The Significance of Covenant Theology in 
Reformed Eschatology 

By Nollie Malabuyo • December 7, 2001 • Escondido, California

Because of the pervasiveness of dispensationalism, Reformed theologians and pastors may be tempted to give up trying to extract believers from the grip of premillennial dispensationalism. Evidences of the popularity of this view are plenty. *Left Behind* books are always on the bestseller lists. Many believers study eschatology with the Bible in one hand and the news of the latest Middle East upheaval in the other. Even in Reformed and Presbyterian churches, Bible study and Sunday school teachers expound on what the 144,000 Jews will be doing during the Great Tribulation. Colleges which advocate the pretribulational, premillennial view far outnumber Reformed, covenantal ones.

Many books, articles, and essays have offered challenges to dispensationalism, but it appears that they have produced very modest results. Why is this so? Haven’t Reformed theologians done their exegesis well enough? Is there any other approach that may offer a solution to the seemingly insurmountable problem of persuading dispensationalists to turn away from what we believe are errant views? This article will not try to present arguments against dispensationalism. Rather, it will explore the option of teaching covenant theology as the foundational approach in successfully tackling the most popular brand of dispensationalism in the evangelical lay community today.

Why should we as Reformed, covenantal believers try to tackle such a seemingly insurmountable system? In addition to its questionable use of Scripture, one of the major influences of popular dispensationalism has global implications in recent history, and should encourage us to persist “against all odds.” Even before a part of Palestine was carved out for the state of Israel in 1948, American evangelicals had always seen Israel as the prophetic key to endtime events. They strongly believe, with some fear included, that God is still fulfilling his promises to Abraham in Israel today when he said, “I will bless those who bless you [Abraham], and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Gen.12:3). Why do Americans have this unwavering support for Israel? Timothy P. Weber traces the reason all the way back to popular dispensationalism,

Obviously, many evangelicals do not want to do anything to put themselves at cross purposes with God over Israel and the end times. The tendency is for many evangelicals to idealize Israel and believe that it can do no wrong. Some evangelicals have demonized the Palestinians: because they are the enemies of the modern State of Israel, they are also the enemies of God and the servants of Satan.¹

This marriage of American evangelicals to Israel has fostered an unhealthy, almost one-sided U.S. Mideast policy in which support for Israel is unconditional, while any assistance to its poor Arab neighbors is given only to suit America’s oil interests. Instead of being peacemakers, many are resigned to pessimism. Jerry Falwell remarked after the Camp David peace accords were signed in 1979, "You and I know that there’s not going to be any real peace in the Middle East until the Lord Jesus sits down upon the throne of David in Jerusalem." "

Until American Mideast policy is reshaped, perhaps by the influence of Reformed covenantalists, wouldn’t Palestinian terrorists be endlessly raised from homes bulldozed or blown up by a people who believe, together with their American evangelical supporters, that they have an inalienable, God-given right to the land as the “chosen people”?

Dispensational pessimism has also resulted in an indifferent attitude towards evil in the world. Instead of working to turn hearts towards God, dispensationalists work towards ideological activism, believing that what the world needs are Christian political leaders and legislation. Instead of being “light and salt” in the world, they turn into “otherworldliness,” and worse, into “oftheworldliness,” believing that salvation is divorced from their behavior.

Various Dispensational Positions

Because dispensationalism is relatively new compared with covenantalism, it is still a developing doctrine. Within the contemporary dispensational camp, there are two views: the classic and the progressive. The core doctrine of classic dispensationalism, as propagated by John Nelson Darby, C. I. Scofield, and Lewis Sperry Chafer, is God’s two distinct redemptive plans in past, present, and future history—one for Israel and one for the church. This classic dispensationalism was modified into “revised dispensationalism” starting in the 1960s. It is essentially the same as classic dispensationalism except for its revision of the Scofield Reference Bible, and thus will not be addressed here. Its main proponents are Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, and J. Dwight Pentecost. Revised dispensationalism, in turn, developed more recently into “progressive dispensationalism.”

