid.*, 51. This statement seems to imply the Covenant viewpoint that Israel is the equivalent of the Old Testament church, in that the identifying factor of national Israel is a common faith. There is no Old Testament evidence for this view. In fact, when the nation of Israel was redeemed from Egypt, the fact that the mixed multitude that accompanied them was identified as such shows that Gentile believers were not considered part of the nation (Ex 12:38). While these believers could enjoy the blessings that God bestowed upon national Israel, they remained distinct from it.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 51.

of dispensationalism on this issue. Ryrie presents his *sine qua non* in such a way as to emphasize the transcendental distinction (earthly/heavenly dichotomy) between Israel and the church. Ryrie quotes Chafer by way of summary:

The dispensationalist believes that through the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.... Over against this, the partial dispensationalists, though dimly observing a few obvious distinctions, bases his interpretation on the supposition that God is doing but one thing, namely, the general separation of the good from the bad, and, in spite of all the confusion this limited theory creates, contends that the earthly people merge into the heavenly people; that the earthly program must be given a spiritual interpretation or disregarded altogether.⁴⁴

What is interesting about this explanation — which is at the heart of Ryrie’s understanding of the distinction between Israel and the church — is that Chafer labels those that subscribe to the Progressive position as “partial dispensationalists.” Clearly, if Progressive Dispensationalists desire to be considered part of the movement’s mainstream, they must show that this understanding of Israel and the church is not an essential part of dispensationalism throughout its history. Therefore Blaising contends that, while this understanding of Israel and the church is the standard view of early dispensationalists, later dispensationalists (represented by Ryrie) all but abandoned that view as dispensationalism developed doctrinally. He writes,

It is amazing that in the writings of Walvoord, Pentecost, Ryrie, and McClain published in the 1950s and 1960s, the heavenly/earthly dualistic language is gone. A distinction between Israel and the church is vigorously asserted and all the theological structures of distinction are present except that the eternal destinies of the two peoples now share the same sphere.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ L. S. Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Seminary Pres, 1936), 107; quoted in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 39.

⁴⁵ Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” 276.

One cannot help but wonder at this statement when Ryrie defines his *sine qua non* in this very language. In fact, Blaising admits in a footnote that others during this time period also subscribe to the heavenly/earthly distinction.

Chafer's language can be found in two places in Pentecost's book *Things to Come*, pp. 202⁴⁶, 212⁴⁷. However, it is not a major characteristic of Pentecost's understanding of the distinction between Israel and the church. Since that time he has dispensed with the heavenly/earthly people dualism altogether. However, Charles L. Feinberg has persisted in maintaining the dualism even in the 1980 revision of his book *Millennialism* (p. 232⁴⁸).⁴⁹

Concerning Pentecost's use of this terminology, one must wonder how many times an author must state something before it becomes a "major characteristic" of his understanding. When one adds Ryrie's commitment to this tradition alongside that of Feinberg's, it seems that Blaising's position is overstated. Still, Blaising is correct in stating that there has been a backing away from such language in the writings of more recent dispensationalists. While some have simply dropped the earthly/heavenly distinction from their discussions, others have openly repudiated it. Fruchtenbaum writes:

Dispensationalists have correctly seen the consistent distinction the Bible makes between Israel and the church, but have not always used the best terminology in trying to show the nature of this distinction. A common distinction some dispensationalists make is to describe Israel as an "earthly people" with "earthly promises," while the church is a

⁴⁶ "Positions in eternity: Israel—spirits of just men made perfect in the new earth; Church—church of the firstborn in the new heavens." J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1958), 202.

⁴⁷ "No one will deny that the destiny of the church is a heavenly destiny. All her promises and expectations are heavenly in character." *Ibid.*, 212.

⁴⁸ "In Genesis 22:17 God had promised Abraham a seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand that is upon the seashore, speaking of an earthly and a heavenly seed. The church is that heavenly seed and Israel is the earthly seed. Israel's promises, hopes and blessings are all related to the earth; those of the church are heavenly." Charles L. Feinberg, *Millennialism: The Two Major Views* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 232.

⁴⁹ Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," 276.