Progressive dispensationalists such as Craig A. Blaising, Darrell L. Bock, and Robert L. Saucy, on the other hand, have moved closer to covenantalism and teach that God has a single redemptive plan for his people composed of Jews and Gentiles “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). However, they still adhere to dispensational premillennialism in which Christ will come again and set up an earthly millennial kingdom for all nations, but “fulfill[ing] for [Israel] the promises covenanted to her, and He will rule over all nations so that through Him all nations might be blessed.” This view is in contrast with historic

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premillennialism, the premillennial view before classic dispensationalism started in the early nineteenth century. Although historic premillennialists believe in a future millennial kingdom of Christ, they do not teach a divided people of God during any period of redemptive history. Most dispensationalist lay people will be surprised that their seminaries today do not teach the classic view that their pastors and teachers taught them in the past, but the progressive view that is presently evolving among dispensationalist theologians.\footnote{Keith A. Mathison, \textit{Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?} (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), 137.} Thus, our focus in this article will be on how to address classic dispensationalist pastors and lay people, rather than theologians. Unless progressive dispensationalism is the subject in view, we will thus use the word dispensationalism in this article to refer to classic dispensationalism.

\section*{Why is Dispensationalism Pervasive?}

Since we are dealing with how covenantalists are to persuade dispensationalists successfully, we will first briefly examine the history of dispensationalism\footnote{John H. Gerstner, \textit{Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism} (Brentwood: Wolgemuth and Hyatt Publications, 1991), 38-55.} so we can place its popularity in proper perspective. Then we will explore some of the reasons why this view is by far more popular and pervasive than covenantalism. After we determine what these reasons are, we can then offer some reasons why teaching covenant theology may offer the best appeal to dispensationalists.

Dispensationalism arose within the Plymouth Brethren movement in Great Britain in the early nineteenth century. John Nelson Darby, an Anglican priest, became the leading proponent of this system after his disaffection with the externalism, liberalism, and worldliness in the church. His teachings spread throughout Europe and made their way to America through his visits in the 1860s. Dr. James H. Brookes, a Presbyterian pastor from St. Louis, became one of his leading students. Under Brookes’ discipleship, C. I. Scofield, a lawyer from Kansas, published the ubiquitous \textit{Scofield Reference Bible} in 1909. This Bible edition became one of the most influential books in the history of American evangelicalism.

Dispensationalism spread not just through publications, but also by: (1) establishing Bible schools and seminaries, (2) conducting regular Bible prophecy conferences, and (3) by sending missionaries worldwide. Some of its most prominent leaders were D. L. Moody, Chafer, A. B. Simpson, R. A. Torrey, and Ryrie. Its most influential schools include Moody Bible Institute, Dallas Theological Seminary, Biola University, and Wheaton College. Evangelistic and missionary organizations such as Billy Graham Crusades, Campus Crusade for Christ, Wycliffe Bible Translators, and Overseas Missionary Fellowship (formerly China Inland Mission) are mostly made up of dispensationalists. Dispensationalist mega-churches include Saddleback Community Church, Willow Creek Community Church, and Potter’s...
House. The grip of dispensationalism on almost all evangelical institutions today leaves the covenantalist wondering how a relatively new and unorthodox system made such rapid gains. John Gerstner observes,

[D]ispensational premillennialism represents quite an innovation over against historic premillennialism and traditional Christian eschatology in general.... It has a new theology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, eschatology, and a new systematic arrangement of all of these as well.  

If dispensationalism is historically unorthodox, why did it spread so rapidly? Granting that its proponents had the missionary zeal to spread its doctrines rapidly, wouldn’t evangelicals reject it if they perceive it as unorthodox, unscriptural and innovative? Christian history is replete with examples of movements and doctrines such as Montanism and Arianism, which faded away because believers were knowledgeable of the movement’s unorthodoxy, heresy, and lack of Biblical basis. On the other hand, many unorthodox doctrines, such as semi-Pelagianism, spread rapidly and overcame orthodoxy not just because of the zeal of their teachers, but because their system appeals to man’s sinfulness, self-centeredness, and lack of interest in studying God’s word diligently.

Dispensationalism is one such doctrine. The antinomian teachings of Darby, Scofield, Chafer and Ryrie, in its emphasis on new covenant grace devoid of obedience to the law, are very convenient to those who indulge in present worldliness without worrying about God’s coming wrath. Its emphasis on futurism is attractive to man’s inherent desire to know what the future holds. In asking Jesus, “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?” the disciples foreshadowed the hunger of all future generations for the “signs of the times” (Mat. 24:3). And who would not want to be taken out of this world before the coming seven-year period of unbridled evil, persecution and suffering, and after that, enjoy heaven on earth with all his loved ones and material possessions for the next one thousand years? When believers read that “they will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years” (Rev. 20:6) over a perfect earth, images of dispensing power from thrones over lands of milk and honey populated by perfect, holy subjects are difficult to reject, even if these images are scripturally dubious.

The heaven on earth imagery of dispensationalism is a powerful salve for a pessimistic world of continuous evil, corruption, and crisis. In recent decades, the Cold War, the Balkan Wars, the Persian Gulf War, and the continuing Middle East conflict have produced despair and uncertainty and fed the need for end time prophecies and the escapism of the Rapture view. For dispensationalists, all of these conflicts point to one of the signs of the Second Coming and of the end of the age in Matt. 24:6,7—“wars and rumors of wars” and “nation

7 Gerstner, Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth, 17-18.
8 Gerstner, Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth, 214-21.
will rise against nation.” And since famines, earthquakes, and lawlessness are on the increase, believers can look forward to the picture in Matt. 24:40 of two men who are in the field from which “one will be taken” by Christ to enjoy heaven, “and one left” behind to suffer God’s wrath on unrepentant mankind. Michael Horton observes: “For many conservative Christians, the ‘Great Escape’—a popular term for the so-called ’Rapture’—does not refer to an escape from the wrath of God but to an escape from ‘the late great planet earth.’”

The “plain, literal” meaning of Scripture is the dispensationalists’ response to figurative and typological interpretation, which they equate to liberalism. Doesn’t Rev. 20:1-6 plainly state that there will be a millennial reign of Christ? Doesn’t Rev. 14:1-8 plainly list the tribes of Israel who make up the 144,000 millennial evangelists? But this kind of interpretation may also be an indication of a lack of diligence in trying to understand Scripture. Weber observes this phenomenon in American evangelicalism,

In his recent study of prophecy belief in modern American culture, historian Paul Boyer found that in addition to the relatively small number of committed “experts” who study Bible prophecy and seem to have everything figured out, there are millions of others who are not so well informed but still believe the Bible contains valuable clues about the future. Such people are susceptible to popularizers who “confidently weave Bible passages into highly imaginative end-time scenarios, or who promulgate particular schemes of prophetic interpretation.”

Grammatical-historical, typological, and redemptive-historical analyses and understanding of unclear passages require a more comprehensive and lengthy analysis, which modern evangelicals are not inclined to do. Instead, because of the reluctance to do diligent study, dispensationalists often lay the charge against those who differ that their view is liberal, new, or worse, unscriptural. Moreover, dispensationalist churches and schools are unwilling to teach differing eschatological views. Many evangelicals are amazed to learn that amillennial and postmillennial views exist, never having heard of them from their churches, bookstores, or their favorite radio programs. Vern S. Poythress writes about his dialogues with dispensationalists: “Too frequently nondispensationalists meet lay dispensationalists who are shocked to discover that anyone would hold views different from theirs. Their first reaction may be to wonder whether the nondispensationalist is a genuine Christian.”