“heavenly people” with “heavenly promises.” However, such a distinction is not correct, nor is it necessary to dispensationalism. Each entity has both an earthly future with earthly promises and a heavenly future with heavenly promises. The distinction between Israel and the church is a biblical one, and there are clear distinctives in God’s program for each, but the contrast between earthly and heavenly is not one of them.⁵⁰

For the most part, Fruchtenbaum’s point is well taken. The language used to define the distinction between Israel and the church can lead to confusion. After all, the translated church (the “heavenly people”) will reign with Christ during the Millennium on earth,⁵¹ and will dwell in the New Jerusalem on earth for eternity. If one defines “heaven” as “the abode of God,”⁵² then redeemed Israel (the “earthly people”) will dwell in heaven when heaven comes to earth.⁵³ It can be seen, therefore, that the ultimate dwelling place of the two peoples cannot be determined by the earthly/heavenly language.

While Fruchtenbaum is correct about the shared location of the peoples of God, he is mistaken when he states, “Each entity has both an earthly future with earthly promises and a heavenly future with heavenly promises.”⁵⁴ Certainly each entity has an earthly and a heavenly

⁵⁰ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “Israel and the Church,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, gen. ed., Charles C. Ryrie, consulting ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 116.

⁵¹ Some dispensationalists do not hold this view and have gone to great lengths to maintain the earthly/heavenly dichotomy. “It is generally agreed by interpreters of both views that the city seen in Revelation 21:10 is suspended over the earth.... The center of that [kingdom] authority is recognized to be earthly Jerusalem. That does not necessitate the presence of Christ on that throne constantly. Christ may still reign on David’s throne over David’s Kingdom, but make the heavenly Jerusalem His place of residence with His bride.” Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 569. This author does not subscribe to this view.

⁵² W. M. Smith, “Heaven,” in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., Steven Barabas, associate ed., 5 vol. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 3:61–62.

⁵³ “I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’” Rev 21:2–3 NIV.

⁵⁴ Fruchtenbaum, “Israel and the Church,” 116.

future. But the *promises* to each are unique and specific. The promises to Israel are, in fact, earthly in nature while the promises to the church are centered in heaven. As Saucy's notes,

In this regard it is interesting to note that none of the physical blessings attendant upon the realizations of the new covenant for Israel are cited in the New Testament with regard to the church (cf. 2 Co 3:6–7; Heb 8:8–13 with Jer 31:31–40; Eze 36:24–38). Rather, both Israel and the church share in their distinctive phases in God's program as the people of God through whom He will be glorified.⁵⁵

The Promises to Israel

National Promises

The vast majority of the promises to Israel were national promises. In other words, the national promises were collective promises given to the nation as a whole. While there were certain individual promises which provided hope for the private citizen, the bulk of the assurances given by God were to the collective state. When these national promises are examined, it becomes clear that the hope of Israel was an earthly hope. In fact, the promise of the land often has primary importance in Israel's relationship with God.

The national promises to Israel are centered around the covenants that God made with his people. Therefore to understand the nature of the promises of God to Israel, a careful examination of the biblical covenants is required.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 82. Saucy's views concerning the church have changed somewhat since the publication of this book. See Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, 187–218.

⁵⁶ The section will not examine the Mosaic Covenant since it has been set aside by the New Covenant. Israel's future, therefore, does not depend upon the conditional covenant given to Moses, but rather upon the unconditional Covenant that God has promised to replace the "old" one.

The Abrahamic Covenant

God's covenant with Abraham is originally stated in Genesis 12:1–3 and then repeated in Genesis 13:14–17; 15:1–21 and 17:1–8. While it certainly contains individual blessings for Abraham and general blessings for the world, the main promise of this covenant, at least as far as Israel is concerned, is for the continuation of Abraham's seed and for their future possession of the land of Canaan. That this is a promise for a specific, geographical parcel of real estate cannot be questioned by anyone who approaches the text assuming the normal, standard definitions of words. In Genesis 13:14–17, God first commands Abram to look in every direction to see the land that he is being given, and then second to walk through the length and breadth of the land. Genesis 15:18–21 lists the borders of the land with geographical markers⁵⁷ and then lists the nations that were currently occupying the land.