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11 Mathison, Dispensationalism, 115.
Failure of Argumentative Approaches

Seeing that dispensationalism is a system that is so entrenched in the evangelical mind, how then will covenantalists be able to persuade dispensationalists away from their position? When we look at the multitude of literature that covenantalists have produced in order to confront dispensationalism, and their obvious failure in dissuading dispensationalism, we are left to conclude that perhaps we should just leave them alone. Knowing the negative influences of dispensationalism in a believer’s life, this indifference is unacceptable to the Reformed believer.

Because covenantalists are generally well trained in exegeting Scripture, they have traditionally challenged dispensationalism in this way. However, dispensationalism, like covenantalism, has also developed into a thoroughly coherent system. Dispensationalists are able to produce a different passage or interpretation, right or wrong, for every passage or interpretation that covenantalists use to present them. The argument then becomes an endless point and counterpoint without producing any positive result. Dispensationalists also employ two complementary hermeneutical techniques. One is producing multiple distinctions from passages that others have not seen. Examples of this technique are the idea of the second coming in two stages, a secret Rapture and then the second coming, and the idea of multiple “gospels” in different dispensations, distinctions that are not easily found in Scripture. The other technique is doubling the application of a single prophetic text—an earthly fulfillment in the nation of Israel, and a spiritual fulfillment in the church. Is it likely then for covenantalists to cite passages and their interpretation, however sound they are, which dispensationalists will not be able to refute with these techniques?

Another approach which covenantalists use in this debate is to appeal to the unorthodoxy and newness of dispensationalism, pointing out that this system started less than two centuries out of two thousand years of Christian history, and was never conceived of until Darby’s time about 1830. Realizing the historical indefensibility of their position, dispensationalists usually teach that some early church fathers held a premillennial view, but they fail to distinguish between the dispensational and historical kinds. However, in the present evangelical scene, innovation and newness, e.g., contemporary elements of worship, are perceived as measures of success, relevancy, and knowledge. What was true in a particular earlier period and culture may not be true in the contemporary scene; the present generation is by far more sophisticated and intelligent than the past generations. Thus, in the sight of today’s evangelicals, the secret Rapture, the rebuilding of the temple, and the identity of the Antichrist are new ideas that were discovered through superior and more refined hermeneutics.

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13 Poythress, Understanding Dispensationalists, 52-57.
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If exegetical and historical arguments are not effective in persuading dispensationalists to change their position, what is left for covenantalists to use? Isn’t sound interpretation of scripture, using the analogy of faith, and dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit, sufficient to disprove dispensationalism? When combined with a disjointed system of argumentation, sound interpretation will nevertheless have minimal effect in persuasion, especially if it is used against a coherent, harmonious, and flexible system such as dispensationalism. Covenant theology is one such harmonious system, and we will explore what it can offer as an alternative approach in challenging dispensationalism.

In Scriptures, God’s covenant with man is: (1) a “bond in blood sovereignly-administered,”14 that is, God alone determines the conditions, (2) with promises of blessing for obedience and curses for rebellion, and (3) signs and seals to confirm it. Although the idea of the covenant existed since the early church, particularly in Irenaeus, Justin Martyr and Augustine, covenant theology was first systematized during the Reformation. Ulrich Zwingli, Henry Bullinger, Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Francis Turretin, John Preston, and William Ames were some of the early Reformation and post-Reformation covenant scholars. The Westminster Divines recognized that God’s transactions with man were revealed through covenants in declaring that “the distance between God and the creature is so great that…. they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant,” and recognized both covenants of works and grace.15

These covenant theologians affirmed that God deals with man through these two basic covenants. Despite the lack of an explicit covenant of works with Adam, the Reformers concluded that all the elements of a covenant are nevertheless present in God’s charge to Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17): (1) a bond between God and his creature, (2) promise of eternal life for obedience and curse of death for disobedience, and (3) the tree of life as the sign, symbolizing the second Adam who would give the eternal life to his covenant people who would partake of him.

Because Adam failed his probation in Eden when the serpent tempted him, all his descendants share the curse of sin and death with him (Rom. 5:12). “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us” (Eph. 2:4), promised that Adam’s descendants would be released from the bondage of the tempter by his seed (Gen. 3:15). The covenant God will “make us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:5), the tree of life who will abolish the curse in the restored holy city (Rev. 22:2,3). Thus was the first revelation of the

15 Westminster Confession of Faith, VII.
covenant of grace made by God, and throughout redemptive history, he made his covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, each time revealing more about the second Adam who is coming—Jesus Christ the True Man who will fulfill all the covenants that God made with man. In Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise in the covenant of grace: “And I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer. 31:34).

1. **Covenant theology is the foundation of Reformed doctrines.**

   Although it does not have the unity of the covenant system, dispensationalism has “a new theology, anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, [and] eschatology.” Covenantalism, long neglected by the Reformed and Presbyterian community, also has its own system that may be the most important tool in challenging dispensationalism. John Murray affirmed God’s dealings with man through covenants, saying that covenant theology is “a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition because the idea of covenant came to be an organizing principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed.”\(^\text{16}\) Since covenantalism was developed by the early Reformers, it became strongly connected and foundational to Reformed doctrines. Geerhardus Vos affirms the concept of covenant as distinctively Reformed and is at the core of Scriptures.

   To what, then, does one attribute the fact that from the beginning this concept of the covenant appears so much in the foreground of Reformed theology?.... The doctrine of the covenant is taken from the Scriptures. It came with the Reformation’s return to the Scriptures... Because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures in their deepest root idea, it was in a position to work through them more fully from this central point and to let each part of their content come to its own.\(^\text{17}\)

   Thus, covenantalism and dispensationalism are divided cleanly in their doctrines, without much overlap. In anthropology and soteriology, dispensationalists are mostly Arminian, while covenantalists are always Calvinist. In ecclesiology, dispensationalists adhere to the dualistic view of the people of God, while covenantalists support the unity of the church in redemptive history. And lastly, while dispensationalists are always dispensational premillennialists, covenantalists are always non-dispensational in their eschatology.

   Where covenantalism is taught, there is knowledge of Reformed doctrines; where dispensationalism is taught, non-Reformed doctrines are also prevalent. Peter Y. De Jong states that “wherever the Reformed religion made its appearance, the idea of the covenant

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became prominent.” It is not surprising then that covenantalists are usually found in Reformed and Presbyterian churches and institutions, and dispensationalists find it hard to accept Reformed doctrines. R. Scott Clark states the importance of the covenant: “We cannot understand what God is doing in history apart from understanding one of the most important terms in Scripture: covenant.” Thus, we can more systematically teach reformed eschatology through covenantalism, its foundational theology.

2. **Covenant theology emphasizes a comprehensive and unified study of Scripture, thereby appealing to dispensationalism’s apparent high view of Scripture.**

The Bible is often called the book of the covenant—God’s covenant with man. Reformed theologians throughout history are united in their conclusion that the overarching theme of Scriptures is the redemptive history of man established by God from everlasting to everlasting through the “everlasting covenant.” John Calvin compares the old and new covenants in that “the covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same.” Herman Witsius, the great Dutch covenant theologian, says that “the Old Testament saints had the same promises of eternal life with us, to be obtained by the same Christ and the same faith in him, and consequently also had the same covenant of grace with us.”

J. I. Packer sees the unity of all sixty-six books of the Bible through Reformed covenantalism,

> The books of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, are... God’s own record of the progressive unfolding of his purpose to have a people in covenant with himself here on earth.... Covenant relationships between God and men.... are in fact the pervasive themes of the whole Bible; and it compels thoughtful readers to take note of the covenant as being central to God’s concern.