Again it must be stated that the Abrahamic Covenant promises more than just land to the nation of Israel. The blessings that extend to the whole world through Abraham's seed are central to the story of the Bible as a whole. But as far as the nation of Israel by itself is concerned, the promise of the covenant concerns the land. This can be illustrated by considering the remaining biblical covenants given to Israel. Each of these covenants is related to the Abrahamic Covenant in that they expand upon one its central promises. The Land Covenant expands upon the land promises, the Davidic Covenant elaborates upon the promise of a seed, and the New Covenant outlines the specific blessings that are to come upon Israel and the world.

⁵⁷ A more exacting description of the borders of the promised land are given in Numbers 34:3–12.

The Land Covenant⁵⁸

According to Kaiser, “few issues are as important as that of the promise of the land to the patriarchs and the nation of Israel: the Hebrew word *'erets* is the fourth most frequent substantive in the Hebrew Bible.”⁵⁹ As Israel was poised to take possession of the land of promise, God institutes another covenant with the people “in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb.”⁶⁰ The importance of this covenant cannot be overstated since it sets the stage for much of God’s dealings with his people throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Wright describes the land as the “fulcrum” in the covenant relationship between God and Israel. He writes:

Given its intimate relationship to both Yahweh and Israel (described, e. g., as the “inheritance” of both), the land functions as a midterm in the relationship between them. The description of the land as Israel’s inheritance underlines the status of Israel as Yahweh’s “firstborn son” (Exod 4:22), a relationship that partly parallels but also surpasses the covenant metaphor... Israel’s behavior on the land determines Yahweh’s response to Israel in the land, and the land will “respond” to both. The king’s just and benevolent government, for example, would bring environmental and agricultural benefits to the land (Ps 72:2–4, 12–16). But the people’s social evil made the land mourn (Hos 4:3). In the end, as threatened, the land that had vomited out the Canaanites for their wickedness repeated the performance on the Israelites (Lev 18:25–28), and the loss of land symbolized the broken covenant relationship between Yahweh and the people to whom he had given it.

But alongside the threat of the covenant curses lay the promise that beyond the judgment of land-loss could lie the future of a return to the land, a symbol again of a restored covenant relationship between a repentant people and God. Lev 26:40–45 significantly makes the land the fulcrum, or midterm, in God’s “remembering”....⁶¹

⁵⁸ This covenant is sometimes called the Palestinian Covenant, particularly in the writings of older dispensationalists.

⁵⁹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “The Land of Israel and the Future Return (Zechariah 10:6–12),” in *Israel: The Land and the People*, H. Wayne House, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 209.

⁶⁰ Deut 29:1. All Scripture citations are taken from the *New International Version* unless otherwise noted.

⁶¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, “אֶרֶץ,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed., 4 vol. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:521.

These blessings and curses are a direct result of the stipulations of the Land Covenant. These are the stipulations found in Deuteronomy 28–30. First, Israel will be scattered among the nations because their unfaithfulness to God (28:63–68). Second, there will be a future repentance of the nation, (30:1–3). Third, as a direct result of this repentance, Israel will be restored to the land (30:4–5). Fourth, Israel will experience national conversion (30:6). Fifth, God will punish their enemies (30:7). Lastly, Israel will prosper in the land because “the LORD will again delight in you” (30:9).

The nature of these covenant stipulations reveals much about Israel’s past and guarantees much of her future. The expulsion of the ten northern tribes (Israel) followed by the two southern tribes (Judah) can be directly traced back to the provisions of this covenant. Likewise, the future of Israel is assured by the promises of this covenant.

As one surveys the wide areas included in this one passage, which sets forth this covenant program, one is compelled to feel that God takes Israel’s relation to the land as a matter of extreme importance. God not only guarantees its possession to them, but obligates Himself to judge and remove all Israel’s enemies, give the nation a new heart, a conversion, prior to placing them in the land.”⁶²

What is important for this study is that the promises that God gives to Israel are centered around the land. Even the spiritual blessings of a new heart and national conversion are mentioned so that Israel can enjoy the land God has given them.