Would this overarching theme be attractive to dispensationalists? Dispensationalism arose from the desire of its founders to oppose higher criticism and liberal interpretation of Scripture, and they also treasure them as God’s inerrant, infallible Word. They too see their system as a unified, harmonious theological system. If presented with a system which emphasizes the harmony of God’s redemptive plan in history and the continuity of his covenants with his people, wouldn’t dispensationalists be able to compare the two systems,

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and realize their system, although claiming to be coherent and unified, is actually a system of disconnected dispensations? Dispensationalists are often surprised and receive with joy the teaching that Eden’s tree of life, the rainbow after the flood, Abraham’s circumcision, the Law of Moses, and the throne of David all point to, are types of, and fulfilled in Christ, the mediator of the new and better covenant (Heb. 8:6).

3. **Covenant theology lends itself to a non-aggressive, non-offensive methodology, especially when taught within a redemptive-historical context.**

   During the course of teaching covenant theology in churches, Bible schools, seminaries and conferences, the deep-rooted ideas of dispensationalism and its eschatology can be slowly pulled up. Starting from the covenant of works in Genesis, to the covenant of grace with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David in the Old Testament, and consummating with Christ the mediator of the new covenant, a diligent study of God’s harmonious covenants with man will slowly whittle away a system of disjointed dispensations of different means of salvation. Kim Riddlebarger relates Christ to all redemptive history,

   Therefore, the new creation and the covenant of grace are forever joined together in the person and work of Jesus Christ.... This reminds us that the basic panorama of redemptive history is creation, fall, and redemption.... play[ing] themselves out in redemptive history in terms of God’s dealing with his creatures in terms of the covenants of both testaments. This means that Jesus Christ is the sum and substance of all biblical prophecy.  

Such a study may even be accomplished without direct references to dispensationalism in order to avoid being aggressive and offensive in our goal of friendly persuasion. It may even produce secondary results in addition to Reformed eschatology. Because covenant theology is the unifying system of Scripture, Reformed doctrines, e.g., Calvinism, sanctification, infant baptism, and the regulative principle, may come up in the discussions. Packer states that studying the Bible from a covenantal view will produce an overall Biblical outlook on life,

   [B]iblical doctrine, first to last, has to do with covenantal relationships between God and man; biblical ethics has to do with expressing God’s covenantal relationships between ourselves and others; and Christian religion has the nature of covenant life, in which God is the direct object of our faith, hope, love, worship, and service, all animated by gratitude for grace. 

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24 Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology."
4. Covenant theology’s “already and not yet” eschatology appeals to the dispensationalist’s concerns about the future, salvation by grace alone, and redemption from God’s wrath.

Because they are used to listening to the latest progress of the Mideast peace process in prophecy seminars and understanding the book of Revelation from the futurist viewpoint, most evangelicals are disappointed and baffled when they hear that the “last days” of Acts 2:16-17 and Heb. 1:1, and most chapters of Revelation encompass the period between the two comings of Jesus Christ, and not the seven-year tribulation period before the Rapture. Even more baffling to them is the teaching that the “signs of the times” are to continue within the inter-advent period, no matter how many centuries it takes for this period to come to its fullness.

However, if these passages are presented as part of God’s redemptive-historical plan beginning with the Roman persecution of believers, they may be more easily acceptable to dispensationalists. Believers today who are being saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone will be like those saints who persevered or were martyred during the Roman persecution. They are now subjects in the kingdom of Christ, who was crowned King of Kings at his ascension. Most dispensationalists are surprised when taught that Jesus Christ is now and already “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev. 1:5), “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ” (Rev. 11:5), and believers are now reigning with him in these last days. But redemption has not yet come to its fullness. They too, like the first century saints, will be invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb in heaven, but they will have to wait for this feast at the consummation of the ages, or death if it comes before the end.