The Davidic Covenant

There are two primary passages that detail the stipulations of the Davidic Covenant: 2 Samuel 7:11–14 and 1 Chronicles 17:10–15. While it is true that the promises given to David

⁶² Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 97.

are not called a covenant in either passage, these promises are declared a covenant in other places.⁶³ Relying on these two passages alone, Fruchtenbaum sees seven promises in this covenant.

First, David was promised an eternal house, or dynasty (2 Sam. 7:11, 16; 1 Chron. 17:10). Second, one of David's own sons, specifically Solomon, was to be established on the throne after David (2 Sam. 7:12). Third, Solomon would build the temple (2 Sam. 7:13). Fourth, the throne of David's and Solomon's kingdom was to be established forever (2 Sam. 7:13, 16). It was not Solomon himself who was promised to be established forever, but rather the throne upon which he would sit. Fifth, Solomon would be disciplined for disobedience, but God would not remove His lovingkindness from him (2 Sam. 7:14–15). God did remove Saul, but Saul was not under an unconditional covenant, as was Solomon. Sixth, the Messiah will come from the seed of David (1 Chron. 17:11). Seventh, the Messiah's throne, house, and kingdom will be established forever (1 Chron. 17:12–14).⁶⁴

Of these seven promises, it is the promise of a house, a throne, and a kingdom that is eternal in nature.

The term *house* must refer to David's physical descendants. This meant that a line stemming from David would continue indefinitely and would be the divinely recognized royal line. The term *throne* refers not so much to the material throne on which David sat as to the *right to rule*, the *authority as king* vested in him. The term *kingdom* must refer to the *political body* David would rule and over which David's descendants would successively reign."⁶⁵

At this point it should be noticed that all the promises directly related to the Davidic Covenant are earthly promises, that is, they deal with realities external to the individual rather than internal, and they deal with life on this earth, rather than in heaven. This is not to say that there are not spiritual aspects to the Davidic Covenant. Far from it! Isaiah 11:1-5 describes the righteous character of the Davidic King and his rule in purely spiritual terms.

⁶³ See 2 Sam 23:5; Ps 89:3, 28, 34, 39; 2 Chron 13:5; 21:7; Isa 55:3; Jer 33:20 among others.

⁶⁴ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, "Davidic Covenant" in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, Mal Couch gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 86.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him — the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD — and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

This being said, it should be noted that these provisions describe the character and rule of the King with regards to his government of the earth and its people and say nothing with regards to the spiritual life of those being ruled. Therefore, the blessings of this covenant are earthly and physical rather than heavenly and spiritual.

The New Covenant

In contrast to the Davidic Covenant, the New Covenant is introduced with a combination of physical and the spiritual blessings. Decker notes that the provisions of the New Covenant include,

... the internalization of the Word of God (Jer 31:33), a personal relationship with God (31:33), a comprehensive knowledge of God (31:34), final forgiveness of sin (31:34), the continued national existence of Israel (31:35–37), Jerusalem to be rebuilt, never again to be demolished (31:38–40), restoration to the land (Ezek 36:24, 28, 33), cleansing from sin (36:25), a responsive heart guaranteed (36:26), indwelling of the Spirit (36:27), motivation and ability for obedience (36:27), personal relationship with God (36:28), material prosperity and fruitfulness of the land (36:29–30, 34–35), and a large population in the restored land (36:37–38).⁶⁶

In fact, the New Covenant is often mentioned in relation to the physical blessings of the kingdom. Ezekiel 36:24–38, for example, includes not only the promise of a new heart and the

⁶⁵ Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, 142.

regathering of Israel, but also of abundant harvests, the refortification of the cities and an increase in the general population.

When one compares the New Covenant with the Land Covenant, it becomes evident that the New Covenant promises the change of heart that is necessary for the enjoyment and prosperity of the land.

Individual Promises

It would be misleading to suggest that all of God's promises to the people of Israel were national promises. While it is true that the majority of these promises were directed toward the nation as a whole, there were at least three significant promises directed toward the individual.

The Promise of a Resurrection

There are at least three passages that indicate a physical resurrection for individuals in the Old Testament: Isaiah 26:19-20; Daniel 12:2-3; and Job 19:25-27. Of these three passages, Job 19:25-27 speaks of the individual's hope beyond the grave. "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God." It is vital to notice the nature of the resurrection hope to which Job refers. The Redeemer, identified as God in the next verse, will stand upon the earth. Thus, the resurrection hope, by which Job testifies that he will see God, is still an earthly hope.

⁶⁶ Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship with the New Covenant" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (Jul-Sep 1995), 294.

The Promise of Reward

Many Old Testament passages speak of individual judgment and reward.⁶⁷ Perhaps the most illustrative of Israel's earthly hope is Ezekiel 20:33–42.

As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will rule over you with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. I will bring you from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered — with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with outpoured wrath. I will bring you into the desert of the nations and there, face to face, I will execute judgment upon you. As I judged your fathers in the desert of the land of Egypt, so I will judge you, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will take note of you as you pass under my rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant. I will purge you of those who revolt and rebel against me. Although I will bring them out of the land where they are living, yet they will not enter the land of Israel. Then you will know that I am the LORD.

As for you, O house of Israel, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: Go and serve your idols, every one of you! But afterward you will surely listen to me and no longer profane my holy name with your gifts and idols. For on my holy mountain, the high mountain of Israel, declares the Sovereign LORD, there in the land the entire house of Israel will serve me, and there I will accept them. There I will require your offerings and your choice gifts, along with all your holy sacrifices. I will accept you as fragrant incense when I bring you out from the nations and gather you from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will show myself holy among you in the sight of the nations. Then you will know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the land I had sworn with uplifted hand to give to your fathers.

It is important to note that this judgment is at once individual in that the LORD will purge Israel of rebellion as each person passes under the rod, and national in that the promised blessing is for the entire house of Israel. What is of particular importance is that both the judgment and the blessing of the individuals and the nations occurs on earth. Additionally, the promised blessing consists of serving the LORD in the land.

⁶⁷ For example, see Isa 40:10; Ezek 11:21; 22:17–22; Dan 12:3; Zech 3:7; 13:9; and Mal 3:16–18; 4:1.

Conclusion

This section has shown that the promises to Israel are centered around events on this earth. The promise of the land is primary in God's dealing with his ancient covenant people. While there is mention of heavenly blessings (i.e. dwelling with God), these blessings are not separated from the land promises and show the essential earthly nature of Israel.

The Promises to the Church

The promises to the church in the New Testament are as uniquely heavenly as the promises to Israel are earthly. Those who belong to Christ are “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven” (Heb 12:23). We have been “blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Eph 1:3). We have an “inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven” for us (1 Pet 1:4). We have a hope that is “stored up” for us in heaven (Col 1:5). Thus Paul could say, “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:14). For “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:20). “Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor 5:2). “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col 3:1–2).

Clearly, the promises to the church are focused upon heavenly blessings and a heavenly home. Thus, the promise of a geographical parcel of real estate is completely foreign to the expectations of the church.

Conclusion

The differences in the promises to national Israel and the church could not be more stark. Israel is promised an earthly inheritance while the church's inheritance is "kept in heaven for us." Saucy's summary of the relationship that exists between the two peoples of God is helpful.

A preferable position sees Israel and the church as distinct phases of God's program; not so distinct as to preclude relationship in the historical plan and purpose of God, but having a distinction which recognizes the calling and election of Israel as a nation among nations.... This interpretation allows for the natural understanding of the Old Testament prophecies portraying a future for Israel as a nation. It is also consistent with the New Testament teaching of the church as distinct from Israel, and yet sharing in God's salvation program."⁶⁸

The Essential Distinction Between Israel and the Church

John Nelson Darby

There are two great subjects which occupy the sphere of millennial prophecy and testimony: the church and its glory in Christ; and the Jews and their glory as a redeemed nation in Christ: the heavenly people and the earthly people; the habitation and scene of the glory of the one being the heavens; of the other, the earth. Christ shall display His glory in the one according to that which is celestial; in the other, according to that which is terrestrial--Himself the Son, the image and glory of God, the centre and sun of them both.⁶⁹

This statement, as much as any, accurately portrays Darby's understanding of the distinction between Israel and the church. Israel is an earthly people with earthly glory, while the church is a heavenly people with heavenly glory. Thus the promises for both Israel and the church are quite different.