5. Dispensationalism is moving closer to covenant theology.

It is not easy for dispensationalists to deny the consistency of covenantalism, with its emphasis on God’s single redemptive-historical plan for man. Many covenant theologians were former dispensationalists who struggled with the inconsistencies of their old system, and we see that in developing recent ideas, progressive dispensationalists are moving closer to covenantalist doctrines. They have acknowledged the unity of the people of God and the present reign of Christ from heaven. In the exchanges between the two camps, most of the “give” is with the dispensationalists’ view of the church and Israel. John Feinberg observes that dispensationalism has moved more towards continuity of Scripture from its classic view of radical discontinuity, resulting in closer concurrence with covenantalism. On the other

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25 Mathison, Dispensationalism, 135.
hand, covenantalism has remained essentially unchanged since its development. Consider the following statements by Blaising and Bock,

Progressive dispensationalists understand the dispensations not simply as different arrangements between God and humankind, but as successive arrangements in the progressive revelation and accomplishment of redemption.... Because they all have the same goal, there is a real, progressive relationship between them. As each leads to the goal of final redemption, Scripture draws various connections between them which relate them together in a truly progressive fashion. 27

We can replace “progressive dispensationalists” with “covenantalists” and “dispensations” with “covenants” in the above quote and come up with a truly covenantal passage. Such a change has led Bruce Waltke to question whether the label “dispensationalism” is still valid to “progressive dispensationalism,” if it concedes that “ethnic Israel’s role is only its remnant status in a permanent equality with the Gentiles in the one true people of God....”28 However, a survey of the evangelical landscape will result in a very different reality: the academic world of progressive dispensationalism has a long way to go in weeding out classic dispensationalism from bookstores, schools and churches. Blaising and Bock acknowledge the “speculations and sensationalism which do not build up the body of Christ,”29 an oblique reference to such books as Hal Lindsey’s The Late Great Planet Earth and more recently, the Left Behind book series of Tim Lahaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Although Blaising and Bock admit that this brand of sensationalism has fallen into disrepute among scholars, we can easily observe that classic dispensationalism is still much more widely popular than progressive dispensationalism in the non-academic evangelical world.

Conclusion

We have seen how classic dispensationalism is pervasive and deep-rooted in modern evangelicalism, and how it is seemingly futile to persuade its adherents to change their position. Many covenantalist scholars have attempted to challenge dispensationalism using sound exegesis and hermeneutics, and by showing its fairly recent deviation from historical Christian eschatology. We may conclude that these challenges have been mostly unsuccessful, since the resulting conversions to covenantalism are very few. The reader may be questioning the use of the covenant theology approach since many of the conversions are the result of the argumentative approaches we have previously mentioned.

Will the covenant theology approach do any better? I believe it will, based on the reasons discussed above. However, some qualifications may be in order, not that they are

27 Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 48-49.
28 Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds., Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 354.
29 Blaising and Bock, Progressive Dispensationalism, 294.
proven, but as a caution in teaching covenantalism. Firstly, classic dispensationalism is addressed here and not progressive dispensationalism, because of the latter’s state of flux at present. Secondly, covenantalism may be more effective when combined with exegetical and historical appeals, being careful not to be aggressive or offensive, and in not getting entangled in endless and uncontrolled exegetical disputes. Granted that covenant theology may not have been a factor in the persuasion of many to come to the Reformed camp, there is evidence to show, from many conversations and informal surveys, that it reinforces and affirms their newly found eschatological view.

Finally, a word of both encouragement and caution to us Reformed believers to be faithful “till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God…. that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine…. but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head” (Eph. 4:13-15). O. Palmer Robertson writes about how covenantalists and dispensationalists can work together in the spirit of love and respect:

[I]t should not be forgotten that covenant theologians and dispensationalists stand side by side in affirming the essentials of the Christian faith. Very often these two groups within Christendom stand alone in opposition to the inroads of modernism, neo-evangelicalism, and emotionalism…. It may be hoped that continuing interchange may be based on love and respect.  

May we Reformed covenantalists “rightly divide the Word” with prayer and diligence so that we, or our covenant children, may see the day when dispensationalism finally moves to covenantalism and fade away from bookstores, schools, and local churches.

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