⁶⁸ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 70.

⁶⁹ John Nelson Darby, *The Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, ed. William Kelly, 34 vol. (Oak Park, IL: Bible Truth Publishers, n.d.), 2:122.

But if one tries to push the heavenly/earthly dichotomy too far, one ends up misrepresenting Darby. While Darby did view the church as primarily a heavenly people, he recognized that, at least for the present, they were earthly as well. As a result he tended to emphasize the visible nature of the church over the invisible. Therefore, he had no trouble speaking of the earthly existence and purpose of God in the church.

Not only this, but in making Christ “the centre and sun of them both,” he incorporated into his theology the truths of Ephesians 1:9–10 — “And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment — to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” Understanding the importance of Ephesians 1 to Darby is essential to understanding his conception of the church.

It is this conviction, that the church is properly heavenly, in its calling and relationship with Christ, forming no part of the course of events of the earth, which makes its rapture so simple and clear... Our calling is on high. Events are on earth. Prophecy does not relate to heaven. The Christian’s hope is not a prophetic subject at all. It is the promise that Christ will come and receive him to Himself, that where He is the Christian may be also.”⁷⁰

Blaising summarizes Darby’s teaching this way:

Israel and the nations will have a future in an earthly kingdom-empire. The church and the church’s future, however, is completely different from that of Israel and the Gentiles. The church is a heavenly people emerging on the earth now, but called out of the earthly entities of Israel and the Gentiles, having come into being since the ascension of Christ. Israel and the Gentiles are earthly people and have a future on the earth. Since history and prophecy concern the earth and earthly people, they do not concern the church. This means that the tribulation and the millennial kingdom concern earthly people only. Therefore they do not concern the church. The church’s entrance into her destiny, the heavens, is not the subject of Old Testament prophecy. That entrance will take place by the rapture. The

⁷⁰ Ibid., 11:156.

rapture is an event unrelated to earthly prophetic events, including the return of Christ to the earth before the millennium.⁷¹

While much of Blaising's assessment is true, his understanding of the believer's role at the second coming and in the millennial kingdom is flawed. Darby writes,

Do the saints not await His coming to earth, and His appearing? Undoubtedly: but not as the time of their joining Him; for, I repeat, they will appear with Him: as walking on earth, they await this event. They await it as the great eventful act of God's government, in which Christ is glorified, as that which will set the earth right, as that in which all responsibility will be brought to its manifest result."⁷²

Since the saints will "appear with Him" at the second coming, it seems mistaken to say that "Since history and prophecy concern the earth and earthly people, they do not concern the church. This means that the tribulation and the millennial kingdom concern earthly people only. Therefore they do not concern the church."⁷³ In fact, Darby clearly teaches that when Satan is bound, "then come the thousand years, and thrones and judgment are given to us. The saints shall judge the world, for so God has revealed in His word."⁷⁴ Any indication that the millennial kingdom does not affect the church in Darby's eschatology is simply wrong.

Since this paper begins with the question of a *sine qua non* in dispensationalism, it seems fair to ask if Darby himself held to any essentials. While he doesn't express his ideas in the same language as Ryrie, he does provide a clue as to what he considers indispensable in dispensational theology. He writes:

⁷¹ Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," 273–74.

⁷² Darby, *Collected Writings*, 11:162.

⁷³ Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists," 273.

⁷⁴ Darby, *Collected Writings*, 11:299.

If the reader has laid hold of the truth, clearly proved from Scripture, that there is a distinct Jewish remnant at the end, with Jewish hopes given of God, and a Jewish character, that the church has its own and peculiar association with Christ, as the body with its own Head, called into union by the Holy Ghost, sent down from heaven; if we have seen that we shall not abide down here till Christ appears, since it is positively declared — revealed — that we shall appear with Him when He appears, he will have got hold of clear land-marks which will guide him safely through details, in the discovery and order of which patience will surely be needed; but through the knowledge of these land-marks, the details will not take him out of the main road, will never enfeeble divine relationship, upon which the holiest and most precious affections are necessarily dependent, and in which, indeed they have their origin. It is, indeed, this last consideration which makes these subjects so vital and important to my mind.⁷⁵

Thus, if one were to list the essentials, those things upon which dispensationalism are “necessarily dependent,” one would have to list the following: 1) ethnic Israel preserved to the end, 2) the promises of the Old Testament still valid for ethnic Israel, 3) ethnic Israel being distinct from the Gentiles, 4) the church as distinct from Israel, 5) the church being related to Christ in a way that is unique, 6) the church as unified by the Holy Spirit which has come down from heaven, and 7) a pre-tribulational rapture of the church.

What is important for the purposes of this paper is that Darby does not list as an essential an earthly/heavenly dichotomy. While he clearly holds to such a distinction, it does not make his list of “land-marks, the details of which will not take him out of the main road.”

Charles C. Ryrie

While Ryrie includes in his definition of the distinction between Israel and the church earthly/heavenly language (quoting Chafer), he makes it quite clear that the distinction between

⁷⁵ Ibid., 11:163–64.

Israel and the church is “stated in different ways by both friends and foes.”⁷⁶ To illustrate his point, he quotes Fuller and Gaebelien, neither of which employ such language.

A careful study of Ryrie reveals that, while he values the earthly/heavenly language, he is not wedded to it. The actual language he uses in his *sine qua non* is simply “A dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct.”⁷⁷ Again he writes, “The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and the one who does will.”⁷⁸

Therefore, there seems to be substantial agreement between Ryrie and Darby on this issue. Both are comfortable with earthly/heavenly language, but neither see that particular language as vital to dispensationalism. What is vital for both men is that the promises to Israel are not transferred to the church, and the blessings of the church are kept distinct from Israel.

Conclusion

Blaising contends that “In Darby’s dispensationalism the distinction between the heavenly people and the earthly people is absolutely essential. It gives meaning to all the other elements of his thought.”⁷⁹ This paper has attempted to show that this contention is fundamentally incorrect. Darby does consider the transcendental distinction between Israel and the church important but does not require the earthly/heavenly dichotomy as one of his fundamentals.

⁷⁶ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 39.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Blaising, “Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists,” 274.

Blaising also asserts that,

It is amazing that in the writings of Walvoord, Pentecost, Ryrie, and McClain published in the 1950s and 1960s, the heavenly/earthly dualistic language is gone. A distinction between Israel and the church is vigorously asserted and all the theological structures of distinction are present except that the eternal destinies of the two peoples now share the same sphere. Consequently the heavenly/earthly descriptions are dropped.⁸⁰

To state that this language is gone is clearly incorrect. Not only does Ryrie include such language in his explanation of the distinction, but Pentecost appeals to it in *Things to Come*, and a dispensationalist as late as Feinberg (1980) includes such language.

Blaising's statement is also misleading in that he implies that a earthly/heavenly distinction in the *essential nature of the promises* logically leads to the eternal separation of the two peoples throughout eternity. When heaven and earth are finally brought together in one place and time, these two peoples will enjoy all that God has promised and more. They will dwell as the peoples of God together, yet they will remain distinct due to the *nature of their promises*.

Finally, Blaising is incorrect in his implication that the development that has taken place in dispensationalism makes the search for essentials futile. Without question there has been refinement and modification in the understanding of dispensationalists since the time of Darby. This being said, these modifications simply are not the wholesale abandonment of the essentials that Darby taught. Therefore, it is historically inaccurate to justify the “doctrinal development” of Progressive Dispensationalism—at least in the relationship of Israel and the church—on the claim that such radical changes have been common in dispensationalism since its inception.

At the end of the day, one must agree with Ryrie.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 276.

One expects that there will be further revisions and changes in progressive dispensationalism as time passes. Where it will all lead and whether or not it will be understood and received by those who have embraced normative dispensationalism, no one knows. But already progressive dispensationalism certainly appears to be more than a development within normative dispensational teaching. Some so-called developments are too radical not to be called changes.⁸¹

⁸¹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 178.

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